

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Race on Campus

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FEBRUARY 1, 2022

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From: Katherine Mangan

Subject: Race on Campus: How a Tribal College Grew from 9 to 55 Nations

Welcome to Race on Campus. While many community colleges are suffering from enrollment declines, Tohono O'odham Community College is experiencing a surge. This is, in part, because the pandemic prompted the college to offer students from about 55 tribal nations to enroll in tuition-free online courses. Now, the college is grappling with a different challenge: What happens when there's less federal aid and in-person classes resume?

If you have ideas, comments, or questions about this newsletter, write to me: fernanda@chronicle.com.

A Welcome Influx

Deep in the Sonoran Desert, less than 30 miles from the Arizona-Mexico border, the Tohono O'odham Community College campus is quiet these days, but it's buzzing online.

Students from around 55 tribal nations are logging on for tuition-free courses most wouldn't have had access to before the Covid-19 pandemic struck. Back in the spring of 2020, nearly all of the college's classes were held in person at the remote, rural campus, established in 1998 as the center for higher education for the Tohono O'odham Nation. About 90 percent of its students were members of the nation, whose land stretches across a section of southwestern Arizona that's [the size of Connecticut](#).



COURTESY OF TOHONO O'ODHAM COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The main campus of Tohono O'odham Community College is in a remote area less than 30 miles from the Arizona-Mexico border.

Since the pandemic forced faculty members to move classes online — many for the first time — the number of tribal nations represented at this tiny college has skyrocketed from about nine to 55. Meanwhile, enrollment has nearly doubled, from 470 in spring 2020 to 927 today.

At a time when community colleges nationally are suffering from [steep declines in enrollment](#), and some tribal colleges have lost as many as half of their students, the influx of new students is generally welcome. Still, the college is wrestling with existential questions.

Some administrators and faculty members worried whether the decision to offer free tuition to any Native student — not just those from the nation the college was set up to serve — risked diluting the college's commitment to its own community. The college was able to extend that offer, which was seen as key to keeping enrollment from tanking during the pandemic, because of relief from the federal government, as well as financial support from the Tohono O'odham Nation. And what happens when the emergency federal aid dries up and more classes resume in person? Will enrollment, which was down to 211 in 2016, sharply contract?

True to Its Mission?

As it scrambles to accommodate the growing number of online students, with only five classes being offered entirely in person this semester, “We’re wondering what this means for our future, because this model isn’t necessarily sustainable,” said the college’s president, Paul M. Robertson. Some students are only able to attend because of Covid-relief money extended by the federal government. “When those funds run out, then what?”

Another question loomed large when the college posted a notice on Facebook in May of 2020 that any Native student could attend the college tuition-free. Tuition was already extremely low — \$34 per semester hour — but the

message of free tuition swept across Indian Country, and students began enrolling. The initial offer was for the summer-2020 term, but it was extended through the 2020-21 academic year and since then has been extended indefinitely.

“The talk of free tuition ignited a lot of students who had been out of school — some for 20 years — about going back,” said Jai Juan, a recruiter for the college. “Seeing someone like them, even if it’s not from the same tribe, going for their goal has been very motivating.”

The college requires all students to study the language and culture of the Tohono O’odham people, and that requirement generally applies to the new students from dozens of different tribes. The college makes a few exceptions; for instance, Apache students studying at the college’s [San Carlos Apache College](#) branch campus, three hours northeast of the main campus, can take language and culture courses that reflect their own heritage.

Still, the question of whether the college was being true to its mission “was clearly an area of some concern,” the president said. So far, he said, faculty members and students say they appreciate the diversity of discussion in the classroom. And none of the students, instructors, and staff members interviewed by *The Chronicle* said the changes in the student body had weakened the college’s ability to fulfill its mission to serve the Tohono O’odham Nation. If anything, they said, the increasing diversity had deepened students’ understanding of their own culture and how it relates to other Indigenous people.

Perhaps no one at the college has given more thought to this than Juana Jose, a founding board member of the college and its current cultural liaison. Jose grew up with a strong connection to her people that she worries younger generations don’t always have.

“I’m a big proponent of learning who you are,” she said. “That’s why I’m still here. I grew up immersed in the language and culture and ceremonies and rituals” of the Tohono O’odham Nation.

Rather than seeing the influx of students from other nations as a threat, she views it as a way to enrich everyone.

“What we try to tell students who are not from our tribe is go back, talk to your parents and grandparents, find out who you are and where you come from,” she said. The newer students are also encouraged to share their practices and experiences with students who, because of their geographic isolation, may not have had much exposure to other cultures.

Extending Their Reach

“Tribal people have great respect and reverence for each other’s culture and language and teachings,” said Patrese Atine, director of federal and congressional relations of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. The consortium, which represents 35 accredited tribal colleges enrolling 130,000 students in academic and community-based education programs, has helped the college negotiate more-affordable rates for the broadband access critical to moving online.

Native students also share a need for culturally sensitive, supportive, and affordable higher education, Atine said. Only 16 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives age 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree, compared to 32 percent of the overall population, according to the most recent U.S. Census data.

Online programs can extend the reach of tribal colleges suffering from declining enrollment, Atine said. “Seventy percent of Native people do not live on reservations. We’ve pressed our presidents to keep that in mind as they

make future plans.”

Tohono O’odham Community College’s Board of Trustees has charged it with continuing to offer online courses serving the nation and other Native students, as well as face-to-face classes for hundreds of students at the main campus and at a center in Phoenix. The college is planning a campaign to bring more students back to a main campus where they can enjoy free meals during the week and stargazing and storytelling at night — experiences that are hard to replicate online. —*Katherine Mangan*

Read Up

- Black-student enrollment at medical schools this fall [was up by 21 percent](#) from the previous year, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*)
- After a security fence was erected around the White House in 2020, protesters advocating for racial justice hung up their signs on the fence. Now that the fence is gone, activists [want to preserve the signs](#) to archive them as historic artifacts. (*The Washington Post*)
- For years, Herbie Husker, the University of Nebraska at Lincoln’s mascot, has held up the hand sign for “OK.” Recently, white-supremacy groups and internet trolls said the sign is a white-power sign. [The university changed the mascot’s hand sign](#). (*Flatwater Free Press*)
- From earlier this month: Did you know that more than 1,700 congressmen enslaved Black people? [Here’s a database](#) that shows you which members of U.S. Congress were slaveowners. (*The Washington Post*)

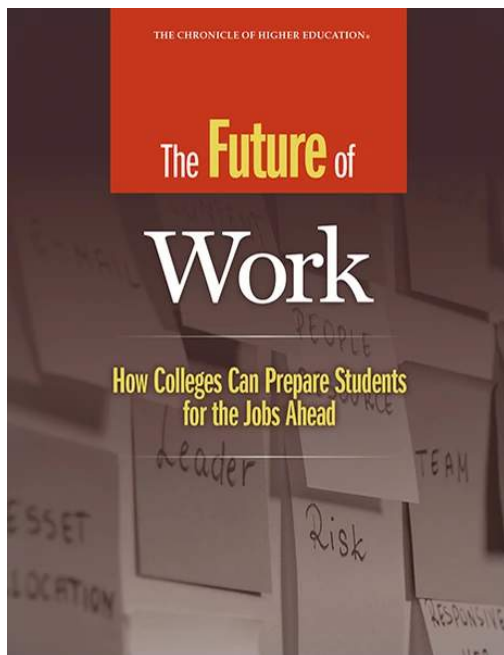
—Fernanda

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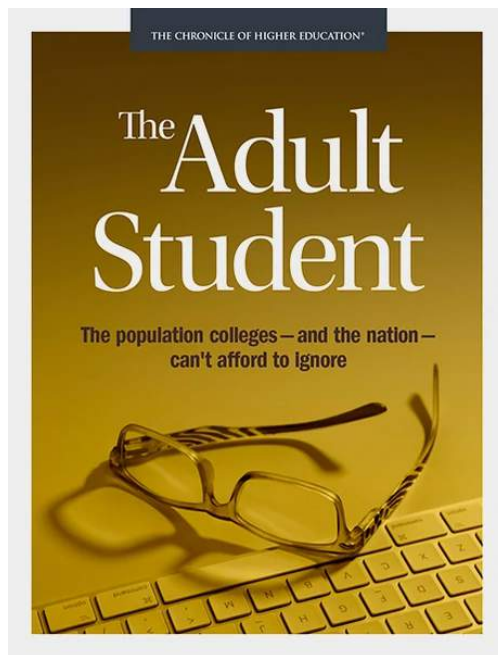
Katherine Mangan

Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, student success, and job training, as well as free speech and other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter [@KatherineMangan](#), or email her at katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.

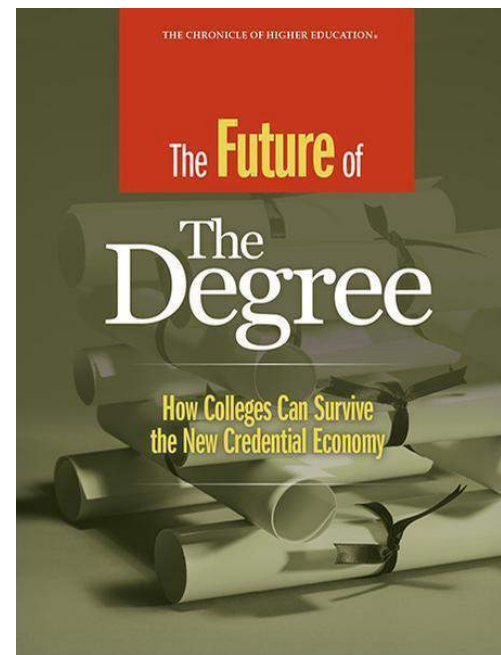
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The Future of Work

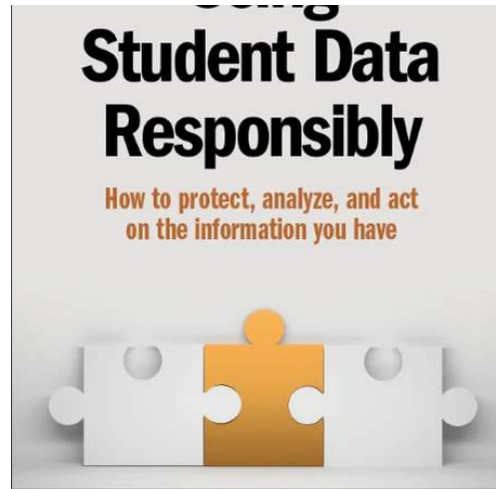


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