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Tribal colleges report pandemic-related challenges around mental health, persistence and internet access

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At Navajo Technical University, which has campuses on the sprawling Navajo reservation in New Mexico and Arizona, some students commute up to two hours each way to attend classes. Many of them lack reliable access to the internet.

The pandemic has made attending the university even more challenging, but university leaders have come up with creative ways to engage students and keep them enrolled, even starting a Homework Express service through which campus shuttle bus drivers bring packets of homework to designated drop-off points for students who lack internet access altogether. The drivers then return to pick up the completed assignments.

Colleen Bowman, Navajo Tech's provost, said she just received approval last week to purchase a drone to help with delivering the homework packets after she learned that some students were walking two miles to get to the pickup points.

Bowman said just a small group of students are participating in Homework Express, but “we want those 12 students to walk across the stage” and receive their degrees.

Over and over again, leaders of tribal colleges say the same thing: their students are resilient -- and college administrators will do whatever it takes to get them to the finish line.

“To give you an idea, when the pandemic first hit, we surveyed our students, asking, do you have access to the internet. Yes or no? Explain,” recalls Charles M. Roessel, president of Diné College, an institution with campuses and sites in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah that also serves the Navajo Nation. “One student explained that he has to drive 15 miles to go on a mesa and then climb a hill that’s a little higher in order to get cell service. And he answered yes. Who else would answer yes?”

Stories of students going to great lengths to find hotspots to do their homework are legion among leaders of tribal colleges, which in most cases serve highly rural areas without good access to high-speed broadband networks. But students' -- and, for that matter, staff's -- access to the internet is just one of many challenges tribal colleges have encountered since the start of the pandemic. Many have struggled to maintain enrollments and have seen students stop out at higher-than-usual rates.

The institutions, underresourced themselves and often quite small in size, serve high-need students that, resilient or not, have faced considerable obstacles in continuing their education. A survey of students at 13 tribal colleges conducted by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) in December found that 56 percent expected to be late on bills. About a quarter (24 percent) of students who were able to meet their mental health needs before the pandemic are now unable to do so (15 percent were unable to meet those needs even before the pandemic). Seventeen percent have unmet childcare needs. More than half said they are less engaged in class (55 percent), interact less with classmates (53 percent) and

their instructors (53 percent), have more interfering factors that prevent them from studying (53 percent), and have greater difficulty understanding the course material (57 percent). Sixty-one percent said they planned to graduate on time.

“One-third are single with children, and the vast majority live in multigenerational homes with deep family and community ties and responsibilities,” David Yarlott, president of Little Big Horn College in Montana and chair of the board for AIHEC, said in [written testimony](#).^[1] to the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs last summer. “Overwhelmingly, our students are poor. In fact, 86 percent of [tribal college and university] students receive Pell Grants. And with an average annual income of less than \$20,000 per year, our students live well below the U.S. poverty line.”

Yarlott said more than half of students across the 37 tribal colleges and universities are also first-generation college students. AIHEC data show that overall enrollment across tribal colleges declined by close to 2 percent last fall.

The enrollment picture varied greatly across institutions, with 21 tribal colleges reporting decreases -- among institutions reporting decreases, the average decline was 19 percent -- and 13 reporting increases, with the average increase among these institutions being 28 percent. Of concern, however, was an 11 percent drop across the tribal colleges in Native American freshmen enrollment.

Enrollment declines have big implications for funding for tribal colleges, which receive a federal allocation per Native American student based on prior year enrollment numbers.

“Receiving [federal] COVID funds to address your immediate needs does not address what might happen to you two years from now if you had a decline in enrollment this year,” said Cheryl Crazy Bull, president

and CEO of the American Indian College Fund, a scholarship-granting organization that supports tribal colleges and their students.

To stave off enrollment declines, many tribal colleges offered financial incentives to keep students enrolled. The inducements included reducing tuition or even eliminating it altogether, giving away laptops or subsidizing internet plans, and providing gift cards to help with food or transportation costs.

Colleges have tapped into federal COVID relief funds to help pay for these efforts. Tribal colleges and their students received \$117.7 million total from the first of three coronavirus relief packages, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, including about \$6.8 million for emergency student aid awards, and \$257.9 million in the second, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA), including another \$6.8 million for direct student aid. The total amount of funding tribal colleges will receive under the new American Rescue Plan Act signed into law last week is not yet known, but early AIHEC estimates put the number at about \$49.4 million, at least half of which must be spent on direct student aid. The colleges are also expecting an additional \$143.2 million from a U.S. Department of Education fund for minority-serving institutions, plus an unknown amount from a fund allocated to the Bureau of Indian Education.

"We knew there was a chance our enrollment could go down, and so we were very creative in using our CARES funds to be very student-oriented," said Karla Bird, president of Blackfeet Community College on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana.

"Any student who had any tuition debt at BCC, we forgave that debt so they could come back to college debt-free," Bird said. "We also reduced tuition by 50 percent, and with our CARES money we purchased 500 laptops so any student who didn't have a laptop was able to check one out, and we also offered a

down payment on their internet. We had grant money that helped students purchase food gift cards. We really put our CARES money towards the students, so we ended up with an enrollment of 409 students, and the previous fall we had 356."

At Cankdeska Cikana Community College, located on the Spirit Lake reservation in North Dakota, tuition, books and fees are free for students with a C average or better. The college provides students with laptops and gift cards to pay for basic needs. It also has emergency funds to help students pay utility bills or rent, or even repair their cars. But other obstacles still prevent students from completing their education.

"There still lingers a suspicion of education because it was used as a coercive tool to punish our people," said Cynthia Lindquist, president of Cankdeska Cikana. "Remnants of that are very much alive in my community, and then that plays out in endemic poverty, then you have the drug crisis going on in rural America and then the pandemic."

Native Americans have died in disproportionate numbers due to COVID-19; their mortality rate is 1.8 times ^[2] higher than that of non-Hispanic whites. One tribal college, the College of the Muscogee Nation, lost its president, Robert Bible ^[3], to COVID. Other colleges have lost faculty and staff members.

Cankdeska lost the director of its Headstart program, Charles Morin. Diné College lost a professor of Diné language and cultural studies, Herbert Benally ^[4], who taught classes in Navajo culture, history and government, among other courses.

Students and employees have lost family members, and communities have lost elders.

“We’ve lost 30 elders, 60 and older, since August of 2020,” Lindquist said of the Spirit Lake community. “These are our knowledge keepers. These individuals are our teachers, they’re the language teachers. We’re very small as a reservation, as a tribal community. How do you recover from that loss?”

Tribal college leaders say supporting students with mental health issues is one of their biggest challenges. Lindquist said she used federal relief funding to hire a therapist to provide telehealth services to students. The college has fewer than 200 students and does not have its own clinic or counselor on staff.

“That is something that has been a challenge for ourselves and for other colleges,” said Roessel, the president of Diné College. “There’s such a feeling of alienation and isolation. How do you address that? That’s not going to come and go away in the next few months.”

Hope is on the horizon. Vaccine distribution is well underway in Indian country, and leaders of tribal colleges, many of which have continued to offer classes exclusively or almost exclusively online, are beginning to plan for a return to more in-person learning.

Tribal colleges were particularly ill prepared for the sudden transition to online learning forced by the pandemic last spring. The AIHEC survey found that nearly half (45 percent) of tribal college students had never taken an online or hybrid course before the pandemic. A separate AIHEC analysis conducted last May found tribal colleges had slower internet speeds than the national average across higher education institutions and were paying higher-than-average costs.

The pandemic “really pointed out the fact that we were not prepared to offer online classes,” said Richard Littlebear, president of Chief Dull Knife College on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Montana.

The college resumed classes this spring after suspending them last fall. “Even though we kind of suspected that, COVID really brought that home to us. We immediately made plans to try to mitigate the effects of that.”

Some tribal colleges have tapped in to federal COVID relief funds to upgrade their IT infrastructure. Nebraska Indian Community College applied for a Federal Communications Commission license through [a program](#) ^[5] designed to expand broadband access in rural tribal areas, and partnered with K-12 schools to install base stations serving the Omaha and Santee reservations. Five different K-12 schools host the base stations, which shoot out signals in four directions.

“We’re offering K-14 access to the internet, if you’re within so many miles of our transmission network,” said Michael Oltrogge, president of Nebraska Indian Community College. “It’s not perfect by any means, but we’re still building towers.”

Leander McDonald, president of United Tribes Technical College, which is unusual among tribal colleges in that it's located in the metropolitan area of Bismarck, N.D., said the campus was able to increase internet speed by 10 times by using \$1.6 million in federal funding for infrastructure enhancements to install a fiber-optic cable on campus (the college kicked in an additional \$200,000 to cover the entire \$1.8 million cost)

“We would have never had the funds to do this,” said McDonald. “The CARES Act really was a godsend for us in that sense. It brought us to the level that we need to be in regards to the infrastructure to help us now be innovative in terms of how we offer classes.”

Twyla Baker, president of Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College, also in North Dakota, said the federal relief funding helped bring tribal colleges to "the starting line."

"The TCUs themselves have been struggling to reach equity with a lot of our mainstream partners," Baker said. "If it's a marathon, everyone's taken off [running]. The COVID funding has gotten them halfway, but TCUs are basically still tying our shoes to get running."

Lori Ann Sherman, president of the Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College in Michigan, said the college purchased laptops and personal hotspots for students and also provided financial support to help them pay for internet service. That's helped, she said, but there are still challenges.

"Even with the internet services they're able to get and the laptop, we've never had online classes 100 percent. This is completely new to us and completely new to our students as well ... Students are definitely struggling a lot. Our students really like that personal interaction."

Paul Robertson, president of the Tohono O'odham Community College in Arizona, said student success, as measured by the percentage of credits completed with a C or better, declined last spring, dipping to 52 percent before bouncing back up to close to 70 percent last fall.

"That was no surprise to us, because it was in the middle of the semester, right after spring break, and all the sudden you were online and you never were before," Robertson said.

Tohono O'odham has substantially grown its enrollment during the pandemic by reaching students from other tribal nations -- many of which don't have their own colleges -- through online classes.

“One of the things we did is provide free tuition to all Native Americans, and that kind of took off on Facebook. Even though our tuition was really small” -- \$34.25 per credit hour -- “it really seemed to light a fire under people who signed up for our online offerings,” Robertson said.

"I think this online environment opens up the potential to serve more tribal nations by every tribal college," said Robertson, who pointed out there are 574 federally recognized tribal nations and only 37 tribal colleges.

Meanwhile, Navajo Tech is one of those institutions that has seen a big decline in students. Its final enrollment number is 1,257 this spring, compared to 1,729 last year.

“Many of our students are fearful of the pandemic, and that extends even to our employees,” said Bowman, the provost. “Many of our students have had trauma in their immediate circles -- loss of parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles. Their focus is going to be on how, you know, I need to be here to help my family.”

The university reduced tuition for Navajo students by 50 percent to try to keep them on track, cutting the cost [6] from \$71.25 per credit to \$36.

Those efforts are designed to send students a message "to just stay in school and finish," Bowman said. "If we have to take a hit and find other resources to supplement that, then that's what we're going to do, because you and your degree is what's at stake here."

Diversity [7]

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Links

[1] http://www.aihec.org/what-we-do/docs/FY21/AIHEC_SCIA%20Hearing_July%2029%202020_with%20appendices_FINAL.pdf

[2] <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6949a3.htm>

[3] <https://www.pri.org/stories/2021-02-11/covid-19-deaths-among-tribal-elders-threaten-cultural-loss>

[4] <https://www.dinecollege.edu/news-release-dine-college-mourns-the-passing-of-herbert-benally/>

[5] <https://www.fcc.gov/25-ghz-rural-tribal-window>

[6] <http://www.navajotech.edu/news/1076-ntu-offers-tuition-assistance-to-accommodate-students-willing-to-persist-during-pandemic>

[7] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/diversity>