

American Indians in Higher Education: A History of Cultural Conflict

Author(s): Bobby Wright and William G. Tierney

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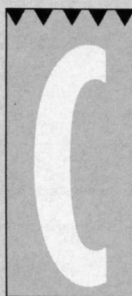
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# American Indians In Higher Education

*A History of Cultural Conflict*

BY BOBBY WRIGHT AND WILLIAM G. TIERNEY



aleb Cheeshateaumuck, an Algonquian Indian from Martha's Vineyard, graduated from Harvard College, class of 1665. An outstanding scholar, Caleb could read, write, and speak Latin and Greek as well as English—not to mention his own native language. Although fully able to meet Harvard's rigorous academic demands, the young native scholar did not escape the dangers associated with life in an alien environment. He died within months of his college degree, victim of a foreign disease to which he had no immunity.

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*BOBBY WRIGHT, of the Chippewa-Cree tribe, is assistant professor and research associate in the Center for the Study of Higher Education, the Pennsylvania State University. WILLIAM G. TIERNEY is associate professor and senior research associate at the Center for the Study of Higher Education, the Pennsylvania State University.*

**TABLE 1**  
**American Indian Enrollment in Institutions of Higher Education, by Control and Level of Institution: United States, Even Years 1976-84**

Control/Level of Institution	1976	1978	1980	1982	1984
<b>PUBLIC</b>	67,757	68,460	74,244	76,959	71,642
<b>Four-Year</b>	28,445	27,197	29,062	30,857	29,568
<b>Two-Year</b>	39,312	41,263	45,182	46,102	42,074
<b>PRIVATE</b>	8,610	9,425	9,679	8,957	11,030
<b>Four-Year</b>	6,765	7,807	7,867	7,166	7,913
<b>Two-Year</b>	1,845	1,618	1,812	1,791	3,117

Source: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office for Civil Rights, *Racial, Ethnic and Sex Enrollment Data from Institutions of Higher Education*, 1976, 1978, and U.S. Department of Education, Center for Education Statistics, *Higher Education General Information Survey*, various years.

**TABLE 2**  
**American Indian Education Profile**

Number of Indian Students Taking SAT Test, 1976 <sup>1</sup>	2,632
Number of Indian Students Taking SAT Test, 1989	18,005
Mean Indian SAT Score, 1989	812
Mean U.S. SAT Score, 1989	903
Number of Indian Students in Higher Education, 1986-87 <sup>1</sup>	89,000
Tribal College Enrollment, 1981 (FTE) <sup>2</sup>	1,689
Tribal College Enrollment, 1989 (FTE)	4,400

Sources: <sup>1</sup> Quality Education for Minorities Project, *Education That Works: An Action Plan for the Education of Minorities* (Report Summary), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, January 1990.

<sup>2</sup> American Indian Higher Education (1989), cited in *Black Issues In Higher Education* (December 7, 1989).

Caleb was among the first in a long line of American Indians who have attended colleges and universities during the past three centuries. He represents, too, the challenge and the triumph, as well as the failure and tragedy, that characterize the history of American Indian higher education. These conflicting outcomes reflect the clash of cultures, the confrontation of lifestyles, that has ensued on college campuses since colonial days. Euro-Americans have persistently sought to remold Native Americans in the image of the white man—to

“civilize” and assimilate the “savages”—but native peoples have steadfastly struggled to preserve their cultural integrity. The college campus has historically provided a stage for this cross-cultural drama.

Within a decade of the first European settlement in America, plans for an Indian college were already underway. The earliest colonial efforts to provide Indians with higher education were designed to Christianize and “civilize” the Indians, thus saving them from the folly of their “heathenish” and “savage”

ways. The hope was that educated Indians, as schoolmasters and preachers, would become missionary agents among their own brethren.

In 1617, King James I launched the initial design, when he enjoined the Anglican clergymen to collect charitable funds for “the erecting of some churches and schools for ye education of ye children of these [Virginia] Barbarians.” The following year, the English set aside 1,000 acres at Henrico, Virginia for construction of a “college for Children of the Infidels.” However, the Virginia natives resisted such cultural intrusions. Their rebellion in 1622, an attempt to rid their lands of the English forever, was only partially and temporarily successful, but it abruptly ended the scheme for an Indian college in Virginia.

In New England, the 1650 charter of Harvard College heralded the next educational design. It provided for the “education of the English and Indian youth of this country in knowledge.” Charitable contributions from England supported the construction of the Indian College building on Harvard’s campus, completed in 1656. During the four decades of its existence, although it had a capacity for 20 students, the structure housed no more than six Indian scholars—Caleb Cheeshateaumuck among them. Most of that time, the “Indian college” housed English students and the college printing press.

In Virginia, the native rebellion of 1622 had ended the initial plans for an Indian college. Seven decades later, the 1693 charter of the College of William and Mary reaffirmed the English desire to educate and “civilize” the Indians. It established William and Mary, in part, so “that the Christian faith may be propagated amongst the Western Indians.” Robert Boyle, an English scientist and philanthropist, inspired this divine mission when he willed a bequest for unspecified charitable and pious uses. The president of William and Mary obtained the lion’s share of this charity, which he used to build the Brafferton building in 1723, purportedly to house resident native scholars. No Indian students were in residence for two decades following its completion, however, and only five or six attended during the life of the Brafferton school. Following fee-



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ble efforts and insignificant results, the American Revolution stopped the flow of missionary funds from England, and William and Mary has since ignored the pious mission on which it was founded.

In the mid-18th century, Eleazar Wheelock, a Congregational minister, passionately engaged in the academic training of Indian youth. Wheelock founded Dartmouth College, chartered in 1769, for "the education & instruction of Youth of the Indian tribes in this Land in reading, wrighting [sic] and all parts of Learning which shall appear necessary and expedient for civilizing and Christianizing children of pagans . . . and also of English Youth." He built the College with charity collected by Samson Occum, Wheelock's most successful convert and a noted Indian scholar, who solicited a substantial endowment for native education. Nonetheless, by the time he established Dartmouth, Wheelock's interest in Indian schooling waned in favor of the education of "English youth." As a result, the College became increasingly inaccessible to potential Native American converts. While a total of 58 Indians attended from 1769 to 1893, Dartmouth produced only three Indian graduates in the 18th century and eight in the 19th.

The College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), although not specifically professing an Indian mission, admitted at least three Indian students. The first, a Delaware youth, attended the College in 1751 under the sponsorship of the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, benefactors also of Dartmouth's Indian program. Although reportedly proficient in his learning and "much beloved by his classmates and the other scholars," the unfortunate young Dela-

ware died of consumption a year later. Jacob Woolley, one of Wheelock's first students, enrolled in 1759, though he was expelled before completing his degree. Finally, Shawuskukhkung—also known by his English name, Bartholomew Scott Calvin—attended the College in 1773. During his second year of residence, however, the charitable funds from Great Britain that supported his attendance ceased, as a consequence of the Revolutionary War, forcing Calvin to abandon his studies.

#### Tribal Resistance

The colonial experiments in Indian higher education proved, for the most part, unsuccessful. Targeted tribal groups resisted missionary efforts and tenaciously clung to their traditional life ways. Among those who succumbed to education, their physical inability to survive the alien environment compounded the failure. Hugh Jones, an 18th-century historian of Virginia, admitted that, at the College of William and Mary

hitherto but little good has been done, though abundance of money has been laid out. . . . [An] abundance of them used to die . . . Those of them that have escaped well, and been taught to read and write, have for the most part returned to their home, some with and some without baptism, where they follow their own savage customs and heathenish rites.

The general Indian sentiment is illustrated by the Six Nations' response to the treaty commissioners from Maryland and Virginia, who in 1744 invited the Indians to send their sons to the College of William and Mary. "We must let you know," the Iroquois leaders responded,

we love our Children too well to send

them so great a Way, and the Indians are not inclined to give their Children learning. We allow it to be good, and we thank you for your Invitation; but our customs differing from yours, you will be so good as to excuse us.

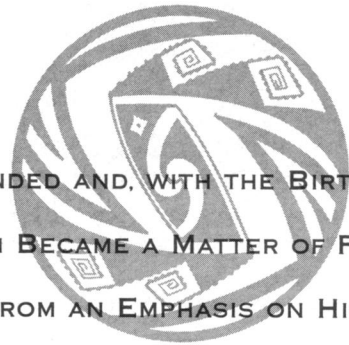
The colonial era ended and, with the birth of the new nation, Indian education increasingly became a matter of federal policy. Influenced by the limited results of the colonial educational missions, George Washington voiced a shift in policy from an emphasis on higher learning to vocational training for American Indians. "I am fully of the opinion," he concluded,

that this mode of education which has hitherto been pursued with respect to these young Indians who have been sent to our colleges is not such as can be productive of any good to their nations. It is perhaps productive of evil. Humanity and good policy must make it the wish of every good citizen of the United States that husbandry, and consequently, civilization, should be introduced among the Indians.

This educational philosophy unfolded in the 19th century and dominated until the 20th, even in the midst of tribal efforts to gain a foothold in higher education.

#### Tribal Support

While some tribes violently resisted attempts to "civilize" them through education, other Indian groups eagerly embraced higher learning. At the same time that Dartmouth was educating 12 members of the Five Civilized Tribes, the Cherokees and the Choctaws organized a system of higher education that had more than 200 schools, and sent numerous graduates to eastern colleges. The 1830 Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek set aside \$10,000 for the education of Choctaw youth. The first official use of the funds provided under this



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treaty occurred in 1841, when the tribe authorized the education of Indian boys at Ohio University, Jefferson College, and Indiana University. The 1843 Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs mentioned the education of 20 Choctaw boys, 10 at Asbury University, and 10 at Lafayette College.

Choctaw graduates from tribally operated boarding schools were selected on the basis of their promise and allowed to continue their education until they had completed graduate and professional study at colleges in the states. Several members of the Five Civilized Tribes entered Dartmouth in 1838, and, in 1854, Joseph Folsom, a Choctaw, received a degree. In all, 12 Choctaw and Cherokee students received support to attend Dartmouth from the "Scottish Fund"—the legacy of their predecessor, Samson Occum. Ironically, the Choctaw academic system, responsible for a literacy rate exceeding that of their white neighbors, collapsed when the federal government became involved in the late 1800s.

The first university in which Indians were to play a significant role was proposed in 1862. As was the case at Harvard, however, the Ottawa Indian University was more a dream than a reality. The Ottawas never received the promised university, as they were removed by the federal government to Oklahoma in 1873.

Bacon College, founded by the Baptists in 1880, also received Indian support, which came in the form of a land grant from the Creek tribe. Dedicated to training of Indian clergy, the college opened to three students. By the end of its fifth year, 56 students had enrolled. Bacon College still operates today with a strong (but not exclusive) commitment

to educate American Indians.

### Education As Assimilation

Indians who attended universities and colleges during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, for the most part, studied the same subjects as did the white students. However, as the federal government began to dominate Indian education in the late 19th century, significantly reducing the role of missionary groups, private individuals, and the states, the result was a continual de-emphasis on higher learning. Instead, the role of higher education changed to vocational training.

In 1870 Congress appropriated \$100,000 for the operation of federal industrial schools. The first off-reservation boarding school was established at Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1879. The boarding school, exemplified at Carlisle, dominated the federal approach to Indian education for half a century. Its methods included the removal of the students from their homes and tribal influences, strict military discipline, infusion of the Protestant work ethic, as well as an emphasis on the agricultural, industrial, and domestic arts—*not* higher academic study.

Most importantly, these institutions were designed to remake their Indian charges in the image of the white man. Luther Standing Bear, a Sioux, attended Carlisle in 1879. He recalled the psychological assaults he and others encountered during the educational process.

I remember when we children were on our way to Carlisle School, thinking that we were on our way to meet death at the hands of the white people, the older boys sang brave songs, so that we would meet death according to the code of the Lakota. Our first resentment was in having our hair cut. It has ever been the custom of Lakota men to wear long hair, and old

tribal members still wear the hair in this manner. On first hearing the rule, some of the older boys talked of resisting, but realizing the uselessness of doing so, submitted. But for days after being shorn we felt strange and uncomfortable. . . . The fact is that we were to be transformed.

Fueled by a large congressional appropriation in 1882, 25 boarding schools opened by the turn of the century—among them, Santa Fe Indian School, which became the Institute of American Indian Arts, a two-year postsecondary school, and Haskell Institute (now Haskell Indian Junior College) in Lawrence, Kansas. These institutes, like the normal schools of the 19th century, were not true colleges. Their standards of training, at best, approximated only those of a good manual-training high school. The range of occupational futures envisioned for Indian students was limited to farmer, mechanic, and housewife.

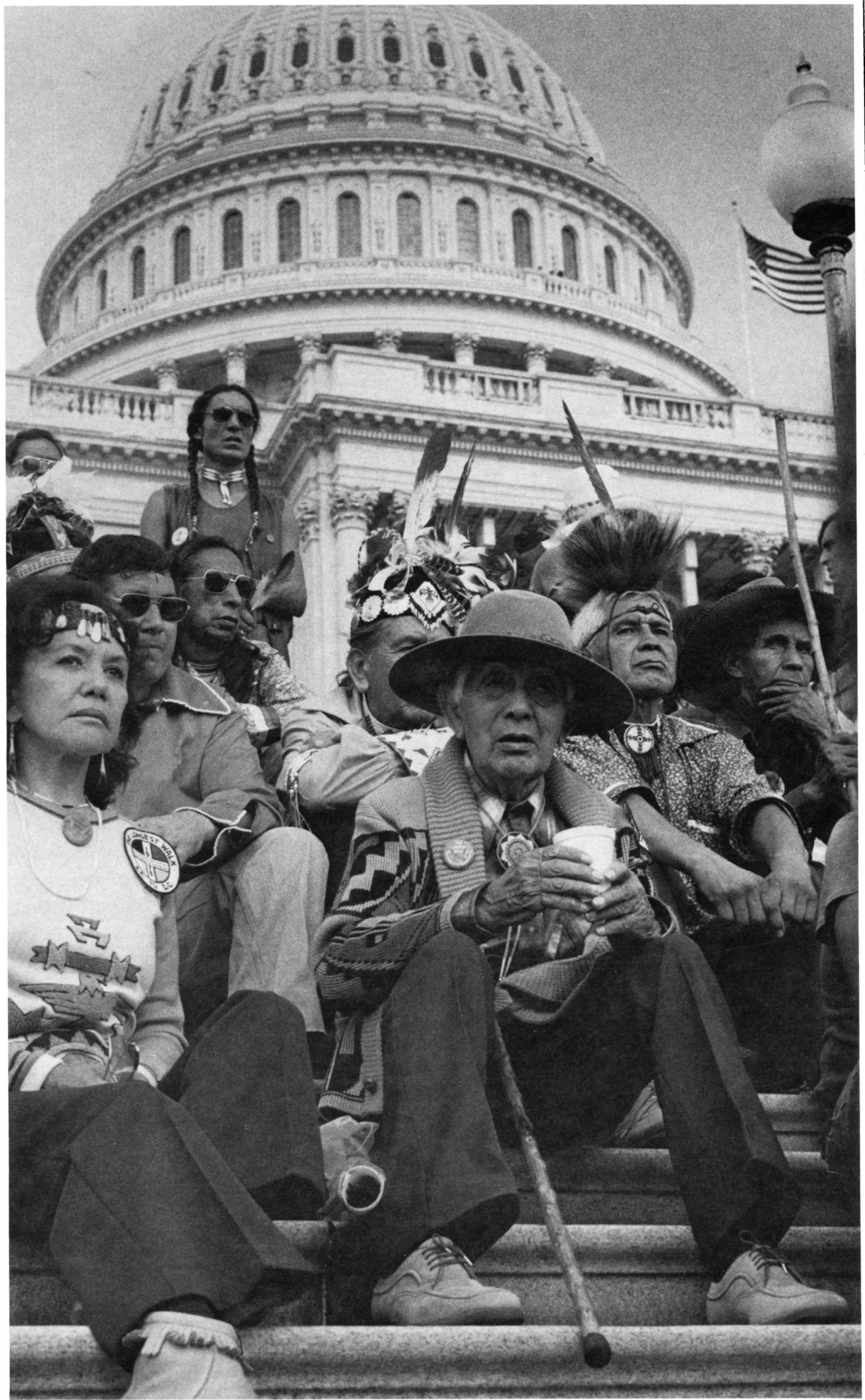
By the turn of the century, only a few talented Indian youth went on for further training at American colleges and universities. Ohiyesa, a Sioux, was among them. Adopting the notion that "the Sioux should accept civilization before it was too late," Charles A. Eastman (his English name) graduated from Dartmouth College in 1887, and three years later received a degree in medicine at Boston University. Eastman was keenly aware that his academic success depended on his acceptance of American civilization and the rejection of his own traditional culture. "I renounced finally my bow and arrow for the spade and the pen," he wrote in his memoirs. "I took off my soft moccasins and put on the heavy and clumsy but durable shoes. Every day of my life I put into use every English word that I knew, and for the first time permitted myself to



*The strong military influence and Protestant work ethic typifying the early boarding-school approach to Indian education is evident in this Carlisle Indian School photograph of the "Perseverance Class of 1913." (Cumberland County Historical Society Photo)*



*The long-standing struggle between Indians and Washington reached a dramatic peak in 1978 when a delegation of Indians made a five-month cross-country walk to the nation's capital to protest "anti-Indian legislation" in Congress. (The Bettmann Archive Photo)*





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Ohiyesa's accomplishments were rare in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The education of Native Americans—although still preserving the centuries-old purpose of civilizing the “savages”—seldom exceeded the high school level. The impact of this neglect on Indian educational attainment is reflected in enrollment figures. As late as 1932, only 385 Indians were enrolled in college and only 52 college graduates could be identified. At that time, too, American Indian scholarships were being offered at only five colleges and universities.

#### **Federal Efforts**

Not until the New Deal era of the 1930s, a period of reform in federal Indian policy, did Indian higher education receive government support. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, among other sweeping reforms, authorized \$250,000 in loans for college expenses. By 1935, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported 515 Indians in college. Although the loan program was discontinued in 1952, the Bureau of Indian Affairs had established the higher education scholarship grant program in 1948, allocating \$9,390 among 50 students. Indian veterans returning from World War II and eligible for GI Bill educational benefits added to the growing number of college students. According to estimates, some 2,000 Native Americans were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education during the last half of the 1950s. The enrollment grew to about 7,000 by 1965. Sixty-six Indians graduated from four-year institutions in 1961, and by 1968 this figure had almost tripled. Still, in 1966, only one percent of the Indian population was enrolled in college.

During the 1970s, a series of federal task force and U.S. General Accounting Office reports called attention to the academic, financial, social, and cultural problems that Indian students encountered in pursuing a college education. These reports fell on attentive Congressional ears. By 1979 the Bureau of Indian Affairs Higher Education Program was financing approximately 14,600 undergraduates and 700 graduate students. Of these, 1,639 received college degrees and 434 earned graduate degrees. In addition, federal legislation, including the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 and the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978, spawned striking new developments in Indian higher education.

Perhaps the most dramatic policy change reflected in the new legislation was the shift to Indian control of education. For the first time, Indian people—who had thus far been subjected to paternalistic and assimilationist policies—began to take control of their own affairs. Higher education was among the targets of the new Self-Determination programs, best illustrated by the development of tribally controlled community colleges.

#### **Tribal Colleges**

Tribal colleges evolved for the most part during the 1970s in response to the unsuccessful experience of Indian students on mainstream campuses. Today, there are 24 tribally controlled colleges in 11 western and midwestern states—from California to Michigan, and from Arizona to the Dakotas. These institutions serve about 10,000 American Indians and have a full-time equivalent enrollment of about 4,500 students.

Because Indian students most often live in economically poor communities, tuition is low and local tax dollars do not offer much assistance. Congress has authorized up to \$6,000 per student, but, in reality, the amount released to the colleges decreased throughout the Reagan era so that by 1989 the amount generated for each student was only \$1,900. Tribal leaders point out how odd it is that those students who are most at-risk receive the least assistance. One would think that if the government was serious about increasing opportunities for Indian youth, then colleges would be provided the funds necessary to aid those youth. Such has not been the case.

#### **Current Demographics**

By all accounts the Native American population of the United States is growing at a fast pace and becoming increasingly youthful. Current estimates place the total population of American Indians in the United States at slightly less than two million. Between 1970 and 1980, Indians between the ages of 18 and 24 increased from 96,000 to 234,000. The average age of this population is 16.

Although Native Americans live throughout the United States, over half live in the southwest. California, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico account for slightly less than 50 percent of the total Indian population. Native Americans are equally split between those who live in rural and urban areas. Los Angeles, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Phoenix, and Albuquerque have the largest numbers of urban Indians. The largest reservations in the United States are the Navajo Reservation in what is now New Mexico and Arizona and the





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Pine Ridge Reservation in the present state of South Dakota.

American Indians are among the most economically disadvantaged groups in the United States. The unemployment rate for American Indians who live on reservations often approaches 80 percent, with the median family income hovering around \$15,000. The percentage of Native Americans who live below the poverty line is three times the national average. About 50 percent of the Native American population over 30 years old has not completed high school.

Given the propensity for Native American students to leave one institution prior to an academic year's completion, valid estimates of how many high school graduates actually participate in a freshman year at a postsecondary institution are difficult to determine. A student, for example, may graduate from high school and decide to attend a particular college and he or she may leave relatively soon thereafter; a few months later the student may re-enroll at another institution. Meanwhile, the previous college may not even be aware the student has left. Consequently, a valid national percentage of Native American high school graduates who are college freshmen is unknown.

We do know that in 1980 there were 141,000 high school graduates, and 85,798 students were enrolled in postsecondary education. The general lesson to be learned here is that less than 60 percent of Native American high school students complete the 12th grade, and that less than 40 percent of those students go on to college. More simply, if 100 Indian students enter the 9th grade, only 60 will graduate from high school. Of these graduates, a mere 20 will enter academe, and only about three of these

will receive a four-year degree.

Not surprisingly, more than half of those students who go on to college will enter a two-year institution, and over 70,000 of the students will attend public institutions. The proportion of American Indian students who enroll full-time is around 50 percent, and Native American women outnumber their male counterparts on college campuses by about 20 percent.

#### The Task Ahead

What does this information tell us about American Indian participation in postsecondary education? The composite population of Native Americans is economically poorer, experiences more unemployment, and is less formally educated than the rest of the nation. A greater percentage of the population lives in rural areas, where access to postsecondary institutions is more limited. Although a majority of the population lives in the southwest, they attend postsecondary institutions throughout the country.

They have a population that is increasingly youthful, yet only three out of 100 9th-graders will eventually receive a baccalaureate. Those four-year institutions that have the largest percentage of Indian students are either in economically depressed states of the country such as Montana and South Dakota, and those colleges that have the highest proportion of Indian students—tribal colleges—receive only a fraction of what they should receive from the federal government to carry out their tasks.

This overview highlights the problems and challenges that American Indians have faced regarding higher education. One certainty is that the federal govern-

ment must renew its support for at-risk college students. Society can no longer afford excluding populations simply because they are different from the mainstream or prefer to remain within their own cultural contexts. All evidence suggests that Indian students and their families want equal educational opportunities. They seek better guidance in high school, more culturally relevant academic programming and counseling, and more role models on campus. Indian students do not want to be excluded from a university's doors because they cannot afford the education, and they do not want to be lost on a campus that doesn't value and accommodate their differences.

Many of the same challenges that confronted Caleb Cheeshateaumuck at Harvard face Indian college students today. A Native American senior recently reflected on her four years at school and the dysfunction between the world of higher education and the world from which she had come. "When I was a child I was taught certain things," she recalled, "don't stand up to your elders, don't question authority, life is precious, the earth is precious, take it slowly, enjoy it. And then you go to college and you learn all these other things, and it never fits."

Now, more than three centuries after Caleb Cheeshateaumuck confronted the alien environment of Harvard, the time is long overdue for cultural conflict and assimilationist efforts to end. American Indians must have opportunities to enter the higher education arena on their own terms—to encounter challenge without tragedy and triumph without co-optation. Only then can higher education begin a celebration of diversity in earnest. □