



# Postsecondary Education of Native Americans

Since the nation’s early years, the United States of America has enacted federal policies intended to provide educational opportunities to Indian peoples. The federal government maintains and supports its trust relationship with Indian tribes, in part, through various postsecondary education programs and initiatives. The trust relationship is a responsibility derived from federal statutes, treaties, court decisions, executive actions, and the Constitution (which assigns authority over federal-Indian relations to Congress).

This In Focus reviews college enrollment patterns and educational attainment levels of Native Americans and federal programs that support Indian postsecondary attainment.

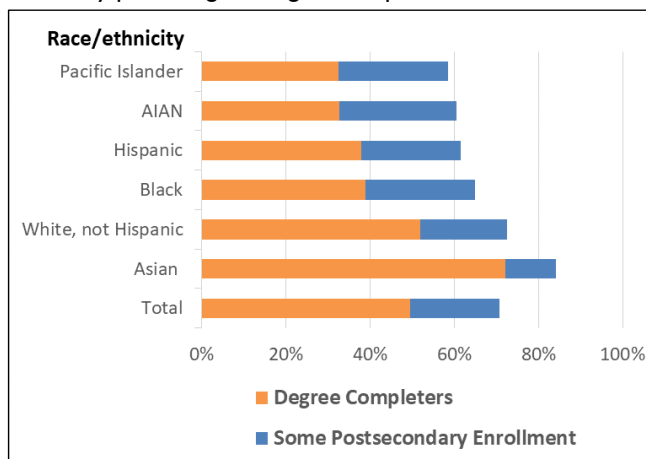
## Postsecondary Access and Completion

Although data are not available on Indian educational achievement nationally, the achievements of American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) students are reported. Persons who identify their race/ethnicity as AIAN may not be members of federally recognized Indian tribes, and not all members of such tribes may identify as AIAN.

According to the most recently published statistics of the U.S. Census Bureau (Census), as shown in **Figure 1**, postsecondary enrollment and completion rates when examined by race/ethnicity are lowest for persons who identified as AIAN and Pacific Islander in 2022. Such rates are highest for persons who identified as Asian or White, not Hispanic.

**Figure 1. Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Over Who Have Completed High School, by Race/Ethnicity, 2022**

Sorted by percentage of degree completers



**Source:** Figure prepared by CRS using U.S. Census Bureau, “Sex by Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Over,” American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table series B15002, 2022 (accessed on October 6, 2023).

**Note:** AIAN is American Indian and Alaska Native.

The percentage of high school completers ages 25 and up who had enrolled in postsecondary education at some time was lowest for persons who identified as AIAN (60%), Pacific Islander (58%), and Hispanic (62%).

The data also indicate that the percentage of high school completers ages 25 and up who at some time completed a postsecondary degree (associate’s or higher degree) was lowest for persons who identified as AIAN (33%) and Pacific Islander (32%).

## Federal Programs and Support

The federal government provides support to help members of federally recognized tribes (Indians) access and complete higher education. Two major mechanisms that primarily or exclusively support tribal members are funding for tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) and federal aid for Indian students. TCUs include federally operated or established institutions and tribally controlled colleges and universities (TCCUs). FY2024 appropriations for the programs discussed in this section are presented in **Table 1**.

TCUs and Indian students are eligible for and benefit from general federal educational assistance programs. For example, Indian students may be eligible to receive Pell Grants under the same terms as other students. The following programs are specific to TCUs and Indian students.

## Federally Operated or Established Institutions

The federal government operates two postsecondary institutions for tribal members and established one for the preservation of tribal culture.

The federal government, through the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), owns, operates, and funds two postsecondary institutions for tribal members—Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas and the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI) in New Mexico. Haskell is a four-year liberal arts university with over 800 undergraduates in academic year (AY) 2021-2022. SIPI, a two-year college with over 400 students in AY2021-2022, primarily awards associate’s degrees. Both institutions charge no tuition, and Haskell charged less than \$500 in fees in AY2022-2023.

The Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in New Mexico is an independent, multi-tribal nonprofit higher education institution for Native Americans dedicated to the study, creative application, preservation, and care of Indian arts and culture (20 U.S.C. Chapter 56). IAIA is federally chartered and under the direction and control of a Board of Trustees appointed by the President of the United States.

Admissions are not limited to tribal members. The four-year university enrolled over 1,100 undergraduate and graduate students in AY2021-2022. Undergraduate tuition and fees for domestic students were under \$6,000 in AY2022-2023.

**Institutional Support for TCUs**

Tribes formally control, sanction, or charter 32 colleges and universities, enrolling over 20,000 students in AY2021-2022. TCCUs are located around the Great Lakes and in the Plains states, Southwest, Northwest, and Alaska. TCCUs reflect tribal ideals of self-determination and culturally relevant educational attainment. Admissions are not generally limited to tribal members. AY2022-2023 undergraduate tuition and fees range from \$900 to \$6,700, depending on the TCCU. Almost two-thirds of TCCUs are four-year colleges. The majority of federal funding for TCCUs comes from formula grant programs administered by the DOI, U.S. Department of Education (ED), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Haskell, SIPI, and IAIA are also generally eligible to receive funding from the TCCU programs.

DOI and ED each administer two programs—one for the technical TCCUs (United Tribes Technical College and Navajo Technical University) and one for the other TCCUs.

- The ED Strengthening Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities program (Title III of the Higher Education Act) aims to improve and expand TCCU institutional capacity. For more information, see CRS Report R43237, *Programs for Minority-Serving Institutions Under the Higher Education Act*.
- The DOI Tribal Colleges and Universities program (Titles I and II of the Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act of 1978 [TCCUAA; P.L. 95-471, as amended]) funds the operation, improvement, and expansion of 29 TCCUs to ensure continued and expanded educational opportunities for Indian students.
- The ED Tribally Controlled Postsecondary Career and Technical Institutions (TCPCTI; Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 [P.L. 109-270]) funds expenses associated with career and technical education programs for Indian students at the technical TCCUs. For more information, see CRS Report R47071, *Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V): A Primer*.
- The DOI Tribal Technical Colleges program (Title V of TCCUAA) funds the costs of operating postsecondary career and technical education programs for Indian students at the technical TCCUs.

In addition, since FY2021 DOI has received appropriations to fund Tribal Colleges Facilities Improvement & Repair.

The USDA administers four programs authorized by the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994 (Title V, Part C, of P.L. 103-382; 7 U.S.C. §301 note) for the 1994 Land Grant Institutions (LGI), also known as TCUs. LGIs teach agricultural and mechanical sciences and

provide nonformal education to farmers, ranchers, and other constituents in their states. The First Morrill Act in 1862 provided grants of land to the states to establish the first LGIs. The Second Morrill Act in 1890 provided grants for the establishment and funding of LGIs that would enroll Black students. In 1994, P.L. 103-382 extended land-grant status to the LGIs. The Tribal Colleges Equity Grant Program helps prepare students for roles in tribal leadership, traditional knowledge, and agricultural careers. The Tribal College Extension Program supports informal, community-based learning such as farmer education. The Tribal College Research Program helps the 1994 institutions build scientific capacity and research knowledge for students. The Tribal College Endowment Program provides capacity grants that may be used at the discretion of the 1994 institutions. For more information, see CRS In Focus IF12009, *1994 Land-Grant Universities: Background and Selected Issues*.

**Financial Assistance for Indian Students**

Two states received grants of land in exchange for each maintaining a school that admits Indian students free of tuition charge. The schools are the University of Minnesota-Morris and Fort Lewis College in Colorado.

The Cobell Education Scholarship Fund (Fund), authorized by the Cobell Settlement through the Claims Resolution Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-291), provides merit- and need-based awards to tribal members for postsecondary education. In 2017, DOI fulfilled its total, aggregate maximum allowable contribution to the Fund—\$60 million.

DOI provides financial assistance to tribal members pursuing GED completion, postsecondary education, and post-graduate-level opportunities through the Scholarships and Adult Education program, Special Higher Education Scholarships, and Science Post-Graduate Scholarship Fund.

**Table 1. Appropriations for Select Postsecondary Indian Education Programs, FY2024**

Agency	Program	\$ in Thousands
DOI	Haskell and SIPI	30,325
IAIA	IAIA	13,482
DOI	Tribal Colleges and Universities	89,146
ED	Strengthening TCCU program	80,097
DOI	Tribal Technical Colleges	9,156
ED	TCPCTI	11,953
DOI	Tribal Colleges Facilities	16,000
USDA	Programs for 1994 LGIs	34,880
DOI	Scholarships	54,648
<b>Total</b>		<b>339,687</b>

Source: Federal agency tables of FY2024 congressional actions.

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