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Barriers and Strategies for Native American Student Enrollment in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of Literature

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Abstract

Native American student enrollment in both graduate and undergraduate programs is low. This article explores the barriers to Native American student enrollment in higher education through a systematic review of the existing literature from 2019-2024. The article further aims to identify strategies from the existing literature that colleges and universities can take to improve Native American graduate and undergraduate student enrollment. The findings are applicable to graduate, undergraduate, online, and on-campus programs. An analysis of the literature indicated that geographic location, financial concerns, and a need for community were barriers for Native American students. Native American students are often from rural areas. They may struggle with the social and economic barriers of rural life and with leaving the community of their tribe to seek education. The key strategies that were identified among the literature for improving enrollment for Native American graduate and undergraduate students at colleges and universities were a) to provide increased student support services, b) to improve Native American students' sense of presence and community on campus, c) to offer more online courses and degree programs, and d) to establish partnerships with Native American tribes in order to expand student opportunities for practicums and work placement. These barriers may also be concerns for graduate and undergraduate students from a variety of different backgrounds, such as adult learners. Implementing these strategies can help colleges and universities create a holistic approach to education that would benefit many graduate and undergraduate students.

Keywords: *Native American, higher education, student enrollment, barriers, strategies*

Barriers and Strategies for Native American Student Enrollment in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of Literature

Native American graduate and undergraduate students may complete courses on traditional campuses, at tribal colleges, or online (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020; Danver, 2016; *Postsecondary National Policy Institute*, 2025). Overall college and university enrollment has declined for Native American students, despite an increase in the Native American population. The Native American population grew by 11.6% between the 2010 and 2020 United States Census, and the combined Native American and Alaskan Native population grew by over 20% (Sanchez-Rivera et al., 2023).

The following statistical information from The Census' American Community Survey from the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2025) presents data on college enrollment in graduate and undergraduate programs in the United States. The survey found that there has been a 38% decrease in Native American college enrollment since 2010. The same report noted that undergraduate enrollment for Native American students has decreased by 40% and there has been an 18% decrease in graduate enrollment during that time frame. At four-year institutions, approximately 44% of Native American students completed a degree within six years, which was lower than the completion rate of 64.6% for non-Native American students. During the 2020-2021 academic year, over two million bachelor's degrees were conferred in the United States; however, only .05% of those degrees were awarded to Native American graduates. In the survey, Native American students were identified as the most likely group to be first generation college students, with 25.9% of Native Americans having a parent that has completed a bachelor's degree. The report also included that 78.3% of students at tribal colleges were Native American.

In a report of the total number of online graduate and undergraduate students, Danver (2016, Appendix A, Table 2) noted that Native Americans made up 15.5% of undergraduate students. The same report found that Native American students accounted for 8.7% of online graduate students (Danver, 2016, Appendix A, Table 3). Research on Native American students is very limited (Dabdoub et al., 2023). A systematic review of the existing literature will provide a better understanding of the barriers and strategies for Native American student enrollment and identify steps that colleges and universities can take to address these barriers for graduate and undergraduate students.

Purpose

The purpose of this review was to examine the existing current literature pertaining to Native American student enrollment in higher education to identify the current barriers to enrollment that Native American students encounter. Additionally, the review sought to identify the strategies colleges and universities can take to address these barriers. The information is applicable to graduate, undergraduate, online, and on-campus programs. Such information will likely benefit administrators and policy makers at higher education institutions, faculty, and Native American tribal leaders who may partner with colleges and universities for education, community, and workforce development. The article is organized as follows: introduction, purpose, definitions, literature search method, findings, discussion, limitations, and conclusions. The existing literature was analyzed to address the following questions:

RQ1: What barriers to enrollment affect Native American students in higher education?

RQ2: What strategies can institutions of higher education use to improve Native American student enrollment?

Definitions

The following pertinent terms are defined below:

Native American: The term “Native American” emerged in the 1970s to replace the term “American Indian,” although both are still used to describe the Native peoples of the United States and its territories (United States Department of the Interior, 2017). In this paper, American Indian will be used when cited by the author(s) for the sources that are being reviewed and in the literature search terms; otherwise, Native American is the term that will be used.

Native American tribe: Native American tribes are distinct and independent communities (United States Department of the Interior, 2017). Schiappa (2024) described tribes as units of community organization among Native American peoples, which may include pueblos, bands, nations, and villages. According to Schiappa social practices and customs may vary by tribe. Wilkins and Stark (2017) note that the tribes have a sovereign status within the United States. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (n.d.) recognizes 574 distinct tribes in the United States.

Literature Search Method

Research questions were drafted, followed by a list of relevant key terms. Criteria for the inclusion of sources were established. A literature search was performed on 12/31/24 using the following databases: Education Research Complete, ERIC, Gale Academic OneFile, APA

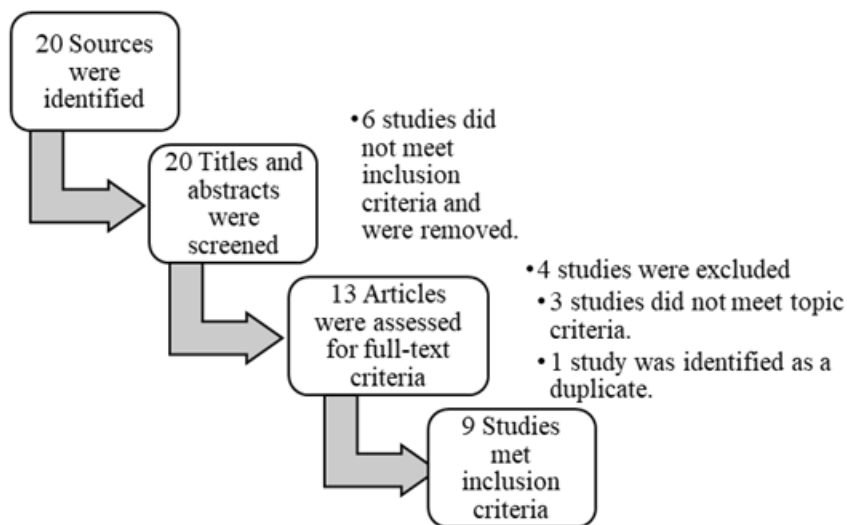
PsycInfo, Academic Search Complete, JSTOR Journals, Medline Complete, and Supplemental Index. The search terms were limited to the following: *learning*, *student engagement*, *student enrollment*, *Native American students in higher education*, and *American Indian students in higher education*. This review followed a structured search strategy for the literature; however, the list of search terms may have not captured studies that used alternative terminology. The search terms are addressed in the *Limitations* section of the article, along with recommendations for further research.

Inclusion Criteria

Search parameters included that the articles must be peer-reviewed journal articles that were published from 2019-2024. A total of 20 articles were returned in the search and encompassed a wide variety of topics. Criteria for inclusion in the review were that the source must have full-text available, be available in English, and must be specific to current Native American students in higher education. The first review of the titles and abstracts of the articles revealed that 13 articles from the search were relevant to the topic of this literature review. Other articles were not specific to Native American students in higher education; therefore, they were not included. In the second review of the full text of the articles, four were rejected because the articles were focused on historical time periods or topics other than current Native American student enrollment in higher education; therefore, they did not fit the scope of this review. Figure 1 contains a flowchart that details the selection process for the articles. The total number of journal articles in the final selection for the review was nine.

Figure 1

Flowchart of article selection



Note: A chart illustrating the process used for the article search and selection in this study.

Categorization of Articles

Upon completion of the literature search, the full text of each of the nine selected articles was collected, reviewed, and analyzed. Each article was listed in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Articles were categorized by year, author, and identified theme(s). The following themes emerged in the review of the literature: 1) Native American graduate and undergraduate students experience barriers regarding geographic location, financial concerns, and a need for community, 2) Strategies for educational institutions included offering student support services, increasing opportunities for student presence, providing more online learning opportunities, and collaborating with Native American tribes. The most frequently occurring themes in the literature were student support services and tribal partnerships. Geographic location was the primary barrier identified in the review, followed by financial concerns. Table 1 contains the barriers that were identified in the literature by source, and Table 2 contains the strategies that were identified.

Table 1

Literature themes (barriers)

	Azure et al. (2024)	Caffrey (2021)	Chelberg & Bosman (2020)	Dabdoub et al. (2023)	Keo et al. (2019)	Kendrick (2023)	Isadore et al. (2024)	Thomas et al. (2022)	Weissma n (2021)
Geographic Location	X			X	X	X	X		X
Finances	X	X			X	X			X
Community	X	X				X			X

Note: A notation of articles and themes pertaining to RQ 1.

Table 2

Literature themes (strategies)

	Azure et al. (2024)	Caffrey (2021)	Chelberg & Bosman (2020)	Dabdoub et al. (2023)	Keo et al. (2019)	Kendrick (2023)	Isadore et al. (2024)	Thomas et al. (2022)	Weissma n (2021)
Student Support	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Student Presence	X		X	X		X			
Online Learning									X
Tribal Partnerships	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	

Note: A notation of articles and themes pertaining to RQ 2.

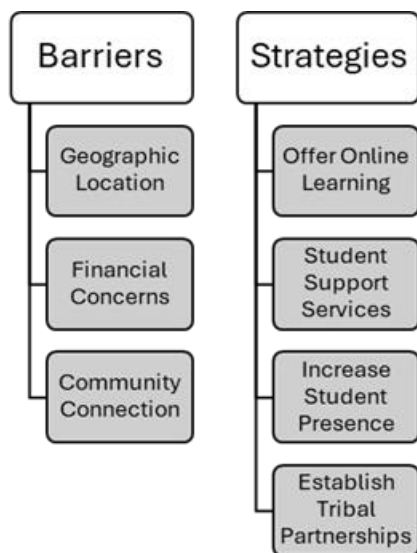
Findings

Native Americans may experience many barriers preventing them from enrolling in college or completing a degree either on campus or online. The major barriers to enrollment that emerged from the review of literature pertaining to geographic location, financial concerns, and a need for Native American student presence in the college and university community. Several strategies for improving Native American graduate and undergraduate student enrollment were also identified in the literature. Strategies for assisting Native American graduate and

undergraduate students included student support services, increasing student presence, expanding online learning opportunities, and partnering with Native American tribes. The literature reviewed pertained to students across colleges and universities in the United States, including tribal colleges. Figure 2 illustrates the barriers and strategies that were identified.

Figure 2

Barriers and Strategies



Note: The connection of the themes between the subtopics of barriers and strategies.

Geographic Location

In their study of the American Community Survey from 2008-2016, Keo et al. (2019) reported that Native American students may have lower enrollment because their employment and economic gains following graduation are lower than other groups. The authors further noted that this may be in part because Native American and Alaskan Natives are overrepresented in rural communities. Native American students from rural areas often struggle with relocation to college (Azure et al., 2024). Dabdoub et al. (2023) noted that for many Native American students, attending college is the first time that they have left their tribe; thus, relocating to a new area and new routine may be difficult for students. Caffrey (2021) reports that Native American students often struggle with adapting to college life. Kendrick (2023) found that there was a significant underrepresentation of American Indian students at the university site when compared to the demographics of the surrounding geographic area with only 1% of the student population identifying as American Indians/Alaskan Natives.

Financial Concerns

Over 70% of Native American students at United Tribes Technical College, a tribal college in North Dakota, were identified as low-income (Azure et al., 2024). Kendrick (2023) noted a need for decreased application and enrollment fees for American Indian students to reduce the financial burden of attending college. As mentioned in the *Geographic Location* section, Keo et al. (2019) noted concern regarding possible lower economic incentives for attending college among Native Americans. The authors also noted that a student's ability to repay student loan debt may be impacted by economic concerns.

Community Connection

A strong need to feel connected to both the campus and tribal community was another theme that emerged in the literature. Azure et al. (2024) reported that Native American students often find it difficult to move away from their tribal community to attend colleges or universities. Several articles identified the importance of community connection for Native American students (Caffrey, 2021; Dabdoub et al., 2023; Kendrick, 2023; Isadore et al., 2024; Weissman, 2021). In Kendrick (2023), faculty and staff noted that Native American students did not have a strong presence on campus. A need for a greater sense of community and focus on Native American communication and culture on the campus was also indicated (Kendrick, 2023). The most frequent theme identified by Kendrick (2023) was a need for Native American student clubs.

Strategies

Several barriers to Native American student enrollment were identified in the literature; however, the research that was reviewed also contained many recommended strategies for addressing these barriers. The strategies pertain to graduate, undergraduate, online, and on-campus programs. These strategies will be useful to college administrators, faculty, and Native American tribal leaders. The literature pertaining to strategies is reported in the following subsections.

Student Support Services. Kendrick (2023) noted that Native American students need college and university services that will address enrollment barriers and increase the support services that are available to Native American students. Azure et al. (2024) reported that Native American students need scholarships, financial advising, and mental health support services. Kendrick (2023) also noted that Native American students benefit when colleges and universities

offer comprehensive support programs that address the social, cultural, and spiritual needs of students in addition to providing academic support services. The services recommended by Kendrick (2023) and Azure et al. (2024) could be incorporated into ground campuses or offered online. Further recommendations for ground campus students included access to an on-campus food pantry, student housing, childcare, and healthcare resources (Azure et al., 2024).

Increase Student Presence. The need for Native American student clubs and events and to increase the presence of Native American students was another trend that emerged in the literature (Dabdoub et al., 2023; Kendrick, 2023). Caffrey (2021) called for every institution for higher learning to establish a Center for Native American Students. The author reported that the center should be staffed with personnel who are knowledgeable about Native American culture and who can assist Native American students with navigating their journey through higher education.

Chelberg and Bosman (2020) found that support and encouragement help Native American students overcome barriers and develop self-efficacy. The authors reported that tribal colleges are uniquely designed to provide support for Native American students. According to Weissman (2021), the increased sense of community is one of the elements that tribal colleges and universities provide for students.

Offer Online Learning. Weissman (2021) noted that the move toward online course offerings led to increased enrollment among many tribal colleges during COVID-19. The author noted that when courses are offered online, they are more accessible to students. Online options offer an alternative for students who would otherwise have to commute or not enroll in college or university programs (Weissman, 2021). Weissman further noted that a blend of online and on-campus course options can help with enrollment and retention for graduate and undergraduate programs. Azure et al. (2024) reported that whether students reside in the state where they are attending college or not was one of the major predictors of their retention.

Establish Tribal Partnerships. Calls for collaboration between Native American tribes, colleges, and universities to promote student success were evident in the literature (Caffery, 2021; Dabdoub et al., 2023; Kendrick, 2023). The need for Native Americans to give back to their tribal community was identified in the literature (Thomas et al., 2022). Tribal partnerships may help further that opportunity. Kendrick noted that students often must complete practicums or clinical rotations as part of their degree program and that Native American student clubs and

tribal partnership agreements with facilities operated by Native American tribes could help them to complete these practicums and rotations. Including Native American speakers and working with Native American scholars and community leaders for university partnerships and events can also help to better serve Native American students (Caffrey, 2021). Dabdoub et al. recommended that colleges and universities work with Native American tribes to arrange for mentors, partnerships, and to establish job placement opportunities for students following graduation.

Discussion

This systematic review of literature focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2019-2024. Additional sources (Brint, 2022; Choctaw Nation, 2023; Gardner & Leary, 2023; Mann & Bowen, 2021; Nowak et al., 2023; Philpot et al., 2023; Rangel de-Lazaro & Duarte, 2023; Running Bear et al., 2021) were not included in the formal review due the search criteria; however, they are incorporated here to provide further insight and context to the discussion. The major barriers to enrollment for online and on-campus Native American college and university students identified in this review of literature were geographic location, financial concerns, and a need for community connection. The key strategies that colleges and universities can take to address these barriers are to a) provide student support services, b) increase Native American students' sense of presence and community on campus, c) offer more courses and degree programs online, and d) establish partnerships with Native American tribes for continued community involvement such as practicums and work placement opportunities. The barriers will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of the strategies.

Barriers

Kendrick's (2023) report on the underrepresentation of American Indian students at the university site indicated that fewer Native Americans sought to attend courses than would be expected based on the demographics of the surrounding area. One explanation for the low enrollment was the perceived lower economic and employment gains for Native American college graduates in rural locations that was identified by Keo et al. (2019). Running Bear et al. (2021) noted that students who reside in rural areas are more likely to have difficulty with poverty as well as access to utilities, such as electricity and high-speed internet, which could affect their ability to attend classes online. Philpot et al. (2023) noted that online higher education institutions should be mindful of the lack of technological resources that Native American students may face. With limited economic opportunities in rural areas and limited

access to resources and technology, Native Americans may be less likely to enroll in graduate or undergraduate programs.

Financial concerns were another barrier for Native Americans that may affect college or university enrollment for online or on-campus graduate and undergraduate students. Azure et al. (2024) noted that most Native American students were identified as low-income. The limited income earning opportunities for Native American college graduates that were identified by Keo et al. (2019) were mentioned above. The combination of low-income earning opportunities post-graduation with concerns about incurring college debt could contribute to enrollment hesitation. Brint (2022) noted that rising costs for higher education have created obstacles for many students; thus, financial concerns may also be a barrier for non-Native American students.

A recurring call for community connection for Native American graduate and undergraduate students emerged in the review of the literature (Caffrey, 2021; Dabdoub et al., 2023; Kendrick, 2023; Isadore et al., 2024; Weissman, 2021). Challenges with relocating away from the tribal community to attend campus-based courses were identified by Azure et al. (2024). A limited presence on campus and a need for a greater sense of communication and culture on the campus for Native American students were identified by Kendrick (2023). Nowak et al. (2023) also supported that a sense of community belonging enhanced degree completion for many students; thus, building opportunities for community and presence is beneficial for graduate and undergraduate students from a variety of different backgrounds.

Strategies

Kendrick (2023) advocated decreased application and enrollment fees for students to reduce the financial burden of attending college. Financial aid and admissions staff knowledgeable about scholarships and grants available to graduate and undergraduate students, including scholarships specific to Native American students, can help students better navigate enrollment (Caffrey, 2021). Calls for student support services, such as academic and financial advising, access to food, housing, healthcare, and mental healthcare resources were heavily noted in the literature (Azure et al., 2024; Kendrick, 2023; Keo et al., 2019). Offering a whole-student support approach that includes childcare, access to health care, wellness resources, and other support services may help students who might otherwise find it difficult to balance the responsibilities and needs of their daily life with the desire to attend college. All students could benefit from colleges and universities offering such programs. For example, many adult students

at colleges and universities benefit from holistic approaches to education that address the social, economic, and technological barriers to learning, and provide a sense of community (Gardner & Leary, 2023).

Chelberg and Bosman (2020) noted that tribal colleges are specifically designed to provide support for Native American students; thus, tribal colleges could serve as a model of student support for other colleges and universities. The need for Native American student clubs to enhance the sense of community for graduate and undergraduate students was identified by Kendrick (2023). Caffrey (2021) called for every institution for higher education to establish a Center for Native American Students to assist Native American students specifically; however, the author also notes that this idea would need to align with college and university budgets. A resource center in which the staff is knowledgeable about Native American needs, culture, and opportunities could provide services for all graduate and undergraduate students. Combined services would promote equality and help to keep costs low for colleges and universities. Such resource centers could be established on-campus or online.

Weissman (2021) reported that increases in enrollment occurred at tribal colleges when courses went online. Gardner and Leary (2023) noted that the flexible schedule of online learning is an excellent option for many students. Rangel de-Lazaro and Duarte (2023) reported that global internet improvements and technological advances have made online education much more accessible to students across the world. Through focusing on building and expanding online learning programs, colleges and universities can overcome the geographic barriers and the issue of leaving the tribal community to attend college that Native American graduate and undergraduate students experience.

Several sources called for collaboration between colleges, universities, and Native American tribes (Caffery, 2021; Dabdoub et al., 2023; Kendrick, 2023). Through establishing partnerships with Native American tribes, colleges, and universities can engage with Native American scholars and leaders to learn the educational and cultural needs of Native American students. They can also form community partnerships that will allow college students more opportunities to complete practicums and find employment opportunities upon completing their degree (Caffery, 2021; Dabdoub et al., 2023; Kendrick, 2023). Thomas et al. (2022) highlighted the need for Native Americans to give back to their tribal community through their education. Many students would benefit from new opportunities for practicums and job placements that

could open up through tribal partnerships with colleges and universities; for example, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's Division of Commerce has a partnership with the Oklahoma State University's Institute of Technology to allow casino and resort employees to receive college course credit for training (Choctaw Nation, 2023). In tribal partnerships such as the one reported by Choctaw Nation (2023), the tribe benefits from the education of their workforce, employees gain education, and colleges and universities increase opportunities for student enrollment. Mann and Bowen (2021) reported that community partnerships can transform colleges, universities, students, faculty, and the surrounding community.

Limitations

This review followed a structured literature search strategy. This review was limited by the fact that there were only nine sources that were included in the final review. Analyzing results from a larger selection of sources may have yielded further information pertaining to the barriers and strategies for Native American student enrollment; however, a larger selection of articles may be difficult to find. Dabdoub et al. (2023) noted that the literature available on Native American students is very limited because this is an understudied population. Further studies of Native American student enrollment in higher education are needed. A comparison between services currently offered by institutions of higher education and tribal colleges was also not included. A more specific comparison between campus-based, online, and tribal colleges and universities could have enhanced the review. The term "indigenous" is a broad description that does not specifically convey the status of the tribes within the U.S. legal framework, which is better represented by the terms "Native American" and "American Indian" (Wilkins & Stark, 2017); however, the list of search terms may not have captured studies that used other terms. Additional articles may have been retrieved if more specific terms for higher education, such as postsecondary, college, or university had been included. Further research is needed to address these limitations.

Conclusion

This systematic review of literature focused on the barriers and strategies for Native American student enrollment in higher education. The major barriers to enrollment for online and on-campus Native American college and university students identified in this review of literature were geographic location, financial concerns, and a need for community connection. Taking steps to identify and address these barriers at an institutional level may be beneficial for

colleges and universities who seek to offer a holistic student experience that aids in student enrollment and retention in online and on-campus graduate and undergraduate courses.

The key strategies that were identified for colleges and universities to address barriers to Native American graduate and undergraduate student enrollment are to a) provide student support services, b) increase Native American students' sense of presence and community on campus, c) offer more courses and degree programs online, and d) establish partnerships with Native American tribes for continued community involvement such as practicums and work placement opportunities. Native Americans have a strong need to give to give back to their tribal community through their education (Thomas et al., 2022). Native American tribes benefit from collaboration with colleges and universities and through gaining education for their tribal members and increased support for their communities. Through offering a holistic support approach that includes wellness resources and other support services, colleges and universities can help many graduate and undergraduate students balance the requirements of daily life with attending courses either on campus or online.

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