

WHATEVER IT TAKES: Creating Pathways for Student Success at Tribal Colleges and Universities



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Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) were formed to provide a culturally relevant postsecondary education to American Indian and Alaska Native students. TCUs offer an array of services to support their students' success; however, little is known about the breadth of these services. This research brief summarizes a qualitative study of 34 leaders, faculty members, and staff members from five TCUs. The study examined how student success is defined at TCUs and the programs and activities TCUs are implementing to support their students. At TCUs, the definition of student success goes beyond the traditional measures of enrollment, retention, and graduation to include students gaining cultural knowledge, impacting their communities, and meeting their individual goals. TCUs focus their programs and activities on three areas: outreach, retention, and postgraduation. They are implementing an impressively large number of programs that can be characterized as holistic, student-tailored, culturally based, and family- and community-focused. All TCU staff, from custodians to leaders, embody a unique, "whatever it takes" philosophy of supporting their students.



Whatever It Takes: Creating Pathways for Student Success at Tribal Colleges and Universities

Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) take a unique approach to defining and supporting student success that is rooted in their dual mission and focus on meeting student and community needs. Much of the literature focuses on American Indian and Alaska Native students' success in higher education generally, especially at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Less is known about what student success looks like at TCUs, as well as the programs and resources available to TCU students. This research brief summarizes student support services available at five tribal colleges and offers recommendations for next steps.

What Do We Know About TCU Student Success?

The limited research literature on TCU student success centers on three themes: the dual mission of TCUs, factors that support student success, and the role of faculty who are culturally similar to the students they serve.

Dual mission. In one study, founding TCU presidents said TCUs exist “not only to teach “useful” skills (like business and carpentry), but also to restore dignity and integrity to [tribal] societies and their own body of scholarship” (Boyer, 2015). TCUs have a two-part mission to provide holistic higher education programs and opportunities to tribal citizens that are community- and culturally based (AIHEC, n.d.).

► **At TCUs, cultural, historical, and language components are woven into degree offerings, assessment approaches, and, importantly, campus support structures.**

Stated another way, TCUs were formed to revitalize tribal cultures through culturally grounded curricula that are incorporated into high-need degree programs.

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Tribal colleges and universities were modeled after community colleges because of their commitment to open access, low tuition, and educational programs that are responsive to local economic needs. Early TCU leaders also found the community college model was a better fit for the tribal colleges' rural locations and funding mechanisms. Unlike traditional community colleges, TCUs were formed to preserve and perpetuate tribal culture, teachings, knowledges, and languages.

Factors of TCU student success. Researchers inside and outside TCUs have identified several activities and approaches used by TCUs to help their students succeed, including maintaining family and community connections, supporting students' cultural identities, and using a family-based educational approach. These factors boil down to a focus on culture, community, and family. While culture and community are integral to the unique missions of tribal colleges and minority-serving institutions (MSIs), the emphasis on family is what makes TCUs uniquely distinct from MSIs and PWIs. TCUs use a "whole community" approach based on the principle that students don't have to leave their family or culture to obtain an education.

Indigenous faculty. Like community college faculty, tribal college faculty play an important role in their students' success. However, the student population at TCUs differs significantly because they must serve a student body that is at least 50% American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) to maintain accreditation, though they usually serve a significantly larger percentage of AIAN students. Tribal college students desire to have and benefit from Native/Indigenous faculty at their tribal college and the institutions to which they transfer. Currently, 44% of TCU faculty are American Indian or Alaska Native (AIHEC, 2020). Research indicates that Native/Indigenous faculty play a critical role as mentors and role models to tribal college students (Williams, 2007; Youngbull, 2022). Furthermore, students who transfer to PWIs want meaningful interactions and connections with Indigenous faculty, staff, peers, and programs. These relationships help students to feel a sense of belonging and provide support while on campus (Makomenaw, 2012).

These key factors underscore that we have an incomplete understanding of what student success looks like at TCUs. Importantly, these factors also highlight there are key differences between TCUs and community colleges and why we need to study student success in the TCU setting.

The Current Study: Interviews with Tribal College and University Leaders and Faculty and Staff Members

This study was designed to add to the paucity of literature on TCU student success. Specifically, this study examines how student success is defined at TCUs, as well as the programs and activities TCUs are implementing to support their students' success. It was guided by three theoretical frameworks: Holistic Student Support (Achieving the Dream, 2022), Family Education Model (HeavyRunner and Decelles, 2002), and the concept of Relationality (Wilson, 2008).

Study participants included 34 TCU leaders (e.g., president, vice president of academic affairs), faculty members, and student support staff members. We interviewed six or seven people from each of the following five tribal colleges: Diné College, Navajo Technical University, Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College, Turtle Mountain Community College, and United Tribes Technical College. The interview questions asked participants to discuss student support programs, resources, and initiatives at their college. The interviews were conducted by Zoom between May and October 2021.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using open and analytic coding to identify emergent major and minor themes.



How is Student Success Defined?

No single definition of student success emerged from the interviews. Of course, to maintain accreditation and for enrollment management purposes, tribal colleges and universities must focus on enrollment, retention, and degree completion. However, these traditional indicators, while important, paint an incomplete picture of student success at TCUs.

This is largely due to the unique mission and cultural focus of tribal colleges. One leader described the challenge of defining student success as an “*evolving question that seems to come up every year. I don’t think we have found the definition yet.*” From his perspective, this “evolving question” is a positive thing because there are several additional criteria to consider when defining TCU student success.

Other participants agreed with this sentiment. They discussed several additional components of student success, which are less likely to be found at MSIs or PWIs.

- 1 Students Gain Cultural Knowledge.** This is viewed as equally important to retention, enrollment, and degree completion rates because it is a primary reason tribal colleges were formed. One TCU leader described his TCU’s balanced approach that helps students learn tribal and Western ways of being, “[S]tudent success is knowing who you are and being grounded and to have a career that would benefit, not only yourself, your community, your people. And of course, I’d like to say most importantly, the elders. So that would be a student success definition is... as a whole individual rather than just focusing on what the Western perspective wants us to focus on.” Tribal colleges are seen as the best postsecondary institution to instill tribal cultural knowledge while completing a degree.
- 2 Students Impact the Community.** This aspect of student success involves the community – their input into programs and how they benefit when students are successful. Tribal colleges actively seek community input to ensure their degree programs meet tribal and local community workforce needs. An important reason for offering relevant degree programs is to keep TCU graduates in their tribal and local communities. Furthermore, the definition of student success includes students using their knowledge, expertise, and skills to build up the community. In sum, a definition of TCU student success must incorporate students’ impacts on the community.
- 3 Students Meet Their Individual Goals.** Tribal college leadership, faculty, and staff all discussed how students come to their institution with varying goals, which are fully supported rather than changed to meet institutional goals. Students enroll for many reasons: to take specific courses (e.g., culture and language courses, professional development for their careers), earn a certificate, complete general education courses, or earn a degree. To help students meet their goals, participants talked about the importance of removing barriers from students’ paths and tailoring services and resources toward their individual needs. Tribal college leaders, faculty, and staff embrace a “whatever it takes” philosophy to help students achieve their goals.

Tribal college leaders, faculty and staff embrace a “whatever it takes” philosophy to help students achieve their goals.



[TCUs] prepare you in ways that you're set to live in two worlds, but not forget where you come from" - TCU staff member

This broader definition of student success requires a postsecondary institution that looks different from the traditional community college. Participants discussed three unique characteristics of tribal colleges which they believe contribute to their students' success:

- 1 The familial environment at the institution.** Leadership, faculty, and staff used terms like "collectivistic setting," "close knit," "looking out," "personal touch," and "relationship-building" to describe the institutional culture. It's not uncommon for TCU personnel to know or be related to students and their families, which allows for greater oversight of students' progress. The familial atmosphere invites all staff members, including custodians, to actively participate in student success efforts. Families and the community are always incorporated into culturally infused campus activities and programs. These activities and a familial environment help students to feel a sense of belonging and to build relationships across campus.
- 2 Physical campus design** which is informed by traditional philosophies and teachings. TCU campuses are infused with traditional culture, artwork, designs, and tribal languages. As one staff member said, *"[TCUs] prepare you in ways that you're set to live in two worlds, but not forget where you come from. ... But when you come to the college, you see [that] art up, whether it's the environment, the feeling, or even the museum itself, and just the way the college is designed."*
- 3 The institution's mission.** Tribal colleges are mission-driven institutions and, therefore, base their successes on achieving their missions. Most TCU mission statements include academic, cultural, and community components. Participants acknowledged it can be difficult to quantify these aspects of student success tied to their mission, particularly the cultural aspects. One TCU leader said, *"In all honesty, we're working on the measurable piece of our student success definition. However, within every degree plan, there is a cultural component and throughout the college, we are a land grant institution, we are culturally based, we are overseen by the tribe really, and truly it's intrinsic and sometimes it's so intrinsic, it's very difficult to separate it out. Actually that might be a good thing because then you can see a way of life versus an add-on."*

How are Tribal Colleges and Universities Supporting Student Success?

TCUs are implementing a broad array of programs and activities to support their students' success. Three themes for student support services emerged from the interviews: outreach, retention, and post-graduation. These themes provide an in-depth view into what TCUs are doing to holistically support student success, starting before a student enrolls, during their time as a student, and continuing after they graduate. Notably, much of this work involves culturally based and family- and community-centered services, resources, and programs.

THEME 1: OUTREACH

Outreach efforts at TCUs are influenced by their mission to respond to community needs and their commitment to Tribal Nation-building through the revitalization of traditional knowledges, practices, arts, and languages. Because most TCUs are located in rural areas and on reservations, their outreach efforts are directed to the tribal/local community and tribal/local high schools.

Outreach to the Tribal/Local Community

Participants discussed the importance of outreach to their tribal/local community. TCUs use several methods to reach potential students, including:

- **Cultivating and Sustaining Relationships** – Many TCUs are the only postsecondary institution in the area. TCU leaders, faculty, and staff recognize the importance of cultivating relationships not only with potential students but with the local community by maintaining open lines of communication on a personal and professional level. TCUs consider outreach an institution-wide effort of leaders, faculty, and staff, rather than the responsibility of one recruiter.
- **Summer Bridge Programs** – Summer bridge programs bring community members to the college, where they are introduced to higher education and learn about the degree programs. These programs reach a broad audience with relatively little effort on the part of TCU leadership, faculty, and staff.
- **Social Media** – TCUs are posting program information, deadline announcements, and videos on numerous social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and appearing on local radio stations. Social media outreach became more important during the pandemic.
- **Website** – Many TCUs are in the process of updating their websites to better communicate their academic programs and services to students and the community. Several TCUs have posted videos of campus tours and student stories about why they chose to pursue their degree at a TCU.
- **Program Development Feedback** – Tribal colleges and universities seek regular feedback from the community on their programs and curriculum through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Outreach is considered a two-way street that encourages greater collaboration between TCUs and their tribal/local communities. In-person visits to tribal/local communities are particularly important for not only recruiting students, but also getting feedback and fulfilling their mission to meet the needs of the community.

“I always tell people that we have the three As: affordability, accessibility, and accountability, and ensuring that we’re providing that quality teaching and learning format. And really supporting our nation-building.”

- TCU staff member

“So that’s our goal, go out, try to recruit at local community events to target those kids like, ‘Hey, you need to come to college. It’s no big deal if your mom and dad never went to college. You can still come.’ And we want to serve all students. ... We’re not just trying to recruit the salutatorians, valedictorians of the classes. We want to serve our community and we want to serve our people.”

- TCU staff member

Outreach to Tribal/Local High Schools

TCUs build formal partnerships with local high schools to create a student pathway from high school to college. This outreach helps to not only introduce high schoolers to higher education, it can help better prepare students for college.

- **Dual Enrollment** – These programs benefit the tribal college by serving as a feeder for new students and benefit students by helping them to earn college credits in high school. By connecting students to a campus, community, and support services early on, dual enrollment programs also improve student retention and success after they enroll.
- **Micro Campuses** – Micro campuses, also known as site or satellite campuses, allow students to attend college without having to move or commute long distances. One participant described a potential ripple effect from a student’s dual enrollment success. Family members may think about higher education for themselves and are more likely to enroll if a satellite campus is located in their community. In this way, micro campuses attract students who need the flexibility and tribal citizens who might not otherwise consider attending college.

Challenges to Outreach Efforts

Participants noted several challenges in their effort to reach potential students.

- **Visibility** is a significant challenge. TCUs and their students are doing impressive work that would help recruit students to campus, yet staff have little capacity for additional marketing efforts. One staff member said several student accomplishments and projects have not been shared with a larger audience outside the institution, thus hurting their outreach efforts.
- **Competition** with other institutions. More postsecondary institutions are developing online programs, thus increasing competition for students who prefer learning online or are unable to enroll in in-person degree programs. However, in the long run, these changes could lead TCUs to develop new and innovative approaches to targeting potential students across and outside of tribal communities.
- **Internet access** is a major challenge, especially for institutions on remote reservations. One staff member said, “[Y]ou can provide all the services in the world, but if it’s not conducive to where [students are] at technologically—internet capability—then it does you no good.” To circumvent this challenge, some TCUs still send information through the mail.



THEME 2: RETENTION

This theme aligns with the traditional definition and measure of student success. At TCUs, retention is supported through holistic support services that address students' academic, financial, personal, health and wellness, and technology needs.

Student Support Services

TCUs offer an array of support services and resources through grant-funded student support programs and federal TRIO programs. Other campus offices, such as wellness centers, financial aid, internship and advising, offer their own services. This array of holistic services reinforces the "whatever it takes" approach to student success. There are layers of support provided to students starting with initial contact and continuing throughout their educational journey. These layers include the following:

1. ACADEMIC SUPPORT – A core activity of any postsecondary institution is support for their students' academic success. Tribal colleges are no different; however, this core activity looks different at TCUs because of their "whatever it takes" approach to student success. Below are areas of academic support discussed by TCU leaders, faculty, and staff.

- **Advising** – Advising structures differ across TCUs; some colleges have a faculty advisor for each degree program and others have general staff advisors. A common theme across interviews was the importance of open communication between faculty and staff to share student progress and challenges. TCUs encourage students to make connections with leadership, faculty, and staff members besides their advisor.
- **Tutoring** – TCUs offer many tutoring services across subjects (e.g., writing, math, science) and formats (e.g., online and in-person, walk-in and scheduled).
- **Leadership** – TCU leaders recognize the importance of being available to students and building trust so students can speak openly about their experiences. In this way, leaders serve as advisors and can advocate for students' needs.
- **Faculty** – Faculty members provide a variety of academic supports that influence student success.
 - **Expanded Course Offerings and Scheduling** – Faculty members offer multiple course sessions, independent study options, and intersession courses to accommodate student needs. After the pandemic, TCU faculty are exploring hybrid (online and in-person) course delivery for courses that were traditionally held in-person to accommodate students with caretaking duties or who live outside the tribal community.
 - **Revised Remedial Courses** – TCUs have revised, or are revising, their remedial courses. Students are enrolled in college-level courses immediately and offered intensive support such as tutoring. Faculty play a key role in evaluating their student's preparation for and progression through these courses.
 - **Experiential Learning** – Experiential learning, or learning by doing, is a traditional method for teaching cultural protocols and activities and is a component of many TCU degree programs. Faculty use experiential learning opportunities such as student projects to collaborate with the tribal community.

"[S]tudents, they need to be provided with the most convenient and most fair avenues for obtaining their education. ...We found out [through the pandemic] that we can facilitate knowledge and learning remotely electronically. Why can't we also do that once we're able to physically go back in the classroom again?"

- TCU faculty member

- **Professional Development** - Faculty members' own professional development also supports students. Most TCU faculty members are non-Native, so TCUs have developed trainings on tribal culture, protocols, and history. These trainings emphasize the importance of building relationships with students and the tribal community. Faculty can enroll in the TCU's tribal language and history courses, sometimes at no cost. During the pandemic, faculty members also completed trainings in online course delivery to improve their teaching practices and keep students engaged.
- **Integrating Culture, Language, and History into Curricula** - TCU faculty must develop and update their curriculum and pedagogy to be culturally relevant, as this is a bedrock principle for tribal colleges. This can be challenging, especially for non-Native faculty. TCU leadership and faculty have employed a variety of approaches to develop more culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy, including professional development training, sharing approaches at faculty meetings, bringing in tribal elders to share stories and tribal knowledge, visiting tribal lands and important sites, and completing courses in tribal government, history, and language. One non-Native TCU faculty member described how their teaching practice changed after joining the tribal college. *"[I]t changed the way I teach. It's changed the content I bring in. And when I look for a guest speaker, it's also changed who I've looked for. So, in my criminal law class, if I bring in an attorney, a prosecutor to speak to my class, I've changed that up. ... there's definitely a desire to bring in more diverse sources of information and guest speakers with greater depth of experience in serving Native American communities."*

2. FINANCIAL SUPPORT - TCUs aim to keep tuition, fees, and overall cost of attendance low, while offering as much financial aid as possible to students. One TCU leader said, *"We try to make it as difficult as possible for our students to go into debt while going to school with us."*

- **Not Offering Loans** - Tribal colleges do not offer loans so their students don't go into debt. This is only possible because the cost of attendance is low and can be covered by other means. TCU staff make it a point to know their students' financial backgrounds and find other financial support such as scholarships and tuition waivers.
- **Tuition Waivers and Assistance** - Three TCUs offered some form of tuition waiver before the pandemic. Some offered waivers to all students and other TCUs offered waivers to students in specific programs. Declining enrollments during the pandemic prompted more TCUs to offer tuition assistance. At some TCUs, students are required to apply for federal Pell grants and other financial aid to determine their unmet financial need before they can apply for a tuition waiver.
- **Scholarships** - TCUs offer few institutional scholarships. Instead, they help students learn about and apply for scholarships from tribal education departments or organizations such as the American Indian College Fund, American Indian Science and Engineering Society, and Indigenous Education (Cobell Scholarship).
- **Emergency Aid** - Students can apply for emergency funding for unexpected costs and living expenses such as car repairs, rent, utility bills, and internet. This funding typically comes from donations and is critical for helping some students to stay in school. During the pandemic, federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding was used for direct disbursements to all students for living expenses and to help TCUs offer loaner laptops and tuition assistance. As one TCU leader said, *"It can be a decision-maker for our students. It can be the point that decides whether or not they're able to stay in school."*



- **Student Debt Forgiveness** – Student debt keeps many students from receiving their diploma upon graduation, re-enrolling at the TCU, or transferring to another institution. During the pandemic, enrollments decreased across postsecondary institutions. Tribal colleges used this as an opportunity to forgive student debt to encourage re-enrollment. At least one TCU experienced a boost in enrollment after implementing a student debt forgiveness initiative.
- **Internships.** Some tribal colleges have internships embedded within their degree programs, while others have developed partnerships with outside organizations.

3. PERSONAL SUPPORT – The level of personal support found at tribal colleges epitomizes their “whatever it takes” philosophy and differentiates TCUs from other postsecondary institutions.

- **Familial Connections and Involvement on Campus** – TCUs make family involvement and familial connections between staff and students a priority. One TCU leader said, “[Y]ou shouldn’t feel like you’re ever on your own. ...So it’s like you’ve got a whole team working with you.” TCUs make sure they involve family members in supporting students’ success. Additionally, leaders, faculty, and staff welcome the development of closer, familial relationships with their students.
- **Cultural Activities and Events on Campus** – Students are encouraged to help plan cultural events (e.g., pow wows), attend classes to learn traditional arts and crafts (e.g., beadwork), and engage in spiritual practices (e.g., smudging). Prayer is embedded in everyday activities and students also are encouraged to get involved in tribal affairs, such as language revitalization efforts, and larger political matters.
- **Career Preparation** – In addition to preparing students for graduate school and careers after graduation, TCU staff also help students develop life skills so they know how to be successful after they graduate, whether they transition to another educational program or into a job.
- **Student Government** – By participating in student government, students can raise issues and concerns to leaders.
- **Transportation Assistance** – One of the top challenges TCU students face is transportation. In response, many TCUs offer inexpensive bus service on the reservation, gas cards, and local taxi services.





United Tribes Technical College

- **Child Care Assistance** – Reliable child care is another top student concern, and few TCUs have the funding to offer child care themselves. They help students access tribal child care, yet many tribes have waiting lists. One TCU helped students living on campus develop their own “student-run” child care service. Child care remains a persistent challenge, however.

4. HEALTH AND WELLNESS

- **Fitness Centers** – Several TCUs have a campus fitness center. At least one houses additional resources such as a health clinic and an office for government support programs (e.g., SNAP, WIC). One TCU without a fitness center partnered with a local gym.
- **Mental Health and Counseling Services** – Mental health services typically entail access to a full-time certified counselor. Although students are notified of these services, one TCU found that incentivizing students with gift cards helped them use these services. One TCU leader said, *“We’ve created an incentive structure and system for people that maybe don’t prioritize mental wellbeing or see it as a priority. So we’ll give out gift cards. ...if you show up to mental wellbeing sessions. ...which works really, really well. So, its mental wellbeing and mental health services I feel has been one of our strong suits.”*
- **Food Pantries** – Although a relatively new service, TCUs are developing their own food pantries or partnering with existing local pantries.

5. DATA AND TECHNOLOGY

- **Data for Student Success** – TCUs are building capacity to analyze their institutional data and student surveys to better understand student outcomes (e.g., retention, qualitative success indicators), and student challenges. Some TCUs are developing enrollment management plans to better understand their students’ pathways to success.
- **Technology and Connectivity** – The move to remote learning during the pandemic laid bare the challenges faced by rural institutions (and households) with limited internet access. In the short term, TCUs used federal funding to provide internet hot spots on and off campus, improve Wi-Fi signals on campus, and help students pay for internet access at home. Tribal communities also set up internet hot spots, which gave students additional options to work on their computers in their cars. Students also needed laptops for remote learning. TCUs provided assistance by offering rental laptops, purchasing them outright for all students, or adding the cost of laptops to students’ financial need budgets. After the pandemic, TCUs have maintained or expanded their internet access and laptop programs, and are discussing how to leverage technology to support student success.

How are Services Delivered?

How do TCUs deliver these services? Participants discussed three main approaches to delivering services. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and exist to some degree at each TCU.

- 1 One-Stop Shop or Centralized Student Services Approach** – Participants emphasized the importance of a centralized location for student support services, such as advising, registration, and financial aid. Before centralization, students would be “given the runaround” or would get lost in their search for the correct office. A centralized approach requires each office and department to collaborate and understand what the other does. One TCU leader said, *“Our division is designed to help students with the social, emotional, psychological, [and] financial components of their academic career. I always ensure that the team is cross-trained, that they’re aware of what the other program is doing. So that if a student comes to them, that it is truly a one-stop shop. Meaning they got their financial aid, their advising, and their tutoring questions answered.”*
- 2 Whatever It Takes Approach** – Several leaders and faculty and staff members mentioned that all TCU personnel are responsible for identifying students who may be struggling. This may involve going beyond one’s assigned job duties and connecting students with other offices or services by calling ahead to a person in another office or walking the student that office. One TCU leader said, *“All of our team members have a responsibility of some sort in the success of our students. And that includes our facilities folks who have a responsibility to make the space look inviting and to look well-cared for.”*
- 3 Holistic Approach** – Based on tribal cultural teachings and understanding, students are viewed more holistically as family and community members with cultural and spiritual needs, not only as college students. This perspective inspires TCUs to meet students’ needs beyond academic and financial needs, and to measure student success differently.

Formal Student Success Support (SSS) Programs

Each tribal college offers formal student success support (SSS) programs in addition to the individual student supports discussed above.

- 1 Early Alert System** – Each institution has an early alert system to track student attendance, grades, and faculty members’ notes. Staff are alerted when a student misses consecutive classes, for example, and they connect the student to an advisor or counselor to build a plan for success. Leaders and faculty and staff members with an informal connection to the student can add context to the student’s struggles or concerns and help tailor the support.
- 2 First-Year Experience Program and College Success Course** – Four TCUs in the study offered a college success course and a fifth offered a first-year experience program. Topics in these courses varied, but typically include academic skills (e.g., study habits), information about supportive resources on campus, life skills (e.g., budgeting, rental insurance), and cultural components.

THEME 3: POST-GRADUATION

Because tribal colleges and universities are responsive to the community(ies) they serve, they develop degree programs and certificates to meet local workforce needs. One measure of student success is how well TCUs prepare community members to fill positions in tribal government and with tribal and local organizations. Another measure is how well students are prepared for additional education (e.g., bachelor's or master's degrees)

TCU leaders believe the job placement pathway with tribal governments, organizations, and partners could be strengthened. Although there are strong partnerships in certain fields, such as teaching and medical assistants, some TCUs see the need for formal partnerships with tribal governments to help place graduates into jobs. One TCU has a placement coordinator who helps students find employment. Another TCU has an outreach coordinator who contacts students six-months after graduation to ask about their employment status and how closely their job matches their degree. Data like these can help TCUs show their impact and help students understand the return on their investment in higher education.

Similarly, TCU staff also help students seamlessly transfer to another institution by ensuring their courses count toward the other institutions' degree program requirements, building relationships with other institutions, and advocating on students' behalf.



Student Barriers and Challenges

TCU leadership, faculty, and staff members identified many student barriers and challenges. Across the board, the top three barriers were housing, child care, and transportation. While some TCUs could offer limited on-campus housing, limited public transportation, or creative solutions to child care (e.g., student-run daycare), these barriers still make it difficult for students to succeed in college. Other barriers and challenges include poor internet access, financial debt, lack of financial aid, family concerns, food insecurity, and mental health concerns.

Leaders and faculty members mentioned other barriers and challenges imposed by the college, such as financial aid and degree requirement policies. One leader expressed concern that some students do not understand the reasoning behind culture and language course requirements. To better understand their students' barriers and characteristics, leaders are working with their offices of institutional research to analyze student data.

Similarly, faculty members were aware of several factors that influence whether students withdraw or stay in school. They listed barriers such as college readiness, specifically writing skills and understanding expectations; family obligations; finances; and even staff turnover in key student services positions due to lack of funding. Finally, faculty discussed students' mental health and noted that some students have experienced trauma that affects their studies.



Conclusion and Next Steps

This study is one of the first comprehensive inquiries of student support services at tribal colleges and universities. Thirty-four leaders and faculty and staff members from five TCUs shared their perspectives on student success and what their institutions are doing to support it.

TCUs are highly mission-driven institutions. Unlike their community college peers, they serve a dual mission of (1) providing higher education programs to tribal citizens in tribal communities that meet tribal workforce and community needs, and (2) offering programs in which tribal culture and language are woven into degree offerings, assessment, and campus support structures. This dual mission was top of mind for every participant throughout the interviews.

Participants discussed three themes of student support at their institution: outreach, retention and post-graduation. Most of the programming at tribal colleges centers on traditional, on-campus student support services and activities aimed at retention. This is understandable because enrollment, retention, and graduation rates are required for accreditation. This study also uncovered the extensive outreach TCUs are conducting in their local high schools and communities to reach potential students and seek community feedback on their degree programs. There is less effort on following up with students after graduation, largely due to lack of a formal structure, and TCUs would like to improve in this area because this information ties back to their missions.

Though this report is not representative of all 35 tribal colleges, it provides an in-depth view of how five TCUs aim to support student success. They provide support services, approaches, and programs that are:

- **holistic**, which means they support not only their students' academic, financial aid, and technology needs, but also their personal needs. This includes their cultural and family connections, financial emergencies, food security, and mental health.
- **tailored** specifically to each student and offered at the time of need – highlighting the “whatever it takes” philosophy in which every student's success is considered the responsibility of all TCU staff.
- **culturally based**, where degree offerings, campus buildings, and support services are rooted in tribal culture, values, and language.
- **family-centered and community-focused**, meaning that family members are incorporated into campus activities and involved in students' success, and academic programs are responsive to community workforce needs.

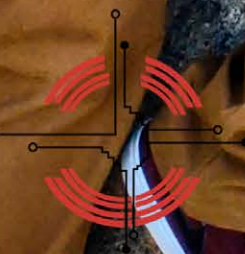
For next steps, participants wanted to see improvements in the student support system. First, they would like to see more collaboration across programs and departments. Benefits would include stronger communication between faculty and staff members about student progress and better alignment across offices about what students need. Second, TCUs without a centralized student services office would like to restructure to a single physical location. Third, TCUs would like greater funding to hire full-time advisors. Finally, the pandemic opened the door for TCUs to see the potential of online programs, and they are exploring ways to engage tribal citizens living outside the tribal community in their programs.

TCU leaders and faculty and staff members all play key roles in student success. This research brief calls attention to the impressive work they are doing at TCUs. It also illuminates the key differences between tribal colleges and community colleges and the importance of further study of student success at TCUs specifically.

This research summarized in this brief provides a foundation upon which future research on TCU student success can be built. When students at tribal colleges are fully supported to reach their goals, they not only gain useful skills and knowledge, they help revitalize tribal cultures and languages and strengthen tribal economies.

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