

American Indian Education

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As Program Manager for the American Indian Education Foundation (AIEF), a program of National Relief Charities (NRC), I help provide a number of services that are focused on American Indian education – from cradle to college and career. We partner with schools, both on and off the reservations, that have a high proportion of American Indian students, and we provide support that helps school personnel influence student success.

Each year around this time, I see hundreds of scholarship applications from a bright body of college hopefuls. These American Indian students, like other students in the U.S., dream of a college education. But unlike most American students, they face unique challenges.

So, let's talk about some of the most important things we see happening in American Indian education today.

What's Happening?

1. First, there's good news: More than ever before in history, American Indian students are applying for college and scholarships. This includes undergraduate as well as advanced degrees and certificate programs from tribal colleges, community colleges, four-year universities, and trade schools. We are very encouraged by this as we believe that education is the key to long term, sustainable change for the poverty and difficult issues faced by Indian country.

Role models, parents, and professionals in reservation and urban communities are motivating more American Indian youth to attend college. Encouraging and expecting

American Indian students and all students to start and complete college pays off. Students will rise to the level expected of them. It is why we ask students who apply for AIEF scholarships. You can hear a recorded discussion that touches on this in our [press room](#).

2. Second, there's not so good news: The low matriculation rate of American Indian students into college continues. About 9% earn a college degree, compared to 19% of other US ethnic groups. This stems from tremendous poverty and low access to information. Although AIEF awards scholarships to



the country, we prioritize students from reservations and Indian boarding schools that we consider to be the most impoverished or to have the least

access to outside resources such as scholarships. The poverty and disparity in funding for American Indian education starts at the K-12 level and continues throughout college. This is not new – but sadly, it may be worsened by the proposed [sequester cuts to Indian education](#). Even prior to the recent sequester, the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools were in the lowest 10% of federal funding and their counselors

were overburdened. The high school graduation rate at BIE schools is 61%, compared to a national average of 75%.

Many foundations and donors that could help provide funding for American Indian students fail to do so because they believe Native people receive a free college education. This is a misconception related to treaties when, in fact, American Indian students have to work harder than non-Native students to access college scholarships and a college education. You can read more about this on our [blog](#).

3. For many American Indian students, the belief that college is not an option but rather something beyond their reach is a powerful obstacle. It stops some indigenous students from applying for college, when many of the barriers to furthering their education are often quite simple. These include not knowing how to search for a college that suits them, college application and financial assistance processes that are unfamiliar and intimidating, and a lack of access to adequate career advisement from overburdened school counselors.

As a long-time educator, the low educational attainment rates concern me, along with AIEF and NRC, because they help sustain poverty on the reservations. Improving access to college and motivating American Indian students to view college as an option can help improve graduation rates and lead to long-term, sustainable solutions in Native communities. Many of our AIEF services are geared to this, starting with our scholarship selection.



What's Working?

College can be daunting for Native students, many of whom will live off-reservation for the first time or become the first generation in their families to attend college. Fewer Native students make it through the financial, emotional, and academic challenges of the first year of college. Their adjustment to life on campus far exceeds what non-Native students face, including cultural, spiritual, nutritional, economic, and lifestyle shifts, along with prejudice. Yet AIEF has learned how to achieve year-over-year success in retaining most scholarship students through the academic year and seeing many go on to graduate.

Over 95% of AIEF's first-year students complete the college year for which they are awarded. This is a surprisingly high rate for any scholarship program and for the group we serve. The norm for first-year completion by Native American students is about 21%. We mainly credit our success to our scholarship selection process. AIEF scholarship selections are made by a scholarship committee with over 200 years of combined experience in American Indian education.

For AIEF, selecting the right students is also a

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key to retention and graduation. We look for students who have faced challenges in their lives and risen to meet them. One student, Alton, grew up on the Pine Ridge Reservation. His family was often homeless so he attended boarding school. When he was 16, his mother died. After years of hardship and loss of hope, he dropped out of high school. Decades later, he discovered that he was a direct descendant of the son of Sitting Bull, a holy man and Chief to the Oglala Sioux. This motivated him to change his life. Battling

a third-grade reading level and learning disability, Alton earned his GED at age 45 and then sought out college scholarships. It was AIEF that awarded him scholarships for his first two years. Today, Alton's a counselor trainee and helps Native people overcome addiction to set their lives on a positive path. Students such as Alton who stick with it make it through and go on to graduate. These are the students we seek out for scholarships.

To learn more about educational solutions that can help American Indian students reach their dream of a college education, please visit our web sites for the [American Indian Education Foundation](#) and [National Relief Charities](#).

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—the rich, complicated, ambiguous experiences of his or her own life.”

Instead, applaud effort and time on task, praise only genuine accomplishment, and help your child see obstacles as opportunities, failure as feedback. As one eighth grader put it: “You never fail until you stop trying.”

That, after all, is the heart of true self-esteem.

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spend most or all of their time with non-disabled students. A self-contained classroom is for special education students only would be considered LRE since the student can be placed in either at the zone school.

Although each student is classified under the same special education category, an analysis of the data shows different needs. Student A's disability impacts the ability to perform in math and written language. Student B's disability impacts the ability to perform in the academic areas of reading, math, and written language. Based on this information, the first step is to decide what goals and objectives to develop. Student A's goals and objectives should focus on math and written language. Student B's goals and objectives should focus on reading, math, and written language. The second step is to examine the value assigned to each area tested. Student A's test scores show some discrepancies, but the student is not