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Overcoming the Odds: American Indian Education Foundation Interview

By: TeachHUB Interview



Among Native American students, only 46% graduate high school and a

The American Indian Education Foundation has made it their mission to realize that they can overcome these daunting statistics and the many ac

AIEF spokesperson Helen Oliff shares the inside info about how the orga American students and facilitates success in this exclusive TeachHUB in

What unique challenges do Native American students face?

Our years of working with students in Indian country have given us insight education.

One major challenge for American Indian students is believing that posts their reach. Yet, some of the factors that discourage these students from furthering their education are quite simple. So how to search for a college that suits them, handling college application and financial aid processes that are unfamiliar and access adequate career advisement from school counselors because reservation schools are consistently in the lowest 1 are overburdened.

Another challenge is that American Indian students are often the first in their families to consider college. There is a need nurses, teachers, lawyers, and accountants who are supporting positive change for their tribes, either on the reservations clear to students that achieving a college degree makes a difference. Seeing role models first-hand helps break the spell option and motivates more American Indian youth to attend college.

A lack of encouragement and interpersonal support (emotional or financial) can cause a Native student not to pursue college. Parental support or support of a primary caregiver or community member is crucial. This is true for American Indian students in the U.S.

Encouraging and expecting American Indian students to start and complete college pays off too. Students will rise to the challenge. We ask students who apply for AIEF scholarships what support they have in their lives. You can hear our recorded discussion clip is named "[Support, the Key to Student Success.](#)"

How does the AIEF actively support Native American students?

The American Indian Education Foundation (AIEF), a program of National Relief Charities, makes it a point to provide American

adequate information about their options for a different future and to help them believe these options apply to them. AIAIEF provides scholarship recipients to conduct workshops in their home communities, which helps younger students believe they can attend college. This approach of one Native student talking to another has been successful in informing more students and overcoming the barriers such as scholarship applications and financial paperwork.

Each year, AIEF awards over 200 postsecondary scholarships to American Indian students. We believe that selecting the right students for these scholarships is key to their success and graduation. We look for middle-of-the-road academic performers who are highly motivated and possess a history of academic success. Of the students we select for scholarships complete the college year. The norm for academic year completion among first-year students is 21%.

AIEF also works with partner colleges to help Native students stay in school until they graduate. We offer:

- High-school-to-college transitional programs, which orient first-year Native students who often have remote communities, and give them an experience of the campus, financial aid, dorms, and the student start.
- Matching grant challenges, which motivate partner colleges to raise more of their own funds to support Native students.
- Funding for tools required in nursing and other health studies, which avoids fees that are often unaffordable for Native students.
- Emergency funding, which partner colleges can distribute to Native students for unexpected emergency home or health issues. AIEF emergency funding reduces college dropout that arises from Native students dropping out of school for a semester for family reasons and lacking the funding to return to school.

How was AIEF formed?

In Bureau of Indian Education schools, the high school graduation rate for all students is 46% compared to a national average of 85% for students who graduate high school, only 17% begin college, compared to a national average of 62%. Of this 17%, only 4% complete the first year of college. The emotional, and academic challenges of the first year of college. Ultimately, 11% of Native people in the US have a college degree compared to 27% for the rest of the country.

The low matriculation rate of American Indian students into college is a national crisis that largely stems from poverty and the situation helps sustain poverty on the reservations. AIEF realized the importance of education and began with the practice of providing scholarships to students attending any type of accredited post-secondary educational institution.

AIEF now administers both undergraduate and graduate scholarships. AIEF further developed four additional educational programs to support the students and empowerment of schools with high indigenous student populations. All of our services were formed with the goal of increasing access and retention so that more American Indian students are equipped to help create long-term, sustainable communities.

How do you determine grant and scholarship recipients?

AIEF has been selecting students to receive our scholarship since 1996. Our applicants undergo a competitive scholarship selection process for monetary assistance for the academic year.

AIEF aims to reach students from relatively remote areas, rather than those who are most likely to receive scholarships through a traditional system. AIEF gives priority to students from reservation schools which, due to their isolation, often require personal visits and phone calls to generate applicants. We target students from all fifty states including Alaska and Hawaii, and American Indian territories.

tribally enrolled and attending full time technical schools, community colleges, colleges or universities throughout the Unit encourages American Indian students to complete their postsecondary education through a certificate program, vocational degree, Bachelor's degree year or graduate degree. These elements are built into our selection process and different the scholarships.

An AIEF scholarship is also different from other scholarships in that it is designed for students who do not have the highest fund applicants whom we consider "the best bet" student who will stick with it to graduation. Emotional intelligence also plays a determining role in scholarship recipients. By this we mean the emotional intelligence of the applicants as well as the selection process.



Can you share a stand-out success story from your programs?

On the reservations, the high school dropout rate ranges from 30% to 70%. Many students do not have a high school diploma or GED live in households below the poverty level. Although many students do not have a GED, many do become successful students.

Alton spent his childhood on the Pine Ridge Reservation. His family was off to boarding school on the reservation. As a child, Alton aspired to be a professional athlete like Billy Mills. When Alton was 16, his mother died. Years of hardship led to his dropping out of high school.

Many years later, Alton discovered through family research that he was a descendant of Sitting Bull, a holy man and Chief to the Oglala Sioux people. Discovering this was a turning point for Alton, who decided to change his life so he could contribute more to his tribe. Getting a GED was the first step. Alton overcame learning disabilities to finally attain his GED at age 45. He was committed to going to college and started to search for ways to achieve his dreams. It was through AIEF that Alton was awarded scholarships for his first two years of college.

Today, he works as a counselor trainee in South Dakota and helps Native people overcome addiction to set their lives on a path for the opportunity to give back to his people and to be finishing his AA degree.

The Transition Camps Grant Program seems pretty unique to your organization. Can you tell me more about that success of students?

AIEF's Transition Camp service is fairly unique in that it targets first-year American Indian students who face a steep transition from reservation life to college life, a transition that is a major contributor to why only 1 in 5 American Indian students complete their college year. The service helps ease the transition for Native students who have only lived on a reservation or in an isolated community.

Like all students, Native freshmen must adjust to campus life, the difference between high school and college classrooms and campus families. Yet unlike other students, many Native students must also adjust to life off of the reservation. This is a huge transition involving spiritual, nutritional, economic, and lifestyle shifts that far exceed what non-Native students face. Native students also suffer from the effects of prejudice.

During the transition camps, students form relationships with other Native students. They also learn their way around campus, visit the career office, bookstore, and student support center, move into their dorms, and eat in the dining hall. Doing this before they have the pressures of new classes gives them a leg up on the steep adjustment they have to make and helps support them through the transition.

Does the AIEF do any outreach to help Native Americans continue their cultural education? Why or why not?

AIEF is not involved with cultural education, as each tribe's culture is unique. In addition, we believe it is each individual's responsibility to participate in within their own culture.

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We do believe in supporting colleges and post-secondary institution student centers, whether Native American or multicult

There seems to be a growing debate surrounding Native American youths attending reservations schools and N: off-reservation public or boarding schools. Do you have a stance in this debate?

AIEF does not have a stance on this. We realize this is an individual and family choice for reasons that are important to t days where boarding school was not negotiable for American Indian students and their families.

What drives students to attend schools off the reservation?

Some rural and remote areas, Havasupai and Alaska for example, do not have a high school and it's a positive for studer continue their education.

The choice to attend off-reservation schools is sometimes based on what a student wants to study, their interests, or wha choice. Sometimes it's a "best fit" decision, but it's always up to the individual.

Do the AIEF outreach programs extend to students who attend school off the reservation? Why or why not?

For grades K-12, AIEF provides school supplies to reservation schools to equip students with the tools to learn and to sup

For post-secondary education, we support schools on and off the reservation with a high proportion of Native students. V urban Indians, and any American Indian student pursuing a college education regardless of where they live within the 50

To learn more about how AIEF helps American Indian students reach their dream of a college education, please visit the [Foundation](#) and [National Relief Charities](#). *Photos Courtesy of AIEF, a program of National Relief Charities.

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