

The American Indian Education Foundation:

RETAINING 95% OF NATIVE STUDENTS

- by Lyn Tysdal

THE AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION FOUNDATION (AIEF) ENJOYS A HIGH RATE OF COMPLETION AMONG THE NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS TO WHOM WE AWARD SCHOLARSHIPS. TYPICALLY, OVER 95% OF AIEF STUDENTS COMPLETE THE COLLEGE YEAR FOR WHICH THEY WERE AWARDED.

OVER 95% IS A SURPRISINGLY HIGH RATE FOR ANY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM. IT IS ALSO SURPRISING FOR THE STUDENTS WE TARGET. THE NORM AMONG NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS IS ABOUT 21%. COLLEGE CAN BE DAUNTING FOR NATIVE STUDENTS, MANY OF WHOM ARE LEAVING THEIR RESERVATIONS FOR THE FIRST TIME AND ARE THE FIRST GENERATION IN THEIR FAMILIES TO ATTEND 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.

Nonetheless, AIEF is successful at retaining most Native students through the academic year and seeing many go on to graduate. We've worked diligently to understand the reason why.

We've asked ourselves; Is it the personal support and mentoring we extend to students after they start college? Or the thoughtful and deliberate process by which we individually review and select each student? That we prioritize states with high need, or isolated communities where few students would normally apply for scholarships or believe they can go to college? Or that we encourage students who wish to attend technical schools, community colleges, tribal or non-tribal colleges, or universities nationwide, including Alaska and Hawaii? Or is it our easy-to-access, easy-to-complete scholarship application?

After careful study, we honed in on this: AIEF's high completion rates are mainly a result of our scholarship selection process. An AIEF scholarship is different from other scholarships:

Our selections are made by a scholarship committee with over 200 years of combined experience in American Indian academics.

Our scholarship is designed for students who do not have the highest test scores or GPAs. Rather, we fund applicants whom we



Alton (left) receiving award from Murray Lee, AIEF staff.

consider "the best bet" student who will stick with it to graduation.

We look for students who have faced challenges in their lives, are able to express how they have risen to meet them, and the lessons they can apply to future challenges.

Sticking with it is key. 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, then sought out college scholarships. It was AIEF that awarded him scholarships for his first two years. Today, he's a counselor trainee and helps Native people overcome addiction to set their lives on a positive path.

For AIEF, selecting the right students like Alton is the key to retention and graduation. We credit our selection process, followed by individualized student support, for AIEF's success in attracting and retaining college students through the school year and on to graduation.



LYN TYSDAL is the Program Manager for the American Indian Education Foundation. She sees education as a catalyst that goes beyond finishing school. Lyn has over 30 years experience assisting American Indian children and families, as well as rural communities. She spent 10 years as a volunteer teacher with the Red Cloud School system on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. She has significant experience in program development, program research, and training design, and has also worked as an assistant principal, a Head Start/Early Head Start director, a university instructor, an early childhood and elementary teacher, and a family and community partnership consultant. Lyn holds an M.A. in Early Childhood Education, with an emphasis in both Indian Studies and FASD, from the University of Northern Colorado. She also studied leadership and management at UCLA.

For the past seven years, Lyn has directed the American Indian Education Foundation, a nationally-recognized program that supports Native American students enrolled in post secondary schools. AIEF seeks out students of all ages who are focused on their educational goals, and who demonstrate the ability to make positive change in their communities and in modern society. AIEF expands opportunities for students to attend and remain in tribal or non-tribal colleges by providing vigorous educational leadership and networking services and helping school personnel influence student retention and success. AIEF is a program of National Relief Charities.