

THE RISE OF TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Read the following article, pausing to summarize your learning after each section.

Assimilation Education

Beginning with the first colonies in the New World, European settlers made it a priority to educate members of Native American tribes and convert them to Christianity. The education of Native peoples began with different religious groups in **missionary schools**. The purpose of these schools was to educate and baptize Native people with the hope that they would become “**civilized**” and follow the cultural customs and religious beliefs of white settlers. Before long, Native children were sent to live at **boarding schools** to make separating them from their parental and tribal influence easier.

In 1875, an American military officer named Richard Henry Pratt established the first **off-reservation** boarding school in Pennsylvania far from the homes of Native students. Known as Carlisle Indian Industrial School, it was here that Pratt put into practice his motto of “Kill the Indian ... Save the man.” He implemented strict **assimilation** techniques for all students: take away their personal belongings, insist they wear military garb, cut their hair in a European-American style, force them to speak only English, choose new American-style names, and live at the school year-round. The penalty for breaking any of these rules was harsh, physical punishments. Believing that by removing students from their homes, Pratt believed he could **civilize** them and they would forget their native languages, religious traditions, and other elements of tribal **culture**.

Assimilation was the goal of the boarding schools. In the 39 years of its operation, only 8% of students actually graduated from Carlisle. Children in these boarding schools lived for years away from their families and homelands only to return strangers to their people, their mother tongue, and their families. Not everyone returned home, however. On the grounds of almost every boarding school in North America was a cemetery where children who died for a variety of reasons such as illness, starvation, abuse, and even homesickness were buried. It is reported that over 40,000 student deaths occurred in the 150 years these schools were in operation. It is reported that “[b]y 1926, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, 83% of American Indian school-age children were enrolled in boarding schools” (The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2020).



Stop and Jot your thoughts on the reading so far:

The Rise of TCUs

In the 1960s, the U.S. government's policy of tribal self-determination gave tribes more control over their own affairs. For the first time, the Bureau of Indian Affairs relinquished the oversight of some programs to the tribes. Because of this, in 1968, the Navajo Nation created the first tribal college, called the Navajo Community College, now Diné College (Crazy Bull & Guillory, 2018). Within 5 years, five more Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) were opened, and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium was formed.

For the first time, Native education was created by and for Native people. The first curriculum began with an emphasis on tribal history, culture, art, and language. Tribal **cultural norms** are also incorporated into the curriculum. It was important to include “elders, traditional experts, heads of families, and cultural informants” who emphasized the importance of place and its role in tribal culture as a critical component because “indigenous people . . . represent a culture emergent from a place, and they actively draw on the power of that place physically and spiritually.” Traditional teachings were also deemed an important spoke in the curriculum wheel. Tom Sampson, a Nez Perce elder, says that each person is born with special gifts and leaders are responsible for engendering the cultural context for each gift. This concept aids in strengthening identity through self-discovery and self-expression (Crazy Bull & Guillory, 2018).

Tribal colleges and universities tend to be located on geographically isolated reservations and have a high Native population. They began as two-year colleges, sometimes chartered by tribes, but remain separate from tribal government. They have open-admission policies (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1999). The typical students also tend to be older than average students in their 20s-30s, so the need for support is higher.



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The Impact of TCUs Today

Currently in Oklahoma, there are 3 tribal colleges: Bacone College, the College of the Muscogee Nation, and the Pawnee Nation College. Unfortunately, some TCUs are no longer operating. The Comanche Nation College was located in Lawton, Oklahoma. Chartered in 2002, it operated until 2017, when it closed due to lack of funding and loss of accreditation. The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribal College was founded in 2006 in Weatherford, Oklahoma; however, it was dissolved in 2019 because of continued lack of funding. However, Bacone College, chartered in 2019 in Muskogee as its replacement, has pledged as its vision to empower life-long learners to become “transformational leaders who incorporate traditional values and voices to positively impact our local communities around the world” (Bacone College website).

The most vital program at all TCUs is language. Currently, Native languages are at a critical level with many languages going extinct or having 20 or fewer first-language speakers. Not only do the tribal colleges offer these language classes to their students, but many also have outreach programs to the languages to be taught to pre-K students, immersion programs for K-8, and as a high school foreign language class.

Today, more and more tribes are chartering tribal colleges. Tribes are extending their **sovereignty** to the needs of their tribal members in many ways. The first ever tribally affiliated medical school opened in 2020 at Oklahoma State University in conjunction with the Cherokee Nation. Another area of focus is the building of pool of native teachers and professors to carry on teaching of the native education at TCUs (Marchbanks, 2018). Tribal Colleges and Universities have become the centers of the tribal community with many providing services such as pre-k programs, K-12, and cultural centers. Cheryl Crazy Bull notes that TCUs have “emerged from the sacred to do the necessary, present-work of our ancestors. They teach our languages, socialize our children and support their families, protect and manage our resources and assets, and preserve our identities and ways of living for future generations.” (Crazy Bull & Guillory, 2018).



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