The invisibility of Native American perspectives—those of Native students, researchers and their communities—continues to plague higher education, despite numerous calls for action from educational advocates across the country. A recent report from ACE, *Pulling Back the Curtain: Enrollment and Outcomes at Minority Serving Institutions*, confirms the challenges that other scholars have encountered in trying to be inclusive of Native perspectives: namely, a lack of data on Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and the students they serve.

Disaggregated numbers for TCU enrollment were unavailable for this report, given the low number of TCUs that participate in the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), from where the researchers pulled the data. According to NSC, 84 percent of Title IV degree-granting institutions participate, whereas only 50 percent of TCUs (17 of 34) have reported student data at any one time.

The missing Native narrative and lack of data availability is not a negative reflection of NSC or TCUs, but rather a challenge and opportunity that institutions like TCUs face when establishing a foothold in the higher education landscape. Data availability for TCUs would improve the visibility of Native perspectives and drive higher education practice, policy and research toward improving the system of higher education for Native students and communities.

**Invisibility in the Native Context**

Invisibility, from a Native American perspective, has been largely framed in terms of student experiences, where Native students are not seen—their
stories are either missing or misunderstood within higher education. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy uses an invisibility framework to describe how students navigate and persist at predominantly white institutions and how invisibility acts as a paradox. In one sense, invisibility marginalizes Native voices and experiences. In another sense, invisibility allows one to maintain cultural integrity while navigating potentially hostile spaces within higher education.

The book *Beyond the Asterisks* confronts the dominant narrative that positions Native students as an “asterisked” group in quantitative student data due to statistical insignificance. The authors instead use qualitative methods to demonstrate the multiple perspectives missing from the research literature, writing that the asterisk needs to be retired and Native student experiences need to be heard on a larger platform. Looking at the history and purpose of data through the invisibility framework contextualizes why the Native perspective has been absent and begins the discussion of how data can promote equity and visibility for TCU institutions and students.

**History and Purpose of Data**

After 500 years of multiple waves of colonization and educational approaches that favored assimilation, dedicated tribal leaders, tribal community members and educational allies began the [tribal college movement](https://www2.ed.gov/tribalcolleges) in the 1960s and 1970s. Provoked by the fact that Native students were not persisting and graduating from mainstream institutions, TCU advocates sought to design institutions that best served individual tribal nations and their students. Today, 35 TCUs enroll nearly 28,000 full- and part-time students annually, and enrollment continues to grow incrementally.\(^2\) Between the 2002 and 2012 academic years, overall TCU enrollment increased 9 percent.\(^3\) TCUs are in the opportune position to influence and determine Native higher education practice, policy and research across the United States.

The notion of tribal self-determination is intricately tied to federal Indian treaty rights between the United States and tribal nations. At TCUs, tribal self-determination gives tribes the right to direct educational initiatives that serve their needs, which includes institutional data usage. In most mainstream higher education settings, the production of data informs policy formation and allocation of resources. TCUs do not object to the importance of demonstrating accountability and progress, but through tribal self-determination, they are in a position to [widen the meaning and purpose of research and data](https://www2.ed.gov/tribalcolleges) by employing Indigenous paradigms that value cultural integrity.

In some ways, the invisibility of TCU data has now emerged as an opportunity to purposefully engage in a data usage dialogue that values and centers around cultural integrity: These institutions are able to challenge the dominant research and data norms that often frame Native American communities as “less than” and deficient. The power to structure research protocols has been historically in the hands of non-Native communities and the right for tribes to self-determine education, which includes data capacity building and usage, disrupts this relationship.
Considerations for Building Data Capacity

Addressing the issue of invisibility through data capacity building is not a simple solution for TCUs and the higher education industry as a whole. Areas to consider when promoting data capacity building are:

Data Use and Participation

As accountability movements continue to take shape within the higher education sector, TCU leadership are recognizing the need to be better stewards and users of data. This move toward promoting the collection and use of data is two-fold. On one hand, participation in national data warehouses has pragmatic implications to demonstrate the impact of TCUs. On the other, TCUs are in a position where they can (re)define data usage for the betterment of their communities.

Participation in national data warehouses will increase the visibility of TCUs and allow researchers to conduct more high-level analysis of TCU trends. Possibly more important is how data availability allows TCUs to understand and advocate their contributions to the wider higher education field, and better serve their students by further understanding their postsecondary pathways.

Cultural Integrity of Data

As participation in non-tribally controlled systems like NSC become more commonplace at institutions that serve Native communities, it is important to remain focused on cultural integrity. Currently, existing large data warehouses do not employ measures, frame data collection, and report the types of data that capture the unique contributions that TCUs make to their communities (e.g., cultural and language revitalization).

While collaborative efforts with tribally informed organizations, like the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) and the American Indian College Fund (AICF), have begun reporting data indicators relevant to TCUs and their communities, local work also has been happening with the support of tribally informed agencies. For the past three years, AICF, through external grants, participated in the Achieving the Dream’s National Reform Network, a student success initiative to build capacity at the community college level. Two tribal colleges, Diné College (AZ) and Salish Kootenai College (MT), embraced a data-informed institutional culture that blended the pragmatic aspects of data with indicators that valued cultural integrity and tribal self-determination.

Resource Realities and Needs

As data usage continues to develop, we must consider the current resources available at TCUs. It has been well documented that TCUs face fiscal challenges that lead to a shortage of staff and faculty. These institutions frequently require employees to hold multiple administrative roles within the institution, and often the employee reporting institutional data has other responsibilities. Additionally, TCUs, unlike any other higher education
institution, are required to report institutional data to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA Form 6259); many times, supplemental reporting is also required to the tribal councils who charter the institutions.

Adding more responsibilities to a department or person without a commensurate increase in resources raises the question of whether or not participating in larger data warehouses is the best method for TCUs to build capacity. It also begs the question of how smaller and developing TCUs should begin the process of tribally self-determined data usage.

Improving Data Usage

A more collaborative and robust support network is needed to support TCUs on data usage. Currently, organizations like AIHEC and AICF continue to lead collaborative data initiatives by engaging with TCUs on a local and individualized level. Researchers and policy analysts that work within larger data warehouses need to engage in dialogue to understand TCU data collection norms so they may systemically question how their existing practices ignore or impede TCU data usage. Once actively engaged in this process, outsiders can begin to systemically and culturally understand how TCU self-determination, which is linked to federal public law (see P.L. 95-471), is distinct from the dominant standards of data collection in U.S. higher education. Researchers and policy analysts at large-scale national data warehouses need to be open to respecting the tribal sovereignty inherently embodied by TCUs and data usage. Failing to do so places an undue burden on TCUs to assimilate their values to meet dominant expectations and to continue the narrative that TCUs are deficient in their operations.

Next Steps

The path toward TCU data capacity building needs to be informed by the intersection of history and purpose. History informs how data typically serves the dominant narrative of higher education; in today’s context, data collection and sharing need to shift to accommodate tribal values that inform TCU operations and sustainability. This multifaceted approach helps both tribal and non-tribal entities view the process as collaborative and TCU-led as they work toward improving TCU visibility and data usage. This will allow outside researchers to contribute to the TCU narrative by 1) asking how research and data visibility is relevant to individual tribal communities and 2) working collaboratively with TCUs and their institutional researchers to advance the tribal self-determination of data and its contribution to improving institutional visibility.

[1] Native and Native American are used interchangeably and include both American Indian and Alaska Native people within the United States.


[3] Derived from the IPEDS 12-month unduplicated headcount (AY 2002–03 and AY
2012–13) for all students attending TCUs. Does not include Comanche Nation, Muscogee Nation, and Wind River.

[4] Not all TCUs or tribal nations have institutional researchers or institutional review board protocols, but there is a growing trend for tribal communities to adopt formal requests for research (Hernandez 2004).