



**Testimony of the  
National Indian Education Association**

**United States Senate  
Committee on Indian Affairs**

**Oversight Hearing on "Indian Education:  
Examining Higher Education for  
American Indian Students"**

**June 11, 2014**

Chairman Tester, Vice Chairman Barrasso, and members of the Committee, tribal leaders and Native advocates have consistently listed education as a top priority for our communities. As such, the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) is excited that the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs has heard the collective call and is working to highlight the condition of Native education across all grade levels in order to find solutions to persisting problems. As NIEA and Native education stakeholders have stated for years, equal educational opportunities from early to higher education is critical to the future of tribal nations and Native communities. The renewed commitment of this Committee and its focus on improving all education systems serving Native students is critical. As part of our continuing partnership to ensure equitable educational opportunities for Native students, we are glad to provide this testimony regarding "Indian Education: Examining Higher Education for American Indian Students" for the congressional record.

NIEA, founded in 1969, is the most inclusive Native organization in the country representing Native students, educators, families, communities, and tribes. NIEA's mission is to advance comprehensive educational opportunities for all American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians throughout the United States. From communities in Hawaii, to tribal reservations across the continental U.S., to villages in Alaska and urban communities in major cities, NIEA has the most reach of any Native education organization in the country. By serving as the critical link between our communities and education institutions – such as public and private universities, community colleges, and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) – NIEA hopes the Committee will take our testimony into consideration as you address concerns in higher education.

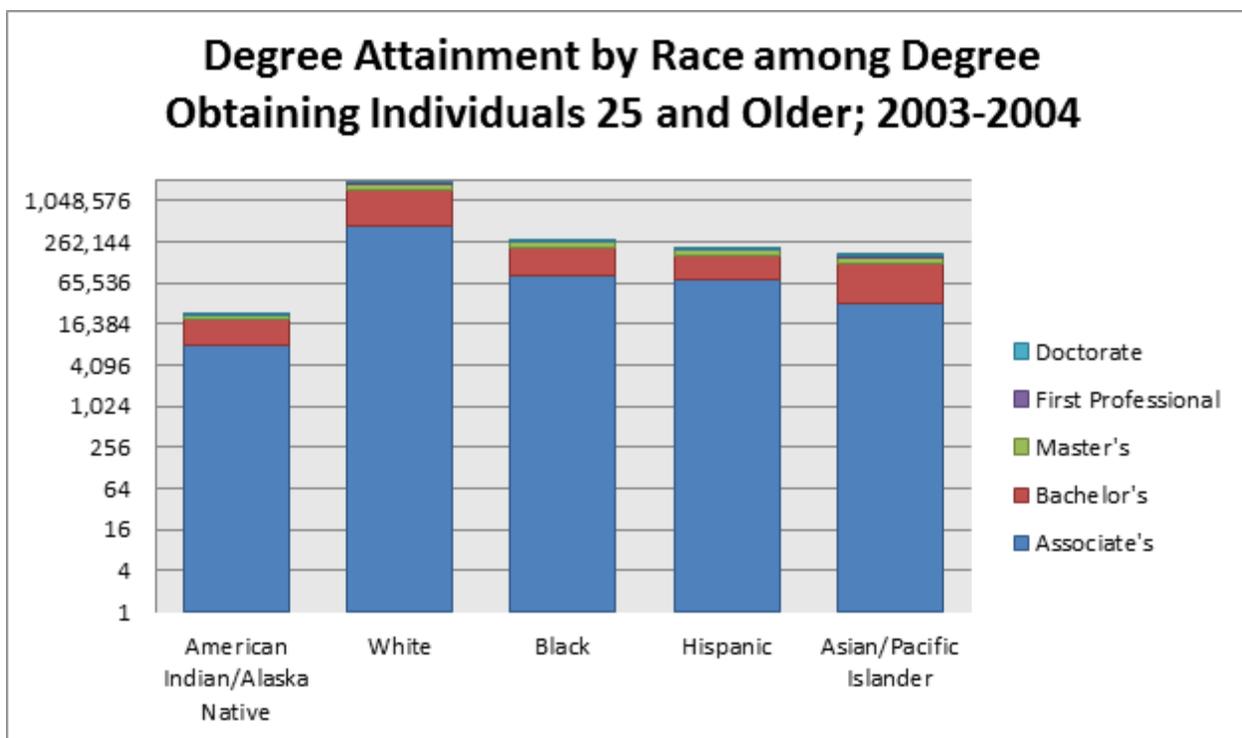
**Native Education Crisis Due to Federal Mismanagement**

As all of us realize, Native education is in a state of emergency partly due to the inability of the federal government to uphold its trust responsibility. Native students lag behind their peers on every educational indicator, from academic achievement to high school and college graduation rates. In 2010, only 1 in 4 Native high school graduates who took the ACT scored at the college-ready level in math, and only one-third in reading. In the same year, more than half of the majority students in high school tested at college-ready levels, illustrating the persistent readiness gap among Native and non-Native students. As Native students leave high school ill prepared for higher education, remediation or academic failure often become commonplace for

our students. In the last decade, only 52% of Native students enrolled in higher education immediately after high school and fewer than 40% of those students graduated with a bachelor's degree in six years. Nearly 62% of White students graduated within six years. In addition to the shockingly low number of Native college graduates that this percentage represents, the disparity among Natives and non-Native students illustrates the continued lack of college preparedness experienced by Native populations.

### Native Student Demographics Snapshot<sup>1</sup>

- In 2012, 17% of Native students age 25 and over held at least a bachelor's degree in comparison to 33% of White students.
- In 2012, 6% of Native students held an advanced graduate degree (i.e., M.A., M.S., Ph.D., M.D., or J.D), as compared to 12% of the White population.
- The 2010 Census found that only 65,356 Natives ages 25 years and older had a graduate or professional degree.



### The Trust Responsibility to Native Education

Since its inception, NIEA's work has centered on reversing these negative trends, a feat that is possible only if the federal government upholds its trust responsibility. Established through treaties, federal law, and U.S. Supreme Court decisions, this relationship includes a fiduciary obligation to provide parity in access and equal resources to all American Indian and Alaska Native students, regardless of where they attend school. With equal educational opportunity, our future generations will be prepared for academic achievement and consequently, success in college and careers.

<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, United States Department of Education. National Indian Education Study. 2011. (NCES 2012-466). <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nies/>

The federal government's trust corpus in the field of Indian education is a shared trust between the Administration and Congress for federally-recognized Indian tribes. To the extent that measurable trust standards in Indian education can be evaluated, NIEA suggests this Committee refer to the government's own studies encompassing Native test scores, treaty-based appropriation decreases, and Government Accountability Office (GAO) Reports, among other reports, which illustrate the continued inability of the federal government via the BIE to uphold the trust responsibility.

## **NIEA 2014 Postsecondary Education Recommendations**

### **I. Create Equity in Higher Education to Fulfill Trust Obligations**

NIEA requests this Committee work with Native-serving postsecondary institutions to increase the educational attainment rate for Native students. This Committee should ensure equity in access to higher education resources and institutions in policy and legislation like the Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization. This Committee should also work with the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee as they develop policy priorities to encourage and strengthen tribal-state partnerships in Native education.

For example, expanding adequate resources for Indian Education Professional Development Grants is necessary to meet training needs and increase retention rates among Native teachers, administrators, and education leaders in reservation schools, as well as the surrounding schools with high Native populations. There should be more opportunities for higher education partnerships with Regional Education Laboratories (RELs) in order to facilitate and collect data regarding Native students. Collaborative opportunities should also include community colleges and universities that serve high numbers of Native students. Such partnerships should assess factors, such as total cost of attendance, debt burden on graduation, job or graduate school placement rate, etc, as they often critically affect a student's ability to thrive in college and beyond.

Competitive Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) undergraduate programs for Native students should be developed to meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century workforce needs. Native students require increased resources across all Native-serving institutions (public, private, TCU), so funds are available in areas such as capital financing, master's degree development, and STEM programs. Increasing competitive grant competitions for Minority Science and Engineering programs to include all institutions, not only selected groups, would facilitate increased access to resources.

### **II. Increase Retention Rates Among Native Students**

The federal government should provide colleges and universities adequate resources to increase retention rates among Native students. As successful federal investments, TRiO programs, such as Upward Bound and Student Support Services, illustrate the ability to positively impact retention when support is appropriated. These programs provide critical academic support in higher education to assist colleges and universities in retaining vulnerable students and increase graduation and preparedness for a student's post-graduate career.

Unfortunately, the federal government reduced critical TRiO programmatic funding for Upward Bound and Talent Search during sequestration, which equated to a \$17,500 cut from each program per year in just a single institution. This is reflective of more expansive reductions nationwide. While Congress postponed sequestration, we request that future reductions as mandated under the Budget Control Act be replaced permanently to avoid funding cuts to our most vulnerable students. Programmatic ineffectiveness in serving at-risk students is only exacerbated when already strained programs are required to serve more students with equal or reduced budgets.

Further, need-based financial aid programs should be expanded to provide year-round assistance, so that available resources cover summer course sessions. Since Native students are more likely to require remedial course work and are the least likely to graduate from college—with only 15% of those entering college earning a bachelor's degree within six years—summer course options are particularly important for Native students. Moreover, the inability to graduate on time often increases the student's financial burden. Through funding for expanding summer course options, Native students will have more opportunity to finish college in four years and graduate with less student loan debt.

### **III. Support and Strengthen Native Language and Culture**

Similar to elementary and secondary education systems, it is critical that higher education institutions have the ability to partner and collaborate with local tribes and Native education stakeholders. This would support cultural and linguistic initiatives before Native students enter and as they attend college. Tribes understand the needs of their children best and can help higher education institutions ensure a collegiate education is not only respectful to their Native students but also engages students to become future leaders in Native communities.

Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, provides a laudable example of such a partnership. The college, on average, has 900 Native students from over 140 federally recognized tribes each semester. Through the school's collaboration with tribal communities, it works to strengthen the Native culture of its students from matriculation through graduation to their entrance into the job market. At Fort Lewis College, programs and classes offer Native students the ability to strengthen their collective Native culture through the Native American Center, the Native American Honor Society, and the American Indian Business Leaders Organization, as well as the Elder-In-Residence program. This emphasis on academic and cultural support has made Fort Lewis College one of the top public institutions in the country where Native students excel and graduate.

Yet, many institutions across the country do not have the resources to provide a support system like that of Fort Lewis College. Postsecondary institutions should have the resources and political support to graduate more students who understand Native cultural and linguistic traditions. Native language revitalization and preservation is a critical priority for tribes and Native communities because language preservation goes to the heart of our identity. This Committee should work to provide resources for college students to become educators and leaders who understand their local Native identity. We also request that this Committee work to create a means for providing debt repayment options, adequate housing, and other incentives to degree-holding Native educators and students who wish to return to their communities. Because jobs are often inadequate in a Native student's community due to

geographical isolation and small, rural markets, we request the Committee increase incentives for Native teachers to return to Indian Country and reinvest their talents and cultural understanding among their fellow tribal citizens.

#### **IV. Professional Development for Student Success**

We request this Committee increase and expand available professional development opportunities for Native educators. NIEA submitted draft language last year to expand the Department of Education's (ED) Office of Indian Education (OIE) Indian Professional Development program. This expansion would support Native students pursuing doctoral degrees. While current law provides training to assist qualified Native individuals to become traditional K-12 teachers and administrators, educators and administrators in higher education institutions, teacher aides, social workers, and ancillary educational support, this request, as consistent with NIEA Resolution 2012-4, would grant funds to support and train Native individuals to obtain postsecondary masters and doctoral degrees.

To help students achieve, Native communities need certified educators who have the local, cultural understanding and knowledge to support our young generations. Native-serving higher education institutions, such as tribal colleges and universities and non-tribal Native-serving institutions are committed to building a Native-speaking teacher workforce and stress culturally and developmentally-appropriate pedagogy that embeds community values and tribal culture. The commitments and strategies are working, but as described above, there must also be increased access to resources and education programs in order to help Native students become educators. In many locations, there is the will, but there are not enough certified Native language or culture teachers. We need this Committee to work with Congress and the Administration to stand behind TCUs and other Native-serving postsecondary institutions by increasing their ability to support Native teacher preparation and Native student retention and graduation.

#### **Conclusion**

NIEA appreciates the continued support of this Committee, and we look forward to working closely with its members to support our students. Strengthening our partnership will ensure all Native-serving schools, from pre-schools to TCUs, are as effective as possible. To achieve success, there must be collaboration among all entities and at all levels – tribal, federal, state, and local – that touch a Native child's life. We particularly appreciate this 2014 education series because confronting the challenges facing our Native students cannot be approached through one facet of the education system at a time. Only by working with all stakeholders in all education systems will we increase our students' preparedness for success. Once again, thank you for this opportunity, and if you have any questions, please contact Ahniwake Rose, NIEA Executive Director, at [arose@niea.org](mailto:arose@niea.org).