

## Native American Students in Higher Education: Still Here and Resilient

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I want to take a minute to indulge you with a flashback memory. It's the first day of my freshman year of college. Just three days prior, I was dropped off to my residence hall, anxious about the uncertainties of what it meant to be a college student. As a first-generation college student, I knew the road ahead was going to be full of challenges, including how to navigate the new town that would be my home for the next four years, how to budget money so I could enjoy more than ramen noodles and microwaveable mac n' cheese, and how to manage my time in a manner that allowed me to read hundreds of pages of readings per week. What I *wasn't* prepared for was a question that would rock me to my core, "What are you?"

The first time I was asked this question I thought I misheard the question. My response: "I'm a freshman." After a good laugh, the person clarified their question. She wanted to know my ethnicity. Coming from a community that was predominately Native American, I had never been asked this question before. To make matters worse, after I informed the individual that I was a member of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, and went through my talk about the difference between state and federally recognized tribes, she had the nerve to ask me if I was sure! "You look more Puerto Rican or mixed to me," she said. Apparently, my high cheek bones, hazel eyes, and tight curly hair did not fit the stereotypical portrait of a Native American woman.

Unfortunately, this was only the first of many instances throughout my educational journey when my identity would be questioned. Many times, diversity in higher education is viewed through a binary lens, and Native American students are often left out of the conversation, becoming "the invisible minority." Research shows that Native American students often feel isolated and alienated in higher education, accounting for about 1% of the student population each year (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). In addition, the microaggressions Native American students experience, much like the one I shared previously, happen both in and out of the classroom, among both faculty and students. These unwelcoming and intolerant campus environments contribute to high attrition rates and continue to widen the educational attainment gap between Native American students and their peers (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003).

Given the historical oppression and institutional racism Native American students have endured in the American education system, the invisibility of this population in higher education should not come as a surprise. The low percentage of Native Americans at four-year institutions creates additional challenges in having enough members to sustain a Greek-lettered organization. I was lucky enough to attend a university with a chapter of Alpha Pi Omega Sorority Incorporated, the first historically American Indian sorority. Joining Alpha Pi Omega as a freshman provided me with a sense of community on a campus that often felt foreign and lonely. The sorority encompassed everything I needed during my college journey: a strong sisterhood, support in living a balanced life, greater scholarship, honesty, leadership, service, personal integrity, and celebration of Native American culture.

Understanding how impactful membership in a Native American Greek-lettered organization can be, and the lower percentage of this demographic on most campuses, I encourage fraternity and sorority professionals to consider their policies and requirements around membership and chapter size. Do your practices and policies further perpetuate the marginalization of a population of students that have been consistently marginalized in higher education?

Consider that most Native American students will be on campuses where they are extremely underrepresented. As student affairs professionals, it is important to realize that you can support Native American students without being Native American yourself. They need allies, people who will support connecting them to their culture. Fostering an environment that is respectful and understanding of Native culture is crucial to ensuring the success of Native American students in higher education. I urge you to support and advocate for the voices, experiences, and opportunities of Native students to add value to the overall culture of your campus, and to higher education as a whole. Despite the obstacles we have faced, we are still here and we will continue to be resilient.

## References

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