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Better Data for Supporting American Indian/ Alaska Native Students

> *"Without quality data, policymakers and community planners cannot set policy goals, monitor implementation, measure impact, or plan for demographic shifts in an effective way. The absence of American Indian/Alaska Native peoples in data and policy domains reflects the lack of national discourse on the status of our nation's First Peoples."* [1]
>
> – National Congress of American Indians

The effective use of data plays a critical role throughout the policy process – from accurately capturing populations being served to monitoring and measuring implementation and allocation of resources. In order for data to be used in a manner that supports evidence-based decision-making there is a need for education leaders and policymakers to be equipped with comprehensive and accurate data. This is particularly true for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations and students who have historically been undercounted or underrepresented across data sources and systems. This gap in comprehensive and quality data related to AI/AN populations means that education leaders are not equipped with the tools necessary to develop and implement policies or have the resources necessary that will lead to transformational educational outcomes for Native students. This brief begins by highlighting broad issues that arise in data collection efforts on a national scale, followed by a more detailed discussion of persistent data challenges that occur in capturing AI/AN student populations within postsecondary data systems and the implications of these challenges as they relate to higher education policy and practice.

Improving Access and Success for American Indian/ Alaska Native Students

This edition of *WICHE Insights* is part of WICHE's Native-Serving Institutions Initiative, which is committed to supporting American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) student educational attainment in higher education by working in partnership with higher education institutions, tribal colleges, tribal education offices, higher education organizations, and state and federal policy makers to strengthen practices and policies that lead to successful postsecondary outcomes of AI/AN students. To achieve equitable educational attainment of AI/AN students in higher education, the unique cultures, political identities, and experiences of Native students must be recognized. This calls for a comprehensive approach at colleges and universities to develop external partnerships, outreach to students' home communities, relationship building with tribal nations, and strengthening institutional practices in student support services and in the academic teaching and learning environment. Ultimately, this requires collaboration, network building, and resource sharing among the federally recognized Native American-Serving, Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs). The Native-Serving Institutions Initiative fosters collaboration among NASNTIs through meetings, events, and webinars focused on sharing best practices and strategies for AI/AN student attainment. It also promotes resource sharing through annually released publications and data resources. Additionally, the Native-Serving Institutions Initiative worked with 11 NASNTIs that developed and implemented campus actions plans to foster increased use of high-impact educational practices and to develop promising practices that will support the educational success of AI/AN college students. Funding for this initiative has been provided by Lumina Foundation.

Lumina FOUNDATION

WICHE Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

A Need for Better Data

An accurate representation of the population is a critical component of ensuring that policies are crafted and resources are allocated in a manner that will drive social and economic change for targeted populations. The US Census is intended to describe the nation's population – including significant demographic changes – and provide an accurate framework for how public dollars are allocated across social and economic programs. In relation to resources for tribal communities, Census data serve as the main source of data used in the funding formulas of key social and economic initiatives related to education, workforce, health services, and housing on tribal lands, such as the Indian Housing Block Grant Program and Native American Workforce Programs established under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.[2] An equitable allocation of these resources is necessary for the economic advancement of AI/AN populations, but is dependent on accurate and reliable population counts. Across jurisdictions, these counts inform policymaking and planning, however, a historical underrepresentation among AI/AN populations in the Census has direct implications for long-term planning and support of Native populations. For example, it is estimated that among the AI/AN population residing on a reservation there was an underestimation of about 12.2 percent in the 1990 Census and 4.9 percent in the 2010 Census.[3]

The undercounting of the AI/AN population is, in part, due to high numbers of the population being considered 'hard-to-count' as the result of intersecting social and geographic factors.[4] For example, rural areas with high poverty rates and low education attainment rates are considered more difficult to count compared to populations with similar poverty and attainment rates residing in urban areas, making the AI/AN population residing on reservations or in remote villages a particularly vulnerable population for being undercounted. In addition to these factors, due to the relatively small population size the AI/AN population is more susceptible to sampling errors compared to other populations. The social and economic vitality of AI/AN communities is reliant on a fair distribution of resources as a result of these data, which highlights the importance of ensuring that foundational data sources, such as the Census, are carried out in a way that accurately represents populations and equips policymakers with a framework that supports evidence-based decision-making and drives social and economic progress.

Higher Education Data Challenges

The need for accurate and reliable data to guide decision-making is true within the higher education environment as well. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) allows for institutional-level analysis and is a useful tool to describe long-term higher education trends. However, the manner in which data are collected serves as a significant challenge in describing the postsecondary trends among AI/AN students. Specifically, the changes to the racial and ethnic categories that were made a decade ago limit the ability to accurately and comprehensively describe American Indian/Alaska Native postsecondary students.

Table 1: IPEDS Race/Ethnicity Categories and Definitions

Race/Ethnicity Category		IPEDS Definition
Any Race	Hispanic or Latino	A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.
Non-Hispanic, Single Race	American Indian or Alaska Native	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community attachment.
	Asian	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian Subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.
	Black or African American	A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawai'i, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.
	White	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.
Non-Hispanic, Multi-Racial	Two or More Races	A person of non-Hispanic origins who identifies as more than one race

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS). See endnote 5.

IPEDS data collection relies on the seven federally designated racial and ethnic categories across all areas of reporting (Table 1).[5] Simply put, this means that any student of Hispanic origin is included within the Hispanic population and all non-Hispanic students who identify as a single race are reported as either White, Black, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander and all non-Hispanic students who identify as more than one race are reported as Two or More Races.

Data from the American Community Survey shown in Table 2 (below) highlight that restricting AI/AN postsecondary counts to just those who are non-Hispanic and single race has more significant implications for the AI/AN population than the general population, due to the large numbers of the AI/AN population who identify as more than one race and/or of Hispanic origin. For example, 38 percent of the AI/AN population nationally identifies as non-Hispanic and a single race (the definition used by IPEDS), while 79 percent of the general population does. Additionally, 25 percent of the AI/AN population is of Hispanic origin, which is 7 percentage points higher than the general population (18 percent).[6]

As shown in Table 2, for both the general population and the AI/AN population, younger populations are more likely to be of Hispanic origin and not identify as single race individuals. This suggests that data that relies on more restrictive definitions of student populations may continue to impede accurately describing postsecondary students. This could potentially make it increasingly difficult to correctly measure educational successes and challenges or the effectiveness of diversity efforts by demographic group due to data limitations. Additionally, this difficulty could be compounded by the already small sample size for Native populations.

While the general population trends demonstrate that there are more AI/AN individuals who are categorized as more than one race and/or Hispanic compared to the general population, according to Census data these trends carry over to postsecondary enrollment as well. For example, according to the American Community Survey, in 2018 there were over 321,000 AI/AN adults (alone, in combination with another race, or with Hispanic ethnicity) who were enrolled postsecondary education.[7] However, just under 34 percent of the AI/AN population who was enrolled in postsecondary education are considered AI/AN, alone and non-Hispanic (the definition aligned with IPEDS definitions).[8] By comparison, among the total population enrolled in college in 2018, 76 percent are part of a single race, non-Hispanic population. These differences across definitions have potential impacts on how students are counted and the ability for postsecondary outcomes to be viewed in a manner that accurately represents the students being served and provides a foundational baseline for developing data-informed policies and practices.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The definitions and categorizations of student populations provide a foundational basis of understanding our postsecondary populations but relying on these data to view trends in higher education limits education leaders' and policymakers' understanding of who their students are and identifying the best policies and practices for supporting AI/AN students. For example, enrollment data highlight how populations access and enroll in postsecondary education and being able to understand how enrollment trends vary across populations is essential to ensure that higher education is accessible and promotes opportunity. However, if one were to view IPEDS enrollment data for the state of Oklahoma, the state that educates the most AI/AN undergraduates and has the highest number of Native American-Serving, Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs), it would appear that AI/AN enrollment has decreased by 30 percent since 2004, with nearly all of the decreases occurring after 2009.[9] One may assume that these decreases are the result of a decreasing population base, but according to the US Census the AI/AN population in Oklahoma has

Table 2: Share of the Population by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2018

		General Population				American Indian/Alaska Native Population			
		Under 18	18-24	25 & older	**Total**	Under 18	18-24	25 & older	**Total**
Non-Hispanic	*Single Race*	70%	74%	83%	**79%**	34%	37%	40%	**38%**
	Multi Race	5%	3%	2%	**3%**	36%	38%	38%	**37%**
Hispanic		25%	22%	15%	**18%**	30%	26%	22%	**25%**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey. See endnote 6.

increased since 2010, with the largest percentage increases among the AI/AN, Hispanic population and those who identify as AI/AN in combination with another race.[10] This leads to questions about declining enrollments in the state such as: Are these the result of demographic changes? A recategorization of students? Or persistent gaps in the college-going rates of the AI/AN population? The answer is likely a combination of all three factors, but without a more comprehensive approach to the collection of postsecondary data education leaders and policymakers are left with gaps in the foundational data that is used to inform policy and decision-making.

Beyond its use for research purposes, IPEDS is also used as a data source in the allocation of resources for special state and federal programing and funding opportunities, such as the *Strengthening Institutions* program under Title III of the Higher Education Act. Native American-Serving, Nontribal Institutions are one cohort of minority serving institutions where funding is based on institutional eligibility and based on undergraduate enrollment of AI/AN students. NASNTI eligibility requires an enrollment of 10 percent AI/AN students as based on IPEDS-reported enrollment, which as stated previously relies on a single-race, non-Hispanic definition of AI/AN students. The determination of which institutions have the NASNTI designation can fluctuate over time, depending on shifts in overall enrollment patterns.

In a recent study of five NASNTIs, institution leaders at almost all the institutions specifically mentioned issues with IPEDS reporting not accurately capturing their AI/AN population, particularly as it relates to IPEDS undercounting the AI/AN population. Some NASNTIs internal data collection includes collecting 'Certificate of Indian Blood' (CIBs) on their campuses to determine the number of Native students and to recognize tribal affiliation. Those totals may differ substantially from what is reported in IPEDS. For example, at Fort Lewis College, AI/AN students comprised 931 (29 percent) of the Fall 2019 enrollments as measured by IPEDS; by contrast AI/AN students comprised 1,323 (41 percent) of the Fall 2019 enrollment as measured by CIBs.[11]

At the institution, state, and federal levels data are used to inform decision-making, but there remain significant gaps in the data that are collected and accessed with resulting implications on policy and practice. This is particularly true among the AI/AN population that has been undercounted or even excluded in fundamental data systems. These persistent gaps and limitations in data collection efforts leaves institution, state, and federal policymakers with an opportunity to improve data collection in a way that is representative of diverse student populations. A more expansive data collection that allows for more nuanced analysis could equip policymakers with more accurate data that serves as the foundation of effective policies that drive educational opportunities and success for AI/AN students.

Endnotes

[1] National Congress of American Indians, *The Asterisk Nation*, (Washington, DC: National Congress of American Indians) accessed September 15, 2020 at http://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/data.

[2] National Congress of American Indians, "Making Indian Country Count: Native Americans and the 2020 Census," (Washington, DC: National Congress of American Indians) accessed November 9, 2020 at https://www.ncai.org/attachments/Testimonial_mdhaqGuvUFJPmxYsbAlsiWrcEAplkxlhddmWBvBp_2018.02.12%20NCAI%20Census%20Testimony.pdf.

[3] National Congress of American Indians accessed September 15, 2020 at http://www.ncai.org/policy-issues/economic-development-commerce/census.

[4] William P. O'Hare, *2020 Census Faces Challenges in Rural America*, (Durham, NH: Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire) accessed September 15, 2020 at https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1329&context=carsey.

[5] Categories and definitions were accessed at https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/report-your-data/race-ethnicity-definitions. IPEDS uses definitions developed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). In addition to these race and ethnicity categories, IPEDS includes student populations for nonresident alien, resident alien, and race/ethnicity unknown.

[6] United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata, 1-year estimates, 2018. WICHE analysis and calculations.

[7] United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata, 1-year estimates, 2018. WICHE analysis and calculations.

[8] United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata, 1-year estimates, 2018. WICHE analysis and calculations. These data are for adults over the age 25 only.

[9] Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems, Fall Enrollment Survey, 2004 to 2018.

[10] United States Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for Oklahoma: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2019," accessed September 15, 2020 at https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-state-detail.html.

[11] Data retrieved 8/10/20 from Fort Lewis College Institutional Research website, https://www.fortlewis.edu/Portals/1/Leadership/Institutional%20Effectiveness/Institutional%20Research/docs/2019-20%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf.

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