



## THE EDUCATION CATASTROPHE ON AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS

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In the last 30 years, the college experience for has changed quite substantially. It's no secret that college has changed over the past few decades. Increased tuition, online classes, and new majors are just a few examples of change in colleges nationwide. Still, the rise in college tuition and a current pandemic hasn't stopped students from continuing their education. However, a specific ethnic group has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic—American Indians. Specifically, this pandemic has impacted American Indian students from college. College is important to American Indians because it is the only way to get off the reservation. Education will ensure a decent life for American Indians in this cruel, corrupt, capitalist world. Although various populations in the United States have experienced academic hardships due to the changed environment caused by COVID-19, none are comparable to those faced by American Indians because of limited access to the internet, higher risk of contracting COVID-19, and financial privation.

The issue of limited access to the internet on various Native reservations is the first major obstacle. In the city, there is internet access in the palm of peoples' hands; however, most Americans take this internet access for granted, while other Americans do not have that advantage. On the report of AZEDNEWS, "In a recent survey of 506 [Navajo] families, '36.4% of our families have access to reliable internet and adequate tools for online learning'" (Irish 9). As Native college students are returning from campus, they will face the reality that Wi-Fi access in the area is limited. Internet access for American Indian families and students is essential. According to MacGillis, the lack of schooling in children can cause enduring harmful effects on children's future opportunities. During World War II, he found that "German children, with those in the most heavily bombed cities completing 1.2 years less of school and seeing their future earnings decrease by an average of 6%" (MacGillis 30). As of now, "...only 14% of American Indians have a college degree—less than half the national average" ("Our Purpose," 2020). Now imagine the future of American Indian students. They may be deprived of many educational opportunities. After all, they may not be able to get that 3.5+ GPA to hold their scholarship or were not able to pass that one general education class because they could not show up to all their classes. These opportunities are necessary for Indian students because America is a capitalist world. In other words, "[t]o be poor in America is to be a failure—it's to be without decent health care, without basic necessities, often without dignity" (Edmundson 9). American Indians already face these restraints daily. Although, there are many individuals and schools that have created fundraisers to get laptops out to students, it does not change the fact that many Native students are in an area where they cannot connect to the internet. Limited access to the internet will create academic hardship by not allowing students to attend their classes, so they will begin to fall behind and lose motivation to study.

The internet access disparity continues to impact the college experience for American Indians negatively, but the outbreak of COVID-19 has also increased health concerns that prevail over inaccessible internet. The American Indian population has a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 than any other population in the United States. According to the CDC, "[they] found that in 23 selected states, the cumulative incidence of laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases among [American Indian/Alaskan Native] was 3.5 times that of non-Hispanic whites" (CDC 1). American Indians are more susceptible to contracting COVID-19 because there is little running water on Indian reservations. This deficiency means that they cannot keep up with the CDC guidelines of washing hands regularly. The guidelines also ask to clean and disinfect surfaces daily ("How to Protect Yourself & Others," 2). However, as soon as COVID-19 began to spread in the United States, Clorox wipes and sprays were the first to go in many grocery stores. Many American Indian families do not have the means to afford to go to the grocery store more than once a week because their trek will require more than 20 miles of travel. A recent study in 2011 stated, "Thus, many American Indians living on reservations may face long distances to supermarkets" (O'Connell 21). With little to no transportation, obtaining sanitary supplies will not be possible—resulting in plummeting their overall health. Being at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 will create academic hardships by adding unwarranted stress and distraction from learning.

With the ongoing pandemic, millions of Americans were laid off from their jobs because the economy fell, so the need for employees also fell. According to AZEDNEWS, "When businesses closed, and many local economic resources shut down, 'this created economic hardship for families already on a limited budget'" (Irish 12). With these economic struggles, limited learning opportunities are no longer seen as a priority. Native families need to worry about where their next meal is coming from instead of their children prioritizing exams, assignments, or quizzes. These students are more obligated to aid their families in getting another source of income. Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, people must satisfy physiological needs before any other type of need (Maslow qtd. in McLeod par. 3). With students dropping out of school, what does this mean for future endeavors? Many Natives will lose their chance of "escaping" the reservation. American Indian reservations are known for their high rates of alcoholism and drug use. It is a corrupt environment constructed by the United States Government. According to the American Journal of Public Health, during the time of European arrival, "[w]hites...deliberately pressed alcohol upon the natives because it was an immensely profitable trade good..." (Frank 2). During this pandemic, several Native college students had to stay home rather than live on-campus because they could no longer afford college tuition or on-campus housing. Parents can no longer pay for their kids' schooling. They are preoccupied with struggling to make means for food, rent, and other necessary amenities. Financial privation will increase academic hardships among Native college students because it will cause students to put their studies on hold rather than make them a priority.

Although various populations in the United States have experienced academic hardships due to the changed environment caused by COVID-19, none are comparable to those faced by American Indians. Many American Indian students do not have access to a reliable internet source, which is essential in the virtual learning imposed by colleges during the current pandemic. In addition, limited running water and scarce sanitary supplies and PPE put American Indians in a high-risk category of contracting COVID-19. Finally, financial privation in the United States economy has brought adversities to basic human needs, which affects the students' academic priorities. Education is seen as an important method in the Native community

to overcome their mistreatment. They need a chance to escape from the shambolic representation made by the U.S. Government and show people who they truly are. The inequitable education system of America has consistently been unilaterally skewed away from benefitting American Indian students. The current pandemic has further increased this gap. Now is the time to address this long-forgotten, concealed issue and recognize that American Indians are people who deserve an equal chance at education.

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