

New Study Reveals the Impact of COVID-19 on Tribal College Students

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The American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) has released findings of a broad survey of tribal college and university (TCU) student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first study of its kind, the survey posed an array of questions to nearly 500 returning TCU students, focusing on persistence, online learning, and physical and mental well-being. The results underscore the far-reaching effects of the pandemic on TCUs, Native students, and their communities.

One of the greatest challenges for TCU students has been adapting to an online curriculum. According to the survey, 45% of respondents had never enrolled in an online or hybrid class prior to 2020, with 54% reporting being less engaged than in face-to-face classes and 58% responding they had greater difficulty understanding class material. Even though nearly 40% of TCU students commute 50 or more miles to attend class, a clear majority (57%) prefer traditional, in-person courses.

To compound matters, many TCU students live with their families and report difficulties studying at home or having the necessary support to succeed. More than 60% responded that a variety of factors at home have inhibited their studies, and 51% say they cannot find a quiet or adequate study space.

“Our students have had a rough time with the transition to online, but they are persevering. Many students pointed to new opportunities, such as being able to spend more time with a special needs child,” says Katherine Cardell, AIHEC research and data associate and survey lead. “Still the data tells us that much more focus and care should be given to students who are struggling to meet their basic and educational needs.”

Another concerning finding from AIHEC’s study is the impact of the pandemic on both mental and physical well-being. Students are spending less time exercising, being outdoors, engaging with their peers, and connecting with their respective communities. Nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents reported they can no longer adequately address their mental health needs.

“Addressing the issues our students face will take time and resources. Even after everyone is vaccinated, these issues will remain,” states Carrie Billy, president and CEO of AIHEC. “Rebuilding is going to take a long-term commitment from TCUs, tribes, states, and Congress.”

