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Tribal Colleges in the United States: Empowering Native Americans?

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INTRODUCTION

Tribal Colleges are institutions of higher education which were created at the end of the 1960s in the United States. Even though they emerged during a specific period marked by social and political changes within American society, it can be assumed that they are the consequence of centuries of political relations between Native American¹ tribes and Euro-Americans². In a broader sense, they result from the encounter of two different cultures which frame two different educational standards: Euro-American standards and tribal standards.

Education can be defined as a way of transmitting knowledge, beliefs and norms to someone. As a consequence, there are different types of education because these parameters are different from one culture to another. Prior to the arrival of European settlers, the inhabitants of what is known today as the United States were organized in tribes which had their own educational system. The latter changed from a tribe to another but overall, tribal educational system was made in such way as to prepare Native American children to serve and to meet the needs of tribal societies when they grow up. Education was supervised by relatives and the elders of the tribes: their educational mission was to transmit traditional beliefs and values and encourage the children to learn through participation so as to perpetuate and strengthen their tribal system of life.³

First of all, when dealing with Native American education in the United States, it is necessary to make the distinction between education *by* Native Americans and education *for* Native Americans. Tribal education – so education *by* Native Americans – must be opposed to

¹“Native American” was deliberately chosen to refer to peoples indigenous to North America among other options such as American Indians, First Nations or Indians. Although it seemed more precise and respectful to use the names of tribes when referring to their members, the subject under study does not specifically focus on distinct tribes so it is necessary to use a terminology that has a broad approach of indigenous peoples even though tribal names will be encountered. Still, Native Americans can be seen as a problematic term because it can be understood as a reference to all the indigenous people of America, therefore including Canada, Central America and South America. However, since the subject is limited to the United States, therefore including Hawaii and Alaska, no confusion can be made. The term Native American which started to be used more commonly during the 1960s was thought more appropriate because it avoids stereotype contrary to the term Indian; a term shaped by a colonial point of view whereas Native American hints at what predates colonization.

²It was necessary to reflect on the term “white” which is commonly used and socially accepted. It seemed more meaningful to use the term “Euro-American”, a term which starts to be used more frequently by scholars. Indeed, this term is broad and is embedded in a social and cultural framework as Native American. “European” refers to the first settlers of what is now known as the United States who were from European descent.

³Earl J. Barlow, “Indian Education: State and Federal” *American Indian nations: yesterday, today, and tomorrow*, edited by George Horse Capture, Duane Champagne and Chandler C. Jackson, Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007. pp. 89-90.

“colonial education”. The latter refers to the educational system imposed on Native Americans by the federal government of the United States. The 19th century saw the implementation of several types of schools such as missionary schools and federal boarding schools, exclusively conceived for Native Americans because it was considered that they needed an appropriate education which goal was to assimilate them to Euro-American standards. They were ruled by Euro-American Christian missionaries, educators and teachers. According to Native American scholar K. Tsianina Lomawaima:

[i]n the “American” era (from 1776 through the present), “civilized” education has usually meant instruction in English and the suppression of Native languages; conversion to Christianity [...]; an emphasis on manual labor, and on “industrial” or “vocational” rather than academic training [...]; and physical disruption of family/community by removing Indian children into boarding schools [...]⁴

Therefore, as K. Tsianina Lomawaima suggests, these schools did not seek to encourage Native Americans to pursue an academic career which would lead them to high social ranks in society. In these schools, education was used as a political tool. It was instrumental in homogenizing the status of Native Americans within American society by breaking their tribal affiliations and by creating a workforce which would not meet tribal needs so much as American ones. As a matter of fact, the government sought to dominate these populations by a process of “Americanization” which was aimed at building a more united nation. This type of education was provided until around 1920. Even though the schools which were created during the 19th century did not treat Native Americans in the same way, they were ruled by people who considered that they knew more about Native Americans’ own interests. In other words “policymakers, professional educators, federal bureaucrats and interested citizens argued over Indian abilities as they proposed radically different visions of the Indian place in America.⁵” This implies that Native Americans were considered as “wards” of the government. Whether intellectuals or reformers valued tribal ways of life or not, Native Americans did not participate in the debate concerning their own affairs. In this sense, Native Americans have been denied the power to direct their education according to their own standards and their tribal needs.

⁴K. Tsianina Lomawaima, “American Indian Education: *by* Indians versus *for* Indians”, *A Companion to American Indian History*, edited by Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, p. 422.

⁵Lomawaima, p. 427.

Nowadays, Native Americans are underrepresented in the academe. This underrepresentation stems from the fact that the government of the United States has sought to provide a specific education for Native Americans in such way as to fulfill a larger political agenda. In tribal education, there is no such thing as “higher education”. However, throughout the centuries, Native Americans have understood the necessity of being represented in the higher-education system so as to ensure the survival of tribes under mainstream society. Indeed, higher education is commonly seen as a path to gain power in society as it grants access to functions which have more weigh in the decision making of a society. So, the specificity of Tribal Colleges is to be found in their primary goal which is to give access to higher education to Native Americans. They are educational institutions which address a specific minority in the United States, Native Americans, and a specific problem, the access to higher education for this very population.

The aim of this research paper is to evaluate to what extent Tribal Colleges have contributed to foster Native American empowerment through higher education from the late 1960s to the 21th century. The work will be divided into two main parts. First, it will be necessary to study the historical context(s) which led to the creation of Tribal Colleges and to explain their structure. Then, we will focus on the development of Tribal Colleges and more specifically on their performance in the 21th century. This issue was thought relevant because Tribal Colleges are at the core of debates in the educational field in the United States. Indeed, the success of these institutions is a topic that divides decision makers. This divergence stems from the different ways of assessing the results of these institutions and the way of considering success and failure, two notions which are socially and culturally constructed. By evaluating the outcomes of Tribal Colleges, we will show that these notions vary from an American and tribal points of views as the two parties do not try to achieve the same goals through higher education. The latter is different at mainstream institutions and at Tribal Colleges, which are minority-serving institutions. The Native American population⁶ in the United States is considered as a “special” minority. More precisely, Native American tribes have a specific relationship with the federal government which places the implementation of higher education through Tribal Colleges at the core of complex power relations.

⁶ According to the United States Census Bureau of 2010, there were 5.2 million people who identified as “American Indian and Alaska Native, either alone or in combination with one or more other races”.

I. The emergence of Tribal Colleges in the United States

When considering Native American higher education, it is important to understand the political relationship between the federal government and Native American tribes. Tribal Colleges are one of the expressions of this complex relationship, as their existence is the result of social but also political changes introduced by the federal government. Studying the emergence of these colleges gives an idea of the complexity of the matter. Indeed, the access to higher education for Native Americans was and still is conditioned by the political relationship between the federal government and Native American tribes. The distinctive political relationship has had a major impact on the foundation of Tribal Colleges.

When European settlers arrived to what is now known as the United States, they were less numerous than Native Americans, who were organized in tribes. In addition to being more numerous, Native Americans were also more powerful because they knew how to manage the natural resources of the land. So as to assert their power, Americans treated Native American tribes as political entities, sovereign nations with which they could trade. From 1778 to 1871, the federal government conducted its relationship with Native American tribes thanks to treaties.⁷ As Americans were moving westward, they needed to acquire lands occupied by Native American tribes so as to build the nation. Therefore, they made treaties with Native American tribes for them to cede their lands and, in exchange, the federal government would guarantee them its protection. This “treaty-making process” built the “trust relationship” – a government-to-government relationship. This special relationship implies that the federal government has a moral and a financial obligation to assist Native American tribes while the tribes have the right to self-governance. However, the latter is limited because Native American tribes form “tribal governments” which are embedded in a larger government – the United States federal government – and are therefore submitted to federal legislation. The states in which the reservations are located, however, have no right to interfere in Native American affairs, and their laws do not apply to the tribes. Although this distinctive legal status, reserved for Native American tribes, is guaranteed by the Constitution, it was often seen as problematic because paradoxical.

In the 1950s there was a major shift in federal Indian policy which aimed at “terminating” Native American tribes– by abolishing their sovereignty – and therefore

⁷ “Frequently Asked Questions”. *U.S. Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs*
<http://www.bia.gov/FAQs/>

terminating the “special relationship”. This shift triggered a reaction from Native American tribes during the broader context of the 1960s social protests which enabled them to expose their issues. As a consequence, federal Indian policy was altered to foster Native American self-determination which resulted in the creation of the first Tribal College in 1968.

1. From Termination policy to self-determination policy

a) Pre-1950s context

Before World War II, there were many political reforms which were favourable to Native American tribes. The publication of the *Meriam Report* (1928) which analysed centuries of mistreatment of Native Americans had major consequences on federal Indian policy. The report pointed out the negative effects of the education provided through the assimilation policy: “[a] key feature of the assimilation policy was to educate Indian children in the ways of white Americans so that they might be productive, if not particularly intellectual, members of the dominant society.”⁸ Thus, the report recognized that Native Americans had been educated in a way that did not respect their tribal culture and that did not foster academic careers. It shed light on Native American culture, on tribal system of life and brought new ideas regarding higher education for Native Americans. Indeed, according to scholar Cary Michael Carney “[t]he report did state that higher education should be encouraged, not just allowed, by restructuring the federal schools to furnish adequate preparation, and by the provision of more financial aid and funding.”⁹ Therefore, the report advocated higher education for Native Americans and might thus be seen as a first step in the development of self-determination, even though the report did not encourage the creation of educational institutions ruled by Native Americans.

From this report stemmed the Indian Reorganization Act (1934) which was passed under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal administration (this act is often referred to as belonging to the “Indian New Deal” policy). This act fostered tribal autonomy: it was drafted

⁸ Kevin Gover, “Federal Indian policy in the twenty first century” *American Indian nations: yesterday, today, and tomorrow*, edited by George Horse Capture, Duane Champagne and Chandler C. Jackson, Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007, p. 188.

⁹ Cary Michael Carney, *Native American Higher Education in the United States*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1999, p. 101.

so that Native American tribes would have their own constitutions and would manage their own lands and programs thanks to federal investments.¹⁰ Also, it advocated access to higher education for Native Americans by guarantying federal funds for education, which would be managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs¹¹ (BIA).¹² However, even though this act is a milestone in the history of higher education for Native Americans by stating that it was necessary for them, no real reforms were made. Still, thanks to the *Meriam Report* and the Indian New Deal, the government reconsidered its relationship with Native American tribes by asserting that they should have more self-governance and that their education should be more tribally controlled so as to meet tribal needs.

However, World War II marked a new turn in federal Indian policy which sought to assimilate Native Americans to mainstream society again. The government's aim was to make Native Americans participate in the post-war effort. At that time, most Native Americans lived on reservations, places which guaranteed their tribal affiliations but were devoid of economic opportunities. Between 1947 and 1948, the Navajo reservation (in Arizona and New Mexico) suffered blizzards which worsened Native Americans' living conditions on the reservation. As a consequence, the government and the BIA started to relocate the Navajos to urban areas through relocation programs which were implemented so as to assist them in their new living environment.¹³ These relocation programs were progressively applied to the whole Native American population – at first benefiting the unemployed Native Americans and war veterans or Native American women who had participated in the war effort –and went hand in hand with a new major federal Indian policy known as the “termination” policy.

This policy was implemented under the conservative government of Dwight S. Eisenhower (1953-1961) and aimed at assimilating Native Americans to American society once and for all, for a matter of equality between American citizens. Indeed, the President stated that Native Americans had to be treated like any other citizens of the United States, with the same rights, duties and responsibilities under the passage of House Concurrent

¹⁰Anne Garrait-Bourrier and Monique Vénuat, *Les Indiens aux États-Unis: renaissance d'une culture*, Paris: Ellipses, coll. Les essentiels, Civilisation anglo-saxonne, 2002, p. 74.

¹¹ The Bureau of Indian Affairs is an agency within the United States Department of the Interior created in 1824, responsible for the management of the lands held in trust by the U.S. government (reservations) and in charge of the 567 federally recognized Native American tribes.

¹²Carney, p. 102.

¹³Donald Fixico, “Federal and state policies and American Indians”, *A Companion to American Indian History*, edited by Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, pp. 386-387.

Resolution 108 in 1953.¹⁴ Still, the real idea that lied behind this policy was to abolish tribal sovereignties and the reservation system because they were considered as problematic since the federal government had to financially assist the tribes, according to the historical trust relationship. World War II had left the United States with huge debts and the Federal Government did not want to spend money on the reforms of the “Indian New Deal”, which were very expensive.¹⁵ The government was more concerned with investing in relocation programs because it would be more profitable on a long-term basis. Also, the reservations were seen as a problem because Native Americans were facing poor living conditions and at the same time, they did not serve the post-war effort in mainstream society while the Cold War context encouraged patriotism.

This policy highlights what is known as the “Indian problem” which dates back to the creation of the reservation system in the 19th century during the westward expansion. As K. Tsianina Lomawaima explains “[...] most Americans imagined reservations to be temporary enclaves where Natives could be effectively schooled, civilized, trained as domestic or manual laborers and then swallowed into the lower strata of American life.”¹⁶ The typology of the reservation suggests that they were places of assimilation located *outside* American society. Therefore this system can be considered as rather paradoxical because the process of assimilation can only be efficient when one adapts to the values of the dominant population but also to its environment. In addition, reservations were usually places that Euro-Americans considered as useless for their own economic development – being devoid of usable natural resources – but alright for Native Americans to live in. As a consequence, reservations were, and still are, poor places in which Native Americans cannot prosper even though the federal government assists them. By terminating the tribes and the reservations through the termination policy, the “Indian problem” would be solved once and for all.

According to Kevin Gover, Director of the National Museum of the American Indian and former Assistant secretary for Indian affairs (1997-2000), this policy is also a consequence of the return of Native American veterans from the war. When they came back to live on the reservations, they realized that there was no employment or, if there was any, they were too qualified for it and they expected better professional opportunities. Indeed, the

¹⁴Gover, p. 193.

¹⁵Garrait-Bourrier and Vénuat, p. 74.

¹⁶Lomawaima, p. 427.

war veterans had acquired new working skills which – while being useful to a non-Native society – seemed rather superfluous in reservations. According to Kevin Gover, it gave an impetus for the government to encourage their relocation because of the lack of prospects in the reservations. Native American veterans themselves were more concerned with finding better jobs.¹⁷ So, the relocation programs were established by the federal government in partnership with the BIA, but many Native Americans sought to be relocated in urban areas.

Therefore, in the 1950s, new geographical patterns regarding the location of Native Americans in the United States developed: Native Americans were still living on reservations but for the first time, Native Americans were living in urban areas on a large scale. This had a huge impact on the education of Native Americans. Indeed, through the termination policy and relocation programs, the government and the BIA had come back to the idea that the education of Native Americans should focus on vocational training and adult education. In this sense, it was not aimed at giving Native Americans high-academic skills but rather aimed at conditioning them to professional careers which did not require high intellectual abilities. Indeed, Native Americans had to acquire working skills very quickly so as to serve the post-war effort. To do so, in 1957, Congress passed a vocational educational law which aimed at helping Native Americans to adapt professionally to mainstream society.¹⁸ Still, it is interesting to note that this relocation impacted Native Americans' access to higher education during a post-war context in which there was a general growth of enrolment at institutions of higher education in the United States.

b) Native Americans in urban areas: accessing higher education

According to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Dillon S. Myer, the philosophy which was at the core of the termination policy was that “Native Americans should be encouraged to live without federal supervision like other Americans. Moving Indians to urban areas to work and to live would, he believed, escalate their standard of living.”¹⁹ Living “like other Americans” implied that Native Americans would adapt to mainstream society by being “urbanized”. In such way as to fulfil this goal, the BIA’s relocation programs were supposed

¹⁷Gover, pp. 191-192.

¹⁸Fixico, “Federal and state policies and American Indians”, p. 387.

¹⁹ Donald Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960*, Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1986, p. 135.

to give housing, financial support and job opportunities to their applicants. Even though the BIA made significant efforts to assist Native Americans, the promises of a better “standard of living” were not met for most of them. Some even decided to return to the reservations because they did not manage to adapt to urban life. Indeed, Native Americans faced a totally different reality from the one of the reservations which were – and still are – geographically isolated and rural places with poor facilities. As Donald Fixico, Professor of History and Director of Indigenous Nations Studies Program at the University of Kansas, explained:

[f]or those who left the reservations and travelled a long distance for the first time, the relocation experience was a threatening cultural shock. Once off a bus and alone in a strange large city, relocatees encountered a foreign and threatening new world that often proved to be traumatic. Relocatees knew little about such modern gadgets as spotlights, clocks, elevators, telephones and other everyday objects that Americans took for granted. [...] Newly relocated Indians who had not yet mastered the English language experienced even more difficulty, and many were embarrassed to ask for assistance.²⁰

As suggested by Donald Fixico, relocated Native Americans were very vulnerable in urban areas because they had to adapt to things which were new to them but trivial for the rest of the urban population. The relocation programs were made for Native Americans to “escape” poverty and increase their economic status but these many problems of adaptation and comprehension of the western standards of living – such as the notion of time or the notion of productivity – placed them in a vulnerable position regarding the world of work but also regarding other “strong” ethnic minorities (African Americans, Hispanics or Asians) living in urban areas. These minorities suffered from discrimination as well but at least they were adapted to Western standards of living. As a consequence, many Native Americans suffered what could be referred to as a “double discrimination” effect because they were like a minority within the minorities. Indeed, as stated by Donald Fixico “[f]or the majority of relocatees [however] urbanization presented a difficult social and psychological adjustment to an alien environment.”²¹ The relocation programs actually led to the creation of “red ghettos” in which Native Americans faced violence on a daily basis. This “double discrimination” effect was also found in education.

While the BIA provided vocational training and job placement for relocatees, the urbanization of Native Americans – and particularly that of veterans of war and the youth– enabled them, however, to have access to college. Indeed, the late 1950s and 1960s witnessed an increase of Native Americans’ enrolment at institutions of higher education in a context of

²⁰Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, pp. 139-140.

²¹Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, p. 147.

general growth in enrolment at such institutions in the United States. This growth was the consequence of the G.I. bill (1944) which was implemented by the federal government through scholarships so as to fulfil an increasing demand for higher education among war veterans.²² Thanks to this bill, many Native Americans had access to college. This interest in attending higher education institutions might be understood by the fact that war veterans (World War II and Korean War) had acquired enough skills to be granted basic jobs and that they wanted to increase their status within American society. At the same time, the BIA started to implement a scholarship program which was meant to support Native Americans wishing to go to college but it is rather difficult to evaluate how many of them benefited from these scholarships as the main point of focus of the BIA was to provide vocational education and job placement. Still, it is interesting to note that at that time some tribes started to create their own “tribal scholarship programs”²³ which underscores the tribes’ will to give Native Americans access to higher education. These programs were implemented by the tribes themselves, notably the Navajo tribe, which used their own funds to financially support students willing to go to college.

However, access to higher education at Euro-American institutions did not guarantee academic success for Native Americans. The number of degrees awarded was abysmal: in 1961, only 66 Native Americans graduated out of approximately 2,000 Native American college students and in 1968 only 181 whereas in 1965 there were around 7,000 Native American college students.²⁴ Although the enrolment rate had increased and the number of graduates had tripled within seven years, it remained a very small figure. The reasons for these low rates of graduation are to be found in the “double discrimination” they faced when attending college, which echoes the one most Native Americans faced when they were relocated to urban areas. The first discrimination can be explained by the fact that higher education was new for most of them and that college environment did not provide enough comprehensive support for them, as they faced a cultural shock. The second one is to be found in the curricula. The textbooks’ content was based on a Eurocentric vision of Native Americans which represented them in a stereotypical way. The dominant historical narratives were seen as erroneous regarding Native American history and culture. As a consequence, this misrepresentation triggered a loss of identity and a disillusion which was to trigger despair

²² John R. Thelin and Marybeth Gasman, “Historical Overview of American Higher Education”, *Student services: A Handbook for the Profession*, edited by John H. Schuh, Susan R. Jones and Shaun R. Harper, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. 13.

²³ Carney, p. 103.

²⁴ Carney, p. 103.

regarding American society but also regarding themselves because their cultural background was not respected.²⁵ This led to a tendency to drop out of school without completing a degree and therefore, to low educational attainment. These educational conditions led to sensitise Native Americans to the necessity of educating their youth in a way that would make them succeed educationally. Some Native American students started to implement American Indian studies programs at some colleges – at San Francisco state College, for instance – so as to promote tribal culture and cover Native American history in a more respectful way.²⁶

The urbanization of Native Americans did not only have negative consequences. While tribes were not “connected” before because they were scattered on reservations cross the United States, the urbanization of Native Americans fostered inter-tribal relations because Native Americans from different tribes lived in the same urban areas and were facing the same issues. These connections enabled them to organize themselves politically. For urban Native Americans, the first concern was to fight against the poverty they were facing in their new urban environment. In this sense, it gave birth to a broader Native American political movement which was meant to alleviate their many frustrations triggered by their conditions of life in urban areas, at first.

Then, these political organizations crystallised around the fight against a much broader enemy, the termination policy which had proven to have disastrous effects on Native American tribes. Therefore, the urbanization of Native Americans was one of the major conditions which fostered Native American activism (usually referred as the AIM, standing for “American Indian Movement”). The latter developed concurrently with the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, a context which increased their political consciousness and which incited them to promote their rights, first on a local scale, then on a national one.

²⁵Troy Johnson et al., “American Indian Activism and Transformation: Lessons from Alcatraz” *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk*, edited by Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel and Duane Champagne, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997, p. 23.

²⁶ Duane Champagne, “The Rise and Fall of Native American Studies in the United States” *American Indian Nations*, edited by George Horse Capture, Duane Champagne and Chandler C. Jackson, Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007, pp. 131-132.

c) Native American activism and federal reforms: promoting self-determination in education

In the early 1960s, Native Americans living in urban areas started to organize themselves politically so as to manage their own affairs as the federal government and the BIA had progressively abandoned them. The historiography on Native American activism tends to claim that Native Americans adopted a “passive” attitude while American society was marked by many social movements which found their roots in various forms of oppression. The mass movement of protest which occurred throughout the 1960s and later on, including ethnic minorities but also social minorities (women, students, LGBTs), was initiated by African American people who developed what is referred to as the Civil Rights movement. As stated by Native American scholar Troy Johnson “disparate groups came together in an era marked by dynamic personal change, cultural awareness, and political confrontation. Meanwhile, many Indian activists observed the Civil Rights movements and contemplated how this activity could be brought to bear on Indian issues.²⁷” The idea is that Native Americans’ issues were different from the ones of other ethnic minorities but they could be related to broader struggles, such as the fight against oppression. It is rather difficult to evaluate to what extent the Civil Rights movement influenced the creation of Native American activism but it can be asserted that this movement created an atmosphere of radical change within a society in which minorities were oppressed. The fact that an oppressed minority started to protest for its own rights on a large scale has certainly empowered Native Americans to protest as well.

As American society was shaken by protests and riots, the Democratic government of Lyndon B. Johnson (1963 – 1969) implemented a series of domestic reforms which were part of the “Great Society” set of programs adopted to meet African Americans’ demands. One of the major concerns of these reforms was to end racial injustice and poverty thanks to what was known as the “War on Poverty” program. The latter led to the enactment of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 and from this act stemmed the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). At first, this program targeted African Americans but progressively other minorities benefitted from it. Indeed, the Indian Community Action was created within the OEO. These new institutions were very important because they enabled to fund and foster community actions: the federal government increased its financial resources allocated to

²⁷ Johnson, Champagne and Nagel, p. 20.

minorities so as to create federal programs to fight against poverty. It is interesting to note that it actually strengthened Native American political organizations such as the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) created in 1964 as they enjoyed more financial resources and so they could mobilize themselves more easily and implement new programs. So this increase in funding was not made to foster assimilationist policies but it rather promoted Native American self-determination.

The protests of the NIYC were mostly organized by college-educated Native Americans. This early activism is very important because it set the stage for the late forms of activism and brought political and historical awareness among Native Americans living in urban areas but also on reservations. Native American activism as such is said to be born with the creation of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1968 in Minneapolis. Yet, the NIYC led by the Paiute Indian Melvin Thom is the organization which started to claim Native American self-determination. As stated by Native American scholar Troy Johnson, the concept of self-determination for Native Americans “included the right to assume control of their own lives independent of federal control, the creation of conditions for a new era in which the Indian future would be determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions, and the assurance that Indian people would not be separated involuntarily from their tribal groups.”²⁸ This concept implies that the federal government should keep on assisting Native Americans by financing their programs without controlling them. It also sheds light on a resurgence of tribal values which were to be erased by the termination policy.

As the educational attainment was very low among this population, education appeared to be one of the major issues for Native Americans as it was seen as a way to better themselves. Indeed, Native American students who took part in the organization realized that it was necessary for their people to have access to higher education because it represented a source of power within Western society but also for the sake of tribal survival and sovereignty. They also pointed the fact that Native American youth was in a state of powerlessness and that it could be alleviated through education because it is a means to build up one’s future. They were aware that it was necessary for them to hold on their tribal affiliations and so the reservations remained important places for that. Thanks to the new federal funding stemming from the War on Poverty program, Native American tribes began to be independent from the control of the BIA: this increase in financial resource through federal

²⁸Johnson, Champagne and Nagel, p. 14.

agencies – on reservations and in cities²⁹ – enabled Native American tribes to create their own independent educational programs and therefore to implement the self-determination concept.³⁰

The historiography related to the creation of the first Tribal College on Navajo reservation in 1968 is quite limited as scholars do not give actual data on this matter. Nevertheless, it can be asserted that it is an indirect result of the early Native American activism and of the progressive political shift of the federal government regarding its relationship with Native American tribes. At that time, the termination policy was very unpopular among politicians themselves because they realized that it was not successful, although this knowledge did not bring on any major shift in federal Indian policy. The shift towards a policy of self-determination was made possible thanks to the “official” Native American activism which got more attention from the federal government.

As Native Americans acquired more independence to manage their own programs, the wave of activism grew. The event which marked the beginning of “official” Native American activism is the occupation of the island of Alcatraz from November 1969 to June 1971 in San Francisco Bay. College students started to occupy the island so as to protest against the federal government’s treatment of their population. They proclaimed themselves the “Indians of all Tribes”. Native Americans from urban areas but also reservations gathered on this island so as to stage their issues. Their will was to have more financial resources from the federal government so as to implement their own programs, including their own schools. After this occupation, a series of other protests followed and did get the attention of the federal government contrary to the early activism which had an impact on a local scale.

The creation of the Navajo College was considered as a success and so various tribes decided to follow this initiative. Progressively the federal government acknowledged the necessity for Native American tribes to take control over their education. This was made official by the enactment of the Self-determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 which represents a major legislative landmark as it marked a shift in federal Indian policy. Indeed, it denied the previous termination policy and changed the paternalistic attitude into a supportive one: Native Americans were given the right to manage their own educational programs without the abolishment of tribal sovereignty.

²⁹ Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 126.

³⁰ Carney, p. 106.

2. The concept of Tribal Colleges: a new form of education

Tribal colleges are unique institutions of higher education in the United States. Their educational structure differs from the one which can be found in mainstream institutions. The main difference lies in the fact that they are minority-serving institutions so they offer a specific curriculum and they are at the service of a community, which implies that they serve a student body with specific needs. Therefore, they can be considered as a form of community college: “[t]hese schools are unique institutions that blend the traditional community college goals of local economic development, workforce training, and preparation for continuing education with a combination of supplemental student support, cultural preservation and enhancement, and community outreach programs.”³¹ Their particularity is also linked to the fact that most Tribal Colleges are located on reservations which are places that face many socio-economic challenges. Thus, Tribal Colleges attempt to provide a new form of education. Indeed, their educational missions fit within the concept of self-determination. They embody Native American tribes’ right to manage their own education thanks to a comprehensive and supportive educational structure. Tribal Colleges are institutions which cultivate a profoundly Native American style by enhancing tribal educational structure and tribal values.

a) Basic characteristics of Tribal College

Since the first Tribal College was created in 1968, many sprung up. Today, the United States counts 32 accredited Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and 5 non-accredited TCUs which serve around 28,000 students.³² The number of students of each Tribal College varies considerably from a state to another. Overall, they are small colleges: among the 37 TCUs, only three of them have more than 1,000 students enrolled. Tribal Colleges are tribally chartered and locally controlled. Most of Tribal Colleges are two-year institutions – among the 37 TCUs, 7 are four-year institutions – and offer associate degrees and vocational training. More precisely twenty seven TCUs offer programs leading to a certificate or diploma. Some

³¹Alisa Federico Cunningham and Christina Parker, “Tribal Colleges as Minority Institutions and Resources” *New Directions for Higher Education*, Vol. 1998, no. 102, 1998, p. 1.

³²Ginger Stull et al., *Redefining Success: How Tribal Colleges and Universities Build Nations, Strengthen Sovereignty, and Persevere through Challenges*. University of Pennsylvania: Center of Minority-serving Institutions of the University of Pennsylvania, 2015, p. 1.

of them also offer master's degrees but Tribal Colleges are, overall, conceived for students to complete a degree or to transfer to a mainstream four-year institution.

Students who attend Tribal Colleges are, for the most part, Native Americans, even though these institutions are also opened to non-Native American students. Still, the federal government delivers the status of Tribal College to an institution in which the proportion of Native Americans – originating from federally recognized tribes – reaches 51%, at least. In the United States, there are around 567 federally recognized tribes, that is to say tribes which are considered as political entities which have the right to self-governance and which can be federally assisted.³³

The student body of Tribal Colleges can be considered as a non-traditional student body for many reasons. First, they have specific needs which are historically explainable:

Stemming from the long history of poor education service provided to Native Americans, tribal college students are usually the first generation in their family to go to college, and are often in need of particular attention to cultural and personal support systems, financial aid, study assistance, remedial education, and vocational training.³⁴

As the education provided by the BIA was not concerned with granting higher education opportunities to Native American students, Tribal Colleges are deeply concerned with providing a supportive environment for them to succeed. Students who attend Tribal Colleges are students who often had negative experiences at mainstream institutions because of discrimination and inadequate pedagogy. Most students who attend Tribal Colleges are women, single-parents who face familial difficulties which might slow down their academic career. As a consequence, the average age of students, 31.5, is older than in mainstream institutions where students are usually aged between 18 and 24 years old.³⁵

One of the aspects that counter Native Americans' achievement in mainstream higher education institutions is geographical isolation. Tribal Colleges address specific needs by being located, mostly, on reservations or near reservations, which enables students to remain close to their community and their family. This specific location is very important because it totally changes the access to higher education. Indeed, these institutions represent the only access to a post-secondary level institution within the reservation. In addition to that, Tribal

³³"Frequently Asked Questions". *U.S Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs*.

³⁴ Carney, p. 111.

³⁵American Indian Higher Education Consortium and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, *Tribal Colleges: An Introduction*. 1999, p. D-1.

Colleges adapt to the needs of their environment. Reservations are places which face many socio-economic issues and are often compared to Third World countries within the United States. Indeed, as stated by Native American scholar Robert G. Martin, the reservations face “[p]overty and the associated lack of social services, unemployment rates approaching 80 percent, extremely low high school completion rates, suicide rates more than double the national average, extremely high incidences of alcohol-related accidents and deaths, and other major health concerns.”³⁶ As a consequence, Tribal Colleges are institutions which attempt at minimizing these issues by providing health and social care but also by implementing educational strategies which are more comprehensive for this type of students living in a disrupted socio-economic environment.

b) The multiple missions of Tribal Colleges

Primarily, Tribal Colleges are institutions which aim at providing access to higher education to Native Americans. The education provided by Tribal Colleges is designed for Native Americans, although Tribal Colleges also enrol non-Native American students. To do so, their educational structure relies on a major question: What is a relevant education for Native Americans? According to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), the mission statement of Tribal Colleges was adopted in 1973 as “national movement of tribal self-determination”. The report states that Tribal Colleges have two major missions: “1) to rebuild, reinforce and explore traditional tribal cultures, using uniquely designed curricula and institutional settings, and at the same time 2) to address Western models of learning by providing traditional courses that are transferable to four-year institutions.”³⁷ So, the educational staff preoccupies itself with offering a curriculum and an environment in accordance with tribal identity but also to offer courses which use western methods of learning. This implies that the curriculum is a complex one to establish as it requires finding a balance between two methods of teaching which are very different. Indeed, on the one hand the curriculum seeks to emphasize Native education which relies more on

³⁶ Robert G. Martin, “Serving American Indian Students in Tribal Colleges: Lessons for Mainstream Colleges”, *Serving Native American Students*, special issue of *New Directions for Student Services*, Vol. 2005, no. 109, 2005, p. 80.

³⁷ AIHEC and IHEP, 1999. p. A-3

experimentation and active participation of the learners and on the other hand, it also has to provide a western type of teaching, which uses a learning method based on lecturing.³⁸

The curriculum is made for students to be culturally connected with what they learn and so it is required to use an appropriate pedagogy. The different curricula offered by Tribal Colleges have active implications and are very flexible. It means that the teachers aim at encouraging participation in class rather than offering pure theoretical courses. In other words, students have to learn by doing. In this sense, Tribal Colleges try to reverse back to a tribal model of education by incorporating tribal ways of thinking in their pedagogy: “[b]eyond the classroom, traditional values also are embedded in the very spirit of these institutions. Cooperation is valued, for example. Respect for elders is encouraged. Differing ideas about how time should be managed and how people should interact with each other are understood and accepted.”³⁹ Therefore, Tribal Colleges advocate participative and interactive behaviours. By implementing this, they “establish a learning environment that encourages self confidence in students who have come to view failure as the norm.”⁴⁰

Concerning the courses available at Tribal Colleges, it is noticeable that they are in accordance with their environment. For instance, according to the list of possible courses at Tribal Colleges, there are courses such as “Tribal management” (AaniiihNakoda College, Montana), “Casino Management” (College of Menominee Nation, Wisconsin) or courses linked to the rural environment of the reservations which surrounds Tribal Colleges such as “Tribal Natural Resources” course (Little Big Horn College, Montana). There is a common idea to each Tribal College: to preserve tribal heritage in an attempt to counter “cultural genocide”. For instance, most Tribal Colleges have Native Language courses available. This is unique in the sense that these courses, among others, are made to revive tribal cultural aspects that were meant to be erased by the coercive assimilation imposed by the federal government. The use of Native language was prohibited at federal boarding schools. Also, some offer cultural studies including traditional subjects. An interesting example is the traditional tribal literature course at Bay Mills Community College (Michigan) which is taught “only in winter term because the stories are supposed to be told when snow is on the ground.”⁴¹ Or, at Diné College (Navajo community, Arizona), the whole curriculum is based

³⁸Lomawaima, p. 425.

³⁹The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Tribal Colleges: Shaping the Future of Native America. A Special Report*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 4.

⁴⁰ The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, p. 3.

⁴¹AIHEC and IHEP, 1999, p. B-1.

on teaching methodologies in accordance with Navajo philosophy.⁴² It means that the whole educational structure of this college is based on principles specific to the Navajo tribal culture: “[t]he educational philosophy of Diné College “Sa’ahNaaghaiBik’ehHozhoo”, the Diné traditional living system, places Diné life in harmony with the natural world and the universe.”⁴³ In this sense, the courses taught at Diné College have a practical outlook which aims at reviving Navajo tribal way of life. It is important to understand that in addition to serving community needs for the present and the future, Tribal Colleges attempt to revive ways of living that the young generation is not aware of. In this sense, Tribal Colleges have a political outlook. They fall within the scope of a nation-building process by really attempting to enhance tribal culture among the young generation and advocate tribal sovereignty. The elders (the staff of the institutions) pass down the tribal values and principles to the students. This very transmission builds a sense of belonging to a community. Still, the curriculum will not be the same from a Tribal College to another because they serve different tribes and so different customs, habits and cultural heritage.

c) Funding

Tribal Colleges benefit from a specific type of funding. Indeed, in the United States, whereas institutions of higher education are usually indirectly funded by the federal government, Tribal Colleges rely on direct federal assistance.⁴⁴ This specific status stems from the historical trust relationship between the federal government and Native American tribes which guarantees federal commitment towards Native American tribes. Like all institutions of higher education in the United States, Tribal Colleges receive student financial aid and research grants but they also receive, thanks to their specific status, federal financial assistance for the staff, academic programs and facilities.⁴⁵

The direct federal funding of Tribal Colleges is guaranteed by two acts: The Navajo Community College Act of 1971 and the Tribally Controlled Community College Act of 1978, which was drawn from the first one. These two acts take into account the community of students who are more liable to drop out attending these institutions: the majority of Native

⁴²AIHEC and IHEP, 1999, p. B-2.

⁴³ “Educational Philosophy” *Diné College Official site*. www.dinecollege.edu/about/philosophy.php

⁴⁴Thomas R. Wolanin, “The Federal Investment in Minority-Serving Institutions”, *New Directions for Higher Education*, Vol. 1998, no. 102, 1998, p. 17.

⁴⁵Wolanin, p. 17.

Americans living on reservations cannot afford to pay for their education due to their low income and the poor living conditions of the reservations. As a consequence, these acts provide a financial support for the students. The latter was of \$4,000 per year per full student and was increased later to \$6,000.⁴⁶ Through the years, it was noticed that this financial support was not always respected.

Tribal Colleges are also known under the label of minority-serving institutions. Normally, this type of institutions receives federal funding but also funding from the state in which it is located. Yet, Tribal Colleges are located on reservations which are land held in trust by the federal government. This status implies that states have no obligation to fund these institutions. As a consequence, it is more complicated for Tribal Colleges to be funded because they only legally rely on federal funding.

Even though these two acts guarantee significant funding for Tribal Colleges, it can be noticed that the latter has been rather unstable all through the years and represents a major issue for the survival of these institutions. As stated by Carney “[a] lack of funding is still a major concern for tribal colleges. [...] In 1988, a survey of 110 administrators in Native American higher education found lack of funding to be their number one problem.”⁴⁷ This instability reflects the way Native American tribes are considered by Democrats or Republicans. Indeed, we can notice that funding varies depending on the party elected to the presidency of the United States – Democrat or Republican. It is noticed that Democrat administrations tend to support programs aiming at increasing the performances of Tribal Colleges whereas Republican administrations tend to see Tribal Colleges under the scope of the “Indian problem”. For instance, during the Reagan era the per-year student support was of \$1,900 whereas Congress guaranteed \$6,000.⁴⁸ Moreover, it seems that Republican administration push towards the withdrawal of the federal government’s commitment to Native American tribes, encouraging them to seek private funding, as George H. W. Bush did in the 1990s. On the other hand, the late 1990s witnessed Clinton’s Executive Order which aimed at increasing the federal commitment to these institutions by providing federal resources on a more regular basis, among other things. To some extent, Republicans and Democrats might consider the trust relationship and the Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 in different ways.

⁴⁶Carney, p. 109.

⁴⁷Carney, p. 111.

⁴⁸Carney, p. 111.

II- Performance of Tribal Colleges

The performance of Tribal Colleges is at the core of debates in the United States in the field of education. This debate exists because it seems that these institutions do not provide convincing results while they rely on federal funding: the performance of Tribal Colleges in terms of educational achievement seems to be very low. However, to assess this performance, it is meaningful to consider the different ways educational achievement can be perceived and understood. Traditionally, educational achievement refers to the highest educational level reached by a person. At the primary and secondary levels, it refers to the number of grades completed and at the post-secondary level it refers to the certificates, diplomas or degrees obtained. When discussing educational achievement, success and failure are two notions which are worth considering because both are socially constructed and, therefore, different from a culture to another.

Indeed, since Tribal Colleges were created to provide a supportive environment to a student-body which has historically encountered barriers to access higher education, success and failure are not seen in the same way by Native American students and staff at Tribal Colleges and at mainstream institutions. Educational achievement is also defined by the way one attains a given level in education. For example, if someone has earned a master's degree in six years whereas it is supposed to be possible in four years, this person might be seen as having failed at some point in her academic career whereas someone who has completed a master's degree in four years would be seen as "more successful". The problem is that this "failure" has to be taken into account relatively to a number of reasons which might have affected the academic career but also the personal choices of the student. One might be considered as having failed in their academic career if they stopped at some point or repeated a year. To consider them as such is not relevant in the sense that this is not necessarily negative for the student but rather more constructive for the rest of a career.

The divergence in opinion concerning the success of Tribal Colleges stems from the different way of assessing the outcomes of these minority-serving institutions which address tribal priorities. The goals of these institutions are different from that of mainstream institutions and thus, the assessment of their outcomes ought to be adapted to these goals.

1. Debates on the performance of Tribal Colleges

a) Development of Tribal Colleges: an overview of enrolment and trends

Through the years, Tribal Colleges have organized themselves to implement educational strategies by creating the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) in 1972.

In 2003, the AIHEC organization created a tool called “American Indian Measure for Success” (AIMS) in higher education to evaluate success according tribal standards – which may be considered more accurate. This tool was made to provide quantitative data (enrolment, number of degrees conferred, financial support available etc.) and qualitative data (types of students, student activities, success stories, etc) in order to analyse the performances of Tribal Colleges and to implement new educational strategies for their sustainability.⁴⁹ This tool also has a national outlook because it seeks to shed light on all the activities implemented at Tribal Colleges: to some extent, it was created to maintain and increase federal support. In this section, the focus will be on the number and the type of degrees awarded to Native American students solely at Tribal Colleges from the annual years 2003-2004 to 2009-2010. The data provided by two reports of the AIHEC will enable us to have an overview of the performance of Tribal Colleges through quantitative data.

According to the AIHEC AIMS report of 2012, 14,342 Native American students were enrolled at 32 accredited Tribal Colleges in 11 states for the academic year 2003-2004 out of a total of 17,190 students. The rate of enrolment saw a decrease in the next academic years with 13,696 Native American students enrolled in 2005-2006 out of 17,239 falling to 13,040 out of 15,484 in 2008-2009. Yet, the rate of enrolment in the academic year 2009-2010 saw an increase as 15,994 Native American students were enrolled out of 19,070 students.⁵⁰ We notice that Tribal Colleges aroused a real interest among the Native American population as in 1982, the total number of enrolled students was 2,100 according to the 1999 AIHEC report (more Tribal Colleges were created as well).

⁴⁹ American Indian Higher Education Consortium, *Sustaining Tribal Colleges and Universities and the Tribal College Movement: Highlights and Profiles*, Alexandria, VA: AIHEC, 2006, p. 5.

⁵⁰ American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) *2009-2010 American Indian Measures for Success Fact Book: Sharing Our Stories – Strengthening Our Nations through Tribal Education*. Alexandria, VA: AIHEC, 2012, p.14.

From AY 2003-2004 to AY 2005-2006, the number of degrees, diplomas and certificates granted remained stable with an average of 2,385 students graduating each year.⁵¹ At the end of AY 2005-2006, 2,278 students graduated from 32 TCUs and 79% of diplomas, certificates and degrees were awarded to Native American students.⁵² No data was found regarding the number of degrees awarded to Native American students at Tribal Colleges in AY 2009-2010: the AIHEC AIMS report of 2012 did not provide this type of data. It seems that it is not a priority for the organization. Yet, as there are many debates on the performance of Tribal Colleges, it can be deduced that the number of degrees awarded in AY 2009-2010 was not very high.

The reports show that there is a trend in disciplines. Most of the degrees awarded are Associate degrees and certificates. Indeed, very few students are awarded Master's degrees; only 10 completed a Master's degree during AY 2005-2006. This can be explained by the fact that only 2 Tribal Colleges offer a Master's degree program because most of Tribal Colleges lack financial resources and cannot afford to provide Master's degrees. In addition, as most students struggle in high school before entering college, providing Master's courses might not be considered as a priority. The disciplines which are the most popular are Liberal Arts (25% of students enrolled in this discipline in AY 2003-2004; 23% in AY 2009-2010), Vocational Career (13% in AY 2003-2004; 12% in AY 2009-2010) and Health (11% in AY 2003-2004; 13% in AY 2009-2010).⁵³

When considering these results, it seems that Tribal Colleges have very low rates of graduation if we look at the number of students enrolled and the number of degrees completed. However, there is a limitation to this statement as it is difficult to know how many students are in their final years each academic year. Yet, as most of Tribal Colleges are two-year institutions it can be deduced that the students attending Tribal Colleges take more time to complete a degree than the norm. In this sense, the students attending Tribal Colleges might be considered as educationally "less successful" than "traditional" students. Still, this data has to be reframed, first by analysing the type of students which attends these institutions. The specific characteristics of the student-body affect the rates of graduation, more specifically the time taken to earn a degree, and the retention rates of Tribal Colleges. Then, since the results cannot be dissociated from the non-traditional student-body of these institutions, this very

⁵¹ AIHEC, 2012, p. 8.

⁵² AIHEC, 2006, p. 9.

⁵³ AIHEC, 2012, p. 25.

student-body will be examined so as to understand why the outcomes of Tribal Colleges are “non-traditional” according to mainstream standards.

b) Characteristics of the student-body

Students attending Tribal Colleges are considered as “at-risk” students. This category means that they are students who are more likely to drop out of an educational institution without earning a degree; or, would complete one in more academic years than average because their abilities are hampered by a series of challenging socio-economic conditions. It means that they face several barriers which “traditional” students hardly ever face. The data which follows was partly taken from the AIHEC AIMS report of 2006 and concerns only the academic year 2005-2006. This decision stems from the fact that this report was the most detailed and the most precise of its kind.

A barrier that most Native American students face when attending Tribal colleges is the lack of college preparation. As stated by the President of Oglagla Lakota College (South Dakota): “[t]he dilemma that we’re facing is we’re open admissions. [...] We do have a major problem with our students’ preparedness.⁵⁴” This statement was made in 2014 but has always been a problem to Tribal Colleges overall. The fact that Tribal Colleges are open admissions suggests that everyone can attend it even though they do not even have a high school diploma. The problem is that Native Americans who attended secondary school in reservations are most of the time very ill-prepared academically and need to take placement tests. These tests determine if they need to take remedial courses or not. Some attend college with a GED (General Education Diploma) - meaning that they passed a test which asserts that they have high-school level skills - but some do not. As a consequence, Tribal Colleges spend time and extensive resources on adjusting students’ academic level by supporting them with remedial courses: “[t]he colleges therefore continue supporting their students after enrolment, by offering tutoring programs that build basic skills, General Education Development (GED) instruction, and active counselling programs for students.”⁵⁵ The General Education Development is acquired through Remedial/Developmental courses in Reading, Writing/Composition and Mathematics. In AY 2005-2006 around 53% of the 2,677 students enrolled successfully completed the remedial courses in Writing and composition skills

⁵⁴Sarah Butrymowicz, “Tribal Colleges Give Poor Return on more than \$100 million a year in Federal Money”, *The Hechinger Report*, 26 Nov. 2014. www.hechingerreport.org/tribal-colleges-give-poor-return-100-million-year-federal-money/

⁵⁵Cunningham and Parker, p. 50.

(among 25 TCUs) and around 51% of the 4,937 students enrolled successfully completed the remedial courses in Mathematics.⁵⁶

The fact that most students need more courses to be able to attend a college-level curriculum has an impact on the graduation rates which are lower than mainstream norms. Indeed, according to these norms, students who want to attend a traditional institution are supposed to have completed the high school diploma because it is required upon entering college. Therefore, it means that they are supposed to have an academic level which enables them to attend college courses without needing remedial classes; or they would attend this type of classes while they are already attending classes to complete their degree. On the contrary, students attending Tribal Colleges stay longer in Tribal Colleges and it takes them more years to complete a degree.

In addition to offering the support students need for achieving a high-school level, Tribal Colleges are also concerned with supporting their students with “Academic Core Curriculum Courses” which are “required for an Associate or Bachelor degree regardless of the student’s major.⁵⁷” These courses consist of English Composition, Communications, College Algebra, Introduction to Computers and Native American Studies. In AY 2005-2006, 14,652 students were enrolled (so 86%) and 63% completed these courses.⁵⁸ It is difficult to know what happened with the students who did not complete the remedial courses or the academic core curriculum courses. They might have repeated the courses or dropped out of the institutions.

The number of degrees conferred each year is also affected because students do not strictly attend Tribal Colleges with specific professional ambitions. For instance, students might choose not to enrol in a specific major. By doing so, they take more time to choose the career they are interested in: in fall 2005, among 32 TCUs, 2,872 students were enrolled in “undeclared” major (17%) and this constitutes the second category of enrolment.⁵⁹

Contrary to “traditional” students, Native American students seem to have family obligations which cause them more anxiety. One of the missions of Tribal Colleges is to enable Native American students to stay close to their families because in Native American culture, the familial entity represents an important element of self-development and often

⁵⁶ AIHEC, 2006, p. 14.

⁵⁷ AIHEC, 2006, p. 15.

⁵⁸ AIHEC, 2006, p. 15.

⁵⁹ AIHEC, 2006, p. 6.

comes before the individual. In their article “It’s about family: Native American Persistence in Higher Education”, scholars Raphael M. Guillory and Mimi Wolverton concluded that family could be a source of motivation but also a barrier to Native American persistence in higher education⁶⁰ (the data was provided by Native American students who participated in the study).

c) Assessing Tribal Colleges: mainstream perspective vs. tribal perspective

The analysis of the ways of assessing Tribal Colleges will be based on two articles considered to be representative of the mainstream perspective, on the one hand, and of the tribal perspective, on the other hand.

In 2013, Tom Burnett, a former member of the Montana House of Representatives, published an article entitled “The Tragedy of Tribal Colleges” in which he criticizes the poor return on investment of these institutions. His analysis of the outcomes of Tribal Colleges is mostly economic and relies on quantitative data. Since the 1950s, the performance of higher education has been assessed through a “return on investments” (ROI) metric in the United States which, at first, was applied to businesses. When applied to education, this type of assessment considers the student attending an institution in terms of human capital. In other words, it focuses on the economic impact that a student will have on society after completing a degree by asserting that the longer the academic career is, the more one will participate to economic growth through a well-paid – high-skilled – employment.

According to him, the federal government invests in institutions which form students who will not be marketable after completing their academic career whereas the cost per degree awarded is very expensive and is not worth it because they do not contribute to economic growth. Indeed, he states that “[...]the goals of tribal colleges, as given by their mission statements, give little weight to helping students increase their earnings or contribute to economic development. Instead, cultural transmission is primary.”⁶¹ Tom Burnett proves that he is aware of the missions of Tribal Colleges but he does not highlight them because according to him, Tribal Colleges train students who will not be able to access the wider

⁶⁰ Raphael M. Guillory and Mimi Wolverton, “It’s about family: Native American Persistence in Higher Education” *New Directions for Student Service*, Vol. 2005, no. 109, 2005, p.77.

⁶¹ Tony Burnett, “The Tragedy of Tribal Colleges” *The John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy*, 9 June 2013. www.popecenter.org/2013/06/the-tragedy-of-tribal-colleges/

market economy of American society. In other words, they will stay stuck in the reservations without necessarily contributing to their economic growth.

His analysis also suggests that the higher education offered by Tribal Colleges is a limited one. Traditionally, higher education refers to the courses you attend after high school and therefore, the academic level is supposed to be higher. However, in the case of Tribal Colleges the diplomas awarded such as certificates or diplomas are the kind of educational achievement that one is supposed to earn by the end of high school. In this sense, the students who complete these types of degrees attain a lower academic level than students who attend a mainstream college. For instance, vocational training is aimed to prepare the student with specific knowledge and skills meant to be applied to a particular professional function. In this sense, this type of career might be seen as less academic and therefore less intellectually valuable. Therefore, if we follow the mainstream ROI perspective, these students will have a lower economic impact on society because their academic career is less likely to lead them to a valued and well-paid employment. The problem also lies in the fact that Tribal Colleges spend extensive resources on courses that mainstream colleges do not provide because usually, when one attends college it means that he or she is academically prepared.

This analysis is very narrow because it uses mainstream measures of success to assess the performance of Tribal Colleges. It focuses on the graduation rates and on the enrollment without taking the whole mission of Tribal Colleges into account. Therefore, the mainstream perspective solely focuses on a logic of productivity whereas the tribal perspective tries to assess performance through a wider scope which includes tribal way of thinking, by taking into account the student's individual progress but also his impact on the community he belongs to.

Indeed, as stated by Marybeth Gasman, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania in her article "Not a Full Picture: Evaluating Tribal College Success Using Mainstream Measures" (2015):

[m]ainstream discussions of institutional success often focus on enrollment numbers, 4 or 6-year graduation rates, standardized test scores, rankings, faculty research output, and so on. However, TCUs find success in Nation Building, language revitalization, personal student growth, and increasing Tribal Sovereignty. Who measures these contributions to society and education?⁶²

⁶²Marybeth Gasman. "Not a Full Picture: Evaluating Tribal College Success Using Mainstream Measures", *Huffingtonpost*, 16 Dec. 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marybeth-gasman/not-a-full-picture-evalua_b_6320400.html

By saying this, Professor Marybeth Gasman acknowledges that Tribal Colleges do not show astounding results but that they are efficient in their initial missions. However, there is a problem in the ROI tribal perspective: how can we measure concepts such as tribal sovereignty or cultural pride? These types of notions are very subjective and depend on how much one is aware of such notions. In addition, one of the problems faced by many Tribal Colleges is that they have to prove that they are worth the investment so as to have more weight in the higher-education system.

This perspective enables us to consider Tribal Colleges in terms of *empowering* institutions.

2. Tribal Colleges as empowering institutions for Native Americans

a) Defining empowerment

The concept of empowerment is not a clear one. Scholars have attempted to define the term through the establishment of theoretical frameworks. Yet, the literature on its definition has always been variable and not everyone considers the concept in the same ways because it can be applied differently according to various contexts.

First of all, empowerment is always relative to an individual or to a group of individuals. The term itself assumes that an individual has an inherent power with which he can have an impact on his own life and environment by making choices.⁶³ Depending on the context this individual or group finds himself or itself, this power can be increased, limited or even suppressed. In this sense, one's power is subjected to many outside parameters - social, economic, political, etc. Power is therefore variable according to a given context. For example, if a student fails at college, he might feel *disempowered* in his academic career but also in the college environment, that is to say that he might feel less able to succeed than before. Disempowerment is felt when one does not find the means to evolve in a positive way in his environment. On the contrary, the term empowerment can be understood as the process by which one acquires the ability to have an impact on his life, independently from outside factors.

⁶³ Nanette Page and Cheryl E. Czuba, "Empowerment: what is it?", *The Journal of Extension*, Vol.37, no. 5, 1999, commentary 5COM1.

If empowerment is understood as a goal, it means that one has acquired the abilities to adapt to any context and that one knows that he or she has these abilities. To be empowered is also a self-conscious quality: it suggests that one is aware of his power and that he knows how to use it in such way as to achieve his goals or to be efficient in a given context. Therefore, there is a psychological aspect to this concept. As a consequence, empowerment is often the result of an outside actor who guides the disempowered person; or, of a general awareness among a group of individuals who share the same issues.

In the United States, the concept of empowerment has frequently been used relatively to minorities. The term “empowering” was chosen to qualify Tribal Colleges, since they are institutions which serve students who have historically been experiencing difficulties to persist in higher education. Indeed, these institutions were made to counter these barriers thanks to a supportive environment achieved through educational strategies which were implemented to give Native American students the necessary means to succeed. Through the creation of this specific learning environment, Tribal Colleges attempt to ensure that Native American students are the actors of their own academic career instead of lacking control over their educational choices. When analyzing the assessment of these institutions through tribal standards, notions such as “personal growth” and “self-development” appeared to be priority goals. That is why the term empowering seemed to be accurate.

To understand how Tribal Colleges function as empowering institutions for Native American students, comparing their experience at mainstream institutions and at Tribal Colleges seemed relevant because the two different learning environments affect their success in higher education. Experiences are diverse according to each tribal affiliation but the purpose of the following section will be to provide an analysis by defining the characteristics of each learning environment and their respective consequences on Native Americans.

b) Native American student experience in higher education: mainstream institutions vs. Tribal Colleges

Nowadays, most Native Americans live in urban areas – one-third lives on reservations – and attend mainstream institutions. Native American students attending Tribal Colleges represent a very small portion of Native American total enrolment in postsecondary education: in 2008, there were 193,289 Native American students enrolled in degree granting

institutions whereas 13,820 were enrolled in Tribal Colleges (8%).⁶⁴ Yet, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) pointed out that the “American Indian/Alaska Native enrollment in tribally controlled colleges and universities increased at a faster rate between 2001 and 2006 than did American Indian/Alaska Native college and university enrollment generally.”⁶⁵ In addition to that, research has demonstrated that the retention rates were higher at Tribal Colleges than at mainstream institutions, which proves that Tribal Colleges have a positive effect on Native American experience in higher education.⁶⁶ Still, the retention rates at Tribal Colleges can be misleading as many students “stop out” in the course of their academic career but are not counted as students who have dropped out of the institution. Data is quite limited on retention rates but reports of the AIHEC stated that many Native Americans enrolled at Tribal Colleges after a negative experience at a mainstream institution.

Concurrently, research has proven that the high dropout rate at mainstream institutions was not due to academic inability but rather to a series of factors which affect Native American students’ academic success. Even though experiences are undeniably diverse – cultural practices vary from one tribe to another – scholars managed to find patterns in academic failure shared by Native American students. It must be noted that there are limitations in this section as it is very difficult to find surveys of Native American students’ experience at mainstream institutions (state universities). An important amount of literature on the subject was available but not in the form of qualitative data giving voice to Native American students.

The main hypothesis is that Native American students are academically *disempowered* at mainstream institutions. In the article “The Empowerment of Indian students” (1992) Jim Cummins elaborated a framework of the different factors which affect Native American students’ academic success at mainstream institutions. Our analysis will focus on one factor explained in Cummins’ article: the interaction between the faculty staff and Native American students. This characteristic was seen as one of the most important for Native American students because when gathering students’ comments on their experience at Tribal Colleges this theme appeared to be frequent and appeared to be a condition for success.

⁶⁴Jill Fleury Devoe and Kristen E. Darling-Churchill, *Status and Trends in the Education of American Indians and Alaska Natives: 2008 (NCES 2008-084)*, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 130.

⁶⁵ Devoe and Darling-Churchill, p. 130.

⁶⁶ Martin, p. 80.

According to Cummins' framework, the interaction between the faculty staff – especially the teachers – and Native American students is crucial for their academic success. He argues that “[m]inority groups that tend to experience difficulty appear to have developed an insecurity and ambivalence about the value of their own cultural identity as a result of their interactions with the dominant group.”⁶⁷ The “dominant group” includes the other students but more predominantly the teachers. The value of the cultural identity is called into question because Native American students are subjected to stigmatization and discrimination – being a minority in this environment – by the dominant group which has a Euro-American culturally-biased vision of them. This implies that the dominant group does not fully understand their cultural background and do not necessarily take into account their difficulties to adapt to a culture and an educational environment which they are not familiar with. As a consequence, Native American students might experience implicit judgments which cause a loss of cultural pride. Therefore, the Native American student might experience failure, not because he is intellectually disabled, but because he does not feel culturally connected with the way he is given classes and with the learning environment as a whole.

In addition, overall, the Western style of instruction is based on transmission of knowledge through lecturing, whereas the tribal style is established through interaction and active participation, as noted by scholar Earl J. Barlow.⁶⁸ In other words, at mainstream institutions, the student depends on the teacher to learn, which places him in a passive position: Native American students feel disempowered because they are not active participants of their academic career and are submitted to teachers who do not take into account their specific cultural backgrounds when assessed.

On the contrary, at Tribal Colleges, Native American students are satisfied with their interaction with teachers and the faculty staff and even consider them as a source of motivation:

“My most valuable experience was with the teaching and administrative staff...I felt at ease because there was always someone there for you no matter what the situation.”

“[...] the small classes and personal relationship with the teachers and professors made me want to give school a chance again [...]”

⁶⁷Jim Cummins, “The Empowerment of Indian Students” *Teaching American Indian Students*, edited by John Reyhner, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Barlow, p. 89.

“During my years attending a Tribal College, I received a lot more attention and help than I would have if I’d attended a university. I feel that the Tribal College has given me the experience and ability to be a successful student.”

“The best part of attending a Tribal College is the encouragement and support I received from the faculty and staff.”

“People know you, they know what you’re capable of and they hold you to a high standard.”⁶⁹

These testimonies suggest that the interaction between the teacher and the student is not a traditional one in the sense that the function of the teacher is not limited to instructing and to preparing the student to complete a degree. Teachers are also mentors or counselors who ensure the personal growth of Native American students by assisting them through personalized attention, which is made possible because classes are smaller. For example, students would ask more questions or feel free to tackle personal matters with them. Therefore, having a broader understanding of the student’s difficulties enables the teachers to implement supportive and comprehensive educational strategies.

In addition, Native American students tend to be academically ill-prepared when they attend Tribal College. Instead of pointing out that they are not prepared enough to attend college, teachers encourage them to take remedial classes. By doing so, they do not condition Native American students to their low academic level but assume that they are *able* to improve. Also, a great difference is that at Tribal Colleges the teacher and the student are from the same cultural background. In this sense, the teacher has the ability to understand more profoundly why the student fails and to help him to find the means to succeed. The fact that the education is culturally responsive - as tribal values and principles are infused in the academic courses by strong tribal figures - enables Native American students to feel at ease in their environment. There, their culture is not considered as a burden but on contrary, as an element they must be proud of. Therefore, we can assume that this interaction based on

⁶⁹ These Native American “voices” were respectively taken from: Alisa Federico Cunningham and Kenneth E. Redd, *Creating Role Models for Change: A Survey of Tribal College Graduates*, Washington, DC; Alexandria, VA: Sallie Mae Education Institute, IHEP and AIHEC, 2000, p. 14. American Indian College Fund and The Institute for Higher Education Policy, *Championing Success: A Report on the Progress of Tribal Colleges and Student Alumni*. Washington, D.C: IHEP, 2006, p.17. AIHEC, 2012, p.40.

mutual respect and comprehension increases and consolidates the student's cultural pride, self-esteem and self-confidence because he does not experience the educational and social pressures encountered at a mainstream institution. These educational approaches – which focus on the student's personal growth primarily rather than on academic achievement – are essential for Native American students to persevere in higher education.

The supportive environment educationally empowers Native American in two ways. Tribal Colleges are considered as necessary “bridges” for students who want to attend to mainstream colleges and, at the same time, they give them the opportunities to empower their communities.

c) Empowering Native American tribes

Tribal Colleges foster commitment and active participation through several activities, on the reservations, implemented to improve the community's socio-economic conditions. Students are empowered individually but also take part in the broader empowerment of their community.

Economic empowerment is a relevant parameter to take into account when analysing the empowerment of Native American tribes, even more because they are located on reservations – places which face dramatic socio-economic issues. It will be determined by one's ability to have an economic impact on its environment. The economic impact suggests how and through which means one contributes to economic growth. Therefore, the main questions to be asked are: do Tribal Colleges prepare their students for future employment? What happens with TCU students after graduation? Do they serve their community?

Reports on Tribal Colleges have concluded that most Tribal College graduates work inside the reservations and “give back to their community”. As studied before, Tribal Colleges tend to emphasize vocational training so as to meet tribal needs on the reservations. Through providing courses which are more practical and technical and through granting certificates, diplomas or Associate degrees, Tribal Colleges are more concerned with the direct realities of the reservations. One can be granted a certificate if they attended one or two very specialized courses. For instance, reservations dramatically lack of healthcare services while they face alcohol, drug abuse, suicides, infant mortality or violence at higher rates than the national average. When analyzing the trends in disciplines, it can be noticed that health studies are

very frequent. Indeed, AIHEC report *Creating Role Models for Change: A Survey of Tribal College Graduates* (2000) have concluded that among 33 Tribal Colleges, in 1998, 91% of graduates were working a year after their graduation in areas considered as highly-needed on the reservations such as Health and Education.⁷⁰ Students who graduate from Tribal Colleges serve and represent success in their community. The fact that Native American students manage to graduate reverses the “norm of failure”. This can have a positive effect on their environment and these students might turn examples for other students to attend Tribal Colleges.

Tribal Colleges were primarily created to give Native Americans access to higher education through a culturally relevant education. Through the years, it seems that these institutions progressively implemented “student transfers” to mainstream institutions. According to former United States Commissioner of Education Ernest L. Boyer some “see tribal colleges as a valuable stepping stone between high school and non-Indian college. [...] Students looking for greater emotional and academic support can turn to a tribal college after a negative experience elsewhere, rather than simply dropping out of higher education.”⁷¹ Ernest L. Boyer suggests that Tribal Colleges empower the students to pursue higher education at mainstream institutions. Although it is very difficult to have an overview of the number of TCUs graduates who transferred to mainstream institutions, this “mission” rather seems to underscore Native American tribes’ awareness of the need for higher-skilled graduates to strengthen themselves. As Tribal Colleges are mostly two-year institutions, some fields of study – such as health – might require more training which is provided by mainstream institutions. As a consequence, the transferred student will acquire more skills which can be used at the service of the community and improve the lives of its people.

The transfer to a mainstream institution might also be a way to gain visibility in American society. Reservations are isolated places in which people do not want to invest because of their impoverished state. As a consequence, even though Tribal Colleges attempt to improve the harsh realities of the reservations through higher education, these places remain similar to Third World countries. Native American tribes are disempowered because they are somehow invisible: economic empowerment is achieved through the interaction with other economic entities. As Cummins stated: “[...] minority students are disempowered educationally in much the same way that their communities are disempowered by interactions

⁷⁰Cunningham and Redd, p. 4.

⁷¹The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, p. 31.

with other societal institutions.”⁷² Power is relative to another power and is asserted, or not, according to the interaction between these two powers. Each Tribal College represents a Native American tribe in the United States as a political entity which has the right to self-governance on its own educational programs. Native American tribes are to some extent empowered because through Tribal Colleges, they manage to create a workforce, to create educational programs stemming from decisions of tribal leaders and to increase tribal sovereignty by asserting self-determination. Yet, Native American tribes remain dependent on the federal government; therefore, Tribal Colleges implement self-determination but in a limited way. As these institutions depend on federal investments, the transfer of students might be seen as a way to enable them to be more influential in American society as if they were representatives or spokesmen of their tribes. In other words, Native American tribes need to be more politically empowered to be more economically empowered.

CONCLUSION

Education has been at the centre of the complex political relationship between Native American tribes and the federal government. Tribal Colleges are unique, recent institutions of higher education which serve communities which were subjected to federal, Euro-American, decisions which did not value tribal interests. Resulting from centuries of “mis-education”, the Native American population ended up being the less represented population in the academe in the United States - as Native American students have been experiencing systemic failure at mainstream institutions. Tribal Colleges must be understood as institutions which attempt at changing the “norm of failure” for this specific population by asserting that mainstream institutions are the ones that are not adapted to Native American students and not the other way round. They present an alternative to this norm because they permit Native American students to make choices that they could not make before.

These institutions empower Native American students and Native American tribes to some extent. If a “historical” perspective is preferred when analyzing the present state of these institutions, one can assert that they are extremely successful in the sense that they managed to renew tribal education and culture of many Native American tribes which destiny was to be

⁷²Cummins, p.4.

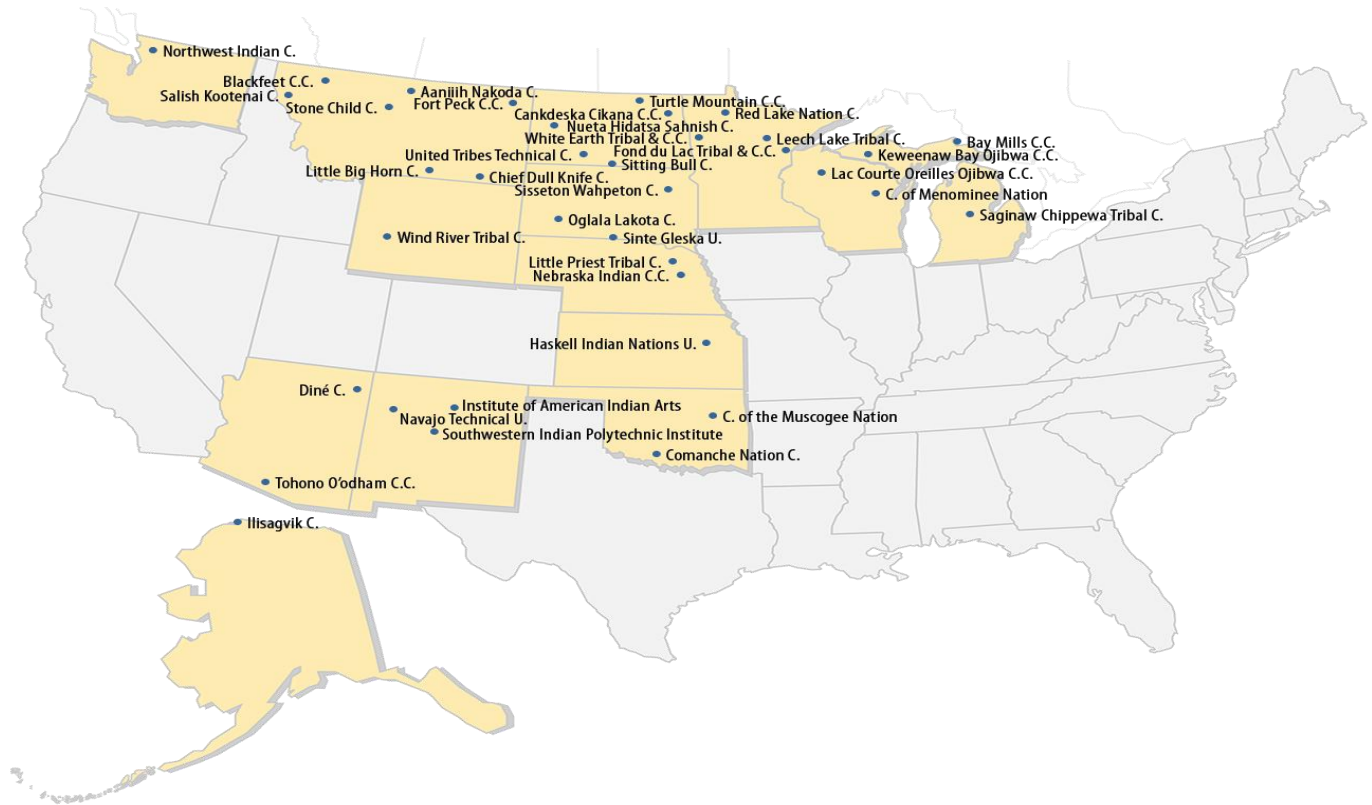
erased by the termination policy. In this sense, they changed the course of History by keeping Native American tribes alive, being, in addition, depositories of tribal knowledge. Through the education provided, the last generation of students revives with its tribal culture or even discovers it. Empowerment grows and is achieved through the implementation of educational strategies which come from tribal decisions and not federal decisions. In this sense, Tribal Colleges are an on-going assertion of self-determination at a community level but also at an individual level because they give their students the ability to make choices over their education and their future.

Though Tribal Colleges manage to increase graduation rates among the Native American population, the visibility of this success is hampered by many factors, the first one being that the “higher-education” provided at these institutions is not the same one as at mainstream institutions. In addition, these institutions are located on reservations – isolated, remote places which represent enclaves of poverty within the United States and in which an extreme small portion of U.S. total population live on. Therefore, they suffer from their very small demographic representation. Moreover, although Tribal Colleges manage to represent more Native American students in higher-education, the choices available to build up one future is questionable. Indeed, many enroll in vocational training or seek to complete certificates or Associate degrees and often end up serving the reservations. In this sense, the missions of Tribal Colleges can be seen as ambiguous. Traditionally, an institution of higher-education is supposed to give the means to its students to be independent, that is to say, to pursue whatever he or she wants to do later on. In accordance with tribal education, the individual at Tribal Colleges is taught tribal values and therefore, implicitly, that education is made to serve the tribe so as to perpetuate tribal way of life.

As a consequence, mainstream perspective somehow criticizes that the type of higher education provided at these institutions is “disconnected” from the American higher-education system whereas the federal government has a trust responsibility – moral and financial – over Native American education but also expects an “economic” return on investments. Tribal Colleges present paradoxes, reflected by Native American tribes’ legal status in the United States. Native American tribes have the right to self-governance, yet, the latter is limited because their survival depends on the federal government. So, tribal leaders and organizations cannot fully implement their own programs. Tribal Colleges are therefore limited by federal investments which have been very unstable since the enactment of the Tribally Controlled Community College Act of 1978. As a consequence, at the political level,

these institutions might be seen as an aspect of the 21th century “Indian problem” which is still linked to the reservations and to the fact that they shed light on historical struggles which they attempt to recover from.

Appendix



Map of Tribal Colleges and Universities in the United States (2016). <http://www.aihec.org/who-we-serve/map.htm>

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