

Tribal College Enrollment Drops With Transition To Online Learning

By AARON BOLTON • MAR 3, 2021

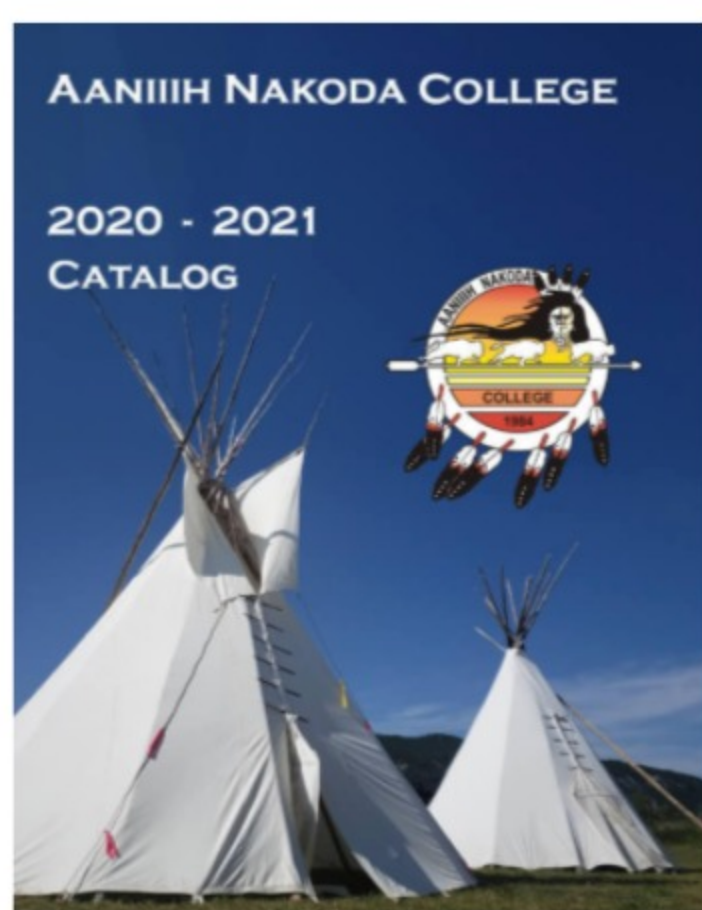
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Tribal College Enrollment Drops With Transition To Online Learning

Freshman enrollment at tribal community colleges and Universities in Montana dropped by more than a 25% during the Fall of 2020. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit last year, many schools shifted to online classes, most for the first time ever. That speedy shift reduced total student enrollment at tribal colleges in Montana and nationwide.

Ester Talks Different has been attending [Aaniiih Nakoda College](#) on the Fort Belknap Reservation since the fall of 2019.

"I thought well, someday I'd like to be my own boss, start maybe a small business, assess the needs, maybe, in the area, what we're lacking."



She's settled on opening a floral shop once she graduates. But through the pandemic, graduating seemed like a far-flung goal as she lost family members to COVID-19.

"Losing my dad and my sister and then somehow still managing to stay focused, it's was hard. I wanted to give up, I wanted to throw the towel in and give up with reckless abandonment."

Talks Different persevered. But not everyone was able to battle through life's challenges during the pandemic and keep up with a sudden shift to online classes.

Montana's tribal colleges saw a larger drop in enrollment this fall compared to other tribal schools across the country, according to data gathered by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. Higher education advocates say the digital divide prevented some Native students from enrolling, pushed others to drop out, and some students struggled with their first experience learning online.

That was the case for Talks Different's 22-year-old daughter Hailley Lame Bull. She dropped out shortly after Aaniiih Nakoda transitioned to online classes last spring.

"For me, I have to be in class. Online, it just wasn't working for me. I couldn't focus and I started getting behind on my homework."

Head of the American Indian College Fund Cheryl Crazy Bull says that transition online was hard for many students, especially where internet access is limited.

"Digital access in the rural areas served by tribal colleges is particularly spotty or non-existent."

Chief Dull Knife College on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation shut down completely last fall due to technology barriers.

Crazy Bull says that lack of digital access drove much of the enrollment declines seen at a majority of the 35 accredited tribal colleges across the United States last fall.

"The area that was most alarming, of course, is the pretty significant decrease in the number of first year students."



CREDIT CHIEF DULL KNIFE COLLEGE POSTER WITH A TRIBAL MEMBER ILLUSTRATION AND THE WORDS "KNOWLEDGE, SUCCESS, TRADITION, CULTURE, RESPECT, JOURNEY"

First-time freshman enrollment declined 11 percent at tribal colleges across the U.S last year. That decline was 27 percent at schools in Montana.

David Yarlott is the President of Little Big Horn College on the Crow Agency Reservation. He says the college used some of its federal COVID relief dollars to cover tuition and help students stay in school.

"The Little Big Horn College board of trustees, approved a debt write-off for all students so that everybody could get a fresh start because of the pandemic."

That free tuition brought back students who had dropped out, and Little Big Horn's overall enrollment increased. But the school's freshman class was nearly cut in half, and that could spell trouble down the line when funding for the incentives that attracted past students dry up.

Yarlott says the digital divide will also make it difficult to bring students back into the classroom.

"Students, community members, don't have access to wi-fi or internet, so it was kind of hard to reach out to them via social media."

The American Indian College Fund is assisting schools with these outreach efforts to attract first-time students through both online and local PR campaigns. But President Cheryl Crazy Bull says colleges will likely need more federal assistance to attract and retain students still experiencing challenges from the pandemic.

"And my hope is that we'll continue to see that kind of support over a longer horizon so that the colleges can get past this and then thrive."

Hailley Lame Bull is already thinking of returning to Aaniiih Nakoda.

"Thinking of going back next semester, even if it's still online, because I miss school."

Lame Bull says she wants to finish her business degree sooner rather than later so she can pursue her dream of opening a café.

Native higher education advocates hope Lame Bull is just one student in what will be a larger trend of recovery for tribal community colleges next fall.

- TAGS: AANIIIH NAKODA COLLEGE FORT BELKNAP RESERVATION ESTER TALKS DIFFERENT HAILLEY LAME BULL AMERICAN INDIAN COLLEGE FUND CHERYL CRAZY BULL CHIEF DULL KNIFE COLLEGE NORTHERN CHEYENN INDIAN RESERVATION DAVID YARLOTT LITTLE BIG HORN COLLEGE CROW RESERVATION COVID-19