

Gathering Data to Advance the Dream



When Cheryl Crazy Bull began her teaching career 32 years ago, her office was a closet in an abandoned building, and supplies were so scarce that her colleagues teased each other about hoarding paper clips. “We didn’t have anything,” she recalls of the early days at Sinte Gleska College on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. “But the founders of the school came to campus every day to encourage us. I was young, and I heard firsthand about their hopes and dreams for the tribal college movement.”

Now president and chief executive officer of the American Indian College Fund (College Fund), an organization that provides scholarships to Native students and financial support to the nation’s 34 accredited tribal colleges and universities, Crazy Bull leads the effort to secure and expand the founders’ dreams. Two past Endowment grants totaling \$47.5 million have helped the College Fund upgrade facilities and develop leadership initiatives at the colleges, which together serve more than 30,000 students. This year a grant for \$1.6 million is helping the College Fund strengthen the schools’ ability to gather, analyze and disseminate information about Native American students and the practices that enhance their classroom success.

“Tribal colleges and universities are unique, and the students who attend them are unique,” explains Dorothy Aguilera-Black Bear, vice president of research and sponsored programs at the College Fund. “At tribal colleges, students can learn about themselves, their history, culture and language while receiving their post-secondary education.” The College Fund’s credo is “educating the mind and spirit.”

The research that Aguilera-Black Bear and her team are gathering—with assistance from student interns—will document the past and forecast the future.

American Indian College Fund staff members David Sanders, Cheryl Crazy Bull and Dorothy Aguilera-Black Bear visit the “Wisdom Keepers” sculpture at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis.

“New tools are available that allow us to do predictive analysis that takes into account various barriers to academic success,” says David Sanders, research director at the College Fund. “We’re studying campus populations and asking, what will they look like in 10 to 15 years? We’re making projections about the

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growth of the American Indian College Fund and asking, how will scholarship programs impact persistence?”

The data that emerge will be useful as the College Fund educates potential donors on the importance of tribal schools and the tuition needs of their students. Some statistics, already available, are alarming. Among them:

- ▶ More American Indians live in poverty than do those in any other ethnic group.
- ▶ Only 13 percent of American Indians have bachelor’s degrees, compared with 30 percent of the overall population.
- ▶ Only 5 percent of students who apply to the College Fund for scholarships can afford to pursue higher education without financial aid.

“The single way many of these students can attend college is by accessing the institutions down the road,” says Crazy Bull, referring to tribal schools located on or near reservations. “Part of our job at the College Fund is to bring together those people who don’t have resources with those people who do. We’re the conduit for that, and data will help us do it better.”

The College Fund distributed more than \$5.3 million in scholarships and program support last year, providing scholarships to more than 6,000 tribal college students. But five times as many students applied for scholarships. Research that measures student progress, tracks graduation rates and reports alumni employment numbers will help the College Fund build a compelling case for donors considering gifts to “the institutions down the road.”

College Fund President and CEO Cheryl Crazy Bull believes that robust student data will improve the College Fund’s ability to live out its credo: “educating the mind and spirit.”