

18th Annual Native
American Essay
Competition

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“The Impact of Higher Education on Federal and Tribal Relation”

As an essential element of any contemporary successful Native American, higher education has proven worthy of increased attention and support from tribal and federal leaders. In order to meet social and political standards, a certain level of education is required for proper representation in the federal government. This increasing requirement has, in turn, gained importance among tribes, who realize the importance of advancing educational opportunities for tribal members. With hopes of attaining stronger federal-tribal relations, better educated tribal members can more successfully communicate with the federal government. Therefore, higher education has become a key factor in ensuring the best interests of tribes across South Dakota.

With the eventual goal of self-sustainability, tribes recognize the need for additional financial sources, other than the reserves of the Bureaus of Indian Affairs (BIA). By creating more ways for Native Americans to finance their education, tribal enrollment will increase, and more Native Americans will achieve the level of education society currently demands. For instance, a program could be created that helps Native American students with educational expenses, in exchange for work at the tribe or at Indian Health Services for a fixed amount of time. Not only would this benefit the students, but the local Native American population as well. If that student failed to meet the requirements, then the scholarship would convert over to a low-interest loan. After graduation, the tribe would utilize their college educated students to benefit not only their particular tribe, but all of the tribes in the country. Should this take place not only will the underrepresented members of the tribes be represented, but intertribal relations would improve. First, however, the program needs funding. Before self-sustainability can be achieved,

tribes may have to reach out to the federal government for assistance. Within a few years of successful running, tribes could overtake the program and reimburse the United States government.

Without a doubt, every tribe is affected by decisions made on Capitol Hill. Better educated representatives will ensure that tribes will have a legitimate voice through their Congressperson. In order to accomplish this, the reputation of the Native American people must first be established as a group who values education. By improving representation and increasing federal-tribal communication, the federal government will realize the legitimacy and need for increasing funding of programs that remain grossly underfunded, such as Indian Health Services and educational programs. Clearly, such funding would benefit all tribes, and subsequently enable more tribal members to attend college. Eventually, this would lead to a reciprocating cycle in which more educational funding leads to more Native American students, leading to more money and, in turn, educational opportunities. This chain of events would lead to a revolutionized Native American community. In other words, the success of tomorrow depends on measures taken today. Many strong advocates of the environmental movement proclaim that people must “think globally, and act locally.” A similar mantra applies to Native American tribes and education. That is, not only does education bring legitimacy to the thought of proper representation at a national level, but it creates opportunity at a local level. As more Native Americans enter college and many postsecondary centers of education, they become increasingly better equipped to not only fulfill the needs of their tribe, but also their country.