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Native American Tuition Waivers:
Uncovering the Complexity of Eligibility, Native Identities,
& Improvements for the Future

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in American Indian Studies

by

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Native Identities, & Improvements for the Future

by

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Master of Arts in American Indian Studies

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Professor Ananda M. Marin, Chair

Over the past decade, a significant number of higher education institutions across the US have sought to expand education access by establishing tuition waivers for Native American students. A tuition waiver commonly provides free or reduced tuition for Native American students who can meet the eligibility criteria set by an institution. As support for Native students through the form of tuition waivers continues to expand, there is a critical need for institutions to understand both the positive and negative impacts of tuition waivers beyond the benefits of financial assistance. In this thesis, I explore the impact of Native American tuition waivers by focusing on the University of California's Native American Opportunity Plan (NAOP) and Native student experiences with the NAOP at UCLA. Through interviews with Native students from diverse tribal community connections and racial identities, this study highlights the importance of recognizing the complexity of contemporary Native identities and addressing barriers for Native students beyond financial access. The findings suggest that tuition waivers can be most effective when paired with intentional learning about Native communities on behalf of institutions, and sustained support systems that promote Native student retention and pathways toward graduation. In addition, I offer recommendations based on Native student's experiences for expanding tuition waiver eligibility to include the highest number of eligible students.

The thesis of Avory Wyatt is approved.

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2026

Dedication

For my family, relatives, and all future generations Native students.

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Introduction

Higher Education within the United States has, since its initial development, had a complex relationship with the Native American communities. From the genocidal agendas of boarding schools to early assimilationist goals of education institutions, college campuses have remained contested sites of learning for Native students (Brayboy & Tachine, 2021). Today, US colleges and universities are attempting to make amends with Native communities by instituting tuition waivers for Native American students. Tuition waivers, though varying by institution, are intended to remove the financial burden and barriers of access by covering the tuition and fees for Native students who meet the waiver eligibility requirements. In 2022, the University of California, one of largest public education systems in the US, established the Native American Opportunity Plan (NAOP) which ensures that tuition and fees are covered for California students enrolled in a federally recognized tribal nation (UC Office of the President [UCOP], 2026; University of California Admissions, n.d.). Although tuition waivers seek to mend historical wounds between institutions and tribal communities, restrictive eligibility criteria and a shortage of Native-specific resources at UCLA continue to generate personal and communal challenges for Native students. This study explores the experiences Native students at UCLA in relation to the Native American Opportunity Plan (NAOP). The primary goal is to recommend new strategies for expanding tribal tuition waiver eligibility requirements and offer new insight on student Native experiences to aid in the creation of effective campus resources.

Although more tuition waiver opportunities have been established over the last decade, tuition waivers and cost reduction options for Native American students have existed for over a century. One of the first institutions to establish a free tuition program for Native students was Fort Lewis College (FLC) in 1911 (Fort Lewis College, 2015). In a deal with the federal

government, the state of Colorado received over 6,000 acres of land and, in return, they agreed to transform the former federal boarding school into an education institution where Native students could attend free of tuition (Berry, 2010). Similarly, following the closure of a boarding school located at what is now the University of Minnesota Morris (UMM), the state of Minnesota transformed the campus into UMM. To this day, UMM continues to provide free tuition to Native students who are federally enrolled or direct descendants of a federally enrolled tribal member (University of Minnesota Morris, n.d.). Both UMM and FLC's foundational agreements to support Native students can now serve as models for contemporary institutional initiatives to acknowledge historical injustices and expand access to higher education for Native communities.

Over the past five decades, more than 25 non-tribal higher education institutions across 13 states have introduced tuition waivers to provide financial support for Native students. Out of the tuition waivers I identified, notably, more than 75 percent of the tuition waivers were established or expanded since the start of 2021. The expansion of tuition waivers since the turn of the decade demonstrates a growing shift within higher education to provide financial support to Native students. Thus, reflecting the growing movement of institutions acknowledging the historical wrongs and land dispossession of Native communities.

As support for Native students continues to expand, there is a critical need for institutions to understand the positive and negative impacts of tuition waivers beyond the benefits of financial assistance. Each day Native students endure unique challenges associated with ongoing colonization and settler colonialism. The tenets of Tribal Critical Race Theory provide a framework for understanding current effects of colonization explain how, because of continuous engagement with the effects of colonization, Native students experience hostile and isolating environments where colonial ideologies continue to be reinforced (Brayboy, 2013; Masta, 2018)

Native students additionally carry with them unique stories, cultural knowledge, and tribal identities which influence their support needs within higher education. With research on Native college student experiences being alarmingly low, there is a risk of misunderstanding what types of support work best for Native students and, importantly, how the implementation of tribal tuition waivers affects the student wellbeing (Willmott et al., 2016).

Beyond analyzing tuition waivers and their effects on the recruitment of students, my research examines student perspectives on tuition waivers, discusses how Native experiences and identities correlate with one's ability to navigate higher education, and how colleges and universities can best implement tuition waivers in the future. Each of these questions is crucial for gaining a holistic overview of the Native student experience, beginning with student's understandings of their Native identities and wrapping up with how their identities and experiences relate to tuition waiver criteria. Together, the topics fuse to give a holistic overview of Native students, Native communities, and how tuition waivers can best support the highest number of Native students based on their current needs.

To explore these questions I interviewed eight Native American students from the University of California, Los Angeles. Together, I discussed with the student participants their experiences at the institutions, their understanding of identity as Native people, the impact of tuition waivers on their education, and suggested improvements for tuition waiver implementation and eligibility. Each of the study participants were interviewed with a series of questions which: introduced and discussed the students' life experiences, discussed the details of their experiences in relation to the research topic, and reflected on the interview and the meaning of their experiences. The interviews took place over a two-week period to ensure that students could participate according to their school schedules. Importantly, this study utilizes Indigenous

methodologies in which I place myself in relation to study participants and rely on the respect for participants to ensure the study's outcomes promote individual and collective good.

The remainder of this thesis proceeds with three main sections. I begin by exploring current research on Native student experiences within higher education and why Native students possess unique needs in relation to their experiences with colonization. In addition, I include a small subsection on the current resources in place to support Native students at UCLA for background information on the current campus support systems. I follow up with a detailed breakdown of my research methods, goals and design of my study. In the second section, I discuss both my quantitative and qualitative findings from the student interviews. The second section includes various subsections based on themes I formulated from the student's responses. Each of the subsections provide critical insight for understanding the varying identities of Native students and how their experiences relate to their individual support needs. Finally, I conclude with tuition waiver recommendations for institutions and a discussion on the implications of implementing Native American tuition waivers. Altogether, each of the sections offer critical insight for understanding Native students and how to establish or improve tuition waivers within higher education institutions in the US.

Positionality

Before making my journey into higher education, I lived on a reservation located about thirty minutes outside of Reno, Nevada. Both my Washo and Paiute relatives lived in the same region, so all my cousins were either close neighbors or within a short drive across town. As a kid, I lived with my parents and sister in, what I would now consider, a rather privileged household on the rez compared to some of my friends I grew up with. My parents met at Haskell

Indian Nations University, however, both did not finish college there. After moving back to Reno, my parents got married when I was six and both worked full time jobs off the reservation throughout my youth. I do not recall times where we were not able to make dinner, keep food in our fridge, or have reliable drinking water. My family also made time to do extracurriculars and sought out opportunities for me to play sports outside of the reservation which was not as common for all my fellow community members. I believe this is an important distinction to make especially considering the many intersecting identities that exist within tribal identities and the differing characteristics of reservations throughout the country which are often thought of as being the same.

While I was in high school, my mom went back to college and graduated with her bachelor's degree. Along the way she developed connections with Black, Indigenous and other staff members of color who helped her develop her own pathway toward graduation by connecting her with the resources she needed to graduate. So when I got to college, I was more aware of the resources available to students compared to some of my peers who were first generation students. During my first two years as a student I experienced immense challenges with cultural isolation, my academics, and my mental health. Navigating these challenges along with threats of being disenrolled from the institution left me feeling disconnected and overwhelmed. Fortunately, I reached out to the same Black and Native mentors who assisted my mom and they helped connect me with other underrepresented students on campus who were going through similar challenges. Their guidance not only helped me navigate my coursework but also shifted my mindset of merely surviving at a predominantly white institution, to actively thriving and uplifting other underrepresented students with experiences similar to my own.

The various intersections of my life – including traumas, cultural connection, sexual orientation, and skin tone – have shaped my identity as a Native student, partner, and relative. While my positionality continues to evolve through academic and personal growth, the pathway that brought me to higher education remains the core driver of my career goals and the foundation of my values as a Native scholar.

Research Goals

This study aims to highlight the perspectives of Native American students to ensure colleges and universities are able to create adequate resources to support the Native community at their institutions. In addition, the inclusion of student perspectives provides higher education institutions with a better understanding of how to best implement a tuition waiver for American Indian students. Throughout my career in higher education, I have remained a strong advocate for the implementation of tuition waivers for Native American students at higher education institutions. My first experience with tuition waivers began during my undergraduate studies at the University of Nevada, Reno when I worked with state legislators and various members of the Nevada Native community to help establish Nevada's first tuition waiver for federally enrolled Nevada Native students. During the establishment process, I recognized the immediate benefits of tuition waivers yet, simultaneously, I recognized several complexities associated with the establishment of the waiver. A few of the complexities included a lack of Native specific resources for students on campuses, institutions having problematic histories with Native peoples, and the lack of critical understanding for Native American or Indigenous identities. When the University of California proposed to establish the Native American Opportunity Plan, I encountered students who expressed similar complexities regarding the new tuition waiver for

tribal members in California. The similarities between my two experiences with tuition waivers in Nevada and California inspired me to learn more about student perspectives of the Native American Opportunity Plan (NAOP). This study therefore seeks to examine student perspectives to help institutions understand both the contemporary and historical relationships of Native students and higher education institutions, and how universities can best implement tuition waivers for Native students in the future.

Literature Review

To understand the discourse of Native American students, tuition waivers, and Native student resources, I focus on scholarly sources covering Native students within higher education, colonialism and eurocentrism in academia. Each of these topics further emphasize the resilience and persistence of Native students who attend higher education institutions and why Native students require additional resources to succeed.

The positionalities of Native students create unique educational pathways within higher education. Particularly, several factors play major roles in shaping the identities of Native students. Certain characteristics that constitute Native student identities are the varying legal and social differences of tribal nations. Examples include growing up urban communities versus growing up on a reservation, federal enrollment status, or whether or not an individual considers themselves traditional or non-traditional (Brayboy et al., 2015). In addition, Native students are classified as both a racial and a political group within the US which further heightens the awareness of their identity in relation to the colonial state (Brayboy et al., 2015).

Colonialism, capitalism, and the homogenous European structures that dominate American society and higher education institutions also shape Native student identities (Grande,

200). Each day Native students are forced to engage with the colonial structures embedded into society around them (Masta, 2018). Academic institutions specifically utilized destructive forces, such as erasure, cultural assimilation, and land dispossession, as modes to eradicate Indigenous cultures and languages (Fox, 2017). Today, Native students continue to occupy the same higher education institutions which are rooted in the violence, dispossession, and genocidal processes used to ensure Native people ceased to exist (Brayboy, 2021; McCoy, 2021). Or, as Richard Henry Pratt proclaimed, assimilative practices could be utilized to “kill the indian and save the man” (Brayboy, 2013). Understanding the historical wrongs of universities and their relation to colonization has a deeply complex past. Nevertheless, the harmful impact of academic institutions combined with the political identities of Native students demonstrates how Native student experiences differ significantly from many of their peers within higher education.

Native students report that when attending eurocentric academic institutions, their learned ontologies and pedagogies often conflict with the college systems they are forced to rely on for their future (Grande, 2000; Tachine et al., 2017). The sense of conflict due to the differing values of Native students and their institutions considerably impedes Native student experiences in higher education (Brayboy 2013; Rodriguez, 2012; Tachine et al, 2017). When asked about their experiences on college campuses, Native students report feeling isolated, exhausted, and misunderstood (Masta, 2018). They attribute these feelings to the colonial foundations found in American higher education institutions, which contribute significantly to perceptions of isolation that Native students commonly feel on college campuses (Brayboy et al., 2015; Tachine et al., 2017). The sense of discomfort created by the conflict between American Indian students and their institutions further contributes to Native students’ inability to achieve their fullest potential

in college resulting in the prevention or delay of graduation (Brayboy et al., 2015; Tachine et al., 2017).

The phenomenon of Native students experiencing hardships in higher education is not new. Yet, even in an era of praising diversity and multiculturalism, universities show a lack of interest in policies that shift relational dynamics (Castagno, 2007). As stated by Castagno (2007), institutions find it fascinating to celebrate multiculturalism and diversity, however, they do not have “interest in critical, social justice-oriented policies that challenge the status quo, the current racial order, or the institution's privilege and power (p. 3). Furthermore, universities continue to provide surface level solutions to combat the obstacles Indigenous students face and undermine the transformations needed to center the values and needs of Indigenous students (Castagno, 2007; Brayboy et al., 2015; Tachine et al., 2017). In order to effectively address the needs of Indigenous students, it is imperative that colleges and universities recognize the importance of implementing new policies and resources to uproot the long-standing histories of colonization instilled within higher education.

UCLA’s History and Current Resources for Native Students

The city of Los Angeles, California has an extensive history with Indigenous peoples far predating the arrival of Europeans to the region in the sixteenth century. UCLA, specifically, sits on land stolen from the Gabrielino Tongva people who lived on the land since time immemorial (University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA], n.d.). The Morrill Act of 1862, although it did not directly reserve land through the act, allowed for the purchasing of the land needed to construct the campus. UCLA's construction is therefore rooted in the dispossession of the Gabrielino Tongva peoples and, additionally, the university continues to profit off land stolen from Native peoples (Lee et al, 2020). The historical relationship between UCLA and the

Gabrielino Tongva peoples demonstrates the complicated bond instilled within the campus environment.

In the twentieth century, detrimental conditions on reservations, poverty, migration, and relocation programs led many Native peoples to move to Los Angeles (Rosenthal, 2012). The movement of Native peoples to the greater Los Angeles region transformed the Gabrielino Tongva's homelands into one of the largest urban Native centers in the United States. In 2020, 163,464 people in Los Angeles County identified as solely American Indian or Alaskan Native (US Census, 2020). With Los Angeles being what some refer to as the "urban Indian capital of the United States," the city and its educational institutions have developed an extensive history interacting with Native peoples (Rosenthal, p. 3, 2012).

Native students at UCLA shaped the school and its programs which continue to benefit students today. Importantly, the establishment of the American Indian Studies (AIS) program in 1969 continues to be pivotal for Native students' education at UCLA (American Indian Studies Center [AISC], n.d.). The AIS program and American Indian Studies Center (AISC) were established during a revolutionary period of Native history which saw an increase in Native activism and protests such as the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969. The occupation at Alcatraz is important to Native history at UCLA because about 80 Native students traveled to Alcatraz from UCLA for the occupation (Thomas, 2010). Students returned to UCLA from the occupation with greater insight into the world of activism and their identities as Native people. This led the students to create the American Indian Student Association (AISA) at UCLA. With the creation of AISA and an increased will to advocate for Native knowledge, Native students and community members petitioned for the creation of a curriculum and a research center at UCLA in 1969 (American Indian Studies [AIS], n.d.).

The AISC continues to be one of the leading resources for students at UCLA. Core objectives of the AISC are to: "facilitate and disseminate research about Indigenous peoples; strengthen graduate and undergraduate education; seek extramural funds to support student and faculty research; and carry out university and public service programs related to the Center's mission" (AISC, n.d.). The AISC strives to accomplish its core objectives by providing students with access to an AIS library, various events, and funding for student projects or tuition.

Outside of the AISC, Native clubs and organizations at UCLA consistently have been one of the most vital resources for Native students. The student's establishment of the AIS program, AISC, and numerous events and retention services on campus from the 1960s to the present demonstrates the care that clubs have always had for the advancement of Native students. AISA remains the longest-running, and arguably most impactful, Native student club on campus. The club's mission statement expresses the importance of community and collective efforts to promote education, dispel misconceptions, and acknowledge the diverse Native cultures existing at UCLA (American Indian Student Association [AISA], n.d.).

AISA developed two student-led initiatives in the 1990s that continue to be vital for Native student outreach and retention: the Retention of American Indians Now (RAIN) and American Indian Recruitment (AIR) (Thomas, 2010). RAIN was created in 1990 to help alleviate high dropout rates amongst Native students at UCLA (Community Programs Office [CPO], 2022). Services that RAIN offers to students include peer counseling, mentorship, a wellness program, and other events or activities designed to ensure the retention of Native students. In 1997, increasing concerns over a lack of outreach to Native students prompted AISA to develop the American Indian Recruitment (AIR) project – the first student-run and student-led outreach program in the United States (CPO, 2022). AIR promotes and aspires to encourage

Native students to pursue degrees in higher education after they graduate from High School "while strengthening cultural ties and creating a cycle of learning which students return to their communities and meaningfully contribute to this process" (CPO, 2022). AIR supports students by providing peer advising, tutoring, workshops, and cultural programming (Morales, 2019). In addition, the program has a community college component which seeks to guide students through the transfer process and ensure they further their education beyond community college.

Despite being the sole campus resources dedicated to Native student retention and outreach, in 2025, both RAIN and AIR were defunded and each of the full time Project Coordinators positions were eliminated (Chagoya, 2026). The elimination of the positions and the inability of UCLA Student Affairs to fund student employment positions virtually ended the programs' ability to function. Thus, leaving all the Native students without any resources solely dedicated to the retention and outreach of Native students to UCLA. It is not clear through research of the programs whether or not they will return anytime in the near future.

Other initiatives operated by AISA currently exist to help support Native students and Native youth exploring higher education. The events include the annual Youth Conference and Basketball Tournament, the ULCA Pow Wow, and the formulation of events throughout the year to advocate for Native students (AISA, 2022). The level of complexity it takes to operate such large events demonstrates the care and determination of Native students at UCLA. AISA is one of the smallest clubs on campus yet, size and population numbers do not deter students from continuing to operate their events. Even when faced with the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020, the students overcame the challenges of being remote to ensure their events continued virtually. UCLA has multiple other Native organizations in affiliation with AISA across the multiple disciplines and degree programs at the institution.

For graduate students, the American Indian Graduate Association (AIGSA) and the Native American Law Student Association (NALSA) currently are the only organizations for Native graduate students. Both of the clubs provide spaces for graduate students to gather and comfortably express their cultures to enhance the graduate school experiences for Native students (AIS, n.d.). The organizations do not run such large events as the undergraduate student organizations, but they hold various meetings and smaller events for students at UCLA.

All of the available resources for Native students at UCLA collectively do their best to uplift the experiences of the Native student community at the university. It is important to distinguish that, unlike other institutions, the outreach and retention services offered to students are student-run initiatives (AIS, n.d.). Therefore, Native students are responsible for retaining their peers at the university, while simultaneously navigating the same hurdles which they are put in a position to help alleviate. The weight of such challenges may increase the possibility of Native students not being able to finish school, especially for those heavily involved in student retention initiatives on campus without support systems of their own (Beck et al, 2014).

Research Justification

A need exists for tuition research that goes beyond quantitative data and how tuition waivers affect Native students. Current studies on tuition waivers shows that college attendance for Native American students increased within the states (Cooper, 2015). In addition, students from these states emphasized how they were thankful for tuition waivers and how much the tuition waiver helped them in the job market (Cooper, 2015). Other than Cooper (2015), there is minimal research exploring qualitative data from tuition waiver recipients (American Indian College Fund, 2025; Minthorn, 2023). With the increase in Native tuition waiver implementation across the US, research is needed to understand Native students' perceptions of tuition waivers

and, especially, how they relate to their tribal identities. A relationship exists between tuition waivers and student identities because the waivers directly require Native students to analyze their relationship to the colonial state – for example, being a descendent or federally enrolled member of a tribe. Tuition waivers also increase the accessibility for Native students to attend higher education institutions, which Brayboy (2015) and other scholars have found to be significant in affecting the identities and experiences of Native students (Grande, 2000; Tachine et al., 2017). Ultimately, investigating Native student perspectives adds to scholarly conversations by emphasizing a need for institutional transformation to support academic success for Native students. This research is also critical because it centers Native voices which further enables institutions to design tuition waivers that truly reflect and honor realities of Native identities and Native communities

Conceptual Framework

To guide my research process, I utilize the concept of braiding to bring together the knowledge of Indigenous scholars and Native communities. Braiding, as a concept, can be thought of as a process that requires patience, care, attention to detail, and the ability to reconcile with one's mistakes. The concept can be related to the process of weaving together a basket. However, I closely relate braiding to the process of braiding my own hair, which I learned during the early stages of my research and have since grown more comfortable with over the years. In relation to my research, the process of braiding is one that I will never perfect. Yet, with continued determination, patience, and the willingness to grow along with my hair, I will continue to fine tune all my skills that are needed to contribute to the Native community and students in need of support.

Throughout this study I utilize Indigenous research methodologies to integrate cultural protocols, values, and behaviors into the research process which has historically been rooted in colonization and imperialism (Smith, 2012). The two main Indigenous methodological approaches I focus on are Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies (CIRM) and the Kaupapa Māori research framework. CIRM, which is rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, utilizes a framework based on Relationality, Responsibility, Respect, Reciprocity, and Accountability (Brayboy et al., 2012) to help (re)establish Indigenous knowledge into the research process. The Four R's of CIRM also instill the idea of community to ensure that my research can adequately assist the Native community to meet their needs. In addition to CIRM I plan to utilize the Kaupapa Māori research framework which is highlighted in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2021) book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Kaupapa Māori is a list of culturally specific ideas used commonly as a code of conduct for community members and researchers (Smith, 2021). The list of Māori phrases emphasizes the importance of having respect for others, listening, meeting face to face, sharing, maintaining caution, and not flaunting knowledge (Smith, 2021). The Kaupapa Māori framework, although rooted in the knowledge of Māori peoples, closely resembles the teachings of the tribal community I grew up in, and I plan to use the methodology to guide the ethical principles and context for my research. Drawing upon the Four R's of CIRM and the Kaupapa Māori, I plan to incorporate Indigenous frameworks and ensure my research is rooted from Indigenous communities to promote collective good.

Research Methods & Design

A qualitative research design provides the best structure for documenting and analyzing the voices of Native American students (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As described by Ravitch and

Carl (2021), “qualitative research design necessitates criticality, reflexivity, collaboration, and rigor” (p. 100). Using this approach, therefore, allows me to critically think through my research process and understand the complexity of the participants lived experiences while simultaneously recognizing my responsibility, as a researcher, to give back to the communities I am aiming to support. Furthermore, my study utilizes multiple methods of qualitative inquiry including interviews, analyzing student data, and connecting with the Native community. Each of these methods of inquiry proved to be essential in analyzing the student perspectives of the Native American Opportunity Plan at UCLA.

Participant Observation. I began the research process by reviewing the history of UCLA and its surrounding communities as they relate to Native students. Understanding this background allowed me to better situate myself during an in-person site visit of the campus and surrounding area, where I observed the daily environment of Native students. In addition to exploring this history, I researched the resources currently available to Indigenous and Native American students at UCLA. Finally, I incorporated journaling into my site visit where I noted any particular details that caught my attention, including specific observations of the campus environment. The site visit took place over a span of one day in which I walked to throughout UCLA’s campus and visited the current Native spaces in the Student Activities Center and Campbell Hall. At the site visit, I journaled the sights, sounds, and smells of campus which align with Critical Indigenous Research Methodology’s notion of multisensory listening. Multisensory listening emphasizes how, as Native people, we listen with much more than our ears, engaging with our environments through sight, touch, and smell. Documenting these experiences allowed me to deeply comprehend the campus environment and how Native students at the university may perceive their everyday life experiences. Ultimately, by grounding myself in the same place

as the interview participants, I gained valuable insight into how space and place shapes student perspectives at UCLA.

Campus/Community Data. Understanding the institution's Native student demographics and data on the Native American Opportunity Plan is essential for this project. By analyzing quantitative UC-wide data first, I established a baseline to compare UCLA's demographic data to other UC institutions and other higher education institutions around the country. Utilizing this data, I analyzed the similarities or differences between all UC institutions, current trends in Native student data, and determined how many students qualified for the NAOP. I began the data collection process by first researching Native student data at all the UC campuses followed by researching any available datasets on Native students at UCLA. Furthermore, I gathered datasets containing Native American student populations, graduation rates, and tuition waiver data. Collecting student demographics from all the UC campuses was an important first step for this project because it allowed me to compare data from UCLA to the UC-wide Native American student data. Altogether, the data collected from UCLA generated a concise and localized picture of the Native student experience of UCLA's campus.

The University of California releases public data online which can be found on the University's official webpage. For data not available on the UC website, such as updated NAOP statistics, I reached out directly to the institution's Office of the President for updated data. Utilizing these methods provided necessary background context of the NAOP prior conducting interviews with student participants.

Participant Recruitment. Interest flyers with a link to a Google Form were given to Native students and posted within UCLA's Native student lounge with a goal of encouraging eight students to participate in the study. Specifically, I sent the flyers to Indigenous student

groups, services dedicated for Native and Indigenous students, and academic programs with a focus on Indigenous peoples. There were two target populations for this study. First, I recruited Native American students who qualified for the NAOP during the academic school year. To be eligible for the Native American Opportunity Plan, a student must meet the following criteria according to the UC admission website (2022):

1. Must be a current or newly admitted University of California undergraduate, graduate or professional school student.
2. Must be a California Resident for tuition purposes.
3. Must be an enrolled member in a federally recognized Native American, American Indian and/or Alaska Native tribe.
4. Must be enrolled in a qualifying UC degree program.

In addition to the eligibility status for the Native Opportunity Plan, I requested that participants also have at least one full year of experience at UCLA. This includes both undergraduate students in at least their second year and graduate or professional students who have been enrolled at UCLA for more than a year. By interviewing only second-year students and above, my goal was to gather more comprehensive and detailed data about current campus life experiences and trends witnessed over multiple years.

My second target population was non-NAOP eligible Native students. I aimed to include students in this study who are ineligible for the NAOP, either due to specific tribal enrollment policies, disenrollment, financial aid restrictions, or because they are affiliated with a non-federally recognized tribe. Across the US tribes have the ability to decide who is and who is not a tribal member often based on blood quantum percentages or descendency to a tribal member. Students who do not meet their tribal enrollment requirements therefore possess unique

experiences navigating tribal communities and resources dedicated to federally enrolled tribal members. Other non-enrolled students, such as those disenrolled, endure additional challenges which too make them unique within the population of students not eligible for tuition waivers. Including these perspectives will further broaden the diversity of the participants and create space for the students to share how the NAOP or other tuition waivers could be improved to encompass more Native students.

Participants Information. Eight self-identifying Native American student participants were selected from a pool of self-identified American Indian students to provide insight into tuition waivers and how universities can best understand the needs of the Native American community. Student participants came from different California tribal nations. In addition, three students came from tribes in other states. Thus, the student participants provided unique experiences expanding from a wide variety of tribal identities, including those: enrolled and not enrolled in tribal nations, a disenrolled student, a transnational Native student, self-identified White Native students, students who grew up on the reservation, and students who grew up off the reservation – who often self-identify as “Urban Natives.” Understanding student backgrounds will remain significant throughout this study’s findings, as each of the students’ expressions represent the different identities within the larger scoped American Indian/Alaskan Native identifier. All of which commonly make up the Native student populations within US colleges and universities.

Information about students’ backgrounds and Native identities are presented in Table 1. Each of the students' have been given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and comfortability when expressing their experiences. Only one of the participants received the NAOP. A brief reason is provided for those who did not receive the NAOP. In addition, brief biographies for

each student are provided in subsequent sections.

Table 1

Student Participant Tribal Identifiers

Student Name	Reason for Not Receiving the NAOP	Enrolled with Federally Recognized Tribe	Grew up on the Reservation	Grew up in a Urban Area
Lily (Undergraduate)	<i>See note.</i>	X		X
Amber (Undergraduate)	Not Enrolled			X
Dakota (Graduate)	Tribal Nation Outside the US			X
Finn (Undergraduate)	Financial Aid/Other Scholarships	X		X
Hope (Undergraduate)	Financial Aid/Other Scholarships	X	X	
Jimmy (Undergraduate)	Not Enrolled		X	
Joy (Undergraduate)	Disenrolled		X	
Sage (Graduate)	Non-Resident	X	X	

Note: Lily was the only student participant interviewed who received the NAOP.

In addition to the four identifiers listed on the top of Table 1, students discuss personal differences in privilege, need for financial assistance, and various experiences with differing tribal enrollment policies. All will remain critical to fully comprehend the implications and recommendations provided in this section.

Interviews. Following the participant selection period, interviews were scheduled in accordance with a ten-week research timetable. I scheduled each of the interviews to take place within a 90-minute timeframe, with additional time being scheduled if needed. To ensure participant comfortability, I invited students to choose a secure location for their interviews. I conducted interview sessions by following a semi-structured style of questioning. With this approach, all core questions were asked within the protocol, while certain questions were tailored to a participant's unique identity or perspectives on the NAOP. This format also opened up space to engage with participant's responses by asking follow-up questions.

All interviews were audio recorded in order to ensure data accuracy. In addition, I documented emotions and other contextual information in a research journal. My primary goal for the interview process was to foster a safe and supportive interview environment where I could maximize my attention shown to participants in the study to ensure they felt as comfortable as possible. Especially considering that we discussed topics that were traumatic or potentially emotionally triggering for Native people.

Transcription. After completing the interviews, I uploaded audio recordings to Otter.ai, an online transcription service. Once the audio recordings were transcribed, I listened to the audio recordings and made edits as necessary. In addition, I connected with participants about their transcriptions if any clarity was needed on any statements or words not clear in the recording.

Data Analysis. Once I completed the collection of the qualitative data, I began the data analysis process by listening, and reading through the transcripts. Each of the transcripts required multiple listening sessions and revisions to ensure their quotes matched the recordings. During this process I journaled my thoughts, reflections, and noted any emerging themes I noticed from each of the transcriptions. In addition, I wrote memos addressing the themes I created and how they best connected between one another. My memos also included any particular issues or concerns that emerged throughout the research process, which, in the end, only related to the lack of response from the UC's Office of the President, and the small differences in broad and institutional data between the UC and UCLA. Following the memo process, I analyzed my data further by coding emerging phrases and participant ideas from the transcriptions and memos. Examples of common phrases included "UCLA is a business," "whiteness," "urban Natives," "disenrollment," and "touchy subject." Utilizing the themes and phrases I collected, I created single codes, placed them into one document, and input quotes from the transcriptions along the corresponding student pseudonym under the codes. After reviewing the qualitative dataset, I noted any repetitive data and organized the codes into a flow of themes for the findings section.

In the following section, I will discuss and provide analysis of the themes that emerged from the student interviews relating to my research questions. Each of the subsections directly reflect the codes I created in a way that allows for readers to, first, learn about the backgrounds and identities of Native students, and conclude with how their experiences connect to their comprehension of the NAOP. I also include data from both the UC and UCLA to establish a baseline understanding of the Native community at UCLA and across the entirety of the UC system. Finally, for any topics that may require prior knowledge, I discuss current research and writings on the topics to ensure readers gain a thorough understanding of the subject matter.

Findings

My discussions with student participants offered key insight into contemporary identities and challenges of Native students, and, importantly, how tuition waivers can be best implemented to alleviate those challenges. Each of the student participants possessed unique positionalities and identities which offered critical input on the diverse needs of the Native student community. In particular, I found that, despite their differences, each of the participants mentioned similar topics associated with Native identities, student support, and how tuition waivers can be best implemented to reflect the needs of themselves and their peers. Altogether I identified two overarching themes from the discussions. First, there is a need for intentional support from the institution to include the highest number of waiver-eligible students, and second, how NAOP eligibility requirements can further cause feelings of embarrassment, mistrust, and isolation depending on the tribal enrollment status of students. Each of the findings and recommendations, overall, intertwine to offer a holistic understanding of Native identity, enrollment requirements, and their relation to Native tuition waivers.

Contextualizing Native Student Demographics and NAOP Totals

The total Native American population across the University of California (UC) System reflects the trend of institutions having low total Native populations. In Fall 2025, Native students made up 0.7 percent of the total UC student population totaling 1,990 students (University of California [UC], 2026). Native graduate students made up about 23 percent of the total AI student population for fall 2025 with 449 students (UC, 2026) This makes the total Native student population the second lowest out of the eight recorded races and ethnicities – American Indian, African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, white, International, and unknown. From 2016 to 2022, the Native undergraduate student population

was at its lowest in 2020 with 1,442 total enrolled students (UC, 2026). The recorded total number of Native students in 2020 was the lowest since 2009 when the total number of Native students was 1,327 (UC, 2026). Both the Native undergraduate and graduate student population in the UC system are a mere decimal point when calculated, however, the needs of Native students at each UC institution remains significant.

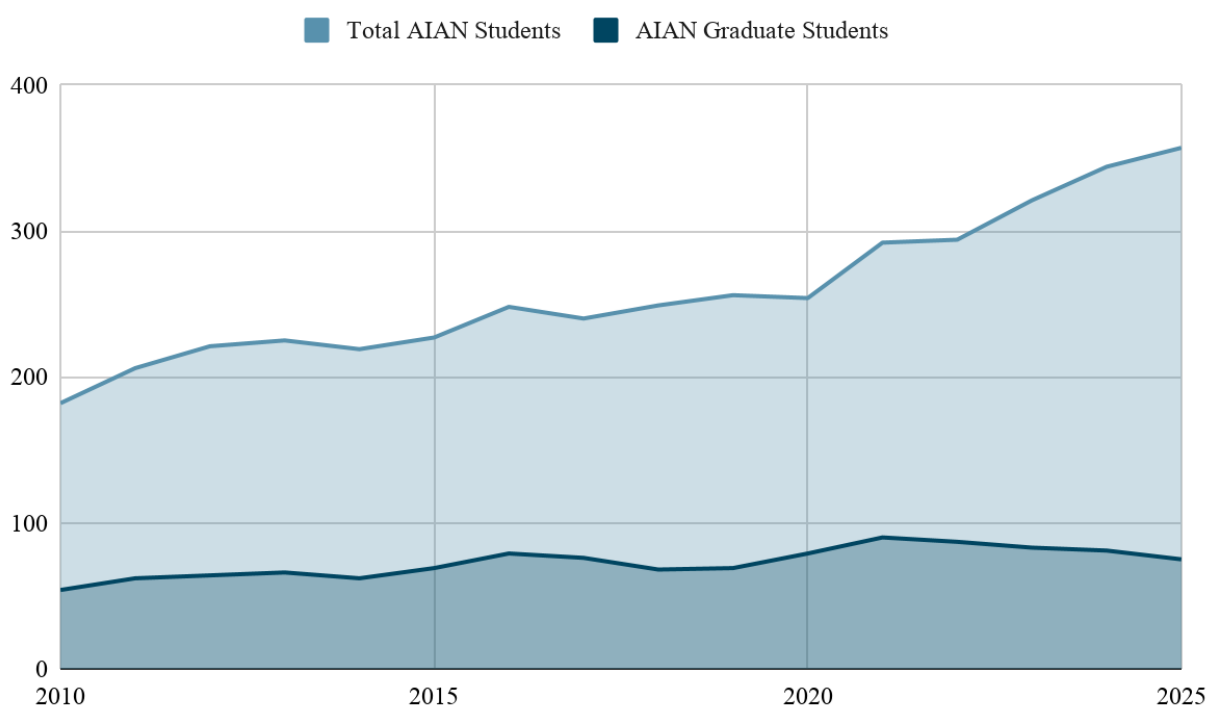
The total number of self-identified Native students at UCLA, similar to the UC system totals, is a decimal percentage in comparison to the total student population. Native students made up less than one percent of the total student population for the fall 2025 quarter, totaling 357 students with 75 of those being enrolled as graduate students (UC, 2026). As seen in Table 2, the Native student population at UCLA has steadily increased over the past 15 years. Most notably, the total American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) population has increased by 21 percent since the inaugural year of the NAOP. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Native student population increased by an average of 3.5 percent per year with that percentage increasing to 5.2 percent as students returned back to in-person learning. Considering the trend in the AIAN population, there isn't a clear distinction that the NAOP was the cause of the increase in the total Native student population. Nevertheless, the overall Native student population is increasing on average, suggesting that, while the NAOP may not be the primary catalyst for growth, the increase represents a critical need to establish institutional support for the Native community at UCLA.

Retention and graduation rates, similar to enrollment data, demonstrate whether students' needs are being met at their institution. AI students, along with Black and Pacific Islander (PI) students, have similar six-year graduation rates which differ from UCLA's 91 percent overall six-year graduation rate (IPEDS, 2022). The overall six-year graduation rate for AI students at

UCLA is 82 percent, which is nine percent lower compared to UCLA's overall rate. Similarly, Black students and PI students had a 10 percent lower six-year graduation rate in 2020. The lower graduation rates among AI, Black, and PI students supports the need for increased campus resources and initiatives for the underrepresented student groups at UCLA.

Table 2

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Enrollment Totals for UCLA, 2010-2025



An important characteristic to recognize when looking at the Native student data is that it is unclear if the total number of Native students represents students who identified solely as AIAN or if the data does account for students who identified as having two or more races. I am also unable to distinguish the exact number of Native students who additionally listed themselves as enrolled members of a federally recognized tribe. Data distinguishing how many students solely identify AIAN, multiracial, and enrollment status would provide a more precise overview of the total Native student population at UCLA.

Another data dilemma that commonly occurs at higher education institutions is when students who are not Native falsely identify, either intentionally or unintentionally, as having Native or Indigenous ancestry (Kolopenuk, 2013). Non-Indigenous students often claim to have Indigenous ancestry in an attempt to take advantage of resources dedicated solely for Indigenous or Native students. In addition, students may falsely claim Indigenous ancestry due to the popularity of DNA tests or false ancestry beliefs from family members (Sturm, 2011; Tallbear, 2013). It likely is not a large number of students who falsely identify as AIAN, yet the existence of this dilemma and past research demonstrates the possibility of Native student populations being lower than demonstrated in university databases.

NAOP Data. I acquired two datasets detailing NAOP totals during the first year of the tuition waiver's implementation. With the data not publicly accessible online, I requested the data from UCLA's Director of Financial Aid and the UC's Executive Director of Student Financial Support. The specific datasets requested included the total number of NAOP recipients, non-recipients, total funding disbursements, and the number of students who identified as members of a federally recognized tribe. I will analyze both datasets concurrently as the two differ slightly in totals, but both provide a comprehensive overview of the NAOP's data elements.

Beginning at the UC level, the Executive Director provided early data estimates for the 2022-2023 school year, a cost analysis, and a breakdown of recipients by institution. According to the data, the estimated institution wide cost for the NAOP was 2.4 million (S. Brick, personal communication, May 23, 2023). The actual cost however was 2.3 million which aligned with the UC estimates which accounted for eligible Native students who already had their tuition covered by another source – such as the Cal Grant or UC Aid. In addition, the Executive Director

provided a table with a complete breakdown of the total NAOP recipients by institution for the 2022-2023 school year. The data can be found in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Total Estimated Number of NAOP Recipients within the UC System, 2022-23

Campus	Total Recipients	Award Totals
Berkeley	33	\$292 K
Davis	25	\$260 K
Irvine	28	\$344 K
Los Angeles	40	\$511 K
Merced	6	\$31 K
Riverside	5	\$64 K
San Diego	28	\$165 K
San Francisco	0	\$0 K
Santa Barbara	25	\$366 K
Santa Cruz	21	\$229 K
System Totals	211	\$2,263 K

Institution wide, 211 students received the NAOP for the 2022-2023 school year, which equals out to approximately 13 percent of the total AIAN student population across all institutions. At UCLA specifically, 40 students received the NAOP the same year which is approximately 14 percent of the total AIAN student population at the school. Due to a lack of data, the UC could not provide a specific total for the number of self-identified federally enrolled students at each institution as the current collection of enrollment data had only been asked for a few years at the time.

The same request for data was given to UCLA's Director of Financial Aid who was able to provide the total number of federally enrolled Native students, total recipients and non-recipients of the NAOP, and a financial breakdown of funding costs. According to the Director, 71 undergraduate students attending UCLA for the 2022-2023 school year self-identified as enrolled members of a federally recognized tribe, which equals to 24 percent of UCLA's AIAN student population (I. Sotomayor, personal communication, March 1, 2023). Of the 71 students identified as potential recipients of the NAOP, 25 students were identified receiving grants or scholarships that covered their tuition and fees in full under the standard awarding policy. Thus, their funding commitment was covered so they did not need supplemental funding from the NAOP. The remaining 46 students did not have a fee-paying award, so the financial aid office reached out to them for supporting documentation to verify tribal membership. Of those 46 students, 13 did not respond to their request. 33 UCLA students in total verified their membership and received \$352,748 in NAOP grant funding.

When comparing the increasing percentage of AIAN at UCLA and across the UC system, it is likely that the total number of NAOP recipients has increased since the tuition waiver's establishment. However, without updated NAOP data, it is unclear if there has been any growth or reduction in the number of students receiving the funding. Over the years I requested updated data from the UC but was either not given a response or met with questions of my intent for acquiring NAOP data. Additional data recommended for future research includes updated NAOP or tuition waiver recipients, total non-recipients who are enrolled in a federally recognized tribe, total NAOP eligible students, and retention rates for Native students who both receive tuition waivers compared to those who do not. Precise retention rates broken down between graduate, undergraduate, full-time, and part-time students would provide a clearer picture of inadequacies

that may or may not prevent students from furthering their education at UCLA. It would also be effective to inspect any data on the number of Native students who apply to UCLA to examine the school's outreach efforts aimed at Native students. Importantly, utilizing multiple forms of data can provide transparency into current, financial, and cultural barriers existing for Native students. By pinpointing specific areas of focus through data analysis, UCLA and other institutions of higher education can create a more equitable environment that supports Native scholars throughout their academic journeys.

Native Experiences at UCLA

In general, higher education has proved to be a difficult space for Native American students across the US (Brayboy et al., 2012; Shotton et al., 2013; Waterman et al., 2018). Specifically at UCLA, the student participants expressed similar feelings relating to the difficulties of being a Native student within colleges and universities. Before understanding specific findings relating to the Native American Opportunity Plan, it is imperative to comprehend the experiences of Native students at UCLA. To answer my research question of understanding student identities in relation to academic institutions, I identified three themes in relation to the experiences of being a Native student at UCLA. These include the feeling of being misunderstood or experiencing erasure, a lack of resources and support, and the idea of higher education institutions not being made for Native students.

The Asterisk Problem

When discussing issues relating to the lack of support for Native students, participants often brought up the size of their population as a determining factor in whether or not they deserved established resources. Institutions taking account of population size in determining the relevance of Native student needs is common within higher education (Shotton et al., 2013). At

UCLA, specifically, Native students make up 0.7 percent of the undergraduate student population and 0.6 percent of the graduate student population (UCLA, n.d.). Compared to the national statistics, Native students made up one percent of the total undergraduate student population in 2021 (Characteristics of Postsecondary Students, 2023). Finn, a Native student who grew up in Northern California, explains how low Native student populations could be a contributing factor in universities determining the distribution and size of resources for student populations.

I keep hearing the excuse that they don't have enough Native students in these programs, so why fund these programs? It doesn't mean we aren't here. It feels like they just keep seeing that less than one percent of the student population for our community and kind of detour to that.

Finn's statement reflects the personal statements of all the participants who discussed the low percentages of Native students in relation to the total campus resources for Native students. Each of the students noted how they too felt there was a correlation between the institutional support for new and current Native student resources and their total population size. In addition, Finn's statement establishes a baseline for colleges and universities that, despite low population numbers, Native students deserve equitable access to resources dedicated toward their academic and personal success.

Feeling Misunderstood and Erased

Hope, a student who grew up on her reservation in Southern California, indicates how Native students commonly feel misunderstood, and how it can often be a "culture shock" for Native students attending institutions of higher education. She explains this by stating,

I do feel being a Native student at a huge institution, you're really misunderstood on almost all levels, like from cultural aspects to... just other things like social. It's such a culture shock. From the people that you're interacting with...UCLA doesn't really do a good job of making it feel like home and making it feel like this is a space that is made for you and you are meant to be here. And I think that was really hard for me to really work through. And I think it's hard for a lot of Native students to work through as well. Another student, Joy, who also grew up on her tribal homelands explains further how erasure, in turn, affected her experience as a student.

I learned quickly when I got here how erased Native people are from educational spaces. And how institutionalized and intentional that is. So I feel like I was pretty resentful of UCLA for pretty much this whole time since I've been here for not being more inclusive and respectful to Native people and our cultures.

All student participants shared similar experiences to those of Joy and Hope. Though a few expressed how they were proud to be Native students at such a prestigious university, all felt, in some form, feelings of isolation, erasure, and lack of support from the institution. In connection with the NAOP and other tuition waivers, students discussed this topic because, with a goal of tuition waivers being to increase the total number of enrolled Native students, a higher number of Native students may not resolve current challenges with feeling erased, or misunderstood on campus.

Lack of Resources and Supports

Since the turn of the century, institutions of higher education have established resources dedicated to solely supporting Native students to alleviate feelings of isolation and erasure. However, student participants pinpointed how UCLA is unique in how the two resource

programs dedicated to serving them are “student-run” initiatives affiliated with the American Indian Student Association (AISA) on campus. With students in charge of their own retention and outreach efforts, students expressed how they often felt overwhelmed and burnt out due to a need to maintain the functionality of the programs combined with their academics and outside responsibilities. Hope describes the situation by exclaiming, “It sucks[...] because you have to go in [to UCLA] fully knowing there’s a large possibility the only support you’re gonna get is from your own people.” In this quote, Hope pinpoints a lack of resources intentionally established by the university that are not operated by Native students and, importantly, how when she does require assistance, she has to look to her peers instead of full-time staff members.

In addition to Hope, Jimmy, a Native student from Southern California, expands on the university lacking support for Native students by stating how he “never felt they were providing enough support especially for our community that needs it.” Instead, he goes on further by explaining, “[Native students] empower ourselves to do well in our classes and graduate.” Jimmy and Hope’s statements, along with nearly all of the student participants, demonstrate how intentionality is important when providing resources for Native students. Each of the students recognized how, despite having two resources dedicated to Native student outreach and retention, because these resources are run by students and not facilitated by the university, it can further amplify feelings that the university is not fully supporting the needs of Native students.

Higher Education Institutions “Weren’t Made for Native People”

While students pinpoint the low Native student population as one argument for why institutions do not create adequate resources for Natives people. Historical attitudes toward Native people also contributed to Native student experiences. When originally built, universities were constructed to educate White, non-Native students (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). UCLA, for

instance, was established on Tongva homelands far before the United States government considered Native people to be citizens on their traditional homelands. Hope identifies the parallel between student experiences and historically racist attitudes by stating, “Well, education wasn't really ever made for Native people. Native people were never really meant to be in these huge institutions. And when we were, it was kind of forced through boarding schools and different things like that.” With institutions not being made for Native people, Hope is identifying a critical issue for nearly all colleges and universities built without the intention of serving Native students during their initial foundations. Thus, Native students remain forced to overcome racist foundational structures of universities while attempting to successfully attain their degrees.

The boarding school era, which Hope identifies in her previous statement, was a tragic time for Native people living in the United States. Boarding schools were designed as centers for assimilation and cultural extermination disguised as institutions for education (Child, 2000). As a result of the boarding school era, the historical relationships developed between Native communities and educational institutions created feelings of distrust for Native people related to the intentions of the education system (Wright, 1996). Finn specifically describes how, despite not directly enduring the forced assimilation practices of a boarding school, historical trauma continues to live within Native students whose ancestors either attended boarding schools or faced traumatic experiences within the education system.

I feel like having that generational trauma kind of bleed into UCLA, or just students in general, going into higher education is a fear that Native students will continue to lose tradition lose cultural identity, and kind of pick up more so on that Eurocentric or that

Western way of life as compared to kind of maintaining traditions and being able to learn language and everything like that.

It is imperative to understand how students, like Finn, remain cautious of the education system due to the harm it caused to Native communities contemporarily, and in the past. Because of Boarding schools and organized assimilation practices, tribal nations continue to struggle to revitalize their languages and cultures that were nearly lost or fully put to rest. Therefore, it is common for Native students to enter into higher education spaces with a sense of caution or, comparably, feelings of distress due to the past actions of educational institutions.

The experiences of Native students in higher education reveal a common outlook for the student participants. Each of the participants described feelings of mistrust, isolation, and misunderstanding related to their experiences as students. Importantly, student participants identified a connection between the education system's past wrongdoings for Native communities and the contemporary lack of resources to help current and future Native students. Identifying the relationship between Native people and the education system strengthens the roots for understanding the positionalities of Native students within higher education, therefore, creating a baseline understanding of Native students' needs.

Native Identities and Pressured Expectations

Native students, although often confined to their singular political status as Native Americans, make up a wide variety of ethnic, racial, and tribal identities which affects how they interact with the environment around them. At UCLA specifically, students frequently discussed their identities when describing personal experiences as Native students and how they relate to their comprehension of the Native American Opportunity Plan. I found six reoccurring emotional dimensions amongst the student participants including pressures of higher expectations, differing

tribal identities, racial differences, and differences in connection to their tribal communities. Students identified each of these themes as significant to their responses. Therefore, insight into the complex myriad of Native identities allows for a greater understanding on Native students' needs and implications related to the tuition waiver eligibility requirements.

Diversity of Native Peoples

Students often began conversations related to their identity by focusing on the diversity of Native people within the “Native American” and “Indigenous” identifiers. Identifying as Native American is merely a surface-level designation, to the experiences that come with growing up as a Native or Indigenous person. Within the identity, hundreds of tribal nations exist, all with a multitude of unique tribal cultures, traditions, lifeways, and experiences that construct the individual pathways of all Native people. Jimmy focused a great deal on the importance of acknowledging the diverse identities of Native people and how conflict can arise when Native students are viewed as coming from a singular identity. He explains this issue by describing repeated experiences where others viewed him as a spokesperson for all Native people during class.

There's more than just one Native American identity. I don't necessarily want to say something or stand up because I just don't want the attention of... oh, now I'm gonna have to have to say something on behalf of all the other Native American students. Or I have to do a land acknowledgment because I'm the only Native American person in the room and they want someone to do it. So I feel it's just not fair. We aren't just one group with one identity.

Here, Jimmy acknowledges the diversity of Native identities by explaining the interpersonal conflict and tokenization felt when university leadership or professors expected him to speak on

behalf of all Native people. His hesitancy to speak demonstrates how, despite being a single racial group, a multitude of identities and experiences encompass the common Native American categorical identity. Therefore, when thinking about institutional support in the form of tuition waivers, components for eligibility, such as federal recognition, will not reflect the identities of all Native students.

Tokenization

Nearly all student participants expressed similar feelings of being misunderstood or tokenized by university leadership. Amber, a Native student from Southern California, explains these feelings further by questioning the university's lack of understanding for Native identity and its correlation with the current resources provided to Native students.

How are they supporting [Native students]? Honestly, not very well. And I feel like every culture is gonna be very diverse. But I feel ours is also one that just requires very specific needs, that I don't think that the UC, or universities really understand. Because everything I feel, from everybody that I've talked to, ties back to their own cultural beliefs, or their own cultural needs... and we're such a diverse group of people that I feel like, they don't necessarily understand that.

Importantly, Amber discusses the diversity of Native culture and how it has to be considered when creating resources for Native students. She also makes an important connection by linking the existence of diverse communal needs with the necessity for campus resources to adhere to those needs. In closing, she points out how the lack of understanding can contribute to how supported Native students feel on campus. Support for Native students, especially when creating tuition waivers, therefore begins by taking the initial steps to understand Native cultures. As a

result of taking the steps to comprehend Native cultures, colleges and universities will have the potential to create the appropriate resources needed for students to feel supported.

Expectation to be an Expert on Native People

Students similarly reported higher levels of expectations as a common theme within the overall Native experience in higher education. With such low student populations, yet high expectations to be illustrious representatives of their culture, Native students face an immense amount of pressure – often coming from external influences. For instance, when the topic of Native American history or contemporary issues arises, as Jimmy states, “they expect us to say something grand or expect us to be the experts on stuff when we are not necessarily. We’re just students.” Jimmy continues by emphasizing how higher expectations result in negative feelings of standing out in educational spaces. “I feel some Native American students don’t want to stand out as a Native American student. They want to just blend into the crowd. If they do stand out, then they’re gonna get all this negative attention or get questions about Native Americans.” Jimmy’s statements are not referenced as a call for professors and administrators to avoid difficult conversations with their Native students. Native students, like Jimmy, expressed how they understand how their knowledge is beneficial for the classroom despite the difficulty of being singled-out. Instead non-Native professors and educators should view students’ experiences with higher expectations related to their cultural background as justification for increased resources.

Tied together with higher expectations for Native students in higher education, student participants often pinpointed racial differences, such as being mixed White and Native, as a significant topic relating to the Native American Opportunity Plan. Similar to nearly all racial

identities and contemporary cultures, whiteness plays a role in all individual's experiences with privilege and how they interact with the world around them.

Whiteness & Being Mixed Race

In tribal communities, whiteness – though not an indicator of one's tribal identity – is often associated with individuals who are pretending to be Native American, otherwise known as “Pretendians.” Lily, an enrolled student from the Pacific Northwest and the only student participant to receive the NOAP, focused a majority of her discussion on her experience identifying as White and Native, and how challenges relating to her racial identity arose with the presence of pretendians. “When you're White and Native, there's a lot of people that are White who claim to be Native and are not. And so that's a huge problem that kind of invites all these questions of like, ‘well, how Native are you? How much are you?’” In her statement, Lily describes the questions she faced about her identity while simultaneously recognizing the problem of non-Natives identifying as Native American to attain additional resources. It is not out of the ordinary for students to encounter questions about the name and location of their respective tribal nations. However, questions seeking to quantify or challenge students' identities may arise for those who come from a mixed racial background or, similar to Lily, those who identify as both White and Native American.

Another challenge White Native students face is recognizing their privilege when accessing Native resources, such as the Native American Opportunity Plan. Among the participants who identify as White and Native, each pinpointed their privilege when discussing reactions to the tuition waiver's eligibility requirements. Recognizing one's White privilege, according to the students, caused feelings of contemplation and critical reflection about the resources they felt were easier to access compared to their non-White peers. Lily expands on

these feelings by describing how her racial identity allowed her to experience her student journey through a privileged lens.

I know that my experience has been easier than a lot of other Native students just because I'm white. Personally, with my own experiences growing up and just my own identity, I feel like I walk this line a lot where I have all of the privilege in the world of walking on campus, being white, being able to fit in and look like a lot of the other people that are here. My racial identity is not really questioned often.

Here, Lily begins by acknowledging her racial identity and how it allows her to interact with the world differently than her Native student peers.

Amber, another student who identifies as both Native and White also discussed whiteness and how it can potentially harm communities of color when one does not recognize their privilege. She explains,

I know I'm very white passing. I've met so many people who are also in my shoes...very white passing... but they just don't accept it for some reason. And they feel that they have the right to speak on BIPOC issues or whatever. I feel I can speak about it from an Indigenous person's lens, but I can't speak about it as a person of color. And I've seen so many people that just feel it does not apply to them. It's ... you know you're not a person of color. But they really just don't want to accept it. But I'm just saying that in acknowledging my own identity. My ability to speak on certain issues is definitely different from somebody else's

Amber specifically identified the issue of privilege when discussing the NAOP. According to Amber, while she wishes to offer productive discussions on Native issues, she acknowledges the

potential differences in impact of her statements as a Native student who benefits from White privileges.

Lily additionally expands on Amber's reflection by offering insight into how she views her White privilege particularly when discussing the expansion of NAOP requirements.

I never want to represent myself in a way that's not aware of that privilege or take space in the sense that I'm speaking about Native issues in a broad sense, and not from the lens of just my own experience. So that's really important to me, and that's something that I want to convey that the NAOP is benefiting students like me, but it could be reaching more students.

Similar to Amber and other student participants who identified as White and Native, they recognize the importance of recognizing racial privileges when fostering productive spaces of discussion – especially when discussing the NAOP.

Identifying the racial diversity of Native students is critical for understanding how differing racial identities bring forth different life experiences. And, accordingly, how student participants will formulate their beliefs on tuition waiver eligibility requirements and the impact of racial privilege. Each of the students who identify as White and Native pinpointed specific challenges relating to race that arose during personal discussions and reflections of the NAOP. In particular, students such as Lily, felt a great sense of uncomfortability after witnessing her non-white peers who grew up on their tribal homelands not being eligible to receive the NAOP. Thus, it is imperative to recognize and prepare for conversations on how whiteness connects with the implementation of tuition waivers for Native American students.

On Rez Versus Off Rez

An additional aspect of the Native American identity that students mentioned in their interviews were the differences between Native students who grew up on the reservation, versus those who grew up in urban areas outside of reservations. Students often discussed these differences when describing their reactions to either receiving or not receiving the NAOP. Both groups, those who grew up on the reservation and those who did not, identified significant differences which they noted in their responses. Interestingly, the main differences discussed include varying privileges and incompatibilities existing between the two distinguishable student groups. Sage, a graduate student from a reservation on the Great Plains region, specifically discussed how she has noticed differing privileges and understandings between urban Natives and those who grew up on reservations.

After attending two different universities, I recognized a difference in understanding and realizing privileges for those who didn't grow up on the reservation. Being from "the Rez" is really glamorized in a lot of shows and stuff. But when you talk to someone who actually grew up on "the Rez"...yeah we have our culture there, but there's also a lot of trauma and unique experiences tied with growing up on "the Rez."

By identifying how the reservation is glamorized in television or other media, Sage is describing a difference in common discourse between students from the reservation and those from urban settings. In addition to Sage's statement, Hope, who grew up on a reservation in Southern California, describes a similar experience as Sage relating to differences in reservation cultural identities.

Coming to UCLA, you meet an entirely different group of Native people, who are typically urban Natives. My freshman year[...] Actually, I don't think it was until my

sophomore year when I met another Native student who was from “the Rez” as well. So that was really interesting to see the different dynamics between urban Natives and “Rez” Natives. I think that was a pretty big thing for me.

Both Hope and Sage identified distinct differences in privilege, cultural dynamics, and cultural discourse between urban Natives and “Rez” Natives. As Hope pointed out, it was noticeable to her especially because she had not met another student with a similar identity to her own until the second year of her undergraduate career. Importantly, both students did not intend to convey ill feelings toward those who grew up off the reservation. Instead, the students pointed out differences they felt were significant to understanding Native students and the diversity of Native identities within college campuses.

Urban Natives.

Urban Native students also recognized the expressed differences in identity between reservation and non-reservation students. Lily, a graduating student who grew up off the reservation, offered unique insight into her experiences as an urban Native student. In her description, she stated how she grew up around Native people in her household. However, she identified differences in her experience compared to other Native students she met. She states, “I grew up around Natives in my family. But that’s not the same experience as a student that grew up on the reservation or grew up in a different way than I did.” Lily goes on further by identifying the specific privileges she grew up with and how her locale shaped a specific Native identity for her and her family – one that particularly differed from students who grew up on the reservation. Her experience is similar to many off-reservation students. Nevertheless, every urban student experience varies based on certain life experiences such as locale, connection with other urban Native families or communities, or connection to their ancestral lineage.

Honoring both the past, present, and future generations of Native communities

Despite expressed differences in communal connection and privilege, student participants shared a similar ideology of community and ancestral respect across time. Honoring both the past, present, and future generations of Native communities is a form of wisdom upheld by Indigenous communities across the world. For the students, many expressed the opportunity to obtain their degree at UCLA as a way to give back to those who came before them. Finn, throughout his interview, repeatedly emphasized the importance of community and how honoring those who came before him contributes greatly to his commitment to uplift the Native campus community at UCLA. He offers his insight by explaining, “everything that I do, all the way down to what I do in my private time, is always done with a sense of respect and integrity towards those that have come before me.” While honoring one's ancestors, utilizing this mindset simultaneously motivates students to develop resources for all future generations of Native students entering higher education. By advocating for increased resources, such as Native American tuition waivers, students are creating necessary pathways toward higher education for Native people. Who, in the past, were barred from entering such institutions.

Native students make up a diverse array of identities with different experiences, racial backgrounds, and cultural connections. All of which play a significant role in understanding which resources are required to ensure student success at colleges and universities and how their identities relate to tuition waiver eligibility. Recognition of participant's personal identities will remain critical throughout the remainder of this study as students mention aspects of their Native identities when discussing the NAOP and recommendations for the future. Therefore, establishing foundational comprehension of this section will allow for further understanding of student's reactions, and statements about the Native American Opportunity Plan.

The Native American Opportunity Plan

The student participants expressed varying opinions about the establishment of the NAOP. While some felt a sense of relief or excitement when they announced the tuition waiver, many shared how they were disappointed or felt that the eligibility requirements left out a significant portion of Native students. Importantly, all of the student participants, regardless of their eligibility status, expressed some type of criticism of the NAOP which includes a critical overview of the waiver's enrollment criteria, ignored or misunderstood responsibilities toward Native students, and potential resolutions for the future of Native American tuition waivers.

Reactions to the NAOP's Establishment

When the University of California first announced the establishment of the NAOP, the students expressed how they felt shocked and excited for the potential impacts of the new tuition waiver. "It was a lot to take in, because not only did I think about myself, I was like, now my nieces can go to school. Like now I can take back the money that I was saving for them [Laughter]," stated Finn. Hope expressed a sense of shock at the initial announcement.

I thought, 'Finally!' I remember hearing about it and being like, 'damn, that's really cool.' I was lucky enough to have my education paid for through a tribal scholarship, but not everybody is. And I do feel like for a lot of Native students, that's the huge barrier that's stopping them from joining these huge institutions like UCLA. So when I first heard about it, I was really pretty excited about it.

Both Hope and Finn, regardless of whether or not they were receiving the NAOP, pointed out the potential impact of the tuition waiver on future generations of Native students. As Finn said, with the implementation of the tuition waiver, families and students will no longer have to bear the burden of paying tuition at any UC institution. Thus, opening up potential pathways toward

higher education for those who may not have envisioned attending a more prestigious university due to financial constraints.

Lily, who was the sole participant to receive the NAOP, shared how the newly implemented tuition waiver immediately impacted her experience at UCLA. She acknowledges that, “the Native American Opportunity Plan has been a really incredible and transformative thing for me. It has given me freedom that I don't feel like I had before.” With the help of the NAOP, Lily was able to step away from another on-campus opportunity that provided her funding and took up a majority of her schedule throughout the school year. She notes further that by receiving the NAOP, “I've been able to be way more involved with the Native community at UCLA, which is always something that I really wanted.” Lily’s experience is comparable to many Native students who now are receiving the NAOP as one of their primary sources of payment for tuition. Importantly, her statement demonstrates how reduced financial stress with tuition waivers has the potential to positively impact all Native students through newly formed community interactions and participation.

Conflicting Emotions with the NAOP

Despite expressing joy for the NAOP, students’ feelings of excitement were often followed by statements of disapproval. According to all the student participants, the NAOP failed to capture a large portion of the Native community at UCLA. The tuition waiver also sparked conversations about Native identity and tribal enrollment that they felt the university did not fully comprehend when creating the tuition waiver. To put it simply, as explained by Jimmy, while it is “about time” that the University of California established the tuition waiver, Jimmy notes that, “it feels like every time we take a step forward, we take about a dozen steps back.”

According to Joy, when she first heard of the NAOP, she recalled her initial feelings of excitement quickly retreating into feelings of disappointment. “It was the biggest disappointment. I wasn’t surprised, but it was disappointing. Again, I feel like I don’t really get my hopes up about scholarship opportunities.” Joy grew up connected to her tribe and on her reservation. However, her family was disenrolled from their tribe in the early 2000’s so she does not meet the eligibility requirements for the NAOP.

Joy explains further how, beyond receiving financial benefits, the NAOP added to questions surrounding Native identity that both recipients and non-recipients had to confront.

It's also been a source of controversy, and extra labor because of how much extra work it puts on us to have to explain, justify, and tell students that it's okay. Just because you don't receive the NAOP doesn't mean that you're any less native, or you're not deserving of resources and all these things.

Justification of Native identity is a conflict students commonly face when accessing federal or state resources. The non-Native institutions who create such policies requiring proof of tribal enrollment often do not hear the deep, inter-personal conflicts caused to those who do not meet eligibility requirements.

Hope discussed the issue of institutions misunderstanding Native identity as the perfect opportunity for institutions to take action and learn more about Native students. In her explanation, she stated, “I don't think institutions meant this, but they are going to have to answer a lot more questions about Native identity and about different Native issues that we face all the time. And I think that was something that was really exciting.” Uniquely, Hope identifies how the institution's lack of understanding for Native identity when drafting the NAOP inadvertently opens opportunities for learning. The following section will uncover the identity-specific

conflicts related to the NAOP and the personal experiences of student participants who faced such conflicts.

Students Viewing the NAOP as a 'Touchy' Subject

When initially discussing the NAOP with the student participants, interestingly, nearly all student participants began the conversations by pointing out student's hesitancy to discuss the tuition waiver with their peers. According to the students, discussing whether or not a student received or did not receive the NAOP is uncomfortable because, by asking, one is essentially revealing their tribal identity or enrollment status. Lily explains her feelings of hesitancy by stating,

It's not something you necessarily want to talk about because it's kind of asking, "are you federally recognized and enrolled? Are you receiving this benefit?" You know... it's weird. And I have felt in a couple of different situations where I don't know if I want it to come up because, back to that conversation of quantifying it [...] who gets it? And who doesn't have it? And what does that mean about how Native you are?"

As Lily points out, asking whether or not someone qualified for the NAOP can be understood as asking if that person is enrolled in a federally recognized tribe – which is a difficult predicament for those who are unable to meet their tribal blood quantum requirements, those who have been disenrolled, or students who may come from state recognized tribal nations.

Jimmy offers a similar view of the NAOP and its connection with tribal enrollment.

I haven't talked too much about it because I thought it would be a touchy subject.

Because then you would have to talk to students about their enrollment and whether or not they're enrolled. And I just never want to have a conversation talking about that because it's a private matter. And I'm not super uncomfortable talking about my own

status, not being enrolled. But I just never wanted to put that pressure on other people to talk about it. If you want to talk about it, go ahead. But I don't want to pressure people in order to ask them, "Oh, are you getting the plan?"

As Jimmy states, tribal enrollment can be a private matter for students. Especially for those who have a difficult relationship with their enrollment status. Jimmy also explains how this is not a difficult conversation for him to have with others. However, for example, those who may identify as White and Native or those who have been disconnected from their tribal nation may have a more difficult time openly discussing the topic due to possible scrutiny over the validity of their tribal identity.

Beyond inter-personal conflict for those who are not enrolled with their tribal nation, some students who did qualify for the NAOP also expressed feelings of discomfort when discussing the tuition waiver. Lily, who is enrolled in her tribe but grew up in a city many states away from the tribe's reservation, describes how receiving the NAOP caused her to think critically about her eligibility status in relation to those who grew up on the reservation.

I have one specific example of this experience. I have two really great friends and the three of us hang out together. One of them asked me one time, "Do you feel bad?" And I was like, "about what?" And she said, "Do you feel bad or ever feel guilty about having the Opportunity Plan?" Because our other friend is disenrolled. She was like, "we both have it and we weren't raised on our reservations. We're connected and enrolled by lineage." She was like, "Do you ever feel a certain way about that?" And we had this talk. There's nothing at all that makes me more deserving of this incredible financial gift than that friend, not a single thing. But I get [the NAOP], and she doesn't because of this set of

rules and guidelines that somebody who maybe doesn't fully understand what it means to be Native decided on.

As she described, both her and her friend received the NAOP while their friend, who grew up on the reservation, did not. The situation she described is one of many that Native students face who receive tuition waivers like the NAOP. According to the student participants, growing up on the reservation is a common indicator of one's cultural identity, regardless of an individual's lived connection with their cultural practices, traditions, or language. So, essentially, if one grows up on the reservation, it can be assumed that they have some sort of lineage or lived connection with the tribe which Lily, as quoted, felt she did not possess.

The experiences described by Lily and Jimmy help illustrate how the establishment of the NAOP increased feelings of uncomfortability. It is important to note that, while the NAOP increased these feelings, it is not the sole source of uncomfortability. The student participants expressed similar feelings as existing prior to the inclusion of the Native tuition waiver. Therefore, students previously were “hush hush” or evaded questions about tribal enrollment or tribal connection – especially if the student was not enrolled in their tribal nation. Despite not being the original source of uncomfortability, it can be argued that the NAOP inflated these feelings because of the tie between reduced or free tuition costs and the tribal identity of individual students.

Tribal Enrollment and its Connection to the NAOP

The criteria of the NAOP requires proof of tribal enrollment which, in itself, has a conflicting history and varies amongst all tribal nations. All tribes are sovereign nations which have the ability to create their own enrollment requirements for their members (Native American Tribal Enrollment, n.d.). Enrollment requirements often resort to requiring a certain blood

quantum percentage or proof of lineage to an individual on the tribe's descendancy role to be eligible for enrollment. As a result of tribe's differing enrollment criteria, Native students' pathways within higher education can be greatly affected due to some resources, such as the NAOP, requiring proof of enrollment. The following sub-section includes Native student reactions to tribal enrollment and its connection with the NAOP.

Students often face the consequences of strict enrollment criteria, which may exclude them for failing to meet tribal enrollment requirements. Jimmy, who grew up on his reservation but is not enrolled, describes his feelings of not being enrolled which prevents him from accessing the NAOP. He stated, "I feel it puts us at a disadvantage that we don't have any control over, which is the enrollment criteria for our tribe. And so if that's the criteria for the [NAOP], a lot of people I know in 'SoCal' wouldn't be able to qualify for it." Despite having a connection to his tribe and tribal homelands, Jimmy is unable to access the NAOP because he does not meet his tribe's minimum blood quantum requirement. So regardless of familial connection to the tribe, he would never be able to access such resources that require proof of enrollment.

Tribes did not always require proof of enrollment as the primary indicator of defining if one is a member of a tribal nation. The practice of enrollment was established as tribes became affiliated with the US government. Prior to federal recognition, tribes recognized varying forms of lineal descent and communal relations to determine – what is now defined as – tribal membership (Native Governance Center, n.d.). Jimmy discusses this history further by explaining how current enrollment practices do not reflect the traditional practices tribes used to claim their relations.

We never traditionally have had any way of defining who is Native American. You never had to prove it. You just were. People know your family. People know that you're part of

the community. As long as you work with the community and support others in the community, you just have that identity. You are a Native American. I feel for the greater Native American community overall, contemporary enrollment practices can cause a lot of conflict, or confusion with how we see ourselves. I mean, the only reason why we do this is because the colonizers said you need blood quantum to prove who is in your community or not.

As explained by Jimmy, current enrollment practices do not allow for all tribal descendants to be enrolled in federally recognized tribes. Thus, as time goes on, creating new generations of Native students who will not be able to access resources with enrollment requirements.

Many of the student participants, enrolled or not, expressed similar sentiment advocating those not enrolled who were Native through familial descent or communal connections. Finn, a federally enrolled tribal member who grew up outside of his reservation, was one of the students who spoke in support of Native students who weren't enrolled. Growing up, according to Finn, he believed "every Native person had [an enrollment card]. Then later on as I went to college I realized that not a lot of Native people have these cards." It was then when he learned more about those who are not enrolled and the challenges they face, particularly when it comes to accessing certain resources such as the NAOP. Hope and Sage expressed similar experiences as Finn by discussing how they had not met many Native students who were not enrolled before attending college.

Jimmy and Amber, two of the student participants who are not enrolled, discussed the challenges specifically about how it feels to not be enrolled and how it affects them personally. Beginning with Jimmy, he asserts how it is simply not fair for him to not receive the NAOP despite growing up connected to his tribe with proof of descendency. He says, "it could

definitely feel unfair in that way, that you could feel just as Native as a person who's enrolled, but you yourself, not be enrolled... and therefore they are getting the [NAOP] and you're not.” Amber continues similarly by discussing how her enrollment status has caused her to feel embarrassed and is a setback for her.

I didn't want to talk about it at first. And I think it's just because I was embarrassed at my own enrollment status. So my tribe specifically follows blood quantum criteria for enrollment. I do in fact meet the requirements, but my parents never enrolled me when I was younger. It really upsets me because I couldn't apply for any scholarships. It was a setback because everything felt like a slap in the face. I wasn't able to get literally anything. I could show them my proof of blood. I could show them my descendancy roles and everything. But they don't take descendants. They take members.

Both Amber and Jimmy's statements reflect the experiences of many Native students who are not enrolled with their tribes. Despite being able to prove they have a connection or a blood link to an enrolled tribal member, the University of California has yet to establish avenues for students with descendancy to become eligible for the NAOP.

One of the most significant challenges identified by participants relating to enrollment is the existence of varying enrollment criteria amongst federally recognized tribes. As stated previously, tribal nations have the ability to enforce their own requirements for members to become enrolled. For example, tribes who enforce blood quantum commonly require members to meet at least $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{8}$ Indian blood from the respective tribe. For tribes who do not use blood quantum, those seeking tribal enrollment may have to prove their lineal descendant to a family member on a base role. Therefore meaning that family member must have been identified as

having a blood link to the tribe, or the family member was placed on a base membership role at some point throughout the tribe's history.

Amber acknowledged how not being enrolled hurt her personally even more because she knew if her tribe had the enrollment criteria of other larger tribes, she could benefit from the NAOP. She explained this feeling by stating, “It just sucks because, for example, you can be from a tribe in southern California and not meet enrollment criteria. But then you go to the Cherokee Nation where you can be 1/1000 and still get any opportunity that you want.” What Amber is referring to is how tribes, such as the Cherokee Nation who determine their members based on the Dawes Rolls, do not have minimum blood quantum requirements. Therefore, even if a tribal member’s blood quantum is “1/1000” or higher, they can still qualify for enrollment as long as they can prove lineal descent to family members on the Dawes Roll (Cherokee Nation, 2026: National Archives, 2026). Amber, aware of the Cherokee Nation’s enrollment criteria, expressed a great deal of disappointment toward the NAOP eligibility requirements because of the tuition waiver’s lack of acknowledgement for those who can prove their connection to a lineal ancestor.

Lily similarly spoke about varying enrollment requirements among tribes. However, since she is enrolled in a tribal nation that recognizes lineal descent, she discussed a critical perspective of her identity as someone who benefits from being enrolled.

It's such a difficult thing because, take me for example... I'm enrolled in my tribe, and I'm connected to my tribe through lineage. There's a lot of students at UCLA who are disenrolled or not enrolled. And I think that the Native American Opportunity Plan... It does a great thing, but the federally recognized and enrolled aspect of it [...] I understand why it's there in order to keep box checkers out and to make sure that it's getting to

students who need it. But I also think I've been surprised and disappointed at UCLA to see how many of my friends don't receive the Native American Opportunity Plan who are students that really deserve to receive it. But they don't get it because either their tribe isn't federally recognized, or because somewhere in their lineage there was disenrolled. Lily continues further by acknowledging how much more challenging it is for her to comprehend her positionality. Especially knowing how, regardless of one's connection to a tribe, virtually anybody can be enrolled in her tribe as long as they can prove their descent to a lineal ancestor.

Some people go way back. It can be someone that didn't even know they were Native and then found out through this long line of lineage. But the NAOP would support that student, but it wouldn't support a student who has grown up on the reservation, whose parents grew up on the reservation, who have lived in these communities their entire lives... but aren't enrolled members.

Importantly, Lily touches on a challenging issue amongst the Native community which is the idea of people becoming Native. This idea refers to individuals who choose to transform their identities from non-Native to Native immediately after discovering a Native ancestor somewhere in their lineage. In turn, these individuals can now benefit from any resources dedicated to Native students who are enrolled in federally recognized tribes. It is critical to note that Native people do exist who have lived their lives without knowing they are Native. For example, it is common for Native people who were adopted, removed from their families, or relocated outside of reservation to lose all connection with their tribal nation. For Lily, it is not those students she is referring to in her statement. Instead, she intends to refer to individuals who only choose to acknowledge their Native heritage when it benefits them monetarily or racially.

Disenrollment and the Experience of being Removed from Tribal Enrollment

Another aspect of enrollment that adds additional challenges for students is a tribe's capability to disenroll its members. As demonstrated in previous student statements, awareness of disenrollment is common especially for Native people living in Southern California. One student who participated in this study had direct experience with her family being disenrolled. Joy, whose tribal nation resides in Southern California, provided a descriptive narrative of her experience being disenrolled and how it affected her experience as a student.

Joy begins by specifying how the opening of her tribe's casino ignited early issues with enrollment for her tribe. She explains how, "once the casino opened, there was a huge rush to go and get enrolled. My family was already enrolled by that time." Joy identifies how this rush to be enrolled resulted from families pursuing the possibility of getting per capita payments from increased revenue with the new casino. Depending on the tribe, per capita payments can range from a few hundred dollars or less per year to thousands of dollars per month. So, with her tribe opening enrollment during the creation of the casino, families with lineage took advantage of the opportunity for compensation while available to them.

Joy continues by explaining the requirements for enrollment in her tribe and how the process of disenrolling her family began.

When our tribal Constitution was published, they also published an enrollment book that laid out all the families who were enrolled at that time. And all you have to do to be enrolled in my tribe is to prove your lineage to one of the original people living within our village. So anyways, we can trace our ancestry back to one of the original people... no problem at all. My tribe even hired an anthropologist to trace our ancestry and the anthropologist was like, "I'm 100% sure these people are from here." And after that, the

Tribal Chairman said, “Well, it's up to the tribe to uphold our sovereign right to make the final decision” kind of thing. And “nobody else can tell us what to do.”

It's so messy because one of my family members had been elected to the tribal enrollment committee and they found out about some pretty scandalous stuff that was being done on the committee. And the [culprits] were just, unfortunately, in positions of power. When one of my family members realized all the internal corruption that was going on, my family got a letter shortly after saying that we were going to be disenrolled.

They traced it back to an ancestor, way far back and basically said, “this person abandoned her tribe.” But we discovered she was sold off to a Spanish settler. They pointed their finger at that ancestor. And basically, anybody who was a descendant of this person was disenrolled. Which ended up being about 10% of our tribe who was disenrolled. Then shortly after they disenrolled another entire lineage.

Joy's recount provides necessary knowledge needed to understand the process of disenrollment, how it starts, and how it is implemented. For Joy, the tribe discovered a single ancestor many generations back and removed that one ancestor from their tribe's lineage. Thus triggering a frenzy of disenrollment for any family members who could trace their lineage back to that one ancestor.

According to Joy and the other student participants from Southern California, disenrollment has a strong connection with modern day per capita payments. Per capita payments are divided amongst all tribal members which means, the more members, the lower total of payment. With less tribal members, per capita payments will be higher. Joy breaks down the issue by stating how the decision to disenroll her family and others as, “definitely tied to money.” Joy's family made up ten percent of the tribal members before being disenrolled.

Therefore, current tribal members now receive the payments which once were intended to go to her and her family.

For some disenrolled or non-enrolled tribal community members, there is an option for them to be re/enrolled in the tribe. Joy expressed however that with her tribe, the feat being re-enrolled would be a lot harder. According to Joy, “there was a moratorium put into place at my tribe where if you weren't enrolled by the year my family was disenrolled, basically, you couldn't get enrolled any longer. And the moratorium is still in place. So if you were disenrolled, you're kind of just out of luck.” Other students said disenrolled members of their tribes are put in similar situations as Joy's family. Essentially, this could mean that students who have been disenrolled are not likely to be re-enrolled in the near future.

Joy concluded her conversation on disenrollment by touching on how unique her positionality is as a disenrolled student.

The California native experience is so unique and my experience being disenrolled was so unique too. So, coming into UCLA, when I tell people I'm disenrolled, I had no idea how people were going to react. I had a whole identity crisis getting here. I never had to introduce myself growing up, everybody always just knew who, me and my family were. And so coming here, I was like, dang, do I say I'm disenrolled every time I introduce myself? Is that something I have to announce? So that's something that I really struggled with. And I think that's also why I had a hard time connecting, because I didn't want people to think I'm some pretendian over here. I feel like there's so much shame within our community too of pretending to be something that you're not, not being connected enough, or not being native enough. And being half white, I just had so many things that I was juggling and contemplating in my head.

The identity crisis Joy explained is one that can be shared amongst all disenrolled students in higher education. In an environment where identity plays an important role in communal connections, not having a solidified connection to a tribe – which enrollment can serve as – may cause students to question their sense of identity and belonging. So with the introduction of the NAOP, disenrolled students are forced, once again, to face the pain of their tribe and, now, the university telling them they do not belong.

State Recognized & Non-Federally Recognized Tribal Nations

Another group of students who are affected by the current eligibility requirements of the NAOP are those who come from State Recognized tribes and tribes that are not federally recognized by the US government. State recognized tribes are those which have been recognized through state legislatures (Salazar, 2016). The importance of state recognition is that it acknowledges the historical and cultural contributions of tribes that are not federally recognized. Unfortunately, the recognition status of these tribes does not guarantee them any resources or funding from the state or federal government. Which, in turn, means that their tribal members are unable to receive the benefits of being federally enrolled tribal members. Non-federally recognized tribes who, in addition, have not been recognized by the state face similar challenges as state-recognized tribes.

Tribal members of both state recognized, and non-federally recognized tribes face unique challenges within higher education, especially when it comes to tuition waivers. Foremost, it is not common for tuition waivers to include non-federally recognized tribal members in tuition waiver eligibility requirements. With 62 non-federally recognized Native tribes existing in the state of California, students from these tribes are left out of resources the university provides (Judicial Branch of California, n.d.; Office of the Tribal Advisor, 2022). Amber discusses this

issue by talking about the Gabrielino-Tongva, whose tribal lands encompass the greater Los Angeles region and the land which UCLA was erected on. She stated, “I just thought it was really stupid when I first heard of [the NAOP eligibility requirements]. I have a friend whose tribal lands are here. I texted her right away and said to her, ‘You're studying on your own tribal territory, and they won't even offer this to you?’” Amber recognizes a drastic flaw in the eligibility requirements, which is the ineligibility of Native students who come from non-federally recognized tribes who are attending school on their tribal homelands.

Despite UCLA officially acknowledging the Gabrielino-Tongva people, descendants from the tribe cannot benefit from any Native tuition waivers dedicated to assisting federally recognized Native students. This unfortunate flaw directly ties into the cultural identity crisis that non-federally recognized Natives students face. For instance, state-recognized or non-federally recognized students express how such policies make them feel unsupported by their institutions which, as a result, could affect their overall academic performance. Later in this study, I will review a potential solution to this issue which could potentially help alleviate the number of non-federally recognized students forgotten by tuition waiver eligibility requirements.

Enrollment as a Form of Protection

Nearly all student participants discussed the challenge of how to comprehend enrollment requirements while concurrently keeping out “box checkers” or individuals who exploit Native identities. While many support the idea of expanding eligibility requirements, all of the student participants pinpointed how pretendianism must be considered when drafting tuition waiver eligibility requirements not based on federal enrollment. Dakota, a Native student whose tribe resides outside of the US, specifically recognized this phenomenon when discussing his status as a non-federally recognized Native student.

It would be nice to see more scholarships to provide access to students who are Native but aren't necessarily federally recognized. But I also recognize some of the difficulty with that, because there are a lot of people that like, you know... we consider pretendians. Elizabeth Warren's a good example of someone that just wanted to take advantage of this idea that they might be Native. And also not do anything for the community.

The incident Dakota refers to with Elizabeth Warren took place in 2018 when she famously released her DNA results on video after receiving backlash for claiming Cherokee ancestry (Associated Press, 2018). Warren essentially sought to validate her claims of being Native American by taking a DNA test which cannot specify one's connection to a tribal nation or community unless taken to see if someone is biologically related to a tribal member (Office of Indian Services, n.d.).

It is a common occurrence for Native students to encounter individuals who, like Elizabeth Warren, claim Native ancestry with the belief they can acquire more resources for doing so. When talking with Hope, she described multiple instances where she met students who listed themselves as American Indian / Alaskan Native after enrolling at UCLA. Hope passionately stated, "Oh my gosh! I met, so-called, Native students who told me that when they were seniors in high school, their parents told them they were Cherokee so they would put that on their application. And then they would go on explaining how they believe it helped them get in despite claiming no connection to their tribe. I heard a lot of that." Hope's experience with non-Native people claiming Native ancestry is one that is a common experience for students within higher education (Sturm, 2011). Accordingly, Hope expressed that the establishment of the NAOP made her feel, as she describes, "a bit nervous because I did feel like [the NAOP] was

incentivizing Native identity.” After encountering individuals who informed her they were claiming a Native identity with the intention of possibly acquiring additional resources, it makes sense why she would feel a sense of unease with the establishment of the NAOP.

Other student participants similarly expressed feelings of carefulness when discussing enrollment as it relates to the NAOP. Sage, one of the four enrolled student participants, spent a great deal of time discussing enrollment and her experience with others falsely claiming Native identities. According to Sage, despite previous students expressing a critical view of the enrollment requirement, she views enrollment as significant to the protection of Native students at UCLA. She states,

I like the idea of the federally recognized component because in this coming of age, you have a lot of people who are just claiming Native identity just to claim it for tuition purposes. And we have a lot of students who are not really connected or they're just saying that they're Native without really knowing their ancestral lineage or their family history. So I think it makes sense to keep a federally recognized requirement.

Sage’s critical lens of the enrollment requirement aligns with Hope and others who view enrollment as a form of protection against those taking advantage of Native American resources. Importantly, with Sage and Hope expressing support for the enrollment requirement, more clarity is provided into the challenges surrounding tribal enrollment when establishing Native American tuition waivers. In the implications and recommendations section, I will offer potential solutions to this issue while concurrently considering both those in favor current requirements and those wishing to change the eligibility requirements for Native American tuition waivers.

Students Feeling Commodified

Another shared experience amongst student participants was the feeling of being commodified by UCLA. Seven out of eight student participants in some way explained how, because of the University of California's reservations with the NAOP's eligibility requirements, they felt commodified or as if they were a pawn within UCLA's business structure. Despite the University of California creating the NAOP with the intention of giving back to Native communities within the institution, students stated how these restrictions or eligibility criteria directly correlated with these feelings.

Though nearly all students offered short statements on how they felt a part of a "business" as Native students at UCLA, Dakota offered communal insight into these feelings and how Native community values conflict with those of the University. Here, Dakota begins by acknowledging the business aspects of UCLA and ends with his explanation of how this can affect Native students.

[UCLA] is being operated like a business, to a large degree. And it's evident in the amount of money they try to extract from you. But you're always socialized, especially in early education, that if you're going to university, then you're doing it to benefit yourself. You're trying to get smarter, you're trying to learn... that's the goal of being at these institutions. And then you come here and you realize, oh, well, maybe that's not really the case. Because you have a lot of bureaucratic loopholes you have to jump through. And at the same time, it feels like they don't really care about or value your own personal health and how you're doing outside of it. As students, we're always in a rush to go from one place to the next and focused on the next thing we have to do to get our degree. As opposed to taking the time to engage with the people and the things around us. That, to

me, is making [Native students] feel separated from everything around them. It's isolating. Whereas, in Native way of doing things, everything's connected, at least in some way. It's very different.

As explained by Dakota, he feels there is a separation in values between the institution and Native students that is creating feelings of isolation, a lack of connection, and, specifically, feelings that UCLA is operating as a business. Furthermore, Dakota acknowledges how, in Native ways of learning, there is awareness of connections that exist between all that is living and non-living. It appears that the conflicting values between Native students' understandings of connection and belonging, thus, create feelings of distrust for Native students with the institution.

Native students' feelings of UCLA operating as a business can be especially heightened with the existence of eligibility criteria that, participants feel, is taking advantage of the possibility that not all Native students will benefit from the NAOP. As seen in Table 1, nearly all students interviewed, except one, did not receive the NAOP. Finn, who is one of the four enrolled students who did not receive the NAOP, touched on his experience not receiving the tuition waiver despite meeting all the eligibility requirements. According to Finn, because of scholarships offered to him through UCLA and other outside sources, accepting the NAOP on top of his scholarships would have provided him no benefit. In fact, he stated that he would end up losing essential income from refund disbursements that are normally in excess after his tuition is paid in full. Hope and many other Native students also experienced a similar situation to Finn and, therefore, did not receive the NAOP despite being eligible because of outside funding sources that were prioritized to pay for their tuition in full before the NAOP could provide any benefit.

The dispersal process for the NAOP caused confusion for Native students because, normally, all scholarships or funding opportunities they applied for would be used until tuition and fees were fully paid and any leftover funds would be returned back to them to use for personal expenses. For the NAOP however, the same funding dispersal process was not being used. Instead, if a student qualified for the NAOP but the student had other scholarship or funding sources awarded to them, all non-NAOP funds would be dispersed first and any leftover fees required to be paid would be covered by the NAOP. Conversely, if a student had excess funds from their non-NAOP scholarships or funding sources, the NAOP would not be considered for use. When asked how he felt about the situation, Finn described that, “you can tell they're trying to cut corners. They're trying to spend as little money on us as possible. UCLA is a public institution. However, for [Native students], it still feels very much like a for-profit institution.” With the scholarship dispersal process being unique for the NAOP, Finn and Hope felt as if their culture and identity played a role in the university’s decision to not allow students to obtain additional sources of income simultaneously with the NAOP. Thus, contributing further to sentiment that UCLA chose business values over the needs of Native American students.

UCLA as a Land Grant Institution on Native Land

A final topic students mentioned in response to the NAOP was the importance of recognizing the dispossession of Native people from their tribal homelands by institutions, like UCLA, which resides on Tongva homelands. Despite not being directly asked about land grant institutions, each of the student participants acknowledged that they did not feel UCLA was properly giving back to Native people or recognizing their role in Native dispossession and colonization. Jimmy expands on this subject by stating,

UCLA is only here because colonizers took land and disenfranchised Native American communities. The university says that they can just do whatever they want with the land that wasn't necessarily theirs. So I feel it's especially important for educational institutions to really hold themselves accountable to the histories of not just when they first started as a university, but the hundreds and 1000s of years before then.

Importantly, Jimmy acknowledges the history of Native people and how long they served as original stewards of the land prior to the establishment of UCLA. He additionally recognizes the importance of accountability within the institution, especially when it comes to giving back to Native communities and Native students.

Similar to Jimmy, all of the student participants described university accountability as providing all the essential resources needed to accommodate Native students' needs. Finn, in particular, offers a strong recommendation for higher education institutions by describing accountability as the need for Native student resources as a duty, rather than a voluntary option for universities. He argues, "how I see it right now is that the universities that occupy Indigenous land, which are all of them, have a duty to ensure that the Native students that do attend their campus... have the resources and adequate tools at their disposal to ensure that they make it through that university." By viewing Native student needs as a fixed necessity rather than an administrative possibility, Finn hopes that UCLA and other institutions of higher education take the initiative to create effective resources that contribute to Native success.

As an institution on Native land who has expressed support for the Native community, a critical form of acknowledgement – that goes beyond traditional land acknowledgements – begins with listening to and learning from Native students (Office of the Chancellor, 2023). Each of the student participants offered many practical solutions for the NAOP and discussed

additional needs to help support Native students. In the final section of this paper, I dissect the potential solutions and implications offered by students, combined with my personal recommendations for universities. By learning from the student experiences and their knowledge shared throughout this section, it is my hope that colleges and universities have a far greater understanding of the Native student community and the challenges needed to be taken into consideration when implementing Native American tuition waivers.

Recommendations & Implications

When the University of California first implemented the NAOP in 2022, President Michael V. Drake described the university's efforts as a way to better support the Native community to further advance inclusive excellence within the UCs (UC Newsroom, 2022). In total, it is estimated that 211 undergraduate and graduate students received the NAOP during the inaugural year of the tuition waiver, and, at UCLA, 33 undergraduate students received the NAOP with about 7 more graduate students receiving tuition coverage from the Plan. Overall, the establishment of the NAOP was monumental for the UC system. However, according to Native student participants, who both did and did not receive the NAOP, they do not feel as if the UC established the tuition waiver with full consideration of tribal identities and critical understandings of the challenges Native students face on college campuses.

Arguably, it could take a lifetime to fully understand the experiences of Native students. As explored in previous sections, Native students encompass a multitude of cultural characteristics and identities. Some examples shared within this study include the presence of students from various Indigenous nations from across the world, those possessing varying connections to their tribe and the tribal homelands, and the diversity of racial identities existing

within Native communities. Each of these characteristics, and more, play a significant role in one's understanding of Native students' needs within higher education. Thankfully, the student participants in this study offer critical insight for both Native and non-Native readers seeking to learn more about how to better support Native student populations. With this insight, it is my hope that all campuses seeking to improve support for Native American students have a baseline understanding of Native student communities and the resources needed to ensure a far more effective pathway toward graduation.

In this section, I will discuss recommendations provided by students along with short discussions of such recommendations from a critical lens. The recommendations provided include both suggestions for improving the NAOP and all Native American tuition waivers alike, along with concurrent improvements required alongside tuition waivers for campuses to better support the Native community. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of the potential impacts for both campuses and the Native community in the instance that recommendations are implemented.

Native American Tuition Waiver Recommendations

The NAOP currently supports Native American students who are enrolled in one of the 575 tribes and villages located across the United States, and the students must be California residents (Indian Affairs, n.d.). With these restrictions, Native students who do not meet the criteria have been unable to access the NAOP and, often, other funding opportunities specified for federally enrolled students. Student participants additionally expressed challenges with their financial aid disbursement which prevented them from benefiting from the NAOP. Despite the NAOP requirements often being a baseline for Native American funding opportunities, other avenues for support exist that could potentially benefit those who did not qualify for the NAOP,

and those who chose not to claim the NAOP due to their expressed loss of outside funding opportunities.

Together, I offer five potential eligibility and funding access improvements for Native American tuition waivers. Each improvement suggestion aims to increase access to those who do not currently benefit from the NAOP and offer alternative avenues for reduced tuition costs for Native students. Improved adjustments for the Native American tuition waiver eligibility include: eligibility for Native American students who can show proof of a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB), direct descendancy to an enrolled parent or grandparent, proof of descendancy on California Indian census rolls, and the inclusion of a formal interview process for disenrolled students. An additional stipulation I recommend including within tuition waiver guidelines are providing in-state tuition costs for enrolled Native American students who are not state residents. Together, each of these suggestions, whether implemented singularly or simultaneously, can significantly benefit Native students not supported through the current eligibility requirements.

Support for Non-federally enrolled and Disenrolled students

It is not an unattainable feat to financially support Native students who are not enrolled in a federally recognized tribal nation. The existence of such support is shown within prominent Native education organizations, such as the American Indian College fund (n.d.), and other universities, such as Fort Lewis College (n.d.), who have had long standing relationships with the Native community. Each of these entities provides tuition assistance to non-federally enrolled Native students through multiple avenues of tracing one's ancestry. Importantly, the ability of universities to provide tuition assistance to non-enrolled members demonstrates that it is possible for the University of California to include the same assistance for their non-enrolled students.

Multiple avenues exist for tracing Native ancestry that go beyond surface level enrollment requirements. The first option for universities to expand their tuition waiver eligibility is to allow Native students to demonstrate proof of descendancy to an enrolled member. Utilizing descendancy is an increasingly popular tool for recognizing Native people because it demonstrates a direct link to a tribal nation regardless of one's enrollment status or current blood quantum percentage. In order for a student to utilize this option, students will need to provide a copy of either their parent's, or a grandparent's tribal enrollment identification card along with a copy of their birth certificate to demonstrate their relationship to the enrolled member. These are similar requirements tribal nations will use when enrolling new members based on descendancy.

The second recommendation for universities is to consider students' CDIB as a valid eligibility document. As an enrolled tribal member, I had not heard of CDIB's until I attended UCLA where I met a larger number of non-federally enrolled Native students who discussed their CDIBs. In summary, a CDIB certifies an individual's degree of Indian blood for federal purposes – such as establishing eligibility for services dedicated to Native Americans in the United States (Gover, 2008). A CDIB is issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) who determines whether an individual is or is not eligible to receive a CDIB. Similar to the proof of descent process, an individual must provide the birth certificate to demonstrate a direct relationship with a parent enrolled in a federally recognized tribe. If the parent is not enrolled in a federally recognized tribe, the parent is required to provide a birth certificate or death certificate to demonstrate the parent's relationship to a member of a federally recognized tribe. Furthermore, if the grandparents are not enrolled, the birth certificate or death certificate is required to demonstrate they were a child of a federally enrolled tribal member (Indian Affairs,

n.d.). The process of obtaining a CDIB certainly is not simple. Nevertheless, CDIBs offer a viable path for universities to offer resources to non-federally enrolled Native students.

Understanding the CDIB's eligibility process additionally provides a glimpse into the challenges faced by Native students who are forced to navigate federal obstacles in order to prove their identity to universities.

While the option of recognizing descendency benefits those relating to an enrolled ancestor, the eligibility process can be much more challenging for students who are disenrolled. Disenrollment is the act of being formally stripped of tribal citizenship and terminated from a tribal roll (Gilio-Whitaker, 2025). Oftentimes when a tribal member is disenrolled, not only are they disenrolled, but their entire lineage leading up to a single late ancestor is removed from tribal rolls. Thus, eliminating any histories, connections, and federal protections for all those affected. In the case of disenrolled Native students, the process of obtaining financial assistance for programs dedicated to tribal members or descendants of tribal members becomes increasingly complex. Especially with any proof of relation to an enrolled member of the past, now, being non-existent according to tribal records.

Despite the challenges of recognizing disenrolled students, one California tribe, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria (FIGR), launched a scholarship in 2022 which covers tuition and fees for non-federally enrolled and disenrolled UC students with a California tribal affiliation. The tribe launched the scholarship virtually simultaneously with the launch of the NAOP to help assist students, and particularly those disenrolled, who could not meet the NAOP's eligibility requirements. According to the FIGR scholarship webpage, in order qualify for the scholarship, one must meet the following criteria: not be a member of a federally recognized tribe; either have a CDIB showing a California tribal affiliation or descend from a

person with a CDIB showing a California tribal affiliation, on the California census rolls of 1928 or 1933, or on the California Judgment Fund Rolls of 1955 or 1972; be a current or newly admitted UC undergraduate, graduate, or professional school student; enrolled in a qualifying UC degree program; and completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, 2026) A specific difference between the FIGR's scholarship and others is the inclusion of both the census and judgment rolls of California Indians. By including these roles in their requirements, the FIGR is attempting to capture the highest number of UC Native students as possible and, particularly, those who have been disenrolled from their tribes.

Joy, whose entire family was disenrolled from her tribe at an early age, expressed immense gratitude for the implementation of the FIGR scholarship. According to Joy, she described the scholarship as “a saving grace” for not only her, but her entire family, relatives, and community members who were not eligible to receive the NAOP due to being disenrolled. Joy specifically praised the FIGR scholarship further by comparing its eligibility requirements to the requirements of the NAOP.

When you compare that to a resource provided by a native community, like the Graton Rancheria scholarship, it's crazy to see the difference between what's inclusive and what's accessible to Native students. This comparison is clear especially when you see something that is provided by a tribal community versus something, like the NAOP, that is provided by the UC system and the university.

Joy recognizes a substantial challenge for Native students in higher education which is an expressed disconnect between the knowledge of Native communities and college institutions. FIGR, having prior knowledge of the disenrollment controversies across the state of California, made sure to include criteria which supports and, at the minimum, acknowledges the existence of

disenrolled Native students within the state. The NAOP, however, failed to acknowledge those affected by disenrollment, further contributing to a lifetime of mental challenges and feelings of erasure that coincide with being disenrolled.

To capture disenrolled students within tuition waiver eligibility criteria, specifically in California, I suggest following the model set in place by the FIGR scholarship. At this moment, the FIGR scholarship is the sole funding opportunity I discovered which is designed to help support disenrolled Native students. Thus, it is imperative that California institutions consider the eligibility criteria included in the FIGR scholarship to expand opportunities for current and future generations of Native students.

One foreseeable challenge pertaining to FIGR's requirements, however, is with the current status of one's family member's, or their own, CDIB. As mentioned previously, when tribes disenroll tribal members, it could create challenges obtaining a CDIB. In the instance of a student not being able to provide a CDIB, they would not be able to qualify under the current FIGR scholarship requirements. These situations will require critical conversations with tribal communities and Native scholars to determine equitable routes for providing resources to disenrolled students. One potential route to include those disenrolled who may not have a CDIB is to conduct a formal interview process. It is imperative that, if proposed, the interviews are conducted by individuals who are trained to work with disenrolled students. These students often carry with them the pain and challenges associated with being disenrolled which must be treated with respect and trauma informed care during a scholarship eligibility process. Ultimately, the complexity that surrounds students needing formal interviews and providing documentation to prove one's identity provides a glimpse into the lives of Native students and especially those affected by disenrollment. As Donald L. Fixico (2025) describes, "[Natives] have been reduced

to carrying a card to prove that we are Indians.” It is therefore critical that institutions adopt new avenues for acknowledging disenrolled Native students who may not be able to prove their identity through traditional tribal document methods.

Alternative Recommendations for Non-State Residents

A common challenge expressed by the Native student participants was the inability to qualify for the NAOP due to not being state residents. In my previous professional role working with Native students, I encountered multiple students who lived on campus at UCLA for two to four years who were ineligible for the NAOP because of their residency status. According to the UC system, it is “extremely difficult” for undergraduate students, and particularly those who are financially dependent, to obtain California residency (University of California, n.d.). The current UC residence guidelines include three elements students must meet prior to applying for residency status. In order to consider qualifying, students must: be present in California for more than one year, demonstrate intent to remain in California, and be citizens or legal residents of the United States (University of California, n.d.). The main obstacles preventing students from obtaining residency is the inability to be financially independent and, generally, students cannot claim on-campus housing as a permanent address. With these guidelines, Native students who are enrolled as non-residents would not be able to qualify for the NAOP.

Across the US, other universities have implemented policies aimed at supporting Native students classified as out-of-state or non-residents. The two most common options listed for out-of-state Native students are providing in-state tuition for all federally recognized tribal members or allowing residency status for out-of-state tribal members whose tribe historically lived within the boundaries of the state. For example, Colorado State University (CSU) offers the Native American Legacy Award (NALA) which covers a broad range of Native students and even offers

support for those who are not enrolled. According to CSU's admissions webpage, the criteria for NALA is as follows: a student must be "an enrolled citizen of a state or federally recognized tribe or provide proof that a biological parent is an enrolled member of a state or federally recognized tribe" (Native American Legacy Award, n.d.). In addition, if a student or biological parent is not an enrolled member of a tribal nation, they may qualify if they can prove they have at least one-half of singular or combined Native ancestry from a federally recognized tribe. NALA is currently one of the most inclusive funding opportunities for out-of-state Native students due to its acceptance of all state and federally recognized tribes, along with the opportunity to qualify through proof of combined blood quantum. For institutions seeking to expand coverage for non-residents, I recommend looking to NALA as a baseline for supporting the non-resident Native students who cannot qualify for tuition waivers under current residency guidelines.

Alternatively, institutions can also provide tuition reductions to enrolled Native students whose tribes historically reside within the state's boundaries, or if the tribe's traditional homelands crossed over into what are now a state's boundaries. An example of a student who would qualify under this scenario would be a Native student enrolled in a California tribe who is currently a resident of Nevada. Another example could be a student whose reservation is located in Oregon, but their tribe's traditional homelands cross over current Northern California borders. Institutions may choose to not offer the full benefits of a tuition waiver to out-of-state Native students. However, at a minimum, providing resident tuition to members of federally recognized tribal nations within an institution's state is an absolute necessity. At the University of California (UC) specifically, the expropriation of Native lands to the UC is intrinsically tied to the genocide and dispossession of California Natives (Joseph A. Myers Center for Research on Native

American Issues & Native American Student Development [Joseph A. Myers CRNAINASD], 2021). In total, it is estimated that more than 148,000 acres of seized Native land across the state was used to fund the establishment of the UC and all its current campus sites (Lee et al., 2020). In return, Native people have not received a single cent for any of their land seized by the University of California (Joseph A. Myers CRNAINASD, 2021). With the UC continuing to bolster its wealth, including a reported endowment standing at \$29.5 billion, California Native students rightfully deserve to be considered as residents if their tribal homelands reside within the state's boundaries (UC Office of the President, 2024).

The genocide and continued displacement of Native people around the US is not unbeknownst. Thus, the awarding residency to a state's tribal members applies to every institution seeking to increase support for Native students and their respective communities. If a tuition waiver is unable to be implemented, a steppingstone for providing support begins with offering in-state tuition to tribal members. Accordingly, it is necessary for future tuition waivers and current waivers with residency requirements to include eligibility guidelines for non-resident tribal members to receive resident tuition. With such low populations across higher education institutions, yet a high demand for the presence of Native students, the move to improve pathways toward higher education for non-resident Native students will ultimately benefit universities and help mend relationships with Native communities.

Remaining Cautious of Pretendianism

Throughout all the student interviews, pretendianism, which is the act of someone – deliberately or unintentionally – falsely claiming Native ancestry, came up in every conversation when discussing guidelines for tuition waivers. Arguably, it is because of the existence of pretendians that universities developed tribal verification policies that require documentation to

prove that one is affiliated with a tribal nation (Kolopenuk, 2023). For decades Native scholars have sought to find explanations to why individuals are so intrigued to claim they are Native American (Deloria, 1988; Sturm, 2011). Dina Gillio-Whitaker (2025) accurately depicts this phenomenon by describing Indianness as being “chic,” or otherwise described as a popular trend. Beyond the trend, researchers discovered that by claiming a Native identity, one is able to disassociate from their whiteness, distance themselves from the guilt of colonization, chase a sense of spirituality, or simply feel as if they belong to a culture (Sturm, 2011; Gilio-Whitaker, 2025).

Unfortunately, higher education is not immune to the incursion of pretendians. Academic institutions consistently serve as venues where individuals falsely claim to be Native American. One of the first documented instances of pretendianism took place in 1992, when The Detroit News published an investigation into box-checkers, which includes pretendians and those seeking additional benefits or scholarships at US universities (Viren, 2021). The article reported that thousands of non-Native students were fraudulently claiming to be Native each year during the application process for colleges and universities. In addition, The Detroit News also reported similar lies perpetuated by faculty claiming a pseudo-Native identity. The issue arose again the following year when 45 Native faculty of the American Indian Professoriate met in Phoenix, Arizona for the third annual gathering of American Indian and Alaska Native professors (Cook-Lynn, 1993). The meeting included a facilitated discussion by Dr. Beatrice Medicine who touched on ethnic fraud and the abuses of non-Native faculty claiming to be Native at American universities. Together the group introduced six recommendations for colleges and universities to prevent non-Native faculty from committing ethnic fraud – with one recommendation encouraging universities to require proof of enrollment in a state or federally recognized tribe.

After over three decades of Native scholars identifying the abuse of pretendians within academia, the problem of ethnic fraud and pretendianism still persists with Native communities in higher education. For this reason, it is important for colleges and universities to remain vigilant and consistently updated on the issue of pretendians and individuals falsely claiming indigeneity.

The recommended eligibility criteria provided in this study required a great amount of thought to ensure the greatest number of Native students could be included, while still maintaining protections from pretendians. Lily, the only student participant to receive the NAOP, described the tuition waiver eligibility requirements as a “gate” protecting resources for Native students from those fraudulently claiming Native identities. She states, “it's this really, really tricky kind of gate where you want to open it, but you don't want to make it so easy that people that don't deserve it are getting in. But you also don't want to keep it so tight that you're not including all these students who are deserving of it.” Lily’s portrayal of critical eligibility requirements as a form of gatekeeping, directly reflects the ideals of Native communities and their protection of Native cultural practices, languages, and land from those who seek to take advantage of them. For tuition waiver eligibility, it is imperative for institutions to consider expanding tuition waiver requirements. At the same time, institutions must also recognize the harm of pretendianism and revise tuition waiver eligibility requirements to align with accepted tribal recognition practices.

Additional Recommendations for Campuses

A need for additional campus resources and improved support became apparent while interviewing the student participants about the NAOP. UCLA, specifically, has one sole resource ran by Native students that is dedicated to supporting the retention of Native students. Therefore, when the Native community heard about the establishment of the NAOP, they grew worried

about the possibility of recruiting students to a university that they felt did not provide adequate support to retain students throughout their undergraduate and graduate careers. In relation to tuition waivers, if an institution's goal is to holistically support Native students, a waiver cannot be implemented without the existence of previously established retention resources. Through conversations with student participants, I combined their ideas of supplementary support to create three additional recommendations for campuses which includes increased hiring of culturally competent staff and professors, increased community outreach, and the presence of at least one retention program along with a space on campus.

The lack of culturally competent or relatable staff and professors was repeatedly discussed throughout the student interviews. To many, they felt as if they simply could not relate with the non-Native individuals who were their professors or those in positions of student support. In some instances, students also mentioned challenges with Native professors they felt did not relate with their experiences and challenges due to varying privileges relating to whiteness and socioeconomic status. As asserted by Joy,

[campuses] need people who understand things like enrollment or living on the reservation and then coming into urban communities. All these different nuances are important to understand, and somebody who is not Native is going to have a really hard time. So the university has a responsibility to hire people who understand our experiences.

Thus, it is important to prioritize increasing Native professors and staff especially in situations where the staff are working in roles focusing on the Native community, and when professors are teaching classes about Native people. Doing so additionally has the potential to uplift the campus overall by providing culturally competent staff within colleges and universities.

Another suggestion brought up by the students is for campuses to increase relationships within surrounding Native communities. Many campuses currently have initiatives or offices of tribal relations across the state of California. The offices are often tasked with bridging relationships between universities and tribal communities. In addition, the offices also support the recruitment of Native students by establishing connections with local tribal nations. UCLA, unfortunately, has yet to establish a central office dedicated to improving tribal relations. For UCLA and other campuses who do not have dedicated roles focused on improving connections with tribal communities, it is necessary to begin the steps to establish a position or office of tribal relations to mend relationships with Native communities. Finn emphasized a need for UCLA to increase engagement with Native communities by urging the institution to, “do outreach at reservations. Show them that you care about them. Go to tribes and do presentations. Show them that there is a way. Show youth it is possible to get to this institution.” Establishing a solidified relationship with tribal communities demonstrates to all that, beyond financial support, the university is committed to supporting the Native community. While UCLA has taken one step forward by creating the Native American and Pacific Islander Bruins Rising Initiative, establishing an official tribal liaison office will ensure connections are sustained and mutually beneficial for both the university and surrounding tribal nations (UCLA Native American and Pacific Islander Bruins Rising Initiative, 2022).

Finally, the suggestion discussed most notably by students was the creation of a campus space dedicated to supporting and uplifting success of Native students. Similar to tribal liaison offices, some campuses have established Native resource spaces and others, like UCLA, have yet to establish a formal setting where Native students can gather and access support services. Research on underrepresented student spaces found that students who utilized the space reported

increased feelings of belonging, support, and improved overall academic engagement (Beaulieu, 2020). For Native students, a sense of belonging is critical for persistence and success, making the lack of a space particularly detrimental to those experiencing feelings of isolation (National Native Scholarship Providers, 2025). When discussing additional resources to add at UCLA, each of the student participants discussed an urgent need for a solidified student space. Finn stressed the importance of establishing a student space by passionately exclaiming,

Give us a space. Give us somewhere that we can call home. As tribal people, we're spread far and wide. And to be able to have a space where we can call home, find friendships, and be able to go out and hang out with one another is crucial in being able to make sure that Native students succeed. Everything is done through community, everything is done by community. So being able to have that space would be a great idea.

Here, Finn echoes the response of Native students across the country by making it known that, without a student space, their ability to succeed is impeded. Establishing a Native resource center at UCLA would address a critical need for social and cultural support. Without a physical space to foster community and connect both academically and culturally, universities risk a decline in Native student success. Thus, a dedicated resource center is essential to elevate Native student retention especially when paired with a Native American tuition waiver.

To provide holistic support to Native students, it is vital that institutions like UCLA pair tuition waivers with structural support systems that ensure persistence and retention. Participants reported that, because of the lack of resources for Native students, the implementation of the NAOP helped financially, but did not resolve issues related to overall student experiences. Students found themselves feeling misled and felt UCLA lacked the resources to help them succeed. With the addition of an established Native resource center combined with increased

community outreach and culturally competent faculty, institutions have the opportunity to alleviate the detrimental effects of academic institutions on Native students. Doing so proactively initiates a process of repair for the relationship between Native students and academic institutions.

Conclusion: Impacts & Hopes for the Future

The original purpose of this study was to explore new opportunities for expanding tuition access for Native American students within higher education institutions. I had thought early on that I would explore new ideas for tuition waivers and combine them with student experiences to create a fine-tuned list of eligibility requirements for institutions to model. After having conversations with fellow Native students and student participants, it became clear however that UCLA offered a vastly unique perspective of tuition waiver research that offered new insight into the complexity of education access and retention for Native students. Beyond the simple action of expanding eligibility requirements, which is still necessary, the findings demonstrate a critical need for institutions to intentionally bolster their comprehension of Native communities to understand the multitude of identities that make up their Native student communities. Current findings reveal that, while the University of California's implementation of the NAOP was groundbreaking, the implementation of such a financial resource without proper resources to uplift and strengthen pathways to success for Native students is resulting in ongoing feelings of mistrust and the continuance of producing obstacles toward graduation.

The first step institutions can take to repair, rather than create, obstacles is to listen to the experiences of Native students. In this study, I include interviews of Native students who came from a diverse array of tribal nations with varying privileges, racial backgrounds, and cultural

connections. Each of these characteristics provided a glimpse into the experiences of contemporary Native student identities. Rarely do non-Native administrators and staff hear the direct experiences of what it is like to be a Native student. Similarly, experiences of Native students, such as those who are disenrolled, from urban settings, or those coming from multiracial backgrounds, are not often heard within both Native and non-Native academic studies. I encourage readers looking to learn more about Native identities to intentionally take time to comprehend the experiences of both students within this study, and those within campuses. I provide a broad view of Native identities within higher education, however, every Native student possesses a unique story that molds their pathway toward graduation. In order to begin a process of repair, intentional support and learning is required on behalf of the institution to understand how to better support their Native student community.

Providing tuition waivers is one way which colleges and universities can address their historical wrongdoings toward Native communities. Over the last decade, the implementation of tuition waivers has become more common at higher education institutions around the country looking to acknowledge their obligation to Native peoples. Each includes varying eligibility criteria, with most requiring enrollment in a federally recognized tribal nation. After hearing the announcement of the University of California's Native American tuition waiver, I was inspired to explore new opportunities for tuition waivers eligibility especially because I had met more Native students who did not qualify for the waiver than those who did.

Through discussions with students and research of current tuition waivers at different institutions, I compiled a list of recommendations for tuition waivers which includes potential eligibility for Native students who would not otherwise be supported under federal recognition and state residency requirements. Suggested adjustments for Native American tuition waiver

include eligibility for Native American students who can: show proof of a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB), direct descendancy to an enrolled parent or grandparent, proof of descendancy on California – or other state – Indian census rolls, and the inclusion of a formal interview process for disenrolled students. If applicable, I also recommend including guidelines within tuition waivers that provide the opportunity in-state tuition costs for enrolled Native American students who are not state residents. Each of these suggestions directly reflect the current Native community at UCLA. Nevertheless, the suggested eligibility criteria can be implemented at other institutions exploring new opportunities for giving back to the Native communities, as it includes both students from tribes within California and out-of-state tribes.

Again, when paired with holistic improvements to campus resources for Native students, Native American tuition waivers have the potential to expand higher education access to Native students who already experience tremendous challenges persisting within colleges and universities. With effective resources, Native students, like myself, who never imagined themselves setting foot on a prestigious university campus, can now envision themselves walking amongst the world's greatest scholars. And, importantly, colleges and universities should understand that without the knowledge of Native communities, arguably, their institutions would not hold the current academic standing or credibility they have today. Therefore, it is within the duty of institutions to ensure that Native students feel empowered and have adequate resources to succeed. It is likely that future generations of Native students will still encounter challenges seeking to disrupt their educational goals. However, like our ancestors, I am confident that, as Native scholars, we will continue to prevail to ensure the future is bright for all Natives in academia.

Participant's Hopes for the Future of Natives in Higher Education

My hope is to make sure that [Native students] can see themselves in these spaces.

Because I didn't even see myself in the space when I applied. Show yourself grace.

You're not going to be perfect at everything. You're going to fail. You may get poor grades. Don't beat yourself up over it. Remember to always love yourself whenever and every day that you can. - Finn

I definitely hope that Natives in higher education have the opportunity to actually learn in their institution, instead of being a source of free labor for the institution and teachers. I hope that one day the university can get to a place where there is enough resources and representation for Native students to go into higher education and, one: enjoy their educational experience, and also, get as much from their educational experience as any non-Native person who is going to learn. - Joy

I hope all education institutions make major changes in order to make up for all the violence they're actively imposing. I don't think that, at least not in the next five years, they're going to be able to undo all of what has been done. But I feel like they can always change. And they can always realize talk with Native students to know where those changes are needed. - Hope

I do think when you're trying to create policies that improve the lives of Native students, you have to have an understanding and a willingness to dive into the reality that there isn't one type of Native person. We're talking about hundreds of different tribes all with

their own cultures and identities. I think all of those things really matter when you're trying to think of how to improve the lives of students. – Sage

I really hope that students can come to higher education and really feel like they belong here. I hope that they can really feel like they're needed here. Because Indigenous people are needed in higher education. - Lily

Appendix

Appendix A. *Research Timetable*

Week 1: Preparation for study

Week 4: Sending out questionnaires

Week 5: Collecting Datasets - Campus/Community Data

Week 6: Collecting Datasets - Site visit

Week 7: Collecting Dataset - Interviews

Week 8: Collecting Dataset - Interviews

Week 9: Data analyzation

Week 10: Data analyzation

Appendix B. *Interview Protocol*

Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about your cultural background.
 - a. Where are you from? Where did you grow up?
 - b. Describe your connection to the Native community growing up?
 - c. Describe your current connection to the Native community?
 - d. How has this shaped your identity or how you view yourself today?
2. How do you feel that your culture supported your education growing up? What did this look like when you went to college?
3. What are your beliefs about the relationships between education institutions and indigenous students? If so, what is that belief and where did you learn this belief?
4. What do you believe a university's responsibilities are to Indigenous students?

5. How do you see yourself fitting into this university and the institution? Would you say the ideals of the institution differ from your own?
6. Do you feel supported as a Native student at this institution? If so, what are some examples of the support you feel at this institution? If not, in what ways should the university support you?
7. What changes could this institution make to better fit students with similar Native identities? Do you think these changes are feasible?
8. What campus resources are available for Native students at your institution? Are these resources easily accessible?
9. Describe how it feels to be a Native student in your classes? Do these feelings change depending on the class environment or location?
10. Describe how it feels to be a Native student walking on campus? How do these feelings differ from the feelings within the classroom?
11. What are some significant differences between how you view your identity at this institution versus an environment where you are surrounded by people with similar identities?
12. How did you come to understand the Opportunity Plan? What is your current understanding of the Tuition waiver?
13. How do people in your community feel about the Opportunity Plan? What are things you have heard from community members about the Plan?
14. How has the NAOP affected your educational experience?
15. Do you see the university as a place that supports your identity as a Native person? Did this view change with the implementation of the NAOP?

16. Does the NAOP change your outlook on the institution as a whole? If so, how did the NAOP change or not your views of the institution as a whole?
17. Given what you said in our first two interviews, what does it mean to you to be a Native student at this institution?
18. What is your hope or hopes for future Indigenous students in higher education?
19. Describe a message you would leave for future generations of Native students who go to college.
20. Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?

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