Higher Education Among Alaska Natives

Few Alaska Natives are in college classrooms in the 1980s, and among those who are, women outnumber men by two to one.

Natives make up about 13 percent of Alaska's college-age population, but in 1984-85 they received only 7 percent of the associate degrees, 4 percent of the bachelor's degrees, less than 2 percent of the master's degrees, and none of the doctorates awarded by Alaska colleges and universities.¹ (See Figure 1.) During the same school year, 2756 Native women and just 1408 Native men were enrolled in four-year programs.

These are among the findings in a recent report on the educational status of ethnic and racial minorities in Alaska. The report was prepared by the Institute of Social and Economic Research for the College Board. It concentrates on education among Alaska Natives because Natives are the largest minority group in Alaska. Other findings are summarized below.

- *Alaska Natives in 1980 had less education than any other group in the state.* Among all Natives 25 and over, less than 4 percent had completed four years of college, another 11 percent had some college, 32 percent had graduated from high school, and 13 percent had some high school. More than 40 percent had gone no further than elementary school. Among non-Native Alaskans (25 or older), 24 percent had four years of college, another 24 percent had some college, 40 percent had graduated from high school, and 8 percent had some high school. Just 4 percent had not gone past elementary school. (See Figure 2.)

¹ "College age" here is defined as those aged 20 to 29.
More Alaska Natives are graduating from high school now. At the time of the 1980 census, about three in four Native men between 25 and 35 had graduated from high school, as compared with fewer than two in four among men between 36 and 50. These patterns were similar among women. More education among younger Natives provides evidence of the recent changes in state policy that gave Natives better access to high school—first establishment of a state boarding school system and later construction of high schools in small villages.

Young Alaska Natives are staying in high school just about as much as whites. Among 14- and 15-year olds, 97 percent of both white and Native students were in high school in 1980; among 16- and 17-year olds, 89 percent of whites and 84 percent of Natives were in school.

But similar levels of high school enrollment among Native and white teenagers statewide may be masking big differences in drop-out rates between urban and rural students. Drop-out rates of 50 percent or more are commonly reported for Native students in urban areas, as compared with about 12 percent in rural areas.2

National statistics show that children from poorer families are much less likely to go to college, and poverty is widespread among Native families. In 1986, Natives made up around 14 percent of the total population but between 40 and 55 percent of the recipients of major welfare programs.

Although Natives in 1980 made up 13 percent of college-age Alaskans, they accounted for less than 6 percent of enrollment in two-year schools and less than 8 percent in four-year schools.

Native women in the 1980s have strongly outnumbered Native men in college enrollment. In 1980, about 8 women for every 5 men were enrolled in four-year programs. By 1984, that gap had widened, with 2 women for every 1 man in four-year schools. Similar disparities existed among Native men and women in two-year programs.

The pool of college-age Natives will be about 50 percent larger in the 1990s than it was in 1980. By the year 2000, Natives are expected to make up around 15 percent of the college-age population and 27 percent of the school-age population.

2See Alaska’s Small Rural High Schools: Are They Working? by Judith Kleinfield, G. Williamson McDermid, and David Hagstrom. Published by the University of Alaska’s Institute of Social and Economic Research and Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, December 1985. "Drop-out" statistics have to be interpreted carefully—because drop-out rates are measured in various ways, and because it’s difficult to tell if someone who appears to have quit school has in fact transferred to another school or some other program.


Editor’s note: The report summarized here is one of a series—Minorities in Higher Education—sponsored by The College Board, a nonprofit organization that provides tests and other services for students, schools, and colleges. The Changing North: Alaska was written by Judith Kleinfield of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and Lee Gorsuch and Jim Kerr of the University of Alaska Anchorage’s Institute of Social and Economic Research. Copies are available from ISER at 3211 Providence Dr., Anchorage, Alaska, 99508 (phone 907-786-7710).

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Institute of Social and Economic Research
University of Alaska Anchorage
E. Lee Gorsuch, Director
3211 Providence Drive
Anchorage, Alaska 99508