



CSU, CHICO BY THE NUMBERS – February 2021

A publication of the Chico State Office of Institutional Research

A New Methodology for Identifying Native Students: Enumeration Through Self-Identification

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In many aspects of American politics, resources and power are allocated to various social groups relative to their size. The decennial U.S. Census is the best example of this: population counts are used to allocate proportional representation in Congress, as well as billions of dollars in funding for grants and social services. Quantitative and statistical data (such as numbers and proportions) also possess an “objective,” reality-defining quality in our culture that frequently obscures the all-too-human processes involved in their creation. How groups come to define and measure themselves, as well as how they are defined and measured by others, can therefore become powerful social tools for both empowerment and disempowerment.

In this month’s *By The Numbers* report, we explore these issues by looking at data on Native American student enrollment at CSU, Chico. We compare standard enrollment figures with those generated using a new methodology that incorporates self-reported data on tribal affiliation. This methodology is being developed in collaboration with the Office of Tribal Relations at CSU, Chico, as well as with partners at Humboldt State University.

Native American Population Data In the Historical Context of Colonization

In order to secure exclusive access to Indigenous land and resources, colonizing nations have generally sought to make Native peoples disappear as such¹. In American history such dispossession has often relied on significant physical violence, but making Native peoples disappear has also been attempted by other means, including the generation of “objective” population data. Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution deemed that

“Indians not taxed” were ineligible for political representation and thus would not be counted by the Census. This stipulation remained in place until 1890, when the Census finally began to count all Native Americans regardless of taxpayer status². Shortly after, in 1900, Census enumerators were instructed to begin recording the fraction of White ancestry possessed by each Native American. In subsequent decades these data would be used to determine lower bounds of ancestry, known as “blood quantum,” below which individuals could not legally claim to be recognized as Native American³. As their political existences came to be increasingly defined by a regime of ancestry, which is another way of saying “race,” Native American tribal nations pushed back by asserting their distinct legal, political, and cultural identities⁴, including their ability to determine their own rules for tribal membership apart from racial classification by others.

In 1960, the Census began to allow individuals to *self-identify their own racial identities*, rather than having those identities ascribed by enumerators. For Native Americans, particularly those who might not have stereotypically “Indian” physical features or who might live far away from tribal territories, the result was a statistical sea-level change. Between 1950 and 1960, the Native American population increased by 48%, while the American population as a whole increased by only 18%. This pattern continued in subsequent decades: between the 1950 and 1990 censuses, the Native American population increased from 357,499 to 1,878,285, an overall increase of 425%⁵. Subsequent analysis established that the leading cause of these increases was a shift in racial self-identification among persons “designated as White in earlier censuses and records [who] chose to classify themselves as Indian.”⁶ When the Census began allowing individuals to identify

¹ Wolfe, Patrick. 2001. “Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race.” *American Historical Review* 106(3): 866-905.

² Snipp, C. Matthew. 2003. “Racial Measurement in the American Census: Past Practices and Implications for the Future.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 29: 568.

³ *Ibid.* p. 569

⁴ Steinman, Erich. 2012. “Settler Colonial Power and the American Indian Sovereignty Movement: Forms of Domination, Strategies of Transformation.” *American Journal of Sociology* 117(4): 1073-1130.

⁵ Nagel, Joanne. 1995. “American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Politics and the Resurgence of Identity.” *American Sociological Review* 60(6): 951; Thornton, Russell. 1987. *American Indian Holocaust and Survival*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: 160.

⁶ Passel, Jeffrey. 1976. “Provisional Evaluation of the 1970 Census Count of American Indians.” *Demography* 13: 397-409.

with multiple racial groups in 2000, opening the doorway for enumerating multiracial Native Americans, over 1 million *additional* individuals identified themselves as such⁷. The increasing ability of Native Americans to identify themselves as such, and to identify themselves in increasingly complex ways, has therefore been hugely influential on population data.

Self-Identification in CSU, Chico Enrollment Data

Currently, the CSU system enumerates Native American students using a methodology stipulated by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Similar to the Census, this methodology aligns with Federally-mandated data reporting standards from the Department of Education. Using the IPEDS methodology, Native students are identified only as those who select their race as “American Indian / Alaskan Native” on their Cal State Apply form. Students who identify themselves as being both “American Indian / Alaskan Native” and any other race(s) are classified as “Two or More Races,” and not as multiracial Native students. Cal State Apply also gives applicants the option to claim a political affiliation with a particular tribal nation, regardless of their selected racial group membership, but these affiliation data are not utilized in the IPEDS methodology. Using this methodology, Native student enrollment counts have remained quite small, as can be seen in the table below.

In collaboration with the Office of Tribal Relations and partners at Humboldt State University, Institutional Research has sought to utilize existing student application data on *both* racial self-identification and tribal affiliation to arrive at (what we argue is) a more accurate measurement of Native American student enrollment. In the table below, the “New” Native student counts identify students within existing IPEDS race / ethnicity categories who either identified themselves as “American Indian / Alaskan Native,” or who selected any other racial group(s) and *also* provided a tribal affiliation. As can be seen at the bottom of the table, these new counts increase the size of the Native student population, term to term, by roughly 500% to 800%. It is also worth noting that large proportions of “New” Native students can be found within the “Two or More Races” IPEDS category. This is particularly significant since students classified as “Two or More Races” under IPEDS are *not* factored into many equity and diversity initiatives in the CSU system, including the Graduation Initiative 2025. These provisional data represent a work-in-progress, and there is much more work to be done to better identify, and therefore better serve, students from increasingly-diverse backgrounds. This is especially the case for our Native students, as the above historical discussion and presentation of data demonstrate.

Native Student IPEDS Counts

IPEDS Race / Ethnicity	Term								
	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	Fall 2014	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020
American Indian / Alaskan Native	117	97	103	96	100	102	96	94	92

Native Student New Methodology Counts

IPEDS Race / Ethnicity	733	785	889	875	886	905	813	716	635
Grand Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
American Indian / Alaskan Native	117	97	103	96	100	102	96	94	92
Hispanic / Latino	284	325	423	429	413	426	370	308	260
Two or More Races	324	352	352	340	365	371	343	310	281
White	8	11	11	10	8	6	4	4	2
	1.1%	1.4%	1.2%	1.1%	0.9%	0.7%	0.5%	0.6%	0.3%

Change in Counts

	Term								
	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	Fall 2014	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020
	616	688	786	779	786	803	717	622	543
	526%	709%	763%	811%	786%	787%	747%	662%	590%

⁷ [Liebler, Carolyn A., Renuka Bhaskar, and Sonya R. Porter \(née Rastogi\). 2016. “Joining, Leaving, and Staying in the American Indian / Alaska Native Race Category Between 2000 and 2010.” *Demography* 53: 507-540.](#)