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California has no accredited Native American colleges. That could change.

The state has largest population of Native Americans in the U.S., but no accredited tribal colleges



Javier Galvez adjusts a headdress with feathers at the Gathering Under the Stars event at California Indian Nations College in Palm Desert on Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023. (Photo by Angel Pena, Contributing Photographer)

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It has been a generation since California had an accredited tribal college serving the state's [Native American](#) residents. An Inland Empire college is trying to change that.

“We have more than 1.4 million American Indians living in California,” said Celeste Townsend, president of [California Indian Nations College](#). “And yet not one (accredited) tribal college.”

Compare that to Oklahoma — the state has one-third the Native population of California but three tribal colleges.

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“There’s something wrong there,” Townsend said. “We’re going to be changing that.”



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Attendees of the Gathering Under the Stars event were greeted by several vendors selling Native American jewelry, clothing, and other items at the Gathering Under the Stars event at California Indian Nations College in Palm Desert on Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023. (Photo by Angel Pena, Contributing Photographer)

CINC “started as a discussion around the table” in 2015, Townsend said, about 10 years after California’s previous accredited tribal college, [Deganawidah-Quetzalcoatl University](#) in Davis, [lost its accreditation](#), spelling the end of it offering a full schedule of classes.

Tribal colleges and universities are a federally designated category of higher education institution, which are controlled and operated by [federally recognized tribes](#).

CINC began offering classes in fall 2018, and graduated its first four students in 2019. Last year, 10 students graduated from the college, the largest class to date. The fall term began this year with 140 students attending classes.

The college currently leases space at two Palm Desert campuses, College of the Desert and UC Riverside Palm Desert, and it offers online and hybrid classes to allow students from throughout California and the country to attend the school.

CINC offers associates degrees, along with workshops and a Cahuilla language immersion program, with plans to offer

more languages belonging to Southern California tribes. The school is in the process of adding Cahuilla language signage to its campus spaces.

That’s emblematic of what tribal colleges offer students, according to Townsend.

Historically, “when education involved American Indians, it was ‘remove the Indian, save the man,’ ” she said. “It wasn’t to educate us, it was to remove our identity.”

Traditional history books either misrepresent or obscure Native history, including how they were treated by European colonists, according to Townsend.

As a result, “we find that, with our students, they don’t have the sense of belonging in a traditional mainstream educational institution,” she said. “They don’t feel safe in those environments. Having a program for Native Americans is one thing, but having a whole environment ... it just brings more of a home atmosphere and a safe place for learning.”

That’s what attracted Menifee resident Victoria Martinez to CINC.

“The feeling you get around school is community,” she said. “And it’s home.”

Martinez splits her time between Palomar College in San Diego County and CINC, pursuing a degree in psychology at one and studying Cahuilla at the other. But she says the contrast between the two is like night and day.

“The experience at California Indian Nations College is more like a family,” said Martinez, who serves as student government secretary and treasurer at CINC.

The school is currently in the second phase of the three-stage accreditation process.

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Federal accreditation would allow the college to apply for state and federal funding and students would be eligible for federal financial aid.

California is home to two other tribal colleges — [California Tribal College](#) in Woodland and [Kumeyaay Community College](#) in El Cajon — but neither is as far along in the accreditation process as CINC.

CINC receives no ongoing state or federal funds. Instead, the college has received most of its funding from [Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians](#) near Twentynine Palms, which has given the college more than \$9 million. It has also received funding from the [San Manuel Band of Mission Indians](#) near Highland and the [Morongo Band of Mission Indians](#) based near Banning.

In 2022, Assemblymembers James Ramos, D-Highland, and Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella, helped CINC secure \$5 million in state funding for the accreditation process. At the time, there were 35 federally accredited tribal colleges around the U.S., but none in California despite its significant number of Native residents.

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, there are more than 630,000 Californians, or about 1.6% of the state's population, [who identify as American Indian and Alaska Natives](#). Include those who identify as American Indian along with another race, and that number jumps to 1.4 million, or more than 3% of Californians.

Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, meanwhile, are home to about 42% of the state's Native residents, census data shows.

“Some states have as many as two or three (Native colleges),” Ramos said. “California is home to more Native Americans than any state in the nation and it stands to reason that we should have one.”

He said tribal colleges provide an important accepting and welcoming environment for Native students.

“We have to be able to have an Indian college that then reaches out to the population and engages them in education, an education where they don't have to worry about assimilation or their culture or even wearing their Native American regalia,” he said. “We're still fighting those issues in the state of California.”

Ramos, the [first Native American from a California tribe in the California Legislature](#), says there's a great deal of bipartisan support for the college and Native issues generally in Sacramento.

“There's a good bipartisan effort to try and correct some of these issues in the state of California, including education,” he said.

The \$5 million from the state “starts to lay the groundwork” for accreditation, Ramos said. He hopes the process can be finished in less than two years.

He concedes that's a “very aggressive” timetable.

“But I think we're ready to go,” he said.