



## Introduction

American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIANs) in the United States and Ethnic Minorities (EMs)<sup>1</sup> in China are both underrepresented groups in their higher education (HE) systems regarding access and attainment. Also, their cultures and languages confront challenges in contemporary societies dominated by mainstream cultures and languages, as well as the trend of globalization. Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in the United States and Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions (EMSI) in China increasingly play a significant role in changing the disadvantageous situations of AIAN and Chinese Ethnic Minority (CEM) students in both HE systems. Also, they are critical in AIAN tribal nation building and CEM policy implementation, as well as in the preservation of indigenous and ethnic minority languages, cultures, and identities. TCUs and EMSIs face some common challenges such as financial constraints and student readiness for HE and preparation for the job market, as well as unique challenges caused by the specific political and HE contexts in the United States and China.

This book is based on a qualitative comparative study of ethnic minority-serving higher education institutions—TCUs and EMSIs. To answer the central research question—how TCUs and EMSIs address challenges in serving AIANs and CEMs—the author conducted a series of in-depth semi-structured oral interviews with 29 TCU and EMSI administrators and content area experts (CAEs) of AIAN and EM HE in the United States and China.

## 1.1 RESEARCH PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS

In this book, the author explored the roles, challenges, and responses of TCUs and EMSIs in the United States and China. The author also conducted a comparative analysis between these two types of ethnic minority-serving higher education institutions (HEIs) to highlight the successful experiences which can be applied in specific contexts. Finally, based on the findings of this book, the author hoped to help TCU and EMSI administrators, policymakers, and government planners better serve AIANs and CEMs to increase their HE access and success, as well as better preserve their cultures, languages, and identities.

The central research question of this study was, “How do TCUs and EMSIs address challenges in serving AIANs and CEMs?” This central research question was further examined by the following three additional questions.

- What roles do TCUs and EMSIs play in serving AIANs and CEMs?
- What challenges hinder TCUs and EMSIs from accomplishing their roles?
- How do/should TCUs and EMSIs address these challenges?

Afterward, this study answered the comparative question: “What can TCUs and EMSIs learn from each other to address their respective challenges?” This question was addressed by data collected from the previously listed research questions.

To achieve the research purpose and answer each of the guiding research questions, the author conducted in-depth semi-structured oral interviews with institutional administrators from TCUs in the United States and EMSIs in China, as well as with CAEs in the fields of AIAN and CEM HE. The author also conducted a content analysis of the mission and vision statements of TCUs and the charters of EMSIs. Afterward, the author carried out a comparative analysis of TCUs and EMSIs on their respective practices and strategies to address their common and unique challenges and, finally, to provide suggestions for TCUs and EMSIs. This study obtained the official approval from the University of Pittsburgh Internal Review Board to conduct interviews.

## 1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS BOOK

As Jackson (2014) noted, “among the axes of educational inequality, race, class, and gender are three of the most important, impacting on individual access and achievement across diverse societies. As such, these three factors arguably deserve more focus in comparative education research than they commonly receive” (p. 195). This comparative study focused on the long-lasting ethnic issues within the United States and Chinese HE to explore the possible ways of changing the disadvantageous situations of AIAN and CEM students, as well as of better preserving their cultures, languages, and identities through HE.

Also, it is significant to have a deeper understanding of HE issues that are central and unique to AIANs and CEMs (Brayboy et al. 2012; Meng 2016). Through conducting the comparative study of TCUs and EMSIs on their contexts, roles, challenges, and efforts, this study aimed to verify and update what we have already known and, more importantly, to explore what we do not yet know. In summary, the author hoped to provide exemplary strategies and good practices of TCUs and EMSIs in addressing challenges, which can be applied to each other to serve AIAN and CEM students and communities better, as well as to preserve their cultures and languages better. Findings from this study also helped fill the existing literature gap as it is the first comparative study between TCUs in the United States and EMSIs in China.

## 1.3 BOOK STRUCTURE

This book includes 11 chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research background of this study. Chapter 2 gives an overview of AIANs and CEMs and the current HE contexts and policies for both groups. Chapter 3 examines the evolution and characteristics of AIAN and CEM HE. It also discusses the current challenges faced by TCUs and EMSIs. Chapter 4 is the research design, where an analysis framework is presented and the research methods—including sampling, data collection, and analysis techniques—are addressed. Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 cover the major themes about TCUs and EMSIs emerging from the qualitative data analysis process. These themes include roles, facilitating factors, challenges, strategies and practices, and suggestions for improvement. Chapter 10 includes a comparative analysis of the five themes. Finally, Chap. 11 presents a brief

conclusion and recommendations for the better development of TCUs and EMSIs, as well as outlining suggestions for future research on this topic.

## NOTE

1. The phrase “Ethnic Minority” is capitalized intentionally to specifically refer to the 55 ethnic groups officially recognized by the Government of the People’s Republic of China.

## REFERENCES

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