



# Ethnic minority-serving higher education institutions in the United States and China: a comparative case study of two institutions

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Received: 14 March 2019 / Revised: 30 December 2019 / Accepted: 29 January 2020 / Published online: 13 February 2020  
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## Abstract

Tribal Colleges and Universities in the United States and Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions in China play a significant role in changing the underrepresented status of American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIANs) and Chinese Ethnic Minorities (CEMs) in their respective higher education systems. This comparative study of two ethnic minority-serving institutions—Diné College in the US and Yanbian University in China—examines strategies and practices each institution uses to address challenges in serving Navajo and Korean Chinese students and communities. Through conducting semi-structured interviews with senior administrators from two institutions and AIAN and CEM content area experts, this study confirms that Diné College and Yanbian University play important roles in providing higher education opportunities and preserving indigenous and ethnic cultures and languages. From a comparative perspective, the efforts of Diné College and Yanbian University in addressing challenges differ because of their respective political and higher education contexts.

**Keywords** American Indian and Alaska Native · Chinese ethnic minority · Minority-serving institutions · Indigenous higher education · Navajo people · Korean Chinese

## Introduction

American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIANs) in the United States (US) and Ethnic Minorities (EMs) in China face many challenges in their higher education (HE) systems regarding access and attainment (Brayboy et al. 2012; DeVoe et al. 2008; Hunt and Harrington 2008; Tan and Xie 2009; Wang 2016). Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in the US and Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions (EMSIs) in China are vital in changing the disadvantageous situation AIAN and Chinese Ethnic Minority (CEM) students encounter 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 languages,

culture, and identities (Clothey 2005; Crazybull 2009; Gasman and Conrad 2013; Jacob et al. 2015a, b; Qiu 2012; Stull et al. 2015; Stein 2009; Yang and Wu 2009).

Currently, there are 37 TCUs in the US, of which 34 are chartered by AIAN tribes, and three by the federal government. Twenty-three TCUs award associate degrees, and 14 offer bachelor's programs, among which five also have master's programs (American Indian Higher Education Consortium [AIHEC] 2018). In China, EMSIs have two main categories—Ethnic Minority Colleges and Universities (EMCUs) and Institutions in Ethnic Autonomous Areas (IEAAs). Also, outside of the EM autonomous areas, there is a small number of HEIs with an institutional mission to serve EM students. In total, there are 255 EMSIs in China, which cover the entire HEI-type spectrum from vocational colleges to comprehensive research universities, and all are under the administration of central or local governments. All 17 EMCUs offer undergraduate and graduate programs. There are 233 IEAAs, among which 195 are in the five EM Autonomous Regions; the remaining 38 are in EM Autonomous Prefectures in non-ethnic provinces (China's Ministry of Education 2017).

This comparative study focuses on Diné College and Yanbian University as case study institutions to examine

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their roles, challenges, and responses in serving Navajo and Korean Chinese students and communities.<sup>1</sup> Yanbian University is a comprehensive university that offers undergraduate and graduate programs (including doctoral programs). Diné College is a 4-year institution offering general education courses and programs conferring certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees. There are two primary rationales we chose these two HEIs for comparison. First, both the Navajos and Korean Chinese have relatively large EM populations in their respective countries. Second, the Navajo People and Korean Chinese play a particular role in HE for AIAN and CEM groups in the US and China (Jacob and Park 2011; Stein 2009; Choi 2010). Navajo People established the first tribal college—Diné College in 1968, which set up the foundation for the tribal college movement in the US (Gipp 2009). In China, Yanbian University is a leading EMSI with an excellent reputation for providing culturally relevant education to Korean Chinese (Xiong et al. 2016).

While clearly realizing and understanding the different political, social, and HE contexts for TCUs and EMSIs in the US and China, the authors strategically focus this article on an institutional-level comparison between these two prominent HEIs. In specific, the rationale of comparability include (1) both TCUs and EMSIs serve ethnic minority groups who are underrepresented in their respective HE systems; (2) both TCUs and EMSIs serve ethnic minority areas; (3) both TCUs and EMSIs depend on national (federal and central governmental) HE policies; (4) both TCUs and EMSIs are organized in the modern form of HEIs; (5) both TCUs and EMSIs bear the responsibility to preserve indigenous languages, cultures, and identities; and (6) both TCUs and EMSIs face similar challenges, including institutional identity and evaluation, financial constraints, and preparing student graduates for the workforce. The last commonality makes this comparative study especially meaningful because it provides examples and potential solutions from their foreign counterparts in addressing similar issues in the contemporary era.

Through a comparative analysis, this study highlights some successful experiences which can be applied in specific contexts. It also provides suggestions to help Diné College, Yanbian University, and other TCU and EMSI administrators, policymakers, and government planners to better serve the Navajos, Korean Chinese, and other AIANs and CEMs to increase their HE access and success, as well

as to better preserve their cultures, languages, and identities through HE. The central research question in this study was “How do Diné College and Yanbian University address challenges in serving Navajo People and Korean Chinese?” This question is further examined by the following three sub-questions:

- (1) What roles do Diné College and Yanbian University play in serving the Navajo People and Korean Chinese?
- (2) What challenges hinder Diné College and Yanbian University from accomplishing their roles?
- (3) How do Diné College and Yanbian University address these challenges?

Afterward, this study answers the following comparison question: “What can Diné College and Yanbian University learn from each other to address their respective challenges?” This question is addressed by data collected from the previous-listed research questions.

## Case institutions: Diné College and Yanbian University

### Diné College

Formerly known as Navajo Community College, Diné College was established in 1968 and is the first tribally controlled HEI in the United States. Diné College is chartered by the Government Service Committee of the Navajo Nation Council and serves Navajo Nation residents across the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah (Diné College 2018a). As a pioneer TCU, Diné College has inspired the foundation and development of other TCUs since the 1960s. Diné College attained its accreditation in 1976 as the first accredited tribally controlled 2-year college. Now Diné College is a 4-year college that provides associate and bachelor degree programs, certificate programs, and general education curriculum to cultivate critical human resources for the socioeconomic development of the Navajo Nation (Diné College 2018a). Under the supervision of the Navajo Nation Health, Education, and Human Services Committee, Diné College is guided by a Board of Regents and is led by its President. Under the presidency, four administrative divisions oversee the operation of the college: academic affairs, finance and administration, student affairs, and external affairs (Diné College 2019a). The U.S. Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and the Navajo Nation are the two primary revenue sources for Diné College. For the 2018 revenue projection, BIE contributed 62% of Diné College revenues, while 19% was allocated from the Navajo Nation. Auxiliary revenue and student tuition and fees contributed 9% and 8% of revenues respectively (Diné College 2017, p. 12).

<sup>1</sup> The first author's background of growing up in Southwestern China where the most CEM groups reside and his studying experiences on AIAN HE in the US provided the motivations and expertise of comparing ethnic minority-serving HEIs in two countries. The second author has over two decades of conducting research in collaboration with CEM and AIAN peoples.

In 1998, partnering with Arizona State University, Diné College established its first baccalaureate degrees (Diné College 2018a). Currently, Diné College offers five certificate programs, 19 associate degree programs in science, applied science, and arts, and nine bachelor's degree programs in arts and science (Diné College 2019b, pp. 4–5). To facilitate Navajo Nation governance and cultural and language preservation, four relevant programs are provided by Diné College, which include certification programs in Navajo Nation Leadership and Navajo Cultural Arts, the associate of arts degree program in Diné Studies, and the bachelor of arts degree program in Diné Studies. In addition, Diné College offers a comprehensive curriculum covering the language, history, philosophy, and culture of the Navajo People. Students in the mainstream degree programs are required to take one or more tribal-related courses as part of their higher education experience (Diné College 2019b).

### Yanbian University

Established in 1949, Yanbian University, located in Yanbian Korean Chinese Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province, was one of the first group of HEIs set up by the Chinese government in EM areas. As an Institution in Ethnic Autonomous Area (IEAA), Yanbian University is a comprehensive research university that grants doctoral, master's, and bachelor's degrees. Yanbian University has 20 colleges offering 75 bachelor's degree programs, 54 master's degree programs, and nine doctoral degree programs. While Yanbian University focuses on serving Korean Chinese and the greater Yanbian area, its enrollment is open to others in China and the world (Yanbian University 2019a). As a public university in China, Yanbian University is under the direct administration of Jilin Province government, and it is adopting the President Accountability System under the leadership of the committee of the Chinese Communist Party, in which the Party Committee Secretary provides the guidance for the institutional development, and the President is responsible for the operational affairs (Liu et al. 2019). At Yanbian University, under the supervision of the Party Committee Secretary and the President, five divisions are set up covering affairs of administration, teaching, teaching support, research, and auxiliaries. Even though the financial status of Yanbian University is not available to the public, as a province-administrated university in Yanbian Prefecture, its primary revenue source is the provincial and local governments' appropriations. In addition, as a member university of the national Project 211<sup>2</sup> and Double First-Class University

<sup>2</sup> "Project 211" was initiated by China's Ministry of Education in 1995 to promote 100 national key universities in China. Through significant government appropriations, "Project 211" enhanced the research standards of high-level universities in China. In 2017, it was

Plan<sup>3</sup> (Yanbian University 2019a), Yanbian University can receive funding support from China's Ministry of Education.

Among the 20 colleges covering almost all the mainstream disciplines at Yanbian University, the College of Korean Studies serves as the leading academic unit in preserving and promoting Korean Chinese culture and language. All courses in the College of Korean Studies are taught in the Korean language. In addition to the programs and curriculum of Korean language and literature, the College of Korean Studies also houses several research centers on Korean language and culture (Yanbian University 2019b). Moreover, similar with other EMSIs in China, Yanbian University also offers a 1-year Preparatory Program to help Korean Chinese and other EM students prepare for their college-level education (Yanbian University 2019c).

## Literature review

### Characteristics of American Indian and Alaska Native higher education

In this study, AIAN HE refers to AIAN members receiving HE and pursuing a degree at TCUs and other mainstream HEIs. The dominant characteristic of AIAN HE is manifested in tribal nation-building, which is originated from the history between American Indians and the early colonists and the US government (Cornell and Kalt 2003; Grande 2004; Jacob and Bradshaw 2009). Moreover, the bilateral relationship between AIAN tribal governments and the federal government has created a platform for AIANs to pursue their independence in tribal political, economic, cultural, and education affairs. In this process, a unique knowledge system is required to realize the nation-building purpose.

### Tribal nation-building

Akoto (1992) defines nation-building as "the conscious and focused application of [indigenous] people's collective resources, energies, and knowledge to the task of liberating and developing the psychic and physical space that is identified as own" (p. 3). There are two popular models of nation-building. One relies heavily on the economic development of AIAN tribes (Cornell and Kalt 2003; Helton

Footnote 2 (continued)

replaced by the new "Double First-Class University Plan," which, however, has not been officially launched.

<sup>3</sup> The "Double First-Class University Plan" is a national effort to develop a group of top Chinese universities and disciplines to achieve the world-class status by the end of 2050. The list of institutions in this plan was announced by China's Ministry of Education in 2017.

2003/2004). AIAN economic development efforts strive to eliminate dependence on external resources and other aspects of nation-building—such as political, cultural, and educational development. The second model of nation-building also emphasizes the importance of economic development, but it is not the most significant focus. The process of nation-building also emphasizes other aspects, such as politics, culture, and education (Brayboy et al. 2012). In both models, HE is relevant to tribal nation-building. First, HE helps AIAN tribes strive for cultural sovereignty (Coffey and Tsosie 2001). Cultural sovereignty is an essential and integrated part of nation-building because it determines the direction. Second, HE is also used to reshape the rules of dialogue between AIAN tribes and the federal government. AIANs want to make their voices heard in the rule-making process (Brayboy et al. 2012). Finally, HE is vital for and the realization of tribal economic, cultural, and social well-being (Blain 2010).

### Indigenous knowledge systems

The establishment of an independent indigenous knowledge system is critical for each AIAN tribe in the realization of self-determination. There is a commonality regarding knowledge systems of all AIANs—they stress the survival of communities. Personal growth and development are considered prerequisites to sustainable tribal development. A reciprocal relationship between individuals and the tribe is essential for indigenous education systems. The sharing of knowledge is a manifestation of reciprocity (Whitt 2004). In this sense, HE is an essential platform for knowledge sharing and preserving the knowledge system. Also, the reciprocity orientation influences the practices of TCUs and American Indian programs housed by mainstream colleges and universities. Culturally responsive education is an essential means of developing indigenous knowledge systems and achieving the success of AIAN education (Brayboy et al. 2012), because culturally responsive education values students' backgrounds, treats their cultures as strengths, and reflects on and utilizes their indigenous learning styles (Gollnick and Chinn 2009).

### Characteristics of Chinese ethnic minority higher education

CEM HE refers to post-secondary education that serves EM students and areas. CEM HE has a robust political underpinning, which is reflected in its importance to national unity and stability. Also, the rapid economic development of Chinese society in recent decades has exerted significant positive and unintended influences on CEM HE. Finally, the centralized educational system has led to several notable drawbacks of CEM HE.

### Pluralist-unity framework

The Pluralist-Unity Framework is the guiding philosophy adopted by the Chinese government to deal with ethnic affairs. Renowned historian Fei (1989) first used this framework to describe the basic pattern of ethnic relations in Chinese history. The Pluralist-Unity Framework contains two levels. One is the national level of ethnic affairs, which emphasizes political unity; the other is the level of EM groups, which emphasizes cultural diversity in languages, religions, and customs (Ma 2006). Within this theoretical framework, CEM HE has two functions. One is to facilitate the educational development, and the other is to promote the unity of all EM groups (Gan and Peng 2012). The Pluralist-Unity Framework has shown the Chinese government's respect for EM cultures, which has been valuable for creating a favorable environment for EM students to invest and apply cultural capital gained from their ethnic backgrounds (Yan et al. 2015). Also, according to this framework, some CEM groups are empowered to highlight their unique characteristics in the HE system. However, these efforts are difficult to be realized within China's centralized educational system (Clothey and Hu 2015) but provide a significant insight that diversity should be respected (Chen 2004).

### Multicultural education in a centralized education system

EM education in China is multicultural or cross-cultural education. However, there are many problems in multicultural education in a centralized education system. The National Higher Education Entrance Examination (NHEEE) system is the embodiment of the centralized education system. Although the Chinese government has put forward the *Min Kao Min* policy since 1981, that is, if EM students choose to attend ethnic programs at HEIs, they can use their mother-tongue languages in the NHEEE, only several EM groups with large populations can benefit from this policy, such as the Mongol and Korean Chinese (Wang 2016). Moreover, very few EM students can enter prestigious universities through the *Min Kao Min* policy. Therefore, many EM students turn to Mandarin learning at an early age, thus giving up on their multicultural education altogether (Hasmath 2011).

Since its foundation, the Chinese government has stated the significance of EM cultures and languages. Each group is free to use their languages, both written and spoken, in life and educational settings. The Chinese government has implemented a bilingual education policy for EM students, which involves Mandarin plus an EM language. However, multilingual education in China is facing many challenges and obstacles, one of which is that ethnic languages, as well as talented bilingual students, do not receive enough recognition from society. From the perspective of cultural capital,



this problem is generated by the issue of transferring ethnic languages into capital that can bring financial and social status benefits for EM students (Ye et al. 2017).

### Common challenges for TCUs and EMSIs

Existing literature has shown that TCUs and EMSIs encounter some common challenges related to institutional identities, financial constraints, and student preparation for the mainstream workforce. First, TCUs and EMSIs often deal with explicit and implicit narrow definitions of institutional success, which is evident in HE accreditation processes in the US and the general trend of institutional development in China. TCUs define their success in nation-building, language revitalization, personal student growth, and increasing sovereignty (Brayboy et al. 2012), which are quite different from traditional criteria of HE institutional success such as enrollment and graduation rates and institutional rankings (Stull et al. 2015). Also, non-Native accreditation agencies often ignore (and do not fully understand) the many unique characteristics of TCUs (Crazybull 2009; Randall 2014; Willeto 2014). In China, there is no operational definition of EMSI. Moreover, economic development and educational reforms have significantly changed student demographics within EMSIs, especially the decrease of EM students, which has generated mission and identity challenges (Choi 2010). Also, within the HE policy context driven by the national goals and projects (Clothey and Hu 2015), there is an ongoing trend where many Chinese HEIs strive to become comprehensive universities, which has become a threat to the distinctive ethnic features of EMSIs (Lei 2010; Meng 2016).

Second, TCUs and EMSIs tend to be underfunded compared to other mainstream HEIs (Stein 2009; Wei 2012; Xu 2012). TCUs have been one group of the most underfunded HEIs in the US because they often do not receive state tax financial support and instead depend heavily on federal funding that is not always sustainable (Clement 2009; Stull et al. 2015). Also, the growth in enrollments of non-AIAN students worsens the underfunding situation for TCUs (Clement 2009). Finally, TCUs are at a disadvantage in securing competitive grants because of a lack of competent grant-writing staff (Stull et al. 2015). In China, EMSIs heavily rely on public funding from both the national and local governments. However, most EMSIs are low in institutional rankings, which limit their access to significant government funding. Moreover, most EMSIs serve remote areas where local governments have insufficient funding abilities (Xu and Wang 2013).

Third, it is a common problem for many AIAN and CEM graduates to secure jobs after graduation in the mainstream workforce. The economies in both countries have created an environment that places greater value on

mainstream cultures and languages, which in turn lessens the value of indigenous languages, cultures, and identities in the job market (Jacob 2015). Therefore, many ethnic students choose to pursue HE degrees in mainstream languages, which can bring them real benefits in school and the job market. From this perspective, the economy and mainstream cultures and languages in many ways combine to endanger the preservation of ethnic languages and cultures (Xiong et al. 2016).

### Conclusive remarks

Given the existing literature, this section has synthesized the characteristics of AIAN and CEM HE, as well as the common challenges faced by TCUs and EMSIs. However, these summaries come from the general situations of both types of institutions, and it is worthy of an in-depth investigation of individual and representative TCUs and EMSIs on their challenges and responses. Therefore, in addition to what has been known regarding the challenges of TCUs and EMSIs, this study aims to look into the two case institutions on how they conquer challenges when playing their roles of serving their students and communities. While this case study can provide further empirical evidence to the existing literature, some insights derived from the contextualized situations have also appeared.

### Research design

As Fig. 1 predicts, the central research question is divided into three sub-questions regarding institutional roles, challenges, and responses. Guided by the sub-questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with senior administrators from two institutions and content area experts (CAEs) in AIAN and CEM HE to collect data. The interview is an appropriate way to have an in-depth understanding of study participants' practical experiences and perceptions of TCUs, EMSIs, and AIAN and CEM HE in general, which will be the primary data source to answer the central research question. Meanwhile, through a content analysis approach, we examined the Diné College mission and vision statements and Yanbian University charter and profile regarding the espoused and actual institutional roles.

The central research question and its divided three sub-questions have been answered by the empirical data collected from the interviews with senior administrators of case institutions and CAEs, as well as the content analysis of relevant documents. Moreover, the response to the comparison question is demonstrated by the discussion section in this article, which interprets the differences and similarities on two case institutions' roles, challenges, and responses,

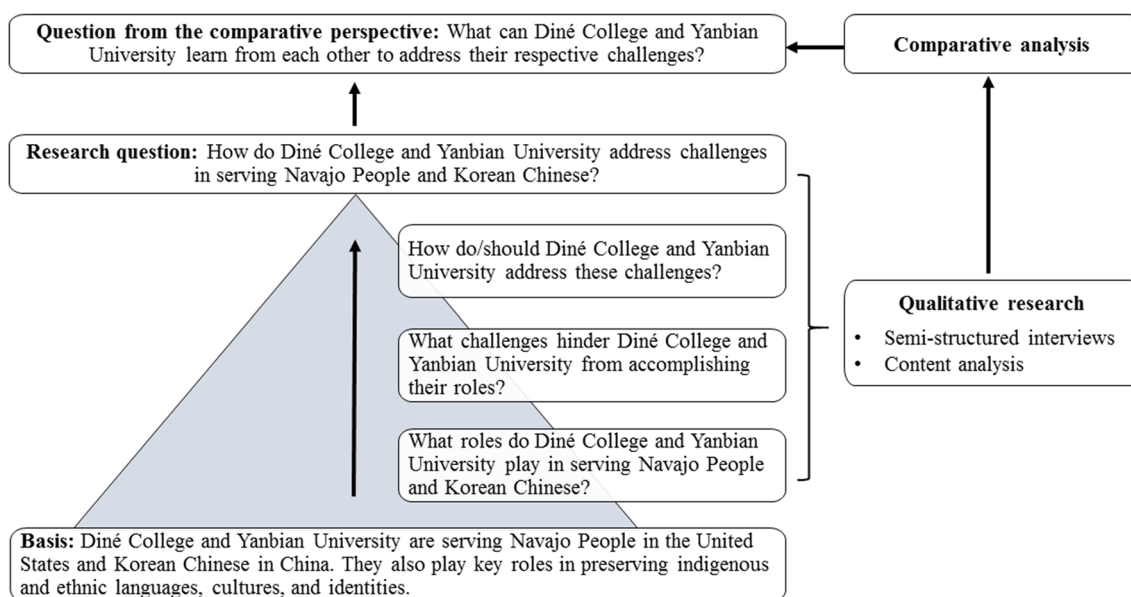


Fig. 1 Analysis framework

and how they can apply each other's experiences in their contexts.

## Data collection

As discussed previously, semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary data collection method in this study. Interview questions explored participants' perspectives on the roles, facilitating factors, challenges, and responses of Diné College, Yanbian University, and general TCUs and EMSIs. Interviews with participants from the US and China were conducted at the same time period, and the interview languages were English and Mandarin based on specific situations.

Guided by an institution-level focus, this study identified the first group of study participants as TCU and EMSI administrators who are relevant to the institutional development strategies. These individuals include presidents, vice presidents for institutional development, provosts, school deans, and department chairpersons. Most of their contact information was obtained in the public domain through their respective institutional websites, and some interview participants also provided the personal contact information for other potential interviewees. The second group of study participants includes content area experts (CAEs) with expertise in AIAN and CEM HE, whose contact information was retrieved during the literature review process. CEAs are important informants in this study because they provide perspectives outside of the TCUs and EMSIs.

Using the purposive and snowball sampling approaches, researchers invited 80 potential study participants. Finally,

a total of 34 interviewees participated in this study, among whom 17 were from the side of TCUs and AIAN HE, and 17 were from the side of EMSIs and CEM HE. Table 1 presents interviewees' administrative positions and areas of expertise of the participating CAEs. We assigned a unique code to each interviewee to maintain anonymity. Each unique code consists of two parts. The first is a two-letter label referring to the interviewee group. "DC" refers to Diné College, and "YU" refers to Yanbian University. A second part is a two-digit number referring to the order of interviewees participating in this study. For example, "DC02" means the second interviewee for Diné College who participated in this study, and "YU07" means the seventh interviewee for Yanbian University. Before data collection, this study obtained the approval to conduct interviews from the University of Pittsburgh Internal Review Board.

## Data analysis

In this study, all interviewees signed a consent form to allow the researcher to record the interviews. After the transcription of interviews, qualitative data were stored, cleaned, organized, and coded using the NVivo qualitative research software. Guided by the research questions, the coding process went through three rounds. The first-round open coding gave researchers a general sense of the responses to the research questions. In the following two rounds of coding, researchers formed and finalized the themes under the three categories "institutional roles and facilitating factors," "challenges," and "responses and exemplary practices and strategies." After finalizing

**Table 1** Interviewees and their administrative positions or areas of expertise

Interviewees	Titles	Administrative positions or areas of expertise
DC01	Doctor	Senior administrator of Diné College
DC02	Associate professor	Former member of Board of Regents, Diné College
DC03	Professor	CAE-Minority-serving institutions in the US
DC04	Doctor	CAE-TCU history
DC05	Doctor	CAE-Former AIHEC President
DC06	Professor	CAE-AIAN students' persistence in HE
DC07	Doctor	CAE-Indigenous education and TCU; Former TCU President
DC08	Doctor	CAE-TCU funding
DC09	Doctor	CAE-Former TCU President
DC10	Professor	CAE-AIAN HE
DC11	Professor	CAE-AIAN and indigenous education
DC12	Doctor	CAE-TCU senior administrator
DC13	Doctor	CAE-TCU senior administrator
DC14	Doctor	CAE-TCU senior administrator
DC15	Ms	CAE-TCU senior administrator
DC16	Doctor	CAE-TCU senior administrator
DC17	Ms	CAE-TCU senior administrator
YU01	Professor/director	Senior administrator of Yanbian University
YU02	Professor	Research center administrator at Yanbian University
YU03	Professor	Research center administrator at Yanbian University
YU04	Associate professor	Research center administrator at Yanbian University
YU05	Professor	CAE-CEM HE policies
YU06	Associate professor	CAE-HE for Xinjiang Uygur people; Minzu University of China
YU07	Doctor	CAE-EM language issues in Chinese HE
YU08	Associate Professor	CAE-CEM HE policies; Minzu University of China
YU09	Professor	CAE-CEM HE policies; HE for Mongol Chinese
YU10	PhD candidate	CAE-Organizational structure of EMSIs
YU11	Associate professor	CAE-CEM HE policies and EMSIs
YU12	Professor/dean	CAE-EMSI senior administrator
YU13	Professor	CAE-CEM HE policies
YU14	Professor/dean	CAE-EMSI senior administrator
YU15	Professor/dean	CAE-EMSI senior administrator
YU16	Professor	CAE-CEM education theories
YU17	Professor	CAE-HE for Mongol Chinese

the data coding and forming themes, we conducted a comparative analysis between Diné College and Yanbian University to explore the commonalities and differences regarding the three categories. Researchers applied the triangulation approach to ensure the quality of data analysis, including peer checking of formed themes and referring to the relevant documents like strategic plan reports of case institutions for information on their development.

The following three sections present and compare empirical data to respond to three research questions on “institutional roles and facilitating factors,” “challenges,” and “responses and exemplary practices and strategies.”

The discussion section examines the similarities and differences of two case institutions and explores the ways of learning from each other.

### **Institutional roles and facilitating factors**

This section answers the research question “What roles do Diné College and Yanbian University play in serving the Navajo People and Korean Chinese?” In addition, the facilitating factors for two institutions to play their roles are discussed and compared.

## Diné college

Diné College plays a vital nation-building role, much like other TCUs do (DC04; DC08), including providing culturally relevant HE (DC05; DC10; DC16), preserving Navajo culture, language, traditions, and values (DC01; DC03; DC11), and serving the local community (DC02; DC04). As the mission statement of Diné College reads, “Rooted in Diné language and culture, our mission is to advance quality post-secondary student learning and development to ensure the well-being of the Diné People” (Diné College 2017, p. 9).

Interviewees argued that external facilitating factors for TCUs include the importance of tribally controlled status and sufficient and sustainable funding sources (DC03; DC04; DC09). The internal facilitating factors include four aspects—the location of TCUs (DC06; DC10), synergistic partnerships with mainstream HEIs and other TCUs (DC02; DC04), tribal cultures (DC10; DC11), and competent institutional leadership (DC08). In specific, Diné College’s location on the Navajo Reservation was highlighted as a huge plus by most interviewees (DC01; DC02; DC10). Because of its location, Diné College can better serve their students who do not want to leave their home to attend mainstream HEIs. “Navajos and non-Navajos can go to college without leaving the Navajo Reservation. Navajos live on the reservation and have not had to leave since the establishment of the College in 1968” (DC01). Also, the relatively low cost of tuition or affordability was another factor emphasized by several interviewees (DC10; DC11). “The factor is the cost of education. Like right now at Diné College, we charge \$55 per credit hour at most schools. That is a huge factor for Navajos who may not have a high paying job” (DC01).

## Yanbian University

As the only comprehensive research university in the Yanbian Korean Chinese Autonomous Prefecture, Yanbian University has played a significant role in providing a quality HE to Korean Chinese students and serving local communities. “One of our strategies is to keep the rate of ethnic minority students at 40%. Meanwhile, we have also offered the Preparatory Program, which serves around 200 ethnic minority students every year” (YU01). Yanbian University emphasizes its ethnic characteristics through its College of Korean Studies and research centers that focus on Korean Chinese literature and language, arts, and history (YU02; YU03; YU04).

Many interviewees argued that within the highly centralized Chinese HE system, government support is the most significant factor that finances and facilitates the development of EMSIs (YU06; YU07; YU08; YU09; YU10; YU12). “In China, there are special policies regarding

enrollment and financial support to help ethnic minority students get into schools and be successful” (YU06). In addition to the national and provincial policies that have created a supportive environment for Yanbian University, two particular facilitating factors make it stand out among all EMSIs in China.

The first factor is the strong basic education system in Yanbian Prefecture (YU01; YU02; YU03; YU04). Korean Chinese are widely regarded for educational achievements in China (Xiong et al. 2016). Comparing to the 9-year compulsory education implemented nationwide in China, since 2015, Yanbian has realized the 15-year compulsory education. “The 15-year basic education has set up a great foundation for Yanbian University regarding the human resource, student resource, and culture resource capacity” (YU01). The second factor is the geographic location (YU01; YU02; YU07). Yanbian University benefits from its relationships to the Korean Peninsula countries, especially South Korea, which has the same ethnic origin as Korean Chinese. South Korea offers workforce opportunities for many Korean Chinese students. These opportunities are geographically reciprocal, benefitting Koreans in China as well as in South Korea (Jacob and Park 2011). The relationship with South Korea also helps maintain the vitalization of the Korean language within China because it is necessary for economic and daily life (YU07).

## Comparative analysis

### Institutional roles

The primary role of Diné College and Yanbian University is to accomplish their dual missions in providing HE opportunities to EM students and in preserving their languages, cultures, and identities. However, each institution has different emphases due to its historical, political, and HE systemic contexts. First, tribal nation-building was widely recognized by interviewees as the most critical role for Diné College and TCUs, which has also been supported by the literature (Brayboy et al. 2012; Cornell and Kalt 2003; Helton 2003/2004; Stull et al. 2015). For Yanbian University and EMSIs, interviewees emphasized the importance of the institution in the political and economic development of EM areas as a critical area of community engagement (Clothey 2005; Jacob et al. 2015a, b).

Regarding the specific role of providing HE opportunities to EM students, interviewees of Diné College and TCUs emphasized the importance of access to a “culturally-relevant HE” (DC05; DC10; DC16), which is also called a “culturally responsive education” in the literature (Brayboy et al. 2012; Gollnick and Chinn 2009). Chinese interviewees also recognized this important role but also talked about the



importance of providing greater “HE access” to all Chinese students regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. This difference shows the degree of engagement of the cultural aspects in degrees offered and also in the curricular focus at TCUs and EMSIs. Diné College places a greater emphasis on integrating indigenous cultures and philosophies of learning and knowing into programs, curricula, and institutional management. For Yanbian University, primarily because of the centralized HE system, the program and curricular structures and requirements follow national standards. Within EMSIs, ethnic languages and cultures are usually taught as a subject (Lin and Chen 2017).

Compared to the relatively stable roles of TCUs as is reflected in their mission and vision statements, the roles of EMSIs are much more dependent on and influenced by the changes of Chinese HE system. In addition to its dual mission, Diné College also focuses on tribal nation-building and community engagement. For Yanbian University, besides its traditional three functions (talent training, scientific research, and social service), some scholars are discussing new roles such as the transformation of knowledge, promotion of employment, life-long education, and internationalization (Jacob and Park 2011; Wang 2012). From a positive perspective, the continually updating roles of EMSIs can help them keep up with the development of Chinese HE and society. However, it may also bring more burdens upon EMSIs to truly meet the needs of Korean Chinese students in preserving their ethnic language, cultures, and identities (Clothey and Hu 2015).

### Facilitating factors

When covering the facilitating factors for Diné College and Yanbian University, many interviewees discussed issues related to their respective political and policy contexts. Diné College is tribally controlled but also dependent on funding from the federal government. Yanbian University is governed by national policies on EM HE and receives sustained funding from national and local provincial sources. TCUs continue to have political and financial support from a series of laws approved by the US Congress, such as the *Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act* and the *Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act*. For Yanbian University, the political environment is founded on the national laws and policies of EM HE, like the preferential policies for EM students in HE access. A significant body of Chinese literature has treated the national policies as the most crucial reason for the development of EMSIs (Clothey 2005; Clothey and Hu 2015; Zhang 2011), which is also reflected in the responses of interviewees. Despite government policies that, in theory, promote language learning and cultural preservation, other factors often intervene and

prevent these policies from reaching fruition (Jacob 2015; Park and Jacob 2011).

Regarding the internal facilitating factors, interviewees showed more disparities than similarities. First, the internal facilitating factors for Diné College were closely related to the inherent characteristics of the institution and tribe. For example, the on-reservation location of Diné College is crucial to community engagement. While Yanbian University locates in a strategic geographic location within the nexus of the majority of the Korean Chinese population, we also recognize that internal facilitating factors are primarily based on and related to national policies. This latter argument reflects the perception that EMSIs are largely policy-oriented institutions. While the government and some scholars keep emphasizing the importance of the ethnic characteristics (Zhong and Lei 2017), there is a growing trend among EMSIs toward balancing their characteristics as ethnic *and* regular HEIs (Ou 2017; Zhang 2017). Several interviewees argued that EMSIs should continue to focus on this trend because regular HEI status can bring much-needed additional resources, which can jointly be applied to accomplish their goals in primarily serving EM students and communities. Second, the emphasis on the location has its differences. For Diné College, being located on reservations means an ability to offer immediate services to their students and communities. In comparison, for Yanbian University, the location factor stresses the available resources. Next to the Korean Peninsula, Yanbian University can benefit from the ethnic connections to help their students find employment opportunities and better preserve their language, culture, and identities (Xiong et al. 2016).

### Challenges

This section answers the research question, “What challenges hinder Diné College and Yanbian University from accomplishing their roles?” Also, the similarities and differences of challenges faced by two institutions are discussed.

#### Diné College

Like other TCUs, the first challenge faced by Diné College is inadequate funding (DC05; DC08; DC10; DC11). “Funding is always the thumb because we are not funded to full capacity” (DC01). Second, student readiness for HE is another challenge (DC03; DC09). Because of the unpreparedness of students, Diné College has invested many financial and human resources to the remedial education programs, which further exacerbates the funding situation for Diné College. “In our case, we spend about 2.5 million dollars on remedial education for all of our students. That is quite a bit for the budget that is about 20 million or so” (DC01). Finally,

because of the lack of sufficient funding, Diné College also faces the challenge of the lack of sufficient facilities (DC05; DC08; DC11). Notably, the limitation on technology hinders Diné College from developing online education programs (DC01).

Diné College also faces some unique challenges because of its geographical and institutional situations. First, Diné College must deal with the high competition for student sources from the HEIs on or around the Navajo Reservation while not placing enough emphasis on the uniqueness in program offering. “When you look at [Diné College’s] degree programs and options, they do not believe that they make themselves more unique in offering programs different from other community colleges. It looks more like a traditional community college than a tribal college or university. So, they often end up competing with other community colleges. That is why they lose a lot of their students” (DC02). Second, an interviewee (DC02) suggested that Diné College should update its mission and vision to better meet the emerging needs of the Navajo Nation, which is particularly vital for them to maintain unique tribal characteristics.

### Yanbian University

Yanbian University faces some challenges such as regular HEIs and other EMSIs in China, as well as unique ones. First, Yanbian University needs to adapt to the changing HE policy environment to fully benefit from the new policies. The trends of massification, marketization, and internationalization of HE keep influencing the Chinese HEIs (Mok and Han 2017; Yang 2014), and EMSIs are inevitably involved in this process. “The Chinese higher education system is undergoing a restructuring process. Therefore, in the current complex situation, the biggest challenge faced by Yanbian University is to update and improve the institutional development strategies and finally, to become a high-level university with evident ethnic characteristics” (YU01). However, within this national policy-driven HE context, the ethnic characteristics are weakened (Clothey and Hu 2015).

Second, Yanbian University struggles to integrate academic resources by breaking down disciplinary silos and promoting interdisciplinary collaborations (YU01; YU03; YU04). Third, because of its remote location in China, it is challenging for Yanbian University to recruit and retain high-level faculty members (YU01; YU04). Fourth, the total amount of financial resources is inadequate for the full development of Yanbian University to achieve the full potential of its designated mission (YU01). Moreover, compared with those mainstream HEIs directly administrated and financially supported by China’s Ministry of Education, Yanbian University heavily relies on the provincial and local governments, whose priorities are more than education. In this sense, the current financial resources of Yanbian University

are only available on a short-term basis and hard to predict in the competition with other public service sectors (YU01). Finally, the IT capacity in terms of faculty skills and infrastructure is relatively low at Yanbian University (YU02).

Yanbian University also faces challenges related to the relationship between Korean Chinese and South Korea (YU01). The geographic positioning of South Korea nearby is a distinct advantage to develop education and preserve the Korean language, culture, and identity. However, South Korea also causes some brain drain of China’s brightest HE graduates from Yanbian University.

### Comparative analysis

Diné College and Yanbian University face many more challenges than facilitating factors in realizing their institutional roles. Many of the challenges can also be viewed as facilitating factors, which causes some complexities in our analysis. However, it also provides some insights about TCUs and EMSIs to better understand and eventually overcome these types of challenges.

The primary external challenge faced by Diné College is the unstable and mostly single-source of funding strategy. While the available funding sources are also viewed as a facilitating factor for TCUs to establish and develop, the uncertain status of these funds is a significant challenge to establish new programs and meet emerging needs of AIAN students and communities based on economic trends and workforce demands (Clement 2009; Jacob et al. 2015a, b; Stull et al. 2015). In Comparison, Yanbian University faces challenges about pervading national EM policies. In addition to the changing HE context (Mok and Han 2017; Yang 2014), there are often controversial perceptions on the preferential policies extended to EMs in HE, especially considering Han students who live in EM and rural areas who are poor and struggling to obtain a HE degree. These students are prevented from being able to enjoy the same preferential treatment afforded to EM students (Feng and Cheung 2010).

Many US and Chinese interviewees discussed some internal challenges related to students, albeit their responses varied in placing emphases on these challenges. For instance, Diné College deals with more challenges related to low student enrollments and readiness upon reaching the college (Nguyen et al. 2015), while Yanbian University is focused heavily on student success in HE (Ye et al. 2017). The trend in China for HEIs to become comprehensive institutions gradually diminishes the focus on EM programs within EMSIs. Many scholars argue that this trend significantly reduces the ethnic characteristics of EMSIs (Clothey and Hu 2015; Lei 2010; Meng 2016). If comparing this situation to Diné College (that succeeds in many ways in integrating the Navajo culture and philosophy into its organizational

operation and program delivery), Yanbian University has room for significant improvement in the delivery of its EM programs.

Even though both case institutions face various challenges, the challenges force them to adapt and innovate to overcome these challenges. These challenges can, therefore, be viewed as valuable learning organization experiences and each institution with opportunities to grow. Just as the administrator of Diné College stated, “These are the challenges that we are facing, but these challenges are what we want. Because we have these challenges, it means we are still around, and we are still here. If we are not faced with them, it means we are done, and we are not around anymore. Because we have them, and they are difficult, we can take confidence in addressing them” (DC01).

### **Institutional responses: exemplary strategies and practices**

One of the objectives of this study is to present appropriate strategies and good practices, which can add to the depth of understanding of how best to serve Navajo and Korean Chinese students. To answer the research question “How do Diné College and Yanbian University address these challenges?” the strategies and practices of Diné College and TCUs highlighted by interviewees primarily focus on the institutional level, while the strategies and practices shared by the interviewees of Yanbian University and EMSIs mainly focus on responses to national policies. Two exemplary programs are also presented in this section.

Most TCUs are adopting a student-centered strategy (DC10; DC 13; DC17). Many challenges Diné College faces are related to students, such as declining enrollments, students being either unprepared or underprepared for college, low retention rate, and unsatisfying employment following graduation. The need-based strategy in community service and outreach is another strategy highlighted by interviewees (DC03; DC17) and is aligned with best practice community engagement in HE strategies (Jacob et al. 2015a, b). This strategy reflects the close relationship that exists between Diné College and the Navajo Nation. Moreover, even though Diné College is a 4-year college primarily offering associate degree programs, it is also engaged in meaningful research activities to meet tribal needs and address local social issues (DC13; DC14). In comparison, interviewees of Yanbian University and EMSIs mentioned much about national policies, because, in the centralized HE system, the government bears the responsibility to address the inequalities that exist in HE access for EM students. In specific, interviewees shared some good practices under the guidance of national policies and the government-initiated missions, include the Preparatory Program (YU01; YU06), the Free

Normal Higher Education Program (YU01), and the Partnership Assistance Program (YU01; YU09; YU11).

Regarding cultural preservation, which is an important side of the dual missions of Diné College and Yanbian University, both groups of interviewees provided some similar responses. They felt it was critical to establish required programs in Navajo and Korean languages and cultures (DC04; DC12; DC17; YU06; YU08 YU12). However, interviewees also shared different perspectives on how best to accomplish this preservation. For Diné College, interviewees stressed that their institution integrates the tribal cultures into the curriculum design and delivery and institutional management. For Yanbian University, interviewees highlighted ethnic research as the main venue to preserve cultures. In specific, in addition to the College of Korean Studies, Yanbian University has established various research centers that focus on the preservation of Korean language and culture.

### **Diné College: summer research enhancement program**

Many interviewees highlighted the efforts of TCUs in promoting research (DC04; DC08; DC13). As the only center of HE in a given tribe, most TCUs have devoted many resources to research. “The area of research, especially community-based and culturally grounded research, is a fascinating model of exemplary success. They are doing something that no other colleges are doing in those areas” (DC08).

One example of Diné College on the community-based and culturally grounded research is the Summer Research Enhancement Program (SREP). As a part of Diné College’s public health bachelor’s program, this 10-week program has two specific goals. One is “to provide health-related research training and research experiences to Native American students,” and the other is “to provide students with a firm grasp of the health and living concepts embedded in traditional Native American life, how they relate to those taught in Western academia” (Diné College 2018b). Furthermore, SREP aims to cultivate students with first-hand experiences, skills, and interests in prevention research and finally prepare them for community-based research projects at Diné College or other HEIs. As a community-based research program, in addition to the academic and research training on public health, SREP focuses on strengthening cultural identity and connectedness with the community and developing students’ self-confidence and self-efficacy skills. Meanwhile, as a culturally grounded program, SREP is deeply rooted in the Navajo culture, especially the Diné educational philosophy (Diné College 2018b).

**Table 2** A comparison table of key findings

	Similarities	Differences	
		Diné College	Yanbian University
Institutional roles	Dual missions: providing HE and preserving language and culture	Other mission: tribal nation-building (self-determination and reliance) Providing culturally relevant HE	Other missions: ethnic unity; internationalization, knowledge transformation, etc Providing HE in general sense
Facilitating factors	Favorable political and policy contexts	Tribally controlled status	National policies and strong basic education system
	Geographic location	Service-oriented: on-reservation location, easy to serve local students and community	Resource-based: access to more resources
Challenges	Funding issues	Unstable and undiversified funding streams	Short-term based funding
	External challenges	Competition from other HEIs around Navajo Reservation	Constant changing HE policy priorities
	Student-related	Focus: student enrollment and readiness	Focus: student success and employment
Strategies and good practices	Making efforts	Institutional-level strategies and practices (student-centered; need-based; community-based)	Responses to national policy priorities (government-initiated programs)
	Culture preservation: emphasizing ethnic programs	Integration of tribal philosophies of learning and knowing to institutional governance	Ethnic programs (College of Korean Studies) and research centers

### Yanbian University: graduate internship program

The Graduate Internship Program (GIP) of Yanbian University's College of Normal Education stands out among the strategies and practices shared by interviewees about EMSIs. GIP is a mandatory program for all master's students that requires students to serve as a student–teacher intern in local kindergartens, primary schools, or middle schools for 12 weeks. “Their school internship includes both Korean Chinese schools and Han schools; Korean Chinese master's students are assigned to Korean Chinese schools” (YU01). During the internship period, some students receive a salary and a stipend to cover their living and transportation costs. After completing the internship, students are required to submit an evaluative report about their experiences.

GIP is highlighted as an exemplary model because it enables Yanbian University to accomplish its institutional mission in several ways. First, GIP helps train EM teachers by providing EM students with opportunities to gain professional teaching experience. Second, participating students research their master's theses on topics relevant to local educational needs, and mainly related to the educational needs of Korean Chinese. Third, the GIP helps reduce the number of unqualified basic education-level teachers, especially bilingual and trilingual (Korean, Mandarin, and English) teachers.

### Discussion: what can two institutions learn from each other?

The previous three sections juxtapose and synthesize the themes that were derived from the data analysis of Diné College and Yanbian University regarding their institutional roles, facilitating factors, challenges, and responses. This discussion section will answer the comparison question, “What can Diné College and Yanbian University learn from each other to address their respective challenges?”

Before addressing this research question, it is necessary to review the similarities and differences of Diné College and Yanbian University. A comparison table is often used in qualitative comparative studies to visually display a summary of key findings (Creswell 2012). As Table 2 depicts, Diné College and Yanbian University face some common roles (dual missions), facilitating factors (favorable policy support and geographic location), and challenges (funding issues, external challenges, and student-related challenges). Also, both institutions have made efforts to play their roles in providing HE and emphasized the importance of ethnic programs in the preservation of Navajo and Korean Chinese cultures and languages.

Meanwhile, the differences between Diné College and Yanbian University in the four aspects are prominent, which are deeply rooted in their distinguished political contexts. In the US, the government-to-government relationship between Navajo Nation and the US federal government (Cornell and



Kalt 2010) determines that Diné College has to contribute to the independence of Navajo Nation while cannot leave the financial support from the federal government, which take more than the 60% of the total institutional revenue (Diné College 2017). In China, Yanbian University plays an implicit but internalized role in maintaining the ethnic unity of Korean Chinese, which can originate from the first group of EMSIs in the early 1950s (Ma 2006). In addition, as a public university in China's centralized HE system, Yanbian University focuses on national policy priorities because they mean the financial resources and policy support. Therefore, the changes of Chinese HE like massification, marketization, and internationalization have influenced all HEIs (Mok and Han 2017; Yang 2014), also Yanbian University and other EMSIs. These very different political contexts explain the different extra roles of two institutions that Diné College focuses on tribal nation-building and Yanbian University follows the national HE policy priorities, as well as their efforts of responding to the challenges.

In addition, the institutional scales including student and faculty size and numbers of disciplines and programs of Diné College and Yanbian University provide the explanation to some differences. As a comprehensive university within a trend in which HEIs are striving to achieve and maintain their comprehensive status, Yanbian University finds it hard to just keep its focus on the Korean Chinese characteristics (Lei 2010; Meng 2016). Even through the College of Korean Studies is serving the preservation purpose, it is impossible to spread the EM-related programs to the whole student body of more than 20,000 people. This situation can explain why Yanbian University focuses on research to preserve Korean culture and language. Different from Yanbian University, Diné College is much smaller in scale, which makes it possible to cover the whole institution with Navajo culture and tradition. Also, locating in cultural and political environment of Navajo Reservation, Diné College is able to design and implement its programs freely to reflect their culture and philosophy. Furthermore, Yanbian University's comprehensive status can attract top secondary graduates in China while a big part of Diné College students are non-traditional. The different student sources explain the different student-related challenges for Diné College and Yanbian University.

In this sense, regarding the question about Diné College and Yanbian University learning from each other, it needs to be very careful not to generalize the situations in two very different political and social contexts. However, each institution indeed sheds some lights on how to preserve indigenous and ethnic cultures and languages for their counterparts. In specific, Diné College's efforts and practices of integrating their culture and philosophy into every aspect of the college is a good example that Yanbian University can carefully consider to deeply integrate Korean Chinese culture

into the teaching, learning, research, and community service, instead of isolating the efforts to the College of Korean Studies and research centers. Meanwhile, Diné College can get some insights from Yanbian University's efforts in pursuing available resources and promoting their influences, like Yanbian University's exemplary role in EM education in China (Xiong et al. 2016). Generally, it is important for Diné College to keep an open mind for the external environment for opportunities.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Diné College and Yanbian University play significant roles in providing HE opportunities to Navajo and Korean Chinese students, as well as in preserving their respective languages, cultures, and identities. From both historical and political contexts, two institutions have different emphases in accomplishing their missions. While both institutions enjoy some similar facilitating factors—including the favorable external environment and their characteristics and efforts—they also face many challenges, including the funding issues and student-related challenges regarding readiness and success. However, challenges can be viewed as opportunities to grow. They increase their confidence as they overcome these challenges through their collective and persistent efforts. Diné College and Yanbian University present some exemplary strategies and practices, which demonstrate the high potential of their contributions to the well-being of their students and communities. From a comparative perspective, the efforts of Diné College and Yanbian University in addressing challenges have different approaches and emphases because of their respective political and HE contexts. Diné College has an institutional-level focus to solve its challenges and problems and continues to address these issues through a set of successful strategies and practices. In comparison, Yanbian University primarily focuses on efforts to take better advantage and leverage of resources made available through national policies.

The important implication of this comparative study of Diné College and Yanbian University, we argue, is that TCUs and EMSIs should be keeping an open mind for the mainstream society and HE system. While they can be the obstacle to the preservation of indigenous and ethnic languages and culture, they also provides the opportunities or markets for AIAN tribes in the US and CEM groups in China. With the inevitable connections with mainstream society through politics, economy, and even technology, AIAN tribes and CEM groups should embrace the trend but apply a strategic approach to exert their influences, which will in turn help preserve their cultures and languages. The role model status of Korean Chinese education in China is a good example. In addition, we argue this comparative study



can showcase the value of comparison of ethnic minority groups' efforts in offering culturally relevant education and preserving ethnic and indigenous cultures and languages. Globalization can be a barrier for native language and culture preservation, but it can also serve as an advantage for each AIAN and CEM group to be more open and learn from other groups in different countries and contexts.

Finally, the limitation of this study is identified as the lack of voices from other stakeholders of Diné College and Yanbian University. Instead of only the senior administrators and CAEs in the areas of indigenous and ethnic education, faculty members and students of Diné College and Yanbian University can provide some down-to-earth perspectives about the development of two institutions, as well as their efforts of preserving Navajo and Korean Chinese cultures and languages. These limitations also provide a direction for the future research on the EM-serving HEIs in the US, China, and other countries.

**Funding** This study is supported by the Research in Diversity Program funded by the University of Pittsburgh Research Council.

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