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More Native American students to get free tuition at California universities after donation

BY ALEXANDRA YOON-HENDRICKS
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Tuition at University of California campuses will now be free to Native American students from non-federally recognized tribes in the state with the creation of a $2.5 million scholarship fund by a Northern California tribe.

The Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria created the fund, which will operate in perpetuity, to make top schools more financially accessible to Native American students in California, said tribal Chairman Greg Sarris.

Scholarships will go out starting in fall 2022. They will cover tuition and mandatory fees, as well as some professional fees in graduate programs for Native California students.

“It was important for me that all California Indians, whether in a federally recognized tribe or not, know that a door is open,” Sarris said. “We need to get our students to a level playing field, to get into this great public institution.”

The announcement of the fund Wednesday comes days after UC President Michael Drake told campus chancellors that the university system would cover the tuition and student fees of all California residents who are members of federally recognized Native American, American Indian and Alaska Native tribes starting in fall 2022.

“The University of California is committed to recognizing and acknowledging historical wrongs endured by Native Americans,” read Drake’s letter.

Planning for the scholarship fund started a few months ago, Sarris said, after Drake initiated conversations with the tribe about how to provide free tuition to all California Native American students.

Graton Rancheria is one of 110 federally recognized tribes in California, comprised of Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo Indians with lands in Sonoma County. That designation gives tribes access to a number of protections and federal benefits, as well as the power to self-govern as a domestic dependent nation.

It also allows the UC system to bypass Proposition 209, which forbids state institutions from considering race, sex, or ethnicity in public education. Because federally recognized tribes are sovereign nations, the new program Drake announced last week, called the UC Native American Opportunity Plan, is similar to scholarships designed for international students.

But there at least 55 tribes in the state that aren't federally recognized, according to a 2016 state report from the Native American Heritage Commission.

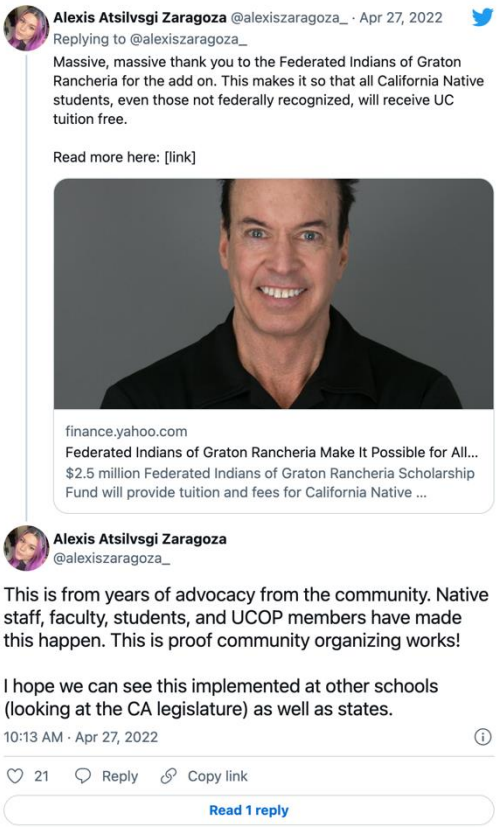
While it's unclear how many Californians are currently affiliated with non-federally recognized tribes, Sarris said a "significant" number of students would be eligible for funding.

Less than 1% of the roughly 280,000 students at the University of California identify as American Indian or Native American. And only about 2% of Native American students attending higher education institutions in California are enrolled at a UC school, according to student regent Alexis Atsilvsgi Zaragoza, with most instead going to community colleges.

But about 3.6% of Californians identify as at least part Native American or Native Alaskan, according to 2020 U.S. Census Bureau data, totaling about 1.4 million people.

Zaragoza, who is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and attends UC Berkeley, said many students don't even apply to the system because they think it will be too expensive. Historically marginalized, Native Americans have the highest poverty rate compared to other ethnic groups in the United States.

Tuition for undergraduate students who are California residents costs about $13,000 for the 2022-2023 school year.



The scholarship fund, in conjunction with the UC Native American Opportunity Plan, serve as a kind of reparation for indigenous people in California, Zaragoza said, "undoing the (historical) harm by the state."

"This kind of just tells those students, 'The UC cares about you, we want to see more of you,' " Zaragoza said.

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