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BAY AREA

UC will offer free tuition to Native American students. But not all are included

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The University of California system will fully cover in-state tuition fees for California residents who are members of federally recognized Native American, American Indian and Alaska Native tribes starting this fall, UC President Michael Drake announced in a letter to chancellors last week.

The program, called UC Native American Opportunity Plan, “will advance critical efforts to expand student diversity and make the University of California more affordable and accessible for California’s Native American undergraduate and graduate students,” Drake wrote.



A man walks through the UC Berkeley campus in Berkeley, California. The UC system will fully cover in-state tuition fees for California residents who are members of federally recognized Native American tribes starting this fall. Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

In-state tuition at UC schools is around \$13,000 per year, with \$1,400 in campus fees on top of that. Estimated housing costs for those living on campus is \$17,800. Housing is not covered by the program.

But the program, funded by a combination of existing state and university financial aid, applies only to federally recognized tribes, the letter says.

In California, there are 55 tribes that aren't federally recognized, affecting around 80,000 people — the largest group of unrecognized tribal groups and individuals of any state in the country, according to the UCLA American Indian Studies Center. These groups are unrecognized because of treaties and policy decisions made in the 19th century as well as the 1950s and '60s.

That means Californians in these tribes would not have access to funds from the UC Native American Opportunity Plan. A UC spokesperson said that the system's ability to extend the program beyond federally recognized groups was limited by legal constraints on affirmative action programs imposed by Proposition 209, passed by California voters in 1996.

Unrecognized tribes were also left out of pandemic resources like testing supplies or vaccine allocations, NPR reported last year.

But the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria will make up for the difference with a \$2.5 million scholarship fund, which will cover tuition and mandatory fees both for non-federally recognized California Native American UC students as well as any added needed support for those from federally recognized tribes, the group will announce Wednesday.

“California Native American students now have a clear path to the nation’s top public education system with no financial roadblocks,” Greg Sarris, the group’s tribal chairman said. “Inclusivity is our responsibility and we’re pleased to extend scholarships to California Native Americans from non-federally recognized tribes. We’re helping to level the playing field and provide representation in higher education for all California Native American students.”

Drake added that UC “sincerely appreciate(s) the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria” for offering scholarships to this group.

In the fall of 2021, Native Americans made up 0.5% of the UC system’s total enrollment. Native Americans make up 2.9% of the total U.S. population and 3.6% of California’s population, according to the 2020 Census.

Esmeralda Quintero-Cubillan, president of the UC Student Association and a native student, said that she is “proud to see the University of California taking a massive step in expanding access to our schools.”

“The Native American Opportunity Plan offers a promising future and I hope to see its expansion to capture state-recognized tribal nations and our Indigenous students from all of the Americas,” she added.

“The University of California is committed to recognizing and acknowledging historical wrongs endured by Native Americans,” Drake wrote in the letter to chancellors. “I am hopeful that this new program will benefit our students and continue to position the University of California as the institution of choice for Native American students.”

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