



American  
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# POLICY BRIEF

## COVID-19: The Impact of Limited Internet Access and Issues with Social Distancing for Native Students

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### Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities and other institutions of higher education across the U.S. have transitioned academic coursework to online internet platforms. However, this transition assumes that Native students have constant access to affordable, and reliable internet options. As universities move to strictly online platforms, it's important to recognize that not every student has internet access in their home communities. The assumption that Indigenous students have internet access once they return to their home communities is a grave, and unfortunate, misunderstanding. The ability to access the internet—and to have a reliable and affordable connection—may not always be the case for American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian students. We must also be aware of our Pacific Islander students from the U.S. Territories that are Indigenous peoples far from home and live in remote regions.

This Policy Brief highlights certain challenges that Indigenous students experience when the lack of internet access is compounded by social distancing policies and adversely impacts their ability to complete academic coursework or to participate in interactive online classes.

### Indigenous Life on the Disadvantaged Side of the Digital Divide

Indian Country continues to lag behind the rest of the U.S. in terms of access to high-speed, home internet service. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 2016, “More than 68 percent of Americans living on Tribal lands in rural areas lack access to advanced telecommunications capability,” (FCC, 2016) which includes high-speed internet at home.

Citing the same report, the 2018 Arizona Statewide Broadband Strategic Plan noted that “In Arizona, 162,382 people living on tribal lands (95 percent) have either unserved or underserved telecommunication infrastructure needs. They do not have access to fixed advanced telecommunications capabilities, and often resort to local (community anchor institutions, such as libraries and schools) for their only connection to the rest of the digital world” (Arizona Department of Administration, 2018).

Even when internet connections are available, disparities remain for tribes and reservation residents to access the internet. Costly and unreliable internet connections have disadvantaged tribal communities for decades. While densely populated cities and urban areas have been targeted by

telecommunications companies as competitive and sought-after markets, tribal and rural areas have historically and continually been left behind.

Last year, the American Indian Policy Institute at Arizona State University (AIPI) published the first tribally-driven quantitative and qualitative research study on internet access for residents of tribal reservations, titled: *Tribal Technology Assessment: The State of Internet Service on Tribal Lands*. The study surveyed residents of tribal reservations to determine whether the tribal members (residing on reservation lands) had access to the internet and if they were accessing the internet through a desktop/laptop computer, tablet, or smartphone.

The study found that 18 percent of tribal reservation residents have no internet access at home, wireless or land-based. Another 33 percent rely on internet service from a smartphone at home. However, the reliability of smartphone internet connections is questionable since 31 percent of respondents stated that their connection was ‘spotty’ or they had no connection at home. These findings emphasize the need for increased in-home high-speed broadband access for residents of tribal lands. Our study also found that only 12 percent of individuals residing on tribal lands access the internet through a cable subscription, which is important to note because cable internet subscriptions typically offer the highest tier of broadband speeds. Therefore, many more families on tribal lands are stuck with lower levels of connectivity. By comparison, the FCC reports that 97.9 percent of Americans residing in major metropolitan cities have access to high-speed fixed broadband services (FCC, 2018).

The disparity between those with and without access to reliable and affordable high-speed internet is often referred to as the digital divide. In the *Tribal Technology Assessment*, AIPI expands on the notion of “digital divide” to include barriers to internet availability, affordability, speed, type of access, quality of access, and location of access.

For instance, a resident on tribal lands may have internet access at their home but only through a smartphone. Worse still, their connection may be unreliable and may be throttled—or extremely limited in speed—by the telecommunications carrier because of data caps on wireless devices. Another tribal resident’s house might have the ability to receive a fixed connection, but it may be cost prohibitive. In either case, they might then have to travel long distances to reach a publicly accessible Wi-Fi spot, which may be limited in its hours of availability. This is Indigenous life on the disadvantaged side of the digital divide.

### **Indigenous Students Facing the Digital Divide**

Indigenous students have been impacted by the adverse effects of the digital divide. Disconnected students must find creative ways to get online, either relying on public Wi-Fi or internet at a friend or relative’s house. Even for students who have some internet access at home, not all access is equal or sufficient. The struggle of completing homework assignments or participating in interactive online classes is amplified for students who only access the internet through mobile smartphone internet services. It is also important to keep in mind that some technology platforms are unable to run certain programs. For instance, Chromebooks cannot run Respondus Lock Down, which is a widely used online testing application in K-12 schools and institutions of higher education.

According to a 2018 study by ACT Research and the Center for Equity in Learning, twenty percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students have access to *only* a smartphone at home, compared to 4 percent of White students. Another study from the Quello Center at Michigan State University found that, “Reliance on a cell phone alone for home Internet access has as negative an impact on student performance as having no access at all” (Quello Center, 2020). Typing papers, completing

exams, and submitting assignments on a smartphone is not, and should not become, the norm for students to complete academic assignments. Smartphones serve an important purpose for communications and internet access, but they are not the solution to fulfill standardized testing and other academic requirements.

Problems of internet speed and quality also pose challenges. Online classes often require students to view or download video presentations, and may ask them to participate in video conferencing sessions or download large data files. These data intensive forms of engagement and participation present additional barriers for Native students.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic: Increased Challenges Indigenous Students Are Experiencing**

The policies that have been put in place to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus are necessary, but they also place immense pressures on students to make the transition online and have impacted Indigenous students in three specific ways.

First, the closure of businesses and community anchor institutions such as schools and libraries—places where one would typically find access to public Wi-Fi—has left Indigenous students with even more limited options to access the internet. Under the circumstances, Indigenous students must either access the internet at their home or on their smartphone, but, as previously mentioned, some don't have that option and smartphones are inadequate to fulfill all scholastic needs.

Second, Indigenous students with home internet access may not be able to participate in the data intensive activities of online school. Poor internet service is common in Indian Country, but there are now stories from across the U.S. of internet networks that are overstressed because of the increased online activities of households with parents, children, and other relatives staying home. In Indian Country, this limited capacity is critical to public safety and emergency management services.

Third, some students are being forced to withdraw from school altogether. The reasons vary—maybe they couldn't get internet access despite all their efforts, or maybe they suffered a more severe family tragedy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even families that have a cable or DSL internet connection at home may be faced with the costs of such connectivity. If a student should have to choose between purchasing food and water or internet service, food and water wins for obvious reasons. With the increasing rise of unemployment, schools and universities have to be aware that essential needs for survival will always outweigh access to the internet. Withdrawing from school is not an easy decision to make. A college education is an investment and withdrawing has associated costs that students have to weigh against their immediate needs. Some may fear losing scholarship funding in future semesters or other penalties. Nonetheless, there are some priorities that supersede an education and college students are forced to make these decisions as we all cope with the health and economic crisis currently striking the country.

Universities and K-12 schools around the country have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by adapting their coursework to online formats. But we must be cognizant of and acknowledge the limitations of rural and tribal communities. Moreover, we must be aware that while we think of internet access as a commodity, it is still a luxury for many in rural communities because of the financial cost to stay connected.

### **Recommendations**

Arizona State University (ASU) recognizes the needs of the communities it serves locally, regionally, nationally, and abroad. As an institution of higher education, ASU has a responsibility to be socially

embedded and transform society, aiming to effectuate positive change for the communities and peoples it serves.

Digital inequities on tribal lands existed prior to the current global health crisis, but effects of our response present an opportunity for universities to creatively demonstrate their support for Indigenous students. ASU, in collaboration with Northern Arizona University and University of Arizona, is already working with Indigenous students to provide them with internet access so they can complete their coursework. In the event that the three state universities are unable to provide internet access to students, the universities should hold students harmless if they have to withdraw from classes because of extenuating circumstances related to COVID-19.

Below are three recommendations for universities tied to the challenges Indigenous students are experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- ***Provide access, where possible.*** In some cases, providing a student with a Wi-Fi hotspot device may make all the difference in helping them complete their coursework online.
- ***Faculty should be cognizant of the need to scale courses based on students' internet bandwidth.*** It may not be possible for some students to participate in data-intensive applications like streaming or video conferencing. One alternative is to provide course materials and curriculum through an asynchronous learning format. Another possibility is to send students course material pre-loaded onto a thumb drive, like a correspondence course.
- ***Finally, some students simply may not be able to continue with the semester, given the circumstances.*** Universities should consider extending a leave of absence waiver to students who have been forced to withdraw for the semester due to extenuating circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. No student should be penalized for having to withdraw due to lack of online access or health or family concerns.

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