

EDUCATION

Tohono O'odham Community College thriving as it tries to weather proposed deep cuts to tribal college funding

As local college turns 25 and experiences explosive growth, federal budget asks for a nearly 90% reduction in support



by **Shannon Conner**
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Tohono O'odham Community College is turning 25 years old. Some of its funding is under threat as the proposed federal budget includes a nearly 90% cut in funding to tribal colleges. Photo credit: Tohono O'odham Community College

SELLS — At the end of six months in a Casa Grande addiction treatment facility, Thurman Lynch knew he could not return to his Navajo Nation home. He understood he needed a purpose.

He had no steady income and few possessions. But he was sober. And looking for a new start.

A conversation at rehab revealed a buried dream: “I want to go back to school,” he said.

As a silversmith, he made some jewelry and sold it to earn gas money. That fuel took him 400 miles from his home in Hunters Point — in the northeast corner of Arizona — to Tohono O’odham Community College in Sells.



Tohono O’odham Community College student Thurman Lynch is also the president of the student congress of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium.

nearly doubled in the last five years.

There, he enrolled in school, moved into student housing and began to invest in his dream of becoming a large-animal veterinarian.

“I had never actually been here,” said Lynch, 36. “For me to leave my own reservation and come down here was an eye opener. It was culture shock. I am open to change and you have to be able to be adaptable.”

Free tuition, housing and three meals a day gave Lynch, who is Diné, the opportunity to focus on his biology degree and opened his mind to exploring beyond tribal lands.

For all students, attending college builds confidence, can illuminate a career path and generates a chance to dream big. For many tribal college students, getting to that first class is already a journey and carries generational hope.

The growth of Tohono O’odham Community College, where 91% of students use some type of grant for their education, has

And students like Lynch and the faculty and staff that support the 37 tribal colleges in the United States are under threat. Their opportunities and livelihoods could be drastically curtailed under the proposed federal budget released last week.

The Trump administration's [budget request](#) includes a nearly 88% cut in tribal college funding for next fiscal year, beginning in October. Federal funding comprises almost three-quarters of all tribal college and university funding, according to [Indian Country Today](#).

"This proposed budget ends tribal colleges. There's no other way to put it. We will close our doors," said Tohono O'odham Community College President Stephen Schoonmaker. "Even this college, which is blessed and truly wonderfully supported by the Nation, which thinks education is really important, they support us. Even with their support, we can't operate the way we've been operating."

Proposed budget could 'close tribal colleges'

"We would hope that a revised budget would reflect more of our value. ... Take the politics out of it," Schoonmaker said. "Let's remember the history of why tribal colleges exist and how we're funded. It's not discretionary funding. This is based on decades, almost century-old trust and treaty obligations between the United States government and the tribal nations that for ceding the land in perpetuity... there will be this support. That's why it's not discretionary."

[Congress passed legislation in 1978](#) saying it would fund the tribal college system and promised inflation-adjusted appropriations based on enrollment in federally recognized tribes. [ProPublica reports](#) those appropriations have consistently lagged far behind inflation.

Post-secondary education is a necessity for many Indigenous students across the country who aim to find careers and advance them with college degrees.

Yet, the schooling is in jeopardy.

In February, the Bureau of Indian Education [laid off dozens of staff](#) at two federally-operated tribal colleges — [Haskell Indian Nations University](#) in Kansas and [Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institute](#) in New Mexico. Classes were canceled because there were no instructors and students were wary.

The Native American Rights Fund [sued](#) and in April the colleges, which are not affiliated with any specific tribe, were allowed to rehire for most positions.

But the new proposed cuts include grants and the stress for students, faculty and staff continues around the country.

If the proposed budget is approved by Congress, it would devastate tribal colleges, American Indian High

Education Consortium President and CEO Ahniwake Rose [told ProPublica](#) earlier this month. “The numbers that are being proposed would close the tribal colleges,” Rose told ProPublica. “They would not be able to sustain.”

[AIHEC](#) represents tribal colleges in Washington D.C., and TOCC student Lynch is the AIHEC student congress president — a leadership position he would not have thought possible before his experience at Tohono O’odham Community College.

Speak out

To voice your opinion about the federal budget, contact your [senators](#) and [representatives](#).

As a way to give back to TOCC and to the Nation, he applied to attend the AIHEC Student Congress. He was elected as president last year and attended a [tribal summit at the White House](#) where he met then-President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.

“I never ever thought in my entire life I would be invited to the White House,” he said. “It was an awesome experience.”

What stood out most to Lynch was advice from Harris: “As Native American minorities, we are representing our own people, but there’s gonna be times we are in a board room or meetings where I would be the only possible minority in the room and you’ve got to make sure you know what you are standing up for,” he said.

“I am trying to be there for my own students, standing up for all tribal colleges and universities, making sure that each one of us has the opportunity for education.”

TOCC grows native crops and humans

Tohono O’odham Community College opened its first of four campuses in 2000 and is one of four tribal colleges in Arizona.

With two campuses on the Nation, which is about the size of the state of Connecticut, TOCC offers a tuition waiver for members of federally-recognized tribes.

It serves students from 57 Tribal Nations and is about 90% online. It has 18 areas of study to earn an associate’s degree.

Series

This is the first in an occasional series on how Tohono O’odham Community College boosts the Tohono O’odham Nation and its economy.

483 in the fall of 2023.

Enrollment was about 1,250 last school year, said Schoonmaker, in his third year as president.

“Wow. I think we’re doing something right, if we’re getting that kind of student-enrollment response,” he said. The combination of Native American student tuition waivers and faculty and staff who pivoted to online learning made the difference, he said.

Then there’s TikTok. During the pandemic, a student-made video touting TOCC, the tuition waiver and his quality experience was a hit. Schoonmaker says the video influenced a wider audience — some as far away as Alaska and Montana. [The videos](#) continue today.

A hunger for knowledge — both academic and cultural — was the inspiration for DeAnndra Porter, a member of the Tohono O’odham Nation and graduate of TOCC who also graduated from the University of Arizona in 2023 with a degree in nutrition and food systems.



“Higher education is accessible. You can break out of your shell,” she said. “I’ve seen people go to the university and drop out within the first two semesters.

“I started here first and it helped me prepare for the university level. ... Even though we are small, there’s opportunities to join clubs and travel. I had never been farther than Phoenix or Tucson,” said Porter, who is the traditional food systems coordinator for TOCC.

Porter, 31, wanted to work with plants and grow native crops like tepary beans and June Corn and “be more sustainable,” she said.



“It’s about getting back to the seeds that we’ve had for generations,” she said. “It’s spreading that knowledge and supporting our community to think about healthy options.”

Funding cuts “would hinder a lot of our programs and the growth of college students ... and pause the work we are trying to move forward with. ... It is a long process.”

On the Tohono O’odham Community College farm, grants are vital and TOCC is working to find funding partners and other options, said Adrian Quijada, director of the land grant office of sustainability.



Adrian Quijada is director of the land grant office of sustainability at Tohono O’odham Community College. Photo credit: Adrian Quijada

The farm trains students and community members to connect to the Sonoran Desert’s tribal lands, the Tohono O’odham language and culture through natural resources.

“In the case of my office, (losing the funds) would be devastating at the moment,” he said. “We cannot rely on federal funds alone.”

The federal money comes from multiple federal agencies, Schoonmaker said, adding the Tohono O’odham Nation supports about 16% of TOCC’s annual budget.

The investment pays off, said Lynch, as he prepared for a precalculus summer school class this week. In the fall of 2026, he should be at the UA and after that, vet school. In his time at TOCC, he has made contacts, traveled and evaluated his situation.

“I don’t have student debt and I want to come back here and to my reservation and help the people,” he said.

“(Indigenous students) have the opportunity to gain a lot more from higher education when we have schools that are closer to home and students who look like us.”