



Career Resources for Native American and Indigenous Law Students

© May 2025
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By The NALP Task Force on Native and Indigenous Peoples¹ in the Legal Profession

Native American and Indigenous people² are underrepresented in the legal profession, starting with law school. According to data from the American Bar Association, in 2022, only 0.4% of law students and 0.7% of lawyers identified as Native American. As discussed below, recent data from the National Association for Law Placement (NALP) also indicates that there continues to be a significant — and in some respects, still growing — hiring gap between Native American and Indigenous students and their classmates. Recognizing the need to address these disparities, many law schools are taking steps to make their institutions more welcoming and supportive spaces for Native American and Indigenous students.

Although focused on what colleges can do to attract Native American and Indigenous undergraduate students following the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in the *Students for Fair Admissions* (SFFA) cases, a November 2024 article from *Inside Higher Ed* explains, “Native American students will continue to be attracted to [schools] that are known to offer resources and a sense of community through Native representation among faculty and administrators, robust Indigenous student groups, cultural events, and other supports, including scholarships.” While the undergraduate and professional school experiences are different, the need for community and support services in both settings can significantly impact students’ ability to succeed.

¹ We recognize and acknowledge that Native and Indigenous peoples are not a monolithic community, and that each community has rich and varied cultures with different ideas, values, practices, beliefs, languages, and customs. We have chosen “Native American and Indigenous” to refer to this broadly diverse set of communities.

² We have chosen not to use acronyms to describe Native American and Indigenous students and communities, as the use of acronyms to describe groups of people minimizes the complexity of their identities and lived experiences and reduces them to simplistic labels stripping away their individuality. The use of acronyms contributes to erasure of individual identities, and frames underrepresented groups through an external and oppressive lens by taking away the ability to define themselves.

Below we outline strategies law schools can apply, and are applying, in each of these areas, from law school-wide initiatives to more targeted efforts driven by career services offices, faculty, staff, alumni, and/or students.

Hiring Trends for Native American and Indigenous Law Graduates

Based on recent and historical data from NALP, there remains a significant hiring disparity between Native American and Indigenous law school graduates and their peers. For the Class of 2023, 87.7% of Native American and Indigenous graduates reported being employed 10 months after graduation — 4.9% below the class as a whole at 92.6%. This gap was even greater for positions requiring passage of the bar exam, with 73% of Native American and Indigenous graduates reporting employment in bar passage required positions compared to 82.1% for the Class of 2023 overall (a gap of 9.1%). Notably, despite a general nationwide trend towards narrowing the employment gap for law school graduates of color since 2015, the gap for Native American and Indigenous students has actually grown during this period from 2% in 2015 to 4.9% in 2023.

While median post-graduate salaries for Native American and Indigenous graduates were on par with the Class of 2023 at \$90,000, Native American and Indigenous graduates were more likely than their classmates to take positions in government (+3.9% compared to the overall class) or business (+5.0%) than in private practice (-5.9%). Moreover, NALP’s *2024 Report on Diversity in U.S. Law Firms* found that the percentage of Native American and Indigenous associates at private firms nationwide has remained static over the past decade (comprising 0.19% of all associates in 2015 and 0.15% in 2024), despite overall increases in associates of color during this period.

Taken together, these trends highlight a continuing need for law schools, and many employers, to strengthen programs and initiatives specific to supporting Native American and Indigenous students entering the legal profession.

Forming a Law School Committee

Law schools are notoriously siloed. It is quite common for smart, creative student services professionals to work tirelessly to support students and to develop innovative solutions to address systemic challenges to ensure that all students have access to opportunities and the chance to succeed academically and professionally. But that work is often uncoordinated across the law school resulting in unfilled potential in terms of the positive impact for the students that those individuals were trying to support.

Many of the greatest successes have come when a group of dedicated staff and faculty gathers, informally or formally, to tackle large challenges that are creating roadblocks to student success. It is through this collaborative work — the most impactful of which often also includes student and alumni leaders — that programs are created to provide students and alumni with the support and guidance they need to succeed in law school and in practice.

One of the places to start is by forming a committee at your law school to convene law-school wide support for Native American and Indigenous law students and alumni, which may include:

- Career Services
- Admissions
- Financial Aid
- Student Services
- Academic Support/Bar Success
- Faculty Members (especially Native American and Indigenous faculty and/or teaching in the area of Native American and Indigenous/Indian law/tribal law)
- Native American and Indigenous Student Leaders
- Native American and Indigenous Alumni
- Native American and Indigenous Staff or Faculty

Scholarships and Pipeline Programs

Law schools and other organizations have created programs to attract Native American and Indigenous students to law school and support their legal careers. Several law schools, including the University of California Los Angeles School of Law and Seattle University School of Law, offer financial support specifically for Native students, and the National Native American Bar Association (NNABA) and the American Indian College Fund offer several scholarships. Native Forward Scholars Fund also provides some scholarships for students in graduate/professional school.

Law schools could consider partnering with the Pathway to Law Initiative (PLI), a free five-day program designed to support Indigenous students in pursuing admission to law school. Currently, PLI is sponsored by Arizona State University's Indian Legal Program, Michigan State University College of Law's Indigenous Law Program, the University of California at Berkeley School of Law, and the American Indian Law Center. Once students take the LSAT and are admitted to law school, they can then attend an eight-week Pre-Law Summer Institute (PLSI), an intensive boot-camp style experience that builds skills as well as a network that supports Native American and Indigenous students during law school and thereafter.

Professional Development and Networking

Law schools should also identify programs outside of their campuses that could be beneficial to Native American and Indigenous students. One example is the annual Cutting Sign to the Legal Profession Conference hosted by the University of Utah's S.J. Quinney College of Law, which brings together law students, law school faculty and career services staff, and legal practitioners interested in Indian and Tribal law from across the country for two days of professional development and networking activities.

Native American Law Student Association (NALSA)

The National NALSA (NNALSA) was founded in 1970 to support law students interested in Federal Indian Law, Tribal Law, and traditional forms of governance. The organization works to increase the Native law student population and to promote indigenous legal issues that affect Native communities. NNALSA provides a network for Native American and Indigenous law students to build relationships and offers friendly support throughout their law school journey.

If your law school does not have a NALSA chapter, consider reaching out to NNALSA for assistance in starting one to support your Native and Indigenous people's students. In the meantime, the administration should work to support students and provide a faculty adviser. If your law school has a NALSA chapter, the administration can work to support it in various ways. If the law school decides to form a committee focused on supporting Native American and Indigenous students, it should (1) invite NALSA to designate a student representative to serve on the committee and (2) work directly with NALSA leaders to come up with a list of goals for the committee to work through.

This will ensure that the committee is starting from a place of asking students directly what they need and what is most important to them. The committee could also work with NALSA to support their efforts to survey their members to assess their needs and priorities. If NALSA is interested, the administration (or committee) could also collaborate with student leaders to support the creation of a peer-to-peer mentorship program in which 3L and 2L NALSA members mentor 1L NALSA members, as well as work to connect NALSA members with Native American and Indigenous alumni.

Alumni Outreach and Engagement

Law schools can also utilize their Development/ Alumni Relations (DAR) office(s) to see if they can identify Native American and Indigenous alumni and other members of the local legal community. If DAR is able to produce a list, the administration — working with student leaders — could develop a short survey to

send to Native American and Indigenous alumni to ask them about their experience in law school, with the bar exam, and in practice as well as whether they may be open to providing informal or formal mentorship to current Native American and Indigenous students. One of the most significant issues Native American and Indigenous students face is a lack of role models, and therefore mentorship opportunities are important for students to hear that they, too, can be a lawyer. If there are enough alumni interested in a formal mentoring program, the administration could work with NALSA student leaders to create one.

Dedicated Staff or Faculty Member and Curriculum

One significant step a law school can take is to identify a member of the staff or faculty at your law school who will be specifically responsible for convening law-school wide support for Native American and Indigenous law students. Offering coursework in this area can also be helpful to these students. As of 2021, 69 law schools had at least one class focused on Indian law. Many schools also offer more robust clinical programs focused on Indian and Tribal law. Providing such courses and hands-on learning experiences helps fill an unmet need for Native American lawyers within the 574 federally recognized tribes and outside of them.

Academic Support and Bar Preparation

Some Native American and Indigenous law students face unique challenges in passing the bar exam, including a lack of resources for tuition, books, and bar preparation programs. In 2023, 68% of Native American and 62% of Native Hawaiian first time bar takers passed the exam, compared to 84% of their White peers. To address this gap, Arizona State University created a free early start bar preparation course for all 3L students in the Indian Law Program.

Cultural Competency Education

Provide cultural competency education for all staff and faculty to increase understanding and awareness of Native American and Indigenous cultures, histories,

and legal issues. If you are part of a larger university community, explore whether there are trainings, workshops, resources, or experts on your main campus that you and your colleagues can use to educate yourselves.

Application, Scholarship, and Fellowship Information

Provide support with the law school application process so that applicants understand how to complete them and what criteria will make applications successful. Many Native American and Indigenous law students may not have lawyers in their families or communities, and some may be the first in their families to attend college and/or law school, making navigating these processes even more challenging. In addition, supply information about scholarships, fellowships, and other financial aid opportunities specifically for Native American and Indian law students.

Cultural and Community Engagement

Support and promote cultural events and initiatives on campus and in the local community to help Native American and Indigenous law students feel more connected and supported.

Advocacy and Awareness

Advocate for policies and practices within the law school that support Native American and Indigenous law students and raise awareness of the unique challenges they face in legal education and the legal profession.

Feedback and Evaluation

Regularly seek feedback from Native American and Indigenous law students about their experiences with career services and use this feedback to improve and tailor services to better meet their needs.

Additional Helpful Links and Resources

Bar Associations and Other Resource Groups

- <https://www.nativeamericanbar.org/>
- <https://www.nationalnalsa.org/>

Advocacy Group Resources and Career Initiatives

- <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/judicial/committees/tribalcourts/>
- <https://www.calindianlaw.org/>
- <https://indianlaw.org/>
- <https://www.nativeamericanbar.org/job-postings-2/>
- <https://turtletalk.blog/>
- <https://courts.navajo-nsn.gov/judicial-branch-announces-new-initiatives/>
- <https://www.nationalnalsa.org/career-2>
- <https://www.nationalnalsa.org/2025-moot-court-competition-host>
- <https://narf.org/>
- <https://www.law.utah.edu/cutting-sign/>
- <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/women/2023/native-women-report-2023.pdf>

Scholarship and Fellowship Information

- <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/admissions/jd/financial-aid/types-of-aid/scholarships/outside-agency-scholarships-private/scholarships-for-native-american-students/>
- <https://www.nativeamericanbar.org/foundation-scholarships/>
- <https://www.nativeforward.org/scholarship-finder>

The Task Force would like to thank Khadija Glover of Gowling WLG and Dylan Hedden-Nicely of the University of Idaho College of Law for their generous assistance with the preparation of this resource.