

Systemic Barriers to Indigenous Higher Education: A Comparative Analysis of the United States and Australia

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Abstract

Access to higher education (HE) is heralded as a pathway to social mobility and equity but remains elusive for Indigenous populations in high-income countries like the United States and Australia. Systemic racial inequities, deeply rooted in colonial histories, perpetuate barriers to HE access and attainment for Native American and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This essay employs a comparative analysis based on statistics and Indigenous policy frameworks, using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and marketisation as analytical lenses to interrogate these challenges. It examines how “Whiteness” shapes educational discourses and institutional practices, reinforcing exclusion and inequality. Key disparities are analyzed, including lower enrollment, geographic isolation, socio-economic disadvantage, and financial barriers. Contrasting outcomes—declining Native American enrollment in the U.S. versus rising Indigenous completion rates in Australia—underscore the importance of community-led, equity-focused policies. The essay advocates for transformative reforms that prioritize Indigenous voices, dismantle systemic barriers, and address colonial and neoliberal legacies.