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The bridge to possible

While she studies to retake the MCATs, Beyoncé Bahe is temporarily back in her childhood

bedroom. K-pop singers and Phoenix Suns players still beam at her from the posters on her walls, and her recent Northern Arizona University [President's Prize and Gold Axe](#) awards for achievement complement childhood medals from soccer tournaments.

But the 22-year-old woman who returned to Whiteriver (population 4,100), on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in Navajo County, Ariz., is not the girl who left.

"I'm not 17 anymore. I've traveled the world," Bahe says. In December 2023 she earned dual honors-college degrees, in biomedical science and comparative cultural studies. Her program included two semesters in Japan, first in immersive language training and then learning gene-splicing techniques in a research laboratory. "I've realized how much stronger I am," she says. "I am a hard worker, and I can get through difficult things."

Northern Arizona University isn't where Bahe had planned to go. The first-generation college student dreamed, she says, of "big fancy schools" out of state. But Bahe, the oldest of four children of a single mother who works as a technician at an ophthalmology office, worried about the potential price tags of those colleges. So she decided to look closer to home. NAU, in



PHOTO COURTESY OF BEYONCÉ BAHE

In December 2023, Beyoncé Bahe earned dual degrees, in biomedical science and comparative cultural studies.

Flagstaff, a few hours from Whiteriver, won her heart, she says, “because of how similar it is to my reservation here and the small town I grew up in.” The small pines. The four seasons. The snow. “It felt familiar.”

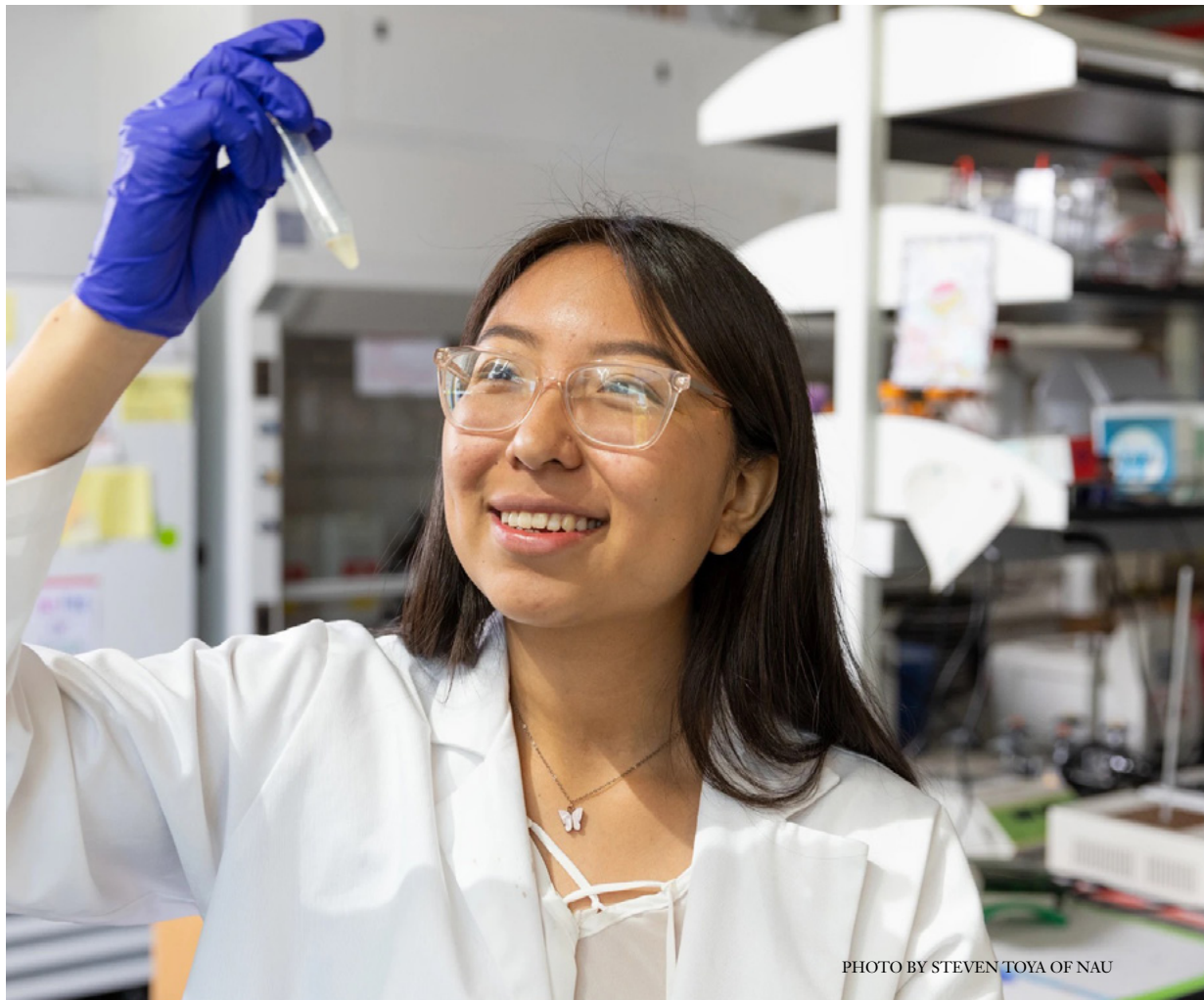
Bahe, who is half Apache and half Navajo, won [Cobell](#) and [Udall](#) scholarships for Native American students, and plans to get both her M.D. and a master’s degree in public health. While she studies for the MCATs, she is also working half-time as a program assistant at the Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health at Whiteriver. She wants, ultimately, to work for the Indian Health Service at a hospital like the one where she was treated for pneumonia and other illnesses as a child.

Her immune system was weak, she says, and “I have a lot of experiences of waiting in the local ER with my mom.”

POSTSECONDARY VALUE

To help students reach goals like Bahe’s, colleges strive to offer the right academic, financial, and cocurricular support. That requires relevant data and careful planning. Yet amid the reams of data available, which are the important statistics and facts to analyze and act upon?

When José Luis Cruz Rivera became president of NAU, in 2021, he and his leadership team chose to center their strategic plan, called “[NAU 2025 – Elevating Excellence](#),” around



Bahe, pictured here in an NAU lab, hopes to attend medical school and pursue a master’s degree in public health.

PHOTO BY STEVEN TOYA OF NAU

postsecondary value. That phrase may sound generic, but it's actually pretty specific, referring to [six priorities](#) determined by the [Postsecondary Value Commission](#), a diverse group of 30 higher-education experts that released a [report](#) the year Cruz Rivera's presidency started.

Those priorities are: that college graduates earn as much as a high-school graduate plus enough to recoup their total net college costs within 10 years; that they earn at least the median salary for their field of study; that minority, low-income, and female college graduates earn as much as more-advantaged peers; that graduates have enough economic mobility to ascend to the fourth (upper-middle) income

quintile; that graduates earn enough median wealth to withstand life's financial shocks; and that minority, low-income, and female graduates reach the same level of wealth as their more-advantaged peers.

Those principles sound fairly straightforward, right? And even many advocates of knowledge for knowledge's sake would probably agree that if you have gone to college, ideally, you should expect to earn more than if you hadn't.

But finding and mining the relevant postsecondary-value data can be tricky, as can disaggregating it — separating it into various demographic categories. That's key, because there are significant [variations](#) between how students in different



PHOTO COURTESY OF BEYONCÉ BAHE

Bahe celebrates her graduation with her family. Pictured here (l-r) are her mother, Bernadette Colelay, her sister, Vyllette Kane-Johnson, her mother's husband, Kenzie Dehose, and her brother, Areyu Colelay.

categories perform. Figuring out why, and how to help, is crucial to improving student success.

Groups like the Postsecondary Value Commission and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, a nonprofit research, policy, and advocacy organization, are building consortia and tools to help sort and sift higher-education numbers.

- The [Value Data Collaborative](#), established by IHEP, enables states, colleges, and college systems to combine and crunch data relevant to the Postsecondary Value Framework.
- The [Equitable Value Explorer](#) is an interactive tool built by the Postsecondary Value Commission to contextualize former students' median earnings.
- And IHEP's [Degree Mining Tool](#) helps colleges, [step by step](#), identify students with some credentials but no degree and award them credits for which they are eligible, smoothing entry, or re-entry, into college programs.

Using such resources and federal data pools like the U.S. Education Department's [College Scorecard](#), NAU and other institutions can make better sense of where they are and where they'd like to be. From the Equitable Value Explorer, for example, NAU knows that 10 years after enrollment, its students earn a median of \$42,340, higher than the \$34,244 they'd need to make to recoup their college costs. Their median earnings

are also higher than the targeted fourth income quintile for Arizona (\$38,862). However, NAU students end up earning less than the average Arizona bachelor's-degree holders (\$46,912). That's partly because the number reflects students who graduate but also those who don't. So boosting the NAU college-completion rate (currently about 52 percent) would help narrow that gap.

DATA BEYOND NUMBERS

Karen Pugliesi, NAU's executive vice president and provost, and John Georgas, senior vice provost for academic operations, say that NAU is improving its collection and disaggregation of data on basics like enrollment, retention, completion, and alumni income. An upgraded learning-management system enables early alerts when students are flailing academically. Language has shifted toward a friendlier tone that emphasizes what Cruz Rivera calls "academic momentum." What was "academic probation" is now an "academic warning." "Academic suspension" is now an "academic pause." The terms convey that students can sort out what they need to and then get back in the game.

But Pugliesi and Georgas explain that data is more than just numbers. For instance, the university is making a big push, in its "[100% Career Ready](#)" drive, to ensure that students are well positioned for promising professional paths, especially in fields that offer high wages and are also vital to Arizona's economic vitality.

Pugliesi and Georgas cite, as examples, health care and the manufacture of microchips and batteries for electric vehicles.

NAU aims, by the end of 2024, to align all of its bachelor's and master's programs with measures like the [skills criteria](#) (1,900-plus occupations, each divided into four levels) described by the labor-market-analytics company Lightcast. The university also tracks how its courses instill career-readiness [competencies](#), such as critical thinking, teamwork, and leadership, that are listed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

To help students understand that what they learn is relevant and necessary to their professional ambitions, each learning outcome on an NAU syllabus will be clearly articulated for students as a skill suited to listing on a résumé. NAU is training faculty members to offer career guidance appropriate to the phase of a student's journey that the course represents. In the future, career services will be decentralized and woven through curricula and classrooms to make it more accessible and relevant to students' goals. The university also takes pride in ranking [eighth](#) among U.S. doctoral universities for long-term study-abroad programs, like Beyoncé Bahe's experiences in Japan, that increase students' global awareness and cross-cultural confidence.

All those efforts and more, Pugliesi says, point students toward “lives of purpose and careers of consequence.”

A key element of NAU's postsecondary-value strategy is its [Access2Excellence](#) program, which offers free tuition to

Arizona students whose family income is at or under \$65,000 — around the median household income for the state.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BEYONCÉ BAHE

Bahe spent two semesters in Japan, first doing immersive language training, and then learning gene-splicing techniques in a lab. She is pictured here at the Dazaifu Tenmangu shrine in Fukuoka, Japan.

Access2Excellence, which began in the fall of 2023, seems to have contributed to an increase in American Indian/Alaskan Native (AIAN) enrollment to the highest level in NAU's 125-year history — 4 percent, or 997 (including both full- and part-time students) in 2023, compared with 3 percent, or 841, in 2022. Among the statistics that Pugliesi and her colleagues will be watching closely in coming years are the AIAN retention and completion rates. The latter lagged 24 percentage

points behind that of white students in 2022.

In a recent interview with the student newspaper, Cruz Rivera proudly cited other notable data points, accentuating access in accord with Arizona’s priorities. He discussed, for instance, back-to-back record first-year classes, three-quarters of whose members were from in-state; and 50 percent of students qualifying for Access2Excellence scholarships.

“I’m saying these statistics, I know them,” Cruz Rivera told *The Lumberjack*, “because I’m so proud of them. We have accomplished all of this together.”

But institutional progress, like football, is a game of inches. Gains are hard won.

Take, for instance, that one-percentage-point bump in the AIAN demographic at NAU. It partly resulted from the Access2Excellence funds but may also have been aided by the university’s Seven Generations Signature Initiative, supported by \$10 million in grants — \$5 million from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and \$5 million from the NAU Foundation. The initiative includes Indigenous living-and-learning communities, the hiring of new Indigenous-studies faculty members, support for Indigenous students’ undergraduate research projects, and the weaving of Indigenous perspectives into general-studies courses.

DATA IN PERSPECTIVE

Data-inspired interventions can be led from but not imposed by the top, says Georgas. At all levels of faculty and staff, “it takes a partnership,” he says. “Using

data is a huge cultural transformation for an institution, especially one our size.”

But using data well, he says, also means keeping it in perspective, realizing that it won’t always reflect the nuances of the student experience. “Data tell part of the story and an important part of the story, but not the whole story. So you need to reach out,” says Georgas.

Spreadsheets sorting NAU’s roughly 23,000 undergraduates abound, but every student’s path is unique.



Brendan Trachsel majored at NAU in parks and recreation management with an emphasis on outdoor education and leadership.

Brendan Trachsel, 23, was a disengaged high-school sophomore with a 1.8 GPA in Poway, Calif., near San Diego. What turned him around during junior year was a peer-counseling program that included outdoor retreats. That combination of outdoor adventure and the building of

leadership skills gave him “something to latch onto and be motivated by,” and he buckled down and started to thrive academically and socially.

He toured the NAU campus with his parents twice, he says, and “I couldn’t see myself anywhere else.” He applied through NAU’s rolling admissions and was accepted there before the end of 11th grade. Flagstaff is well situated for rugged excursions but also has a good nightlife, he says, and he happily majored in parks and recreation management with an emphasis on outdoor education and leadership. He was a resident assistant and then became a student-government staff member, then senator, then president.

As head of a club, he planned a concert featuring four bands. In student government, he worked to counter

misinformation about mandatory student fees. On that project, he collaborated with Bjorn Flugstad, NAU’s senior vice president for finance and business services.

That was a revealing endeavor for Trachsel, he says, because he wasn’t sure if he would like what he saw when shifting from a student viewpoint to seeing the administrative workings. But he was impressed. Flugstad was cordial and helpful, Trachsel says, and their work together left Trachsel, he says, “extremely proud of my school.”

After graduating, Trachsel went to work as coordinator of student involvement at the University of Maine at Orono. He’s applying to master’s programs in student affairs.

And his first choice for grad school?
NAU.

Questions or comments about this case study? Email us at ci@chronicle.com.

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