Negotiating understanding: Considering Native American attitudes about higher education in a Eurocentric context

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ABSTRACT

Native American\textsuperscript{1} students are the most likely racial/ethnic group tracked in post-secondary American education to be affected by poverty and limited access to educational opportunities. In addition, they are the most likely group to be required to take remedial course work and are the least likely to graduate from college. This is the initial report of a longitudinal project to improve recruiting and retention of Native American students at a large open-enrollment teaching university in the intermountain West where such students are greatly underrepresented. It is part of a series of studies nested within a large project with the objective of increasing digital literacy and college readiness among Native Americans funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF). A review of the literature was undertaken to analyze the research and opinions directed towards improving Native American student persistence and academic success at the post-secondary level. This review was utilized to develop a survey to measure the perceptions of Native American college students about education and their institution. Emergent themes were used to generate focus group questions. Two focus groups were conducted and over 20\% of the Native students at the institution participated in either the survey or a focus group. Their perceptions found about the level of support that Native students received to help them succeed in school and their feelings of isolation are reported in this study.

Key words: Native American, American Indian, Eurocentric, post-secondary, persistence, retention.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, there was a widely held belief that Native Americans were very much a people of the past. At that time, education was expected to train Native Americans for life in mainstream society. Native culture and rights were ignored, both passively and actively, and Native languages were suppressed. As Davis and Keemer (2002: 10) summarized: “At best, forced acculturation and at worst, annihilation were imposed upon the indigenous people of North America.” Native communities and entire tribes, in many instances, were destroyed.

\textsuperscript{1}The terms Native American, American Indian, Native, and Indigenous are used interchangeably since they are all terms commonly used by Native peoples in the Southwest to speak of themselves.
Even though annihilation was not an official policy of the U. S. government, assimilation was. Under the theory that Native American culture and language were inferior and stood in the way of success within white society, forced assimilation was the stated goal of U. S. government agencies and the assumed purpose of mainstream educational institutions for Native American youth until the late 1960s (Mosholder and Goslin, 2013).

As we began the 21st century, Native American culture has not only survived but is becoming increasingly more vital (Boyer, 2008: 23-24). The 2010 census reported 5.2 million people in the U.S. who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, either alone or in combination with other races. In addition, 2.9 million people identified themselves exclusively as American Indian or Alaska Native (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Cultural and traditional activities also appear to be on the upswing. Schweigman et al. (2011), for example, studied the relationship of ethnic identity of Native American adolescents in California, as measured by the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Scale, who participated in cultural activities including powwows, sweat lodges, drum groups and roundhouse dances. Findings from the study showed a strong association between cultural activities and traditional practices with positive ethnic identity as well as higher school grades. Their study also demonstrated that there are many of such cultural activities available to Native American adolescents in California. Despite these promising improvements many problems lingered for Native Americans and their communities.

Census data from 2010 showed that over 25% of American Indians lived below the federal poverty level as compared to about 12% of the total U.S. population. These percentages are consistent with the per capita income of $15,971 for American Indians versus a per capita income of $39,937 for the overall U.S. population in 2010 dollars. A related statistic is that the unemployment rate for American Indians was over 15% in 2010, 6% higher than for Whites (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Tribal communities and Native Americans face many other economic and social hurdles as well. The suicide rate for Native Americans has been over twice that for other tracked racial/ethnic groups and the alcohol related death rate is over three times higher (Ortiz and Heavyrunner, 2000). Further, 52% of American Indian households were headed by single parents in 2010 as compared to 34% for the total U.S. population (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

"Indigenous students are twice as likely to be out of high school without a degree as their White peers" (Brayboy and Castagno, 2011: 141). Similarly, Native Americans are the least likely racial/ethnic group tracked in post-secondary American education to graduate from college, with only 15% of those entering college earning a bachelor's degree within six years compared with 51% for Asians, 49% for Whites, 31% for African Americans, and 24% for Hispanics (Grande, 2004; Freeman and Fox, 2005).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2010, Americans with less than a high school diploma earned a median annual wage of $20,070 compared to $61,950 for those with an associate’s degree and $63,430 for those with a bachelor’s degree. Unemployment rates for those three groups in the same year were 14.6, 6.9, and 5.2%, respectively.

Significance of study

Since income increases and unemployment decreases correlate with level of degree attainment, increasing the level of degree attainment might have a positive impact on many of the economic and social problems noted in the introduction. This study attempts to identify factors that contribute to Native American students not feeling connected to their post-secondary educational experience and therefore not completing it.

Purpose of study

The purpose was to discover the perceptions of Native American students at a large open-enrollment teaching university in the intermountain West where members of this group are greatly underrepresented. Our intention was to identify any structural barriers for the group and to inform the development of a recruiting and retention program for them. This is of particular interest to the researchers who teach at a university where there were 311 Native American students during the fall of 2011 (personal communication from Institutional Research) but approximately 15,000 Native Americans aged 18 to 24 within a 7 to 8 hour drive of the institution (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

In addition, the open enrollment status of our institution may prove to be advantageous for this group since their secondary preparation is often less effective than that for their White counterparts (Mosholder and Goslin, 2013).

Research questions

The following research questions guided our study: a) what does the literature say about the perceptions of Native American students in mainstream post-secondary institutions about education and their institutions? b) what are the perceptions of the Native American students in our institution in the same categories? and c) how can we use these perceptions and a framework of culturally responsive teaching and relationships to develop curricula and programming to improve recruitment and retention of Native American students at our institution?
LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Native American student educational access and attainment at the post-secondary level was reviewed. The information gathered was used to construct a survey to measure student perceptions (Appendix 1) and to guide the development of curricula and programs intended to improve recruitment and increase retention of Native American students. Several categories emerged from this search. These categories are used as a framework to present the results.

Eurocentrism

Gregory (1994) observed that Native Americans and other indigenous people have historically approached education within cultural contexts which are holistic and sacred, that is, views that everything is connected and alive. Most mainstream schools in the U.S., however, approach education from a Eurocentric cultural perspective. This view focuses on separateness and only considers animals and plants as being alive.

Many Native American students find the mismatch between the cultural perspectives of what they are taught at home and what they are taught in mainstream educational institutions alienating. Brayboy (1999) refers to such alienation as cultural incongruence and to curricula and programs that are constructed to respond to Native American views as culturally responsive. Gay (2000) provides a framework for developing culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy.

Program design

Brayboy and Castagno (2011: 140) pointed out the need for more research “that focuses on both the student and the larger structural barriers that influence the experiences of Indigenous college students”. Tierney (1992b) observed that any program by a mainstream organization should emerge from a vision developed working with, not for, Native Americans. Programs developed for Native Americans using a top-down approach have seldom been successful. The opposite is also true.

Shotten et al. (2007) reported on a successful peer mentoring program developed by Native American students and observed that Native American students have rarely been asked for input when mentoring programs were developed for them. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) suggested getting Native Americans involved in program development by creating collaborative programs with local tribes where students go directly into internships emphasizing academic areas popular with Native American students and important to tribal growth like student teaching, business or natural resource management. This approach would enable students to serve their communities while earning academic credit.

Institutional philosophy

Mihesuaah (2004) wrote that a physical space where Native American students are with other Native American students, can receive academic assistance, speak their language without ridicule, discuss issues with other students and staff members who share their concerns about the institution is critical. Such a space could go a long way to meeting Ortiz and Heavyrunner’s (2003) goal of establishing a sense of family at school in addition to at home.

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) observed that post-secondary institutions typically have cultures that inhibit the ability of Native American students to express their traditional culture. Rather than insist that students conform to the culture of the institution, they suggest that the institution should develop ways to support and honor student identities by way of curricula and events (Tierney, 1992a, 2000).

Native American student perceptions of how well the institution is doing this correlate with learning (Lundberg, 2007). Choney et al. (1995) wrote that institutions must recognize that there is a clash between traditional Native American culture and Euro-American culture. Native American students that are required to give up cultural behaviors to meet the expectations of the college they attend may resist doing so and leave school as a result (Tierney, 1993). Thus, non-Native faculty and staff should familiarize themselves with the issues faced by Native American students (Tierney, 1991).

Native American students should be encouraged to fully express their cultural identity (Wildcat, 2001). They should be given culturally appropriate counseling (Huffman, 2001). The Native American students in Garrod and Larrimore’s (1997) study perceived that their culture was neither valued nor recognized and this resulted in disengagement. Cultural awareness must take the students’ dual cultural focus into account and help maintain their role in their Native American culture (LaFromboise et al., 1993).

Mentoring and student support

Kuh and Love (2000: 202) wrote that the students’ initial experiences with the institution are key to retention. The “challenge is to make the strange seem familiar as soon as possible” by facilitating relationships with resource providers and peer groups. Structured mentoring programs that connect advanced Native American students with incoming Native American students have been shown to address issues regarding isolation, lack of awareness of available resources, and lack of support and role models
In addition, support systems should be in place to assist with the personal issues that arise like transportation, child care, substance abuse, family violence, family illness, and dealing with racism in addition to the academic issues that arise like lack of study skills and major and career planning (Heavyrunner and DeCelles, 2002).

These systems should also address the need for adequate daycare and provide assistance in learning about the full range of financial assistance available (Guillory and Wolverton, 2008). Conversely, research has established that a lack of support for developing a better understanding of the institution's environment often results in students leaving it and returning home (Brayboy and Castagno, 2011).

Skill and identity development

Tierney (1992a) observed that Native American students who considered their college preparatory course work adequate were the most interested in persisting. Jackson and Smith (2001) found that apprehension over the inadequate academic college preparation was the greatest concern of the Native American students that they interviewed. Mihesuah (2004) argued that Native American students have doubts about their identities because they often do not speak the language of their ancestors nor know much about their tribal traditions. She further argued that these doubts about identity often lead to a lack self-confidence and cultural pride causing depression followed by self-medication with alcohol and drugs.

Watson (2009) found Native student racial identity status to be a significant predictor of college adjustment. Harrington and Harrington (2011: 4) observed that "(first) year programs are critical to the retention of American Indian students". One reason for this is the "poor academic preparation that many indigenous students are receiving in high school" (Brayboy and Castagno, 2011: 142).

Curricula and pedagogy

Cajete (1994) wrote that, to Native Americans, learning is observing nature and applying the understanding gained to develop relationships that have strength and stability and to make decisions based on tradition and values for the good of the community. Education helps students find face (who they are, what their potential is, and what they need to do to be happy), heart (intrinsic motivation), and foundation (vocation). These elements are harmonized and balanced by the interplay between the physical and spiritual worlds in order for the student to develop his or her potential for the benefit of the community.

Sanchez (2000: 40), in her information analysis and opinion article, points out that Native American students “exhibited definite preferences for (more) feedback, participation, collaboration, and concrete experiences as well as, teacher directed experiences” by comparison to white students. Such approaches would be consistent with providing student-centered and experiential learning as called for by Cajete (1994) and Wildcat (2001) as well as, the use of problem posing models that allow students to draw on their own experiences and encourage them to interact with other students as called for by Dyc (1994).

Classroom management and behaviors

These behaviors are governed by what have been called participation structures that are “several principles for allocating student turns at talk used in determining which students will hold the speaking end of the floor and in what order they will hold it (Philips, 1983: 77 as cited in Brayboy, 1999: 165) and "students who choose not to speak or who are silenced by these structures". Native American students, particularly those from traditional backgrounds, often choose not to speak in classrooms because to do so requires acting in ways that can be considered rude in their home cultures. Brayboy (1999) observed that successful Native American students develop ways to reconcile this incongruity.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were chosen for this study. The rationale for this approach is that “Native Americans are the experts at being Native Americans, and thus, it is imperative that their voices be heard when creating policy that can directly or indirectly affect their educational lives". (Guillory and Wolverton, 2008: 63).

Specifically, we used the grounded theory approach of the observation of emergent themes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory uses all forms of data that the researchers come in contact with to both inductively and deductively generate a theory. Data forms used within the comparative process can include interviews, observations, surveys, statistical analyses, and literature. One goal of grounded theory is to develop hypotheses about what is going on (Martin and Turner, 1986).

Survey development

Two of the researchers independently developed interview questions designed to generate Native American student perceptions of their views and experiences as they related to the key elements affecting recruitment and retention that were found in the literature review. These initial question sets were combined into one set and evaluated and adjusted by the third researcher as a check for consistency.
with the key concepts that had been identified from the literature.

Four undergraduate students from within the larger population were recruited as Native American Student Researchers (NASRs) and given training in survey data collection procedures. The NASRs evaluated the instrument to ensure that it was both culturally relevant and appropriate for the population. The final survey is Appendix 1.

Population, sample, data collection and coding

A list of students identifying themselves as Native Americans was obtained from the university's Institutional Research Office. There were 311 names on this list. The NSRSs scheduled four events at various locations around campus. They advertised the sessions as being part of a larger effort to help make the university more responsive to and supportive of Native American students with fliers and through social media. They offered food as an inducement. Participants first completed an informed consent waiver and then the survey. Forty-nine students completed the survey.

Each of the three researchers hand coded the survey data checking for emergent themes using an open coding line by line analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In addition, two of the NSRSs were asked to follow the same process as a way of evaluating the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations within the appropriate cultural context. The emergent themes were used to form focus group questions which are included as Appendix 1.

The NSRSs were asked to contact as many of the unsurveyed Native American students as possible by telephone and e-mail to ask them to participate in focus groups. As with survey completions, students were told that the focus groups were part of a larger effort to help make the university more responsive to and supportive of Native American students.

Two focus groups were conducted, one with eight students and another with six. The students completed an informed consent waiver prior to the start of the session. Two of the researchers took field notes. These were hand coded by the third researcher and two of the NSRSs checking for emergent themes using an open coding line by line analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

In addition, focus group meetings were recorded and transcribed and reviewed afterwards as themes were developed by the researchers. The transcriptions were used to check and compare with the field notes taken by the researchers.

All of the data were then compared and analyzed independently by each of the faculty researchers and the NASRs who searched for themes across the data sets. Six themes emerged related to the recruitment and retention of Native American students at the subject university.

RESULTS

The methods of data collection discussed as aforementioned produced helpful results in addressing the purpose of this study and answering the research question.

Themes emerging from the surveys

Theme one

The first theme that emerged from the survey data collected was an overwhelmingly expressed need for more activities that bring the students, their families and communities together. Some examples of this are found in the following comments made by the students and the survey question (SQ) that elicited the response:

- SQ 7: “We need to have luncheons to get people information”.
- SQ 8: “create events that involve both family and students to make both feel part of the university”.
- SQ 14: “event, games, going to social events and maybe getting involved with other Natives with things on campus”.

The focus group participants agreed that that this was an issue that needed to be addressed with no dissenters. When asked about it, a student in the focus groups volunteered the following:

- “There is no Native American student orientation (here at this university). Perhaps, we should be matching up incoming students with Native students who have been here a while. This could extend to alumni. Perhaps, a career night featuring successful Native Americans would be helpful.”
- “There is a need for activities that the Native community would be interested in so that they feel comfortable coming here. College can be as intimidating and foreign to the families as it is to the students”.
- “Native students do not know many other Natives because there are not enough places to go where they can be together or activities, other than the powwow that bring them together”.

Theme two

The second theme that emerged is that the Native American student community is fragmented and that the Native students do not know or interact with many other Native students. Some examples of this are found in the following comments made by the students in the survey question
(SQ) that elicited the response:
- SQ 4: “Yes and no. I feel like as Native we don’t come together enough on campus”.
- SQ 4: “Yes, I’ve felt isolated at UVU. These feelings were caused by my non-Native and Native peers in school. I felt they did not understand where I was coming from”.

When asked about this issue in the focus groups, the students agreed. Students in the focus groups shared the following:
- “When I go down the hall and see another Native student, I smile and try to get their attention, but they do not smile back, they don’t really look around”.
- “Natives are reserved and shy by nature and the students here could benefit from more activities to break out of their shells. Our skin is brown and we can feel like outcasts. I do not think we are outcasts, but it is easy to feel that way and more opportunities specifically designed for Natives to interact would help overcome that. They just need some opportunities to break out of their shell”.
- “I look for group activities involving Natives, there are some social get togethers, but nothing serious or academic. I would be interested in something like that”.
- “Other schools have housing specifically for Native students. If we are serious about attracting Native students we should look at something like dedicating a floor of one of the housing units to Natives”.

Theme three

Another theme that emerged is that Native Americans should be mentoring other Native American students, but that is not happening. Evidence of this including the survey question (SQ) that elicited the response is as follows:
- SQ 8: “If they have mentors and people they know and look up to attending, so they can see it is possible”.
- SQ 8: “Having a strong student community (and) having elders available to talk to”.

The students in the focus groups agreed. The following comments were made:
- “I don’t think we know how to get in touch with each other… it is a communications issue, I probably know only ten other Natives here… out of what did you say? (311 answer to the question by a researcher) who are here”.
- “We should have a Native American student orientation. We should match up incoming students with Native students who have been here a while… This should extend to alumni…. We should have career night featuring successful Natives”.
- “The freshman year is critical for Natives. They will decide during that year if they believe they can make it or will move back to the rez and stay there”.
- “Maybe even alumni as they are out in their field, maybe even the other way… extending it back into the high schools”.

Theme four

This emergent theme is that parents and elders do not understand the nature of the commitment necessary for Native American student success and, therefore, put pressure on the students to attend to home and community activities at the expense of school success. Native American students would like help with educating parents and elders about these issues. Survey responses that led to the development of this theme can be seen in the following responses to survey questions (SQ):
- SQ 16: “make things available to tribal members’ family… information from tribes (of) what they offer to their tribal members”.
- SQ 16: “family activities and show them the benefits of college experience”.
- SQ 16: “Families might be more supportive if we took time to recognize their students. Perhaps, there could be a Native student achievement award or opportunities for students to include their families for on campus events”.

When asked about this in the focus groups, students made the following comments:
- “Back on the reservation, parents and family can think… you are out there in the cushy, cushy world and we are back here…. if you really loved us you would be back here…. that idea of two canoes. I think there would be value in seeking out those elders who are higher education advocates and have them speak at different gatherings. Those graduating Natives are coming home to serve you;… you better behave and not ostracize them…. that “crab in the bucket” syndrome”.
- “Students and their parents do not understand that you can’t just walk away from class for two weeks or a month and still do ok. When the students are here, a lot of what they think about is going back home. At the same time, the family may need help with the sheep or building a fence. Students leave to help with this because they have always been expected to help and their parents do not understand that this is a problem. If they knew, they would not make the students come back”.

Theme five

The fifth theme that emerged is that new Native students need more explanation about the resources available and on course and institutional requirements. Evidence of this
theme was found in the following responses to survey questions (SQ):

- SQ 7: “More information needs to be offered to incoming students with emails or outreach programs”.
- SQ 7: Mentoring and helping to understand time management, work load, classes and fields could help show what is ahead of the student”.
- SQ 8: “through high school counselors. This would allow Native American students to know what to expect in college.. allow them not to be scared”.
- SQ 9: “Have a class or seminar that gives advice and educates about expectations of classes”.

In response to a question about this, students in the focus groups said:

- “People do not know about the resources available... like the mathematics laboratory. I actually had a conversation with somebody, they were having trouble with mathematics and I said: “you should go to the mathematics laboratory.” and they said “-what is that?”, and I said “you should go, just drop in”.
- “Students get a check at the beginning of the semester for like $6,000. This is more money than they have ever seen in one place before. They often blow it and then, run out of money before the semester is over”.

**Theme six**

A final theme that emerged is that new Native students could benefit from constant and consistent reminders through multiple modalities of course requirements and relevant student activities. Many of the comments from Theme 5 attest to this point; however, some other comments that support this finding were found in the responses to these survey questions (SQ):

- SQ 12: “Some elementary schools have parents participate in an emergency ‘calling tree’. We could have a texting/social media tree with each volunteer to inform X amount of people”.
- SQ 12: “It (Facebook) is a good way to notify about activities and events. More structure is needed for class participation and attendance; ...social networking might encourage students because they will recognize and make connections with people they know”.

The focus group participants said the following about this theme:

- “A lot of people do not have the common sense, the skill, to recognize that they are paying their own money to be here. I think we need to tell the younger students that- “you need to be an adult-” when you come here. I had no idea when I came here that you were supposed to be prepared for what is on the syllabus for that day”.
- “Maybe we could use e-mails and texts to remind students of important things”.
- “You could text them when things are due, but this would get annoying by the end of the sophomore year”.

The data received from the survey and focus groups provided important insight into the changes needed within the institution in order to improve the perception of Native American students about how well they fit in and are accepted. An analysis of how these data fit within the framework that emerged from the review of the literature and the research questions is subsequently presented.

**DISCUSSION**

The connections observed are presented under the categories that emerged during the literature review.

**Eurocentrism**

Research question b is concerned with the perceptions of Native American students in our institution. Evidence of cultural incongruity can be seen in the data presented under Themes one and two where Native students talk about feeling isolated, being shy by nature, and in need of activities that bring the students, their families and communities together inside of the university.

Tinto’s (1993) data on mainstream students describes a different social dynamic, that is, one of increasing independence by students from their families as they integrate into the social and academic activities of college life.

**Program design**

Research question c involved using these perceptions and a framework of culturally responsive teaching and relationships to develop curricula and programming to improve recruitment and retention of Native American students at our institution. Our approach from the outset was to do our best to conform to Tierney's (1992a) advice and work with Native students, not for them. Our approach was also consistent with the observations of Guillory and Wolverton (2008) who suggest that one way that institutions can connect with Native American students and their communities is to get them involved in program development.

In addition to paying our student researchers, we arranged for internship credit when that was a benefit to them. To the extent possible, we worked with our Native student researchers in study and instrument design as well
as, with data collection and analysis. We believed that our survey respondents and focus group participants were open and honest with us as a consequence. The data in Themes one and two provide direction for activities that are attractive to the Native American community and bring students, their families, and other community members together.

Institutional philosophy

Regarding the issues of perceptions from research question b), Ortiz and Heavyrunner’s (2003) advice to establish a sense of family at school in addition to at home is clearly not being met at our institution. Data in support of this statement can also be seen in Themes one and two. Respondents to the survey and focus groups observed several inadequacies including the lack of a Native student orientation, dedicated housing, or sufficient dedicated space.

Further, the perception of these students was that the institution is not inviting to the Native community in general. Efforts are made, including an annual powwow, an annual celebration of Native food and traditions called the Buffalo Dinner, and the occasional fry-bread making fundraiser, but these are not enough. Our Multicultural Center is apparently not meeting Mihesuah’s (2004) goal of a safe and culturally congruent space for Native students. Overall, as one of the students in the focus groups put it, there is “not enough emphasis put on Natives”.

One interesting aspect of the Native student culture at our institution is how little the group that we talked to, which totaled 63 of the 311 students identifying themselves as Natives, appeared to know or participate in these activities. Two of the themes that emerged from the survey and were validated by the focus groups are evidence of this disconnect, that is, Theme one - the need for more activities that bring the students, their families, and Theme two - the Native American student community is fragmented and Native Americans do not know or interact with many other Native American students.

Mentoring and student support

Additional evidence under both research questions b and c of the perceptions of Native students within our institution was found within this category. Data from students presented under Themes three, four and five indicated a need for help educating parents and elders about the requirements for success at the post-secondary level and an active effort to explain the requirements of post-secondary education to naïve students.

Further, data from Theme six indicated a need to familiarize and remind naïve students about and of the requirements for success at the post-secondary level. Jackson et al. (2003) and Shotten et al. (2007) have observed that structured mentoring programs that connect advanced Native American students with incoming Native American students have been shown to address issues regarding isolation, lack of awareness of available resources, and lack of support and role models.

Our Theme three –Native Americans should be mentoring other Native American students, but that is not happening’ clearly indicates a need for program development in this area. Conversely, we found no evidence from our survey respondents or focus group participants of the need for assistance with personal issues like those found by Heavyrunner and DeCelles (2002) and Guillory and Wolverton (2008).

Skill and identity development

Theme five, that new Native American students need more explanation about the resources available and on course and institutional requirements, and Theme six, that new students could benefit from constant and consistent reminders through multiple modalities of course requirements and relevant student activities fall into this category.

No concerns about adequate preparation like those observed by Tierney (1992a) and Jackson and Smith (2001) or identity development as discussed by Mihesuah (2004) emerged. Nonetheless, there do appear to be some needs by naïve students in developing self-regulatory skills and in understanding the requirements of being a successful college student.

Data presented under Theme six indicate that the respondents think that more experienced students should be positioned to accomplish this task. This last need seems to be shared by some parents and elders as indicated by Theme four.

Curricula and pedagogy

While our survey respondents and focus group participants did not provide much evidence that this is a challenge at our university, data presented under Theme five did indicate a need for a class or seminar to explain about expectations to naïve students. Appropriately designed courses can address this and many of the other issues surfaced. We will discuss this concept in detail in the next section.

Classroom management and behaviors

Our survey respondents and focus group participants did not provide evidence that this is a challenge at our university.
LIMITATIONS

A more nuanced perspective of the perceptions of the Native students in the study would have been gained if the data had been disaggregated by, for example, gender, tribal affiliation, first generation students, stage in school (freshman, etc.), or urban/rural.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research was our mechanism of finding out the specific issues faced by Native American students at our institution. Future research should focus on Native students at other institutions to determine whether the degree to which these issues are common. In addition, programs and curricula reflecting the observations of these and other groups should be implemented to evaluate the effects on Native student recruitment and retention. Examples of what could be done are presented within the framework of the first aspect of our literature review.

Program development

The objectives of our NSF grant are to increase digital literacy and college readiness among the Native Americans of our region. Complementary goals to increase the employability and educational development of Native Americans should be developed and implemented both for urban groups and groups on reservations. Additional programs and events that celebrate and honor Native traditions and values and that provide opportunities for mentoring, support and positive role modeling should also be developed (Themes one and two) that attract both the Native American students from the university and members of their communities. Further, we need to reach out to the extended Native American community to determine what else could be done to realize the community engagement necessary to achieve the emancipatory element of Gay’s (2000) culturally relevant teaching paradigm as well as to approach the extended family feeling of Heavyrunner and DeCelles’ (2002) family education model.

Mentoring and student support

One opportunity to improve on mentoring and student support systems is to fully utilize new literacy techniques including texting and Facebook to establish and maintain contact. As communication is improved, we need to determine the most accepted method of providing the two types of information that the data tell us that naive Native students require: constant and consistent reminders through multiple modalities of course requirements and the relevant student activities that new students apparently need. In addition, we need to reach out to the Native American community to determine the best way to educate parents and elders about the nature of the commitment necessary for their students to be successful at the college level (Themes four through six).

Skill and identity development

Harrington and Harrington (2011: 4) observed that “(first) year programs are critical to the retention of American Indian students”. There is a need for the development of indigenous curricula in order to take additional action on the needs identified in Themes three though six and to implement the elements of Gay’s (2000) culturally responsive teaching paradigm. Developing a Native American student mentoring program can help with this challenge as well.

Curricula and pedagogy

Both our data and our review of the literature identify the difficulty that Native American students can have in feeling connected within mainstream schools. (Huffman, 2008; Cajete, 1994; Wildcat, 2001; Dyc, 1994). Part of the difficulty in this area stems from competing conceptions of legitimate knowledge and the institutions’ Eurocentric view of Native students as individuals compared to the Native view of being part of a network of family and community (Brayboy and Castagno, 2011).

Brayboy (1999) observed that successful Native American students develop ways to reconcile this incongruity. We need to develop indigenized curricula and pedagogy at our university that is consistent with the framework of culturally responsive teaching (Gay,2000) and the perspectives of Native scholars like Cajete, Wildcat and Brayboy. If appropriately designed and implemented, these approaches may facilitate productive perceptions by Native students about themselves and our institution that will enable them to be academically successful. A key to success in this area is attempting to understand the different cultural ways in which diverse students communicate so that instructors and student services personnel may avoid the challenge of misdiagnosing “their academic performance” or getting “trapped in communicative mismatches” (Gay, 2000: 78).

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REFERENCES


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Appendix 1. Survey of Native student perceptions of education and this university.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No.</th>
<th>Research questions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What is your view of a college education? Does your family support this view or disagree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Have you picked a major or thought about what it might be? If so, what is it? What would you like to do once you have finished your degree program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What subjects and academic areas are seen by the tribal elders and other community leaders as being important to tribal growth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Have you, or anyone that you know experienced feelings of not fitting in or of isolation at this university? If the answer is yes, what caused these feelings and did they affect the desire to continue at this university?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Have you experienced aspects of university that make you feel like you belong? If the answer is yes, what were they, and how did they affect your desire to continue at this university?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>In pursuit of your educational goals, have you or anyone you know experienced financial challenges? If so, what were they? How were they dealt with?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>What would be the best way to help Native students understand all of the resources available to them, including the full range of financial aid, and to encourage the students to use them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>What could be done, both here at this university and in your home communities, to change the way that Native students transition into the university community so that they would be most likely achieve a successful outcome?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>What would be the best way to help new Native students understand the expectations of this university both in traditional and distance education classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>If you could change the way that classes are taught at this university, what would you change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Do you have a computer at home, an internet connection, and a cell phone? Do the members of your extended family and friends have access to these resources?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>How might new literacies, like social networking and text messaging, be used to help integrate Native students into the academic and social communities of this university?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Have you taken an on-line course before? If yes, what was it and did you like it? Why or why not? What would be the key elements of a successful on-line peer mentoring program that might help students stay motivated to completing an on-line course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>What would be the best ways of assisting new Native students in developing bicultural competence, that is, the ability to feel comfortable and be successful both within the home community and the white community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>How could this university best assist Native students in having knowledge of, and pride in, their traditional culture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>How might we encourage the families and tribes of Native students to play a larger and more supportive role in advising students and helping them to achieve academic success?</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Appendix 2. Introduction to the focus groups and the focus group questions.

Introduction

(The researchers) are conducting research on the ways and means to retain a higher percentage of the Native students at (this University) and to attract more Native students to it. As part of this effort, the (researchers) and the (student researchers) developed a survey that the (student researchers) asked other Native students to complete. The (researchers) and the (student researchers) coded the data from the surveys, which means we looked for themes which emerged from the data. Today we want to ask your opinions about what we think we found.

Focus group questions
One of the themes from the surveys was the need for more activities that bring Native students, their families, and communities together. Do you agree that this is an issue?

A related theme that emerged was that The Native American student community is fragmented. Native Americans don’t know or interact with many other Native American students. Do you believe that’s true and, if so, why do you think the Native student community is that way?

A third theme that emerged was that Native American students should be mentoring other Native American students, but this is not happening. What do you think about that? Do you have any ideas about the best way to develop a formal mentoring program?

A fourth theme that emerged was that parents and elders do not understand the nature of the commitment necessary for Native American student success and, therefore, put pressure on the students to attend to home and community activities at the
expense of school success. Native American students would like help with educating parents and elders about these issues. What do you think about that?

A fourth theme was a need for education of parents and elders about what it takes to be successful here. More specifically, when parents and elders have needs in the home community, they expect the students to come home regardless of what's going on at school. When students go home they stop working on assignments and going to class and end up doing poorly in the class. Do you agree with this and what, if anything should and could we do about it?

A fifth theme that emerged from the survey data was a need to inform new Native students about the expectations and requirements of the institution and the other knowledge needed to be a successful student including the resources available. Is this needed, and how would we do this?

A sixth theme was the desire for, or a need for, constant and consistent reminders about activities and course requirements. What do you think about that?

Is there something that stands out about (this university) and the experience that Native students have here that we haven’t mentioned?