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# Native American College Students: A Population That Can No Longer Be Ignored

**Deanne H. Maxwell**

*Native Americans have the highest college drop out rate of any ethnic minority (Reddy, 1993). This paper addresses the unique challenges that Native American college students face, including suppressing familial and spiritual beliefs, having financial disadvantages, coping with existing stereotypes, receiving insufficient secondary education, and finding no one on campus with whom to identify. According to Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997), "A common element of successful Native American drop out prevention programs is that at least one adult establishes a relationship of trust with each youth" (p. 5). In the spirit of the above-mentioned quote, this paper also addresses the importance of the involvement of student affairs offices in establishing connections with Native American students, which contributes to an improved college experience and increased retention of native students. Specifically, the counseling center, career services, and the ALANA (African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American) student center are discussed.*

As a result of the 1970's movement to boost the level of higher education achieved by Native Americans, post-secondary enrollments increased and several undergraduate programs for Native American students were established (Guyette & Heth, 1984, p.21). Despite this increased enrollment, Guyette and Heth report the following:

The educational and support programs currently in place have not yet entirely met the needs of Native American learners, as evidenced by the still extremely high unemployment rates, low levels of educational attainment, low health levels, and low income levels in Native American communities as compared to the U.S. population in general. (p. 21)

Although this statement was published 17 years ago, little progress has been made toward reaching a promising situation for Native Americans in the Academy. Though Native Americans score higher on SATs than either African Americans or Hispanic students, college drop out rates for Native Americans are the largest for any underrepresented population (Reddy, 1993). National surveys report that post-secondary drop out rates for Native Americans range from 75% to 93% (Guyette & Heth, 1984, p. 23). Of the estimated two million Native Americans that inhabit the United States, approximately 234,000 are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Tierney & Wright, 1991, p. 17). One might imagine that, due to a large pool of young Native Americans capable of attending college, the high school drop out rate would be lower. However, only three out of 100 ninth-graders will eventually receive a baccalaureate degree (Tierney & Wright, 1991, p.18).

## Unique Challenges

Upon entering institutions of higher education, Native American students not only face challenges typical to other minority students, but also encounter challenges that are uniquely their own. If the high post-secondary drop out rate is to be decreased, such challenges must be identified and addressed. Before this can be done, however, it must be mentioned that the starting points for college bound Native Americans vary greatly, as do the institutions that they attend. Some Native American college students have grown up on poverty-stricken reservations in the West while others have been raised in eastern, metropolitan cities. Some Native American students attend institutions such as the University of Arizona, where the Native American population is approximately 15%, while others attend institutions such as The University of Vermont, where there is a Native American population of less than 1%. For the purposes of this paper, Native American students who have grown up on reservations and attend institutions of higher education where they are significantly underrepresented will be the population that is discussed.

In their book *First Person First Peoples*, Garrod and Larimore (1997) make the following statement:

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In order to survive and participate successfully in mainstream culture, Native American students must learn an alien way to walk, talk, think and act, behaving as themselves only when they are at home in the Indian world. This expectation places the burden of assimilation squarely on the shoulders of Native American students and can be brutalizing to one's identity and spirituality. (p. 3)

Upon entering a traditional college campus, one of the single most debilitating predicaments that Native American students encounter is a suffocating suppression of their familial and spiritual beliefs (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Garrod & Larimore, 1997). Many Native Americans have an extended family network that is unlike the nuclear families that exist in traditional dominant culture today. At a young age, Native American children are permitted to make their own life decisions and are held responsible for their choices. In contrast to this early independence is a tribal viewpoint that honors group collaboration over the wants of the individual. Problems can arise for Native American college students as a result of these values. For example, the sense of independence to which many Native Americans aspire may prohibit them from asking for help and therefore perpetuate a cycle of isolation and aloneness. In addition, the emphasis that Native Americans place on collaboration can leave them behind in a competitively charged, individualistic academic environment. As described in First Person First People, Native American students at Dartmouth often encounter difficulties with informal seminars in which the professor becomes a participant and students are expected to discuss and debate. For some Native Americans, like those of the Navajo tribe, speaking up in class is perceived as bragging and comes into conflict with the Native American belief that individual attention works against the group's progress (Garrod & Larimore, 1997, p. 6).

Another obstacle that Native American students encounter involves the merger of their spiritual identity with the rest of their identity. This is particularly challenging being that their new environment is one that not only devalues such a merger, but also provides little space for tolerance of spirituality. Spirituality is a fundamental aspect of Native American culture. Integral to Native American spirituality is the belief of wholeness, interconnectedness, and balance, which is woven into family, community, tribe, and homeland (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). Thus, Native American students entering college often feel a deep void of separation from their family. It is usually within their first semester that native students realize that rather than functioning whole individuals, college students' lives are fragmented into different parts (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). These parts may include students' academic, professional, personal and social lives. Based on their perception of popular student culture, native students feel pressured to develop public and private identities. According to Garrod & Larimore (1997), such distinct divisions leave Native American students feeling as if only the intellectual portion of their being is fed, while the heart, body, and spirit go un nourished.

As a whole, Native Americans are severely financially disadvantaged. The percentage of Native Americans living below the poverty line is three times greater than the national average, and the unemployment rate on reservations is nearly 80% (Tierney & Wright, 1991, p. 18). A notable number of Native Americans live on reservations, where the standard of living is often below the national average (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997). Limited financial resources may be available to provide a college education. A 1990 survey of 1,291 minority students reported that 83% of Native American students applied for financial aid (Melnick & Wolf, 1990). This was greater than the 75% of African American students, 71% of Hispanic students and 48% of White students that are reported to have applied for financial aid (Melnick & Wolf, 1990). Native American students who manage to afford college face additional obstacles; often they cannot talk with their family, as some reservations do not have phones, much less computers for conversations over e-mail (Garrod & Larimore, 1997).

For Native American students who have lived on a reservation their entire lives, traveling to college can be an eye-opening experience. Their expedition to the Academy exposes them to the academic rigors of college and makes Native Americans painfully aware of the perceptions that some white students hold of them. The reputation that dominant cultures have placed on Native Americans is that they are lazy drunks, whose high school educational system is inferior compared to that of mainstream education. The education provided to students on reservations may pose a challenge for native students attending a competitive college, especially when white classmates may have been educated in private, college preparatory high schools. Because the quality of education one receives is increasingly determined by the socioeconomic and geographic area in which the student lives, there are some very real discrepancies between public and private schools. For example, students who live in the metropolis of New York City will likely spend a significant portion of their school day dealing

with issues of discipline. Students living in rural Randolph, Vermont, will probably use inadequate resources and dated equipment in school due to the limited budget that is allocated to such a diminutive town. In both cases, such obstacles detract from students' learning. Since private secondary institutions charge tuition to their students, many such schools have the benefit of a healthy budget. Therefore, students who graduate from private schools are perceived by many colleges and universities as having received a quality education, and the private school attended often has a reputation that precedes such students. Although public schools are integrated, the quality of educational experiences is not consistent throughout public schools. According to Garrod & Larimore (1997), "developing the learning potential of students all too often takes a back seat to managing classroom behavior, and in such settings the failure of Native American (and other minority) students is not problematic, it is expected" (p. 5).

While the notion that all Native Americans are lazy drunks is refutable, it cannot be denied that severe unemployment problems combined with the fact that Native Americans have a clinically proven predisposition to alcohol, has led to alcohol abuse on many reservations (A. H. Levto, personal communication, April 11, 2000). Therefore, according to Anat Levto, a 1998 graduate of Dartmouth College and former honorary member of Dartmouth's Native American organization, one of two possibilities is likely. In college, Native American students can abhor drinking and find friends and activities that do not revolve around it. The other and more often selected option, according to Levto, is for Native American students to drink in college and continue on a destructive path toward alcoholism (personal communication, April 11, 2000).

Finally, since the number of Native Americans in higher education is significantly low, those students enrolled in post-secondary institutions have few other Native Americans with whom they can identify. It is conceivable that at some institutions there may be only one or two students who identify as Native American. Therefore, faculty, staff, and peers may overlook such students. There may be few if any programs in place to help Native Americans adjust to college life, and providing such programs would not be cost-effective for the institution.

### **Inclusion, Not Exclusion**

Thus far, a synopsis has highlighted the challenges and obstacles with which Native American students have to contend concerning their pursuit of higher education. Now that the primary issues have been identified, possible solutions must be discussed. Scholars have provided insight on this issue of critical concern.

Society can no longer afford excluding populations simply because they are different from the main stream or prefer to remain within their own cultural contexts. All evidence suggests that Native American students and their families want equal educational opportunities. Native American students do not want to be excluded from a university's doors because they cannot afford the education, and they do not want to be lost on a campus that doesn't value and accommodate their differences. (Tierney & Wright, 1997, p. 18)

The above-mentioned statement makes it clear that the native student population can no longer be excluded, and in fact wants to be included in mainstream higher education. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the best ways to achieve this essential task. Dr. Clint Ford, founder and director of the Annual National Conference on Black Student Retention at Florida A&M University, makes the claim that minority retention proves challenging for many institutions because they have not made it a priority (Phillip, 1993). "This is apparent in their faculty, curriculum and corporate culture assailing most retention efforts as Band-Aid approaches to a serious problem. Retention is a system that should progressively move students toward graduation. Universities should recruit for retention rather than admissions," Ford comments (as cited in Phillip, 1993, p. 24).

Ford's point is a valuable one in that diversity initiatives must be an institutional priority rather than the responsibility of a single committee or office, because this must be viewed by the university community as a campus-wide commitment. However, it is questionable whether or not Native American students are included within the minorities to which Ford refers. It may be contended that while diversity efforts are geared toward minority populations as a whole, little effort has been directed toward the retention of Native American college students specifically. Since this population of students is so small, it has merely slipped through the cracks of higher education, leaving behind little more than tally marks that are added together to create Native American drop out statistics.

In conclusion, institutions of higher education can no longer overlook the profoundly high drop out rate of Native American students. The Academy must achieve a campus climate and culture that is conducive to the success of Native American college students. Such acclimatization begins with three critical student affairs offices: the counseling center, career services, and the ALANA student center.

### Counseling Center

As previously discussed, Native American students face a multitude of challenges upon arriving at the Academy. The clear developmental challenge that Native American students face is that of rediscovering their identity in the college environment (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). As a result of having to suppress or leave behind their true identity regarding familial and spiritual beliefs and adapt into mainstream society, such students must learn to develop a new sense of themselves in the college environment. It is in this way that Native American students have left the environment in which traditions were not only celebrated, but considered beautiful and sacred, and arrived at a place where these values are clearly different and contradict the compartmentalized lives that most students lead.

In making the transition to college and a new way of life, the counseling center may provide a safe environment for Native American students to discuss the myriad of issues that they are encountering. Unfortunately, like other minority students, Native American students underutilize the counseling center (Johnson & Lashley, 1989). Johnson and Lashley (1989) determined that even when counseling services are sought out, almost twice as many Native American students fail to return for a second appointment, as compared to the general population (p. 116). The reason Native American students do not return to the counseling center for a second appointment may be attributed to the fact that they are not receiving what they need. In other words, the counselors simply cannot identify with what the Native American students are experiencing, as they may have had very limited exposure to native student populations in their counseling career.

In order for a counseling center to successfully provide the services that Native American students seek, counselors must be attuned with Native American cultural identity. In three out of the four studies conducted, it was determined that Native American students preferred to receive counseling from someone who is also Native American (Johnson & Lashley, 1989). However, the overarching reason that Native American students prefer racially similar counselors is because the students perceive the Native American counselors to have a better conception of native cultural identity than a non-native counselor. Those Native American students who indicate a strong cultural commitment have certain expectations about counseling (Johnson & Lashley, 1989). "They expect nurturance, facilitative conditions, and counselor expertise" (p. 120). Because Native American students could clearly benefit from counseling, it is important that counselors be culturally adept. It is for this reason that Native American sensitivity training should be a necessary component of counselor instruction. Additionally, because one of the primary challenges that Native Americans encounter in college is a sense of alienation and loneliness, the encouragement of group counseling for those students may alleviate such isolation and cultivate a sense of belonging. Once the counseling center develops a reputation as a space in which Native American students can freely express themselves and be understood, more Native American students will seek out counseling and benefit from this service.

### Career Services

In their 1997 article, Brown and Robinson Kurpius modified Vincent Tinto's (1975) model of educational persistence and applied it to Native American college students. Tinto cited institutional performance as a fundamental factor associated with persistence (1975). Institutional performance exists on several dimensions. Grade point average (GPA) is the single most important determinant to persistence of Native American college students (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997, p.5). Some white students often convey to Native American students, especially at selective institutions, that Native American students are not smart enough and are merely at that particular institution because of their minority status as Native Americans. Native American students internalize such suggestions; therefore, they place a large emphasis on their grade point average. If their grade point average is marginal, Native American students begin to question whether or not they belong at the institution.

Early intervention by career services might also contribute to the retention of Native American students. Because they are primarily concerned about grades, choosing a major might encourage persistence efforts, as Native American students would feel as if they truly had a purpose for remaining in school.

Career services could also develop uniquely tailored programs to address professional work experience for Native American students. For example, in one seminar native students could explore certain companies and organizations whose mission is congruent with Native American lifestyles. The intent of this program is twofold. First, the program aims to initially encourage the native students to explore post-graduation possibilities, which emphasizes completion of secondary education. Also, the program functions as a tool to reinforce to Native American students that they can preserve their beliefs, rather than alter them for specific environments.

#### ALANA Student Center

Making contact and establishing relationships with peer groups is critical to the sense of belonging for all students, especially Native Americans. For this reason, many colleges have Native American organizations that celebrate Native American identity through programs and activities. Native American organizations are often housed under the ALANA (which is an acronym for African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American) Student Center. The ALANA Student Center may provide the space for Native American students to truly behave as themselves without the pressure to suppress or leave behind their identity.

According to Jacob Diaz (personal communication, December 1, 2000) ALANA Student Centers are not necessarily a development that is unique to the East Coast. However, such centers may be more viable on campuses with relatively small populations of African, Latino/a, Asian and Native American students. Campuses with large minority populations such as the University of Santa Barbara in California, have the students and the resources to have individual student centers for each specific underrepresented student population. Additionally, although the goal of ALANA Student Centers is to create a safe space for all African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American students, some students belonging to these groups believe the efforts of the ALANA student center are little more than a feeble attempt on behalf of the institution to uniformly deal with student populations in the racial minority. Therefore, rather than receiving individual recognition, these students believe they are lumped together under one “minority community umbrella.”

The arena for one’s true identity to flourish may be developed through an ALANA summer orientation program for accepted minority students, including Native Americans. This program not only gives incoming first-year students the opportunity to become familiarized with their new environment, but also provides them with the critical need to forge bonds with students who have similar needs.

ALANA Student Centers attempt to create solace for students in the racial minority, including Native American students. ALANA Student Centers accomplish this through highly skilled staff members, who are often of African descent, Asian descent, or are Latino/a or Native American. At least one such staff member is usually a graduate student. This person is extremely important to native students, as s/he serves as a role model, and is a visible representation that graduating from college can be achieved.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the counseling center, career services, and the ALANA student center have been highlighted as offices which provide support for Native American college students and the unique challenges with which these students contend. However, these three offices cannot solely boost the retention of Native American students. The success and retention of Native American college students is contingent upon a university-wide commitment to provide a satisfying experience for Native American students. If such an initiative is central to the mission of the institution and clearly communicated and understood by University faculty, staff, and students, Native American students will believe they belong to a community in which they matter. It is this development of a sense of belonging and mattering that will enable Native American students to persist in the Academy.

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