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Facing the future: Retaining Native American college students

Abstract

Native Americans' beliefs and values are disregarded by the majority American culture. They are disregarded not only in the media but also in the classroom. This neglect in education extends beyond informing today's youth of the factual history of Native Americans to the actual education of Native Americans themselves. This neglect begins in the elementary and secondary schools and continues throughout our institutions of higher learning.

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Facing the Future: Retaining Native American College Students

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by Tina Roher Malone
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This Research Paper by Tina Malone

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

6 April 1995	Florence Guido-DiBrito
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Native Americans' beliefs and values are disregarded by the majority American culture. They are disregarded not only in the media but also in the classroom. This neglect in education extends beyond informing today's youth of the factual history of Native Americans to the actual education of Native Americans themselves. This neglect begins in the elementary and secondary schools and continues throughout our institutions of higher learning.

Since Native Americans have a very high drop out rate from all levels of education (Kleinfeld, et al, 1987), special measures must be taken to encourage Native American students to continue their education. Programs must offer a smooth transition from the students' indigenous culture to the university culture in order for them to graduate.

To fully understand how to meet Native American college students' needs and develop programs to assist them in the transition to the university, we must take a step backwards and look into the student's home culture. This includes considering the way Native Americans interact and learn within the culture and using this knowledge to improve our own classrooms and programs for their benefit.

In this paper, successful programs for Native American students that focus on orientation and retention efforts at universities and tribal colleges is discussed. First, a brief historical overview is offered as a foundation for understanding the higher learning of Native Americans.

Historical Overview

The history of educating Native Americans can be divided into three time periods: the missionary period (1636-1870), the federal period (1870-1970), and the tribal college period (1968-Present) (Oppelt, 1990). Each of these periods will be discussed in turn.

The Missionary Period: 1636-1870

America was founded by European immigrants searching for religious freedom. The Puritans landed on our shores and established themselves and their religion. After some contact with the indigenous people of this land, the Puritans felt it was their responsibility to spread the word of God onto this seemingly godless people (Oppelt, 1990). Since the natives' ways were very different from the Puritans, in the way they dressed to the way they prayed, the Puritans interpreted the native ways as being savage.

To convert the natives to Christianity, the Puritans felt it was necessary to impose their values, wardrobe, and language onto the natives so that they would look and, therefore, act like "civilized" people (Oppelt, 1990). This process of Christianizing the natives seemed like an act of Christian duty to the Puritans. However, the natives had already established a long history of traditions and religion within their cultures that the Puritans disregarded.

In the 1600's, formal educational institutions developed to educate the "red man." Harvard, William & Mary, and Dartmouth were all

chartered to educate the sons of the natives (Stein, 1990). Due to funding and attendance problems, these schools soon became white, upper-class institutions (Oppelt, 1990). Of the few Indians who attended and graduated, some died soon after graduation from disease while others were rejected and killed by their own people (Oppelt, 1990).

The goals of these institutions were never realized. Their objective was for the graduates, now civilized by Christianity, to return to their tribes and pass on to the Native American people what they had learned as preachers of the Gospel (Salisbury, 1974). Ultimately, the private, Christian missionary schools came and went without achieving their goal of changing the native people.

The Federal Period: 1870-1970

The end of the Civil War brought about great change throughout the United States. The federal "government began to take on the responsibility [of] providing education for American Indians. The primary objective ... was ... the assimilation of young Indians into the white culture" (Oppelt, 1990, p.117). Thus, the source of education changed hands from the Christians to the government, but the goal remained the same, to change the Native Americans.

The government took more drastic measures than the Puritans. While the Puritans were more subtle, the government was forceful. Boarding schools opened that forced native children to give up their native ways (Oppelt, 1990).

One such school, Carlisle Indian School in Kansas, was opened in 1879 by Captain Richard H. Pratt (Oppelt, 1990). By founding the school off-reservation, Pratt felt he could better achieve his goal of taming the savages. Pratt stated: "To civilize the Indian, put him in civilization and keep him there." (Lindquist, 1944, p. 96). To the white society, Carlisle was a success and was used as a model for Indian boarding schools for the next five decades (Oppelt, 1990).

At these boarding schools, Indian children were forced to cut their hair, wear uniforms, speak English, and learn what the white people believed (Foulkrod & Grant, 1994). Often, children suffered torture, violence, and ridicule if they spoke their native language. These tactics would cause many young Indians to rebel against white culture and its education (Oppelt, 1990).

As for higher education, there was only one institution especially for American Indians. Haskell Institute in Kansas was the only federal college for natives until the 1960's (Oppelt, 1990).

The Tribal College Period: 1968-Present:

In the 1960's, the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing. With it came a rise in institutional programs that would allow equal opportunities for minority students and open admission policies which affected financial aid and academic programs (Kulik, et al, 1983). Such programs included tutoring and learning centers, guidance, and study skills courses.

The Higher Education Act was passed in 1965. It offered grants and loans from the federal government to students based on need rather than just on merit (Levin & Levin, 1991). This act opened the door to higher learning to people that may have never considered attending college before because of low grades or poor academic preparation. This act succeeded in supplying minority students with a means to attend higher educational institutions but neglected to alter their poor primary and secondary schooling which left them unprepared for college courses.

In 1968, the Navajo Community College (NCC) was the first tribally controlled and funded college (Oppelt, 1990). Since NCC was founded, many other tribal colleges have opened. Two dozen individual tribes have established their own tribal colleges (O'Brien, 1992).

Though there are several tribal colleges today, they all share in their mission statements to "preserve, enhance, and promote the language and culture of its tribe, to serve their communities, and to strive to provide quality academic programs" (Stein, 1992, p.89). The goal of these similar mission statements is to return the pride and identity to the Native American people. This is done by teaching the language, history, and values of the tribe by focusing on their strong spiritual heritage, and by including Native Americans' contributions to academia, which has gone ignored by public school systems (Mahan, 1982 & Boyer, 1990).

Native Americans have spent the past three decades trying "to gain more control over their own education" (O'Brien, 1992, p.2). Each year, they gain more ground in their quest and win small battles along the way.

In 1990, President Bush signed the Native American Language Act. This act will ensure the preservation and protection of the many languages of the native people. This act secures that the native languages of the tribes can be taught in any school funded by the Secretary of the Interior (Reyhner, 1992). By passing legal acts such as this, the rights and heritage of the native people may be preserved from extinction.

Programs to Retain Native American Students

Orientation Programs as Retention Devices

Starting college can be a very traumatic and dynamic experience for all students. First year students are beginning a new lifestyle: they are moving away from home.for the first time, they must make new friends, and they must learn new rules and procedures in order to survive in this new environment. Colleges and universities must respect the pressure this change of lifestyle has on students, especially minority students, by offering support in the transition from home to campus life.

Orientation programs are designed to assist all students with this transition. In order to meet the needs of students, researchers have looked at specific groups to determine their needs and how the college or university can best meet these needs within the confines of an orientation program.

Orientation programs can help students make realistic goals for college achievement inside and outside the classroom (Baker et al, 1985). Research has found that students remain in college when they: become

active within the campus environment; are supported, challenged, and encouraged; and are given opportunities to become good leaders (Bedford & Durkee, 1989). Students persist in college when they get involved because activities increase students commitment to their college while offering them social contacts and responsibilities (Brower, 1992).

Schwitzer et al (1991) found that orientation programs were most beneficial for students that were unsure of their major, learning skills students, and minority students because they provide realistic information, offer support, and provide study skills training. Native American students share these needs and concerns with all other student populations. However, they have additional needs that regular orientation programs may not provide.

Why retention efforts are needed

There are several reasons few Native Americans are enrolled in higher education. The first is due to the small pool of people from which Native American college students originate. Native Americans make up only 0.8% of the population in the United States (O'Brien, 1992). Of this small number of people, Native Americans suffer a 6.7% higher high school dropout rate than all other student populations. For this reason, programs must begin within the high school, or even the junior high, to encourage more Native American students to strive for a high school diploma and form a plan for a post-secondary education early in their educational careers.

A second reason there is such a small number of Native Americans in higher education is that the few who attend institutions of higher education often feel that faculty have misconceptions and stereotypes about them (Tate & Schwartz, 1993). In fact, many Native American students feel a high incidence of rejection, depression, and anxiety in the university setting (Ludwig, 1984). It may be for these reasons that 53% of Native American students drop out of college after the first year (O'Brien, 1992).

A third reason few Native Americans are enrolled in higher education is that college graduation seems to be an unfulfilled dream for Native American college students. Only 9% of Native American college students graduate compared to 20% of the total population (O'Brien, 1992). That means that 75% of Native American college students leave higher education before graduation (Hoover & Jacobs, 1992), making Native Americans the least successful ethnic group in academe (Benjamin, et al, 1993).

Lessons to be learned from Tribal Colleges

Tribal colleges are successful at helping Native American students because they know the culture of the Native American and can integrate the Native American culture into their educational setting. Tribal colleges are student centered. Their programs cater to a different student body than traditional universities. Tribal colleges include an older population with a mean age of 30. Most students are female heads of households that need special assistance with the burden of higher education and raising a

family. Many of the students have already failed at traditional schools, and 90% of the students are the first generation to seek a degree (Boyer, 1990).

Services offered at tribal colleges include transportation to and from school, child care programs, women's support groups, and adult basic education programs (Stein, 1992). The education, assistance, and treatment of students is focused on the individual needs of each student. At a tribal college, it would not be uncommon for a faculty or staff member to go to a student's home to see why they missed class (Stein, 1992). Faculty know their students on a much more personal level than the faculty at traditional schools.

Before beginning programs to retain Native American students, it is important to understand some things about their culture so that these things can be addressed. First, it is important to know that Native Americans avoid conflict, do not like confrontation, and will not ask for assistance to resolve issues that cause the conflict (Henderson, 1991). This may be important to understand in residence life, for example, in addressing interpersonal issues for Native Americans.

Second, some Native Americans may not have learned to speak American English until a later age. Courses geared for International students may not adequately assist Native American students that speak English as a second language. For example, Navajo has no plural or tense, therefore Navajo students may have an extra hard time grasping these concepts that German or Italian students would take for granted (Henderson, 1991).

Third, Native Americans avoid direct eye contact because it is seen as impolite in their culture to do so (Henderson, 1991). Native American students, mostly those that are more traditional, may not speak up in class when they have a question, are more introverted, insecure, and may have low attendance (Schiller, 1987).

Fourth, lack of class attendance is often due to the student's duty to attend tribal ceremonies. Many Native American student's become depressed if they miss these ceremonies because they feel they have disappointed their family and tribe by not attending and participating (Benjamin, et al, 1993).

Fifth, many first generation Native American students face hostility from their family when they leave for school. The Native American culture places the needs of the community ahead of the interest of an individual. Thus, by leaving the community to go to school, the student is going against his/her culture (Stein, 1992).

It is important to understand that Native Americans have a culture that is very different from our own, even though we live in the same country. The Native American student must try to master two very diverse cultures, in a relatively short period of time, in order to survive in each (McDermott, 1974).

Special needs of Native American Students

As discussed earlier, orientation programs aim at meeting the needs of a diverse student population. Native American student's needs are more

complex than those of the majority population. Orientation and other student affairs professionals in retention programs may benefit from developing a better understanding of the Native American culture in order to make a better assessment of what Native American student's require in their university or college experience. For example, realizing that the Native American culture centers around community betterment, educational programs that focus on community participation may be important to Native American students (Reyhner, 1992). Native American students learn better from interaction and experimentation rather than a lecture format (Reyhner, 1992). Informing Native American student's of a professor's instructional style may assist them in course selection.

Some other ideas on meeting Native American student's' needs include: offering career counseling from the beginning of the college experience (Hoover & Jacobs, 1992), including contributions made by ethnic people into discipline curriculums (Spaights, et al, 1985), offering cultural awareness programs for non-Native American students to foster understanding and reduce prejudice of Native Americans; faculty support in advising, as role models, and for emotional support; and providing Native American support groups on campus to decrease isolation and increase a sense of community (Tate & Schwartz, 1993).

Faculty support is very important to Native American students (Burrell & Trombley, 1983). Workshops may be designed to sensitize faculty to minority student needs and cultures. Mentoring programs are very useful but if faculty are too busy, peer mentors may also succeed at

helping new students from underrepresented populations make a successful transition to the college environment (Tate & Schwartz, 1993).

Academic advising is also very valuable in helping the Native American student. These advisors help students adapt to their new environment while also helping them improve their study skills. They also help students set realistic academic goals and provide encouragement for the students (Burrell & Trombley, 1983).

Native American students may require special advising and counseling as the above evidence indicates. Academic advisors may need to teach Native American students test taking skills. Universities may have to provide mentor programs and positive role models for Native American students (Morehead, 1986). Any program that increases the Native American's self confidence in their academic abilities will empower the Native American student to higher success (Hoover & Jacobs, 1992). Existing programs that understand and try to meet these needs will now be discussed.

Successful Retention Programs

As with other minority groups, retention of Native American college students may need to begin in the junior or senior high school. San Juan College in New Mexico has developed a program called "Bridges" that begins retention efforts in area junior high schools (Henderson, 1991). By recruiting early, Bridges helps track junior high age students into college preparatory courses. Studies find that minority students that decide later

in high school or even after high school to attend college do not have the internal drive that may be needed to help them through the harder times in college (Benjamin, et al, 1993).

Another part of Bridges includes offering high school students a chance to take college courses for college credit. By *bridging* the experiences of these students between home and college life, this program has offered high school students a glimpse of what may lie ahead for them in a college or university setting. Exposing these students to the college environment (at least inside the classroom) may offer the students an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and prove to themselves that they can succeed.

In addition, San Juan College offers the Possible Dream Program which provides financial assistance (Henderson, 1991). This scholarship program begins in eighth grade by setting aside $10 a month/per student until she/he graduates from high school. By graduation, the students have earned two years tuition. This works because the college freezes tuition increases for the students in the program.

Programs like Bridges and Possible Dream work because they reach students early, help students mentally and academically prepare to succeed in college, help students focus on a college major, offer a special orientation program, and present career choices earlier (Henderson, 1991). These programs allow the students to look to the future with hope and see that they have a promising future ahead of them.

Another program that starts in high school but extends into college is the Post-secondary Counselor Program (Kleinfeld, et al, 1987). In this program, a counselor works with students throughout their high school years. The counselor relates to students on a personal level and develops a long term connection which continues as the student enters college. The counselor offers advice and nurturing support that the Native American student is accustomed to receiving from their community. The counselor acts as a surrogate parent who answers questions about where to receive assistance in the university setting, encourages the student to persist, and visits the student often to show support.

Other programs also focus on proactive interventions. Special programs for Native American and other minority students that include orientation to the college environment, such as Upward Bound, seem very beneficial for students (Kleinfeld, et al, 1987). Orientation programs for minority students may focus on the transition from their culture to the university culture as well as offering a program on skill development. The University of California in San Diego offers an orientation program called Summer Bridge Program which does just that (Levin & Levin, 1991).

Bridge programs at San Juan College and the University of California, San Diego may also be useful for students making the transfer from community colleges to the large university (Henderson, 1991). For some students enrolling at a larger institution is their first experience in a large urban area. Assisting in this transition is just as important for retention as the transition from high school to college.

Part of an orientation program may include informing students of possible skill development courses available to them. The University of Minnesota allows students to voluntarily register for a non-credit program that requires a student to take courses that teach basic skills and provides students with tutorial services (Levin & Levin, 1991).

Another alternative to focusing on skills inside the classroom is an active teaching style. Confluent Teaching Style focuses on offering education that is relevant, where learners participate, class includes cooperative group exercises, and real life issues are addressed (Hurlburt, Kroeker, & Gade, 1991). In Confluent Teaching Style, the teacher is a facilitator rather than an informer (Shapiro, 1986). This style works well with Native American students because it is congruent with their culture in that it is not competitive like traditional classrooms but allows students to work together for the good of the class, just like in the Native American community.

These programs aim at helping the student succeed within the classroom setting. Of course, other measures must accompany these skill development courses in order for Native American students to survive outside the classroom. San Juan College seems to lead the pack in Native American student retention program efforts. They not only offer the academic programs mentioned earlier, but they also include excellent programs for Native American students once they reach college. These programs are geared toward life outside the classroom. San Juan College employs a full time Native American director that acts as counselor and

advisor (Henderson, 1991). They have an "Indian Club" that supports Native American students and encourages them to participate and take on leadership roles in other organizations. San Juan College provides a faculty mentor program, free tutoring, and ample role models with a diverse faculty population. San Juan College also requires that two weeks out of every semester, students must work or observe in a business environment. For many students, this is their first opportunity in a professional setting.

San Juan College also offers an Outreach Program (Henderson, 1991). This is a satellite college very near the local reservation. This provides students that would not otherwise attend college an opportunity to gain a college education.

San Juan is successful because it focuses on teaching students a very transferable skill: empowerment (Turrel & Wright, 1988). The many skills they learn through empowerment include: risk taking, communication, self confidence, self-reliance, self care, problem-solving, and leadership skills.

Conclusion

The programs discussed in this paper work because they focus on meeting the specific needs of a very specific minority population. Understanding that Native Americans need role models and faculty support is important. Offering skill development to a population that traditionally has not had a chance to attend college is also important. Finally, including programs that signal to Native American students that their culture and

heritage is important may improve the likelihood that Native American college students will enjoy their college experience and persist through graduation.

Since Native Americans make up such a tiny percentage of the national student body, less that 1% (O'Brien, 1992), it may be unrealistic to expect institutions to include such programs. However, universities that actively recruit Native American students have a responsibility to offer these students the support they need to succeed at the institution they attend. Universities that ignore their minority populations are doing a disservice to themselves, the minority students, and the community.

I think it is important for our university administrators and faculty to take the time to learn about minority student cultures, particularly the Native American student culture. Student Affairs professionals need to develop programs that inform and educate the university population. These programs should be provided for all students in order for them to be educated about the cultures, languages, traditions, and ways of cultures within our culture. Through education, people may learn to understand and accept each other. Prejudice is based on ignorance. It is up to our universities to educate the university population beyond prejudice.

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