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Developing Native Student Leadership Skills: The Success of the Oklahoma Native American Students in Higher Education (ONASHE) Conference

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Authors
Minthorn, Robin Starr
Wanger, Stephen P.
Shotton, Heather J.

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Robin Starr Minthorn, Stephen P. Wanger, and Heather J. Shotton

Contemporary Native American tribes and communities face numerous challenges and immense opportunities. These situations call for a leadership base that is both educated and grounded in tribal values and traditions. Tribes recognize that our future leadership lies within Native college students, so there is a growing call for Native students to return home and utilize their education to lead. Native students are beginning to heed this call and express a strong desire to give back to their tribal communities through education.[1] As a result, higher education is emerging as a place where future Native leaders are fostered. Understanding leadership development among Native students within the context of higher education is therefore increasingly important. Although leadership development from a Native American perspective has been explored in the broad context of community and tribal leadership, the literature on Native student development in general, and Native student leadership development in particular, is sparse.[2] The purpose of this paper is to examine the development of leadership skills among Native American college students through a targeted leadership conference.

Robin Starr Minthorn is an assistant professor of educational leadership and Native American studies at the University of New Mexico. Stephen P. Wanger is an associate professor of higher education administration at Oklahoma State University. Heather J. Shotton is an assistant professor in Native American studies at the University of Oklahoma.

BACKGROUND

In the summer of 2007 discussion began in Oklahoma concerning the feasibility of a statewide conference focusing on leadership development and relationship building for Native American college students. The Oklahoma Native American Students in Higher Education (ONASHE) annual conference was subsequently created to provide opportunities for students to develop and strengthen their leadership skills through interaction with current tribal leaders, participation in workshops that are relevant to contemporary student and leadership issues, and fellowship with other Native students. The inaugural conference was held in 2008 and participation has increased each year, with over 100 students and more than 20 professionals attending in 2010, 125 participants in 2011, 117 in 2012, and 106 in 2013. The diversity of higher education institutions likewise has grown and includes fifteen higher education institutions representing public universities, private universities, community colleges, and tribal colleges. Each year the participants expressed the positive impact of ONASHE on the lives of the students and professionals who attended. This paper represents a research study designed to assess the impact of ONASHE on the development of leadership skills among student attendees of the conference.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

We began the study with a review of the literature that encompassed issues associated with Native American college students and the development of leadership skills. The review produced critical considerations that informed the study. The following paragraphs highlight these considerations, focusing on academic persistence and leadership development.

Academic Persistence

Multiple studies have examined factors that contribute to the success of Native American students in higher education, including several that explored academic persistence among Native American college students. Researchers have especially identified confidence and self-perception as possible predictors of academic persistence among Native American students.[3] In a study of academic motivation among Navajo students, a strong sense of self with respect to the capacity to learn was identified as a factor positively related to persistence.[4] Another study found that confidence and self-efficacy are related to academic persistence.[5] These findings echoed previous studies which indicate that self-efficacy is a critical component for helping students to overcome obstacles.[6]

Among the general student population in higher education, faculty-student interaction has been identified as another important factor for both persistence and student satisfaction.[7] This is also true for the Native American student population. Studies of Native American student academic persistence have consistently identified positive interactions between faculty members and Native American students as critical for fostering persistence and academic achievement.[8] A study published in 1997 found that those Native American students who have positive interactions with faculty members experience greater persistence in college.[9] A subsequent study indicated that academically successful Native American students have positive interactions with faculty members that they perceive to be caring; the student perception of care from faculty members provided encouragement for students, thereby increasing their confidence and contributing to persistence.[10]

The literature that addresses success and motivation in higher education, however, points to differing perspectives among mainstream and Native American cultures. The traditional notion of success in American higher education is viewed through a predominantly Eurocentric perspective. Badwound and Tierney explain that from the Eurocentric perspective, "a primary goal of American postsecondary education is to enable individuals to achieve status and success in society. Society measures success by the material rewards which one accrues. The emphasis is on individual competition."[11] Cross further maintains that the educational system itself was established on the premise of individualism and competition.[12]

Native American culture sharply contrasts with mainstream culture in this area, placing emphasis more on the group than the individual. Within many Native American cultures, children are surrounded by values of extensive sharing, generosity, and cooperation.[13] Success and prestige are closely connected to the extent to which an individual shares accumulated wealth, rather than the material wealth that one accrues.[14] From the Native American frame of reference, achievement and excelling differ considerably from the individualistic perspective of mainstream culture. Because the emphasis is placed on the group rather than the individual, the prevailing concern is for the welfare of the group as a whole.[15] Cooperation and group commitment are valued, and individual achievement focuses on the betterment of the group.[16]

From the dominant societal perspective, individual achievement is a significant motivating factor for achievement in higher education. The promise of improved job opportunities, individual success, and accumulated wealth are typical factors motivating students in the mainstream culture to succeed.[17] However, when viewing the motivation for achievement through a Native cultural lens the reasons for pursuing a university education may be vastly different, as evidenced by recent literature on reciprocity.

The notion of reciprocity emerges in current literature as a key motivating factor for postsecondary success among Native American students. Researchers found that for Native American students the desire to obtain a university degree reflects a larger purpose than simply getting a better job; a university degree is "often linked to aspirations with much broader collective/tribal considerations."[18] Higher education may be important to Native Americans for a number of reasons because "it can be seen as a means for collective social and economic mobility. . . . It can be seen as a means of engaging in research to advance the knowledge of First Nations. . . . It can be seen as a means of providing the expertise and leadership needed by First Nations communities."[19] This underlying notion of giving back and advancing the tribe or community is relevant to the development of leadership among Native students, to which we now turn.

Leadership Development

Whereas the literature that explores leadership development among the general population is extensive, the literature that focuses on Native American college student leadership development is limited. This narrow corpus reflects two distinct strands: (1) Native American leadership perspectives,[20] and (2) the integration of tribal communities and families.[21] To these strands we add Dugan's social change model[22] and the leadership identity model proposed by Komives, Mainelia, Longerbeam, Osteen, and Owen,[23] both of which serve as the integrated theoretical framework for this study.

Austin discusses the need for higher education institutions to acknowledge and incorporate the perspectives of Native parents and leaders.[24] For the success of Native American students, he recommends that higher education institutions incorporate key considerations that include recognition of tribal legal status and support for Native students, parental expectations, and tribal expectations.[25] He additionally argues that leadership development among Native students may be strengthened through research partnerships between tribes and higher education institutions, as well as by acknowledging that tribes need graduates. They also need to train teachers and administrators, provide distance education, and recognize the critical role that tribal colleges play in Native communities.[26] These steps are viewed as a means not only to cultivate healthy relationships between tribal nations and higher education institutions, but also as a way to foster leadership development for current Native American students.

The phenomenon of leadership and its evolution is explored in a study of the lives of contemporary tribal college presidents and administrators.[27] This study provides unique insights into leadership from a Native perspective.

Noteworthy among these insights are the necessity to recognize the differences between Natives and non-Natives; the role of cross-communication skills; the practical use of education for Native communities; to cultivate a positive attitude and commitment to education; and to emphasize creativity and vision, patience and tolerance, self-confidence, and pride in being American Indian. We believe that these findings warrant the need for ongoing research not only of contemporary leaders, but also leadership development from an intergenerational perspective.

The findings of these studies complement Dugan's social change model, which is based on the premise of social responsibility and change for the common good. The model addresses the importance of understanding group and societal values and their relationships to leadership development. Core values included in this model are: consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, common purpose, collaboration, controversy with civility, and citizenship.[28]

Komives, Mainelia, Longerbeam, Osteen, and Owen propose a leadership identity model based on the grounded theory of leadership identity. The model can inform both how the formation of self is viewed and how life and the college experience impact leadership development. The model proposes that five considerations influence the development of leadership identity. They are: broadening view of leadership, developing self, group influences, developmental influences, and the changing view of self with others. Each consideration features stages that facilitate the linear comparison of growth in leadership identity. The stages are: awareness, exploration/engagement, leader-identified, leadership-differentiated, generativity and integration/synthesis.[29] As mentioned above, these two models serve as the integrated theoretical framework for this study. The social change and the leadership identity models both attempt to understand the processes that occur in the leadership development of college students, providing a cross comparison of the impact of leadership development on Native students. They thus inform the data collection and the data analysis processes, and facilitate a better understanding of Native college students' perspectives of leadership and the influences that a leadership development program such as ONASHE has on participants.

Methodology

The objective of this study is to examine how the annual Oklahoma Native American Students in Higher Education (ONASHE) conference facilitates the development of leadership skills among Native American student attendees. Initially conducted in 2008, ONASHE is an annual conference

with subsequent meetings in 2009 through 2012. Approximately 100 Native American college students throughout the state of Oklahoma participate in the ONASHE conference each year.

For this study we employed a qualitative research approach. We view the qualitative approach as most appropriate for capturing the unique cultural perspectives of Native American students, and accordingly join with numerous researchers embracing this research approach.[30] Native American students enter higher education from a particular cultural base, and the meanings that they ascribe to their experiences are strongly shaped within their own cultural constructs.[31] Much of the research related to Native American students, however, is conducted from the dominant cultural perspective and often utilizes quantitative methods that may fail to address fully the differing cultural perspectives of Native Americans. This type of approach can produce findings that may not best fit this particular population.[32] Qualitative research is appropriate for understanding the experiences of Native American students not only because it accounts for unique cultural perspectives by allowing Native students to give voice to their own experiences, but also because research is conducted within the setting of the participants.[33] We specifically used phenomenological methodology in which the students' voices influenced the emergent themes throughout the data analysis process. Phenomenological qualitative methodology captures how individuals who directly experienced a phenomenon make meaning of the experience.[34] This qualitative methodology was appropriate for understanding the lived experiences of the Native college students with the ONASHE conference, and with leadership and leadership development overall.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were used to collect data for this study. A standardized interview protocol was observed for all interviews, which were audiotaped and transcribed (see Appendix A). However, all interviews were conducted in an informal manner that allowed for flexibility with regard to the sequence of questions. We deemed it important during the data collection process to meet the student participants in a safe place on or off their respective campuses. Although the participants were familiar with the researchers, it was also important to reestablish a connection with each student by reintroducing ourselves and spending time getting reacquainted. After this was done, the interviews were conducted at the participants' respective preferred locations between May and August, 2010. In interviews that typically lasted between 45 minutes and 60 minutes, participants were asked to describe their experiences with ONASHE and to respond to questions related to Native American leadership.

The researchers utilized criterion sampling to select participants, with the criteria being that participants must have attended two of the three annual ONASHE meetings under study. Eight individuals were selected and interviewed in spring 2010. Of these, five were Native American students and three were Native American administrators; all are affiliated with higher education institutions in the state of Oklahoma.

Participants in this study represent various backgrounds and tribal affiliations. They also represent tribal colleges, public state institutions, and a private university. Three students are in the traditional college-age bracket of 18 to 22 and attend college full-time, while two students are older, nontraditional students. The latter have children and work part-time. The professionals are employed at tribal colleges and a private university and have worked at their respective institutions with Native American students for a minimum of two years. The tribal affiliations represented by the participants in this study include Cheyenne and Arapaho, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee Creek, Seminole, and Shawnee (some participants represent multiple tribes).

Data Analysis

After reading all transcripts, two of the researchers worked together to develop code definitions. The third researcher verified the relevancy of the codes, and discrepancies between the two groups of coders were noted and resolved.[35] The researchers initially identified eight codes, which included student networks, community, shared experiences, building self-confidence, motivation, student voice, student empowerment, and Native role models. Transcripts were then coded and separated manually in an effort to gain familiarity with the data. Data were reexamined to ensure that codes were appropriately applied, and the codes were further developed and collapsed into themes. The emergent themes observed in the data are discussed in the following section.

FINDINGS

Three major themes emerged regarding Native student leadership development, including: (1) developing a positive self-image, (2) community-building, and (3) Native role models. The study found that each was important for fostering leadership development among the students who participated in ONASHE. An in-depth review of the themes follows.

Developing a Positive Self-Image

Students who participated in ONASHE developed a positive self-image that helped them begin to view themselves as leaders and successful individuals,

a development that aided both their personal and academic growth. Their experiences with ONASHE helped to increase their self-confidence, empower them, and motivate them to succeed academically and/or contribute to their communities. Each of these components helped students to create, or sometimes recreate, a positive self-image.

Some students described issues of self-doubt and internal questions regarding whether they could succeed in college. They lacked confidence in their academic abilities, but through their participation in ONASHE they received reassurance and encouragement that increased their self-confidence. One student described her experience in gaining confidence through participation in ONASHE as, "I was on the verge of just saying this [college] isn't for me, I can't do this . . . and winning the award was awesome, and I was like you know, I can do this. And so I think that for me was a point in helping me to go pursue my education."[36]

Students expressed that they gained confidence by interacting with other people, something that had previously been difficult for them. One student explained, "When I first went to ONASHE I was kind of shy and you know I don't like to be around a bunch of people. But they are, like, networking, they express that a lot, and then now I'm more open to different people and like to get to know a lot more people." Gaining confidence by interacting with other people, particularly other students, was important because it allowed students to create networks with fellow students which fostered a sense of community. More importantly, it helped them to grow personally and to develop a positive self-image that allowed them to view themselves as confident individuals.

Students also experienced a sense of empowerment through their participation in ONASHE. The professionals interviewed for the study discussed the importance of giving voice to Native students and how ONASHE provided both an opportunity and a space for students to express their concerns, their needs, and their desires. One professional stated:

> I think having them, or forcing them to participate as speakers, or as presenters, or having a role in ONASHE in some form or fashion . . . I think that's important. And I think all of the sudden that they experience or they do things and they think outside the box, and they didn't realize they could. You know they didn't realize they could sit at a table and talk to people, or they didn't realize that they could get up in front of a group of people and offer a prayer, or do a presentation or something to that magnitude. And I think that ONASHE is one of those facilitators to allow students to experiment and be something they didn't think they could be.

Students felt empowered because they took on an active role in planning and conducting student meetings, presentations, and the overall conference. This experience allowed them to take on leadership roles, and as a student stated,

"It offers opportunities for discussions, small discussions, and so it can create little situations for people to I guess take on a leadership role." Assuming leadership roles was important because it affected the students' understanding of leadership. Through their experiences students began to see leadership less as one-dimensional (that is, leadership as merely the possession of a leadership title), and more as a complex, multidimensional concept. They began to understand that they themselves were leaders in various ways. A student described this revelation as, "You can lead wherever, you don't have to be a board member, but always participate . . . I guess it's just how you conduct yourself, too. You don't have to have a title behind your name to be a leader."

Developing a positive self-image contributed to the motivation that students experienced. Many students described feeling "energized" by their participation in ONASHE. They were motivated by other students, by Native faculty and student affairs professionals, and by tribal leaders. Students were motivated in multiple ways but were most notably motivated to continue their education, to become more involved on their campuses, and to return to their communities and make a positive difference. One female student described ONASHE by saying, "It impacted me by motivating me through seeing tribal leaders in the community and all the work that they do, and so it motivated me to go after my degree and on to apply for graduate school."

Community-Building

The second theme that emerged in the data was the importance of community-building. Students identified the sense of community that was established as a vital aspect of their experience with ONASHE. Their interaction with other Native students from different campuses helped to establish a support network across the state and allowed them to share their experiences mutually. One professional explained that students were allowed to "meet other students from different campuses who are going through the same struggles or same situations as they are on their own campuses." The sharing of experiences provided students with a common ground, reassuring them that they are not alone and that other Native students understand their experiences, concerns, and struggles.

Students also utilized their networks with other Native students to share knowledge and provide support to one another, as described by a student who said:

> I like getting to know other students . . . I like that support system and talking about, like, what we've done, and what they've done, and how we can help each other with ideas and either supporting them by going to their events or helping out. I really like that support system and getting to know each other, because I

see people from the conference a lot, whether they're at pow wows or just even on campus.

Students developed a sense of community because they encouraged one another and focused on contributing to the betterment of the entire group, a group that reflected an inter-campus Native student community. More importantly, the building of a Native student community helped to reinforce tribal values that focus on the collective rather than the individual.

Native Role Models

Native role models were identified as a critical component of developing leadership among Native students. Role models for the students included tribal leaders, tribal elders, Native faculty, and Native professionals. Students described the importance of interacting with other Native people who were successful and actively involved in their communities. They were able to see examples of reciprocity through education, and more importantly began to believe that it was possible for them to use their education to give back to their tribal communities. The impact of role models was illustrated by a student who stated, "I just remember our freshmen year we went and pretty much every speaker was there to encourage us to pursue, not just our bachelor's, but higher education. And they were examples of successful people who had given back to their Native community after pursuing an education."

Interaction with Native role models was essential because it provided inspiration to the students. They felt connected to these individuals with whom they shared a common background and this allowed them to see themselves as future leaders. Students believed that if other Native people could do it, so could they. This sparked motivation, as described by a student:

I think that seeing a lot of the presenters who had gone on with their education past high school back in the day that helped a lot. They have done their part in helping to shape future education for our Native American people. Not just here in Oklahoma, but nationwide . . . And seeing a lot of the Native Americans that are in politics trying to do what they can to change things in the world or politics for us, you know, is awesome. It was awesome to see the presenters there. It is awesome to know that for whatever choice that they made they are gonna leave a mark for Native Americans in a positive manner, and somehow, some way, maybe I can too, you know. To leave it better for my grandchildren, you know, that are coming. And to bring that pride back to saying, "I'm Indian, I'm Cheyenne, and I am proud of it," or whatever tribe you come from. I think it's very important, I think the presenters were all positive; they had good things to say, good information to give, and just knowing that you know what, if that person can do it you can too.

Interacting with Native role models helped students to believe in themselves, reinforced the value of reciprocity, and inspired them to give back to their communities.

DISCUSSION

We think that findings from this study have important implications for future work with Native college students. The themes that emerged from the data—developing a positive self-image, community-building, and Native role models—highlight part, but not all, of how leadership may be developed among Native students. Figure 1 depicts our conceptualization of the relationships between the themes, emphasizing the interrelated nature and importance of each theme for the development of Native college student leadership.
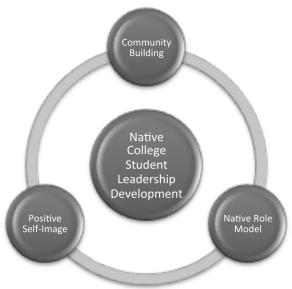

FIGURE 1. *Native College Student Leadership Development Model: a depiction of the interrelated themes.*

Our discussion begins with the theme of developing a positive self-image. Through ONASHE, students were given opportunities to take on various leadership roles and were active in planning and conducting numerous aspects of the conference and student meetings. These opportunities were utilized as tools to give students voice so that they could address their own issues and concerns, as well as to take ownership in their personal and academic development; in essence, students were empowered. These empowered students experienced increased self-confidence and motivation to achieve academically. They began to see themselves as leaders.

If we are to develop our Native students as future leaders we must first empower them. The experience of Native students in education often is one of being silenced or overlooked, an experience that is counter to the concept of empowerment. To address this reality, Native students should be given voice and encouraged to take an active role in their education and their personal development. Educators and professionals working with Native college students must encourage them to express their needs, concerns, and desires. Native students should be reassured that their voice matters, that they matter. In addition, Native students should be given opportunities whenever possible to take active roles planning and implementing the academic and student programming that impacts their lives. Such opportunities should allow students to assume various leadership roles and should be aimed at helping them to take ownership of their programs, campus, education, and their future.

Findings from this study also suggest that community-building played a significant role in the leadership development of Native students. Interactions with other Native students from different campuses helped to establish a support network across the state that allowed students to share their experiences with fellow Native students. Native students often comprise a small percentage of the total campus population at predominantly white institutions and it is not uncommon for them to experience feelings of isolation or loneliness. While many college campuses have established support services and student organizations geared toward Native students, findings from this study suggest that expanding students' networks beyond their respective campuses would be beneficial.

Students enjoyed sharing and networking with students from different types of institutions. The interactions between students at tribal colleges and mainstream institutions especially appeared to be mutually beneficial. The widened support network and sense of community experienced by the students in this study were valuable to their development. Overall, community-building boosted self-confidence while reinforcing tribal values of community. We accordingly recommend that higher education institutions work to help connect Native students with fellow Native students at different campuses. This might be done through cultural activities, social activities, academic programming, or any combination of the aforementioned. We also recommend that institutions seek to find ways to connect Native students at mainstream institutions with Native students from tribal colleges. The overarching goal for these efforts should be to build a Native student community.

Native role models were another significant finding in this study. Native role models included tribal leaders, tribal elders, faculty, and professionals. Student interactions with Native role models provided encouragement for students and helped them to see a positive future for themselves. When they were exposed to

and interacted with successful Natives who demonstrated values of reciprocity, students were able to see the possibilities of utilizing education to give back to their tribal communities. Participants in this study saw Native role models as vital to the development of Native students as future leaders.

Findings from this study suggest that colleges and universities should endeavor to connect Native students with Native faculty and staff on campus who can provide cultural and academic support, guidance, and encouragement and help to alleviate the issues associated with isolation. Structured mentoring programs certainly would be beneficial, as would opportunities for informal interaction.

Finally, higher education institutions should develop programs to connect Native students to tribal communities so that they can interact with tribal leaders, elders, and community members. Tribal leaders and elders serve as important role models for Native students, particularly with regard to integrating tribal values into leadership development. Programs that connect Native students with tribal leaders, elders, and community members would help to reinforce students' tribal connections and allow them to explore tribal leadership roles and values. For some students, such programs would better enable them to maintain existing connections with their tribal communities, while for others the programs would allow students to develop initial connections with their tribal community. Either way, tribal values that are essential for Native leadership would be reinforced.

Conclusion

This study represents a single piece of the research puzzle associated with the development of leadership skills among Native students. Our purpose was to assess the impact of one annual conference in one state. Our hope is that additional researchers will contribute critical pieces to the puzzle so that together a comprehensive picture may be produced for how higher education institutions and other stakeholders may facilitate Native student leadership. There is a need for tribal nations to develop leaders to help build and sustain tribal communities; this research contributes to addressing the process of developing future Native leaders.

Notes

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36.   This quotation and all subsequent quotations in this article are taken from responses to the interview protocol (Appendix A) conducted during May through August 2010 with student participants from ONAHSE.

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol for
Developing Native Student Leadership Skills

1. What is your tribal affiliation?

2. What is your major?

3. What degree are you pursuing?

4. What year(s) did you participate in ONASHE?

5. After you participated in ONASHE, did ONASHE impact your motivation to continue pursuing your degree? If so, how?

6. Were your definitions or views of leadership affected by your participation in ONASHE? If so, how?

7. What do you see as important values and characteristics that Native American student leaders should have to be effective in tribal communities today?

8. How do these values and characteristics relate to the development of leadership among Native American students?

9. How can ONASHE best facilitate leadership development for Native American college students?

10. How can your tribe best facilitate leadership development for Native American college students?

11. How can higher education institutions best facilitate leadership development for Native American college students?