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Introduction: Reducing Barriers to Native American Student Success in Higher Education: Challenges and Best Practices

Robert Keith Collins, Guest Editor

What barriers do Native American and Alaska Native students face in higher education? How are these barriers to student success being addressed theoretically and practically? To engage these questions, this special edition of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* seeks to open this dialogue and create a compilation that professors and service providers may use to enhance American Indian studies and other academic curricula. Contributors to this special edition explore a broad range of educational, cultural competence, mental health, advocacy, and efficacy concerns.

Barriers to Native American student success must be understood in a manner consistent with the diversity of challenges that Native American and Alaska Native students face in their pursuit of a postsecondary education and the best practices that have enabled students to address these challenges. This point, while matter-of-fact, is consistent with a small but complex body of literature that intersects the fields of American Indian studies, anthropology, education, educational psychology, and ethnomusicology. Drawing upon this literature, the articles presented in this special edition illustrate how, on the one hand, barriers to Native American and Alaska Native student success in higher education are created by inattention to the cultural needs of Native American and Alaska Native students, which could ease their transition into university life, and on the other, by a need to further develop culturally

relevant pedagogy that not only motivates students to achieve, but also illustrates on which aspects of their own efforts such achievement must be based. Other topics addressed include the efforts made by stakeholders to recruit and retain Native American students on university and college campuses, to assess their needs and the effectiveness of resources offered to counter resentment and historical trauma, and to uncover the most effective educational tools that enable students to obtain a quality education. It is my sincere hope that the discussions engaged by this assembly of scholars will illuminate some of the problems being faced and the best practices being used to make Native American and Alaska Native students competitive in the twenty-first century.

The achievement rates of Native American and Alaska Native students in relationship to other populations in the United States offer an incredible foundation upon which to begin this discussion; however, the interdisciplinary challenge now is to understand the strengths that Native American and Alaska Native students bring to college campuses, the resources needed to complement these strengths, and what these resources can lend to the development of pedagogy for college classrooms.

Examination of this question is timely, as the Native American and Alaska Native presence on college campuses is changing. In previous decades, it was common to believe that Native American and Alaska Native college students reflected a rather fixed rural demographic. This is in large part because the literature placed emphasis on working with tribal communities to create and maintain American Indian studies programs, and the vital resources that such programs could provide to address underrepresentation of American Indian students.¹ Recent Department of Education survey data and scholarship on academic persistence and the relationship between access and achievement have revealed that this demographic is much more varied.²

Today, with Native American and Alaska Native students representing one percent of the total student body at degree-earning institutions across the nation, the students reflect both rural and urban populations, embodying backgrounds and worldviews that range from traditional tribal-specific to urban pan-Indian. Some students come to college classrooms with firm family support, preparedness from tribal college programs, and exposure to career role models within and outside of the community, while others have no support at all and lack basic confidence in their own abilities.³ These new discussions are guided by scholarship that asserts and examines the ways in which stakeholders in higher education can—and must—continue to address the underrepresentation of American Indian and Alaska Natives in colleges and universities and the pedagogical strategies needed to ensure academic success for all.⁴

The interdisciplinary works presented in this special edition examine the various aspects of historical and contemporary challenges, as well as new directions in best practices upon which Native American and Alaska Native academic success has been and continues to be based. The goal of this approach is to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of both past and present practices and new avenues of research relevant to American Indian studies of student success in higher education.

WHAT IS NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

Although not clearly or consistently defined, student success in higher education has been subjectively understood as the strategies utilized by administrators, educators, policymakers, and students to ensure the achievement of a postsecondary degree. One set of understandings results from the examination of student behaviors and academic performance. Central in these studies are investigations of student competence, remediation, and willingness to seek the campus resources necessary to facilitate individual achievement. A second assesses the extent to which student socialization to campus culture directly correlates with achievement. Analyses examine the nature of campus resources and their ability to provide students with a welcoming transitional environment that enables college success. The third—and the one that this special edition most directly seeks to contribute to—examines the extent to which the best practices and/or pedagogy employed by administrators and professors effectively enables student achievement.⁵

Traditional Native American studies of higher education have offered justification for this conversation. Three major discussions that illuminate—and suggest potential pathways for addressing—the barriers that Native Americans and Alaska Native students face in higher education have centered on intellectual and institutional concerns, the need for relevant American Indian studies in mainstream institutions, and the need for learning from the challenges that Native American and Alaska Native scholars faced in the creation of American Indian studies programs within colleges and universities.⁶ Asserting the need for incorporating Native American worldviews into higher education curricula is not a new conversation among American Indian scholars or in American Indian studies. Concerns range from the need to remain cognizant of the inner workings of higher education to ensuring the interdisciplinary nature of American Indian studies through unique, culturally relevant pedagogical practice within the college classroom for ever-changing Native American and Alaska Native populations. These themes are central in the works of Thornton

and others.⁷ Yet while this discussion is not new, it is not inconsistent with the motives and struggles behind the creation of Native American studies programs. Duane Champagne summarized this point: “Putting living Indian communities and Nations in the forefront of the intellectual agenda of Native American studies will establish the foundation of disciplinary development.”⁸ He further suggested, “Students should not come to the mainstream university to learn about their culture and community. They need to learn directly from their own culture. This is the inherent strength of the Tribal College.”⁹ Attention to the implications that curriculum development and pedagogy can have in ensuring Native American and Alaska Native student success are particularly powerful in both discussions. Although it is not the only theme engaged by the scholars under discussion, I will focus on it here because it seems to be the linkage to the theme of community service through higher education asserted by scholars like Clara Sue Kidwell and expanded on by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who stress the importance of ensuring that Native American perspectives remain the central focus of analysis within the field of Native American Studies.¹⁰

CHALLENGES AND NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT SUCCESS

Building on this foundation, as Jessica Bissett Perea’s article “A Tribology of Native Presence in Academia” does, the concerns that created this small but dense body of scholarship must continue to be seen for their importance. As Bissett Perea asserts, however, they must be integrated into new paradigms to meet the changing needs of Native American and Alaska Native students. Bissett Perea further suggests that it is important for professors to address the “double-erasure” that Native American and Alaska Native students sometimes experience during their pursuit of a college degree. This is a practice of erasure that is maintained not only when faculty do not employ pedagogy related to traditional wisdom and current community concerns, but also with misplaced expectations—by both faculty and students—of behavioral, cultural, and intracultural homogeneity among Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

Bissett Perea’s article illustrates the challenges of addressing this diversity of concerns: understanding the barriers that this erasure creates requires approaches that incorporate Alaska Native knowledge, cultural theory, ethnography, and historiography and that can shed light on the various burdens different Native American and Alaska Native students carry as a result of experiencing this negation during college. She discusses the reconciliation practices that can result from inclusive pedagogy and the respect for Native American and Alaska Native diversity that such practices have the potential

to generate. Inclusive pedagogical practices offer strategies for understanding the unique individual concerns that each Native American and Alaska Native student brings to the college classroom, which can develop into barriers to their success if ineffectively addressed.

Howard S. Adelman, Linda Taylor, and Perry Nelson's contribution, "Native American Students Going and Staying in Postsecondary Education: An Intervention Perspective," expands on the significance of this point. Through an assessment of the strengths, limitations, and effectiveness of current education policies and student and learning support services, they map the systemic challenges and interventions needed to counter the marginalized policies and practices that have shaped the barriers faced by Native American and Alaska Native students as members of the US educational system (such as limited readiness support for postsecondary education and limited transition support services). Such assessments are not only conducive to systemic transformation, according to Adelman, Taylor, and Nelson, but serve as civil rights imperatives to ensure equal opportunity in Native American and Alaska Native student achievement and success.

Given that the volumes by Champagne and Thornton illuminate the inconsistencies between institutional practices and Native American and Alaska Native academic expectations with great force, a discussion here would only exhaust points already made. It should be noted, however, that the authors in this special edition—Native American, Alaska Native, and non-Native alike—share a common goal to address barriers to Native American student success in colleges and universities holistically. In a similar vein, we believe that multiple approaches are necessary to accomplish this objective and understand both the common and unique concerns that shape Native American and Alaska Native students' decisions to pursue a baccalaureate degree.

BEST PRACTICES AND NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT SUCCESS

In this introduction, I have asserted that barriers to Native American and Alaska Native student success must be understood in a manner consistent with the diversity of challenges that students face in their pursuit of a postsecondary education. Yet successful enabling strategies—which professors and administrators have observed over time—for arming students with the tools needed to face the challenges arising in their collegiate lives remain in need of greater academic investigation. This section examines the articles addressing successful strategies, or "best practices," and model programs that show promise in reducing barriers to Native American and Alaska Native student success.

Previously discussed scholarship reveals that barriers to success are not concentrated in only one aspect of Native American and Alaska Native collegiate experiences, nor do they only manifest in academic performance; however, reducing their impact on achievement requires interventions from professors as well as administrators, both within and outside of the college classroom. Robin Starr Minthorn, Stephen P. Wanger, and Heather J. Shotton illustrate in “Developing Native Student Leadership Skills: The Success of the Oklahoma Native American Students in Higher Education (ONASHE) Conference” the roles that self-esteem can play and the benefits of leadership skills development as a best practice in reducing barriers to student success. This qualitative study examines the experiences of both Native American students and Native American administrators in the ONASHE program. Through the cultivation of leadership skills, students developed the tools for positive self-image, community building, and being Native role models. In a similar vein, the networks that students rely upon throughout their collegiate experience (such as tribal community and campus life) were linked in mutually beneficial ways.

A best practice which professors in particular can use to further empower students and provide them with the tools to meet the challenges of academic rigor is to develop a universally designed pedagogy aimed at facilitating achievement for Native Americans and Alaska Natives of all learning styles within the college classroom, for example, learning disabled students (such as dyslexics), so-called “normal” learners, and visual learners alike. In “Using Captions to Reduce Barriers to Native American Student Success,” I examine the extent to which the use of captioned video materials in a college classroom can be effective in increasing student achievement and the positive role a professor can play in enabling student success by the simple use of captioned video materials as part of the curriculum. This observational study examines the correlation between the use of closed-captioned videos in the classroom and student exam scores in an American Indian studies class. Over a period of three years, trends in examination scores and student performance were observed when, as part of the curriculum, video materials that included captions were shown alternately with video materials that lacked them. These data revealed that captioned video materials proved not only beneficial to students with learning disabilities, but also to those without.

While the primary responsibility of facilitating achievement lies with instructors, the ultimate responsibility for making achievement a reality belongs to students, and the supportive relationships that they can form in college and at home. DeAnna M. Rivera’s reflections in “The Tribal Learning Community & Educational Exchange: Examining the Space between the ‘Us–Them’ Binary” close this section as a best practice reminder of the importance

of respectful and mutually beneficial community-university partnerships in ensuring academic achievement. She recalls learning of the “us–them” barrier that her students experienced and the impact that the Tribal Learning Community & Educational Exchange (TLCEE) had on their ability to transition into academic life, improve academic achievement, and see themselves as the academic leaders of the future. Operating on campus, in tribal communities, and online, connections between the academy and tribal communities encourage Native American students to work with and become resources for their communities on specific legal issues, much-needed nonprofit organizational efforts, and as tribal ambassadors. Commentary by Philip M. Klasky in “Making It Real: An Engaged Approach for Native American Students in Higher Education” offers first-person insight into the learning experiences that students can have when classroom curriculum is wedded with civic and community engagement.

The methodologies used by the contributing authors to this special edition are as diverse as the students reflected in their research. Many have employed approaches ranging from auto-ethnography to ethnographic interviews, and from discourse to statistical analysis. These varied lenses are by no means the only ways to address barriers to Native American and Alaska Native student success; however, they can reveal the various aspects of college life within which barriers to this success can manifest. If we are to understand the diversity of challenges that Native American and Alaska Native students face in pursuit of a baccalaureate degree, and if a holistic strategy to reduce these barriers is to be formulated, then knowledge of their varied experiences is crucial. The articles in this volume are intended to serve as resources and model programs for students, faculty, administrators, and policymakers who are dedicated to reducing barriers to Native American and Alaska Native student success in higher education. However, if they only shed light on the concerns and experiences that enable or prevent Native American and Alaska Native student success in college, then still they will have served their purpose.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS EDITED VOLUME

The articles that comprise this special edition of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* engage the challenges and best practices previously discussed. In part I, the continued need for expanded relevant pedagogy—wedded with active student agency in achievement—to engage the challenges of reducing barriers to Native American and Alaska Native student success is the central focus of analysis in the articles by Bissett Perea and Adelman, Taylor, and Nelson. In part II, Minthorn, Wanger, and Shotton, Collins, and Rivera

offer insight into pedagogical and administrative practices that are building an emerging track record for enabling students to become active successful agents and leaders in their own educational experiences. The commentary by Klasky, from an instructor's perspective, sheds light on first-person experiences with the active negotiations between academic and Native American community members that are needed to ensure the success of all Native American and Alaska Natives in higher education.

NOTES

1. Duane Champagne, ed., *Native American Studies in Higher Education: Models for Collaboration between Universities and Indigenous Nations* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2002); Russell Thornton, ed., *Studying Native American: Problems and Prospects* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

2. US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2010* (NCES 2011-015), Table 235, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_235.asp; Table 213, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_213.asp; and Table 214, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_214.asp.

3. Aaron P. Jackson, Steven A. Smith, and Curtis L. Hill, "Academic Persistence among Native American College Students," *Journal of College Student Development* 44, no. 4 (2003): 548-65.

4. Cox Matthews & Associates Inc., "A Snapshot: American Indian/Alaska Native Students in Higher Education," *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* 23, no. 19 (2006): 26-27.

5. Jackson, Smith, and Hill, "Academic Persistence," 548-65; John C. Smart, Kenneth A. Feldman, and Corinna A. Ethington, "Holland's Theory and Patterns of College Student Success Executive Summary: Commissioned Report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success: Spearheading a Dialog on Student Success," *National Postsecondary Education Cooperative* (July 2006): 1-3; http://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/Smart_Team_ExecSumm.pdf; Michael D. Pavel, "American Indians and Alaska Natives in Higher Education: Promoting Access and Achievement," in *Next Steps: Research and Practice to Advance Indian Education* (Information Analyses, 1999), 239-46; Bobby Wright and William G. Tierney, "American Indians in Higher Education: A History of Cultural Conflict," *Change* 23, no. 2 (1991): 11-18.

6. Champagne, *Native American Studies in Higher Education*; Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "Who Stole Native American Studies?" *Wicazo Sa Review* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 9-28; Clara Sue Kidwell, "Native American Studies: Academic Concerns and Community Service," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 2, no. 3-4 (1978): 4-9; Clara Sue Kidwell, "The Vanishing Native Reappears in the College Curriculum," *Change* 23, no. 2 (1991): 19-23; Thornton, *Studying Native American*.

7. Thornton, *Studying Native American*.

8. Champagne, *Native American Studies in Higher Education*, 8.

9. *Ibid.*, 9.

10. Kidwell, "Native American Studies: Academic Concerns," 3-9; Cook-Lynn, "Who Stole Native American Studies?," 9-28.