

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 550

RC 013 211

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**TITLE** Continuing a College Education: A Guide for the Family of the American Indian Student.  
**INSTITUTION** ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Las Cruces, N. Mex.  
**SPONS AGENCY** National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, D.C.  
**PUB DATE** Mar 82  
**NOTE** 22p.; For related documents, see RC 013 210 and RC 013 212.  
**AVAILABLE FROM** ERIC/CRESS, Box 3AP, NMSU, Las Cruces, NM 88003 (1-19 copies, \$4.50 ea., \$10.00/set of 3, 10% discount on 20 or more).

**EDRS PRICE** MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
**DESCRIPTORS** Adjustment (to Environment); \*American Indian Education; \*American Indians; \*College Transfer Students; Culture Conflict; \*Family Involvement; Higher Education; Parent Attitudes; \*Parent Participation; Parent Role; Parent School Relationship; \*Parent Student Relationship

**ABSTRACT**

The second of a 3-part series to assist American Indian students to transfer successfully from 2-year community colleges to 4-year colleges or universities, this handbook is designed to help parents understand what their son or daughter is experiencing at college and to provide specific suggestions for parents and family to help the student be successful. Section I, understanding the college/university student, discusses homesickness, participation in school activities, demands on students' time and money, and conflicts over leaving family responsibilities. Section II, understanding college/university requirements, emphasizes the importance of complying with school deadlines (attending classes, writing papers, taking tests); maintaining grades; establishing healthful eating, exercise, and social habits; and becoming financially responsible. Section III suggests that parents can help students be successful by recognizing that the decision to attend college is honorable; having special family and/or tribal celebrations to show pride in the student's accomplishments; maintaining regular contact through letters, telephone calls, and visits; and encouraging and supporting the student's own decisions. Section IV explores dimensions of the future for successful students, including employment both in and outside the Indian community, the honor brought to the family through the successful graduate, and the challenge to provide an example to Indian youth. (NEC)

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Continuing A College Education: A Guide for the  
Family of the American  
Indian Student

by

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March 1982

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)  
Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools  
(CRESS)

New Mexico State University  
Las Cruces, New Mexico 88003

The National  
Institute of  
Education  
U.S. Department of  
Education  
Washington D.C. 20208



The ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools is funded by the National Institute of Education. The material in this publication was prepared pursuant to contract no. 400-78-0023 with the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education. Contractors undertaking such projects under Government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was critically reviewed for determination of professional quality. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either the Clearinghouse's parent organization or the National Institute of Education.

Cover designed by Eileen Avery

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank ERIC/CRESS for giving me the opportunity to work on these handbooks. I would also like to thank the many counselors who discussed the content with me and helped to identify areas of concern. I also express my gratitude to the individuals who reviewed the handbooks: Allen Riley, Laguna Pueblo, counselor at New Mexico State University; Genova Nakai, Navajo, undergraduate transfer student at New Mexico State University; Genny Mitchell, Karok, 1981 National Indian Education Association Parent of the Year, and Parent/Resource Person for San Lorenzo Unified School District, California; and Stuart Tonemah, Kiowa-Comanche, ERIC/CRESS Advisory Board member and Vice President of the Native American Research Institute.

I would especially recognize the patience and encouragement I received from Elaine Roanhorse Benally, at ERIC/CRESS, during the development of these handbooks.

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## INTRODUCTION

This handbook was developed to assist parents in helping the American Indian student transfer successfully from a 2-year community college to a 4-year college or university. In order to accomplish this, three handbooks were developed for use by:

- the student
- the parents (family)
- the counselor

This handbook has been specifically designed to help parents understand what their son or daughter is experiencing at college and to provide specific suggestions for ways that the parents and family may help the student be successful. The parent handbook consists of four sections on the following topics:

Understanding the college/university student

Understanding college/university requirements

What can you do to help students be successful in their education?

If the student succeeds what will the future be?

Understanding the college/university student

Your son or daughter has made an important choice. This choice will bring its happy times as well as hard and sad times. The decision to obtain a college education at a school some distance from home, family, and friends was not an easy one. Sometimes students will be homesick and want to return home.

Students are faced with daily decisions that have to do with survival within the college or university system. The student must put obtaining an education first. The student will be faced with decisions on whether to become part of the larger body of students or remain exclusively with Indian students, only participating in non-Indian



activities when necessary. The desire to go home for special celebrations when students need to be studying for a class is a common problem. Another conflict the student faces is the desire to invite everyone home, to feed them and have them stay for a while, but studies and finances may not permit it. The college community makes very strict demands on a student's time and money.

Students need to think about the future and make specific plans. The Indian leaving a home where there were specific family responsibilities leaves an empty spot. Whether the responsibilities are ceremonial or just taking part in caring for the grandparents, these are responsibilities the student will miss and someone else will need to take care of. It is important that parents and family understand all of the demands placed on the student obtaining an education.

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### Understanding college/university requirements

The goals your student has chosen have certain rules which must be followed if they are to be achieved. Classes meet at specific times. If a class is missed, the student must get help from another student or from the professor in order to keep up with the rest of the class. Papers must be written, and tests taken. It is important that the student meet the deadlines and do the work required within the time allowed. The fact that the Indian student comes from a different culture than the majority of the students doesn't change the requirements. Attending classes, keeping appointments, and meeting deadlines are necessary if the student is to be successful. In addition, students are required to maintain a certain grade point average if they want to remain in college. An average of C (2.0) or better is usually necessary. If students do not keep their grades up, the college may require that the grades be raised within a given period or the students will

not be allowed to enroll in any more classes. Keeping grades up is often very hard for a student who is making adjustments in lifestyle. Changes in food, living quarters, and relationships may prove to be difficult. In all of this, students must also keep themselves physically fit so that the body and brain will work hard for them. Students in good physical condition will be better equipped to handle the strains of loneliness and studying for long hours.

There is a need to show your student that the family is proud of him or her. Students find themselves in a situation where they are in class for up to fifteen hours each week. This means a total of sixty hours of study each week. Getting A's in class usually means more hours of study, and this is not easy. There are many more entertaining things the student would like to do.

Finances are usually a big problem for all students, Indian and non-Indian. At first, the amount of money they have or will receive from

scholarships, loans, or grants seems enough, and this would be true if they were living at home. At college there are many expenses the student isn't accustomed to. Planning a budget and sticking to it is hard for most people. The student moving into a new city finds it even harder, as he must now pay for things that were provided at home. Finding someone to do repairs on the car can be a problem. Finding the right place to buy groceries and other necessities at a good price can also be a problem, as things in campus convenience stores are usually overpriced. The student will have to learn to get things he needs at reasonable prices. It may seem to the family that the student has a great deal of money and will be able to help out back home, but student funds are usually not sufficient for the student's basic needs, and quite often the student will have to obtain a part-time job in order to stay in college.

What can you do to help students be successful in their education?

At this point you may begin to say to yourself, "My child has decided on a difficult goal and it doesn't look like I can help." In many ways this is true. Your student must meet this test alone. However, family support and interest may make the difference between success and failure.

Recognize that the decision to go away to college is honorable. Students must have a certain amount of success in their community college work in order to be admitted into the 4-year college. Many students do not have a high enough grade point average to transfer to a 4-year college. Parents who honor their son or daughter will also receive respect from them. Show them that you are proud of their achievement. As the world of the "white man's" education becomes a greater part of the student's life, many students fear leaving behind some parts of their lives which have been essential to their happiness.



Parents, family, friends, and the tribe can help the student overcome this fear by having special ceremonies, celebrations, and other special activities during the time the student is home for vacation. Most Indian students do not desire to leave traditions, but often, because of college requirements, are unable to take part in many of the traditional celebrations and ceremonies.

Stay in contact, write letters, telephone, and visit. Letters are very important. Letters can be read again and again, helping the student through those lonesome hours. The telephone sometimes becomes the strongest link for the student because of the need to hear the voice of a member of the family. Plan your calls for times when your student will be expecting them and will not have to leave or miss a class. When you have planned ahead, your student can be prepared to share specific items and you will be sure to tell about all of the things you think may be interesting. Take pictures of the things that are

important to your student, including friends, pets, special places, and the family. Enclosing these in letters will bring them closer to the student.

Encourage your student and help with problems. Let students know that you support their decisions even if sometimes you do not understand them. Provide reassurance by believing that they will be successful, particularly when they are facing problems.

College students are known for poor eating habits. Quick foods or "grabbing something on the run" are not unusual. Students who have limited budgets may find themselves with little or no food just before they receive a stipend or their scholarship funds. A balanced diet becomes the unusual occurrence. Parents might make vitamin supplements available. In the rush, the student is more likely to take vitamins than to fix a balanced meal.

One difficult adjustment to make is the change from traditional foods. Most families have foods which are a regular part of their diet--traditional foods or "just something mom makes." Students usually appreciate parents and friends who send or bring them these foods or the ingredients to make them. This is another means of supporting the student's educational experience.

Just as there are things which will help the student succeed, there are things parents should avoid which will discourage and interfere with the student's studies. A student who has not received letters or phone calls from home will spend a great deal of time wondering about what is happening at home. Going to the mail box and finding no mail is very discouraging. The lack of information from home may encourage a student to take off and go home for a few days or permanently. If the student has been keeping in touch with family and friends, a lack of phone calls may lead to discouragement and homesickness.



When writing letters try not to include statements like, "you could have helped if you were here," "we couldn't do something we wanted to do because you weren't here," or "no one does that any more now that you are gone." If students feel that there is work they should be doing at home or someone or something is neglected, they will feel guilty and wonder if they should be in college or at home taking care of their responsibilities. This type of discouragement is very hard on students, making them think they are being selfish by attending college. They need to be assured that things are being taken care of, even though they are not there.

Another thing which can cause discouragement and interfere with the student's progress is numerous long visits from family and friends. Everyone wants the family to visit and wants to feed them well, to sit and visit, and to show them a good time. The student with limited time and money will want to give much to visiting relatives

and friends, but unfortunately this often uses up time needed for study and money which was to last to the end of the term. While enjoying a good visit, students get behind in their studies and do not have enough money to pay their bills at the end of the semester. They then become discouraged, begin to doubt their ability to succeed in college, and wonder if they should be there.

Through these struggles the parent must remain supportive and recognize the need for students to become successful in their own lives. The parent who provides this encouragement will be able to share the pride of accomplishment with the student. The parent who constantly insists on the student taking care of family matters at home may cause enough discouragement that the student will leave college and return home without giving college a chance.

If the student succeeds, what will the future be?

The choices for Indian people who have a good education are numerous. The tribe and the Indian community may have a specific need for them on their own reservation. As the tribes develop their economic and employment opportunities, more Indians are returning to good jobs where they can make a difference to their people. Some students will find better opportunities for employment in the city and will decide to live there. Others may find that the jobs they want to take are located in another state or in a city across the nation from their home. Parents must recognize these possibilities and be prepared to provide helpful advice when opportunities arise. Most important, parents must consider how it feels to have sons or daughters who bring honor to the family. When a successful student is spoken of, it brings credit to the parents. Younger Indians may look up to them as examples. Finally, the saying is true for each: "The young man should go

out from his parents' home and seek to return with honor." Your help in making this happen, will bring honor to you and your home.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Carol J. Minugh, a member of the Gros Ventre Tribe, was raised on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana, and attended school in Dodson, Montana. She moved to Hoquiam, Washington in her junior year of high school and graduated from Hoquiam High School. She continued her formal education after years of being a waitress, cook, mill worker, and real estate saleswoman, and raising her four children. She attended Grays Harbor Community College in Aberdeen, Washington, where she began to recognize the problems Indian students have in being successful in institutions of higher education. As a result, she developed an Indian program while she attended GHC, and became the director of the program during her junior year, while working toward a B.A. degree at Evergreen State College. After completing her master's degree at Washington State University, Carol accepted a Rockefeller Fellowship in community college administration. This fellowship consisted of an internship as administrative assistant to the president of Central Arizona Community College. During this time she began her doctoral program in higher education administration at the University of Arizona, then transferred to Pennsylvania State University, where she completed her work in 1981. In 1978, Carol accepted a position at Ohio State University in the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, as the director of a national research project on vocational education for American Indians. Carol currently is employed as a Research Specialist at Ohio State University. Her primary interest is in ensuring that Indian people

have every opportunity to meet their social and economic goals in life, whether this involves higher education, vocational/technical education, work, experience or expressing the natural talents of the individual.