

Encouraging post-secondary Native American student persistence

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11/16/11

## **Abstract**

Native American students are the most likely racial/ethnic group tracked in post-secondary American education to be affected by poverty and limited access to educational opportunities. In addition, they are the most likely to be required to take remedial course work and are the least likely to graduate from college. A review of the literature was undertaken to analyze the research and opinions directed towards improving Native American student persistence and academic success at the post-secondary level. Five factors emerged during this review that correlate with Native American student post-secondary persistence. These are skill development, family and peer support, appropriate role-models, awareness and use of financial aid, and a culturally sensitive school environment. In addition to this literature review a qualitative research study was conducted in order to examine what current Native American college students' perceptions of their college experience were and what could be done to enhance these perceptions. What we found, among other things, was that much more attention needs to be paid to creating out of class activities and socials in order for Native American students to interact more with each other and the college community.

## **Introduction**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was “a widely held belief that Native Americans<sup>1</sup> were very much a people of the past. At that time, education was expected to train Native Americans for life in mainstream society. Native culture was purposefully ignored and languages were suppressed. As we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Native American culture has not only survived but is becoming increasingly more vital (Boyer, 2008, pp 22-23). Despite this increased vitality, Native American students are still the least likely racial/ethnic group tracked in post-secondary American education to graduate from college, with only 15% of those entering college earning a bachelor’s degree within six years compared with 51% for Asians, 49% for Whites, 31% for African Americans, and 24% for Hispanics (Grande, 2004; Freeman and Fox, 2005). Native Americans are also the most economically disadvantaged racial/ethnic group tracked in the national data (Lomawaima, 1995).

### **Significance of Study**

In addition to the above statistics, there were 1.8 million American Indians counted in the United States during the 2000 census. Over 25% lived below the federal poverty level, compared to about 12% of the total U.S. population, with a per capita income in 1999 dollars of \$12,923 versus a total population per capita income of \$21,587. The unemployment rate for Native Americans was over 12% in 2000, three times higher than for whites (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Tribal communities face many other economic and social hurdles. Unemployment rates range from 45-90%,

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “Native American“, “American Indian” , and “Alaska Native” are used interchangeably throughout this article. All include any person having origins in any of the pre-European peoples of North America and maintaining tribal affiliations.

the suicide rate for American Indians is over twice that for other tracked racial/ethnic groups, the alcohol related death rate is very high as is the rate of single-parent households (Ortiz and HeavyRunner, 2000).

These numbers are significant to this research study as the researchers are attempting to design better methods for retention and recruitment of Native Americans to a teaching university which is surrounded by many Native American reservations.

### **Purpose of Study**

In light of these statistics, the researchers of this project have set out to determine effective retention methods for Native Americans in higher education. Mosholder and Goslin (In press) surveyed the literature for the factors that have been found to encourage or discourage Native Americans in persisting in 2 and 4 year schools. In the current study, our purpose was to discover the perceptions of Native American students at a large teaching university in the intermountain West where Native American students are greatly underrepresented. The intention of this study is to inform the development of a recruiting and retention program for Native American students. This is of particular interest to the researchers who teach at a university where there are currently 353 Native American students, but approximately 15,000 Native Americans aged 18-24 within a 7-8 hour drive of the institution.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions this project focused on are the following:

1. What are the perceptions of our Native American students and their communities of education in general, and of their community's acceptance, support, and involvement of and with them?

2. How do these perceptions compare to an idealized program based on best practices as found in the literature and designed to optimize Native student success?

The researchers hope these guiding questions will inform best practices for recruitment and retention of Native Americans at the college level.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review has been divided into two principle sections. The first is an empirical data review which informed the creation of a program that would facilitate academic success for Native American students in a mainstream university. The latter is more of a theoretical framework for which the researchers will use to establish how to best connect Native Americans to the curriculum and pedagogy they will experience in higher education.

### **Empirical Data**

*Program design* - Tierney (1991b) observes that any program by a mainstream organization should emerge from a vision developed working with Native Americans. Programs developed for Native Americans using a top down approach have seldom been successful. The opposite is also true. Shotton, et al. (2007) report on a successful peer mentoring program developed by Native American students and observe that Native American students have rarely been asked for input when mentoring programs were developed for them.

Guillory and Wolverton (2008) suggest one way of doing this. Their idea is to create collaborative programs with local tribes where students go directly into internships emphasizing academic areas popular with Native students and important to tribal growth like student teaching, business or natural resource management. This approach would

enable students to serve their communities while earning academic credit. These scholars also suggest bringing higher education to Native American communities through distance education

An example of a collaborative approach is reported by Zah (1999). The Native American Achievement Program is a comprehensive approach to increased enrollment and retention at Arizona State University featuring annual workshops and orientations on the reservation attended by university and high school officials, students and parents in which students receive information on financial assistance, housing, and class selection.

Mihesuah (2004) writes that a physical space where Native American students are with other Native American students, can receive academic assistance, speak their language without ridicule, discuss issues with other students and staff that share their concerns about the institution is critical. Such a space could go a long way to meeting Ortiz and Heavyrunner's (2003) goal of establishing a sense of family at school in addition to at home.

***Institutional philosophy-*** Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) observe that post-secondary institutions typically have cultures that inhibit the ability of American Indian students to express their traditional culture. Rather than insist that students conform to the culture of the institution, they suggest that the institution should develop ways to support and honor student identities by way of curricula and events (Tierney, 1992a, 2000). Native American student perceptions of how well the institution is doing this correlate with learning (Lundberg, 2007).

Choney, et al. (1995) write that institutions must recognize that there is a clash between traditional American Indian culture and Euro-American Culture. American

Indian students required to give up cultural behaviors to meet the expectations of the college may resist doing so and leave school as a result (Tierney, 1993). Non-native faculty and staff should familiarize themselves with the issues faced by Native American students (Tierney, 1991a).

Native American students should be encouraged to fully express their cultural identity (Wildcat, 2001). They should be given culturally appropriate counseling (Huffman, 2001). The Native American students in Garrod and Larrimore's (1997) study perceived that their culture was neither valued nor recognized and this resulted in disengagement. Cultural awareness must take the students' dual focus into account and help maintain their role in their Native American culture (LaFromboise, et al., 1993)

***Mentoring and student support*** - Kuh and Love (2000) write that the students' initial experiences with the institution are key to retention. The "challenge is to make the strange seem familiar as soon as possible" by facilitating relationships with resource providers and peer groups (p. 202).

Structured mentoring programs that connect advanced Native American students with incoming Native American students have been shown to address issues regarding isolation, lack of awareness of available resources, and lack of support and role models (Jackson, et al., 2003; Shoten, et al., 2007). Support systems should be in place to assist with personal issues that arise like transportation, child care, substance abuse, family violence, family illness, and dealing with racism in addition to the academic issues that arise like lack of study skills and major and career planning (Heavyrunner and DeCelles, 2002). These systems should also address the need for adequate daycare and provide assistance in learning about the full range of financial assistance available (Guillory and

Wolverton, 2008).

***Skill and identity development*** - Tierney (1992a) observes that Native American students who considered their college preparatory course work adequate were the most interested in persisting. Mihesuah (2004) writes that Native American students have doubts about their identities because they often do not speak the language of their ancestors nor know much about their tribal traditions. Therefore they often lack self-confidence and cultural pride and are depressed, turning to alcohol and drugs to self-medicate. Programs should focus on helping Native American students develop self-esteem and self-regulating capabilities.

***Curricula and pedagogy*** - Native American educator Gregory Cajete (1994) writes that, to Native Americans, learning is observing nature and applying the understanding gained to develop relationships that have strength and stability and to make decisions based on tradition and values for the good of the community. Education helps students find face (who they are, what their potential is, and what they need to do to be happy), heart (intrinsic motivation), and foundation (vocation). These elements are harmonized and balanced by the interplay between the physical and spiritual worlds in order for the student to develop his or her potential for the benefit of the community.

Sanchez (2000) in her information analysis and opinion article points out that Native American students “exhibited definite preferences for (more) feedback, participation, collaboration, and concrete experiences ... as well as teacher directed experiences” in comparison to white students” (p. 40). Such approaches would be consistent with providing student-centered and experiential learning as called for by Cajete (1994) and Wildcat (2001) as well as the use of problem posing models that allows



students to draw on their own experiences and encourages them to interact with other students as called for by Dyc (1994).

*Participation structure* - Classroom and participant structures are “several principles for allocating student turns at talk used in determining which students will hold the speaking end of the floor and in what order they will hold it (Philips, 1983 at p. 77 as cited in Brayboy, 1999) and “students who choose not to speak or who are silenced by these structures (p. 165). ...Ultimately, there were negotiations and ways of finding comfortable spaces from which students could be both “good Indians” and “good students” (emphasis in the original) (p.175).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In addition to the empirical evidence previously shared, this study is also grounded in the theoretical principles of “Culturally Responsive Teaching” (Gay, 2000). This framework was used in order to better understand how Native Americans learn in the classroom and what teachers can be doing to enhance their learning experience.

As previously mentioned, Brayboy (2006) suggests that the oral traditions used to teach in native cultures differ from academic knowledge and language. Thus, Native American students often have difficulty acquiring knowledge in academic settings. What does this mean to teachers of Native Americans? How can teachers better relate to their native students?

As seen from the literature review, one of the difficult things for Native American students to do in school is to feel connected to the content being taught and the social norms found in public schools (Huffman, 2008; Cajete, 1994; Wildcat, 2001; Dyc, 1994). The paradigm of culturally responsive teaching is designed to help students

connect more with the pedagogy and curriculum in the classroom.

Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as using knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them. “The fundamental aim of culturally responsive pedagogy is to *empower* ethnically diverse students through academic success, cultural affiliation, and personal efficacy” (p. 111). One of the main goals of culturally responsive teaching is to teach *to* and *through* the strengths of the students. According to Gay (2000) there are six components of culturally responsive teaching. Those components are *validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory*.

*Validation* acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum. This component also builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities and uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles. It teaches students to know and praise their own and each others' cultural heritages and incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools (p. 29).

*Comprehensive* means that the teacher focuses on the “whole child” (Gay, 2000, p. 30). Gay cites Hollins (1996) who writes that education should incorporate “culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content” (as cited in Gay, 2000, p. 30). The ultimate

goal of a classroom environment with this focus is to have members function as “an extended family, assisting, supporting, and encouraging each other” based on a “strong belief in the right of students to be part of a mutually supportive group of high achievers” (p. 31). Ultimately, the comprehensive classroom centers around the individual student, focusing on what he or she needs to achieve success. It is an environment where trust and community can be found.

The *multidimensional* component addresses the need for teachers to include appropriate “curriculum content, learning, context, classroom climate, student-centered relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments”. In order for this to happen, teachers must tap “into a wide range of cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives. Emotions, beliefs, values, ethos, opinions, and feelings are scrutinized along with factual information to make curriculum and instruction more reflective of and responsive to ethnic diversity” (Gay, 2000, pp. 32-33).

*Empowering* means helping students know that they *can* succeed. Teachers do what is necessary to help students understand that they can learn and can be academically successful. They challenge students, no matter what their backgrounds and cultures in ways that they can achieve in the classroom. Teachers specifically plan their lessons to help their students understand and triumph.

*Transformative* is a component of culturally responsive teaching that is emphasized in this particular study. Gay (2000) observes the following about it:

Is very explicit about respecting the cultures and experiences of African American, Native American, Latino, and Asian American students, and it uses these as worthwhile resources for teaching and learning. It recognizes the existing

strengths and accomplishments of these students and then enhances them further in the instructional process. (p. 33)

Banks (1991) adds that transformative education is more about equity than it is about equality. At its root, transformative education examines what can be done to help students develop critical thinking skills in order to become “social critics”, as Banks 1991, puts it “who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions in effective personal, social, political, and economic action” (as cited in Gay, 2000, p. 34).

In sum, transformative education has two aspects. First it challenges the curriculum to include marginalized groups. Then it attempts to make students critical thinkers about, and then to take action to challenge the social ills (e.g., racism, and other forms of oppression) thereby becoming agents of change.

Finally, culturally responsive teaching is *emancipatory*. It frees students from only being exposed to the mainstream canon traditionally taught in public education. It challenges the notion that there is only one right way of understanding reality. Grichlow, Goodwin, Shakes, and Swartz (1990) claim that emancipatory education:

utilizes an inclusive and representational framework of knowledge in which students and teachers have the capacity to produce ventilated narratives...By collectively representing diverse cultures and groups as producers of knowledge, it facilitates a liberative student/teacher relationship that “opens up” (emphasis in the original) the written text and oral discourse to analysis and reconstruction. (as cited in Gay, 2000, p. 35).

Gay (2000) adds, “these learning engagements encourage and enable students to find their own voices, to contextualize issues in multiple cultural perspectives, to engage in more ways of knowing and thinking, and to become more active participants in shaping their own learning” (p. 35).

Community engagement is important in the development and implementation of

emancipatory education. Gay (2000) claims that, “cooperation, community, and connectedness are also central features of culturally responsive teaching. Students are expected to work together and are held accountable for one another’s success” (p. 36). This interaction of the students, which ideally is extended to include members of their communities, is paramount in understanding how diverse students learn in the classroom. Students will interpret what goes on in the classroom differently based on their socio-cultural and historical backgrounds. “Students of color who are most traditional in their communication styles and other aspects of culture and ethnicity are likely to encounter more obstacles to school achievement than those who think, behave, and express themselves in ways that approximate school and mainstream cultural norms (Gay, 2000, p. 78). Gay (2000) also claims that if teachers do not understand, or make an attempt to understand, the different cultural ways in which diverse students communicate, “their academic performance may be misdiagnosed or trapped in communicative mismatches (p. 78).

The literature synthesized above provided the framework for the study reported in this article. The researchers conducted a qualitative study to determine what the Native Americans students perceived of the university they attend. The methods and details of this study are discussed in what follows.

### **Methodology**

This section focuses on the selection of the method as well as the structure of the study; it is divided into three main sections. The first section is the ‘Methods’ section which discusses the structure and framework used for the analysis as well as an overview of the procedural elements of the study. The second section presents the population and sample of the study along with the

bounded system in which the research occurred. Also described are the number of participants involved in the study, how they were selected, the setting in which the data were gathered, and the procedures used to recruit the participants. Finally, the third section examines the data analysis and coding for how the data was collected.

## **Methods**

**Structure.** The intention of the study was to begin to develop a theory that would inform the development of a retention program for Native American students. In order to accomplish this task, the researchers focused on two questions aimed at probing the subjects associated with this issue.

1. What are the perceptions of our Native American students and their communities of education in general, and of their community's acceptance, support, and involvement of and with them?
2. How do these perceptions compare to an idealized program based on best practices as found in the literature and designed to optimize Native American student success?

As has been discussed above, the lens or theoretical framework used to explore these questions was the concept of "Culturally Responsive Teaching" Gay (2000).

The ultimate goal of the researchers is to identify some of the key elements necessary to build a strong retention program for Native American students. Philosophically the researchers believe this task can be accomplished by empowering students through positive academic experiences that embrace their cultural affiliation and foster a sense of personal efficacy (Gay, 2000). In order to achieve this objective, the researchers needed to assess the perceptions of Native American students and examine what their support networks were towards the university

and higher education in general. In addition, the researchers needed to understand how these perceptions compared to what the literature said about other programs designed to accomplish similar objectives.

The researchers conducted an empirical data review (Mosholder and Goslin, In Press) and then designed a qualitative study reflecting that research by selecting key elements from the literature review that were used to create an instrument. The instrument was aimed at both understanding our Native American student's perceptions as well as comparing those perceptions to the best practices found in the literature. The study confirmed several elements of the literature review and underscored some new components for consideration. The following segments describe this process in greater detail.

**Framework.** In the process of searching for the best method to explore the two questions mentioned above, several different options were considered. Because the query deals primarily with the examination of human relationships and perceptions, a qualitative method was selected. Using this line of inquiry allows the exploration of the depths of interpersonal connectedness and affiliations in a way that would be difficult using quantitative methods. Next, because this is the first article in a series of articles meant to begin the process of theory building about Native American student retention programs several different alternatives for gathering information were investigated. Eventually, a process was chosen that allowed the assessment through the grounded theory approach of the observation of emergent themes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory uses all forms of data that the researchers come in contact with to both inductively and deductively generate a theory. Data forms used within the comparative process can include interviews, observations, surveys, statistical analyses, and literature. One goal of grounded theory is to develop hypotheses about what is going

on (Martin, P. Y., and Turner, B. A., 1986).

### **Population and Sample**

In order to identify the Native American population, the researchers contacted the Institution Research Office (IRO) at the studied university and requested a detailed demographic report for the Native American population. The IRO data showed that there were 353 Native American students attending college at the time of the study. This number represented an increase of 88 students from spring of 2009 when there were 265 students enrolled at the institution.

Once the larger population had been identified, the researchers determined the best method of acquiring a sample of this population would be to survey a random selection of the population in multiple settings using a survey method. In order to accomplish this task, two of the researchers created an instrument based on themes pulled from the literature review. The third researcher then analyzed the instrument to ensure that it was grounded in the principles of “Culturally Responsive Teaching” (Gay, 2000). Four undergraduate students from within the larger population were recruited as Native American Student Researchers (NASRs) and given training in survey data collection procedures. The NASRs evaluated the instrument to ensure that it was both culturally relevant and appropriate for the population.

After the instrument had been created, the NASRs initiated a data collection method they called “student intercepts”. The student intercepts consisted of the NASRs setting up a booth or scheduling a room at various locations on campus. The NASRs then recruited participants and had them fill out the IRB approved Informed Consent Wavier and then answer the questions on the instrument. The student intercepts recruited 49



participants who provided information for the study. In order to protect the identity of the participants, no names or form of identification were listed on any instrument.

In addition to the 49 participants that were involved in the instrument response phase of the study, 14 additional students were recruited by the NASRs to participate in two different focus groups. The students in the focus group phase filled out the Informed Consent Wavier and were then asked to provide feedback on the themes that emerged from the instrument response phase. In order to protect the students, no names or forms of identification were used in the context of the focus group phase of the study.

## **Instrument**

**Data Analysis and Coding.** The study was divided into three separate phases. In the first phase the researchers isolated the need, framed the questions, identified the population and conducted a literature review to evaluate best practices from around the country. Next the researchers constructed a study by gathering data from three different sources to ensure data triangulation. Data collection began in the spring of 2011 and utilized several different independent evaluation practices to assure the trustworthiness of the data. These practices included using three different faculty researches to autonomously code the data and check for the emergent themes. Each faculty member hand coded the data checking for emergent themes using an open coding line by line analysis (Strauss & Corbin 1998). In addition, Native American student researchers were recruited and asked to follow the same process to assure that an accurate cultural interpretation was being represented.

In phase two, the researchers created an instrument based on the literature review, distributed the instrument and then analyzed the results which became data set number 1. In phase three the themes that emerged from data set number 1 were discussed by two different

focus groups. The information gleaned from these two focus groups was again analyzed by the faculty and NASRs using an open coding line by line analysis format (Strauss & Corbin 1998). The information from these focus groups then became data sets numbers two and three. Finally, the data from each data set was compared and analyzed using the same process and ultimately five themes emerged.

In phase one the researchers conducted a thorough examination of all the literature based on the Native American collegiate experience in the United States (Mosholder and Goslin, In press). Through this process the researchers identified several key components of successful Native American retention programs. This information was then used to build an instrument to evaluate the perception of students at our institution.

In phase two the survey responses from all of the 49 participants were independently evaluated by each of the three faculty researchers. In this stage of the process the faculty researchers coded the responses and then searched for emergent themes again using the open coding format (Strauss & Corbin 1998). In addition to the faculty researchers analyzing the data, two NASRs followed the same process. At the end of this process the themes that emerged became the central items discussed in the focus groups in data sets two and three.

In phase three the researchers conducted two different focus groups that became data sets two and three. In data set two the participants were asked to respond to a series of questions based on the results from the survey data. During the discussion two of the faculty researchers took field notes which were then analyzed by the third researcher and the NASRs. The discussion in the final focus group was recorded and the information obtained was then evaluated for emergent themes by the faculty researchers as well as the NASRs utilizing an open coding format (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

Finally all of the data were then compared and analyzed independently by each of the faculty researchers who searched for themes across the data sets. The same process was followed by the NASRs who also searched for themes across the data sets. Ultimately the six themes emerged which affect the retention of Native American students. These themes will be discussed in the next section of the article

## **Results**

The methods of data collection discussed above produced helpful results in addressing the purpose of this study and answering its research questions. The purpose, as stated above, of this project was to discover the perceptions of Native American students at a large teaching university in the intermountain West where Native American students are greatly underrepresented. The intention of this study was to inform the development of a recruiting and retention program for Native American students. The research questions which we found answers for were: 1. What are the perceptions of the Native American students at our university about their and their communities' views of education, acceptance, support, skills and community involvement? 2. How do these perceptions compare to an idealized program based on best practices as found in the literature and designed to optimize Native student success? In what follows we will address how this project answered these two questions.

### **Research Question #1**

For the first research question, *What are the perceptions of the Native American students at our university about their and their communities' views of education, acceptance, support, skills and community involvement?*, two data collection strategies were used: *surveys* and *observations of focus groups*. We will discuss the findings of

these two sources separately.

**Surveys.** To begin, surveys were administered to Native American students on the college campus studied. Six themes emerged from these surveys which we will address here.

***Theme One - The need for more activities that bring the students, their families and communities together.*** In the surveys collected in this study, there was an overwhelmingly strong indication that the Native American students wanted more activities on campus that would bring Native American students, as well as their families, together. Some examples of this are found in the following comments made by the students in the surveys (survey question (SQ)):

- SQ 15: “more events/conferences. Possible places to visit as a group or a getaway”
- SQ 15: “create more social get togethers”
- SQ 9: “Have get togethers and more meetings”
- SQ 5: “Other Native students who I enjoy seeing more of, seem to be my motivators and encourage, and support me in my studies and transition to college life.”
- SQ 8: “Create events that involve both family and students to make both feel part of the university.”
- SQ 14: “Once again just have more events to get together”
- SQ 14: “Event, games, going to social events maybe even get involved with other Natives with things on campus.”
- SQ 7: “We need to have luncheons to get people information”

- SQ 14: “Getting them involved in school activities from the start.”
- SQ 15: “Offer activities, clubs, and classes on our culture.”
- SQ 15: “I would like more cultural activities – extra classes beading, dancing, etc., and Powwows on campus.”

These are a few of the ideas shared by the students who filled out surveys. One positive comment from one participant, when answering question #15 was:

“They are already doing an amazing work, having a powwow, buffalo dinner, and doing occasional frybread making fundraisers. And if I was unknowledgeable about making frybread or how to dance then I know at [university] I have people who can help me learn. That’s what I love about [university]”.

This last comments shows that progress is being made and some Native American students feel like they are being brought together. However, from the many responses above, it proves more work needs to be done.

***Theme Two** – The Native American student community is fragmented. Native Americans don’t know or interact with many other Native American students.* A second finding that emerged from the surveys is many of the Native American students feel that there is a lack of unity amongst the Native Americans on campus. Comments which lead to this finding are (Survey Question (SQ)):

- SQ 4: “Yes and no. I feel like as Native we don’t come together enough on campus.”
- SQ 4: “Yes, I’ve felt isolated at UVU. These feelings were caused by my non-Native and Native peers in school. I felt they didn’t understand where I was coming from.”

This theme also emerged from different kinds of things the Native American students said. For example, the following ideas were shared during the first focus group:

- There is a need for activities that the Native community would be interested in so that they feel comfortable coming here. College can be as intimidating and foreign to the families as it is to the students.
- Native students don't know that many other Natives because there are not enough places to go where they are together or activities, other than the PowWow, that bring them together.

During the second focus group, these ideas were shared:

- Natives are reserved and shy by nature and the students here could benefit from more activities to break out of their shells. Our skin is brown and we can feel like outcasts. I don't think we are outcasts, but it's easy to feel that way and more opportunities specifically designed for Natives to interact would help overcome that.

*Theme Three – Native Americans should be mentoring other Native American students, but that is not happening.* Another theme that came out of the survey data was the need by Native American students to have more mentors like them. Many of the surveys spoke of a desire to have mentors which the students could go to who were themselves Native Americans. Some examples of this from the surveys are (Survey Question SQ):

- SQ 8: “Offer help when they need it don't through or cast the student aside like the councilors at [university] did to me. Make an effort to help and make sure things you say are understood by the student. [University] could make a study

- group and meeting with Natives to bring things to attention”
- SQ 8: “If they have mentors and people they know and look up to attending, so they can see its possible.”
  - SQ 9: “Introductory courses and full explanations of what’s to be expected. People should be told by people of their won culture.”

These comments indicate that having mentors that are more like the Native American students would help them with the transition into the university as well as help to make them more successful.

*Theme Four - Parents and elders do not understand the nature of the commitment necessary for Native American student success and, therefore, put pressure on the students to attend to home and community activities at the expense of school success. Native American students would like help with educating parents and elders about these issues.* This theme was also prominent in the survey data. Survey responses that led to this finding can be seen in the following (Survey Question (SQ)):

- SQ 6: “Yes! Me! No support from my tribe”
- SQ 8: “Having a strong student community. Having elders available to talk to.”
- SQ 16: “Let them know how important education is – talk with them.”
- SQ 16: “Make things available to tribal members family info. from tribes what they offer to their tribal members.”
- SQ 16: “Family activities and show them the benefits of college experience.”
- SQ 16: “By showing them the rewards of higher education, not just Native Americans, but other cultures too.”
- SQ 16: “Have elders who highly value education speak against ostracizing those

- who come home. Share their views or speak 5-10 minutes at ceremonies; community events, etc.
- SQ 16: “Get them involved and show how their Native students can be a role model to the other members.”
  - SQ 16: “Keep on them to keep up grades in school. Sit with them on their studies...just all around support and academic pressure to succeed.”
  - SQ 16: “Teach the Native students the value education has on tribal success.”
  - SQ 16: “Consistently keep in contact with each. Ask frequently how they are doing. If they can, have the family come see and participate in some part of the education process.”
  - SQ 16: “They have to see value in what is happening at school. As students share positive experiences it will faster support and trust.”
  - SQ 16: “Families might be more supportive if we took time to recognize their students. Perhaps a Native student achievement award or opportunities for students to include their families for on campus events.”
  - SQ 16: “Make Native families and tribal leader aware of how important a college education is. Give these families and tribal leader information to give to Native student. Advertise to families and tribal leaders.”
  - SQ 16: “I know that healthcare, engineering, criminal justice are important, but how? I need some visual aid to show me how these careers will help Native people. Like saying that we always need lawyers to fight water and land rights for Native people. Or we need well-developed road that can be a job for engineers. Or nurses who understand what Native people struggle with diabetes and can



provide the personal care that is needed. If we can point out to Native American youth who are clueless about what their reservations are struggling with, maybe we Native [university] students) can share the info to motivate them to want to get an education and be able to accomplish something their families may have never had the chance, getting a higher education.”

Many of the responses above come from question number 16 on the survey. This question asked “*How might we encourage the families and tribes of Native American students to play a larger and more supportive role in advising students and helping them to achieve academic success?*” These answers show a concern many of the Native American students have about their families and tribal community understanding what it is like for them at the university. This was a definite theme that needs addressing at the university.

***Theme Five - New Native American students need more explanation on course and institutional requirements.*** The fifth finding that emerged from the data has to do with the classroom and student-teacher relations. Many of the Native American students indicated that they needed to be given more help in understanding the requirements of the university. Examples of this are (Survey Question (SQ)):

- SQ 7: “Networking through the Internet and sending out mail to all of the students and having group meeting.”
- SQ 7: “Assign each Native student an ‘advisor’ and go through it with them.”
- SQ 7: “Trainings, workshops, specialized campus tours.”
- SQ #7: “It would probably be creating some kind of pre-meet before the semester starts.”

- SQ #7: “Put up signs, flyers, let tribe know what is offered to their tribal members. Make sure tutors available. Make it so Natives will understand what is being offered.”
- SQ #7: “More information needs to be offered to incoming students with emails or outreach programs.”
- SQ #8: “Native orientation; resources being more interactive and united.”
- SQ #7: “Awareness from Native student body, other classmates, and councilors. Create a warm environment so they would feel comfortable to approach these issues.”
- SQ 7: “Continue the Native American student success class. Organize events and informational presentations within multicultural center.”
- SQ 7: “A mentoring program or a consideration of a small bridge program that involves other sources that provide these services – maybe at a meeting.”
- SQ 9: “The expectation level is expected to be high in every university. Mentoring and helping to understand time management, work load, classes and fields could help show what is ahead of the student.”
- SQ 9: “Have a class or seminar that gives advice and educates about expectations of classes.”
- SQ 7: “The best way is to work one on one with them in high school. And to help them fill out forms with them and parents.”
- SQ 8: “Through high school counselors. This would allow Native American students to know what to expect in college. Allow them not to be scared.”

These answers express a need for more information to be shared with Native American

students. Many of the students called for more emails and postings to help students with reminders of important things to learn how to be a successful university student.

*Theme Six - New students could benefit from constant and consistent reminders through multiple modalities of course requirements and relevant student activities.*

Finally, the sixth theme to emerge from the data is the need for Native American students to be better informed of things happening in, as well as responsibilities related to, the university setting. Many of the comments from *Theme 5* attest to this point; however, some other comments that support this finding are the following (Survey Questions (SQ)):

- SQ 12: “Very successful in youth. As they would bridge that gap.”
- SQ 12: “Makes them feel like they are part of something that makes a difference.”
- SQ 12: “Maybe send a text everytime something is going on to get people involved.”
- SQ 12: “I think it would be a great deal of help.”
- SQ 12: “It gives information to those who receive the messages. Natives could help each other out if they are in the same classes.
- SQ 12: “You could continuously bombard them with information about the school.”
- SQ 12: “Excellent way to introduce natives. Facebook groups with events!”
- SQ 12: “Some elementary schools have parents participate in an emergency ‘calling tree’. We could have a texting/social media tree – each volunteer to inform X amount of people.”
- SQ 12: “I really like seeing the Native group on Facebook. I know what’s going

on.”

- SQ 12: “It is a good way to notify about activities and events. More structure is needed for class participation and attendance.”
- SQ 12: “Its an avenue of communication that has proven to be successful I think. Many student Facebook/Twitter...”
- SQ 12: “Social networking might encourage students because they will recognize and make connections with people they know.”
- SQ 12: “It will definitely be helpful for those who are uncomfortable in face to face situations, which will be beneficial to transitioning in a sense of where the world is foreign to them.”

There are some interesting responses here. There seems to be a theme of texting and using social networking, such as Facebook, as good ways to kept Native American students informed. The last comment is one that needs to be taken into consideration as well. This idea of giving the students a less stressful mode of communication, in order to lower their affective filters (Krashen, 1983) could be extremely beneficial.

These themes were ones that were the most prominent in the surveys collected for this study. There were other issues and ideas that came out, but these are the ones that the researchers felt were of most importance and occurred with the most frequency. In what follows, we will look at some of the themes that emerged from various observations of the focus groups.

**Observations.** The second data collection strategies analyzed here was from the observations of the focus groups which occurred in this study. Notes were taken by two the researchers of the project during the focus group. From the discussion, three themes

emerged.

**Theme 1** – Theme one was the following: *The need for more activities that bring the students, their families and the community together and help and support in helping elders and parents understand college requirements and more explanation of institutional and course requirements.* This theme emerged from different kinds of things the Native American students said. For example, the following ideas were shared during the first focus group:

- Students and their parents don't understand that you can't just walk away from class for two weeks or a month and still do OK. When the students are here, a lot of what they think about is going back home. At the same time, the family may need help with the sheep or building a fence. Students leave to help with this because they've always been expected to help and their parents don't understand that this is a problem. If they knew, they would make the students come back.
- Students get a check at the beginning of the semester for like \$6,000. This is more money than they've ever seen in one place before. They often blow it and then run out of money before the semester is over.
- There is a different concept of time. If the electric bill is past due, we just let the lights go off for awhile. Once there is money, we will have them turned on again.
- There is a need for activities that the Native community would be interested in so that they feel comfortable coming here. College can be as intimidating and foreign to the families as it is to the students.

**Theme 2** – The second theme that emerged was: *The Native American student community is fragmented at UVU and the primary importance of Native Americans*

*mentoring other Native Americans.* Some of the ideas that came up in the focus group which supported this theme were:

- Native American students expressed how they do not know that many other Natives because there are not enough places to go where they are together or activities, other than the PowWow, that bring them together.
- There is no housing specifically for Native students. Perhaps dedicating a floor of one of the housing units to Natives would help build this unity.
- There is no Native American student orientation. Perhaps matching up incoming students with Native students who have been here a while. This could extend to alumni. Perhaps a career night featuring successful Native Americans would be helpful.
- The Freshman year is critical for Native Americans. They will decide during that year if they believe they can make it or will move back to the reservation and stay there.

**Theme 3** – Finally, the third theme was the following: *There is a need for constant and consistent reminders through multiple modalities. Texting can be used to remind students of face-to-face meetings.* One thought was that this might be something that might be needed for first and second year students, but should end by the time they are in their third year. This might help orient them, and provide scaffolding to getting them used to taking that responsibility on themselves.

## **Research Question #2**

The main themes that emerged out of the surveys and observations were:

- The need for more activities that bring the students, their families and

- communities together.
- The Native student community is fragmented. Natives don't know or interact with many other Native students.
  - Natives should be mentoring other Native students, but that is not happening.
  - Parents and elders do not understand the nature of the commitment necessary for Native American student success and, therefore, put pressure on the students to attend to home and community activities at the expense of school success. Native American students would like help with educating parents and elders about these issues.
  - New Native American students need more explanation on course and institutional requirements.
  - New students could benefit from constant and consistent reminders through multiple modalities of course requirements and relevant student activities.
  - The purpose of this section is to compare these findings from the surveys and observations with what the literature says.

In reviewing the literature review from above, there are some common themes that emerge.

Tierney (1991b), for example, proposes that any program developed by a mainstream organization should emerge from a vision produced by working with, not for, Native Americans. Programs developed for Native Americans using a top down approach have seldom been successful. In connection with this, Shotton et al. (2007) report on a successful peer mentoring program developed by Native American students and observe that Native American students have rarely been asked for input when

mentoring programs were developed for them. The connection we made with this and our findings was the following: *Native Americans should be mentoring other Native American students, but that is not happening.* It appears that from the literature, and from the data collected here, that Native American students would benefit from mentoring and program creation that is done by Native Americans.

This is also evident in Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) who observe that post-secondary institutions typically have cultures that inhibit the ability of Native American students to express their traditional culture. Rather than insist that students conform to the culture of the institution, they suggest that the institution should develop ways to support and honor student identities by way of curricula and events (Tierney, 1992a, 2000). Native American student perceptions of how well the institution is doing this correlate with learning (Lundberg, 2007). In addition, structured mentoring programs that connect advanced Native American students with incoming Native American students have been shown to address issues regarding isolation, lack of awareness of available resources, and lack of support and role models (Jackson, et al., 2003; Shoten, et al., 2007).

These issues discussed in the literature also connect to the following finding: *The Native American student community is fragmented. Native Americans don't know or interact with many other Native American students.* If more mentoring and program creation was done by Native American students, more interaction between Native American students would be occurring.

Finally, Tierney (1991a) also talked about the need for non-native faculty and staff to familiarize themselves with the issues faced by their Native American students.



This connects to the study's following finding: *The need for more activities that bring the students, their families and communities together.* The more social 'get-togethers' that can be had, the more opportunities non-native individuals at the university will have to get to know and interact with Native American students.

In conclusion, although not all the findings from this study were brought up in the literature review, there is some correlation. Many concerns that the literature mentions for bringing about success for Native American students is similar to what was commented by Native American students in this study.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Many similarities surfaced between the literature review and the data collected in this study. The six main themes that are discussed above are the following:

- *The need for more activities that bring the students, their families and communities together.*
- *The Native American student community is fragmented. Native Americans don't know or interact with many other Native American students.*
- *Native Americans should be mentoring other Native American students, but that is not happening.*
- *Parents and elders do not understand the nature of the commitment necessary for Native American student success and, therefore, put pressure on the students to attend to home and community activities at the expense of school success. Native American students would like help with educating parents and elders about these issues.*
- *New Native American students need more explanation on course and institutional*

*requirements.*

- *New students could benefit from constant and consistent reminders through multiple modalities of course requirements and relevant student activities.*

These themes correlate well with what was found in the literature about what Native American students need to be successful in academia.

The literature review and the current study have provided the researchers with clear direction upon which to develop and implement an action plan. We are partnering with the universities club for Native American students, the Native Sun Club, to develop activities (Themes One and Two) that attract both the Native American students from the university and members of their communities. We have funds from a National Science Foundation grant to support these activities. We have developed a curriculum, University Success Studies for Native American students that has attracted 24 Native American students that will allow us to take direct action on Themes Three through Six. We have hired three upper class Native American students as mentors and are using a new course management system, Canvas, which facilitates communication by all the new literacy techniques including texting and Facebook. We are using constructivist methods to teach the class like negotiating the syllabus and peer to peer instruction and indigenous techniques like talking circles for assessment. The learning and motivation strategies taught will be framed within an indigenous context wherever possible. For example, self-regulation (time and money management and planning and goal setting) will be presented as strategies to help individuals develop skills that will be used for the good of the community. Students will be asked to consider their mentors as “aunties” and “uncles” who will provide explanation on course and institutional requirements and constant and

consistent reminders through multiple modalities of course requirements and relevant student activities. Mentors will also provide help with educating parents and elders about the nature of the commitment necessary for Native American student success.

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