# EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION AND CULTURAL INTEGRITY ON SENSE OF BELONGING FOR NATIVE STUDENTS AT NON-NATIVE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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The purpose of this quantitative multi-institutional study was to examine the contributions of institutional integration and cultural integrity to Native college students' sense of belonging within Non-Native Colleges and Universities. Both cultural integrity and institutional integration contributed significantly to sense of belonging. This study revealed that social support and peer-group interaction are the most significant factors contributing to sense of belonging for Native college students. In addition, staff support and lack of social isolation were also significant contributors to sense of belonging.

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Since the beginning of colonization in what is now the United States, there has been a potential for Native Americans to be included in higher education but that potential has not been realized. Of the original nine institutions of higher education in the American colonies, three specifically identified the education of Native Americans in their mission with a fourth actually admitting a handful of Native Americans during that time period (Carney, 1999). However, the historical record of educational efforts on behalf of Native Americans is overall one of forced removal, assimilation, and oppression.

In spite of this history, Native Americans continue to pursue higher education as a site of survivance and one of many ways that tribal communities are addressing the challenges facing them and engaging in the process of nation-building to strengthen their communities (Brayboy et al., 2012). Survivance "means a native sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance. Survivance is not just survival but also resistance" (Vizenor, 1999, p. 93). Though there is much to celebrate in the survivance of Native Americans within higher education, Native[1]  students continue to have one of the lowest graduation rates of all racial/ethnic groups at four-year degree granting institutions and a less than 50% graduation rate within 6-years at any four-year degree granting institution regardless of type (de Brey et al., 2019).

The majority of Native students do not attend Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), which enroll only 9.3% of all Native students within postsecondary education (Snyder et al., 2019). Thus, understanding what contributes to Native persistence at Non-Native Colleges and Universities (NN-CUs; Shotton et al., 2013), where the majority of Native students are enrolled, is critical in order for the academy to understand how best to support Native student success. The current study examined to what extent institutional integration and cultural integrity contributed to Native college students' sense of belonging within the campus community.

The seminal theoretical models that a majority of retention studies seek to extend or test have conceptually framed assimilation and acculturation into the campus culture as a necessary component for student persistence and success (Rendón et al., 2000). Many scholars have critiqued these theoretical models and called for retention research that is inclusive of culturally relevant factors of diverse students in institutions of higher education (Deyhle, 1995a; Museus, 2008; Tierney, 1999). There is an increasing body of research in higher education that focuses on sense of belonging as it relates to student success and retention (Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). This sense of belonging helps anchor college students during the inevitable obstacles and challenges they face, by increasing their feelings of "fit," affirming their presence in the institution, and increasing their relationships with peers to provide support. In addition, much of the research shows that sense of belonging is a powerful predictor of retention and student success (Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2008, 2011; Zea et al., 1997).

Maintenance of identity has been cited as one of, if not the most, influential factors in Native student success (Deyhle, 1995b; Huffman, 2001; Tierney, 1992b; Waterman, 2007). In other words, those students who were comfortable with their cultural identity were able to better navigate the academic world (Larimore & McClellan, 2005). There is significant cultural discontinuity between traditional worldviews or Indigenous paradigms and that of higher education. These Indigenous paradigms are impossible to define comprehensively given the cultural diversity of Native nations; however, there

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[1] Native american and native will be used interchangeabley throughout this article.

are similarities and common values such as connection to place, cooperation, relationality, reciprocity, non-linear notions of time/time orientation, self-determination, and sovereignty (Pewewardy, 2002; Salis Reyes & Tauala, 2019; Waterman & Bazemore-James, 2019). Therefore, for example, the emphasis in higher education on competition and individual achievement, separation from family or community, and limited time-frame on learning content can hinder Native students' success by encouraging practices and policies that require students from collectivist cultures to "abandon salient elements of their cultural identities and traditions if they wish to become successful at PWIs" (Guiffrida et al., 2012, p. 70).

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between institutional integration and cultural integrity to sense of belonging. Employing a critical quantitative methodology, the research questions and following conceptual framework were created to "conduct culturally relevant research" (Wells & Stage, 2015 p. 103) that will provide new knowledge about the relationships of cultural integrity with these variables from an anti-deficit approach. The questions that guided this inquiry were:

1. To what extent does institutional integration predict sense of belonging for Native students? (a) Of the institutional integration factors examined, which contributes the most to predicting sense of belonging?

2. To what extent does cultural integrity predict sense of belonging for Native college students? (a) Of the cultural integrity factors examined, which contributes the most to predicting sense of belonging?

The exploratory nature of the follow-up questions in the study were important to further understanding of the extent to which individual variables contribute to Native students' sense of belonging.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study utilized Tinto's (1993) construct of academic and social integration in order to identify Native students' institutional integration and Huffman's (2001, 2008) concept of cultural integrity to identify Native students' perceptions of their ability to maintain their tribal and cultural traditions while in higher education institutions and using their culture as an anchor and catalyst to succeed (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014).

Institutional integration refers to the interactions of students within both the social and academic environments of an institution, including commitment to the institution and students' goals for graduation within the institutional environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Tinto (1993) theorized that student academic and social integration have a direct impact on their commitment to the institution and ultimately their degree attainment. This study assessed students' institutional integration through scores on French and Oakes (2004) Institutional Integration Scale- Revised (IIS-R). French and Oakes conducted a confirmatory factor analysis on the original institutional integration scale devised by Pascarella and Terenzeni (1980). The revised factor structure determined that institutional integration was more appropriately measured by the constructs of college students' interactions with faculty, peers, and the university environment, rather than social integration and academic integration, and the revised model improved the measurement of students' institutional integration.

Strayhorn (2008) helped to distinguish sense of belonging, consisting of both cognitive and affective domains, as an individual construct separate and apart from institutional integration in measuring students' connectedness to a campus environment. Cultural integrity, or the ability to maintain a strong cultural identity, is a relatively new theoretical concept in research within higher education. Factors that contribute to persistence for Native students include main-

taining cultural identity, inclusion of family/ kinship relationships, and having a supportive institutional environment (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Huffman, 2008; Larimore & McClellan, 2005; Tierney, 1999).

## Literature Review

### Cultural Integrity

One of the most significant contributors to poor academic achievement for Native students is cultural conflict (Huffman, 2001). Cultural conflict is most often exemplified as the cultural distance between the students' cultural identity, values, worldview, and behavior compared to those of the institution. Research on the cultural identity of Native students has shown that they are more successful when their cultural identity is strong and is used as an asset rather than seen as a deficit within the institutional environment (Horse, 2005; Huffman, 1999; Okagaki et al., 2009; White Shield, 2004, 2009). Cultural integrity is the ability to maintain, as well as derive strength and confidence from, one's cultural identity. Students who have a higher cultural integrity have a better chance at academic success (Deyhle, 1995; Museus, 2008; Tierney, 1999; Waterman, 2012). Cultural integrity as conceptualized in this study asserts not only that a student has a strong cultural identity but also that there is an institutional responsibility of cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, and cultural engagement (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014).

Cultural integrity is a concept grounded in Huffman's Transculturation Theory (Huffman, 2011; Huffman & Ferguson, 2007) that arose from his research on Native college students. Huffman identified that a key component for most, if not all, of the students throughout his studies was a strong cultural identity and the ability to resist assimilating in order to be successful. Huffman posits two assumptions in regards to the transculturation of Native students. The first assumption is that Native students' culture is an asset for persistence by using their Native identity as "an emotional and cultural anchor" (Huffman, 2011, p. 2). The second assumption is that, through maintenance of a strong cultural identity, Native students' capacity to engage in the institutional environment through cultural exchanges, by learning and understanding the institutional norms, values, and contexts, will be positively influenced, resulting in academic success.

### Sense of Belonging

Maslow's seminal research on human needs and theories of human personality laid the foundation for what is now known as "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" (Block, 2011). Maslow states that "belongingness" is essential to one's individual growth as a person and existence within a community. The definition of sense of belonging within the context of higher education broadly refers to a student's psychological sense of connectedness to the campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) further elaborates that there are many characteristics included in defining sense of belonging within higher education but the core is that sense of belonging is relational. Much of the research on sense of belonging within higher education characterizes it as one of the most important factors in the retention of students, especially for students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1999; Maestas et al., 2007; Maramba & Museus, 2011).

Hurtado and Carter's (1997) study on sense of belonging for Latino college students was the first study to empirically examine sense of belonging as a separate construct. Sense of belonging emerged within the literature as an important component contributing to student persistence and retention (Berger & Milem, 1999; Strayhorn, 2008; Zea et al., 1997). Recently, there has been an increase in research focusing on sense of belonging for Native college students. Tachine and colleagues (2017) found that Native students' sense of belonging on campus was developed through interperson-

al relationships in maintaining connections to family and also through having places, such as the Native American student center, where students felt affirmed and supported. In addition, varied interactions with diverse peers and engaging with faculty in class was positively related to Native students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn et al., 2016).

## Institutional Integration

One of the most influential theories of student persistence is Tinto's Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure (1975, 1987, 1993). Tinto's theory has been widely used within empirical studies to explain student departure but has also been critiqued due to the contradictory findings, especially when applied to diverse student populations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Particularly, throughout Tinto's model is the inherent assumption that, if a student invested appropriate energy into interactions with the institutional systems (i.e., social, academic), then that would promote student success. However, many critics have struggled with this conceptualization, as it places the burden solely upon the student and de-emphasizes the complex environmental and institutional factors that are interwoven in the educational experience (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Bensimon, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1996; Tierney, 1992a, 1992b, 1999). Additionally, the foundation of Tinto's model was based conceptually on a student severing ties with their pre-college backgrounds in order to be successfully integrated into the institutional community. This inherently implies that a student's background is detrimental to their success within an academic institution rather than seeking to understand why students may not be able to integrate into the community (Guiffrida, 2006; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992a, 1992b, 1999).

## Method

This study employed a cross-sectional, multi-institutional research design using a survey instrument adapted by the researcher to measure the variables of institutional integration, cultural integrity, and sense of belonging. Much of the research on Native college students has been either qualitative with a small number of participants or has been secondary data analysis from large national datasets (e.g., National Study of Student Engagement, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System). Furthermore, when large quantitative research is reported, Native students are often omitted from the analysis, known as the "American Indian research asterisk" (Garland, 2010, p. 1), because Native American populations are often omitted from statistical analyses due to sample size. Therefore, this study is a response to calls (Larimore & McClellan, 2005; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013) for more quantitative research based on larger and more geographicically diverse samples of Native students' experiences.

## Instrumentation and Variables

This study utilized a multi-instrument online survey with the addition of a background questionnaire to collect demographic and background information of participants. Considering that persistence research and models have largely failed to incorporate cultural factors, especially those of Native Americans, it was necessary to combine multiple instruments to predict sense of belonging across multiple independent variables.

**The North American Indigenous College Student Inventory (NAICSI; Marroquin & McCoach, 2014)**. Cultural integrity was measured using the North American Indigenous College Student Inventory (NAICSI; Marroquin & McCoach, 2014). The NAICSI is grounded in transculturation theory (Huffman, 2011) and is the first instrument developed to specifically measure Native American cultural factors and support mechanisms that "students perceived to be upholding their cultural integrity" (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014, p. 23).

The NAICSI consists of 44 items, comprising eight factors: faculty support, staff

support, social support, family support, tribal community support, institutional support, cultural reciprocity, and cultural resiliency. Additionally, there are four items that measure social isolation as a subscale. The subscales have shown acceptable reliabilitywith Cronbach's alpha ranging from .82 to .92 (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014). For the current study Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was .94 and subscales ranged from .67 to .90. Evidence for the validity of the NAICSI was supported by content construct validation by content experts and subsequent factor analysis by the scale author.

The original scale was measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (*1 indicating strongly disagree and 7 indicating strongly agree*; Marroquin & McCoach, 2014). This study measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*) in order to collect data on a common scale across the multiple instruments. Prior to data analysis, a linear transformation was completed on the NAICSI to convert to the original 7-point Likert scale of the original instrument.

**Institutional Integration Scale-Revised (IIS-R; French & Oakes, 2004)**. Institutional integration was measured using the Institutional Integration Scale-Revised (IIS-R; French & Oakes, 2004) based on Tinto's theoretical framework. The IIS-R contains 34 items and produces three scores: a total score, two factor scores of the domains of student and faculty, and subscale scores. The faculty factor measures the level of social and academic integration through the student's interaction with faculty. The student factor measures the student's social and academic integration in relation to their interactions with peers and the overall institutional environment (Breidenbach, & French, 2010; French & Oakes, 2004). The five subscale scores comprise the following: Peer-Group Interactions, Interactions with Faculty, Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching, Academic and Intellectual Development, and Institutional and

Goal Commitment.

Participants responded using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). French and Oakes (2004) reported an overall Cronbach's alpha of .92 with subscale alphas ranging from .61 to .86. For the current study the overall scale had an alpha of .94 with subscales ranging from .57 to .91. The validity of the IIS-R scale is supported by appropriate fit of the subscales structure model to the data (French & Oaks, 2004).

**Sense of Belonging Scale (SOBS; Bollen & Hoyle, 1990)**. Sense of belonging was measured using the Sense of Belonging Scale (SOBS; Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). The SOBS consists of three questions to assess students' perception of membership and belonging within the institution and campus community. Participants respond using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Internal consistency of the SOBS was reported as .97 (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In the current study the Cronbach's alpha for the SOBS was .96. Validity of the instrument was supported by confirmatory factor analysis performed by the scale authors.

## Participants

Sampling methods for this study included purposive and targeted sampling (Rea & Parker, 1997). Because it was unlikely that a random sample of campuses with a significant population of Native students would yield the number of participants necessary to conduct an appropriate analysis of the data, these multiple recruitment methods were deemed necessary. Due to this sampling technique, it is impossible to compute a response rate. The primary investigator received support from several Native American higher education associations and institutions (NASPA-Indigenous Peoples Knowledge Community, ACPA-College Student Educators International-Native American Network, National Indian Education Associ-

ation, and American Indian Graduate Center) to send an email with a survey link to their organizations' Native student listservs to participate and to post to Facebook. Having the organizations send the invitation to participate in the study provided added credibility to the study. Data were collected from students at NNCUs in order to understand the experiences of Native students at non-Tribal Colleges and Universities.

Participants in this study were 154 Native students, representing 80 tribal nations, at private and public four-year Non-Native Colleges and Universities (NNCUs) in the United States. The participants for this study were enrolled in a total of 33 institutions: 26 four-year public institutions, seven four-year private non-profit institutions,

and one 4-year private for-profit institution.

The majority of participants reported identifying as only Native American (80%), with the rest identifying as Native American and another ethnicity (20%). The largest number of participants identified their tribal affiliation as Lumbee (N = 57) followed by Cherokee (N = 16) and Navajo (Diné) (N = 15). One hundred sixteen women (75%) and 36 men (23%) completed the survey, which follows the trend of national statistics of 60.7% of Native American students enrolled in higher education identifying as women (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). One (1) participant identified as two-spirit and another participant (1) chose not to answer.

The majority of respondents were enrolled as undergraduates (80%). Finally, the

## Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for the Scales and Subscales

| Scale | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Institutional Integration Scale (33 items) | 3.71 | 1.13 |
| *Factors* | | |
| Student (Academic and Intellectual Development, Peer Group Interactions, and Institutional and Goal Commitment) | 4.03 | .53 |
| Faculty (Interactions with Faculty and Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching | 3.84 | .78 |
| *Subscale* | | |
| Peer group interaction (10 items) | 3.81 | .75 |
| Interaction with faculty (5 items) | 3.75 | .86 |
| Faculty concern with student development and teaching (5 items) | 3.95 | .82 |
| Institutional goal commitment (5 items) | 4.62 | .46 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Academic and intellectual development (8 items) | 3.92 | .60 |
| North American Indigenous College Students Inventory (48 items) | 3.76 | .55 |
| *Factors* | | |
| Faculty Support (6 items) | 5.05 | 1.09 |
| Social Support (6 items) | 5.31 | 1.12 |
| Family Support (6 items) | 6.00 | 1.03 |
| Tribal Support (7 items) | 5.22 | 1.22 |
| Institutional Support (7 items) | 4.73 | .88 |
| Staff Support (6 items) | 4.97 | 1.29 |
| Cultural Resiliency (3 items) | 4.66 | 1.49 |
| Cultural Reciprocity (3 items) | 5.62 | 1.04 |
| *Subscale* | | |
| Social Isolation (4 items) | 4.30 | 1.51 |
| Sense of Belonging Scale (3 items) | 3.71 | 1.13 |

majority of respondents lived off-campus (79%) with a spouse (27%) or a roommate (23%) followed by parents (14%) and with children (13%). Participants for this study were predominately aged 18–24 (58.6%).

### Analysis

Multiple statistical analyses were utilized to answer the research questions, using simple and multiple linear regression. A linear regression was utilized for research questions one and two to measure the extent to which the participants' overall scores on institutional integration and cultural integrity predicted sense of belonging. Research questions 1(a) and 2 (a) utilized multiple regression to analyze the extent to which each factor uniquely contributed to sense of belonging. A series of multiple regression analyses were used for research question 1(a) to first, assess the predictive ability of the two factors of student and faculty as independent variables and second, further explore the five IIS-R subscales as independent variables. The multiple regression for research question 2(a) included the eight NAICSI factors and social isolation subscale as independent variables. Descriptive statistics for the instruments and subscales are in Table 1. Alpha for each analysis was set at .05 (Rencher, 2002).

### Results
### Institutional Integration and Sense of Belonging

Research question one sought to determine if institutional integration could predict sense of belonging. A linear regression was performed, and institutional integration (as measured by the total score of the IIS-R) was a significant predictor of sense of be-

longing, $F_{1,152} = 153.86$, $p < .001$, $a = .05$ $R2 = .50$; accounting for 50% of the variance in sense of belonging. To address the follow-up research question 1(a) a series of multiple regression analyses using the entry method was chosen to ascertain which of the factors of student or faculty and the five subscales of institutional integration contributed most to sense of belonging. As shown in Table X, the Student factor, that is the student's social and academic integration in relation to their interactions with peers and the overall institutional environment, significantly predicted sense of belonging ($p<.01$, $β = .64$). Only one of the subscales of the IIS-R, peer group interactions, made a statistically significant contribution ($p = .04$, $β = .69$) to predicting sense of belonging.

**Cultural Integrity and Sense of Belonging**

To analyze the ability of cultural integrity to predict sense of belonging a linear regression was utilized. Cultural integrity was a significant predictor of sense of belonging $F_{1,152} = 137.804$, $p < .001$, $a = .05$ $R2 = .48$; accounting for 48% of the variance in sense of belonging explained by the cultur-

Table X. Summary of Factors of Institutional Integration Scale-Revised Predicting Sense of Belonging

| Predictor variables | B | SE | β |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Factors* | | | |
| Student | 1.36 | .16 | .64** |
| Faculty | .16 | .11 | .11 |
| *Subscales* | | | |
| Peer Group Interaction | 1.035 | .10 | .69** |
| Interactions with Faculty | .110 | .10 | .08 |
| Academic and Intellectual Development | -.056 | .14 | -.03 |
| Faculty Concern with Student Development and Teaching | .138 | .12 | .10 |
| Institutional Goal Commitment | .009 | .15 | .004 |

Note: **$p<.01$

al integrity total score. To address the follow-up research question 2(a), a simultaneous multiple regression analysis utilizing the entry method ascertained which of the factors/subscale of cultural integrity contributed most to sense of belonging. The NAICSI had two factors and one subscale that made a unique statistically significant contribution to sense of belonging. Social support made the strongest unique contribution (p < .001, β = .47) followed by social isolation (p < .01, β = .23), and staff support (p <.05, β = .19).

### Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into ways that higher education can increase Native students' sense of belonging on campus. The findings further show the essential knowledge that cultural integrity adds to the ability to understand sense of belonging on campus for Native college students. Results showed that institutional integration and cultural integrity significantly predicted Native students' sense of belonging.

The peer group interactions subscale from the IIS-R made a significant contribution to sense of belonging, as did the social support factor from the NAICSI. These findings underscore the importance of relationships with peers to Native students and are consistent with previous research that shows that personal connections, recognition within a particular group of peers, and support from their friends/peers encourages development within the collegiate environment and ultimately success for Native

Table X. Summary of Factors/Subscale of North American Indigenous College Student Inventory Predicting Sense of Belonging

| Predictor Variables | B | SE | β |
|---|---|---|---|
| Faculty Support | 0.07 | 0.08 | 0.07 |
| Social Support | .47 | 0.08 | 0.47** |
| Family Support | -0.03 | 0.07 | -0.03 |
| Tribal Support | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.04 |
| Institutional Support | 0.04 | 0.09 | 0.03 |
| Staff Support | 0.17 | 0.08 | 0.19* |
| Cultural Resiliency | -0.07 | 0.05 | -0.09 |
| Cultural Reciprocity | -0.07 | 0.07 | -0.06 |
| Social Isolation | 0.17 | 0.05 | 0.23** |

Note: *p<.05; **p<.01

students (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Marroquin & McCoach, 2014). As measured by the NAICSI, social support includes such things as peers showing respect for culture, having Native friends, feeling a part of the campus community, having friends from different cultures, and seeing friends as family on campus. The items in this instrument illustrate the centrality of Native American culture as an important aspect of social support.

Second, social isolation was found to be a significant factor in predicting sense of belonging for this group of students. It is important to note that the wording and the scoring of these four items indicate the student's perception of how socially integrated they are on campus. These results are consistent with previous research that shows Native students are able to "break out of their isolation . . . and learn how to navigate within the higher education system" (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014, p. 5) through finding support systems within their peer groups and other staff, while at the same time being able to maintain their own cultural identity.

Third, for this group of students, staff support was significant in predicting sense of belonging. The evidence indicates the importance for institutions to have Native staff members as employees and also to ensure that there are supportive Non-Native staff members in the institution. These results echo previous research that has shown the importance of supportive staff for college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Schlossberg et al., 1989) and that has affirmed the importance of having supportive Non-Native staff members on campus (Hunt & Harrington, 2010; Lundberg, 2007).

In addition, the findings show that looking at cultural integrity adds important information to our understanding of Native students' sense of belonging beyond looking solely at sense of belonging from an integration perspective. Incorporating a measurement that has been created from a methodological framework grounded in the Native American perspective allows us to understand these students' perceptions of how they feel affirmed, validated, and if they see themselves as a valued part of the institution. The significance of the cultural lens provided by the NAICSI reinforces the importance of having theory and instrumentation grounded in culturally relevant research. If certain constructs are not present in the instrumentation (such as staff support in this case), researchers will not be able to detect their importance.

Finally, this study provides support for institutions to develop culturally relevant policies and increase the institutional cultural capacity for understanding the needs of Native students. In addition, for Native students to develop a sense of belonging at an institution some of these include policies that have a direct effect on access to culturally relevant support such as cultural centers, Native student organizations, funding for Native cultural events on campus, policies regarding smudging and other ceremonial traditions on campus, and policies regarding absences due to ceremonies.

## Implications for Practice

Three of the findings from this study -- the importance of peer support, the importance of staff support, and the need to combat social isolation for Native students -- have clear implications for student affairs practice.

Of particular importance to Native students is peer support and the opportunity for practitioners to provide experiences for Native students to develop strong relationships with others beyond acquaintanceship. One of the items of the NAICSI captures this idea well: "I see my friends on campus as family" (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014). Student affairs professionals can play an important role in helping Native students make friends on campus. Practitioners can provide intentional programming and opportunities such as formal intergroup dialog, informal story sharing consistent with Native cultural worldviews, cultural centers, themat-

ically based living learning programs, and extended community engagement projects. We would also recommend that opportunities be offered and committed to as a series of meaningful experiences rather than one-time or one-off in scope as building relationships is a process that happens over time. All of these programmatic efforts also will be helpful in combating the social isolation of Native students (discussed in more detail later).

Second, staff, including student affairs professionals, play a crucial role in ensuring Native students feel welcomed and that they belong in their institutions. This study clearly underscores that Native students view staff as making a significant contribution to their sense of belonging that is different from that of faculty. Student affairs professionals, as part of the staff population within higher education, must continue to find ways to support Native students and promote Native student's sense of belonging. In order to be able to do this it is critical that student affairs professionals "understand the unique complexities of Indigenous identity as well as modern and historical Indigenous experiences in higher education (Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2019)" (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2021, p. 2). Though student affairs professionals are on the front lines of providing support and services for Native students, there is a concern that many student affairs professionals lack the cultural knowledge about Native students needed in order to better provide them with support (Tierney, 1999; Tippeconnic Fox, 2005). Inclusion of Native American cultures and Native students' experiences within the curriculum of graduate preparation programs for student affairs would better prepare professionals for working with Native students and begin to alleviate cultural discontinuity.

National professional associations within higher education (e.g., ACPA, ASHE, AERA, NASPA) also have a role in providing continuing education to current professionals about Native students, such as conference sessions, webinars, research, writing, mentorship, inclusion in structures, and promotion of culturally relevant paradigm shifts within the higher education (Ecklund & Terrance, 2013; Garland & McClellan, 2013; Garrod & Larimore, 1997). Furthermore, in addition to increasing cultural competency within higher education regarding Native students, the findings from this study indicate a dire need to increase the recruitment and retention of Native staff (Oxendine et al., 2018; Pewewardy, 2013).

In addition, the study highlights the importance of helping Native students combat social isolation through supporting and encouraging support systems within their peer groups and other staff, while at the same time being able to maintain their own cultural identity. It is imperative that institutions and stakeholders within them ensure Native students are able to "break out of their isolation . . . and learn how to navigate within the higher education system" (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014, p. 5) without having to assimilate and lose their cultural identity. Recommendations for student affairs practice must be guided by the importance of respect and inclusion of culture for Native students on campus, through efforts such as Native student centers, Native affinity organizations, enclaves for Native students, Native studies programs, and Native Living Learning centers (Garrod & Larimore, 1997; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

**Implications for Future Research**

This study provides new insight into the perspectives of Native students' sense of belonging while at the same time bringing up many areas that are suitable for further exploration. Future research studying sense of belonging of non-dominant student cultures needs to look at factors that are not typically measured in many of the standard instruments utilized within higher education. If certain constructs are not present in the instrumentation (such as staff support being separate from faculty in this case), researchers will not be able to detect the

importance of these constructs.

Future research can both broaden and deepen our understanding of Native student sense of belonging through more quantitative and qualitative research. There is considerable need for quantitative research that explores the diversity within Native students' experiences and our understanding of their sense of belonging by exploring within-group differences such as gender, year in school, tribe, institutional type (comparing samples from TCUs), and involvement in student groups. Furthermore, this study lays the groundwork for exploring Native students' sense of belonging using a path model or structural equation modeling approach in order to determine which factors make a direct or indirect contribution to sense of belonging.

Promising areas for future research that came up as significant factors within this study and that should be studied more deeply are social support, peer relations, the role of staff, and the lack of social isolation. In particular, the role of involvement and engagement in cultural affinity groups and student organizations can shed light on the role of cultural integrity as supported within the campus community. Also, another area to consider for future research is utilizing Rendón's (1994) validation theory to examine the academic and interpersonal validation within the campus environment for Native students. Finally, when looking at sense of belonging for non-dominant student cultures, it is important to look at factors that are not typically measured in many standard instruments used within higher education.

## Conclusion

For too long researchers and higher education administrators and professionals have used the small representation of Native students on any given campus and within higher education in general as a justification not to include this student population. As the "gatekeepers" of education, faculty, staff, and administrators of higher education must move away from the policy, procedures, and practices that consider students' culture a deficit to their success in higher education. The burden should not be solely centered on students to assimilate and conform to the institutional culture; rather, higher education needs to shift towards a reciprocal relationship that helps Native students develop their knowledge of institutional culture without sacrificing their own cultural identity.

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