



## How Transformational Leadership Can Help Native American Students

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### Abstract

In this paper, I examine the challenges that Native American students face in higher education and the role that education plays in their lives. I provide data on this topic spanning more than three decades through a literature review of three published articles. Through this literature review, I reveal key challenges that Native American students historically have faced and provide information on what factors play an important role in their success. Furthermore, I expose a research gap on the role that higher education administrators can play in addressing these challenges and inequities. I present strategies and recommendations on how to effectively implement a sustainable way to address these challenges from an ethical and practical perspective.

Keywords: *Native American students, transformational learners, transformational leaders, transformational resistance*

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### Introduction

Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) believe that a core consideration with which every administration struggles is examining how their actions influence those students who are struggling to find a place on campus. Native Americans are a minority group that often struggles to adapt to traditional educational institutions in the United States. From forced enrollment in the federal government's Indian boarding schools to a higher than average dropout rate in secondary schools, education for Native American students is a complex experience, often filled with suffering (Flynn et al., 2014).

Indigenous populations, including children and elders, are among the most marginalized globally (Huaman, 2011). Tachine et al. (2017) note that isolation, disconnection, and a sense of not belonging often hinder the success of Native American students in higher education; administrators seeking to enhance access and success for Native American students receive little or no guidance on how to address those issues. Yet, successful Native American postsecondary students may often serve as *transformational learners*, embarking on their journeys through college to transform their own lives and the lives of their families and communities. Jack Mezirow, writer, sociologist, and professor of adult education, wrote that transformative learning can be viewed as "an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one's beliefs and feelings, a critique of one's

assumptions and particular premises, and an assessment of alternative perspectives” (as cited in Magro, 2015, p. 113). For this article, transformational learners can be defined as those students interested in combining their beliefs and values with what they learn through their college experience to change their lives and the lives of those around them.

With a recovery from Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) in the United States still months or years away, there are indications that low-income and minority students may struggle the most during the pandemic to stay enrolled in and graduate from institutions of higher learning (IHLs; Fain, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, IHLs struggled to create and maintain constructive and sustainable ways to support Native American students in their academic journey. Hence, it is essential that administrative leaders at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) take proactive steps to ensure that Native American students have the necessary support to continue to pursue their education. Administrators and faculty members often have the ability to address equity through the leadership choices they make at their institutions. According to Johnson (2018), *transformational leaders* focus on terminal values, such as liberty, equality, and justice. By making equitable decisions that support Native American students, IHL administrators and faculty can serve as transformational leaders, which I define in this article as individuals who serve to support transformational learners attain their goals of using what they learn in college to enact positive change in their lives and communities.

To address the historical, unethical marginalization of Native American students, IHLs must seek to employ transformational leaders to work with transformational learners. COVID-19 has emphasized the continued marginalization of Native Americans and their communities. Native Americans have the highest age-adjusted hospitalization rates due to COVID-19; this is understandable since those who live in poverty and in dense living conditions, such as reservations, are at a higher risk for infection (Evans, 2020). Consequently, among other current challenges and responsibilities, administrators could serve as transformational leaders by prioritizing the creation of more inclusive and supportive learning environments for Native American students. To do so, administrators must implement a strategy of transformational leadership. I will provide the background and significance of the marginalization of Native American college students over the past few decades so that IHLs can take the necessary steps to align the ideals of transformational learners with the ideals of transformational leaders.

## Background and Significance

From the earliest contact between Natives and non-Natives, schooling in classrooms has been a primary tool of assimilation; the colonization of Indigenous peoples has its roots in formal education institutions as a perceived way to eradicate cultures and languages (Fox & Tippeconnic, 2017). From an ethical perspective, higher education leaders in the 21st century have an obligation to work toward inclusivity when it comes to Native American students and Native American cultures. Lundberg and Lowe (2016) found that research and data on the experience and participation of Native American students in higher education is difficult to find. This comes as no surprise considering Native Americans ranked as the minority group with the lowest percentage of 18- to 24-year-old individuals enrolled in college as of 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). Common challenges for Native American students include lack of quality counseling from administrators familiar with the Native American experience and a dearth of Native American faculty members teaching at PWIs; other common challenges include experiencing social injustice and dealing with jealousy from family members (Brayboy, 2005; Flynn et al., 2014; Klasky & Collins, 2013).

Tackling social justice issues is commonly expected at most IHLs because there is a recognized societal need for diversity education and global understanding, an expectation that continues to grow amid recent protests and social justice advocacy movements (Gordon et al., 2017).

Currently, many colleges and universities are incorporating service-learning and social justice awareness as part of their curricula. During a panel on ethics in higher education, Dr. Avis Proctor, president of Harper College in Illinois, discussed the trend of embedding service learning into the curriculum, where relationships are cultivated with local communities by addressing local problems (Mack, 2015). According to Wendy Christensen, Associate Professor of Sociology at William Paterson University in New Jersey, the tragic “Unite the Right” events that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 have served as a lead-in for some educators to explore social problems like racism, poverty, racial segregation, and economic disparity (as cited in Zamudio-Suaréz, 2017). However, research shows that Native Americans, one of the most marginalized groups of students in higher education, often do not factor into these efforts.

Understanding Native American college students and their experiences is important to the broader goals of improving equity in higher education, yet because the number of these students in colleges and universities is relatively small, research provides only an asterisk or footnote about Indigenous students (Tachine et al., 2017). Therefore, it appears to be an ideal time in higher education to incorporate and increase Native American student perspectives on culture, community, and social justice into the curriculum. This initiative might increase inclusivity and reduce the marginalization of Native American students while also serving as an opportunity for colleges and universities to benefit from what Native American students and their communities have to offer to our educational system.

## Literature Review

One of the earliest noteworthy studies of the Native American experience in higher education was first published in the *Journal of American Indian Education* by Huffman et al. (1986). The critical element of the article is the acknowledgment that, while white students and Native American students may experience similar challenges when pursuing a college degree, the changes they go through during college are fundamentally different. White students are usually dealing with *social* changes when entering college while Native Americans are dealing with *cultural* changes (Huffman et al., 1986). The societal versus cultural concepts are indicative of the different expectations that exist between white students and students of color, whether they be Native American, Black, Hispanic, or Asian, upon entering college. As Huffman et al. (1986) point out, white students starting college are “not entering an alien cultural milieu but rather are moving deeper into the milieu of their own culture” (pp. 32–33). The same cannot be said of minorities and marginalized groups enrolling in PWIs because of the predominant Eurocentric approach taken by many IHLs toward their curricula.

Huffman et al. (1986) posed questions to white students and Sioux students in South Dakota in the fall of 1982 to compare social, cultural, and aspirational factors related to college achievement between the two groups. At the outset, it was hypothesized that social factors would be more predictive of college achievement for white students, cultural factors would be more predictive for Sioux students, and aspirational factors would relate about equally for both (Huffman et al., 1986, p. 33). Huffman et al. (1986) equated college achievement strictly with GPA. While this may seem reasonable in retrospect, when success in college was often simply equated with academic performance, if a similar study were conducted today, satisfaction with educational instruction, participation in extracurricular activities, and graduation rates could be additional measures used to determine college achievement.

The results of the study showed that college preparedness was linked to college achievement in white students while college achievement for Sioux students was linked to cultural identity (Huffman et al., 1986). This is unsurprising considering that prior research illustrated a serious problem of teaching general Native American history and cultures accurately and with enough detail to make the material interesting and

effective not only for students from a variety of Native American tribes but also for non-Native American students (Havighurst, 1978).

This finding identified what may be a major issue in the educational experience for Native American students: a failure to incorporate and value their cultural identity into the postsecondary learning experience.

Picking up where Huffman et al. (1986) left off, Brayboy (2005) conducted a 2-year study followed by 10 years of interviews with two individual Native American students enrolled in Ivy League universities. This study examined the overall college experience by considering more than just grades and GPA in determining the college achievement of Native American students. This long-term study provided detailed insight into the motivation that lies behind the pursuit of higher education for Indigenous people. Similar to other minority students, Native Americans often pursue higher education to obtain the knowledge and experience to improve not only their lives but also the lives of their families and communities (Brayboy, 2005). Due to how Native American tribal communities have been disenfranchised throughout American history, educational skills acquired through the college experience can enable students to use these skills toward individual and community empowerment and social justice (Brayboy, 2005). Brayboy used personal observations along with research to draw conclusions about the Native American student experience in higher education. Through his use of personal observations with Native American students throughout their college experience and afterwards, he afforded readers the opportunity to learn specific examples of Native American students as transformational learners.

The participants in Brayboy's 2005 study were a female student named Heather, a member of a tribe west of the Mississippi River, and a male student named John, a member of a tribe east of the Mississippi River. Both students attended Ivy League institutions. By following them over the span of several years, Brayboy was able to focus on the expectations Native American students have when trying to obtain credentials from historically oppressive institutions. By conducting follow-up interviews over the subsequent 10 years, he was able to determine how Heather and John went on to use these credentials to assist their tribes and other Indigenous people.

Traditionally, Native American students often feel as though they are outsiders in an educational system that promotes dominant social, cultural, and political perspectives (Klasky & Collins, 2013). This finding amplifies the importance of Heather and John being able to "fight fire with fire" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 194) by obtaining an education at these institutions so that they can work toward social justice efforts for other Native Americans. Heather ultimately attended law school after graduating and went to work for her tribe's legal affairs department; John used the skills he acquired in college to work with anthropologists to help with a land claim case for his tribe. The key takeaway from Brayboy's paper is something that Huffman et al. (1986) also noted when discussing *societal* expectations of white students versus *cultural* expectations of Native American students: white students and Native American students go through transformations when entering higher education, but the transformation that Native Americans experience often directly impacts their culture more than white students. Based on the research, there is a strong motivation for Native American students to serve as transformational learners.

Claiming to build and expand on previous definitions by other scholars, Brayboy (2005) defined transformational resistance as "the acquisition of credentials and skills for the empowerment and liberation of American Indian communities" (p. 196). His paper detailed the experience to illustrate how the Native American students engage in transformational resistance by earning a college degree to improve and empower their lives and the lives of their communities. However, aside from a few sections dealing with the interactions of Heather and John with faculty members, very little of the article calls upon institutions to play a role in the transformational resistance of Native American students.

Lundberg and Lowe (2016) found that access to Native American faculty members seems to be key to the success of Native American students. Lundberg and Lowe (2016) used a sample of 700 Native American students who completed the National Survey of Student Engagement to test the ways in which faculty interactions and inclusion of diverse perspectives in the classroom contributed to learning for Native American students. Lundberg and Lowe (2016) found that motivating students to invest effort in coursework was a faculty behavior that predicted Native American student success in general education, practical competence, and personal and social development. Thus, if faculty members are unaware of the common challenges of Native American students, it may be difficult to motivate those students in meaningful ways. Similar to student representation in colleges and universities, Native Americans make up the smallest represented ethnicity among faculty members in higher education, with American Indian/Alaska Native individuals making up 1% or fewer full-time faculty members in fall 2017 (NCES, 2019). While universities need to address this inequity by taking proactive measures to hire Native American faculty, all faculty members must support Native American students with the challenges they face when attending college.

One particular section of the article by Lundberg and Lowe (2016) led me to discover a gap in the research up until this point. They claimed that “faculty rarely investigate the ways their assignments and feedback are received by students, nor the extent to which they cause students to invest effort in the course” (Lundberg & Lowe, 2016, p. 11). Although this claim was made without a specific source and seems questionable on the surface, it did reinforce the belief that, thus far, the relationship that a Native American student has with their institution of higher learning has often been a one-way street. The onus is on the student to achieve their educational goals. Therefore, the importance of Native American faculty members serving as role models for Indigenous students is essential (Brayboy et al., 2015). This is evident in Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) where they employ more diverse faculty members than PWIs. Indigenous faculty members at TCUs will often serve as academic advisors and/or counselors and can help motivate students who may experience crises of confidence (Stull et al., 2015). The graduation rates at TCUs have been impressive. Heitkamp (2016) found that 86% of TCU students complete their chosen program of study compared to fewer than 10% of Native American students who go directly from high school on their reservation to mainstream colleges and universities and finish their bachelor’s degree. PWIs would benefit from reviewing the practices at TCUs to determine how to better serve their Native American students.

For transformational learners to engage in transformational resistance successfully, higher education must invest in transformational leaders, a concept developed from former presidential advisor, political scientist, and historian James MacGregor Burns. Compared to the traditional lower-level needs-based “transactional” form of leadership, Burns viewed moral commitments to be at the heart of transformational leadership (as cited in Johnson, 2018, p. 245). Transformational leaders eschew the norms of transactional leadership that traditionally involve rewarding individuals for meeting objectives and punishing those who do not (Eagly et al., 2003). To address the inequity of the Native American experience in higher education, institutions will have to focus on how faculty members and school administrators can engage in transformational leadership. First steps would include actively recruiting Native American faculty members and students so a community where Indigenous people feel that they belong can be created at IHLs (Lundberg & Lowe, 2016). Additionally, further research should focus on how all faculty and administrators can work toward creating a supportive learning environment for Native American students (Brayboy et al., 2015).

## Implications

Colleges and universities often embed the importance of ethics in their vision and mission statements and student codes of conduct. Administrators likely believe that statements such as these are performative, but their impact is that language has come to stand in for implementation (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Recently,

many IHLs have incorporated service-learning and social justice initiatives into not only their extracurricular activities but also in their academic curricula. Linking coursework with community-based service enables students to discover firsthand the varying cultural values that are playing distinct roles in contributing to their respective communities (Gross & Maloney, 2012). Dedicated attention to service-learning and social justice initiatives has the potential to create a culture that prioritizes community engagement and diversity.

In the context of colonial education being forced on Native Americans since the 1800s, Indigenous people in the Americas have grappled for generations with the effects of physical, mental, and spiritual colonization through land and natural resource exploitation, assimilation, and religious persecution (Huaman, 2011). In a shared governance model, faculty members and administrators must serve as transformational leaders to assist transformational learners and also address the inequity of the Native American student experience in higher education. Regardless of the size of the local Native American student and community population, institutions have an ethical obligation to address the Native American student experience since the challenges and inequities they face are a result of a much larger part of American history (Fox & Tippeconnic, 2017). Institutions also have an ethical obligation to pursue the recruitment of diverse faculty members, including Native Americans, to help achieve these goals.

IHLs have an ethical responsibility to close the “us and them” gap (Huaman, 2011) by making the effort to not only teach about these injustices but also to collaborate with Native American students and their community members. IHLs need to develop the curriculum initiatives and educational opportunities for Native American students to be successful. Due to the relatively small number of Native American students enrolled in postsecondary institutions compared to other minority groups, IHLs may overlook the needs of this group of students when creating service-learning, community engagement, social justice, and diversity policies. In TCUs, empowering Native American students to make systematic change in their communities through service-learning leads aids to retaining tribal rights, maintaining cultural identity, and improving social and economic issues (“Service Learning Helps Students Create Change,” 2005). If PWIs overlook this aspect of Native American student learning, the institution will miss the opportunity to advance their service-learning and equity policies by failing to create a partnership with a group of students that has a strong inherent interest in these issues.

## Strategies and Solutions

I have determined three proactive strategies that can be employed to partner with Native American students to advance service-learning, community engagement, social justice, and diversity goals. First, every IHL should have a Native American student center. Keith et al. (2016) found that PWIs would benefit from incorporating a key strength of TCUs, where support services for Native American students are available, accessible, and supported by the institution. Some schools already have these centers, but for those that currently do not, it would be a worthwhile investment to provide support for a minority group of students already dealing with a sense of “invisibility” since they have the lowest representation in colleges and universities (NCES, 2018). In a study conducted by Flynn et al. (2014) on American Indian acculturation, they found that the sense of invisibility by Native American student participants had to do with feeling that they did not look very different from white individuals and their awareness of the low number of Native American students in predominantly white settings.

Even at an institution where there may be low numbers of Native American students, IHLs have an ethical obligation to make these students feel that they are recognized and supported. If budget allows, centers should have a director who is qualified and educated in Native American history and culture, preferably a Native American faculty member or administrator.

Second, IHLs should provide professional development opportunities for faculty members and administrators regarding the Native American student experience. Hill and Augoustinos (2001) found that through a cross-cultural awareness program, participants showed an increase in knowledge of those from other cultures and a decrease in negative stereotyping; the authors made note that the program was more effective in the short term, but long-term effects may be achieved if organizations embed this type of diversity professional development into the workplace culture. Therefore, opportunities should consist of year-round guest speakers from local tribal communities, scholars, and experts on Native American students visiting the institution to provide education about the Native American student experience. Another opportunity is to establish open forums with Native American students who attend the institution to provide feedback on their experiences. This strategy would be an extension of a dedicated center for Native American students as these events and opportunities could be planned and coordinated by the director of the center. Since resources can often be scarce in higher education, even if a school cannot designate an entire center or office to Native American students, consideration should be made to include these types of events in other areas, such as multicultural centers, residence life, and commuter services, to name a few. Native American students become engaged as both participants and volunteers in programs such as Native interpretations of cultural artifacts, readings of Native poets and authors, traditional song and dance, and exhibits that explore the nexus of traditional and modern art (Klasky & Collins, 2013). Therefore, Native American students should be included as part of this process whenever possible.

Last, and perhaps most important, IHLs should seek to partner with Native American students not only to develop training opportunities for faculty and staff but also to discuss how their experience as transformational learners engaged in transformational resistance (Brayboy, 2005) can be aligned with the transformational leadership (Johnson, 2018) that is needed to advance institutional goals of service-learning, community engagement, social justice, and diversity. If given the opportunity, Native American students can introduce colleges and universities to tribal members who can, in turn, contribute to the development of needed service-learning and social justice initiatives in local communities. As more and more IHLs gravitate toward service-learning in the community, partnering with marginalized groups is a proactive action to accomplish the expressed ethical goals of their mission and vision statements.

## Intervention

In discussing the power differentials that exist between students and administrators to address equity and diversity on college campuses, Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) found that administrations often expect minority students to do the work of advancing equity even though administrators are primarily responsible for establishing institutional change through policy implementation and resource allocation. Consequently, important efforts to address diversity and inclusion often are delegated to those with the least power and most fluidity of status: the students. This is not a sustainable way to foster diversity and inclusion.

To address this issue, administrators must acknowledge their moral obligation to Native American students and act as transformational leaders (Johnson, 2018) by recommending to high-level administrators that a sustainable center for Native American students must exist at the institution. Having an online presence is important, but a physical space is essential to avoid further feelings of “invisibility” for Native American students. Before developing such a center, administrators should solicit the opinions of Native American students attending their institution for their feedback and insight into what they feel would be helpful for them in terms of a support center.

In addition to creating a physical student center on campus with a full-time staff member, administrators should speak with the school’s general education and college curriculum committees to discuss ways to either create or include more Native American history and culture courses into the general education requirements

mandated for undergraduate students. TCUs use education to revitalize, maintain, and teach culture, traditions, and language as well as to prepare individuals for leadership positions and careers (Fox & Tippeconnic, 2017). There is no reason that PWIs cannot adopt similar initiatives. Some of these topics are already offered in history and art courses, but it would be beneficial to develop even more opportunities not only for Native American students to engage in coursework that teaches and recognizes their history and culture, but also for non-Native American students to learn about these issues as well.

Finally, as research has pointed out, Native American students have strong ties and feel a strong sense of loyalty to their communities. Higher education is also moving in the direction of increasing their engagement with local communities. Concomitant with the development of a Native American student center and increasing educational coursework highlighting Indigenous history and culture, IHLs should create events specifically aimed at Indigenous citizens and tribes in their local areas. Some of these events could include visits to local reservations and having Native leaders visit the campus to speak with students, faculty, and staff. To create the strongest intervention to address the historic and current marginalization of Native American students requires commitment from students, administrators, faculty, and the local communities.

## Conclusion

Leaders at colleges and universities have the ability to exert influence through the decisions that they make. From an ethical perspective, these decisions should account for the needs of those students who face the greatest inequities and challenges. As research has shown, Native American students have historically been one of the most marginalized groups of students throughout elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education (Fox & Tippeconnic, 2017; Flynn et al., 2014; Huaman, 2011). Even before COVID-19 brought about a sharp increase in online learning, Native American students struggled with this type of learning because of a lack of support and interaction from faculty members and little focus on Native-based curriculum (Hunt & Oyarzun, 2020). Therefore, in addition to trying to improve the traditional college learning structure for Native American students, IHLs must focus on how to improve online learning for Indigenous students as well. Often, minority students are those who do not have reliable internet access. How are Native American students to be successful with a lack of access to technology as well as to faculty and administrators? According to the Federal Communications Commission, barely 60% of individuals living on Tribal lands have access to high-speed internet service ("Bridging the Digital Divide for All Americans," n.d.). As campuses remain closed or partially closed because of COVID-19, IHLs should take these considerations into account when offering online courses to students.

Native American students often strive to become transformative learners (Brayboy, 2005), looking to use education as a tool to bring about positive changes in their own lives and the lives of their families and communities. Prior studies and research have shown that the onus is often placed on these transformative learners to overcome the many challenges that they face while pursuing a college degree. Therefore, IHLs must look to employ transformational leaders (Johnson, 2018) not only to address the inequities that Native American students have historically faced but also to create and maintain constructive and sustainable ways to support their academic success and personal development.

As more and more colleges and universities embrace service-learning, community engagement, social justice, and diversity initiatives, it is essential that transformational learners work together with qualified transformational leaders toward a common goal of Brayboy's (2005) definition of transformational resistance. In doing so, IHLs have the potential to put into action many of the goals outlined in modern institutional mission statements. By considering and adopting some of the recommended strategies, recommendations, and plans proposed in this article, administrative leaders at the highest levels of higher education have the opportunity to address the inequities and challenges that Native American students continue to face.



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