

Understanding the Indigenous Student to Foster Success in Higher Education

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Introduction: U.S. History with Indigenous People

The development of the American higher education system is one of the defining moments in U.S. history. Some colleges, like Harvard University, College of William and Mary, and Columbia University, predate the American Revolution, and their establishment is described as “influential and vivid in the American imagination” (Thelin, 2011, p. 1). Institutions expanded to the “undeveloped western lands” with the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, a federal government fund that gave incentives for states to sell land for education institutions (Thelin, 2011, p. 76-78). However, as the land was sold and colleges were established, the Indigenous people were displaced, converted, and erased. Religious and philanthropic motives were strongly tied to the operations of these higher education institutions, and saw the Indigenous people as an opportunity to exercise these practices. Donors in England were eager to fund scholarships for young Indigenous men in order to educate them and convert them to Christianity (Thelin, 2011). Similarly in California, the Franciscans hoped to convert the Indigenous people to Roman Catholicism and train them for “raising and processing local agricultural crops” (Thelin, 2011, p. 39). Colonists also established boarding schools with the goal of isolating Indigenous youth from their family, land, and culture. Some of the institutions responsible are Dartmouth College, the College of William and Mary, and Harvard University (Bryan, 2019). There is a misconception that the Indigenous people wanted to be ‘saved’ by the colonists. They described their motives as altruistic and philanthropic, but this was not the reality (Thelin, 2011). The colonists viewed Indigenous people as “heathens” and believed their ways of life needed to be “replaced with that of white Christian ways” (Waterman, 2019, p. 63). It is

clear that the emergence of American higher education is tied to the disappearance of Indigenous people and culture.

Colonization and Indigenous erasure persists to this day by means of low funding for reservations and minimal education about this population. When Indigenous peoples are seen as an “extinct, or dying, community,” it implies they do not need acknowledgement (Masta, 2018, p. 830). This lack of recognition leads to little to no preparation for colleges to recruit Indigenous students, and also limited resources to help them be successful if they are accepted and enrolled. If future generations of Indigenous students continue to be underserved, the cycle of invisibility will be perpetuated. With theories like tribal critical race theory, funds of knowledge theory, and cultural wealth theory as frameworks, institutions could offer appropriate wellness support and academic resources. Setting this population up for success would lead to increased retention and persistence rates, which could further lead to greater representation of Indigenous faculty and staff on college campuses. This paper will explore key differences between higher education institution types and how all institutions can work together to best care for and support Indigenous students.

Establishment of Tribal Colleges and Universities

Before discussing these institution types, governmental recognition of Indigenous people should be mentioned first. The Indian Education Act of 1972 and the Education Assistance Act of 1975 established “self-determination and self-governance” for Indigenous people (Bryan, 2019, p. 50). In 1968, the first tribally controlled higher education institution was established by the Diné people in Arizona, called Diné College (Diné College History, 2022). Today, there are 35 established Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) based in various geographic locations with unique cultures (Crazy Bull et al., 2020). Currently, TCUs represent over 250 federally recognized tribes (Gipp & Faircloth, 2003). Many TCUs have expanded from offering associate degrees and certificates to offering bachelor and graduate degree programs.

A small portion of funding for TCUs come from state, local, and tribal sources, but the majority of funding is federal, equaling around 70% as of 2015 (Nelson & Frye, 2016). Federal funding resulted from the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978 and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) established in 1972 (Martin, 2005). The AIHEC serves as the “collective spirit and voice of the nation’s tribal colleges” and advocates nationally for the needs of TCUs (Gipp & Faircloth, 2003, p. 2). This advocacy led to the creation of the American Indian College Fund, which raises “private sector funds” to support student scholarships and the operations of the institutions (Crazy Bull et al., 2020, p. 24). TCUs receive about \$8,000 in federal funds per Indigenous student, so with this source providing the majority of funding, it is clear that these institutions are underfunded from all sources (Nelson & Frye, 2016). Despite this, TCUs have persevered in their mission to support the “revitalization of [indigenous] culture and identity” and “individual and tribal self-determination” (Crazy Bull et al., 2020, p. 24). Tribal elders often lead these communities by teaching the history, culture, and languages of Indigenous tribes inside and outside the classroom. They view their mission as “working to undo the damaging effects of colonization on their community” (Bryan, 2019, p. 50). The goal is to offer Indigenous peoples higher education without losing their cultural identity.

Indigenous Representation at Higher Education Institutions

The importance of Indigenous representation among faculty and staff is critical to examine for student success. Less than 1% of faculty at U.S. institutions are Indigenous, compared to 64% at TCUs specifically (Brayboy et al., 2015). This lack of overall representation endures at the leadership level, where there are 21 Indigenous college presidents in the U.S. with 14 of whom at TCUs (Fox et al., 2005). As Indigenous students continue to be under-enrolled at the undergraduate level, there will not be adequate representation at the faculty and staff levels. As with many minorities, tokenization can occur where a single staff or faculty member is the only one representing a particular minority group despite nuance and

differences within that minority group (Brayboy, et al., 2015). Non-Indigenous faculty and staff who are culturally incompetent of the expansive and diverse Indigenous cultures can either do more harm than good toward Indigenous students, or shirk all responsibility of care onto the sole Indigenous faculty or staff member.

One of the main contributors to Indigenous student success, regardless of attending a TCU or not, is building community and connection. It is shown that having Indigenous faculty and staff as role models for these students serve as a visual representation that they can succeed academically which helps to “attract, retain, and graduate students” (Fox et al., 2005, p. 54). But there is evidence that this isn’t the only path for cultivating community. It isn’t required for the faculty or staff to be Indigenous themselves; “they only need to be student-oriented [and] caring individuals” (Fox et al., 2005, p. 50). This is a both-and situation. Both non-Indigenous faculty and staff need to be culturally aware of Indigenous cultures, and there needs to be an increased representation of Indigenous people at non-TCUs. This will lead to progress in diversity initiatives and the chance for all faculty and staff to collaborate on best-supporting Indigenous student success.

While strides have been made, there is still room for growth regarding Indigenous representation in higher education enrollment. They have the lowest educational attainment of any racial or ethnic group, high school dropout rates are double the national average, and 16% have a bachelor’s degree or higher (Bryan, 2019). These statistics influence student success in higher education, and administrators are beginning to focus on how to improve them. Students who do leave the reservation for college exist in both worlds and are constantly bargaining their sense of belonging in both communities (Fox et al., 2005). Research on TCUs is limited, but substantial research supports the idea of TCUs serving as a pipeline to a non-TCU institution. This path leads to higher persistence and degree-completion compared to Indigenous students who went directly to a non-TCU as TCUs help prepare students academically before they

“adjust to the social environment of a mainstream four year institution” (Bryan, 2019, p. 53).

TCUs can be a helpful stepping stone for students to achieve their academic goals but need support within their community to get there.

Methods to Support Indigenous Students

Students are driven to TCUs for a variety of unique experiences and characteristics. To move toward a more equitable college experience for Indigenous students no matter the institution type, it is important to discuss the difference between TCUs and non-TCUs. While the American higher education structure is based on Eurocentric standards, they are all on originally Indigenous land (Waterman, 2019, p.75). Understanding colonization when examining Indigenous students is key because it opens the door to “confront and challenge institutional practices that often harm [Indigenous people]” (Masta, 2018, p. 833). TCUs incorporate “tribal philosophy and practices” into their curriculum and are committed to preserving indigenous languages (Bryan, 2019, p. 53).

The Family Education Model is often used in courses at TCUs to emphasize the importance of family, which goes hand in hand with the convenience of TCUs being close to students’ homes and families. It allows for the regular presence of students’ families at campus events and programs like social dances and storytelling (Martin, 2005). This model emphasizes the importance of community and family structure in Indigenous cultures, and aids TCUs in creating facilities that are committed to promoting the importance of family (Bryan, 2019). While many non-TCUs continue to have methods that are “incompatible with Indigenous Knowledge Systems,” TCUs provide a space that maintains cultural integrity and values the Indigenous traditions, which attracts more Indigenous students compared to non-TCUs (Waterman, 2019, p.66).

The Indigenous population faces very specific social problems, and TCUs are well-equipped in how to aid students who are struggling. Indigenous people are two times more

likely to live in poverty than the general population and their high school dropout rate is double the national average (Bryan, 2019). The average age of Indigenous students is 28, and many are single parents. This creates a hostile environment for Indigenous people to go to college and be successful. Yet despite all these factors, 86% of students who attend TCUs graduate (Martin, 2005). This is because TCUs exist within the environment that contributes to these issues and know which resources can help. Some of these resources are: peer, faculty, and staff mentorship, perceptions of value and respect, adequate preparation to promote academic success, financial assistance, and much more that contribute to their success (Mosholder et al., 2016). There are also high school-to-college transition programs that many TCUs have established, such as summer bridge programs (Martin, 2005). This shows that TCUs are addressing the challenges their students face and have the resources to support them.

Due to the troubled history, there is already a reason to “be suspicious of anything European” (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 84). When TCUs were first starting to emerge in the US, they turned to established higher education institutions for support, resources, and guidance but were often met with either invalidation of their necessity or were taken advantage of). Feelings of isolation, hostility, and outright racism impact Indigenous students at non-TCUs from both classmates and faculty (Bryan, 2019). The lack of representation among students, faculty, and staff perpetuates these attitudes toward Indigenous students. One student reported being told, “You live in an Indian box ... there are over 30 Native kids here, why are you complaining?” (Lowe, 2005, p. 36). If this overt racism is not addressed and expelled, Indigenous students will continue to feel unsupported at non-TCUs or feel discouraged from attending college altogether. Choosing to attend a non-TCU could be seen as an act of “disloyalty to [the] culture” by their community members and family (Bryan, 2019, p. 51). These close family ties have been seen as problematic by education administrators at non-TCUs who could not “comprehend that students wanted to stay on the reservation” (Waterman, 2019,

p.64). Administrators risk invalidating the experiences of their Indigenous students by not educating themselves on the cultural significance of strong communal ties.

There continues to be a lack of accurate perception on what Indigenous students need to succeed in higher education. Researchers Guillory & Wolverton (2008) discovered that students listed their persistence factors as: family support, motivations to give back to their tribal community, and receiving on-campus social support. The institutions in the study listed perceived persistence factors as financial support and academic programs. The students reflected on financial support and academic programs by saying that while these were helpful contributors, they acted instead as barriers to going to college in the first place (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). This shows a disparity in what institutions believe students need to graduate and what they report actually needing. Other reported barriers were family and single parenthood. If the institutions do not fully understand what contributes to Indigenous students' success, then how can they increase retention and graduation rates among this population? By not focusing on the tribal and community importance of Indigenous cultures, it does not allow for students to be fully supported at non-TCUs. Mosholder et al (2016) found Indigenous students needed academic and non-academic university events that were "culturally responsive and reflective" in order to diminish feelings of isolation and bolster academic support (p. 27). Once these systems were in place for a year, they saw enrollment increase by 20%, retention increase by 15% (Mosholder et al., 2016). Positive perceptions of non-TCUs by Indigenous students also increased. This shows that efforts made by institutions to support their Indigenous students appropriately lead to successful outcomes for the institution and the students.

It is important to help all students feel their college or university is their home away from home, no matter the institution type. Indigenous students report greater success in identifying this sense of belonging at TCUs compared to non-TCUs. There is emerging research examining what institutions need to do to improve student support and success. However, this is an

under-researched area of higher education. As mentioned, Indigenous students are more likely to graduate from college at a non-TCU if they first attend a TCU, thus highlighting the importance of guiding students in a smooth and supportive transition from one institution type to the other. There are many resources available for institutions to prioritize this, such as government agencies, partnerships with foundations, and making connections between the two schools. An example of a government agency is the All Nations Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (ANLSAMP), funded by the National Science Foundation, which helps to create collaborations between TCUs and four-year universities (Bryan, 2019). A project called Honoring Our Origins and Peoples (HOOP) is run through University of California Los Angeles's American Indian Studies Center. It focuses on theater as an "integrated subject of study and creative development in tribal colleges, [Indigenous] communities, K-12 schools, and mainstream institutions" (Bryan, 2019, p. 55). There are also dual enrollment programs like that of Navajo Technical University and Northern Arizona University. All Nations Alliance for Minority Participation and Salish Kootenai College collaborated on publishing a handbook called *Touch the Sky: A Guide for Tribal and Community College Transfer Students* (Robbins, 1998). It aids student affairs professionals as they support transfer students. The handbook contains a plethora of useful information, including information on academic advising and the credit transfer process, admissions officers and the application process, financial aid officers and the FAFSA process, and university staff who can help with registration and housing (Bryan, 2019). There are many ways to build connections between TCUs and non-TCUs, but there are also preventative measures to boost student success. Resources on reservations are very limited, and the K-12 education system on reservations creates severe barriers for collegiate academic preparation. Providing proper resources and funding for the K-12 schools would help eliminate this barrier and students would be more prepared for the transition to college.

Higher education administrators should “incorporate [Indigenous] culture into courses, programs, and the architecture and landscape of the campus” to support student success (Martin, 2005, p. 85). Using theoretical frameworks can help administrators in accomplishing this goal, one being Tribal Critical Race Theory. Tribal Critical Race Theory believes “racism is part of the fabric of North American society” and ties it to colonization (Waterman, 2019, p. 68). An important characteristic of Tribal Critical Race Theory is powerful storytelling, a practice that existed before colonization and can be used today to teach future Indigenous generations of their ancestry. The literature describes two other effective theories to help with this: funds of knowledge theory and cultural wealth theory. Funds of knowledge theory states “every individual is a competent, knowledgeable person with their own experiences that can be a basis for productive future learning” (Mosholder et al., 2016, p. 27). The cultural wealth theory “attempts to help students and teachers realize what diverse students bring from their home cultures is of value to themselves and to the school” (Mosholder et al., 2016, p. 28). When institutions invite family, parents, and elders to programs on campus, the students feel supported and that their cultural values are recognized (Mosholder et al., 2016). This practice is not limited to TCUs, and other institutions can do the same. All student affairs departments can provide programming and resources, including residence life. Especially if this is going to be a student’s home away from home, the residence hall is the first place to help them feel welcome and supported. Some institutions offer “living-learning communities designed for specific ethnic and cultural groups,” which can create a community for Indigenous students (Starr Minthorn, 2014, p.155). Even if an institution cannot develop separate living-learning communities, hosting cultural programs and allowing spiritual practices in the residence hall can make a huge difference. One of these common spiritual practices is smudging or burning sage to cleanse a space or a person at the beginning of a semester to clear their minds and feel protected. Indigenous students can feel empowered if staff are educated and equipped to handle these ceremonies. Another ceremony

done by the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota nations is a sweat lodge, representing the journey students take when going to college (Starr Minthorn, 2014). The ceremony was developed by institutions collaborating with elders in the community to “find ways to better serve the [Indigenous] students of a particular region and tribal culture” (Starr Minthorn, 2014, p.157). These represent some examples of how non-TCUs can be more like TCUs in offering resources and support for Indigenous students.

Conclusion

While the research on TCUs and Indigenous students is growing, it is still limited. TCUs are still becoming increasingly established and resourced to serve a growing Indigenous student population. The narrative of Indigenous peoples tends to diminish their presence and speaks of them like they are people of the past. Continued research on Indigenous people and cultures will lead to a better understanding of the various tribes and communities that existed on this land (Masta, 2018). Using tribal critical race theory in our research guides us to the beginning of how colonialism has been pervasive all these years (Waterman, 2019). Centering Indigenous scholars in the research gives them the opportunity to lead it and do, but this can only happen if there is a larger representation of Indigenous people in academia. A theme of the recommendations in the literature is to conduct and fund more research. Other recommendations include providing students with appropriate resources and orienting them to not just the physical campus but also to the higher education system in general (Lowe, 2005). Fox et al. (2005) recommended hiring and promoting Indigenous faculty and staff in all institutional areas. Overall, there are many steps non-TCUs can take to prepare and support their Indigenous students, which will lead to higher retention and persistence rates of Indigenous students. This can further break the cycle of underrepresentation of Indigenous people in academia and higher education administration.

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