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Creating community on campus: Attracting, retaining, and graduating first-generation Native American students

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Abstract

Native Americans are the single most underrepresented racial group in American higher education today; those enrolled in college are also disproportionately first-generation students. In order to help universities attract and retain Native American students, this study utilizes the four R's of indigenous research to document the motivations of first-generation Native American students to attend and remain at a mid-sized public university in the northwest. Student participants report that social and cultural support were key factors in their decisions to attend and remain at their institution. Implications of these findings are discussed, and recommendations are made to higher education institutions seeking to attract and retain Native American students.

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Introduction

Native Americans comprise the single most underrepresented group in American higher education today (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Although Native Americans made up approximately 2% of the U.S. population in 2013 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), Native American students accounted for only .58% of American undergraduate enrollment in 2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016); this number does not reflect graduation rates. Though this low enrollment is due to a variety of different factors, it is a troubling statistic. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate how one university attracts and retains Native American students whose parents have not attended college (challengingly, this is common in the Native American community). This research can serve as an example to other universities, helping to alleviate the problem of Native American underrepresentation in higher education.

Review of the Literature

Definition of First-Generation College Student

According to Davis (2010), there are a variety of ways to define the term "first-generation college student." Some definitions include students with at least one parent who has attended college but not earned a four-year degree, while other definitions limit first-generation students to those whose parents have not attended college at all. Citing both the differences between parents who have attended college without earning a degree (those who left college after one semester versus those who nearly completed a degree, for instance,) as well as the similarities (the fact that these parents do not have degrees, and therefore are much less likely to have high social positions,) Davis argues that "Individuals [should be able to] claim first-

generation student status if neither one of their parents or guardians possesses a four-year degree" (pg. 2).

Engle and Tinto (2008), researchers with earlier publications on this topic, adopt the same definition for the term "first-generation college student." Jehangir (2010) reports that Federal TRIO programs, programs designed to support students identified as "at-risk," also subscribe to a broad definition, categorizing first-generation students as those who do not have a parent with a four-year degree. However, Jenhangir (2010) personally defines first-generation college students as "those who are first in their immediate family to attend college" (pg. 14).

For the purposes of this study, Jehangir's (2010) more specific definition of first-generation college students—those whose parents have not attended college at all—will be used. This definition can be justified by the fact that parents who have attended college, even without graduating, possess information and experiences they can share with their children. Although parents who have attended college without earning a degree are less likely to have attained high social status, and they may be less qualified to give advice on how to *complete* a degree, they are certainly qualified to give advice on how to *start*, as they have personally navigated at least the admissions and enrollment processes. Such parents have some college experience they can share with their children; thus, children of parents who have attended college without graduating will not be considered first-generation college students in the present study. This designation will apply only to students whose parents have not attended college at all.

Characteristics of "Typical" First-Generation College Students

Family dynamics

According to Davis (2010), first-generation (FG) college students must negotiate an entirely different set of challenges than most of their continuing generation (CG) peers face. Not

only do FG students lack the guidance of a parent or guardian who has personal experience in college, FG students also tend to come from tightly-knit families—a circumstance that can create a great deal of tension for students as they begin to separate from their parents.

Davis notes that first-generation students may feel "bound" to their parents, who may view college attendance as "a movement against family unity" (2010, pg. 75). According to Davis, students who are bound to their parents may feel responsible for their parents' financial or emotional well-being, making independence very difficult—or painful—to attain. First-generation students also may feel particularly responsible to represent their families to the outside world—a task daunting enough even for continuing generation students who have been socialized into the culture of college as a matter of course.

First-generation college students are obliged not only to negotiate potentially difficult parental relationships, but also, in many cases, to fulfill responsibilities toward other members of their families. Jehangir (2010) writes that "for many [low income, first-generation] students, family obligations take center stage in their lives" (pg. 24). These obligations can include caring for their own children, parenting younger siblings, acting as a language interpreter for family members who are not proficient in English, performing housework, and coordinating family schedules and transportation (Jehangir, 2010).

Demographics

As an undifferentiated group, first-generation college students, according to Jehangir (2010), tend to fall into multiple disadvantaged categories (some of which are applicable to Native American students and some of which are not.) They are

> more likely than their more advantaged peers to be students of color, older than 24 years, female, nonnative speakers of English, and born outside the United States. They are also

more likely to have a disability, care for dependent children, and be single parents (pg. 14).

Jehangir (2010) also notes a correlation between low income status and first-generation college attendance. And, although income levels and social class are not necessarily synonymous, first-generation college students can more commonly be described as low income and working class than their peers can. They have "life experiences, aspirations, and family expectations, said or unsaid . . . shaped by income, work, domicile, and family history" (2010, pg. 15); since first-generation college students more often fit into the low income, working class category than do their continuing generation peers, their worldviews and aspirations tend to be different than those of their continuing generation peers. Thus, low-income prospective first-generation college students, particularly those who are members of racial minority groups, may forego post-secondary education altogether, reasoning that it is financially out of reach (Urdiquez, 2010). However, Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips (2012) and Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias (2012) posit that one of the most significant differences between first- and continuing-generation college students is a result of cultural, rather than economic, differences between working, middle, and upper classes. Because working class culture emphasizes interdependence whilst the middle and upper classes prize independence, the resulting cultural mismatch leads to hardships for first-generation college students who have not been trained to think of themselves first as individuals (rather than members of a family or community.)

Living situations

Davis (2010) notes significant differences in the living situations of first-generation college students and continuing generation college students. Continuing generation students are

significantly more likely to live on campus, Davis reports, and they are more likely to select institutions at a significant distance from their parents, families, and friends. First-generation students, by contrast, are more likely than continuing generation students to live at home or to select an institution that is relatively close to their parents or families. According to Dirks et al. (2016), first-generation students may go as far as to select a college specifically for its close proximity to home; more geographically distant institutions may not be considered as feasible options.

This difference in living situation logically results in differences between the ways first- and continuing-generation college students can socialize and spend their time. While on-campus continuing generation students, who are separated from their families and, quite possibly from old friends, are more likely to find it necessary to build social networks on campus, commuting first-generation students, who are not separated from their families and old friends, are more likely to retain their old networks. Commuting first-generation students must also spend time and energy traveling to and from campus—time and energy that continuing generation college students can spend studying or becoming involved in activities on campus.

Success Rates of First-Generation College Students

According to Ishitani (2006), graduation rates vary according to student demographics. Students of different racial groups, for example, show different tendencies to graduate or to complete a degree within a reasonable timeframe. Similarly, first-generation college students demonstrate different—and usually lower—success rates than their continuing-generation peers.

Although first-generation college students are more likely to leave college without graduating, or to graduate much later than their continuing-generation peers, Ishitani (2006) identifies several mitigating factors for first-generation college students—factors that contribute

to their success and timely graduation. Of obvious importance is the factor of pre-college education; in general, students who have experienced a rigorous high school education and who have performed well in it are better able to succeed in college than those who have not. Also of importance is the factor of continuous enrollment; students who do not take time off from college are decidedly more likely to complete their degrees (and to complete them in a timely fashion) than students who do. Factors such as race, gender, and income levels may also positively (or negatively) affect the likelihood of timely graduation for first-generation college students, though these are factors that are either impossible or extremely difficult for students to change.

Unique Challenges of Native American First-Generation College Students

According to Schmidt and Akande (2011), "It is clear that [first-generation college students] do share certain characteristics and needs, but that one program or approach will not fit the needs of all [first-generation college students]" (pg. 52). First-generation Native American college students, Schmidt and Akande (2011) write, have needs and characteristics that set them apart from non-Native American first-generation college students. This is unsurprising, given the stark differences between the histories and cultures of Native American peoples and the histories and cultures of other racial minority groups who arrived in North America from colonial times onward. It is also unsurprising in light of certain obvious mismatches between Native American students and Jehangir's (2010) profile of "typical" first-generation college students (e.g., Native American students do not share the "immigrant characteristics" of many other first-generation college students, such as being born outside the United States or being non-native speakers of English; indeed, the Linguistic Society of America (N.D.) reports that most

indigenous American languages are endangered, indicating that Native American communities have a strong tendency to utilize English as the primary medium of communication.)

A common challenge for Native American students is a general lack of preparation for college (Tachine, 2015; Schmidt and Akande, 2011; Hibel & Francis-Begay, 2017; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). This lack of preparation is not solely a lack of academic preparation, although that is a factor; according to Faircloth & Tippeconnic (2010), states with the highest Native American populations have high school graduation rates under 50% for Native American high school students, while Brayboy & Makka (2015) report that common K-12 school practices render Native American students less likely to be placed on the college-bound track. Rather, Schmidt and Akande (2011) write that the culture and teaching traditions of Native American communities are not aligned with the culture and teaching traditions of the modern American university. American Indian and Alaska Native communities have a strong tendency to share cultural knowledge and history orally, while teaching skills by demonstration (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Yeboah, 2005). Schmidt and Akande (2011) write that reading and writing are not emphasized in these cultures, perhaps leading to the poor reading and math skills identified in the study. Additionally, first-generation Native American college students have a greater tendency than the general population to lack college "survival skills"—such skills as time management, study strategies, maintenance of a proper diet, and knowledge of the connections between health and success in college. Recognizing this, the American Indian Education Fund (N. D.) offers grants to postsecondary institutions interested in establishing transitional camps for Native American students; such camps are designed to teach college survival skills and to facilitate cultural adjustment, particularly for students who have never before lived outside of reservations.

In comparison to other groups of first-generation college students, Schmidt and Akande (2011) report, Native American students more often must contend with negative family views toward higher education. Native American parents may not recognize the value of a college degree or, because of previous negative education experiences of their own, they tend to discourage their children from pursuing college. Furthermore, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2013), Native Americans are the single most underrepresented racial group at the postsecondary education level; thus, in addition to facing negative family views toward higher education, Native American students also likely struggle to find academic role models from their own communities.

According to Schmidt and Akande (2011), "community (place) is important in this culture." Thus, ". . . leaving the community to go to college is difficult for many students" (pg. 45). (Of course, Schmidt and Akande's 2011 study also points to the fact that students who leave the community rarely come back; this can act as a strong deterrent to potential students who desire to retain their community and cultural identities.) Similarly, Singson, Tachine, Davidson, & Waterman (2016) report that "place is a foundational epistemology for Native Peoples" (pg. 112).

Although the received wisdom regarding college student-family relationships is that too much family involvement can adversely affect the student (White, 2005), Lundberg (2014) argues that the case is different for Native American students, for whom family involvement is an important means of support and a key link to the students' home culture and community. Recognizing Native American students' need for family support, tribal colleges have successfully implemented the Family Education Model (FEM), an approach designed to preserve relationships between students and their families, in efforts to retain Native American students.

According to HeavyRunner & DeCelles (2002), this arrangement forges a partnership between institutions and families—a partnership in which responsibility for student success is shared between the family and the institution, ultimately resulting in greater retention rates for Native American students. Guillory & Wolverton (2008) refer to this model as an institutional replication of the extended family structure common within Native American communities. HeavyRunner & Decelles (2002) write that although FEM is implemented differently in different institutions, the model utilizes a caseworker who serves as a mentor and advisor for a student's entire family. Each FEM system also shares a common set of principles:

- [A]ll college staff and students' families must work together in relationships based on equality and respect;
- [T]ribal college staff enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members-adults, youths, children, and extended family;
- [T]ribal college students' families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to tribal communities;
- [R]etention programs must affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society;
- [R]etention programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process;
- [R]etention programs advocate for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families that are served;
- [S]tudent service practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development;

- [S]tudent retention programs are flexible and responsive to emerging family and community issues; and
- [P]rinciples of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration (pp. 30-31).

Tribal Colleges and their Relationship to First-Generation Native American College Students

According to Simpson (N.D.), tribal colleges were first developed in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, though Native Americans have been included (via complete assimilation models) in American higher education since Harvard University's early days (Trier, 2005). The goals of tribal colleges are straightforward: to provide post-secondary education to American Indians, enabling them to function in the modern culture of the United States, while preserving ancient tribal culture and customs. Tribal colleges are able to address the unique needs and challenges of Native American students in a way that mainstream colleges and universities cannot; these institutions provide a link between the outside world and the inside community, making it possible for students to gain a post-secondary education without having to abandon tribal culture (Simpson, N.D.)

Unsurprisingly, tribal colleges serve a disproportionate number of first-generation Native American college students. According to the American Council on Education (ACE, 2017), such institutions are federally funded and open to all students, but they receive no funds for non-Native American students. Schmidt and Akande's (2011) study estimates that first-generation college students comprise between 75% and 90% of the student body enrolled in tribal colleges. With a student body thus populated, first-generation American Indian college students can enjoy the benefits of an education that reinforces the culture of their communities, the ability to "catch

up" academically in an environment where this is the norm, and the ability to connect with others who have similar needs, life situations, and concerns. In contrast to first-generation college students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), first-generation students at tribal colleges can view themselves as completely normal; they are encouraged to embrace their identities, rather than to conceal them in order to fit in with the foreign culture of the traditional American higher education system. This tribal college model has been proven effective; students who graduate from them report that they are reaching their academic and occupational goals (Simi & Matusitz, 2016), while students who enroll achieve higher graduation rates than do their Native American peers at PWIs (Larrimore & McClellan, 2005).

Recruitment and retention of Native American student at PWIs

According to Carmen (2006), PWIs tend to conduct recruitment of Native American or Alaska Native students in much the same way that they would recruit students of any other racial group; the very same college-sponsored events and Caucasian or non-Native American recruiters are normally used for the recruitment of all students. Retention efforts, as well, are normally undifferentiated for Native American students (see Tachine & Francis-Begay, 2013). Judging by the underrepresentation of Native American students in higher education, however, it is apparent that this culturally undifferentiated approach is not achieving the goal of equal representation for Native American students. Based on input from Native American students and recruiters, Carmen (2006), a Native American herself, proposes that recruitment and retention of Native American students should be considered as a single goal, particularly as Native American cultures tend to prize long-lasting relationships. Indeed, relationship-building is a prerequisite for positive interactions with Native American communities on many levels; it is a crucial means of building trust prior to performing research within the Native American community (Kovach,

2009), and a means of establishing reliability in research, as individuals who know one another will be able to detect misrepresentations and more motivated to be honest and open (Wilson, 2008).

Relationship-building can be accomplished via engaging Native American recruiters whose job descriptions include retention efforts utilizing personal relationships with students, their families, and their Native American communities. Although the model of personal relationship building may require the investment of more time and financial resources—recruiters may need to attend pow wows, funerals, and other cultural ceremonies in order to demonstrate investment in the communities from which they are recruiting—this is the model that Native American students seem to view as most effective. PWIs, therefore, can learn much from the FEM models employed by tribal colleges; such models encourage long-lasting relationships between mentor-caseworkers (recruiter-retainers, in PWIs) and students. Although PWIs cannot immediately offer Native American students the benefits of immersion in their home cultures, they can, like tribal colleges, offer support to students via Native American student unions and the visible presence of other Native Americans on campus, creating a "home away from home" for them (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2016)—even the presence of a Native American recruiter would be a beneficial beginning.

Methodology

As the primary author of this work is an African-American male who views life and research through the lenses of race and spirituality, this research was begun with the assumption that mutual racial minority identities and similar worldviews would facilitate a kinship between the researcher and participants (the student author who helped to conduct the face-to-face interview is also Black and a native of the African country of Kenya; the other student author,

who primarily contributed to the crafting of this article, is White.) This seemed particularly likely given the racial composition of the university at which the research took place; Native American students comprise only 1% of the university's undergraduate enrollment, and, of the university's 556 full-time faculty and instructors, four are Native American and eight are Black or African American (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, N.D.)

In conducting research within the Native American community, which has historically been marginalized and exploited, it was of paramount importance to us to build and maintain trust with our participants. Accordingly, we applied the "Three R's" of indigenous research, respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, as defined by Weber-Pillwax (2001) and explained in Wilson (2008):

- How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between the topic that I am studying and myself as a researcher (on multiple levels)?
- How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between myself and the other research participants?
- How can I relate respectfully to the other participants involved in this research so that together we can form a stronger relationship with the idea that we will share?
- What is my role as researcher in this relationship, and what are my responsibilities?
- Am I being responsible in fulfilling my role and obligations to the other participants, to the topic and to all of my relations?
- What am I contributing or giving back to the relationship? Is the sharing, growth and learning that is taking place reciprocal? (pg. 77)

Anthony-Stevens (2017) adds a fourth "R" to this framework—that of relationality. This concept entails the building of trust through personal relationships. Personal relationships, particularly those involving members of the Native American community, must be strong enough to weather openness and vulnerability—they must be authentic and deeply honest.

In order to demonstrate *respect* for participants and for the Native American community, the primary author deliberately sought the counsel of both the Chief Diversity Officer and the Director of Tribal Relations at the institution where research took place before seeking Institutional Review Board approval of this present study; afterwards, he requested the assistance of the Director of Tribal Relations in shaping appropriate interview questions. When interacting with participants, we sought to show respect by approaching them at their own place, the Native American Center. As an added measure of *responsibility*, the primary author undertook graduate coursework specifically addressing indigenous Native American research methodologies before conducting research within the Native American community. He also sought and gained approval from his university's Institutional Review Board before proceeding with the study. All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of University of Idaho (Project identification code # 17-113). Developing *relationships* with the Native American community was also a high priority; even though we were unable to establish individual relationships with participants, the primary author often attended campus events recognizing, honoring, and affirming Native American culture and traditions; this allowed him to come into contact with students, faculty, and administrators whose work addressed the needs of the Native American Community and, in particular, the Native American community on campus. And, in the spirit of *reciprocity*, the study was designed to

benefit both participants and the university; participants were encouraged to share their perspectives so that the university might learn how to serve them better, ultimately strengthening the university.

Data for this study were collected via a focus group interview with five Native American, first-generation college students at a mid-sized, land grant research university in the Northwest region of the United States (hereafter referred to as "State University.") This exploratory research employed the qualitative approach of multiple case studies, which allowed the researchers to investigate the college experiences of each individual. This approach was also necessitated by the availability of qualified participants; of the approximately fifty first-generation Native American students enrolled at State University, only five students were able and willing to participate. Although we scheduled the interview to take place at night, intending to make participation as convenient as possible, we recognize that participation may have been impacted by the distractions of the 2016 national election, which had taken place the day before our data collection, or by the busyness inherent to the end of the academic semester. Our original goal was to recruit twenty participants for a larger-scale qualitative study, but this became unfeasible given the available sample size. However, the five available participants were eager to be involved, freely sharing details of their experiences at State University, as well as their motivations to study at the institution.

The interview took place at State University's Native American Center; this was deliberately arranged to show *respect* for participants and to put them as much at ease as possible. We wished to establish ourselves as non-Indigenous allies to our participants and the Native American community at large (Anthony-Stevens, 2017). Thus, in an effort to cooperate with the Native American Center, we requested that staff from the center perform the participant

recruiting. The audio-recorded interview was conducted in-person by a student research assistant (the primary author connected and took notes via Skype.) Interview questions were designed to investigate the experiences of racially underrepresented first-generation college students, focusing specifically on their motivations to attend and remain in college. Participants were also asked to share their views on State University itself; they were asked to recount factors contributing to their decisions to study at State University, as well as to share their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the university based on their own experiences.

All five participants were female, first-generation college students; four were undergraduates, while one was enrolled in a graduate-level program. Each participant shared different plans and aspirations for her future. Amber, an in-state undergraduate student, expressed a desire to become a certified psychologist and to move out of state after graduation (both because she said that she "[wanted] to adventure more" and because she believed that there were more job opportunities elsewhere.) Brianna, another in-state undergraduate student, expressed a desire to remain in the state after graduation; she planned to become a veterinarian. Courtney, also an in-state undergraduate student, planned to remain in the state and to become a teacher upon graduation, but also expressed a desire to study criminology. Lauren, an out-of-state graduate student, shared that her goal was to remain in the state and work in undergraduate student retention, preferably on one of State University's campuses. Torrie, an out-of-state undergraduate student, planned to return to her home state and become an early childhood education instructor. For easier reference, **Table 1** below lists demographic information for each participant.

Table 1. ***Participant information.***

Participant	Gender	Residency	Program type	Plans to remain in state after graduation	Desired occupation/program after graduation
Amber	Female	In state	Undergraduate	No	Certified psychologist
Brianna	Female	In state	Undergraduate	Yes	Veterinary school
Courtney	Female	In state	Undergraduate	Yes	Teacher, but also interested in studying criminology
Lauren	Female	Out of state	Graduate	Yes	Undergraduate student retention
Torrie	Female	Out of state	Undergraduate	No	Early childhood education

Limitations

As this is an exploratory study with a small sample size, we cannot safely generalize our findings to the national population of Native American, first-generation college students. Additionally, all five of our participants were female; consequently, we cannot be assured that our study represents the perspectives of male students from the same population. Future studies would do well to incorporate the perspectives of greater numbers of Native American, first-generation college students—particularly male students. Furthermore, due to the limited availability of student participants, we were able to perform only one focus group interview. This left us no opportunity to follow-up with individual participants. However, it was important to us that we were responsible in our analysis of the data collected from the interviews; therefore,

we allowed an expert and scholar in indigenous Native American research methodologies to review our work, confirming the accuracy of our findings.

Findings

As might be expected, the students interviewed for this study displayed generally positive attitudes toward higher education and the university in which they were enrolled. Although they gave a variety of responses to interview questions, their tendency to display similar motivations for attending the university and remaining there, as well as their tendency to recount similar experiences while at the university, caused several themes to emerge repeatedly throughout the data. These themes are discussed below, organized according to the interview question that prompted them.

Participants' motivations to attend college

Encouragement from family, friends, and academic mentors.

Each participant, in one way or another, acknowledge that her decision to attend college was influenced by a family member, friend, or academic mentor. Amber shared that her "high school counsellor. . . [was] the main reason I [went] to this college. He helped me with my application, scholarships, transcripts and transferring everything over." Similarly, Lauren explained that her primary sources of encouragement were academic mentors: ". . . my high school teachers told me that I should go to college. . . the professor that I had mentioned earlier in the interview highly encouraged me to go to grad school too."

For Brianna, both academic mentors and family members provided encouragement: "The main reason why I'm going to college is because my parents tell me that they missed out on many opportunities because they did not go to college, so they [pushed] me to apply for scholarships and to get a higher education. Also, my agriculture teacher saw potential in me." Both Courtney and Torrie were primarily influenced to attend college by family members;

Courtney shared "what influenced me to go to college was my family." Similarly, Torrie explained "what mainly influenced me to go to college was my family, more so my siblings."

Desire to set an example.

For two participants—students who were primarily motivated to attend college by their family members—there was a strong desire to set a positive example for others to follow. Courtney, who mentioned her family frequently throughout the interview, explained ". . . my family. . . always looked up to me." Torrie demonstrated a wish to be an example both to her family and to others around her: "What mainly influenced me to go to college was my family, more so my siblings—also the youth in my community. I want to show them that it is possible to go to college and succeed." For these two participants, financial and academic rewards were secondary to the goal of being examples to their families and communities.

Enhanced career opportunities.

Three participants explained that widened career prospects (or other opportunities) were a powerful stimulus for their decisions to attend college. Amber shared

> "I've always [grown] up with the mentality that when you go to college and realize the career you want to go into and actually dedicate yourself to it, it pays off in the long run and it helps better you and enables you to get more job opportunities in your major. . ."

Similarly, Lauren explained that consistent, fulfilling employment was a high priority for her:

> I wanted to be certified in something instead of just work. . . so I just went [to college] but didn't do too well. The recession happened and I didn't want to be unemployed forever, so I went back to community college and got a 4-year degree and then went to grad school.

For Brianna, who frequently mentioned her family in interview responses, parental counsel convinced her that college would improve her quality of life (likely via enhanced career options, but possibly in other ways, as well): "The main reason why I'm going to college is because my parents tell me that they missed out on many opportunities because they did not go to college."

Attraction to State University

Financial concerns.

Of the five participants involved in this study, four directly referenced financial concerns as factors in their decision to attend the university in question. For most participants, the combination of scholarships and in-state tuition was a powerful draw. In Amber's words, "What attracted me to come to [State University] was the scholarships I was offered. . . Also, living in [the state], I'd be able to pay in-state tuition." In-state tuition was also a motivating factor for Torrie, who was able to secure it due to her tribal membership, rather than her place of residency: "What attracted me to [State University] was the scholarship opportunities. I got many scholarships, and from being a part of a tribe that is part of the M.O.U tribes, that allowed me to get in-state tuition." (Courtney, the participant who did not mention financial concerns directly, may still have consciously considered financial benefits in her decision to attend; she acknowledged that State University was "close to home," which allowed her to pay the in-state tuition rates available to residents of the University's state.)

However, funding sources differed for individual students. Lauren, the graduate student participant, referenced neither in-state tuition nor scholarships as sources of financial support. Rather, she mentioned opportunities that were available to her because of her level of study:

"When I came, I was studying geology. . . the geology department helped me become a teaching assistant."

Program availability or strength.

Although the criterion of program availability or strength was not as frequently mentioned by participants, two participants directly referenced it as a contributing factor to their decisions to attend the university in question. In Brianna's words, "I chose coming to [State University] because they have a strong career program that I was interested in. It was very strong from [State University]." Courtney, as well, found the availability of her desired program to be important, though perhaps less important than the proximity of the university to her home, and by extension, her existing support network: "I guess it is close to home, and they have the major that I wanted to study."

Interestingly, although two participants considered program strength and availability to be significant factors in their decision to attend the university in question, both participants presented other reasons for their attendance. Though Brianna's response suggested that her primary reason for attending the university was the strength of her desired program, this was not the only motivation she listed. And, although Courtney mentioned the availability of the major she wished to study, she first stated that the university was "close to home," suggesting that the availability of her desired major may have been of secondary importance to her.

Personal connections.

Two of the five participants in this study referenced personal connections as factors contributing to—or primarily responsible for—their decisions to study at State University. Lauren, the graduate student participant, cited personal connections as the most motivating stimulus for her decision, sharing that "The reason I came to [State University] was because one

of my mentors from one of my undergraduate institutions taught geology here, and also my friend who had the same mentor got her PhD here, so I figured that I knew some people here. So I decided to go here." Courtney, by contrast, selected State University because it was "close to home," or to an established support network of individuals who had been influential in her life for a significant period of time. While both Lauren and Courtney indicated the importance of maintaining previous relationships when attending State University, Lauren's relationships were oriented primarily toward support on an academic level, while Courtney's were oriented primarily toward support on a personal level.

Location and physical aspects of the university.

Two participants explicitly mentioned the location of State University as an enticement to attend, though their underlying reasons for being attracted to the university differed. Amber viewed State University's location as beneficial for financial reasons: ". . . living in [state], I'd be able to pay in state tuition." (Amber later referenced State University's proximity to her family as a positive aspect of his time at State University, though she did not cite this as a reason she chose to attend.) Courtney, as previously mentioned, stated that "What attracted me to [State University] is the location. I guess it is close to home. . ."

Students also shared that aspects of the campus were instrumental in their decisions to attend State University. Amber mentioned that a previous trip to State University had been convincing: ". . . when I visited campus last year with a program I was with. . . I enjoyed it and I saw myself going here." Brianna also explained that she "liked the campus."

Reasons to remain at State University

Interestingly, every participant in this study cited "support" as the reason she remained at State University. While sources of support differed between students, the participants made it

clear that they each received encouragement from the university in some way—multiple students spoke warmly of support they received from the Native American Center, while other sources of support included Disability Support Services, Greek life, and positive relationships with faculty. Relationships with family and friends were also considered important.

Support from the Native American Center.

Four of the five participants directly cited the Native American Center as a source of support. Brianna and Torrie briefly mentioned the Native American Center as supportive, while Amber shared at greater length that it had helped her to remain organized academically: ". . . what kept me going here is the support from especially the Native Center, because my advisors here help me keep track of my schooling and what I have completed." Lauren, by contrast, focused explicitly on the community benefits of the Native American Center, mentioning that other universities and colleges she had previously attended had not offered such resources for Native students:

> For my undergrad, I have been to multiple schools and this is the only one with a Native center. Especially when I switched my program, I thought the Native center was always there for me. It was just really awesome to come to a place with that many people, and to come to a place specifically built for Native Americans is nice.

Support from other State University resources.

Two participants named other State University resources beyond the Native American Center as sources of support. Brianna shared that she appreciated the attitudes of State University faculty, whom she perceived to be egalitarian in their approach to power dynamics: "What keeps me going to [State University] is probably. . . the atmosphere. Here, you are treated as an equal to the professors. They don't talk to you as if you are below them; they talk to you as

their equal." Brianna also appreciated the social opportunities available to her from "the whole community at [State University]" as a result of her on-campus living arrangements: "What helps keep me here is that I am also part of Greek Life, and my sorority helps me a lot, so that's good." Lauren mentioned the benefits of multiple sources of academic and non-academic support from across campus:

> Other places that have been supportive to me are the counseling and testing center. I have ADHD that's pretty bad, so ASAP [Academic Support Programs], DSS [Disability Support Services] even have been pretty awesome. I had to change my living situation so the residence office was awesome. Also, the Alumni office has been very great.

Support from personal sources.

Though participants did not elaborate on the specifics of their non-academic support networks, three students mentioned personal support systems as reasons why they remained at State University. Amber cited friends as helpful to her persistence: ". . . my friends keep me grounded while having a good time." Courtney, in keeping with her answers to previous interview questions, acknowledged the support available through the university while stressing the importance of maintaining existing personal relationships: "What keeps me going to [State University] is the support system that I have, and also family and friends." Torrie shared a similar viewpoint, adding that "What's kept me at [State University] is definitely the support I get from the Native Center and encouragement from family and friends, and just their support."

Though participants spoke in greater depth of the importance of the support from the Native American Center than they did of the significance of support from personal sources, this may have been influenced by the fact that the interview was facilitated by, and conducted on the premises of, the Native Center. The act of cooperating with the Native American Center may

have brought the center to the forefront of participants' minds, resulting in the more detailed descriptions of its support than of the support from family and non-State University sources. Regardless, the fact that participants consistently referenced family and friends as helpful demonstrates the importance of personal support networks to the participants.

Students' perceptions of the positive aspects of State University

Efforts to acknowledge and support Native American students.

Two of the three students who mentioned their favorite aspects of State University expressed appreciation for the university's efforts to acknowledge Native American students and their culture. Lauren contrasted State University's Native American relations to those of other universities and colleges with which she was familiar, sharing that she enjoyed the visibility of Native American resources and culture at State University:

> Compared to the Northeast schools that I am used to, [State University] is more connected with Native Communities, and having a student center and the Pow Wow is just amazing. Other things include the lounge in the [student] center, which has tribal flags. . . I like how they are trying to improve the Indian American Studies program. It is my minor but I like how it's getting improved.

Amber added that she appreciated the availability of the Native American Center, which provided a comfortable, supportive environment for her as she focused on her studies: "What's going great for me. . . is I like being able to come to the Native Center whenever I'd like and being able to do my work and just focus on my classes." In explaining what they most appreciated about State University, both Lauren and Amber cited the resources State University afforded to them as Native American students—Lauren for cultural reasons, and Amber for academic ones.

Efforts to keep tuition and costs low.

Though only one participant directly mentioned financial matters when sharing her perspective on the benefits of State University, multiple participants earlier cited low tuition or the availability of financial aid as factors that initially attracted them to the university. Lauren, the graduate student participant, mentioned that "another thing that [State University] is doing great, especially coming from a high cost state, is keeping costs low. . ." Because of her previous experiences with colleges and universities in different regions of the country, Lauren could provide points of comparison that her fellow (undergraduate) participants could not. Perhaps her experiences affected her priorities, motivating her to associate generally low costs with the overall benefits of State University.

Students resources from across the campus.

In addition to the support afforded to them by the Native American Center, participants mentioned that they appreciated student resources from across State University's campus. Amber shared her enjoyment of non-academic services designed to benefit students holistically: "I also like being able to go to the recreation center and work on my fitness and health." Brianna, similarly, focused on how State University had helped her socially: "What's going great for me at [State University] is my grades, for one, and getting me to break out of my shell and meet new people, because I wouldn't have done that if I went somewhere else." Lauren cited the variety of support systems the university provided as helpful: "Another thing that [State University] is doing great. . . [is] supporting students in many ways for example, through D.S.S. [Disability Support Services]." Thus, while participants came to State University to undertake academic studies, the aspects of State University that they most appreciated were oftentimes not directly academic; rather than praising the strength of their major programs, participants tended to report

that they thrived when all of their needs—including social, physical, and cultural needs—were met.

Aspects of State University that students would like to improve

Diversity.

Interestingly, all three of the Native American participants who shared items for improvement at State University referenced racial and cultural diversity, but none directly mentioned increasing Native American student numbers. Instead, the participants shared their desires for State University to recruit students of color from other areas of the country (the northwest is popularly considered to be one of the whitest areas of the United States.) Amber explained "I would like to see more cultural people—people from different races because I come from a place with different types [of] races and I would like to see more of that." She believed that State University could accomplish this via

> advertising to more southern states, because that is where a lot of people who are diverse come from, and [having] more scholarships for things that help cultural students with what they depend on for their schooling, . . . [helping] them . . . to transition up here at [State University] if they decided to come up here for schooling.

Lauren concurred with Amber, stating

> I definitely agree with recruiting from other places. For example, I am the only person I know from my high school here, and everyone is missing out. I mean coming from the East coast, there is less diversity here. I know people would be interested to come. . .

Due to her work with the Alumni office, Lauren also saw a need for past students of color to remain involved at State University, sharing their stories as inspiration for future students:

> Also, I would like to see a more active alumni of color base because I volunteer for the alumni office . . . I know that they are out there, and it would be great to have alumni of color. . . being involved in coming back and talking about their experiences from [State University].

Financial concerns.

Once again, Lauren, the graduate student participant, focused on financial concerns at State University. Despite her appreciation for the university's efforts to keep costs low, she saw room for improvement in student financial matters:

> I would like to see an easier way to get instate tuition. I have lived here since 2014, and I am still considered as an out of state student. . . I would like more support for people who don't have permanent homes because I don't have a permanent home outside the residence halls. . . I feel like changing the requirements so that they are easier for people with less needs to meet. It could be easier for students to stay in school, because I was this close to not being able to go to school this semester.

One suggestion Lauren offered to ease student financial struggles was for State University to provide more work opportunities for students:

> I know it is tough in the job market right now, etc., but if more students are hired, they gain experience before going into the real world. It also reduces the cost of going here because you get paid and learn something.

Discussion

Although each participant clearly attended college to undertake academic studies, the responses given to interview questions heavily emphasized the importance of family; social, cultural, and academic support networks; and financial security. For this group of first-

generation college students, the strength and specifics of academic programs were not as frequently considered items of importance as were concerns about how the experience of attending college would impact each area of their lives. Unlike many students who attend college as a matter of course, prioritizing program details over remaining close to family members or minimizing debt, these participants were keenly aware that attending college would be a major, and potentially disruptive, undertaking. Thus, several students sought help and support from previously established sources, including their families and friends. This support likely allowed them to preserve existing identities and relationships while adding value to their lives—rather than creating new lives, these students nurtured their existing lives while adding to them.

For most participants, the cultural, social, and sometimes academic support offered by State University's Native American Center provided a bridge between the unfamiliar academic world and the highly developed personal lives of the students. (Lauren, the graduate student participant, was of course not a stranger to higher education as the remainder of the participants were; her previous academic experiences likely gave her a firmer grasp of the procedures and expectations of higher education.) Other campus resources catering to students holistically were mentioned as positive aspects of State University or reasons why students persevered in their academic courses; all participants, graduate and undergraduate students alike, attested to the importance of the non- or para-academic support provided by State University. While it is unclear how much appreciation of the holistically beneficial resources stemmed from the participants' identities as Native Americans and how much stemmed from the fact that each participant was a first-generation college student, it is readily apparent that each participant needed more than a rigorous academic program to feel—and ultimately be—successful.

In addition to maintaining existing social networks and attending to physical, emotional, social, and cultural needs via the support systems available at State University, participants frequently mentioned ways that their financial concerns were addressed. Most participants demonstrated great consciousness of the costs associated with pursuing higher education; however, when they received assurance that their financial needs would be met, they were able to focus on, or continue in, their studies. Thus, when embarking on a challenging new course of action, students needed to be assured that they had adequate resources before they could comfortably concentrate on academics.

Implications for policy and practice

Perhaps the most obvious implication for policy and practice would be that Native American students hail from a range of culturally distinct backgrounds that differ substantially from majority student populations. Recruitment and retention strategies targeting Native American students, therefore, must logically differ from those targeting students of other racial and cultural backgrounds. The results of the present study indicate that Native American students need to be assured of opportunities to stay connected to their families, communities, and cultural heritage; this can be facilitated by on-campus support venues such as Native American student unions, clubs, and cultural events. Institutions seeking to attract Native American students would also do well to make such venues visible to potential Native American students, and to employ Native American recruiters who can demonstrate an understanding of potential students' home cultures.

Directions for future research

As this present study is an exploratory one, it is limited in scope and size. Future researchers would do well to consider both male and female students' perspectives on

persistence in higher education, as strategies and success rates may differ by gender. Future studies should also seek to achieve greater depth, venturing beyond focus group interviews to gain more detailed and personal responses from participants. While this study draws much-needed attention to the disparities in enrollment and retention of first-generation Native American students, more research is needed to give a clearer picture of the problem and potential solutions to it.

Conclusion

For the participants in this study, cultural and social support were key components of perseverance and success in higher education. Though the reasons these factors were so beneficial were relatively unclear—it is difficult to determine whether cultural and social support were beneficial more because each participant had a Native American identity or because each participant was a first-generation college student—it was obvious that each student needed support in order to thrive at State University. We would therefore recommend that universities seeking to attract Native American, first-generation college students remain sensitive to the needs of the whole student—cultural, social, financial, and physical needs alike. Faculty, administrators, and staff would also do well to recognize that students may lean on existing support networks of family members and friends, as their very identities may be tied to their home communities. While it may or may not be feasible to involve students' families in their education, it would be wise for educators at very least to recognize that Native American, first-generation college students tend to depend on the support of their existing communities. If such students are placed in such a position that they are unable to derive support from sources familiar to them, universities should be prepared to offer multiple resources to help meet their needs so that they can attend, remain, graduate, and thrive.

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