Breaching the “Cultural Contract:” Committing to Cultural Sensitivity and Cultural Inclusion for Native American College Students

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A culturally responsive, respectful, and inclusive academic environment is a must for Native American students. Educational institutions must work to accommodate and allow Native American cultural traditions to become an integral part of the classroom, of teaching and learning procedures and processes, and of the student experience in general (Burk, 2007). At the colleges and universities of today, Native American students often face challenges beyond that of students from the dominant, typically White, non-Hispanic culture; these challenges are reflected in low retention and college dropout rates of Native American and Alaskan Native students nationwide (Campbell, 2007). Research has indicated that these students face challenges that can include unsupportive faculty (Jackson, 2002), a feeling of a lack of understanding and a lack of desire to understand Native American culture and the cultures of underrepresented students in general (Hornet, 1989), helplessness in connecting campus experiences to cultural and family experiences, a lack of elder representation and mentors on campus (Perry, 2002; Tierney, 1992), and academic responses that reflect attitudes that are discriminatory, culturally insensitive and/or reflective of institutionalized racism (Jackson, 2002).

There are several key areas in which modern institutions must adjust their core efforts in an attempt to greater accommodate, encourage, and support Native American students. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of existing literature and to inform educators and administrative leaders on how to best encourage Native American college student persistence within increasingly multicultural educational institutions. Recommendations for the systemic implementation of needed efforts on the behalf of the modern institution regarding Native American college students are also proposed. The core institutional efforts that are discussed include: adjusting college student recruitment efforts to cater more to the student and less to the institution and implementing orientation programs and classroom practices that ease students into the new academic climate. Additionally, institutions must take action to create ongoing, supportive faculty-student mentoring opportunities and actively seek cultural input and collaboration on curriculum changes and updates from Native American elders and cultural leaders. Implementation of these core institutional efforts assists in promoting collaboration and shared decision making between colleges and universities and Native American cultural members. In order to fully support and encourage Native American college student persistence, a mutually respectful partnership between academic institutions and Native Americans is an absolute necessity.

Transforming Beyond “Hit and Run” Recruitment

Some of the first encounters that Native American students may have with academia are with recruitment events and activities, outreach programs, and media materials. It is important for institutions to remember that many Native American students are first generation college students, may come from low-income populations, and likely have families and friends who do not have previous experience with college recruitment or post-secondary application processes (Laughlin, 2001). Native American college student recruitment must be based upon constructing considerate, ongoing partnerships and relationships with the Native community and particularly Native elders, not on filling
“minority” slots in the next entering class (Laughlin, 2001). Institutions must also recognize that on-campus recruitment fairs may not reach all potentially interested future college students. Furthermore, posting literature in public spaces or online is not a catch-all solution, particularly for Native American students because of potential difficulties with transportation and cultural apprehension about higher education (Young and Brooks, 2008). Instead of relying on the increasingly prevalent “hit and run” recruitment presentations and strategies, institutions must recognize that Native American college student recruitment should reflect and support Native culture (Laughlin, 2001). As Young and Brooks (2008) maintain, “in some [Native American] communities, the decision to pursue an advanced degree at a traditionally White university is viewed as accepting the choice to abandon one’s culture and adopt that of the White establishment” (Young and Brooks, 2008, p. 397). Given this, all institutions, not just predominantly White universities, can benefit from reaching out to future Native American college students by holding informational and recruitment events in Native communities and in cooperation with Native populations and elders when and if possible. This will likely involve establishing a relationship with Native American elders and leaders and finding a Native member to host and coordinate a college recruitment visit to a Native American territory; these efforts can help ensure that college recruitment visits are seen as invited events as opposed to acts of institutional overstepping (Porter and Waterman, 2008). One way to forge this relationship between academic institutions and Native American communities is to create a position within a college or university for an advisory role on Native American affairs and relations. This could perhaps be housed within an institution’s existing Office of Multicultural Student Affairs.

The University of Arizona currently utilizes their Special Advisor to the President on Native American Affairs to create and maintain positive working relationships and increase visibility and understanding between the University and Native American tribes (Francis-Begay, 2009). The Director of the Native American House at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign serves as a contact and source of support for not only Native American students, but also for their families (About Us: Native American House, 2010). The University of Idaho has a similar position in Multicultural Student Affairs; their Native American Tribal Liaison serves as an intermediary between nine local tribes and the University and utilizes resources at the University’s Native American Student Center for additional support (University of Idaho Native American Tribal Liaison, 2010). When colleges and universities are able and willing to create administrative and student affairs positions such as these, a mutually beneficial relationship can be forged between the University and Native American tribes. This can aid in the college recruitment process and in the facilitation of a working relationship between Native Americans and institutions of higher education.

**Paving a Smooth Transition into Academic Culture**

An institution’s recognition of Native Americans’ perceived challenges to a smooth transition from Native culture to academic culture is critical. It is important to truthfully convey that the institution values a relationship with the Native community; emphasizing this right from the start of recruitment to college student orientation programs, throughout the college student experience, and into the student’s eventual pre-and-post-graduation career search can encourage a positive, lasting, relationship between institutions and the Native community.

When Native American students apply for and are accepted into a college or university, an institution’s support and encouragement for them cannot stop there; now is the time to promote and lay the
groundwork for student success and retention. Ongoing orientation programs that feature support groups and social outings that emphasize racial and cultural consciousness and that provide information on future social, academic, and professional opportunities to frequently connect with faculty, administrators, and fellow students of color are essential (Young and Brooks, 2008). A pre-college orientation program should incorporate social, academic, and professional issues, opportunities, connections, and should facilitate social situations that aim to set Native American students at ease within the new academic climate (Young and Brooks, 2008). Part of this effort may involve representatives and leaders from the institution taking advance actions to include and feature Native elders in college orientation activities, scheduling breakout orientation sessions with fellow Native students and faculty, and making a point to discuss cultural connections which new students can make on campus and in their local community. Demonstrating that actual links and points of contact can be and are presently made between Native American culture and the academic climate is beneficial for Native American college students.

Negotiating Identity

Once Native American college students finish pre-college orientation, they are introduced to the modern college learning environment and, particularly if they are first-generation college students, they may not know what to expect regarding social interactions amongst college students or how to prepare for their first semester of undergraduate level coursework.

A critical issue in the Native American college student experience is the adjustment to the college classroom. The reality is that cultural disparities are present more than ever in the modern college classroom. This is not a problem but rather a positive and encouraging fact; the dilemma with diversity is certainly not that diversity and difference are ever present. Instead, the problem with diversity is grounded in the fact that our society is “organized in ways that encourage people to use difference to include or exclude, reward or punish, credit or discredit, elevate or oppress, value or devalue” (Johnson, 2006, p. 16). Power dynamics and hierarchical systems of privilege are at play between a university’s administration, professors, staff, students and parents. College students placed in a category of “other,” mainly underrepresented students, may feel the need to defend their ethnic and family backgrounds, previous educational experiences, and present academic achievements when they feel questioned, less than, or “othered” by members of the dominant culture (Harris, 2007, p. 59).

Native American students are sometimes faced with a difficult choice in the classroom; they may feel that they must either align with the existing social norms and dominant culture thus forfeiting their cultural beliefs, or leave the classroom, and thus the college, entirely (Burk, 2007). For Native Americans, the perception and in many cases the reality, is that postsecondary academic success “comes at the cost of family and cultural identity (The problems of minority group students in science, mathematics, and engineering, 2006, para. 15). At the higher education level, Native American students may feel forced into an unspoken agreement with college educators, a concept that Jackson (2002) terms “the cultural contract paradigm.” This paradigm is based upon the metaphorical agreement between students and teachers regarding socially acceptable classroom norms, attitudes, behaviors, and student responsibilities (Burk, 2007; Jackson, 2002). In the college classroom, underrepresented students may feel that their only choice is to accept this unspoken contract and therefore align with the socially accepted norms and behaviors that they observe in their fellow students from the dominant culture. As the cultural contract paradigm affirms, students may feel that they are
being controlled or that they must regulate their behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and opinions as part of a 
“contract” with their teachers and fellow students (Jackson, 2002). The existence of this contract is 
farther evident when Native American students are greeted with college faculty and an abundance of 
curriculum materials that represent cultural values, beliefs, and practices from the dominant culture.

Students from the dominant culture, typically White, non-Hispanic students, often have an educational advantage, given that culturally relevant course content often connects to their own worldview (Burk, 2007). Native American students do not have this luxury. Also, Native American college students must deal with cultural dissonance, classroom competition, and a lack of student collaboration, which directly contrasts with Native cultural values (Burk, 2007; Ingalls and Hammond, 2007). Native Americans may have difficulty finding faculty and fellow students who understand the need to regularly attend ceremonies and connect with other Native Americans on campus and on their home reservations (The problems of minority group students in science, mathematics, and engineering, 2006). As such, Native American college students may feel that their cultural behaviors and values do not align with the dominant White culture; this can create further cultural dissonance, also called cultural discontinuity (Cholewa and West-Olatunji, 2008; Garrett, 1995; Ledlow, 1992). A relevant issue in the multicultural college classroom is the fact that “the social organization of a traditional American classroom is primarily whole-class oriented, with a teacher who leads, instructs, and demonstrates to the whole group” and classmates who do not face one another and must speak up often in order to earn participation points and thus a good grade in the course (Tharp and Yamauchi, 1994, p. 12). This academic and social set-up in which students interrupt one another in order to voice their comments and opinions, speak at high volumes in front of and over the rest of the class, and respond quickly to topic-specific questions posed by the professor neither appeals nor speaks to Native American cultural traditions and values.

Possible examples of Native cultural behaviors and attitudes may include a preference for nonverbal over verbal communication, an immense appreciation for attentive listening, and a preference for observational learning (Burk, 2007; Coe and Palmer, 2009; Tharp, 2006). When Native American college students encounter course material that they do not understand, they work to figure it out alone first and then ask a fellow student as a last resort; asking a professor for help is an option that is least preferred and rarely pursued (McBlief, 2004). College faculty, academic advisors, and student affairs practitioners may incorrectly interpret these Native American behaviors and academic practices as uncooperative or uncommunicative behaviors that trace to a lack of student participation and low academic effort (Burk, 2007).

Engagement With Faculty and Staff Matters

Cultural discrepancies amongst college students in the classroom are echoed with the present lack of diverse faculty in academia. As students of color are becoming increasingly prevalent on American campuses, faculty of color still represent a very small percentage (Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004). As fall 2007 NCES data confirms, in degree-granting institutions in the United States, African Americans make up 13.1% of the student population but 6.35% of the faculty; Latina and Latino students make up 11.4% of the student population and 3.77% of the faculty; Asian American and Pacific Islander students make up 6.7% of the student population and 5.73% of the faculty; and Native American and Alaskan Native students make up 1% of the student population and 0.51% of the faculty (NCES, 2007a; NCES, 2007b). As these NCES statistics confirm, underrepresented students are largely interacting with
faculty whose race, ethnicity and cultural background are different from their own; this may impact their college experiences, and more specifically, their sense of belonging within the academic climate as it contributes to their ability to learn and ultimately succeed as a college student (Karp and Hughes, 2008; Pittman and Richmond, 2008).

In addition to needing faculty from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, Native American college students need faculty members and administrators who are willing to go above and beyond to support and mentor them in their lives on and off campus. Mentoring programs at colleges and universities have been shown to encourage a positive transition to college life, stimulate college student persistence, and boost student retention (Pope, 2002). In addition, faculty-student interactions positively influence college student academic accomplishments and overall student development, particularly for underrepresented students (Chang, 2005). Faculty-student mentoring partnerships provide an opportunity for faculty to illuminate the unspoken and unwritten ways of academic culture for underrepresented students (Smith, 2004). The establishment and corresponding institutional promotion of faculty-student mentoring partnerships allows for a break from the rigidity of academic culture and encourages the sharing of personal, social, cultural, and educational experiences.

Mentoring relationships can be strengthened when faculty members and students obtain mutual benefits from the mentoring process; institutions must bear this in mind when evaluating faculty activities and when considering their necessary provision of student and faculty development training sessions, professional and academic development opportunities and so forth (Lee, 1999). When a faculty-student mentoring partnership is formed between a diverse faculty member and an underrepresented student, the benefits and potentially the depth of connections are even further enhanced (Chang, 2005).

In their study of undergraduate students from 1998-2001, Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) found that active relationships and frequent interactions with faculty were strong predictors of learning for every racial group including African American, Asian and Pacific Islander, Mexican American, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, Native American, White, and multiethnic students. Interestingly, while Native American and African American students have greater faculty interactions, they enjoy fewer benefits of those interactions than other racial groups (Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004). In addition, Native American and African American students reported the highest levels of working to meet faculty expectations and working harder due to faculty feedback; for these groups, increased faculty feedback often translated to increased student effort. Research confirms that frequent faculty-student interactions can benefit students from all racial and ethnic groups with increased levels of student learning and sense of purpose (Jackson, Smith, and Hill, 2003; Kuh, 1995; Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

Effective faculty-centered support for Native American college students must also include offering and promoting opportunities for career and professional development. This will likely include providing encouragement and support, including financial assistance for Native American students to attend academic and field-specific conferences, providing hands-on, interactive research and publication opportunities, and offering assistance in forging networking connections with practitioners, faculty, administrators and other underrepresented students within their college or university and in their field (Young and Brooks, 2008).

At the heart of underrepresented student support is the notion that academic leaders, faculty, and staff
must acknowledge and confront racial and cultural issues on all levels within the institution. This necessitates offering both “a sympathetic ear . . . [and] a critical eye to racial problems of practice” on campus and beyond (Young and Brooks, 2008, p. 409). Faculty must work to actively and endlessly support Native American college students; administrators can do their part in pushing efforts that promote multiculturalism and diversity in all areas of the university including faculty and staff hiring and leadership initiatives. Academic representatives of the modern university must strive to be culturally sensitive educators and offer inclusive, unbiased learning and socialization environments (Garrett and Garrett, 1994).

Academic Curriculum Conveys an Institution’s Commitment to Multiculturalism

One of the main responsibilities that faculty and administrative leadership have in supporting and connecting with Native American students is in addressing course offerings and the college curriculum. Academic curricula that does not thoroughly overview and address racial and cultural issues sends the message that the institution does not value the beliefs, attitudes, shared meanings, and traditions of cultures outside the dominant culture (Young and Brooks, 2008). Multicultural examples and ways of knowing must be infused into college course curricula including class and online materials, course assignments, group projects, and exams (Burk, 2007). Multicultural issues cannot be inserted as basic additions to existing syllabi, courses, materials, and lessons, but rather should be steeped into all areas of the educational curriculum. The introduction of cultural coursework and reading of texts as supplementary material is not enough. The Native American experience and Native culture should not be an added thread placed in a footnote in the book of academia, but instead woven into every chapter. Educators must work to create regular opportunities where tribal leaders and elders can come to campus and be included as part of the academic curriculum. Educators and administrators must take on the initiative to tread beyond the college campus and the nearest research site. This necessitates making an effort to get to know and connect with local Native American tribes, request Native American elders’ permission to attend tribal school board or council meetings, and become educated on current Native American cultural and political issues (Sparks, 2000). Breaking down the commonly accepted walls of confusion about Native American culture and the borders of bewilderment about Indigenous traditions and values allows for streams of understanding, acceptance, and knowledge to seep through. Taking these initiatives on allows Native culture to become an integral part of the scholarly community and thus promotes an ongoing dialogue that encourages a greater understanding of diverse multicultural values, beliefs, and global views (Morgan, 2010; Rolo, 2009; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper, 2003).

A Synergized Effort: Tohono O’odham Nation and Pima Community College

Campbell’s (2007) research into the partnership between the Tohono O’odham Nation and Pima Community College in Tucson, AZ examines the positive characteristics of an educational initiative that places a multiculturally infused curriculum at top priority. As part of the relationship between Pima Community College and the Tohono O’odham Nation, a revised plan for college curriculum development and delivery was enacted. Course readings were added to the college curriculum that centered on Native American elders, general concepts of culture, Native American, Alaskan Native, and Papago/Tohono O’odham culture, as well as on issues pertaining to education and language (Campbell, 2007). As college faculty became motivated to include Native American perspectives and cultural themes in their curriculum and as part of their syllabi, the partnership between the Tohono
O’odham Nation and Pima Community College allowed for an important realization on behalf of the faculty; it is an issue that academic leaders at other institutions must tackle as well. The conclusion was that it is not enough to merely inject Native American cultural representations, stories, and characters into existing educational curricula; active and ongoing efforts must be made to ensure that the material is culturally accurate and respectful (Campbell, 2007). Simply referring to cultural artifacts, impactful Native American elders and leaders, creation stories, ceremonies, and traditions does not ensure that these cultural artifacts and leaders are accurately depicted. As such, in the restructuring and reevaluation of curricular initiatives and materials, a partnership must be launched between institutions and Native Americans in an effort to ensure that course materials are reflecting Native American culture in a respectful, accurate, and authentic manner (Campbell, 2007).

As the partnership between the Tohono O’odham Nation and Pima Community College demonstrates, a consultation over curricular changes can best be accomplished with actual members of the cultural group who are represented in the literature that the curriculum utilizes (Campbell, 2007). In addition, culturally sensitive research on past and present Native American cultures and experiences needs to be performed and distributed; this necessitates an active, inquisitive dialogue between Native Americans, researchers, and educators.

The collaboration between the Tohono O’odham Nation and Pima Community College reveals and Lundberg (2007) concludes that the level to which an institution demonstrates that they value diversity on campus is important as it shifts some of the burden for student success from the student to the institution (Campbell, 2007). Native American students form their opinions on the level to which a university values diversity based upon student interactions and communications with institutional members, campus programs, groups, policies, and student-based services (Lundberg, 2007). Additionally, an institution’s promotion and encouragement of diversity can be the strongest predictor of underrepresented students’ learning (Lundberg, 2007). Academic leaders, faculty, administrators, and staff should ensure that diversity and respectful, accurate cultural depictions are reflected in all areas of their institution; this includes admissions and hiring decisions, financial aid awards and scholarships, activity, club, and course offerings, course curricula, campus media, and academic leadership. Native American students need campus events and programs that recognize their culture and thus convey that their beliefs are valued. They can no longer be “the unknown minority” greeted by college faculty, administrators, and students with incomprehension and confusion about Native American culture (McBlief, 2004). The institutions that most effectively demonstrate that they value diversity and multiculturalism are those that encourage and reflect cultures routinely beyond the dominant culture (Lundberg, 2007). Today’s institutions must take on the important responsibility of ensuring that their students succeed; a large component of that points to actively valuing, accurately depicting, and encouraging diversity.

Promoting Cultural Inclusiveness and Sensitivity is an Institutional Responsibility

Issues of inclusiveness, equal participation, and open and ongoing communications between institutional members are important determinants of college student persistence, student success, and student retention and graduation rates (Jackson, Smith, and Hill, 2003). Systemic implementation of core efforts to encourage Native American college student persistence should incorporate institutional changes that promote inclusiveness at all stages in the college student experience. As this paper advocates, these institutional changes should be applied to college student recruitment, orientation,
teaching and learning initiatives, curricular updates, collaboration and consultation with cultural members, diverse faculty and staff representation, and college student professional development. The sphere of responsibility for diversity rests on the shoulders of the institution (Fox, 2005). It is the institution that must take on the responsibility of valuing diversity and multiculturalism in an effort to support and aid in the persistence of Native American college students; the responsibility cannot be that of the student alone. In the quest to improve Native American college student persistence, institutions must become culturally sensitive, culturally inclusive, and willing to engage in an active dialogue with students and cultural members about how best to serve the needs of underrepresented students at all stages in the college student experience.

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