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Native American College Student Transition Theory

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This article explores the issues Native American college students face during their transition into higher education. Current student development theories do not fully capture the unique challenges and needs of the Native American population. A new perspective is offered by way of modifying aspects of existing theories, such as Chickering's (1969) Identity Theory, Horse's (2001) Perspective on American Indian Identity Development, and Schlossberg's (1995) Transition Theory. The Native American College Student Transition Theory is a new model, which allows the student affairs professional to envision growth as would Native American culture—in a circular fashion. Six developmental stages were created to better represent the Native American student transition into higher education.

Native American students are the most underrepresented population in higher education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). In fact, when compared to other minority groups, Native Americans have the lowest representation and retention rates (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Furthermore, Native American students make up only 1% of the student population in higher education (Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2004, as cited in Shotton, Yellowfish, & Citrón, 2010). Such low retention rates are due to several reasons, many of which are intertwined with the tragic history of colonization and Native American boarding schools (Waterman, 2011). The underrepresentation of Native American students in higher education is a complex issue involving several factors, such as lack of financial support and campus resources, cultural beliefs, social stigmas, and stereotypes. While there are several student development theories regarding White, African American, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino/a populations, research of the Native American student population is lacking. Native American students' transition to higher education differs from that of students belonging to other minority groups and the predominately White mainstream culture. Therefore, a new model is needed to better represent Native American students in higher education.

Current Developmental Theories

Horse's (2001) Perspective on American Indian Identity Development examines Native American consciousness (as cited in Evans Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). His theory examines the ways in which Native American individuals develop in their diverse identities, which include: knowledge of one's native language, genealogical

heritage, respecting traditions, the degree to which individuals see themselves as Indian, and being recognized as a member of an official Indian tribe. While Horse's model is perhaps the most thorough regarding Native American identity, it does not fully capture the challenges many Native American students face when transitioning into higher education and mainstream culture. The stages of Horse's Perspective on American Indian Identity Development are broad and focus on ethnic identity development, which is only one of several challenges Native American students must deal with when entering college life.

Chickering's (1969) Identity Development Theory can be applied to several different student populations. When applied to Native American students; however, changes must be made to some of the vectors, such as *moving through autonomy toward interdependence* and *developing mature interpersonal relationships* (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). The *moving through autonomy toward interdependence* vector may not suit Native American students, as their culture instills the importance of interdependent relationships at an early age (Chickering, 1969, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Thus, this vector is not one to be reached, but rather, Native American students must learn how to navigate a largely independent culture when moving to and living on college campuses. The ways in which Native American students relate to such developmental stages is simply different from that of mainstream culture. Modifications can be made to better represent the Native American student population, which in turn, will help student affairs administrators meet their unique needs.

Schlossberg's (1995) Transition Theory is widely applicable; it can be used to study Native American student transition into college life. Many of the factors relating to transition are useful and important when guiding Native American students in their first year of college. In particular, *self* and *support* are factors which are important to Native American student retention (Schlossberg, 1995, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). The level of financial, family, and institutional support influences a student's decision to persist to graduation or leave college. Furthermore, the characteristics a student brings with him or her to the institution, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, culture, and spirituality have a large impact on a student's experience during college.

Several development theories cannot be fully applied to Native American students due to the fact that their cultures differs greatly from that of mainstream culture and other minority groups on campus. While Chickering's (1969) Identity Development Theory, Schlossberg's (1995) Transition Theory, and Horse's (2001) Perspective on American Indian Identity Development are useful theories, none capture the critical issues of Native American students' transitions into college life. Aspects of Chickering's, Schlossberg's, and Horse's models are combined to develop a theory which represents the Native American student population and the challenges they face in their transition and journey toward degree obtainment.

Native American College Student Transition Theory

Unlike several theories which use a stepwise model to explain development, the stages of the Native American College Student Transition Theory are circular. A circular model reflects Native American orientation of space and time. Moreover, the circle is a

symbol of power in Native American culture (Garret & Carroll, 2000). Viewing Native American student development in such a way will allow the student affairs administrator to get a glimpse of how students from Native culture think and learn. Students may start and end at different points on the Native American College Student Transition circle, but the stages are in a fixed order. Students also may experience the stages of the theory more than once as they continue to develop and mature. Furthermore, as a student matures they may continue to develop within the circle, but may have a strong establishment in a particular stage, in which case the number of stages would decrease and the circle may shrink.

When developing a model to represent Native American students' development and transition into college, it is important to remember history associated with their cultures. According to Evans et al. (2010), we need to "recognize the role of colonization" (pp. 266-267) and its effect on the Native American view of the educational system. Many individuals may not trust higher education institutions due to the history of boarding schools, in which Native Americans were forced to adhere to White culture (Waterman, 2011). If millennial Native American students have grown up hearing their parents or grandparents speak negatively about the educational systems in the United States, they may have acquired distrust as well. Therefore, *Remembering History* is the first stage for young Native American students. They must overcome the negative views of higher education which individuals in their lives may hold. Moreover, it is difficult for them to leave a closely-knit community. This first stage of transitioning into college life is about the views of the individual's community. The perspective of the student's community members, whether positive or negative, has an impact on his or her decision to pursue a college degree. Therefore, an individual may need to start developing a more independent way of thinking before he or she even enters college to break free from potential negative views of the higher education system.

The next stage a Native American student experiences during his or her first year of college is *Learning to Navigate*. The way in which Native American students develop relationships is essentially reversed in regards to Chickering's (1969) *moving through autonomy toward interdependence* vector. Connection to family and community, and a sense of responsibility to both, are values which Native American culture places great importance (LaFromboise, Heyle, & Ozer, 1990, as cited in Shotton, Yellowfish, & Citrón, 2010). The Native American student must learn to navigate through an independent culture, where importance is placed on the self, rather than the group as a whole. Students might feel isolated or that people on campus do not care about them. It is important to have support systems in place for Native American students as they transition.

The third stage, in which the student experiences a shift in thinking, is *Moving towards Independence*. Before attending college, Native American students are accustomed to living with others, sharing experiences with community members, and being immersed in their own culture. The campus environment may look vastly different from the student's upbringing. The student must learn to think more independently and explore new perspectives offered by differing cultures, such as new religious or spiritual views, values, and relationship dynamics. During this stage, the student may experience cultural dissonance, where they do not necessarily align with what others perceive or

expect. The student must decide to either adhere to mainstream culture, or think independently from the predominately White culture and maintain their cultural identity. According to Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, and Nitzarim (2013), the amount of social support Native American students receive from their families and communities is positively correlated with persistence to degree completion. Faculty and student affairs professionals must recognize Native American students' need to stay connected with family while away at college and the importance of cultural practices; understanding that Native American students' lifestyles may not look as independent as that of other students'.

The next stage Native American college students experience is *Building Trust and Relationships*. They must learn to live in an independent culture, but they also must learn to incorporate their interdependent roots to their academic experiences within mainstream culture. According to Burack, Covarriubius, & Fryberg (2013), Native American students perform at a higher level when they feel as though they can trust their instructors. Therefore, it is important that Native American students develop strong relationships during their first year of college. Student affairs administrators and faculty can ensure professional trusting relationships exist by reaching out to students, attending cultural events, and connecting students with resources, such as Native American student organizations or other common interest groups.

The fifth stage the Native American student experiences when they enter college is *Re-establishing Identity & Reaching Out*. Many Native American students experience pressure placed on them by their friends and families to stay close to home (Thompson, 2012). Students may feel as though they need to abandon their culture in order to pursue higher education. Once students feel more comfortable on campus and begin to build relationships with peers and faculty, they may seek out resources focused on Native American culture, such as a student organization or culture center for Native American students.

The last stage a Native American student experiences is *Developing a Vision for the Future*. Making career decisions may be more difficult for some Native American students. A potential challenge for students is the need to believe they can be successful in their chosen career field. Native American students develop a purpose or a vision for their future differently from students belonging to mainstream culture. Native American students tend to choose careers which will reflect cultural values, such as humility and charity, which often conflicts with the mainstream values of prestige, independence, and competition (Turner & Lapan, 2003; Hansen, Scullard, & Haviland, 2000). In the Native American culture, emphasis is also placed on giving back to their communities when they graduate. Native American students are able to thrive when they have found an academic and career plan which allows them to incorporate their cultural values and beliefs.

Best Practices

Partnerships with Tribal Colleges

In order to reach out to Native American students and ensure their success, student affairs professionals and faculty members must implement programs to support

students in academic and life pursuits. According to Guillory (2013), one way to implement such programs is for public higher education institutions to collaborate with Tribal Colleges (TCUs; as cited in Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). TCUs focus on preserving indigenous cultures by infusing academic curriculum with the history and languages of the cultures (Guillory, 2013, as cited in Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). By placing emphasis on students' culture, TCUs ease the transition into college life because students are not forced to adhere to differing cultural norms. Many TCUs offer two-year degrees, with fewer granting baccalaureate and master's degrees (Stein, 2009, as cited in Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Public higher education institutions can partner with TCUs by developing programs in which students complete two years at their TCU and then transfer to complete their degree. According to Martin (2005), "per-student funding is less than that for a typical nontribal community college" (as cited in Waterman, 2009, p. 159). Through collaboration programs, public universities and TCUs are able to exchange much needed information and monetary resources (Guillory, 2013, as cited in Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013).

Cultural Centers

The University of Oklahoma, University of Montana, and University of Wisconsin are examples of public higher education institutions that have served Native American students well by incorporating cultural centers and traditions into campus life (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintrón, 2010; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). The University of Oklahoma's Jim Thorpe Multicultural Center (JTMC), originally built to serve the Native American population, grew to include all minority student populations on campus (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintrón, 2010). The JTMC was created to give students a physical place where they could make their traditional foods, gather for activities and student organization meetings, and display accomplishments made by members of their culture. Creating a physical space for Native American students is important because it allows them to remain connected to their culture. A building can serve as a retreat for students, allowing them to gather with other students for support and encouragement throughout their academic journey.

Integrate Cultural Practices into the Campus Culture

The Universities of Montana and Wisconsin both encourage Native American students to practice their cultural traditions on campus by allowing a ritual called Smudging (Martin & Thunder, 2013, as cited in Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Smudging is a ceremony in which the smoke of burning sage, sweet grass, and cedar is used to purify a person or place (Martin & Thunder, 2013, as cited in Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). When students arrive on campus, they are permitted to practice this ceremony in designated areas, even though burning candles or incense is generally not allowed (Martin & Thunder, 2013, as cited in Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Incorporating policies on campus that permit Native American students to perform such cultural traditions creates an inclusive environment and encourages students to remain connected to their culture, though they may be far from their communities.

Many TCUs and public higher education institutions have given their Native American students a larger voice on campus by ensuring that programs specific to their culture exist on campus. Faculty and student affairs professionals can help Native American students feel comfortable on campus by learning about Native cultures and traditions; thus, creating an atmosphere where diversity is celebrated. By advocating for Native American students' right to cultural practices, we can also help them in their academic and social lives; therefore, raising retention rates.

Conclusion

The Native American student population is almost invisible in higher education. Little research has been conducted to assist Native American students in their transition to college life. Native American students face unique challenges, many of which begin even before making the decision to attend college. The history of Native American colonization and boarding schools may hold students back due to distrust of the higher educational system (Waterman, 2011). The Native American College Student Transition Theory provides a framework for student affairs administrators and faculty to better understand the challenges Native American students experience during their first year of college. This theory helps educators and staff view development as would Native American culture—in a circular model.

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