
The Most Forgotten Group: American Indian Students

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1 Introduction

Due to the unprecedented events caused by COVID-19, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) encounter painful challenges and disruptive changes affecting student success. TCUs have provided educational opportunities for American Indian students aligning to the goals of economic development, job training, cultural preservation, and community involvement. American Indian students consist a small percentage of the student body and often experience inadequate support for their cultural identities. Despite these shortcomings, TCUs are truly community institutions that empower American Indian students striving to receive education.

2 Impacts of Remote Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global crisis in higher education, in which tuition-driven institutions had taken a massive loss in student numbers resulting in major cutbacks on income and revenue (Brown & Raaper, 2020). Colleges and universities have shifted to new structures of online learning and teaching. Its implications have long-term impacts on students such as risking their mental wellbeing and lack of motivation. Moreover, the challenges of remote learning had overlooked the student experience and support needed belonging in various socioeconomic backgrounds (Brown & Raaper, 2020). According to Harper (2020), COVID-19 has exacerbated the racial tensions that had been in existence for many generations. Our political climate became the mechanism of social division and we are now more divided at any other time in modern American history. The financial support for Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), particularly TCUs, that have been extremely underfunded and are among the poorest in American higher education. Students from different socioeconomic backgrounds do not have the same access to technology, especially in the poorest and most remote areas (Harper, 2020). In addition, these technological resources and trainings are costly to implement. COVID-19 has intensified these issues and the racial inequalities were exposed under those elements.

3 Challenges

According to Cunningham and Parker (1998), TCUs face a series of issues including the lack of funding for American Indian students, college readiness, poor facilities, unsupportive institutional climates, and most especially the low-income levels of the student population who are living in reservations. Reservations are usually located in the most impoverished and remote areas of the United States with the lowest unemployment rate as high as 86% (Cunningham & Parker, 1998). Because of these economic and social circumstances, the usage of distance learning is very common among American Indian students.

Moreover, these communities are plagued by alcohol, substance abuse, suicide, and serious health problems resulting to poor academic achievement. According to May (1992), alcoholism and diabetes are the leading health problems among these tribal communities. Due to these conditions, younger generation of students often turn to gang culture in search of their identity and belonging (Williams, 2016). One example is the major health concern of alcohol and drug abuse among American Indian students. According to Duran et al. (2020), alcohol and substance abuse starts prematurely among American Indian students on or near reservations. Thus, negative consequences have become more complex by the time they arrive college. Developing a consistent understanding of alcohol use among these student groups in particular, remains as a challenge in higher education. Policies on substance abuse vary in American colleges and universities and less likely to have more prohibition on campus (Lenk et al., 2015). This caused a trickle-down effect on tribal communities and in the context of TCUs, enforcement of policies on access to alcohol and illegal procurement have been largely absent.

Another example is the lack of training and opportunities to learn more about American Indian students. Raucci et al. (2016) stated that student affairs professionals have insufficient knowledge and education on this particular group. Therefore, it not only impacts American Indian students but also impacts across all cultural and ethnic lines. Due to the limited research on these students, practitioners are not given sustainable information or specific training on best recruiting or retaining practices to support this population (Raucci et al., 2016). Possible reason of lesser expertise in American Indian students is the lack of interest in such topic that conferences or training modules are not widely available to gain a broader audience.

4 Support Measures

TCUs continue to provide access to American Indian students who are unable to leave the reservation and continue to persist toward achieving their degrees. American Indian students have less resources or tools that hinder their participation and persistence in their studies. During the pandemic, TCUs forgave student debt, paid internet bills, and provided

free laptops for students who cannot afford or have immediate access to these devices (Minnesota House of Representatives, 2019). Through the help of the CARES Act, it supported the TCUs and students in great financial need while balancing the hurdles of online learning.

TCUs have fostered conducive environments and created institutional retention strategies to bolster the success for American Indian students. As a first example, families and home communities are fundamental in American Indian students' overall college experience (WICHE, 2021). It is important that as an ongoing support for them, they must remain connected to their culture and home communities while enrolled in college. Allowing them to return home and partake in traditional ceremonies gained a source of support that may not exist in other campus setting. Another example of TCU's success strategy is providing dedicated spaces on campus such as cultural centers to foster a sense of belonging in the community (WICHE, 2021). This gives an opportunity for students to engage positively in the campus environment while being reflective of their own cultural and identity development. Within these spaces, peer mentoring has a strong association with student success especially among peers of the same race (Gloria & Kurpius, 2001). Strong faculty-student interactions have been evident to positive results for American Indian students. Faculty plays a key role in equipping supportive teaching environments to enhance a motivating campus experience. Creating a diverse faculty body has resulted in successful student support practice in TCUs, which became extremely beneficial to its mission.

5 Student Outcomes

American Indian students have the highest dropout rates and lowest educational attainment, especially during their first year of college (Cunningham & Parker, 1998). These academically unprepared students are also forced to deal with family responsibilities that prevents them from completing their undergraduate degrees. Paying for their education is also a significant hurdle because they have less access to receiving financial aid, with little or no funding from the state or other institutions at all (Cunningham & Parker, 1998). Another barrier is the shortage of instructors and no access to technology or online learning materials in rural communities, especially affecting students with disabilities (Bear, 2021). Classroom spaces are limited, library collections are small, and dilapidated school facilities (Cunningham & Parker, 1998). These work environment conditions and inadequate funding becomes a major source of high faculty turnover and thus, negatively impacting student support.

Harrington (2012) pointed out that "American Indian students are retained and graduated from colleges far below their non-Native peers" (p. 1). The pressing issue of student attrition in TCUs has left a negative impact on their campus communities because of the lack of cross-cultural adaptation and educational disparity (Harrington, 2012). The low number of graduation rates are due to inadequate academic preparation, lack of

administrative support, poor student relations with the institution, and faculty misconceptions and stereotyping.

6 Conclusion

Student success in higher education requires collaboration with many sectors and groups to assimilate a college environment that will strongly encourage American Indian students to plan and persist in completing their degrees. Colleges and universities should work with local tribal governments and be involved in community outreach programs to establish relationships with TCUs. Facilitating student transfers and providing opportunities for student and faculty exchange programs will improve the college experience for this student population. Educating faculty and student affairs practitioners about the Native culture improves the campus environment in an effort to better serve American Indian students in their academic journey. Moreover, commitment to Native research addresses this lack of awareness and improves student support. With this imperative need to reach a wider audience, American Indian students have been forgotten and deserves global recognition that has been a centralized issue in higher education.

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