
Incorporating High-Impact Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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1 Introduction

Learning Communities (LC) as a High-Impact Practice (HIP), while incorporating cultural identity is a strong contributor of college persistence for American Indian (AI) students at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). Guillory (2009) pointed out that ‘social support on campus was critical to [student] persistence’ (p. 18). Providing cultural centers for AI students are important to counter the negative effects of isolation and being away from home while living on campus (Guillory, 2009). Maintaining a strong connection with their community and indigenous-based learning leads to increased persistence and educational attainment. As a recommendation for student affairs professionals, seeking research and qualitative studies on centered topics relating to TCUs and AI students are imperative to best serve this unique group. Their exclusion has been kept in silence for decades and a culturally inclusive approach will result in their success.

2 Overview of Site and Students

TCUs empower students through their cultural development and respect for their identity. Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC) is a tribal college in North Dakota with a mission that is driven by the spirit of multiculturalism and active language preservation to maintain a complex and diverse language background (TMCC, 2010). The academic programs that are offered include Associate of Arts, Sciences, and Bachelor Degrees in Education, Language, Engineering, and Business Management (TMCC, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the existing hardships that AI students had to endure. The widening educational gap among the AI student population is over 14% who have a college degree, along with the digital divide challenges that impact their graduation (CCSE, 2019). In an effort to address the current predicament caused by COVID-19, TMCC received funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) to provide remote learning opportunities, tuition assistance, and

equipment to help the students succeed in college (AIHEC, 2021). Students were provided laptops, free internet utilities, food, classroom upgrades, sanitation products and infiltration systems to enforce safety measures. However, their ongoing needs continue to persist such as emotional and mental health concerns, limited grant period, staff shortage, and food insecurities.

As an evolving student affairs practitioner, my point of interest in this unique student group has resonated deeply with me because of the real-life problems they experience that deserve more attention and critical action. These students remain as a forgotten group in research that exacerbates the lack of awareness for their needs. Practitioners are not given adequate training and information to best recruit and support AI students, thus failing to bridge a connection across all academia.

3 Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice

HIPs remain as a stronghold in postsecondary education that improves retention and graduation rates. According to Sweat et al. (2013), HIPs have been proven successful to racial and ethnic minorities, particularly AI students who are in the lowest depths of academic hurdles. As an example, HIPs are inextricably linked to student engagement at TMCC. The institution provides a setting for AI students to establish learning-centered relationships with their cohorts as well as receiving full access to academic support (TMCC, 2010). In the context of AI students, LC is a powerful educational practice that helps students to be involved in the subject matter consisting of various perspectives (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

According to Tinto (1998), LC is a conjunction of courses taken together that revolves around a central theme that leads to higher levels of cognitive development and student performance. Students in the same classes allow them to bond with one another, thus having a better college or university experience. The resilience of TMCC through the pandemic has been evident by historically serving the most geographically remote areas that no other postsecondary institutions has ever made (Stull et al., 2015). AI students benefit from community-based learning from TMCC's academic programs that concentrate on indigenous knowledge to preserve culture and identity (CCSE, 2019). Indigenous values and beliefs are salient to these students and it has been reflected through the curriculum and academic programs offered by TMCC. In addition, AI students achieve success by partaking in culture-centric pedagogy while taking advantage of distance learning opportunities that are available to them (Windchief & Joseph, 2015). Majority of these students have other obligations that add to their academic rigor, and online learning offsets that during COVID-19.

As a practitioner, LC as a practice can be implemented through diversity-

related course content that are highly effective in ethnic minority engagement (Sweat et al., 2013). AI students thrive in nuanced learning systems and curriculum strategies focusing on linguistics and business programs that improve the wellbeing of their community (Stull et al., 2015). In order to use this effective practice in tribal colleges, creating a structured curriculum will form a solid foundation to shape a meaningful learning experience for AI students. Cultural standards for the curriculum must be set to prepare instructors, while reinforcing the integrity of the overall cultural knowledge and heritage that students will extremely benefit from. Faculty members must demonstrate a commitment and in-depth knowledge on culturally responsive teaching as agents of change. Moreover, making use of appropriate modern tools and technology will help students maintain close family ties and connections to home since most TCUs are located on reservations.

However, the limitations for this practice remain as an inherent challenge for students. They have limited access to these advanced technologies that could cause them to withdraw from their classes. Data shows that over a third of first-generation students are working with dependents who solely rely on them, making it difficult to focus on their studies (CCSE, 2019). In addition, students and faculty members have unreliable transportation to travel to school resulting in a decline in class attendance and decreased flexibility. According to Heitkamp et al. (2015), distance education programs are only efficient if they cater to the needs of students and are culturally responsive. AI students are more likely to experience isolation and lack of motivation due to these limitations, thus providing a space where they can congregate and develop communities is critical for their retention.

4 Outcomes

Participation in LC is a significant driving force for student engagement, especially for AI students. According to Sweat et al. (2013), a culture-centric academic content allows AI students to remain attached to their cultural roots and feel appreciated within the institution. Students from this population develop a sense of collective identity, community connections, and comfort in the university environment (Izzo, 2018). In addition, AI students are most successful and persist academically if they are immersed in their home culture and dominant society. Thus, the application of LC on this particular student group plays an influential role on their cultural identity development. Integrating student collaborative learning and cultural tradition brings a heightened sense of self-worth and identity achievement (Heitkamp et al., 2015).

LC facilitates a positive cognitive pattern for AI students. TCUs commitment to cultural preservation is fundamental to its overall mission that takes a holistic approach to AI students' sense of belonging. Study shows that

their decision to attend a tribal college are predicated from a positive learning environment that is grounded on native language and values (CCSE, 2019). Thus, this creates a safe and welcoming place for students building authentic connections with their peers and instructors. The conditional effects of student-faculty interaction are strong resulting in a pleasant college experience. The campus climate in TCUs provides a sense of community and encouraging place in AI students' identity formation.

According to Tinto and Russo (1998), student outcomes from LC present positive results such as: 1.) students creating a network of supportive peer groups off-campus; 2.) more engaged in class activities; 3.) spending more time and effort in their studies; and 4.) learning adaptability. Moreover, LC is about student development with respect to shared learning and support for one another. Thus, the implementation of this practice in TCUs ultimately impacts student persistence to degree completion (Lamb, 2009). These strong partnerships at TCUs reflect cultural ties among Native people and within this supportive environment, AI students succeed.

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