

This chapter explains how and why Tribal College and University (TCU) enrollment positively influences Native American student persistence in mainstream four-year institutions. It also explores existing partnerships between TCUs and mainstream four-year institutions that could help to improve the transfer process, and overall, Native American student persistence. Ways in which academic and student affairs can partner creatively are emphasized throughout.

The Influence of Tribal Colleges and Universities on Native American Student Persistence

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In the United States, Native Americans have the lowest educational attainment of any racial or ethnic group (Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, n.d.). Their high school dropout rate is double the national average, and their high school graduation rate is 49.3%, which is much lower than the rate for White students at 76.2% (Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, n.d.). Additionally, in 2017, only 16% of Native Americans have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to almost 42% of White Students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). Fortunately, research shows that Native American students who attend a Tribal College or University (TCU), before attending a mainstream four-year institution, are more likely to receive their bachelor's degrees (Makomenaw, 2010; Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005; Vandever, 2017). Specifically, 38% of Native American students receive a bachelor's degree from a mainstream four-year institution after attending a TCU (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005), whereas approximately 10%

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of Native Americans attain bachelor's degrees on average (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018).

This chapter discusses how and why TCU enrollment improves Native American student persistence in mainstream four-year institutions, as well as explores existing partnerships between TCUs and mainstream four-year institutions that could help to improve the transfer process, and overall, Native American student persistence. First, I will provide a brief history of TCUs. Then, I will compare how Native American students are served at mainstream four-year institutions and at TCUs. Based on this comparison, I will suggest ways in which mainstream four-year institutions can learn from TCUs and their mechanisms of Native student support. Then, I will discuss existing partnerships between mainstream four-year institutions and TCUs, as well as describe considerations that should be made before establishing new partnerships. Finally, I will conclude by recommending additional ways in which mainstream four-year institutions can support Native American students, largely through the efforts of academic and student affairs professionals.

History of Tribal Colleges and Universities

Europeans began to infringe on Native American education as early as the 1500s (Shotton, Low, & Waterman, 2013). In the late 1700s, colleges including Dartmouth College, the College of William and Mary, and Harvard University were allocated funds for establishing a Native American education system (Gasman, Nguyen, & Conrad, 2015). Unfortunately, as a result of that system, many Native Americans lost their lives from illness and isolation (Gasman et al., 2015; Shotton et al., 2013). In the 1800s, the federal government seized responsibility of Native American education and established boarding schools, which smothered Native American culture and lead to the colonization of their land (Adams, 1988, 1995; Carney, 1999; Gasman et al., 2015; Shotton et al., 2013). These boarding schools forbade the use of tribal languages, and instead of fostering Native American educational

success, the schools trained Native Americans for manual labor (Gasman et al., 2015).

Moving forward to the 1900s, Native Americans were granted full citizenship by the federal government, increasing funds for Native American education and decreasing Native American autonomy (Gasman et al., 2015).

Over time, Native American autonomy increased as a result of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, the Indian Education Act of 1972, and the Education Assistance Act of 1975, all of which promoted Native American self-determination and self-governance (Shotton et al., 2013). With this autonomy, many Native Americans expressed the need for institutions dedicated to uplifting and honoring their traditions and values. Stanley Red Bird, an elder of the Lakota Tribe, stated, “The people needed a new institution to work directly with the people...one that would provide local leaders who were well educated and committed to living here and running their own institutions” (Boyer, 2002, p. 13). Empowered to serve the needs of their community, the first tribal college, Diné College, formerly Navajo Community College, was established in 1968 (Shotton et al., 2013). Here, elders taught courses on tribal languages, culture, and history, working to undo the damaging effects of colonization on their community (Boyer, 1997; Gasman et al., 2015; Stein, 2009).

After witnessing the success of the first TCU, other tribes sought to create their own; however, many tribes did not have reliable sources of funding, forcing instruction to take place in “abandoned houses, trailers, old storefronts, condemned buildings, barracks, and warehouses, or any structure where students and teachers could gather for class” (Guillory & Ward, 2007, p. 124). TCU funding improved after Congress passed the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act in 1978, which led to increased stability in existing tribal colleges, as well as the creation of new tribal colleges (Gasman et al., 2015; Shotton et al., 2013). As more TCUs were being established, Native American leaders were learning how to establish and run TCUs on the job (Boyer, 2002). Today, there are 35 accredited tribal

colleges that are spread across the nation (American Indian College Fund, 2019; Penn GSE CMSI- MSI Directory, 2018).

Native American Students and Mainstream Four-Year Institutions

Due to their historic relationship with Eurocentric education, some Native American families distrust mainstream four-year institutions, as they can ignore “cultural traditions, norms, and perspectives of other racial and cultural groups” (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005, p. 52). Because these institutions represent European needs and values, such as independence and detachment (Shotton et al., 2013), Native American students and their families can see enrollment in a mainstream four-year institution as an act of disloyalty to their culture (Schmidt & Akande, 2011), which values interdependence and family. If Native American students leave their community to attend a mainstream four-year institution, they often experience isolation, hostility, and racism from both their classmates and their professors (American Indian College Fund, 2019; Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Lin, LaCounte, & Elder, 1998; Perry, 2002; Shotton, 2008). This contributes to the narrative that mainstream four-year institutions do not support Native students, which leads to low Native persistence rates. In addition to their Eurocentric curriculum, mainstream four-year institutions historically lack faculty of Native American descent (Schmidt & Akande, 2011), which can further discourage Native American students from attending. It is also recommended that they employ more Native academic and student affairs professionals to combat Eurocentric student services and programming at mainstream four-year institutions (American Indian College Fund, 2019).

In addition to discrimination against Native students and a general lack of knowledge on Native culture, mainstream four-year institutions do not address the post-traditional nature of Native American students. The term post-traditional is used to replace non-traditional because the non-traditional student population actually represents the majority of the college

student population and should not be referred to as an exception to the higher education system (Smith, 2013). Native American students tend to have minimal financial support, work while attending school, care for dependents, delay their initial college enrollment, require academic remediation, and be first-generation, and low income (American Indian College Fund, 2012; Lee, 2014; Nelson, 2015), categorizing them as a post-traditional student population (Santiago, Taylor, & Calderón Galdeano, 2016). In fact, Native Americans are over two times more likely to live in poverty (26%) than the general population (12%), which can affect students in many ways (Villa, n.d.). For example, some Native American students may not be able to afford transportation repairs or daycare, both of which can influence Native American dropout rates from mainstream four-year institutions (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Poverty can also lead to “alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence,” all of which plague the Native American community at staggering rates (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 23).

Finally, the learning style promoted by mainstream four-year institutions is Eurocentric. Most instruction in these institutions revolves around reading, writing, and math; whereas many Native American communities learn through hands-on instruction and oral history. Based on their experiences, Native American students can see the curriculum, instructors, and instruction of mainstream four-year institutions as “fragmented and unfamiliar” (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005, p. 52), which can negatively impact students both psychologically and academically. In sum, due to their Eurocentric nature, mainstream four-year institutions are failing Native American students, evident in the community’s low rates of educational attainment.

Native American Students and Tribal Colleges and Universities

The mission of TCUs is to “rebuild, reinforce and explore traditional tribal cultures, using designed curricula and institutional settings” and “address Western models of learning by providing

traditional disciplinary courses that are transferable to four-year institutions” (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 1999, p. A-3). Therefore, they benefit Native American students in many ways and the skills gained by their students can help them in their transition to a mainstream four-year institution, should they wish to continue their education. First, TCUs offer facilities that show their dedication to the Native community. For example, they offer “personal and career counseling, mentoring, tutoring, wellness programs, child care, lending of laptop[s], and transportation and housing assistance” (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2019). They also value community members, as evident by the accessibility of “TCU libraries and computer labs, as well as a range of community service programming, such as business incubators and healthy lifestyles awareness events” (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2019).

Next, TCUs provide Native American students with faculty and staff mentorship, which is key in transitioning to a mainstream four-year institution. These individuals are often called “follow-through” mentors because if their mentee is interested in transferring to a mainstream four-year institution, they aid in this process and maintain contact after the transfer process is complete (Robbins, 1998). In addition to their mentorship role, follow-through mentors act as tutors and advisors for Native American students and are present in many aspects of students’ lives (Robbins, 1998). One of the reasons these mentorships are recommended and successful is because TCUs employ ample Native scholars and advocates who can relate to TCU students. In fact, nearly 45% of TCU faculty identify as American Indian or Alaska Native (Pennamon, 2018). It is important to remember that both faculty and staff should take on this mentorship role, since TCUs frequently lack financial backing for extensive student support via academic and student affairs professionals and programming.

TCUs also recognize the need for culturally relevant material. They integrate tribal philosophy and practices into all of their courses, including Native American values, tribal languages, and tribal history (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 1999; Merisotis &

McCarthy, 2005). To empower students, many TCUs require faculty to use the Family Education Model in their courses. The purpose of this model is to increase Native American student retention by affirming linguistic, racial, and ethnic identities, providing academic and familial counseling, building a tight-knit community, and preparing students for mainstream culture (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Most importantly, this model emphasizes that the issues surrounding Native American student retention should not be blamed on the behaviors of Native American students, but on the tension between institutional, student, and familial values (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002).

Finally, if they are interested in transferring, TCUs help Native American students adjust to the academic environment of post-secondary education before having to adjust to the social environment of a mainstream four-year institution (Makomenaw, 2010). The environment of a TCU contrasts with that of a mainstream four-year institution in many ways, including the institutional mission, the size of the institution, and the racial makeup of students, staff, and faculty (Makomenaw, 2012). According to Cheryl Crazy Bull, president of the American Indian College Fund, TCUs serve to “raise a bunch of radicals with the skills to recognize and address social injustice” (Makomenaw, 2012), which is vital as TCU graduates transition into mainstream four-year institutions.

Partnerships with Four-Year Institutions

As more TCU students are transferring to four-year institutions to obtain their bachelor's degrees (Makomenaw, 2014), TCUs and mainstream four-year institutions are recognizing the importance of making the transfer process simple and effective. Therefore, they are fostering partnerships through government agencies, foundations, and individual universities.

Government agencies. One way in which partnerships between TCUs and mainstream four-year institutions are established is through funding provided by government

agencies. The All Nations Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (ANLSAMP), funded by the National Science Foundation, has helped to create collaborations between 27 TCUs and 11 four-year universities housed within 14 states (ANLSAMP, n.d.). The purpose of these partnerships is to increase the number of Native American students who successfully complete their bachelor's degrees in STEM fields by creating STEM programs and projects at TCUs (ANLSAMP, n.d.). One of the ways they work to achieve this goal is by creating articulation agreements between TCUs and four-year institutions (Robbins, 1998). An articulation agreement guarantees that certain TCU credits and courses will transfer to the four-year institution, aiding students in their transition (Robbins, 1998). Through these partnerships, Native American students are also provided with "student stipends, conference travel assistance, and research opportunities" (ANLSAMP, n.d.).

Another example of a partnership established via a government agency is the BRIDGES program, funded by the National Institutes of Health (Brown, 2017). The Bridging Tribal Colleges to Montana State University (BRIDGES) program partners Montana State University–Bozeman with TCUs including Little Big Horn College, Fort Peck Community College, Stone Child College, and Chief Dull Knife College to provide Native American students with a summer bridge program that aids in their transition from TCUs to the four-year institution (Brown, 2017). Similar to ANLSAMP, this program caters to Native American students in biomedical and other health-related sciences (Brown, 2017). The overarching mission of BRIDGES is to bring together TCU students and research faculty from the four-year institution, providing TCU students with a scholarly mentor (Hoepfner, 2018). Through this partnership, students complete a research project and present the results (Hoepfner, 2018). Students also enroll in scholarship-funded summer courses and learn about financial aid and Native American campus support (Brown, 2017). Specifically, student affairs professionals teach students about "TRiO, American Indian Research Opportunities,

and American Indian/Alaska Native Student Success Services,” as well as other support services (Hoepfner, 2018, para. 4). Students also meet with academic advisors in their field of interest (Hoepfner, 2018). Finally, BRIDGES empowers tribal college faculty with research support and professional development opportunities (Brown, 2017).

Foundations. Partnerships can also be established through the use of funding granted by foundations. For example, under the Native American Higher Education Initiative (NAHEI) funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, at least two partnerships have been established (Shotton et al., 2013). First, Sinte Gleska University (SGU) and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) established a partnership with a focus on theater entitled Culture Matters: Project HOOP (Honoring Our Origins and People) (Shotton et al., 2013). Run through UCLA’s American Indian Studies Center, the mission of Project HOOP is to “establish Native theater as an integrated subject of study and creative development in tribal colleges, Native communities, K-12 schools, and mainstream institutions, based on Native perspectives, traditions, views of spirituality, histories, cultures, languages, communities, and lands” (Home, 2018). As a result of this project, the following was implemented: eight new theater courses at SGU, collaborative publications (such as *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader*), and a film on diabetes awareness with the aid of Indian Health Service (Shotton et al., 2013).

Though the project began as a two-year program that included “core curricula, scholarly books, mentoring expertise, and a culminating community theater festival at Sinte Gleska University in Rosebud, South Dakota,” multiple models of the project are now able to be implemented, depending on the existing structures at the TCU or mainstream institution (Home, 2018). Since it is focused on theater as a discipline, implementing Project Hoop requires cooperation from academic affairs professionals who can help integrate the project into existing academic units, support the creation of a new theater discipline at the institution,

or create a Native theater concentration within a theater discipline at an institution. While still developing, this program has the potential to incorporate student affairs professionals who can help Native theater students transfer to mainstream institutions in their pursuit of theater.

Also through the NAHEI and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a multi- institutional partnership was created between Leech Lake Tribal College (LLTC), Sinte Gleska University (SGU), and Bemidji State University (BSU). The collaborative project is entitled *Students Matter* and focuses on “increasing enrollment and improving retention at LLTC and BSU by using distance-learning technology to allow students to complete four-year degrees at the Leech Lake campus site” (Shotton et al., 2013, p. 100). As a result of this project, the following was established: upper-level elementary courses at LLTC, access to BSU’s distance-learning degree programs by LLTC students, and a Native American retention counselor position at BSU (Shotton et al., 2013).

Through the retention counselor, early withdrawals of Native students at BCU decreased by 50% (Shotton et al., 2013), showing the importance of administrators in the Native student transfer process. Finally, through *Students Matter*, American Indian enrollment in BSU increased, as did transfer students from LLTC to BSU (Shotton et al., 2013). This shows that Native transfer students do indeed benefit from increased cooperation and collaboration between institutions, and it is likely that with more involvement of academic and student affairs professionals, the benefits of this cooperation would further increase.

Finally, through Native American College Access and Success, which is co- funded by Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a partnership was created between Northwest Indian College, Evergreen State College, Antioch University-Seattle, Muckleshoot Tribal College (no longer a TCU), and Grays Harbor College. These institutions worked together to create a Pathways Report, explaining “Indian education efforts at the

postsecondary level,” including “extensive Native education profiles of nearly all colleges and universities in Washington State,” as well as recommendations for future partnerships (Shotton et al., 2013, p. 101). This report required the efforts of academic affairs professionals, who provided information about financial aid and distance learning, as well as student affairs professionals, who provided information about support services and college readiness programs (Akweks, Bill, Seppanen, & Smith, 2009).

Individual four-year institutions. Individual four-year institutions can also craft partnerships with TCUs. For example, Bemidji State University has created a dual-enrollment agreement with Minnesota’s TCUs, including Leech Lake Tribal College, Red Lake Nation College (no longer a TCU), White Earth Tribal and Community College, and Fond Du Lac Tribal and Community College (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017). This collaboration required ample support from academic affairs professionals, including Bill Blackwell Jr., the executive director of BSU’s American Indian Resource Center, as well as enrollment management professionals, the dean of students, and technical professionals who helped to establish distance courses (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017). Surely, student affairs professionals will be vital as more Native students transfer through this agreement.

Specifically, BSU will admit students from the four TCUs as juniors after they finish 24 transferable credits (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017). Additionally, these dual-enrolled students do not have to pay the application fee for BSU and are provided with a BSU student ID that allows them to engage in BSU student-life activities while they are still enrolled in a TCU (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017). Finally, they have access to BSU academic advisors once a semester after they achieve sophomore standing to ensure the

transfer goes smoothly (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017).

While BSU’s dual-enrollment partnership with TCUs is the first of its kind (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017), individual four-year institutions have partnered with TCUs in other ways. For example, Navajo Technical University and Northern Arizona University have collaborated on several projects in the past and have recently established a memorandum of understanding (Vandever, 2017). According to the president of Northern Arizona University, Dr. Rita Cheng, the formality of the MOU is important because it sends “... a strong signal that it is important to have this partnership. And why it’s important is for the students and their opportunities. I think together we can provide a great number of opportunities for our students no matter what they want to study, and we can help them fulfill their dreams” (Vandever, 2017, para. 2). Importantly, both parties have offered their resources to each other (Vandever, 2017), which is key in establishing a partnership.

Important Considerations for Establishing Partnerships

Before establishing partnerships between TCUs and mainstream four-year institutions, it is important to know the history of these alliances. When TCUs were first being founded, many four-year institutions claimed TCUs weren’t necessary and refused to establish partnerships because they felt they were already providing all the resources needed by Native American students (Brown, 2003). TCUs sought these relationships to aid with funding (Stein, 1999), as well as with instructional support (Brown, 2003). Unfortunately, many mainstream four-year institutions have taken advantage of TCUs in the past through these relationships. In a qualitative study of partnership collaborators, one TCU administrator stated, “I think most are there for good and noble reasons, but I know some are there just to get the money” (Nichols, 2001, para. 9). Another administrator asserted that four-year institutions “were always trying

to take over what we were doing” (Nichols, 2001, para. 11). It is important to note that many alliances have succeeded, such as that between Arizona State University (ASU) and Diné College, formerly Navajo Community College, in addition to the partnership between Bismark Junior College (BJC) and Sitting Bull College, formerly Standing Rock Community College (Brown, 2003). Both ASU and BJC assisted the TCUs by providing general support when needed, as well as helping with staff and faculty assignments while encouraging TCU staff to determine the qualifications necessary for these positions (Brown, 2003). In sum, it is vital that both parties in these partnerships are giving resources and receiving resources.

To aid those establishing partnerships, Nichols (2001) created a checklist based on his qualitative data that can guide the process. This data was compiled from interviews with 18 faculty and administrators from TCUs, and 18 faculty and administrators from state universities. The administrators interviewed were experts on joint degree development, transfer agreements, student support, scholarships, and experiential learning opportunities. First, administrators and faculty suggested taking the time to learn about the historical and cultural dynamics at play in these partnerships. They also encouraged healthy skepticism, as well as conversations about mission and vision. Then, administrators and faculty recommended that potential partners visit each other’s institutions to get a more realistic idea about what they are taking on in the partnership. Additionally, they recommended building a network of contacts, finding mutual interests, speaking up, being patient, and being open to possibilities. For information on what not to do when establishing a partnership, please see Table 4.1, which offers a collection of suggestions from administrator and faculty (Nichols, 2001).

--insert Table 4.1 here---

Additional TCU Student Support

If partnerships are not possible, there are still ways that mainstream four-year institutions can improve the transfer process for TCU students who wish to continue their education. For example, administrators can provide resources that are specific to the Native American transfer experience. For example, in collaboration with the All Nation's Alliance for Minority Participation, Salish Kootenai College published a handbook specific to this experience called *Touch the Sky: A Guide for Tribal and Community College Transfer Students* (Robbins, 1998). Importantly, it represents a compilation of efforts from Native faculty, academic affairs professionals, and student affairs professionals (Brown, 2017). Many chapters of the handbook focus on educating Native students about the administrative roles at the university and who to ask for help, including academic affairs and student affairs professionals, both of whom are vital in a successful transfer. It includes chapters focusing on academic advisors and the credit transfer process, admissions officers and the application process, financial aid officers and the FAFSA process, as well as university staff who can help with registration and housing (Robbins, 1998). While not as directly, it also emphasizes the importance of student affairs professionals in the transfer process, who can run transfer programs, Native student offices, multicultural offices, and provide other student services that can show an institution's commitment to serving the Native population and helping transfer students adjust to the university (Robbins, 1998). Mainstream four-year institutions can supply similar materials to potential Native American transfer students interested in the transfer process and can gather their Native American faculty and staff to create resources specific to their institution.

Another option for mainstream four-year institutions is to increase outreach to TCUs via academic and student affairs professionals. For example, admissions officers of private colleges and universities in Minnesota have reached out to Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College to talk to Native American students about the transfer process, as well as share available resources (U.S. Federal News Service, 2008). Their resources include

information about credit transfer, campus life, faculty, and financial aid (U.S. Federal News Service, 2008). Mainstream four-year institutions can also show support for TCU students in a variety of other ways, such as by conducting seminars on the transfer process, increasing staff and faculty diversity training, and creating and supporting Native American student organizations on campus (Cunningham, 2007). They can also increase their outreach at events such as summer camps and annual pow wows (Brown, 2017).

Conclusion

TCUs are filling a big gap in Native American educational attainment. Understanding the limitations of mainstream four-year institutions, TCUs offer their students both an education and a community, which can help TCU graduates continue to pursue their education, should they choose to do so. One of the ways in which higher education professionals can improve this transfer process as transfer rates continue to grow (Makomenaw, 2014) is through partnership establishment. As institutions are initiating collaboration, it is essential to consider the history of Native American education as these partnerships are being established and both parties must commit to serving each other and their student populations. Beyond partnerships, higher education professionals can support Native American students by empowering academic and student affairs professionals to create culturally-relevant resources, as well as expand student outreach to intentionally include Native American communities. Institutions can also increase their philanthropic efforts toward TCUs, which could improve TCU capacity and services, and aid in establishing service-learning, bridge programs, professional development, and alumni networks specific to Native American students (Shotton et al., 2013).

Finally, future research should explore existing partnerships, determining who has access to these programs and if they are effective in increasing Native American student enrollment within those institutions. It should also map the history of academic and student

affairs at TCUs, as administrators are often lumped together with faculty in the literature, who also provide student support services due to the lack of funding available to TCUs. By supporting TCUs and the transfer process, the educational attainment of the Native American community will improve, which will lead to a decrease in Native American unemployment rates, an increase in college-educated professionals on reservations, and an improved quality of life for present and future Native Americans (Cunningham, 2007).

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