It's About Family: Native American Student Persistence in Higher Education

For centuries, mainstream colleges and universities have struggled to accommodate American Indians and create environments suitable for perseverance resulting in degree completion. Although a select few have successfully matriculated through higher education's colleges and universities, institutions cannot truthfully claim success when it comes to serving this unique population. To say that Native Americans are ill-prepared for college only scratches the surface of a deep, historically unresolved problem—getting Native American students through the mainstream higher education pipeline.¹

This article presents findings from a study (Guillory, 2002) designed to explore the similarities and differences between Native Americans' student perceptions and the perceptions of state representatives, university presidents, and faculty about persistence factors and barriers to degree completion as they relate to Native American students at Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman, Washington; the University of Idaho (UI) in Moscow, Idaho; and Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman, Montana. In addition, the authors suggest implications that they believe apply not only to the study institutions but also to other universities that serve American Indian students and their respective Native American communities.

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Current Statistics on Native American Student Retention in Higher Education

Recent data show that in 2002, Native Americans represented less than 1% of all students enrolled in college. Most of them attended two-year institutions—typically within the tribal college system (U.S. Department of Education, as cited in the Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2005-2006). American Indian graduation rates were equally low, with Native Americans earning 0.7 percent of all associate’s, bachelor’s, and advanced degrees conferred in that year (U.S. Department of Education, as cited in the Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2005–2006). Year-to-year persistence rates are uncertain, given the paucity of research studies on American Indian retention in higher education and the inadequate representation of Native Americans in national and longitudinal research databases (Benjamin, Chambers, & Reiterman, 1993; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Larimore & McClellan, 2005; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Tijerina & Biemer, 1988; Wright, 1985). Some researchers, however, have long reported minimal retention rates among American Indians with estimates as low as 15% (Astin, 1982; Tierney, 1992; Tijerina & Biemer, 1988).

Numerous studies of Native American students who attend mainstream colleges and universities suggest that factors such as precollege academic preparation, family support, supportive and involved faculty, institutional commitment, and maintaining an active presence in home communities and cultural ceremonies are crucial elements that impact these students' ability and/or desire to persist in college (Astin, 1982; Barnhardt, 1994; Brown, 1995; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986; Lin, 1990; Patton & Edington, 1973; Reyhner & Dodd, 1995). Maintaining connections to home communities (in many instances, on federally designated Indian reservation lands) and attending tribal ceremonies seem to be particularly important (Barnhardt, 1994; Huffman et al., 1986).

Administrators and faculty who recognize the desire on the part of these students to retain strong tribal identities in lieu of assimilating into the mainstream university culture can use this factor as a source of motivation in degree attainment (Belgarde, 1992; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Tierney, 1991; Wright, 1985). For instance, participation at American Indian student centers can lead to academic and social engagement for American Indian students and, subsequently, can contribute to retaining this particular group (Belgarde, 1992; Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Carney, 1999; Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Cross, 1993; Jenkins, 1999; Lin, LaCounte, & Eder, 1988; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Wright, 1985).
Similarly, helping Native American students deal with instances of campus hostility and difficulty in transitioning from the high school social environment to that of college also impacts whether they decide to stay or leave college (Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Lin et al., 1988; Osborne, 1985; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Spaights, Dixon, & Nickolai, 1985; Tinto, 1993). In truth, researchers suggest that to assist Native American students in making the successful transition from high school to college, universities must consciously take into account the academic, social, cultural, and psychological needs of American Indian students (Wright, 1985).

Faculty can also promote academic integration for Native American students (Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Hornett, 1989). Because there are so few Native American faculty in higher education, Tierney (1991) suggested that non-Native faculty, typically White faculty, and staff familiarize themselves with issues surrounding Native American students. Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997) also argued that non-Native faculty and staff can play a key role in cultivating a welcoming and supportive environment for these students. Other institutional roles in promoting persistence include providing sufficient fiscal resources for child and family care and retention programs designed specifically for Native Americans (Almeida, 1999; Day, Blue, & Raymond, 1998; Reyhner & Dodd, 1995; Tate & Schwartz, 1993).

**Student Retention in Theory**

Some of the more widely used theoretical models that explain why students stay or leave an institution before earning a college degree are geared more toward explaining these phenomena in non-Native American students, although some of the factors can be applied to Native American students. For instance, Tinto’s “Theory of Student Departure” (1975, 1987) suggests that students enter college with personal, family, and academic skills and specific intentions regarding personal goals and college attendance. They adjust these intentions on a continuing basis through interactions with individuals, structures, and members of the college or university community. More positive interactions lead to more assimilation within the university system and result in student retention. In contrast, negative interactions or experiences reduce integration, increase alienation, promote marginality, and eventually lead to student withdrawal. Thus, student departure prior to degree completion occurs when there is incongruence between the student’s pre-entry attributes, intentions, goals, and commitments and the campus environment.
Other traditional theories on student retention, such as Astin’s “Theory of Involvement” (1985) and Pascarella’s “General Model for Assessing Change” (1985), support Tinto’s assertions. Both theories emphasize the importance of students’ backgrounds and precollege characteristics and positive encounters and institutional engagement with other ideas and people. A supportive institutional environment; constructive interactions with faculty, staff, and students; and the quality of effort put forth by the students in learning and development act together to impact student success. However, according to Pavel and Padilla (1993), these theories ignore the “cultural clash” experienced by American Indian students who attend mainstream universities. Indeed, Astin (1985), Tinto (1975, 1987), and Pascarella (1985) do not fully explain the driving forces and barriers that exist specifically for American Indian students. For instance, they inadequately take into account unique family, political status, tribal affiliation, language, tribal customs and traditions, and tribal community factors.

In contrast to the aforementioned traditional models of student retention, a less widely known student retention theory is the Family Education Model (FEM) developed by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002). Research that forms the basis for this model was conducted at five institutions in Montana—Fort Peck Community College, Stone Child College, Salish Kootenai Community College, Blackfeet Community College, and the University of Montana, Department of Social Work. It is an Indigenous-based model on student persistence in higher education that explicitly concentrates on Native American students. Similar to other retention/attrition models, the FEM is based on principles of education and social work. But because it is a model that promotes action, it also offers strategies for dealing with Native American student attrition. A central feature of the model that expands its explanatory power as it relates to Native American students is its purposeful inclusion of the core cultural factors suggested by Pavel and Padilla (1993).

This intervention-based model suggests that replicating the extended family structure within the college culture enhances an American Indian student’s sense of belonging and consequently leads to higher retention rates among American Indians. Establishing and maintaining a sense of “family,” both at home and at college, fortifies American Indians’ academic persistence and reduces feelings of resentment that family members feel toward students because they spend time away from home. The family specialist is a unique model feature. This individual serves as family counselor, educator, advisor, advocate, team member, and event planner (e.g., cultural ceremonies and feasts). The specialist works directly with students and their families, assisting with
microlevel issues such as child care, transportation, substance abuse, family illness, academically unprepared students, family violence, and depression as well as macrolevel aspects of college such as career planning and dealing with racism and discrimination in society. Aside from the University of Montana Department of Social Work, the FEM has not been applied to Native Americans attending mainstream institutions of higher education.

Although these explanations of retention/attrition—student departure, involvement, change, and FEM—vary slightly, they hold one thing in common. Each theory or model derives initially from the perceptions of students, not from the perspectives of those individuals responsible for the governance of institutions of higher education and the creation of policies and conditions that foster a welcoming and receptive environment (state officials, university presidents, and faculty).

In contrast, The Model of Institutional Adaptation to Student Diversity (MIASD) developed by Richardson and Skinner (1991) examined retention issues from a policy perspective. They interviewed state officials and institution-specific administrators and faculty about state, institution, and classroom activities that promote retention of underserved students. The MIASD consists of a series or continuum of developmental stages, described by Richardson and Skinner as follows:

The reactive stage occurs when institutions are under pressure to improve their equity performance for minority groups and react by focusing their diversity efforts solely on new recruitment initiatives, retooling financial aid packages, and special admission programs for minority students. The strategic stage is a product of the success of the reactive stage as institutions develop outreach, transition, and academic support services designed to help a more diverse student population adapt to the university environment. The last, the adaptive stage, is characterized by institutional assessment, learning assistance, and curricular renewal. Faculty members become involved in this stage to change educational practices, curriculum content, and teaching practices. (1991, p. 7)

The model suggests that as faculty and staff adapt their behaviors to respond to initiatives from campus administrators (and state entities), the organizational culture shifts to provide a more productive academic and social environment for students who differ in preparation or culture from those an institution has traditionally served. Richardson and Skinner (1991) do not take student voices into account, and none of the models mentioned above attempts to compare student perceptions with those of the stakeholders charged with educating them. In this study we attempted to make that comparison.
Study Methodology

A qualitative approach to research was deemed appropriate for this study (LeCompte, Millroy, & Preissle, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1984). The rationale for using this approach stems from what some of the leading researchers in the field of American Indians and higher education believe is the most appropriate means of capturing the Native American student experience (Pavel, 1992; Tierney, 1991). In reality, Native Americans are the experts at being Native American, and thus it is imperative that their voices be heard when creating policy that can directly or indirectly affect their educational lives. Tierney stated:

What we need now are sensitive studies that move beyond statistical surveys and charts. . . . Rather than research about American Indians for policy makers in Washington D.C., or Helena (Montana), we need studies by and for Native Americans about their relationship to the world of higher education. (Tierney, 1990)

This study also used a multiple case study-like approach (Merriam, 1998; Richardson & Skinner, t991; Yin, 1994) because it lends itself to a cross-case analysis for the purposes of discovering similarities and differences among the institutions under study (Merriam, 1998). In the multiple case study, there are two stages of analysis: the within-case and cross-case analysis. The within-case analysis involves gathering data so that the researcher can “learn as much about the contextual variables as possible that might have a bearing on the case” (Merriam, 1998, p. 194). Once the within-case analysis of each case is completed, cross-case analysis begins. It is at this phase in the analysis process that the researcher attempts “to build a general explanation that fits each of the individuals’ cases, even though the cases will vary in the details” (Yin, 1994, p. 112). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the researcher then examines “processes” and “outcomes” that are common across cases.

In addition, given the lack of qualitative studies on the Native American student experience in higher education, particularly within mainstream research journals, it is important to add to the sparse body of knowledge (Garrod & Larimore, 1997; Larimore & McClellan, 2005). Dodd, Garcia, Meccage, and Nelson (1995), for instance, provide one example of research on American Indian student persistence in higher education that appeared in a mainstream journal.

Each of the more traditional retention theories—student departure, involvement, change, and institutional adaptation to student diversity—informed the design of this study. Native American students were asked to name (and expound upon) the three or four most important factors that
had helped them persist through the university thus far and the same number of barriers that must be overcome by Native American students trying to complete their education. Presidents and faculty at each university and state board of higher education representatives were asked the same questions. Although the FEM model was not originally used as a conceptual framework, we believe that its explanatory power provides insights into study findings that might otherwise be missed. As a consequence, we have relied on it in the interpretation segment of this article.

Study Institutions

The study reported herein compares perceptions about persistence factors and barriers of Native American students with those of state higher education board representatives, university presidents, and teaching and nonteaching faculty at Washington State University, the University of Idaho, and Montana State University. The researchers thought that it was important to compare and contrast what Native American students say does and does not contribute to their success in higher education with corresponding perceptions held by policymakers (individuals who control or influence the environment through policy development and implementation). We believe this comparative analysis could help explain some of the root causes of a disconnect between Native American students and mainstream institutions of higher education.

Washington State University, the University of Idaho, and Montana State University were chosen for several reasons. First, all three are each state’s land-grant university. Second, they are located in close proximity to large populations of Native Americans representing several different tribes. Third, the three universities have similar Native American student enrollments in total number and percentages to overall student enrollment; fourth, they serve rural areas. And finally, because Native Americans have a tendency to attend college on or near their home communities (Benjamin et al., 1993), choosing these particular institutions was logical.

Study Participants

Native American Students

Focus group interviews were conducted with the Native American students and took place at each respective university’s multicultural or American Indian student center. Sessions lasted between 90 to 100 minutes. An audio recorder and handwritten notes were used to record the student responses and observations during the focus group interviews. In
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<th>Enrollment Profile: Students and Faculty</th>
<th>American Indian Enrollment &amp; Graduation Rates</th>
<th>Institutional Services &amp; Programs for American Indians</th>
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| WASHINGTON  | Washington State University        | • Carnegie Doctoral /Research Extensive University  
• State Land-Grant Institution  
• 150 Undergraduate Degrees  
• 70 Graduate Degrees  
• 10 Colleges  
• Approximately 19,000 students on main campus.  
• Approximately 930 faculty | • 252 or 1.4% self-report as being American Indian  
• (1997 to 2003) 42% graduation rate (16 graduates out of 38 freshman cohort) | • Native American Student Center  
• Plateau Center for American Indians of the Pacific Northwest  
• Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Regional Tribes |
| Study Participants  
at WSU  | 1 State Board of Higher Education Member | 1 University President | 3 Faculty:  
• Office of Provost (Tribal Liaison), Native American Student Services, Speech & Hearing Sciences | |
| IDAHO       | University of Idaho               | • Carnegie Doctoral /Research Extensive University  
• State Land-Grant Institution  
• 154 Undergraduate and Graduate Degrees  
• Law School  
• Approximately 12,400 students on main campus.  
• Approximately 850 faculty | • 113 or 1.3% self-report as being American Indian  
• (1997 to 2003) 23% graduation rate (3 graduates out of 13 freshman cohort) | • General Minority Student Center (No American Indian Student Center)  
• Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Regional Tribes  
• Special Diversity Assistant to President |
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<td>• Carnegie Doctoral Research Intensive University</td>
<td>• Approximately 12,200 students on main campus.</td>
<td>• 234 or 2.0% self-report as being American Indian</td>
<td>• 26 American Indian Programs including: AIRO, ABC, MPA</td>
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<td>• State Land-Grant Institution</td>
<td>• Approximately 830 faculty</td>
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<td>• Largest American Indian Student Centers in Northwest</td>
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addition, personal background information was obtained through a brief questionnaire distributed at the end of the focus group sessions. The adequately sized focus groups (Morgan, 1998) consisted of 9 students at Washington State University, 10 students at the University of Idaho, and 11 students at Montana State University for a total of 30 students.

The students chosen for the study were selected based on availability and experience, resulting in the participation of mostly juniors, seniors, and a few graduate students. Students were invited to participate by a primary contact, a Native American staff member, who was in frequent contact with the students. The following American Indian tribes were represented as listed by the students: Arapaho, Blackfeet, Chippewa/Cree, Colville, Coeur d'Alene, Cree, Crow, Fort Peck Assiniboine, Hidatsa/Chippewa, Hopi, Lakota, Lummi, Makah, Navajo, Nez Perce, Northern Cheyenne, Salish-Kootenai, Sioux, Walla Walla, and Yup'ik. All students grew up in Indian reservation communities or "border towns" (towns near Indian reservation boundaries). Students from "border towns" differed in their K–12 experiences from students who attended school on the Indian reservations in that they were outnumbered by their White student counterparts. Students' ages ranged from 18 to 43 years for an average age of approximately 26. Nine of the 30 students interviewed reported being first-generation college students with neither parent ever attending college. Nineteen of the 30 students reported having at least one parent who attended college; seven of these had a parent who earned college credit but never completed a postsecondary degree, while 12 had at least one parent who had earned either an associate arts, bachelor's, or master's degree. Two of the 30 students did not report family educational history. The students majored in various disciplines such as biology, business management, forestry, American Indian studies, and education.

It should be noted that because of the difficulty in maintaining contact with the Native American students, the authors opted not to engage in member checking, which could have ascertained the degree of accuracy and clarity in our reporting and, perhaps, uncovered deeper insights. This is certainly a study limitation.

Rationale for Native American Student Group Homogenization

Native American students in the study are treated as a homogenous group, despite their diversity with respect to tribal affiliation, gender, age, major, and prior secondary and postsecondary experiences. There were two primary reasons for doing so. First, the students all frequented their respective Native American or multicultural student centers and actively participated in cultural activities, such as powwows and Native
American Awareness week. This coming together suggests that the student participants sought out ways to express their “Indianness” rather than their specific tribal affiliation, gender, or any other distinguishing characteristic. Doing so seemed to enhance their sense of belonging to the university, or at least to a small section of it. Second, and related to the first reason, Clever (1983) suggested that Native American students seek a sense of uniformity across tribal identities because of a fear of losing their “Indianness” through assimilation into the mainstream university setting.

When these students were asked to focus on what they felt motivated them to persist to completion and what barriers they perceived held them back, the interviews often became emotionally charged with students voicing their pain and frustration as they described their college experience. Sentiments ranged from complete silence, which called for some prodding by the interviewer, to anger, tears, and inspirational testimonies. As students discussed what keeps them pushing on through to completion and what causes them to quit, however, it became clear that all students across all three institutions shared similar experiences and were impacted by similar factors.

The Institution: State Board of Higher Education
Representatives, University Presidents, and Faculty

Members of the state board of higher education from each state were selected based on their knowledge of and influence in promoting and shaping state policy regarding student diversity. Data were obtained from state representatives via either phone interviews or written responses. Written responses were provided by a public affairs officer of the Idaho State Board of Education and a member of the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board. A 45-minute phone interview was conducted with a member of the board of regents for the state of Montana.

Individual interviews with the university presidents and three faculty members at each institution were conducted for up to one hour, depending on availability. University presidents were interviewed because they are considered the “voice” of the institution, having power to help shape institutional culture. The faculty, both teaching (i.e., college professors) and nonteaching (i.e., student counselors and academic advisors), were selected because of their influence and ability to directly impact, positively and negatively, the experience of the students that they encounter through teaching, counseling, and advising (Astin, 1982; Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Hornett, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In essence, faculty are the “street-level bureaucrats” who accommodate the demands placed upon them by administration while confronting the
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reality of the classroom or counseling experience (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1994). In addition, since Native American students rarely have day-to-day contact with senior-level administrators or state representatives, the faculty “are” the institution for these students. Individual interviews allowed respondents to teach the researchers about the issue (Elliot, 1992). Again, an audio recorder and handwritten notes were used to record their responses and observations. All interviews were held at the offices of the presidents and faculty members.

Rationale for Institutional Group Homogenization

The term “institutions” refers to state employees who occupy positions in higher education that have a potential, direct or indirect, impact on the educational persistence of American Indian students attending their universities. In this study, they were members of the state board of higher education from Washington, Idaho, and Montana; the presidents of the universities under examination; and faculty, both teaching and nonteaching.

These policy players were treated as homogenous because state representatives create policy at the state level and hold public universities accountable for meeting policy mandates; university presidents are the institutional leaders responsible for implementing policy that directly influences the environment in which Native American students exist. Faculty are the individuals charged with executing the policy within the classroom through instruction, counseling, or advising Native American students. Despite their unique positions and responsibilities, each member of the “institution” in the study can, positively or negatively, impact a student’s college experience through the actions that they take in creating and sustaining an institution’s environment. In the case of the American Indian, history and research show that creating the right environment is a critical component of persistence and degree completion.

In addition, similar patterns emerged across state representatives, presidents, and faculty. As a consequence, we use the group identity “institutions” for reader convenience.

Voices of the Institutions: Persistence Factors

Only two factors, financial support and academic programs, consistently emerged as persistence factors across the institutions.

Persistence Factor #1: Adequate Financial Support

Members of all three groups within the institutions believed that if American Indian students had sufficient financial resources, they
would be motivated to persist through college. All institutions saw financial aid as the most important factor impacting persistence.

All state representatives believed that if the financial barriers were removed, Native American students would persist. Similarly, the university presidents appeared to believe that it is money that helps Native Americans continue on to college completion. Financial support was the first persistence factor stated by one university president, but little was mentioned as to why he believed it was a central factor to persistence. Using the financial circumstances of American Indians in his state as his rationale, another president commented: “There are very few of the Indian kids who come in with the essential sufficient financial backing to really afford to go and stay at the university, to the extent that we can get scholarship dollars, fellowship dollars in the hands of young Native American kids, the greater the opportunity to be successful.”

The university faculty interviewed in the study also emphasized finances as a key persistence factor. Although university presidents mentioned its importance to the continuation of Indian students in higher education, it was the faculty who explained why securing adequate funding was critical to the success of American Indian students. One faculty member commented, “Financial aid is probably the number one issue. I mean there’s lack of preparedness [when they] arrive here . . . but they don’t have proper financial aid assistance. It can be very tough on them. . . . Contrary to what many people believe, it’s [not] a free ride for Indian students.” According to the faculty, the lack of financial resources seemed to be the root cause for a multitude of problems that Native American students face. One faculty member explained:

All the years I’ve worked for the American Indian students—which is 25 years now—when they get into trouble, often times academically, even in the community, you can trace their problems back to them being short of money. They can’t pay their rent so they get booted out of their house. They can’t pay their tuition bill and so they end up not being able to get their credits on their transcripts. . . . So if, they get sufficient funding, it’s amazing how much better they do as students. They don’t have to constantly worry about money.

**Persistence Factor #2: Academic Programs**

When asked what aided Native American student persistence through college, all the presidents seemed to attribute a great deal of their success to academic programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of American Indian people. One president highlighted such a program, the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) scholarship. He explained: “[CAMP] has a major impact on us because it has significantly
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increased our minority registration, particularly among two groups [Native Americans and Hispanics].” A second president showcased two programs—the American Indian Research Opportunities Program (AIRO) and the Bridge Program for Native American nursing students. He stated that these programs offer “a lot of hands-on individual attention and advising. In fact, the Bridge Program for nursing students has a 100% retention rate to date.”

The president of the third university did not discuss programs as a persistence factor to any great extent. He did say, however, “I think some individual attention, some tailoring of programs and advising [and meeting] special cultural needs, strengthens a Native American student’s commitment to persist on through to graduation.”

For some faculty, academic, summer-bridge, or orientation programs were deemed important factors to persistence. They explained that bridge programs create a nexus between the student and the university that fosters a belongingness and excitement about the prospect of attending college and that increases the likelihood of success. One faculty member asserted, “A lot of [Indian] students that are very successful have attended some sort of a summer program.”

Other faculty believed the stronger the academic program, the greater the attraction to the university. Some faculty in the study insisted that linking strong academic programming with Native American students was the only way they knew to increase participation among Native students while still focusing on their own research. One faculty member stated,

[Often faculty say], I’ve always wanted to but I never knew how to do it [work with Indians] and then we showed them that you could actually get grants . . . huge grants if you had an American Indian component in the NSF and NIH [proposals]. Everyone will just fall all over themselves to fund you because they could never find any programs to fund.

Besides adequate financial support and academic programming, little agreement on persistence factors within groups (state representatives, presidents, and faculty) and across groups (the institutions) existed. Individuals did mention factors such as academic preparation, role models, welcoming university environment, strong support systems (family, academic, and faculty), and cultural outreach as having some influence.

Voices of the Institutions: Barriers

Institutions identified inadequate financial resources and lack of academic preparation as key barriers to degree completion for Native American students.
Barrier #1: Inadequate Financial Resources

When asked what is the greatest obstacle for American Indians to overcome if they are to persist to graduation, institution representatives unanimously agreed, not surprisingly, that it is a lack of money.

Not only were finances a principal persistence factor but they also were believed to be the core barrier to Native American students. One state representative commented, "Financial constraints may not actually be there. . . . In other words, I’ve encouraged some sort of public affairs activity so that it’s known what the financial resources are available. If it’s not known, well, that’s a barrier." This statement suggests that not only limited funds are a constraint but also lack of knowledge as to the availability of funds. Another state representative also supported this statement.

When asked about barriers, presidents also thought in terms of dollars and cents. Each president stressed the critical nature of securing the right scholarship dollars in order to recruit and retain the type of Native American student that seeks to attend their institutions. All three presidents, however, did acknowledge that there are barriers that Native Americans must overcome in order to achieve their college educations that cannot be measured in dollars and cents.

The faculty considered insufficient financial support a significant barrier to Native American students’ success. Financial factors were discussed more frequently by this group than by any other, including the Native American students. One faculty member went so far as to tie lack of academic preparation among Native Americans to economic resources in a more general sense:

The school systems on or near the tribe or reservations are not funded at the level that they are in other places. [In] Lapwai [on the Nez Perce Indian reservation] and Worley [on the Coeur d’Alene Indian reservation] don’t have the funding that the school district in Moscow [Idaho] has. They’re more depressed economically so the students come in underprepared. . . . it’s more a fault of the school system.

Barrier #2: Lack of Academic Preparation

“One of the most important factors is the [above mentioned] preparation at the K–12 area, whether they’re on a reservation or not. . . . [it] works for all students, those that have poorer skills gained in K–12 do poorly in higher education. And those from [Indian] reservation schools have a number of additional hurdles to overcome. Frankly, some of the [Indian] reservation K–12 schools are not as good a quality as we enjoy at other places,” one state representative stated. This state board member
believed that good academic preparation sets the tone for a productive academic career, regardless of race or ethnicity. However, all concluded that students from Indian reservation high schools in their states are not afforded the type of good, quality education necessary for successful transition to college.

The faculty expressed similar sentiments. One faculty member stated,

I think [a] barrier is [that] students tend to avoid classes, such as math and science, [because they don’t believe they are academically prepared to take them.] They avoid . . . putting them off and I’ve had a few students that actually [finished] . . . all but a math class . . . they went through graduation ceremonies . . . which you can do if you just have some courses in the summer. And I know of a few of them out there that don’t have degrees, and their families think they have degrees because they went through graduation.

This scenario demonstrates the lengths to which some Native American students will go to avoid classes that they feel unprepared to take. Another faculty member suggested that the problems Indian students face result from

poor preparation in math and writing [at the K-12 level]; and this could come for a variety of reasons. Maybe the students and their high schools weren’t preparing them for college. Maybe they’ve been out of school for a while and so their skills are kinda rusty. Maybe academics and education wasn’t emphasized enough in their family or in their community so that they really [are not] valued highly.

The presidents echoed faculty by suggesting that embracing the value of education may be something that is lacking in Native American culture and that it could explain why so few Native American students attend colleges and universities. One president insisted:

There are some values that Native Americans have—very special values—that relate to where they stand in relation to history, and ancestors, and nature, and all those kinds of things are sometimes difficult to reconcile with full involvement in the “modern industrial world.” . . . it’s hard to adjust to the value system that you almost have to adopt to be successful in higher education.

Another president indirectly supported this assertion when he stated, “[There is lack of] appreciation for what education is going to give you at the end of the line, which when present allows you to plow through those bad days that one has.” The sense is that a schism exists between what Native Americans value and what mainstream society values; and since it is mainstream (White) society that controls and directs these major research universities, it is Native Americans who must conform, something that some Native Americans are just not willing to do.
Voices of the Native American Students: Persistence Factors

Dominant persistence factors that emerged from the data were family, giving back to the tribal community (Indian reservation), and on-campus social support.

Persistence Factor #1: Family

Family was the most frequently (i.e., 21 out of 30 students) mentioned factor affecting persistence. Within the context of this study, family took on many different forms. Parents and siblings back home, single parents raising several children, and extended family all constituted “family.” In Native American families, especially those from Indian reservations, it is common for both the nuclear and extended families to live under the same roof. In many cases, American Indian college students end up as caretakers of their parents and grandparents.

In whatever form it takes, family served as a motivational source for these students. One Indian student said: “I think for me, my parents have always instilled the fact that education is important and that in order to achieve anything in today’s world, you have to have at least a bachelor’s or some form of technical degree. . . . Both my parents went to universities.”

In this instance, education passed down from one generation to another served as a persistence factor, but many of the students in the study were first-generation college students. In these instances, family as a persistence factor took on a different meaning. One student commented, “I’m the first in my family to go to college, and so it will mean a lot to my family and me if I can graduate and become a teacher.” For many Indian students, a need to live up to family expectations and a fear of letting their families down by not graduating from college was a major factor in persistence. One student stated, “Mine [motivation] is my family back home. . . . We have a close-knit family, extended family. . . . And they’re, like, pushing us real bad. . . . my greatest fear is to let them down right now.”

The connection for these Indian students to their families, whether nuclear or extended, was so strong that they were willing to overcome many difficult situations, such as an unwelcoming environment, lack of academic preparation, and inadequate financial support. To persist in earning a college education brought hope of making life better for their families. It is a reflection of an Indigenous philosophy of putting community before individualism. In other words, Native American children are taught to “stand in” versus “stand out” (Reyhner & Eder, 2004).
Persistence Factor #2: Giving Back to Tribal Community

The second most frequently cited persistence factor (i.e., 14 out of 30 students) has to do with giving back to their tribal communities. For most of the students in the study, Indian reservations represented their “home community.” Student participants grew up on or near Indian reservation land and came face-to-face with high rates of poverty, unemployment, and drug and alcohol abuse as well as underfunded public schools and substandard education on a daily basis. A college education meant more than just a means to obtaining a career and financial independence; for these students, it was an instrument to combat deleterious conditions back home. “I wanna go back to my reservation and help my Indian people,” said one Indian student. Another student wanted “just to help out the people... help out other students that are coming up, you know, to teach them and help them out... strengthen their minds.” Yet another student said, “I have a lot of family that still live on the reservation, and most of my cousins don’t have high school degrees... maybe I can serve as a role model or make them proud of what I have been doing and of my achievements, serve as a driving force.”

The home community was also a source of encouragement and motivation. Some students felt that many people within the community had given them so much support, emotionally, spiritually, and financially, that they owed it to the tribe to succeed. One of the students explained: “Every time I go back home [to the reservation], they’re [community or tribal members] asking me about school. . . . how’s everything going; they want me to succeed. . . . If they saw me not continue my education, they’d be disappointed.” Giving back is encouraged not only inside the home but also within the tribal community through cultural practices, such as “name-giving” ceremonies (tribal recognition of an Indian name), where gift giving is commonplace. Even at funerals, the family of the deceased offers gifts to community members who made significant contributions to the family during the difficult period. These cultural practices of giving back to community members and the community itself are ingrained within the tribal members and remain guiding forces throughout their lives.

Persistence Factor #3: On-Campus Social Support

On-campus social support (i.e., 11 out of 30 students) also turned out to be a critical factor in persistence. Support from family was crucial, but support from faculty and peers from within the university was also deemed essential. It fostered an environment where students could adjust psychologically and flourish academically. Social support from the
institution also countered the effects of leaving home and the feelings of isolation that many of the Native American students experienced during their stay at the university. “What has helped me as a transfer student is having this Native American Student Center. It makes you feel like you’re at home when you’re around more Native people,” said one Indian student. The Indian reservations these students come from are isolated, with very few non-Indians, so to have an enclave where students can socialize and feel a part of a university (although not a part of mainstream campus life) was vital to their growth as students. In addition, it increased their commitment to stay and finish their college education. Another Indian student said:

Another thing that has helped me are my personal relationships that I have made here, like my friends, they’ve been really supportive and we always come together, the people in the Center [Native American Student Center]. . . . They come together and they tell you “you can do it” and we’re also a part of a [community]. . . . so that has helped me a lot.

Indian students who had persevered into their final years of study reported that White students who began to encourage them by extending invitations to study together also strengthened their resolve to finish college. One student reported that the invitation made her “feel really good because they know that I’ve lasted this long. . . . I’m still here . . . and I’m not going anywhere.”

Support from faculty proved necessary as well. As one student noted, “I’ve had really good teachers; teachers really asked about all my classes; [one is] an art teacher; he’s really interested in my [Indian] heritage.” The responses from the students support the argument that a university-wide effort from not only non-Indian students but also faculty is important to creating a warm and welcoming milieu for American Indians, both inside and outside of the classroom. Such experiences are consistent with the social upbringing of these students who place emphasis on community and a sense of belonging.

Voices from the Native American Students: Barriers

The core barriers were family, single parenthood, lack of academic preparation, and inadequate financial support.

Barrier #1: Family

“When I got into a PhD program, I called my parents to tell them how happy I was, and my father . . . they’ve always supported me in my bachelor’s degree, but the first thing he told me: when am I gonna stop play-
ing school?” one frustrated student exclaimed. In recalling an experience with his family, another student commented:

I wanted to go to college when I turned a freshman [in high school], and I knew that’s what I wanted to do and I think that’s what sort of held me back was my family. I mean, I love my family to death, but I noticed when I started getting good grades, and I took advanced classes—I took chemistry, and I even took college freshman English—most of my family turned their backs on me. They’re [saying], “Oh, he just acts ‘White’ now.” It kinda hurt.

This was the reality of several Indian students in the study (i.e., 16 out of 30 students); families acted as both a persistence factor and a barrier. This paradox was a source of great frustration to the students. On the one hand, students persisted through college to make their families proud; on the other hand, they felt the “pull” from their families to come home, especially in situations where family members were dependent upon them for financial and emotional support. In certain cases, the pull from home was so strong that students “stopped out” or “took breaks” from school just to help out back home. One student reminisced, “I have a friend who I always thought would make it through college. . . . she was very smart in school, but she said she went home just to help her mom and dad.” A former student sitting with the focus group remembered a friend in a similar situation: “My friend Lisa [a Native American] thinks that her mom purposely tries to keep her from finishing [college] and so there’s a struggle there—support her mom or go to school.” In some cases, “getting your education” took a back seat to “getting a job and being a hard-working person.”

**Barrier #2: Single Parenthood**

For others, having and bringing a family to the university was a major barrier (i.e., 11 out of 30 students), especially for those who were single parents (in this study, all women). One student noted, “I just think you got to prioritize what’s really important and how much you have left to get that education that’ll help you eventually because there’s no way you can go to school and take care of a family.” Another single mother commented on the frustration that she feels being away from her parents while trying to raise her child on her own and attend school: “I was raising my daughter by myself and they [family] were always there for me. . . . [Now] I can’t just trust anyone to watch her and I can’t even get a part-time job while going to school. It’s hard to be a single parent and go to school full time.”

Explaining her struggle with single parenthood and having the finances to cover childcare and other expenses, a single mother lamented:
"I applied for more scholarships hoping that it would make it easier, but once I got those scholarships, they just took away the loans. I think as a single parent that they just don’t allow you to get enough."

The responsibilities and difficulties associated with single parenthood of young children are broad and complex, leaving Indian students to deal with multiple problems: inadequate child care, child care cost, time to study, time to spend with a child, and so on. Single parents of high school age children found that it was their children, not just themselves, who had difficulty adjusting to a new community and school. It was especially problematic for older children from Indian reservations who moved into a predominantly White community with few minorities. One single mother said, "[My son] was called ‘prairie nigger,’” recounting her oldest son’s experience at the local high school. “We’re from South Dakota. . . . I’m from Cheyenne River [Indian Reservation] and [we]’ve never heard the word ‘prairie nigger’ until here at the high school and he just fought his way [through]. . . . so uprooting your family and coming here, you know, with older kids is really a barrier.” One student stated, “I know that there were Indian students who ended up quitting because of their kids in the school systems. They, themselves, were doing okay in college here, but it was their family that really couldn’t make the adjustment.” Bringing Native American children into an unwelcoming and hostile environment, for older children, sometimes against their will, created more stress for the parent trying to complete school.

**Barrier #3: Inadequate Financial Support**

Lack of financial support was mentioned by students (i.e., 8 out of 30 students) across the three sites. Needless to say, none of these students could attend college without financial assistance, whether federal financial aid, scholarships, loans, work-study, or tribal support, so to assume that money is not a significant barrier to these students is unrealistic. One student mentioned, “I think money is one of the biggest issues in the education system because if you don’t have it, or if you’ve lost your scholarship and you don’t have the drive or the willingness to work yourself and pay for it yourself, you’re not gonna go back to school.” In reference to the Native American population, another student commented: “A large percentage of the Natives have families or have children or are single parents or they don’t have a mom and dad that can send them money all the time.” To illustrate his point, he related the following experience:

I remember when I was an undergrad. [White] students would call home, get $500-600-1,000 from Mom and Dad, and I’m thinking, “man, if I needed..."
100 bucks, I'd be better off robbing the convenience store, 'cuz I could be calling all day long and who's going to have 100 bucks?" . . . I called home one time for $100 and my parents said, "Baby, we'd love to, but where are we gonna get $100?"

One complaint among the students had to do with the inadequacy of financial aid packages. The problem with federal financial aid programs is that students are not allowed to exceed the total cost of attendance. Students complained that the cost of attendance does not reflect the true financial needs of the students. This was particularly true for single parents. "To put my son in daycare for half a month is over $300. . . . for August, September, October, November, December—five months, that's $1,500. I only got a check for $3,000, so half of that already [goes] to childcare plus my rent, food." Another student explained, "What I see with financial aid, or even the whole financial package, is that it is set up for the traditional single student. That's how everything is based." Experiencing similar financial aid problems, an exasperated student proclaimed, "The first year I had to fund myself. . . . [I'm] so in debt with student loans. . . . I got a scholarship back home. . . . it's still not enough."

Although lack of financial resources was viewed as a barrier, what became clear is that the lack of knowledge regarding financial resources was as damaging if not more so. The Indian students did not seem to understand the financial aid or scholarship process, and they were not properly oriented or informed about the availability of other forms of financial aid. In essence, lack of knowledge acted as a barrier as much as did eligibility or ineligibility for financial aid.

**Barrier #4: Lack of Academic Preparation**

Students across all three institutions (i.e., 7 out of 30 students) cited lack of academic preparation in the K–12 system as a barrier. After the first, second, and even into their third year in college, Native American students were still having difficulties adjusting to curricular rigors. One exasperated Indian student noted:

I think our education is getting a lot better on the reservation, but I really don't feel like I was prepared. . . . I've never seen this stuff before. I've never been taught this. When I came here, I didn't know that I had difficulty in taking multiple choice tests . . . and my first semester as a freshman was just horrible. I just was, like, "oh, I don't know what I'm doing."

Even nontraditional students in the latter stages of their undergraduate careers experienced some difficulty: "I still have a hard time here . . . English and math. I got pushed through high school [on the Indian
Reservation) taking shop, P.E., art, ceramics. Just stupid (expletive) like that, I mean . . . not realizing it until after you’re already graduated . . . it’s too late. . . . I should’ve signed up for some English class or something, you know.”

Another Indian student agreed with the previous comments about the high school education offered on Indian reservations: “Natives are ill-prepared for college and . . . that starts way back in elementary, junior high, and high school. . . . we’re pushed through the system.” This student and several others agreed that preparation for college is not a priority within reservation K–12 public school systems.

Native American students who recently graduated from high school on Indian reservations experienced similar academic problems as current nontraditional Native American college students who graduated from Indian reservation high schools some 20 years earlier. Academic deficiencies in English and math seemed to cross generations. The perspectives of both the traditional and nontraditional students provides a holistic view that suggests that not much has changed in the educational school systems on Indian reservations. For these Native American students, maintaining self-confidence is often just as difficult as maintaining good grades. Some of these Native American students felt so ill-prepared academically that they often refrained from asking questions in fear of looking “stupid” or “dumb” in front of their White classmates.

Institutions/Native American Students: A Comparative Analysis

Native American students and institution representatives in this study held somewhat contrary views about what drives Native Americans to finish college, at least in terms of relative importance. Institution representatives placed a high premium on financial factors. In their view, financial support drives or motivates Native Americans to persist through college completion.

In contrast, Native American students suggested that family and tribal community provide the determination and desire to finish. This emphasis on family and tribal community reflects the communal culture from which these Indian students come. Although a few Native American students in the study stated that sufficient financial support did help, adequate funding was not perceived to be a principal persistence factor. Instead, it was viewed as a barrier because there never seemed to be enough money for child care (for the single mothers in the study), tuition, or rent.

Another motivational source from the institution perspective was the belief that strong academic programs in the university system are a dri-
If universities offer academic programs with strong appeal for American Indians, those students will be more inclined to finish college. Such programs were never mentioned by the students. In contrast, students suggested that social support on campus was critical to their persistence. For example, the Native American or multicultural student centers on each campus provided the “community” that the students deemed essential in reducing the sense of isolation and alienation.

Ironically, students named family—the pull from home—as the single greatest source of frustration because of the financial and psychological dependence family members place on these students. Students agreed with institution representatives that the lack of money is pervasive, but they did not see it as a persistence factor nor as the most daunting barrier to overcome.

Students and institution representatives also agreed that lack of academic preparation at the K–12 level caused, in some instances, severe barriers. Both groups emphasized that public school systems on Indian reservation land are substandard and that ill-prepared students sometimes avoid more rigorous college-level courses particularly in English, math, and the sciences. The implication is that better schools and improved teaching at the K–12 level would increase the likelihood of Native American students completing college since they would not have to play “catch up.” Unfortunately, it is not until they actually get to college that they realize they have some catching up to do.

Implications for Practice

The findings in this study suggest that differences in perceptions about persistence and barrier factors exist between Native American students and institutions. Practically speaking, such differences point to the need at the university level to shift away from dealing with Native American student persistence through purely monetary means and toward creating ways in which Native American students can connect with both the university and their home communities. Even the principal barrier for the Native American students in the study (i.e., family) supports the idea that universities must focus their efforts on maintaining this connection. Suggesting this, however, does not absolve the universities from their obligation to offer sufficient financial support to Native American students and diversity-oriented programming. The financial backing for scholarships, fellowships, childcare, and programs is still greatly needed.

Additionally, although each university has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreement with each of their local tribes and boasts a
myriad of campuswide programs designed specifically for its Native American student body, it is fair to say that more needs to be done to increase the likelihood of success for the American Indian students at these universities. We suggest that the following strategies can be implemented at these mainstream universities as well as at other mainstream colleges and universities nationwide in their attempts to help American Indian students finish college.

One strategy the institutions under study might consider is to create collaborative programs between institutions and local/regional Indian tribes. For example, Indian students who explicitly express a desire to work with their home communities could go directly into internships or conduit programs that emphasize student teaching, business management, or natural resource management—academic areas popular among the Indian students in the study and germane to the economic growth of the tribe. Such direct links created and maintained can be mutually beneficial to both entities. Students can serve their communities while earning college credit. For universities, this approach might establish a direct pipeline through which they can actively recruit Native American students from local or regional Indian reservations as well as create a place where Native American families and tribes feel comfortable sending their best and brightest. Sending successful Indian students back to the reservations in a dual capacity—both as college student and tribal member—can also stimulate interest for younger generations of Native American students currently not exposed to positive education role models. By recognizing that the connection between American Indian students and their families and tribal communities must be encouraged, nurtured, and strengthened, universities can fulfill their mission statements and at the same time help these economically deprived communities educate and cultivate new cadres of future leaders. A crucial component of this approach would be obtaining sufficient financial support through federal grants, state agencies, and private donors interested in investing in the future of our nation’s Indigenous peoples.

A second strategy that these institutions might consider is addressing the need for adequate daycare and sufficient financial assistance to meet the mounting costs for single mothers and students with families. As articulated in the student narrative section, many student participants in the study had small children and expressed tremendous frustration in trying to manage the dual role of parent and student. To meet these special needs, universities must strive to provide financial aid packages that go above and beyond the traditional award packages. And if special consideration for financial aid does exist for students with children, it needs to be clearly articulated to the Native American students with children
who have the tendency not to maximize the general services available to them. Information about types of financial assistance available to student-parents as well as background checks and ratings on local daycare service providers can be distributed through the Native American student counselors or advisors and financial aid officers who specialize in this area. Similarly, the information could be disseminated through a Native American parents or single mothers workshop held on the Indian reservations.

Another means that these institutions might use in meeting the needs of Native Americans is to bring higher education to Native American communities through distance learning. When it comes to “educating” American Indians, the idea has always been to bring American Indians to the university instead of bringing the universities to the Americans Indians. By establishing distance education programs between local/regional universities and Indian reservations, higher education can better serve those who want to earn a college education but remain on the Indian reservation to support their families. This strategy will also tap into a population of adult learners looking for retraining or for further education.

One example of such a program is the Model for American Indian School Administrators (MAISA) project conducted at New Mexico State University (NMSU) in Las Cruces, New Mexico (Guillory, 2005). MAISA is a federally funded distance education program providing a collaborative, comprehensive master’s degree in educational administration leading to licensure for aspiring American Indian administrators serving schools with significant American Indian student populations. It is designed to bring the education to the Native American students through a variety of delivery methods, such as an interactive, hybrid media-delivered class, as well as having Native American faculty traveling to various sites throughout New Mexico to teach, discuss, and advise participants. Through these efforts and its design, MAISA had a 100% graduation rate (12 graduates). Because NMSU is a land-grant university that serves some of the largest American Indian tribes in the United States (Navajo and the 19 Pueblos), it is a peer institution to WSU, UI, and MSU, and its MAISA project provides an excellent model for these institutions.

In addition to these recommendations, the research findings in this study support the use of the strategies offered within the Family Education Model (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). In particular, the use of a family specialist could assist student-parents in obtaining child care information and provide family-life skills training—helping to deal with the tremendous pressure of being student-parents, even assisting with
family problems back home. The essence of the FEM is to create a familylike environment for Native American students by making family and tribal members an integral component of the educational process of these students. This way, the family and tribal community can put their “fingerprint” on the educational experience, using Indigenous-based knowledge, values, and beliefs and thus giving students an education that is relevant and appropriate to their cultural background.

As researchers, we acknowledge that these findings were reflective of the perceptions of study participants at these three institutions only. Thus, the aforementioned implications for practice are directed specifically at these universities. However, we raise the question: Should other similar colleges and universities that serve American Indian students re-examine their institutional practices, particularly in light of these study findings?

Conclusion

The issue of cultural discontinuity between these “two worlds” (Native American worldview and the mainstream worldview) has deep historical roots. In *American Indian Education: A History*, Reyhner and Eder state, “After hundreds of years of the contact with European immigrants, Indians have good reason to be suspicious of anything European, and schools, even Indian-controlled ones with Indian administrators and Indian teachers . . . are alien institutions as far as Indian cultures are concerned” (2004, p. 167).

Indeed, HeavyRunner and DeCelles indicated that “Institutions fail to recognize the disconnect between the institutional values and [Indian] student/family values; hence the real reasons for high attrition rates among disadvantaged students are never addressed” (2002, p. 8). This study helps substantiate the validity of such a statement. Study institutions did not fully understand the Native American student mindset, and, as a consequence, they failed to adequately meet their specific needs. The strategies and examples provided in this article can help Washington, Idaho, and Montana and their universities (and possibly other states with significant American Indian populations) better serve their Native American students and communities.

By incorporating family within the educational experience of Native American students, institutions have the opportunity to bridge gaps, heal wounds, and build trust. For Native American people, it’s all about family. Institutions that serve Native American students cannot continue to operate using traditional approaches to student retention, if they want to truly serve and help our country’s Indigenous peoples.
Notes

There is no consensus with regard to appropriate terminology used in reference to members of this group: Indians, American Indians, or Native Americans. For the purposes of this article, the terms Native American, American Indian, and Indian are used interchangeably.

This is true not only for Native American students but also for Native American faculty. Although Native American faculty are not the focus of this section, recruiting Native American faculty to these institutions is often quite difficult because of the difficulty their children have in adjusting to a foreign community.

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