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Supporting American Indian Students in the Transition to Postsecondary Education

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that promote successful transitions into and through postsecondary education for American Indian students, from the perspectives of the student, school counselor, and college advisor. The method of study included analysis of interview transcripts from clinical practitioners, service providers, and American Indian advisees who had successfully completed postsecondary education programs. A phenomenological approach was used that included a multistep analysis to identify significant statements and themes among participant responses. Interviews revealed that strong academic preparation, motivation and self-confidence, family support, ongoing relations with culturally sensitive faculty members and advisors, strong connections with culturally relevant peer groups, and a clear focus for the future were all factors related to successful transitions to postsecondary programs. Success in degree completion was related to supportive relationships that take into account students’ cultural backgrounds and the integration of students’ cultural identities into the context of higher education.

Census data indicate that the enrollment of American Indian (Native American) and Alaska Native students in higher education has doubled over the past 30 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a). Of those American Indian students attending college, just over half are enrolled in four-year
institutions. This is a relatively new trend considering a higher proportion of American Indian and Alaskan Native students gravitated to two-year institutions in the mid 1970s. Despite positive trends in the numbers of American Indians pursuing college degrees, they are still less likely to pursue postsecondary education than other ethnic groups. Further, there are significant differences between American Indian learners and their White counterparts in high school graduation rates, college entrance scores, and retention and completion rates in higher education institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). These trends are not completely unique to American Indian students, as they are part of a larger group termed “traditionally disadvantaged learners” or “learners from the previously disadvantaged black, brown, and Indian communities” (Maree & Beck, 2004, p. 80). Nevertheless, the low rate of matriculation to higher education is of particular concern to states with high American Indian populations, as job predictions indicate that the United States is now more in need of an educated workforce than at any other period in history (Kelly, 2005).

The differences in matriculation and completion rates between American Indian and White learners are attributed to many factors including lack of financial resources, inadequate academic preparation, a contradiction between home and higher education cultures, and lack of access and resources in rural and impoverished environments (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; O’Hare & Mather, 2008; Payne, 2005). These factors can be addressed and remediated using an ecological systems approach, which identifies unique person and environment characteristics that interact on multiple levels to influence developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; King & Madsen, 2007). Both direct influences within Microsystems (i.e., family, school, and peer contexts) and indirect influences at the macrosystem level (i.e., cultural values and norms, poverty, and educational policy and climate) can be examined to identify aspects of the environmental context surrounding young adults that potentially contribute to their development (Chenoweth & Galliher; King & Madsen). Mesosystems (i.e., interactions between Microsystems) can also be explored to gain an understanding of these factors. Individual and school wide support models can then be implemented to provide the resources and scaffolding necessary for academic advancement in a culturally relevant and sensitive manner, recognizing students’ distinctive cultural niches and avoiding overgeneralizations of cultural influences (Crumpton, 2005; Faircloth, 2009). Rather than relying on a Eurocentric model and assuming homogenous beliefs in minority cultures, counselors and
school staff can take into account “current social, cultural, and occupational environments” (Crumpston, p. 93) of learners in order to assist them with transitions to higher education.

*Systems Approach to Understanding American Indian Transitions*

An ecological systems approach requires refocusing the view of the factors that lead to successful transitions into postsecondary education for high-risk groups by examining the issue through a wider lens (King & Madsen, 2007). These transitions may be complicated by macrosystem cofactors such as poverty, cultural context, racial discrimination, and educational culture (Maree & Molepo, 2007). Poverty, for example, can have a significant impact on career choices as well as educational success (Hart & Risley, 1995; Payne, 2005). Some areas of the United States have higher concentrations of traditionally disadvantaged learners in poverty, and American Indian learners are more likely than other ethnic groups to live in rural and impoverished areas (Faircloth, 2009; O’Hare & Mather, 2008).

Indirect macrosystem influences occur through their effect on microsystem interactions, which directly affect the learner (King & Madsen, 2007). For example, minority youth growing up in poverty may perceive a lack of educational resources (e.g., lack of access to books or computers), or the lack of resources may be “seen as a challenge to overcome” and students may seek out “no-cost options to obtain access to those resources, such as libraries” (King & Madsen, p. 406). Besides resources within education settings, additional important microsystem factors to consider include family, peer, and school support for higher education (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Mesosystem interactions across microsystems must also be addressed. One mesosystem interaction that is recognized by many educators is the disconnect between American Indian students’ home culture and the Eurocentric culture of American schools (HeavyRunner & DeCelless, 2002; Jackson et al., 2003; Kurpius, Payakkakom, Ryle, Chee, & Arredondo, 2008). Interdependence is an attribute shared among American Indians. Regardless of tribal affiliation, “the tribe is viewed as an interdependent system of individuals who perceive themselves as parts of the greater whole rather than as a whole consisting of parts” (Garrett & Herring, 2001). In fact, “formal education may run counter to local forms of social and economic capital and it also may be locally perceived as having little effect on the ability of students to increase their economic capital within the rural context” (Faircloth, 2009, p. 1). Educators are then faced with the issue of how to approach the education of traditionally disadvantaged learners.
from an ecological systems perspective in order to increase the connections between home and school culture. The desired outcome is to create supportive pathways that build upon the strengths of family and community ties, allowing American Indian students to move into higher education in preparation for success at the postsecondary level.

Traditionally disadvantaged learners need access to adequate educational and career training and opportunities that build upon their strengths and help them overcome perceived barriers. An ecological approach can facilitate the development of individualized educational goals (Maree & Molepo, 2007; Patton, Creed, & Watson, 2003). Past studies have indicated that relevance and quality of academic preparation, self-confidence and motivation, supportive relationships, career choice, and maintenance of cultural identity enhance or impede the success of American Indian learners in higher education and career pursuits (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Jackson et al., 2003; Jenkins, 1999).

It is important to acknowledge that the support students receive from family and peers can positively influence first-year students as they negotiate college demands, but those same relationships, in some cases, can also be a distraction. Despite the initial motivation for degree attainment being the ability to provide for their families, some students may abandon their educational pursuits due to family concerns, such as the lack of child care (HeavyRunner & Decelles, 2002; Yazedjian, Purswell, Sevin, & Toews, 2007). Thus, those factors need to be examined individually for students in conjunction with a wide variety of developmental and contextual factors in order to best assist disadvantaged learners in pursuing educational and career options previously unavailable to them (Stead, 1996; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1998; Watson & Stead, 2002).

Factors Supporting Persistence in Higher Education and Career Exploration

American Indian learners cite family support, the ability to give back to their home communities, faculty/student warmth, exposure to campus life and career options, the development of autonomy, and relationships with supportive on-campus peers as the most influential factors contributing to student persistence (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Jackson et al., 2003). Yet, institutional representatives suggest that the most influential retention factors are adequate financial aid and the provision of academic programs that are geared to the interests of American Indian learners (Guillory & Wolverton). The progression toward a college degree for American Indian learners is not always linear, and may include breaks for a semester or more and attendance
at multiple institutions of higher education (Jackson et al.). Educational policy is a macrosystem influence that has impacted higher education opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged learners. Changes in national policy, such as the Education Opportunity Act of 1964, have facilitated the development of support programs to help these learners prior to and during their college experiences (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). These programs are designed to encourage the inclusion of low-income and minority students in institutional programs (e.g., Upward Bound, Talent Search, GEAR UP) and to increase their persistence to graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2008b). Commonalities across these programs include a focus on underrepresented student populations in the realm of higher education through academic preparation, assistance in negotiating the deadlines and procedures for applying to colleges or universities, and career exploration.

There are also federal programs designed to foster degree completion for traditionally disadvantaged learners. Student Support Services is a federal program aimed at the retention of low-income and first-generation college students once they are enrolled (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Services include mentoring, tutoring, career counseling, and financial assistance. Some institutions have also implemented their own approaches to support students in culturally relevant ways. Although relatively new, the Family Education Model (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002) has been used successfully with American Indian learners in the tribal college system. The three core assumptions of this model are that colleges (a) act as liaisons between learners and families and community services when needed; (b) work with family members to support learners in an appropriate fashion; and (c) encourage family engagement in college life, partnering with them in culturally and socially relevant activities. The focus is on partnerships and positive family inclusion in the educational process to support learners’ sense of belonging (HeavyRunner & DeCelles). Figure 1, based upon the Family Education Model and framed within an ecological systems view, highlights the influences on transitions into higher education for American Indian learners at the microsystem (i.e., family, school, and peers, and community), mesosystem (i.e., interactions between microsystems), and macrosystem levels (i.e., cultural identity and support, and national educational policy). While it is important to note that differences exist between individual American Indian learners, there are “core traditional values [that] permeate the lives of Native people across tribal groups” (Garrett & Herring, 2001, p. 143).
Figure 1. Conceptual model for assisting American Indian students with transitions into higher education.

Purpose of the Study

Research suggests differences between what academically successful American Indian students and college faculty and administrators perceive as the most significant factors influencing success in higher education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). This study explored perceptions of students, school counselors, and academic advisors as to the barriers and support systems for American Indian learners by examining commonalities among perspectives. The three broad research questions include:

- What common experiences do American Indian learners share as they prepare for and pursue higher education degrees?
- What contexts or experiences influence American Indian learners on their pathway toward higher education?
- Specifically, how do contextual factors, such as academic preparation, personal variables, family support, support from other adults or mentors, and culture influence American Indian learners?

This study extends previous research (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Jackson et al., 2003) by (a) gleaning more in-depth information regarding factors that promote success among American Indian students in higher education and (b) comparing student perceptions of supports and barriers to academic success to those of school counselors and academic advisors who work with this population.
Method

A phenomenological approach was used to explore the academic development and transition needs of American Indian students from the perspectives of the advisee, school counselor, and college advisor. To that end, interviews were conducted with two former American Indian advisees, four practicing school counselors, and three academic advisors who serve diverse populations at higher education institutions in the Midwest. Participants were recruited through the professional networks of the researchers. Purposeful sampling included American Indian students who had attained degree completion and school counselors and academic advisors with a minimum of eight years of experience and who had served predominately American Indian populations. Interviewees were invited to share their perspectives and provide recommendations for counseling American Indian students in their transitions to postsecondary education. Data were examined within the framework of the conceptual model (see Figure 1).

Creswell (2007) indicates that phenomenological studies are appropriate when the researcher is interested in identifying the common experiences of all participants and reducing their unique experiences of a phenomenon into a “universal essence” or a “composite description of the essence or the experience for all of the individuals” (p. 58). As such, phenomenology was an appropriate method to explore the essence of academic development for American Indian students.

The researchers made the following two assumptions: (a) because advisees, counselors, and advisors are viewing the phenomenon through different lenses, they may provide different perspectives as well as common insights into the issue and (b) the researchers would need to put aside their own experiences in order to remove personal bias from the process.

Participants

Participants included clinical practitioners and service providers at two institutions of higher education and four K-12 school districts, as well as two former American Indian advisees who had successfully completed their postsecondary education. The advisees were between the ages of 30 and 35. Both completed a two-year degree and moved into a four-year degree program. One continued into a master’s degree program. Both advisees worked full time in their fields of study during their college years and gained employment in their respective fields. They had taken a nontraditional route, and both had started
families prior to college entrance. The four practicing school counselors (2 male, 2 female) were between the ages of 39 and 57 years old, and each had between 11 and 34 years of experience in the field. They worked in schools with 50-100% American Indian enrollment. The three academic advisors (2 male, 1 female) were between the ages of 38 and 60 years old, and each had between 8 and 32 years of experience in higher education. Two of the advisors worked at a four-year institution, the other at a tribally affiliated community college.

Ethical considerations. In accordance with current ethical standards in the counseling field (American Counseling Association, 2005), any identifying demographic data were removed or changed in order to ensure that interviewees were nonidentifiable and to protect the confidentiality of their responses. The interviews were conducted via telephone, electronic communication, or in person. Interviewees were informed that their responses were being recorded via handwritten notes, and that all information would be non-identifiable and confidential. Approval for this study was granted by the researchers’ university Institutional Review Board.

Interviews

The interviews were designed to explore field-based practitioners’ and clients’ perspectives about the factors that support or hinder progress into and through postsecondary education for students from an American Indian cultural background in the United States. The interviews were approximately 25 to 45 minutes in length. Two broad questions guided the interview process for advisees: (a) What were your experiences pursuing a higher education degree? and (b) What contexts or experiences influenced your path through higher education? Additional open-ended questions sought information regarding family status and family educational background; their traditional or nontraditional route through higher education; available support and resources provided by their families, high school program, college, community, and cultural groups; any obstacles experienced on their educational pathway; and the outcome of their career pursuits.

Two broad questions also guided the interview process with school counselors and advisors: (a) What are your experiences working with American Indian students who pursue higher education? and (b) What contexts or situations impacted their path through higher education, in a positive or a negative way? They were asked to respond to open-ended questions similar to those posed to the advisees, with the exception that they were reflecting on students who had successfully navigated through higher education, as well as those who had not.
Analysis of Interviews

The shared perspectives of interviewees (i.e., advisees, school counselors, and postsecondary advisors) were examined to obtain a multidimensional view of American Indians' transitions to higher education. Each interview transcript was analyzed primarily by two of the researchers to identify significant statements. Next, commonalities that represented clusters of meaning or themes were identified (Creswell, 2007). Finally, each researcher identified specific topics within themes. After this initial pass through the data, the two researchers met to compare identified themes and thematic topics. Discrepancies were discussed until a consensus among theme names and topics was reached—generally deciding between two similar theme labels. Where appropriate, the unique perspectives of each of the interviewees were also highlighted.

The second stage of analysis involved a joint re-examination of the themes and specific topics to see how they could be compared or combined to acquire a new understanding of the phenomenon. The themes were reviewed to establish whether patterns and relationships existed throughout all of the interviews. Finally, themes were compared across students, counselors, and academic advisors to identify commonalities and to better understand the phenomenon of American Indian academic development from multiple stakeholders’ perspectives.

Results

The results and comparisons among responses from students, school counselors, and academic advisors were grouped into the following major themes: academic preparation and value, personal variables, family support, support from other adults, choice of major, and culture.

Academic Preparation and Value

High school counselors, when reflecting on American Indian students’ higher education pathways, saw a strong connection among adherence to a college-preparatory curriculum, high personal standards that students set for themselves, and subsequent student success in college. As one counselor shared,

Being well prepared in high school by taking the college prep classes including a strong math, science, and English background is important. Additionally, having some idea of goals and what they wanted to do [as a career] helped them to be successful.
This theme was also evident in the college advisor and student interviews. Advisors noted that students who came to college without strong academic preparation needed to take remedial coursework which sometimes slowed their progress through the program. Home and school environments—that valued and expected student higher education pursuits—and students’ willingness to explore higher education options were cited as important factors. Students mentioned these same factors. One student explained that her high school counselor had encouraged her to take “higher level math and science courses,” which helped strengthen her college preparation.

Personal Variables

Across all interviews, resilience, self-confidence, and self-motivation emerged as necessary characteristics for postsecondary success. School counselors and college advisors viewed focus and goal-setting as key for this group. School counselors also saw that the ability to make wise choices impacted and promoted long-term success. Self-motivation was often related to social support provisions. One of the students reflected,

I really don’t know how I did it all. I had a lot of pep talks from a really close friend and my family when times seemed to be at their worst. But those talks and their motivation kept me going. I really just knew I had to start what I finished (sic), and my life would be more rewarding for my kids, as well as myself, when I was done.

One of the high school counselors illustrated the importance of resiliency in the following comment:

If they were persistent, that made a difference. They had to have an inner strength and resilience. Many came from families who were in some type of turmoil, but if they had resilience it made a difference. Family didn’t always have to be supportive—but the student had to be resilient.

Family Support

Across interviews, several forms of family support and encouragement were described as influencing student success. Families who held high expectations for their children, promoted the importance of education, and were active in their student’s high school experience fostered adolescents who were more successful during the transition to college. As students began their postsecondary career, families continued to offer support by encouraging them to stay at school,
keeping in contact, and providing for (when possible) financial and material needs. Students viewed family moral support and help with childcare as vital to their persistence in college. One of the students illustrated this concept through her discussion of how the childcare her parents provided allowed her to attend classes at night. A high school counselor shared this viewpoint, “I saw them [parents] encouraging attendance, good grades, [they] came to conferences, [and they were] very involved and interested in their child and in supporting them. They controlled their child’s out-of-school activities.”

A consistent thematic topic across interviews was the belief that families in which parents or other members had completed some postsecondary education seemed better able to assist students with educational pursuits. They shared an understanding of the process that was not available in families with no prior higher education experience. The same family members shared a sense of pride when the student was able to successfully complete a program. A student shared, “My mom is so proud and brags whenever she can—also my dad. My close friend saw what I accomplished and is eager to go to college in the fall.”

School counselors also held a belief that it was important for families to support students in pursuing educational opportunities that would eventually improve their lives. These families were willing to send their children off reservation to pursue educational opportunities that were not available in their area.

**Support From Other Adults**

School counselors agreed that student connections with other adults who would mentor students at both the secondary and postsecondary levels were important. This seemed to be particularly significant for those students who did not have strong family support. In reflecting upon those students who had left their home community to attend college, one counselor remarked, “They found someone and connected at the college—another student, (or) an advisor/teacher, and that somebody helped them stay strong. It needs to be someone at the college. A connection needs to be made, preferably with another Native American if possible, but it doesn’t have to be.”

College advisors felt that strong academic advisors who assisted students in building a course schedule were critical. It was emphasized that these connections needed to be made early in order to foster success. A student reflected,

...my advisor, Dr. M., she really pushed me when she had to and helped motivate me too. She understood what I had going on at home, work, and school, but she never took pity on me. She was like a second mom pushing me to the end.
Choice of Major

Students' choice of major was often influenced by existing employment and family circumstances. Both students interviewed earned degrees in early childhood education because they had been employed in child development centers where their supervisors had encouraged them to pursue higher education. Counselors noted that many students who obtained a postsecondary degree did not return to the reservation due to lack of employment opportunities in their major field. However, one college advisor noted that a degree alone might be the qualifying factor to allow one access to a job on a reservation, regardless of the major chosen. He shared, "If they return to the reservation, the degree will qualify them for a job, but not in their field unless it is medicine, education, or law." Conversely, one of the students grew up outside the reservation but now works on the reservation and expressed pride at being able to give back to her tribe. Thus, choice of major seemed to be intertwined with perceived career opportunities and somewhat dependent on contextual influences.

Culture

Cultural influences were described across interviews. According to advisors and counselors, students who were able to make connections with other American Indian students, faculty, and staff, and those who became involved in cultural groups on campus, appeared to be more successful than those students who did not make these connections. Relationships with other American Indian students who shared a similar background and heritage (regardless of tribal affiliation) gave students a sense of pride and connectedness. However, both student interviewees saw the cultural offerings on their campus as being less accessible than they would have preferred. One student commented, "I took a class called human relations, and I was able to share my culture in that class. But other than that, there was nothing for a Native American [American Indian] student attending [school name]." The other student shared that while cultural activities were available, they often were held at times that did not encourage working students to attend. Both student participants expressed a sense of cultural disconnect from higher education. While campus communities make an effort to provide cultural experiences, they do not always take into account other ecological factors, such as the lack of child care.

Another cultural theme that emerged from the interviews was the need to maintain connections with family and tribe members. When this connection is maintained, there is an opportunity for the student to serve as a mentor for
future generations. One student, who was hired to teach on the reservation after graduation, said

Some of my tribal members are proud to have a [tribe name] woman teaching here [on the reservation]. This was the only school I applied to, and I am glad I was brought on staff here. I really don’t see myself teaching anywhere else; I love working for my people and having a chance to better the next generation.

Discussion

The findings of this study complement previous ecological systems research on traditionally disadvantaged learners. Specifically, the perceptions of American Indian students who have successfully navigated their transition into higher education, as well as those of academic advisors and school counselors at the secondary and postsecondary levels were examined. This appears to be a new area of exploration and builds upon the work of Guillory & Wolverton (2008) who focused on the perceptions of students, state representatives, university faculty, and administrators without the perspective of their K-12 counterparts or academic advisors from the postsecondary setting. Several contextual factors were related to student success including strong academic preparation, motivation and self-confidence, family support, ongoing relationships with culturally sensitive faculty members and advisors, strong connections with culturally relevant peer groups, and a clear focus for the future. These findings are consistent with current academic advising and school counseling practices, which emphasize building on developmental and contextual factors to develop resources and programs that meet the needs of the traditionally disadvantaged learner (American School Counselor Association, 2005; Crumpton, 2005; Stead, 1996; Watson & Stead, 2002).

These findings were also consistent with the call for postsecondary programs to establish continuity between native and higher education cultures (Crumpton, 2005; Jones, 2005). In this study, both successful students and school counselors emphasized the importance of maintaining family and cultural connections for American Indian students in higher education. Families that supported student goals and valued the positive impact of continued education contributed to overall student success. Family members or mentors who had college experience provided encouragement and insights into navigating the postsecondary system.
The transition to college is particularly difficult for minority students who “evaluate the climate at best as insensitive to cultural differences and at worst as intentionally biased” (Jones, 2005, p. 144). Academic advisors and school counselors working with traditionally disadvantaged populations should account for possible poverty cofactors, such as family stress, lack of emotional support, lack of positive role models, and other ecological risk factors (Barnett, 2008; Payne, 2005). Findings from the study indicated that success in degree completion was often related to established supportive relationships, yet financial resources were not identified as crucial to student persistence. Previous studies have noted lack of resources as a barrier to higher education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). It may be that students with supportive relationships both at home and in the college setting have access to networking and institutional knowledge about the resources that are available. However, study findings also suggest that academic advising and school counseling strategies should focus on relationship building that considers connections to cultural identities.

A strength of this study is that factors were illuminated that promote successful American Indian degree completion, and these findings may be applicable for individuals working with other American Indian students at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Additionally, the perspectives of school counselors were examined. Unique to this study was the insight into factors specific to successful American Indian learners, including resilience and the high personal standards that students set for themselves. Previous studies have examined the perspectives of students and higher education staff, but to date no other studies have identified commonalities in the perspectives of successful students and both postsecondary academic advisors and school counselors. The multiple perspectives allowed for deeper analysis of similarities and differences from varying viewpoints. For example, while school counselors and academic advisors suggested opportunities to maintain cultural connections in higher education as important, students reported barriers that prevent them from attending cultural events on campus, such as work schedules and lack of child care. Finally, the researchers focused on strengths to examine developmental, contextual, and cultural contributions to student success, rather than focusing on barriers that prevent student success. The model in Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the interactions among system-level influences on higher education transitions and can be used within a strengths-based ecological perspective to help school staff, policy makers, and American Indian students identify necessary supports for successful transitions. While the model may be applied to disadvantaged learners as a whole, the perspectives in this article
illuminate issues that are specific to American Indian learners. For example, family support may be important for all disadvantaged students, but due to the greater interconnectedness among American Indian families (Heavy Runner & Marshall, 2003), family support is especially crucial. Heavy Runner and DeCelles (2002) indicate that when institutions engage family members in the college community,

the entire family develops a sense of belonging at the college and no longer feels resentful of the student spending time on campus. Establishing and maintaining a sense of “family,” both at home and at college, fortifies American Indian students’ academic persistence. (p. 30)

Limiting this study was the small sample of qualitative interviews that explored convergent perspectives on successful American Indian academic transitions. This warrants further research, with a focus on testing the conceptual model proposed in Figure 1. Indeed, Herring (1990) suggests that career myths among the American Indian minority group are propagated because of a lack of sufficient research in the area. The next step may be to test the robustness of the model with both American Indian and other native populations struggling with poverty, limited access to services, and the corresponding cofactors that put these groups at risk when transitioning into postsecondary education (Crumpton, 2005; Payne, 2005; Peavy, 1995).

**Recommendations**

Findings from this study may be useful for practitioners who work in K-12 schools, postsecondary advisors, social workers, and government agency staff. In order to facilitate a smoother transition for American Indian learners from the primary and secondary levels into higher education, academic expectations and supports should be congruent. Curriculum content aimed at promoting resilience, career awareness and exploration, and goal setting in elementary through middle school can prove beneficial for students especially when it is followed by opportunities for on-campus visits, job shadowing, and assistance with the college application process at the high school level. High school staff that help students to see the connection between what they are learning in the classroom and how that will fit with future career goals can further engage students in the learning process.
Encouraging family involvement in the career exploration process early on would not only lay the foundation for family support but also increase the likelihood of maintaining family and cultural connections for American Indian students in higher education. Providing parents assistance in navigating college, financial aid, and scholarship applications as well as tours of campuses is beneficial. Parents who have visited the setting in which their student may be entering and met with advisors and faculty may be more comfortable supporting this transition. New student orientations with a strong focus on inviting the entire family to participate also promote an important sense of inclusion.

Personal connections with advisors who can help students focus on the long-term benefits for community and family can help these students persist even when circumstances in their extended families cause them to feel they need to return to their home community midway through an academic term. More collaboration between two- and four-year institutions can create an even smoother route for students, and institutions can benefit from higher retention and completion rates. Researchers and practitioners should further investigate how best to empower traditionally disadvantaged learners and their families through respectful support of their cultural identity in the context of higher education. A follow-up study might be useful to examine the impact that successful degree completers have on future generations as well as the extent to which family and mentoring influences are developmentally, contextually, and culturally specific.

Findings from this study have implications for academic and career counseling with other groups of traditionally disadvantaged learners. As Peavy (1995) points out, career counseling within native cultures presents unique challenges. Heavy Runner and Marshall (2003) indicate that “most ‘First Nations’ peoples are dedicated to retaining their native cultural identity and, in many instances, interested in developing a bi-cultural ability to navigate harmoniously back and forth between native and dominant culture” (p. 16). Rather than viewing American Indian learners as at risk, educators may need to change their perspectives to viewing them at promise.
References


Note
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