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Academic Achievement through Cultural Autonomy: Enhancing Higher Education Persistence for Culturally Traditional American Indians

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Academic Achievement through Cultural Autonomy: Enhancing Higher Education Persistence for Culturally Traditional American Indians

Abstract

This session examines the contrasting experiences between groups of culturally traditional American Indian students and the college encounter. The session will discuss the practical implications emerging from the findings of a five-year research project. Policy and educational practice suggestions for making the predominantly non-Indian campus more accommodating for Native students will be explored.

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In the space of a few days, two American Indian college students were interviewed by the author. What was remarkable about these interviews is that the two individuals were otherwise striking similar. They were virtually the same in regard to their personal backgrounds, age, gender, academic potential and they shared a similar cultural orientation. Both were from South Dakota's Cheyenne River Reservation, men in their early twenties, they were bright and articulate, each demonstrating promising academic capability. What is more, both young men were Miniconjou of the Lakota who strongly valued the Native traditionalism of their people. Yet, within a week following the first interview, one young man had left school and returned to his home reservation while the other young man remained in college (and would eventually graduate from college).

It was a pattern that was to persist throughout the five years of the research reported in this paper. The culturally traditional American Indian college students divided into two groups largely based on the manner in which they responded to the cultural difficulties they encountered in college. There were those who perceived the costs associated with staying in college as too high and choose to leave school. Remaining in college for many of these students meant that there was a significant chance they would lose their cultural identity. It was a risk many were not willing to take. Yet, there were also those who used their cultural identity as a means to anchor their sense of purpose and they drew strength from it as a way to persevere in college.

The words of the two students described above are insightful on the dilemmas and choices each felt. The young Lakota who decided to leave college as a means to preserve his Native identity emphatically declared:

I believe in my Indian ways so much that I would quit school because our old ways are dying out! I don't want to change too much; I don't want to change too much! I want to intensify my cultural side. I mean this is a white man's world. I don't want to keep those (non-Indian values).

The young Lakota who remained in college explained his purpose and actions:

I am proud of being Indian. I am proud of our traditions and our ways. I want to help my people. And I felt like college was important so that I could do that... I am Indian but I can also be here. I guess you can say that I am here because I am Indian. It's like my Indian ness is a mask., a cultural mask. I put it on for all to see.

This paper explores the college experiences of culturally traditional American Indian college students who participated in a five year study on the nature of higher education experiences. Contained in this analysis is the examination of the dilemmas and the difficult choices they faced. The culturally traditional American Indian students who participated in this research choose different courses of action in their college encounters. Some decided to exit school while others remained on campus. Yet, almost ironically, ultimately they also held similar cultural objectives, both groups sought to retain and preserve their cultural identity. Emerging from the project was the question, why did these students, who shared such powerful goals, divided into two distinct groups.

This paper examines the contrasting experiences between these two types of culturally traditional American Indian college students and offers theoretical frameworks to account for the experiences of each group. Additionally, the paper discusses the practical implications emerging from the findings of the research. Namely, the paper will offer policy and educational practice suggestions for making the predominantly non-Indian campus more accommodating to Native students.

Presenter

Terry Huffman is a professor of sociology at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from Iowa State University. Dr. Huffman has been involved in American Indian education since the early 1980s and has authored two books on the subject, *Divergent Paths: Higher Education and Culturally Traditional American Indians*, forthcoming from Edwin Mellen Press and *Cultural Masks: Ethnic Identify and American Indian Higher Education*, Stone Creek Press. He has written more than twenty articles, book chapters and presentations on American Indian education and formerly served on the South Dakota American Indian Studies Council for the South Dakota Board of Regents. In 1990, his work on American Indian education was recognized by the South Dakota Council for Reconciliation.