



## Welcome to a new world: experiences of American Indian tribal college and university transfer students at predominantly white institutions

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### Welcome to a new world: experiences of American Indian tribal college and university transfer students at predominantly white institutions

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This study utilizes an Indigenous methodology and phenomenological methods to better understand the experiences of eight American Indian tribal college and university (TCU) students who transferred to four-year Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The participants attended TCUs and PWIs located in the Midwest, a geographic area that is understudied in analyses of American Indian college students, in contrast to the southwest or Great Plains. While many studies focus on the failure of American Indian college students, this study focuses on the attributes of successful American Indian college students. It specifically examines the relationship between the participants' interaction and engagement with their campus and their successful transition to a PWI. Transferring from a predominantly American Indian institution, the participants showed a lack of interest in interacting with non-native faculty, staff, and students and faced ignorance and stereotypes not present at TCUs. This paper has important implications for future research, theory, and practice related to the successful transition of American Indian students from TCUs to PWIs.

**Keywords:** American Indian; transfer students; tribal college

#### Introduction

The road to a four-year college degree for many American Indian students begins at one of the 37 Tribal College and Universities (TCUs) across the nation. The number of students transferring from TCUs to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) to attain a Bachelor's degree has been steadily increasing during the last decade (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2006). Yet, while American Indian students have been able to find success at TCUs they have not found the same level of success at four-year PWIs (Larimore and McClellan 2005). The percentage of degrees conferred for Bachelor's degrees over the last 10 years has remained at 0.7% for American Indians (US Department of Education 2010). American Indian students continue to struggle to achieve academic success at four-year institutions.

I would like to establish the use of terms for American Indian, Indian, Indigenous, and native. Various terms such as Native American, American Indian, Indian, First Nations people of Canada, native, and Indigenous have been used to describe people who are indigenous to North America. I recognize that tribal nations have

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their own names, in their own languages. However, for the purposes of this study, I will primarily use the term American Indian, but I interchangeably use aforementioned terminology – such as native, Indigenous, and Indian – to describe a group of people who share a similar historical colonization experience.

There continues to be little research on the experiences and success of American Indian TCU students transferring to four-year PWIs. What is known is that upon transferring to a four-year PWI, American Indian TCU transfer students are met with an array of institutional differences, including but not limited to institutional mission, racial make-up of student body, staff, and faculty, and the size of campus (Brown 2003; Dell 2000). Given the continuing low percentage of bachelor's degrees conferred to American Indian students at PWIs, it is important to understand how TCU transfer students successfully navigate and experience a PWI. This study examines the experience of eight TCU transfer students who achieved success in transferring to four-year PWIs, and specifically highlights their interaction and engagement with students, faculty, and staff at their PWIs. For the purposes of this study, success is defined as the process of American Indian transfer students achieving degree attainment or evidence that degree attainment is imminent at a PWI.

### **Literature review on American Indian student success in higher education**

There is an assortment of literature addressing the persistence and success factors of American Indian students in college. The literature on American Indian student persistence and success tends to focus on students who begin and end at four-year institutions, but seldom accounts for those who attend TCUs before transferring. The research on American Indian students often reveals a variety of traditional college-going factors that impact persistence and success in college (Green and Foster 2003; Pavel and Inglebret 2007), but I will highlight three key factors that are often overlooked in these studies: social support, positive relationships with faculty, and racism in higher education. In addition, I will provide a brief background on TCUs and Indian education.

#### ***Social support***

American Indian students benefit from institutions that exhibit a commitment to diversity (Benjamin, Chambers, and Reiterman 1993; Lundberg 2007; Weaver 2000), specifically institutions that house an American Indian program office on campus (Jackson, Smith, and Hill 2003). American Indian students covet interaction with other American Indian students and American Indian student groups and cultural organizations often provide the space for those desired interactions to happen (Reeves 2006; Yurkovich 2001). Like many other underrepresented students, American Indian students miss their families and cultural activities at PWIs, but American Indian organizations or other related student groups often serve as a family unit on campus (Jackson et al. 2003; Reeves 2006; Villalpando 2003). Even though there is a lack of formal research on the role of social support in the success of TCU transfer students and whether they have access or exposure to an American Indian community on campus, the existing research on American Indian students at four-year PWIs provides suggestive evidence that these are important needs for TCU transfer students.

### ***Positive relationships with faculty***

The literature shows that positive experiences (Brown and Kurpius 1997; Jackson et al. 2003) and meaningful relationships with faculty members who invest time in helping American Indian students in and out of the classroom (Pavel and Padilla 1993; Reeves 2006; Tate and Schwartz 1993; Weaver 2000) enhance American Indian student persistence. For example, Dells (2000) found that American Indian TCU transfer students in North Dakota who transferred to a four-year PWI showed academic integration through positive faculty relationships as a factor in their academic success. In addition, Taylor (1999) and Tierney (1996) found that American Indian students prefer and benefit from relationships with faculty members who are American Indian. We see the effect of this influence when examining how American Indian faculty members at TCUs lend themselves to more opportunities for positive faculty relationships than larger PWIs.

### ***Racism in higher education***

Racism for American Indian students in college comes in the form of feelings of isolation from being singled out based on race, being stereotyped by faculty, staff, and students on campus, and inaccurate information regarding American Indians in the textbooks (Jackson et al. 2003). Perceived acts of racism from being culturally different from the majority of students on campus is a significant barrier for American Indian students at PWIs (Brown and Kurpius 1997; Pewewardy and Frey 2004; Tate and Schwartz 1993; Taylor 1999; Weaver 2000). In addition, American Indians are susceptible to micro-aggressions, which are, “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward People of Color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000, 60). American Indian students are clearly less likely to experience acts of racism and micro-aggressions while on campus at a TCU than they are at a PWI.

### ***Background on TCUs and Indian education***

The history of American Indian students in western education has been filled with many failures, obstacles, and wrongful agendas (Boyer 1997; Child 1998; Dejong 1993). Indian education began to take a philosophical change in direction during the self-determination era, which coincided with the development of TCUs (Dejong 1993). The history of TCUs begins with a story about communities that were isolated, had high unemployment rates, and had no immediate access to higher education (American Indian Higher Education Consortium 1999).

The focus of TCUs is to reflect and honor the culture, values, language, and history of their tribal nation (see Benham and Stein 2003; Warner and Gipp 2009). Tribal colleges are institutions of higher education and their uniqueness lies in their mission to ground American Indian cultural values into the teaching, learning, and curriculum of the institution. Cheryl Crazy Bull, the president of Sinte Gleska University, on the intent of TCUs, states “we intended to raise a bunch of radicals with the skills to recognize and address social injustice” (Ambler 2005, 9). Tribal colleges were created to meet a need in the late 1960s and as they continue today they are still in a struggle to meet old and new challenges.

## Methods and methodology

I used hermeneutic phenomenological methods in the current study to allow successful American Indian TCU transfer students at PWIs to share their stories in their own words.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is attentive to the description of a lived experience and places value on the interpretive process of deriving meaning in a lived experience (van Manen 1990). In conjunction with hermeneutic methods, I used an Indigenous methodology to guide my study. I used the concept of an Indigenous methodology as one where the researcher understands the role of Indigenous history, culture, language, and self-determination in the lives of Indigenous Peoples (Benham 2007; Louis 2007; Smith 1999; Swisher 1996). Indigenous Peoples for this study is defined as the collective struggle for self-determination and shared colonial experience of the world's colonized peoples (Smith 1999). In the spirit of using an Indigenous methodology, I respected local cultural protocols throughout the process of the study and made a conscious effort to develop a research question that would benefit American Indian communities. The research question guiding this study is: *What are the experiences of American Indian TCU graduates who transferred from TCUs and succeeded at four-year PWIs?*

### *Theoretical framework*

Pavel and Inglebret's (2007) American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) student success model provided the theoretical framework for this study. Using an Indigenous lens, like the Pavel and Inglebret (2007) model, that places value on American Indian culture will provide a culturally relevant analysis that is often missing from educational research on American Indian students. The American Indian student success model maintains that cultural identity, individual, family, community, and tribal nations are interconnected and play a critical role in an American Indian student's program enrollment or journey through college (Pavel and Inglebret 2007). The AI/AN student success model contends that cultural identity is critical to academic success and returning to serve native communities is a cultural value and goal for American Indian students.

### *Participant selection*

The criteria for selecting American Indian TCU students for this study included: (1) being a tribally enrolled member, (2) a student who attended at least two semesters at a Midwest TCU and transferred to a PWI, (3) recently graduated from a PWI or accumulated at least 24 credits, and (4) a GPA in good academic standing. The selection criteria were chosen to allow for participants who have had time to understand the institutional culture of a TCU, experienced success at a PWI, and are in good academic standing and in position to graduate at a PWI.

### *Site selection*

The selected participants in the current study attended either Mgizi TCU (pseudonym) or Ademin TCU (pseudonym): both are located in the same state in the Midwest. Mgizi TCU (over 500 students) and Ademin (over 100 students) are accredited institutions located on federally recognized Indian reservations. Midwest

TCUs were selected in part due to a paucity of research on TCUs that are not located in the southwest or northern plains. Between the eight participants from the two TCUs they transferred to four PWIs, Big State University (public, 40,000 students), Water University (public, 2800 students), Hub University (public, 27,000 students), and Outpost University (private, 100 students at satellite campus).

### ***Data collection***

Data collection for the current study consisted of personal reflection and notes from the researcher after the interviews, one-hour open-ended interviews with the participants, and a second half-hour follow-up interview. I used my reflections from the interviews to frame questions for following interviews with other participants as well as talking points for the second interview. The second interviews took place anywhere from one and a half to four months after the first interview. At the beginning of the second interview, the participants were given the preliminary themes that I developed from the first round of interviews. The structure of the follow-up interview concluded with a conversation about anything the participants felt was left out about their experience at a PWI.

### ***Data analysis***

All participants were given pseudonyms; the pseudonyms were taken from the native language of the tribal nations of the participants. The analysis process consisted of listening to and reading through the data several times for general understanding of the phenomenon prior to any thematic analysis. The process of thematic analysis is interpreting insightful meaning of a lived experience (van Manen 1990). After transcribing the first interviews, I began analysis of the interviews by isolating and pulling out significant statements. In order to ensure goodness, that is, how meaning making was developed and interpreted (Arminio and Hultgren 2002), I kept a reflective journal on my interaction with the participants and how I was representing the meaning making of the participants. In addition, in order to provide documentation on the authenticity and trustworthiness of the interpreted meaning of the participants, I utilized member checks, triangulation, and peer debriefing.

### ***Profile of participants***

Given the specific criteria for participant selection, the number of eligible participants for the study was limited. However, after interviews with eight participants saturation was achieved. The eight participants had a variety of different backgrounds and paths along their journey from a TCU to a PWI. There were six females, two males, and the average age was 35 for the participants, in fact only one participant was under the age of 30. Six of the participants spent most of their life on the reservation and two spent most of their youth living in an inner city. The average number of years out of school for the participants was 10 years, and only one went to the TCU the first year out of high school. Seven of the participants lived on their reservation or near their reservation while attending the PWI; only one left and she went to a school four hours away from her reservation. The other participants traveled less than 20 miles from their reservation to their four-year PWI. Six of the participants worked full-time while taking classes and two were full-time students relying on scholarships and financial aid for their income.



## Presentation of themes

### *Various levels of engagement with campus*

Naanan: I just want to go to class and do what I have to do and come back home.

Most of the American Indian TCU transfer students focused solely on doing what it takes to earn their degree, which meant they had minimal interest in engaging with the campus other than what is required to pass their classes. Specifically the participants wanted minimal engagement and interaction with non-native faculty, students, and program departments on campus. Conversely, while the participants wanted minimal interaction with non-native aspects of their PWIs, they did covet interaction with American Indian faculty, staff, and program departments at the PWIs. The engagement and interaction with the PWI campus theme centers on the participants' differences in interaction with native and non-native faculty, students, and departments at their PWIs.

### *Differences in interaction with non-native and native communities at PWI*

Almost all of the participants kept interaction with non-native faculty, staff, and students to a minimum. The participants' interaction with non-native faculty varied, but most of the participants did not cite interaction with non-native faculty and students as a primary factor in their success while at their PWIs. Kaagego talked about her mission for each class. She commented, "I try not to have any contact with my professors outside of class. I'm really vocal in class, but outside of class I don't want anything to do with them." Ngodwaaswi commented on her interaction with non-native students. She said, "I really have no contact, I just go to class and go back to work." The participants were not anti non-native faculty or students, they were just focused on what they wanted out of their collegiate experience and interaction, and developing relationships with non-native faculty and students was not a necessary component to their success.

The American Indian TCU transfer students' use of non-native departments at the PWI was minimal, but the academic advising and financial aid office were the most used services. The participants' meetings with their academic advisor were often uneventful and relegated to figuring out what classes they needed to graduate. Kaagego said, "I only meet with my advisor once a semester to figure what classes to take in order to graduate as fast as possible." The participants believed their interaction with academic advising was not very useful.

The department the participants mentioned the most was the financial aid office; unfortunately, it was from a negative perspective. In general, when talking about the financial aid office the participants did so with bitterness. Niizh described the situation with a particular financial aid employee. Niizh commented:

This is what she (Financial aid staff member) said, "this Indian tuition waiver right here is a gift from us (Hub University) for you to use." And I (Niizh) was like, I don't think so, you need to reword what you are saying. She (Financial aid staff member) was like, "that is how we classify it", and I (Niizh) was like well you need to reword what you are saying. I said it is not a gift, you might, whatever you are thinking, you need to say this is what you are entitled to.

Several of the participants mentioned that their financial aid office seemed to have issues with American Indian students receiving a tuition waiver.

However, most of the participants embraced the idea of interacting with American Indian faculty, students, and departments on campus. Most of the participants coveted interaction and experiences with American Indian faculty and students at their PWIs because they believed it would give or gave them a sense of belonging in the academy and provide comfort for them while on campus. Niizh described why taking a class with an American Indian faculty member would be important to him. He commented, “you feel more like you belong if you have more native faculty.” Niiwin talked about the positive vibes he got from crossing paths with other native students on campus. He stated, “native students here are few and far between. Not everyone is getting the same degree or classes. When you see another native it brightens up your day.” The lack of American Indian faculty and students on campus left many of the participants feeling like the PWI is not for American Indian people because they rarely see any in the academy.

Lastly, the participants found American Indian departments to be very helpful and useful. Kaagego talked about the importance of American Indian departments. She said, “I don’t think even (Big State University) recognizes what they have in their Native American department and how important that is to Native American students.” Niizh, on the importance of the American Indian department at his PWI, simply stated, “I mean they believe in me.” The American Indian department was useful as a resource in navigating the university and getting connected to the American Indian community on campus.

### *Overcoming ignorance and stereotypes*

Niizh: They ask do you live in teepees? I’m like yeah and I ride a buffalo to school.

Kaagego: So [ignorance and stereotypes] is really hard and sometimes I walk out of the class wanting to punch somebody in the head and sometimes I want to cry and sometimes I want to yell.

American Indian TCU transfer students were cognizant of the probability that they would encounter stereotypes, ignorance, and racism while at their PWIs and in fact most of the participants dealt with those issues on their PWI campuses. The participants did get discouraged by the various stereotypes and ignorance, which often impacted their classroom and campus experience. The overcoming ignorance and stereotypes themes are sectioned into two sub-themes: educating misinformation and impact of ignorance and stereotypes.

### *Educating misinformation*

American Indian TCU transfer students believe that it is their obligation to inform and educate those faculty, staff, and students at four-year PWIs who hold inaccurate portrayals of American Indian people and culture. The participants believed educating on the misinformation was a necessary step in redefining what people know and think about American Indians. With so few American Indian students at PWIs, the participants often found themselves having to be American Indian educators. Naanan talked about taking time out of her busy schedule to educate others on



American Indians. She commented, “I think they need to be schooled on stuff like that; what are you going to do, let them keep those ideas without straightening them out?”

The consequences of not educating inaccurate views of American Indian people and culture outweighed the energy used to constantly be the purveyor of American Indian knowledge. Niizh talked about the stress of being a spokesperson for American Indian issues. He said:

Sometimes, like thinking about it in retrospect, I am like man I hate it. But when it comes right down to it and the situation is right there, it’s like a reaction, so I am not even thinking about should I do it. I have a big mouth, whatever. I just don’t want to be that person who lets ignorance keep going, I’m like you know what, you are going to be a little bit smarter, because you are just dumb and I am going to give you some information.

The participants accepted their role as American Indian educators because they believed they were making a difference by taking time to educate others about American Indian people and culture.

#### *Impact of ignorance and stereotypes*

Racial stereotypes and ignorance played a role in some of the American Indian students’ disengagement from the classroom and university. Naanan talked about her thoughts heading into class. She said:

I get nervous when I go into a class. I know people have their preconceived ideas about natives and I can overlook it, but there is just a feeling inside of what people are going to think of me.

Overall the participants were able to overcome and handle stereotypes and ignorance while on campus, but on a few occasions, racially charged moments became very stressful and overwhelming.

Kaagego and Ngodwaaswi experienced racial incidents at their PWIs that exemplified the impact racial ignorance and stereotypes can have on American Indian students in the classroom. Kaagego, on her state of mind following a classroom incident where the professor made several racially sensitive comments, stated: “It pissed me off, not only do I have to sit there and listen to it, it’s a lecture class, with the knowledge that another 200 people are in the class not getting the right information.” Kaagego’s racial experience ended up with her no longer attending classes and her experience left her very hesitant and wary of future classes that she had to take at her PWI.

For Ngodwaaswi, her racial incident did not end with her no longer attending class, but it did leave her feeling very uncomfortable. Ngodwaaswi, talking about what happened in her Business Ethics class, said:

In one of my classes, my instructor was talking about something and it ended up being a big deal, and I didn’t mean for it to be a big deal. She was talking, and she was using examples, and she said, we got this Indian chief and he wants to kill people for not following the rules basically something like that. And then people in the class started saying ‘kill the chief, kill the chief’. Oh my gosh! I felt so uncomfortable and anyway it turned into a big fiasco.

The experience left Ngodwaaswi fearful and nervous anytime Native Americans were mentioned in any of her classes while at the PWI.

## Discussion

The guiding question for the study was: *What are the experiences of American Indian TCU graduates who transferred from TCUs and succeeded at four-year PWIs?* The TCU transfer participants upon arriving at their PWIs noticed the lack of American Indian faculty, students, and staff in comparison to their TCUs. Pavel and Inglebret (2007) advocate for positive relationships with faculty, staff, and administrative departments and other studies have shown positive and meaningful interaction with faculty to be a factor in American Indian student success and persistence at college (see Brown and Kurpius 1997; Jackson et al. 2003; Pavel and Padilla 1993; Reeves 2006; Tate and Schwartz 1993; Weaver 2000). However, for the TCU transfer participants, developing positive and meaningful interactions with non-native faculty, students, and departments was not a factor or a desire in their persistence and success at their PWIs.

The TCU transfer participants did covet meaningful interactions with native faculty, students, and departments though. The literature suggests that while American Indian students prefer a positive relationship with American Indian faculty, the racial/ethnic status of faculty members is not a significant factor in the need for positive faculty relationships (Taylor 1999; Tierney 1996). This study arrived at a different conclusion and found that the racial/ethnic status of faculty members did matter to the participants. Furthermore, this study did not support Locks et al.'s (2008) finding that having a sense of being a part of campus and having positive interaction with White peers was an important component to success and persistence for Students of Color. For most of the TCU transfer participants, interaction with non-native students was not desired or a necessary component of their success at PWIs.

For the participants in the current study, academic advising and financial aid were the two most cited academic services in regards to their experience at PWIs. Advising and the financial aid office have been shown to be the most useful services on campus for community college transfer students (Berger and Malaney 2003; Flaga 2006; Harbin 1997). However, while academic advising and financial aid were often cited in the experience at a PWI for the participants, it was not always positive or useful.

A second theme of the TCU participants' experience at their PWIs was dealing with and overcoming ignorance and stereotypes. A barrier for American Indian students in college is dealing with ignorance, racism, and alienation due to being a member of a racial/ethnic group that is different from the majority of campus (Brown and Kurpius 1997; Jackson et al. 2003; Pewewardy and Frey 2004; Tate and Schwartz 1993; Taylor 1999; Weaver 2000). The research on ignorance and stereotypes is consistent with the findings in the study given that TCU transfer participants did experience acts of ignorance and stereotypes while on campus and in the classroom at their PWIs. As a result, several of the participants were worried about encountering future acts of ignorance and stereotypes while at their PWIs.

A useful method the participants used in overcoming ignorance and stereotypes was to become American Indian educators. A common issue faced by American

Indians in colleges is that they are often placed in an uncomfortable position and asked to be the voice for all American Indians on American Indian issues (Brayboy 2003; Deloria 2004). However, the participants in the current study embraced the role of being American Indian educators who provide accurate information about their experiences as American Indians. The participants believed it was better that they give their opinions and information rather than let less informed people talk about American Indians, or worse yet, let individuals walk around with inaccurate information.

### **Recommendations**

The experience of successful TCU transfer students at PWIs is relevant information for tribal college administrators, faculty, and students; administrators, faculty, and students at PWIs; American Indian high school students; American Indian communities; and anyone concerned about the success of American Indian college students. I have two recommendations to help American Indian TCU students succeed at PWIs.

#### ***Recommendation one: American Indians in key departments at PWIs***

While the participants may have succeeded without significant interaction with non-native faculty and staff on campus, they would benefit from positive interaction with a variety of academic and student service departments, such as a writing center, financial aid, and advising to name a few. PWIs could help their American Indian students by having American Indian faculty and staff in departments or areas other than those designed for diversity or American Indian studies.

#### ***Recommendation two: help PWI faculty and staff understand underlying assumptions***

Many of the participants encountered various degrees of stereotypes and ignorance while on campus, which resulted in students feeling uncomfortable while in class and not wanting to go back to class. It is important for PWIs to educate their faculty, administrators, and students on their underlying assumptions or bias in regard to American Indian people. PWIs should provide required training for non-native faculty, administrators, and students to help them understand their own underlying assumptions concerning American Indian stereotypes.

### **Conclusion**

The current study explored the experiences of successful American Indian tribal college students who transferred to four-year PWIs. The participants attended tribal colleges and PWIs from the same state located in the Midwest. While the study provided a glimpse of the experience of tribal college transfer students at four-year PWIs, it was not all-inclusive and future studies should be developed. American Indian students continue to struggle in college and the current study provided a peek at the experience of successful American Indian students at PWIs. The themes highlighted on-campus interaction for the participants and the critical role their experience on campus had in their success and persistence.

### Notes on contributor

Matthew Van Alstine Makomenaw is an enrolled member of the Grand Traverse Bay Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians. He is currently the director of the American Indian Resource Center and adjunct faculty member for the Educational Leadership & Policy Department at the University of Utah. His research interests include American Indian higher education, Indigenous methodologies, diversity in higher education, and student success and retention.

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