

4

The author offers insights into perceptions and expectations that tribal leaders and Native American parents have of higher education.

Perspectives of American Indian Nation Parents and Leaders

Raymond D. Austin (Navajo)

The idea that American Indians and Alaska Natives should be educated in the Western institutions of higher learning so that they can participate in the Western ways of life is older than the United States. Thousands of pages of official policies, laws, court decisions, studies, and reports attest that educating American Indians in Western ways has always been a Euro-American obsession. Education for American Indians by Euro-Americans, however, has produced few laudable achievements, because its proponents did not bother to consult with American Indian parents, American Indian communities, and American Indian leaders about their children's education.

American Indians have been studying at the colleges and universities in this country for 350 years now, yet the key people at these institutions—administrators, student services staff, and faculty—can claim no more than exiguous knowledge about the American Indian students on their campuses. If institutions of higher education want to improve their American Indian retention and graduation rates, they must include American Indian views and expectations in their planning. To date, however, these institutions have expressed little interest in knowing the views of tribal leaders and the parents of their American Indian students. Although not presuming to represent the view of all leaders or all parents, this chapter seeks to offer insights into perceptions and expectations that tribal leaders and parents have of higher education. The chapter discusses five major areas: tribal legal status, funding for American Indian college students, support for American Indian students, cooperative relationships between universities and American Indian nations, and respect for American Indian cultures and languages.

Tribal Legal Status

Most Americans know of the two sovereigns—federal and state—operating in the United States, but most are not aware that American Indian nations form a third sovereign. The United States Constitution and nearly 175 years of United States Supreme Court decisions have recognized the American Indian tribes as limited-sovereign nations possessing inherent powers of self-government, which necessarily includes the power to govern their internal relations and regulate their territories. The American Indian nations interact with each other, the U.S. government, and the state governments on a government-to-government basis. This relationship underlies the many intergovernmental agreements that the officials of these sovereigns have signed over the years.

It is easy for colleges and universities to simply dismiss students who are American Indian as just another minority group clamoring for special attention, but things are not that simple. Unlike other minority groups, American Indians have “maintained a special relationship to American society and its governing bodies” since the early days of the republic (Woodcock and Alawiye, 2001, p. 810). Although the American public has strong sentiments about equality and equal opportunity, federal policies, laws, and court decisions have created separate standards for American Indians pursuant to the unique federal-tribal relationship (called trust relationship)—a political relationship deeply embedded in the nation’s historical dealings with its original inhabitants. Awareness of this special relationship would help key college and university officials better understand their American Indian students, the students’ tribes, and the responsibilities the universities have assumed by admitting American Indian students.

Support for American Indian Students

American Indian students are an invisible minority on most campuses; and institutional apathy for their well-being has fostered misunderstanding, miscommunication, stereotyping, campus racism, and marginalization of American Indian students. University information that shows American Indian student enrollment counts and graduation and dropout rates can say a lot about an institution’s level of commitment to its American Indian students, American Indian programs, and overall campus diversity. These statistics can influence the parents of potential American Indian college students, particularly those living on reservations, when selecting a university. A university that works hard at recruiting and retaining students who are American Indian usually enjoys a large American Indian enrollment and favorable retention and graduation rates for those students. American Indian parents will gladly send their children to a university that values its American Indian students as part of the university community.

Parental Expectations. American Indian parents (like potential American Indian college students) usually favor a university with a large American Indian enrollment and positive retention and graduation rates as the university to attend. A large American Indian enrollment allows the students to develop a support system to help each other. The university usually has programs that give special attention to the needs of students who are American Indian such as a residence wing for freshman and sophomore American Indian students, precollege orientation for American Indian students, socials to connect American Indian students with each other, group registration for American Indian students, and mentors and tutors who are American Indian. Moreover, universities with large American Indian student enrollments normally have American Indian faculty and administrators, American Indian studies programs, majors and minors in American Indian programs, working relationships with American Indian nations and tribal communities, and faculty knowledgeable about American Indian issues. These factors also carry tremendous weight when American Indian parents and students choose a university.

American Indian parents do not want their children to start college without assistance, nor do they want their children overwhelmed with college adjustment problems. American Indian students, particularly those from reservations, can find the freshman year of college daunting. Adjustment problems and culture shock can send even the most academically qualified Indian student packing a month into the semester. Universities can relieve the anxiety by making graduate and upper-division students who are American Indians available to help new American Indian students maneuver the college maze. Programs and functions that connect American Indian students to each other and to American Indian faculty and administrators can also provide much-needed support.

American Indian parents want their children to establish good relationships with their professors. A professor knows when a student is having problems and should take the initiative to help that student. A professor should recommend the American Indian student to student services if he or she is unable to help. A caring professor can prevent the American Indian student from acting on the "I should just go home" feeling. Student services can also practice preventive measures by tracking at-risk Indian students throughout the school year and quickly helping when the need arises.

Tribal Expectations. Leaders of American Indian tribes have unique expectations when it comes to higher education for their students. They want American Indian students to soak up Western knowledge, place that knowledge within the context of their cultures and languages, and return home to better their communities. Tribal expectations cannot be fulfilled unless American Indian students remain in college. Tribes have therefore given gifts to universities with instructions to do everything possible to retain their students and improve the American Indian graduation rate. These gifts should be used to provide the students who meet the university's

definition of *American Indian* with academic tutoring, counseling, mentoring, emergency grants or loans, and other services to improve the retention rate of American Indian students.

University and American Indian Nation Partnerships

There are many areas in which American Indian nations and institutions of higher education cooperate (or should cooperate) to address Indian country problems and needs. Universities are repositories of knowledge and expertise, so American Indian nations desire mutually beneficial relationships with them. The tribes know that the institutions they can turn to for help maintain a core group of American Indian students; have American Indian faculty or faculty knowledgeable about Indian issues; and offer American Indian studies programs, American Indian law programs, American Indian education programs, or other programs that train students for work with American Indian communities and American Indian nation governments.

Research Partnerships. Occasionally, tribal officials encounter problems and issues that require study by outside experts. The tribes' unique sovereign status can generate eclectic issues that require specialized knowledge and skill. American Indian tribes may also encounter social, health, or economic problems that require specialized inquiry within the tribe's cultural context; and a tribe-university effort might be necessary. The American Indian diabetes epidemic is one such example. These kinds of problems and issues require university and tribe agreements that contain guidelines for the research or study and the methods of reporting findings and recommendations to tribal officials. Unique issues arise in the fields of American Indian education, American Indian health, and reservation economics; and these areas produce prime opportunities for tribe and university partnerships.

Tribes Need Graduates. Very few American Indians have earned bachelor's degrees. Only 9.3 percent of the American Indian population in the United States, ages twenty-five and older, had earned undergraduate degrees by 1995 compared to 20.3 percent of the non-Indian population (Dingman, Mroczka, and Brady, 1995). Even fewer American Indians hold graduate and professional degrees. Because tribes drastically need college-educated talent, universities should improve on the number of American Indians receiving degrees in the fields of law, medicine, business, American Indian language and culture preservation, agriculture, education, health, engineering, administration, and management. Some universities have accepted the challenge to graduate more American Indians in these fields, and we applaud them. More colleges and universities should join the effort. American Indian college graduates are needed to work with tribal communities, schools that educate American Indian children, health care providers, tribe-owned businesses, and American Indian nation governments. Tribal leadership also

needs American Indians with graduate and professional degrees to do research and help develop Indian policy.

Training Teachers and Administrators. The field of American Indian education is chronically short of American Indian teachers, principals, and superintendents. American Indians with degrees in education are needed to move American Indian education forward. Those graduates have knowledge of American Indian cultures and languages that make them ideally suited for working with schools that educate American Indian children, with American Indian pupils and their parents, and with the local American Indian communities. The teachers and administrators that American Indian education needs most are those capable of using American Indian cultures and traditional teaching methods to motivate and educate American Indian children. We know that local control of schools promotes community and parent involvement in education. The school becomes the hub of community life on a reservation. Community-oriented schools have even helped boost economic development opportunities in American Indian communities (Szasz, 1999). American Indian teachers and administrators who know their cultures and apply them in the schools and tribal communities are the key to local control of schools and American Indian education shedding its assimilationist practices.

University officials who have experience with American Indian issues know that educators who are American Indian have positively influenced reservation schools and empowered tribal communities, so they have accepted the challenge to graduate more teachers and administrators who are American Indian. For example, some colleges and universities have joined with the Navajo Nation to develop teacher-training programs that accommodate Navajo students, Navajo culture, and the rural Navajo lifestyle. Schools serving Navajo children on the Navajo Nation need skilled Navajo teachers who can integrate Navajo culture, history, and language into the curriculum. When it comes to teaching American Indian children, knowing only Western teaching methods is not enough. The differences between American Indian cultures and American mainstream culture produce challenges that require application of both Western and traditional American Indian teaching methods.

Distance Education. Some colleges and universities are helping American Indian education by instructing their college students using distance education programs. Students enrolled in distance education programs work in their communities during the day and attend college classes using either the Internet or other telecommunications technology in the evening. University distance education has great potential for American Indians who reside on rural reservations (Sanchez, Stuckey, and Morris, 1998). American Indians, like other Americans, value education; but family and cultural obligations, financial hardships, and employment often make attending college far from home difficult. The key to successful distance education for American Indians is cultural sensitivity: the college must

understand that the students are “part of the cultural community,” and it must be “sensitive to the parameters of that community, recognizing that ‘distance’ can be both cultural and geographic, and that effective learning requires the reduction of both” (p. 7).

Tribal Colleges. Tribal colleges have worked miracles in American Indian higher education: “Tribal colleges have proven their ability to enroll students who were not served by higher education, to graduate students who have dropped out of other institutions, and to sponsor successful community development projects” (Pavel, 1999, p. 249). Tribal colleges enroll more than thirty thousand students (Boyer, 2002). If we want to move Indian higher education to the next level and improve on the American Indian matriculation and graduation rates, we have to include tribal colleges in the plan.

While operating under the most trying circumstances, the tribal colleges have been able to retain their students and help raise the college matriculation rate of American Indians. They have significant knowledge of strategies for retaining American Indian students that mainstream colleges and universities could use (Pavel, 1992). Tribal colleges are also committed to preserving and revitalizing American Indian cultures and languages, which could lead to mutually beneficial partnerships with mainstream institutions. Mainstream colleges and universities would be wise to seek out mutually beneficial partnerships with tribal colleges.

Tribal colleges perform a critical role in the ongoing mission to graduate more teachers, administrators, and other professionals who are American Indians. Some tribal colleges have joined with four-year institutions by developing and offering programs that allow American Indian students to complete their first two years of study at the tribal college and then transfer to the university to complete the remaining major requirements (Pavel, Inglebret, and Banks, 2001). Tribal colleges can work with mainstream institutions to make distance education programs available to American Indian students who live in remote areas. The cooperation and goodwill between tribal colleges and mainstream universities should expand to more programs, including nursing, preservation of language and culture, natural resources, economic development, and fields in which tribes and tribal communities need college-educated American Indian professionals.

Respect American Indian Cultures and Languages

American Indians have 350 years of experience with Western higher education in the United States. For the majority of this time, Western higher education has relegated Indian cultures to the category of myth while anointing Western perspectives with the status of truth. This method of education has produced American Indian college graduates who are at odds with their own American Indian communities. The conflicted graduate cannot function effectively in either mainstream society or the American Indian society. American Indian college graduates indoctrinated with

Western perspectives have caused turmoil within their tribes by favoring Western values, exploitation, and economics over their own cultures, values, and beliefs. Consequently, corporations have snatched up tribal natural resources for pennies and left tribes with ravaged lands, destroyed sacred sites, and polluted air and water. American Indian college graduates have a duty to use their Western-acquired technical skills and knowledge within the American Indian context when working with tribal governments and communities.

American Indians are revitalizing their cultures and languages all across America. There must be respect for American Indian cultures, languages, land, and all our relatives in the natural world. Institutions of higher education can help by acknowledging that American Indian cultures and languages are as essential to human survival as any other subject. Colleges and universities should demonstrate that American Indians matter by offering courses on American Indian history, cultures, and languages; encouraging internships with tribal governments and communities; inviting American Indian leaders and elders as speakers; and promoting faculty and student exchange programs with tribal colleges.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Colleges and universities can prevent and eliminate existing misconceptions and miscommunications by sponsoring American Indian cultural awareness programs at which faculty, administrators, and non-Native students can exchange information and concerns with tribal leaders, American Indian parents, and American Indian students. Tribal leaders and parents should be invited to roundtable discussions to give their views on matters that affect American Indian students, including recruitment, retention, high school preparation, summer precollege programs, adequate financial aid, student support programs, integration of tribal culture into courses, growth in the number of American Indian faculty and administrators, and the elimination of racism and prejudice. Every avenue that is conducive to the academic and social success of American Indian students in college should be explored. The tribal officials, American Indian parents, and tribal communities must likewise do their part by supporting and encouraging their students to take advantage of higher education and graduate. Challenges abound in American Indian higher education, but through communication and cooperation tribes and universities can produce American Indian college graduates who are in tune with tribal societies.

References

- Boyer, P. "Defying the Odds." *Tribal College Journal*, 2002, 14(2), 12–19.
- Dingman, S. M., Mroccka, M. A., and Brady, J. V. "Predicting Academic Success for American Indian Students." *Journal of American Indian Education*, 1995, 34(2), 10–17.

- Pavel, D. M. *American Indians and Alaska Natives in Higher Education: Research on Participation and Graduation*. ERIC Digest. Charleston, W.Va.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1992. (ED 348 197)
- Pavel, D. M. "American Indians and Alaska Natives in Higher Education: Promoting Access and Achievement." In K. G. Swisher and J. W. Tippeconnic III (eds.), *Next Steps: Research and Practice to Advance Indian Education*. Charleston, W.Va.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1999.
- Pavel, D. M., Inglebret, E., and Banks, S. R. "Tribal Colleges and Universities in an Era of Dynamic Development." *Peabody Journal of Education*, 2001, 76(1), 50–72.
- Sanchez, J., Stuckey, M. E., and Morris, R. "Distance Learning in Indian Country: Becoming the Spider on the Web." *Journal of American Indian Education*, 1998, 37(3), 1–17.
- Szasz, M. C. *Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-Determination Since 1928*. (3rd ed.) Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999.
- Woodcock, D. B., and Alawiye, O. "The Antecedents of Failure and Emerging Hope: American Indians and Public Higher Education." *Education*, 2001, 121(4), 810–820.

RAYMOND D. AUSTIN, J.D. (NAVAJO) is a doctoral student in American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona. He served sixteen years on the Navajo Nation Supreme Court.

Copyright of *New Directions for Student Services* is the property of Jossey-Bass, A Registered Trademark of Wiley Periodicals, Inc., A Wiley Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.