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American Indian  
Study

Retention of Native American  
Students in Non-Indian Colleges:

A Proposal

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American colleges and universities have been enrolling Native American students for over 350 years. When Harvard College began in 1636 as the first institution of higher learning in the American colonies, a campus for American Indians was included. In Virginia, the College of William and Mary also gave itself the task "to teach the Indian boys to read and write, and vulgar arithmetic." Other early educational efforts were known to recruit students from the native population.

Academic success, however, was not always guaranteed. Even when motivated by the best of intentions, few colleges were able to keep their students for long after enrollment. In the early years of colonization, abuse and disease had a devastating impact on attendance. Some educators of the time soberly described their efforts to actually buy children from local tribes in an effort to fill vacant schoolroom seats.

Undaunted, however, this legacy of involvement in Indian education is still evident today. Many institutions remain eager to include Native Americans and, although the commitment may be far less than needed, the federal government, too, encourages enrollment through a variety of grant and loan programs. From these opportunities, the number of Indians on America's campuses has grown dramatically.

But, after three centuries of experience, retention still

remains a central concern. While accessibility to higher education as increased, the dropout rate remains an educational disgrace. Even recent estimates suggest that between 75 and 90 percent of Indian students who enter college will leave before completing a degree.

Access to higher education is crucial, but an open door means little if opportunities for academic success are not also offered. A college or university cannot say it has fulfilled its commitment to American Indians if only a small minority go on to earn a degree.

Despite this history of failure, there has been, however, surprisingly little research into the subject of retention. Most studies have only looked selectively at individual reasons for failure. The need for financial support and the problems of stress and poor academic preparation, for example, have been subjects of past research. Others only examine problems at a single institution. None provide anything more than general proposals for institutional reform.

While valuable, this body of work looks at only scattered pieces of a complex problem. Colleges and universities trying to promote retention in their Native American population, however, need to have a complete understanding of why the students leave. They need, for example, to better understand who their students are and realize why higher education is an academically difficult and emotionally stressful experience. Most urgently, colleges and universities also need guidance in their efforts to improve the success of Indian students at their institutions.

There is, then, an urgent need for a comprehensive study providing more than a checklist of problems or a study of one institution. There must be a more complete analysis of student retention in higher education.

As a first step, there should be a broader examination of the complex social and cultural reasons behind academic failure. For a college to serve its Indian students, it must understand the unique values, expectations, and pressures they often bring with them. This proposed study will provide that needed introduction into Native American society today.

Next, the report will focus on the specific factors that can promote or inhibit, Native American academic success. It will investigate, in part, the following issues:

-- How important is the size of the institution? Is small better than large?

-- Is the institution's location a concern? Is an urban campus preferable to rural?

-- In what academic areas are Indian students especially weak? Where are their strengths?

-- How crucial is the need for supportive services? Do students benefit from orientation and counseling?

-- Are Indian students more likely to persist if they attend a campus with other Native Americans? How many are needed to achieve this "critical mass?"

But, most critically, there must also be a clear understanding of what a college or university can do to overcome these barriers and promote retention. As the next step, the study will provide detailed recommendations to institutions wanting to improve the academic success of their students.

Not just a list of proposed policy changes, it will be a blueprint for the creation of an integrated and supportive environment intended to nurture achievement. By looking at innovative programs around the nation--including those at tribally-controlled colleges--it will focus on realistic proposals for action based on what has already proven successful on model campuses across the nation.

Additional research will be gathered from interviews with leaders in Indian communities and educators familiar with the needs of Native American population. It is especially important to interview students--persisters and non-persisters alike--to find out what they see as factors important to achievement. For deeper insight, site visits of representative institutions may also be planned and several case studies offered. Valuable information in past research will also be incorporated.

In the end, an institution will have a deeper understanding of who its Indian students are. From this, they will be more aware of the unique pressures faced by Indians in academia. Finally, recommendations will be made for colleges and universities not satisfied with the success of their Native American students.