



A Phenomenological Investigation into Cultural Factors Which May or May Not Contribute to Degree Completion Among American Indian Students in One Community College

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated cultural factors' contribution to degree completion among American Indian college students. Surveys were sent to 238 currently enrolled and 87 formerly enrolled American Indian students during March 2013. From the survey respondents, a group of ten, all currently enrolled American Indian students, agreed to one-on-one interview sessions with the researcher. Dialoguing sessions were recorded and transcribed; answers were analysed and subjected to close examination through metasynthesis leading to the discovery of themes. Verification of dialogue and transcriptions through triangulation was obtained.

The results indicated there were no reported cultural factors that contributed to the retention or attrition of the American Indian college student. For administrators, faculty and staff, the findings affirm practices used to welcome students of various cultures may be effective in preventing attrition of the American Indian student and that cultural factors may not play a role in retention or attrition.

Keywords: American Indian, community college, culture

Community colleges in the United States serve as important pathways to careers, higher paying positions and an educated public. Across the U. S., there are 1,132 community colleges. Of these, 986 are public institutions, 115 Independent, and 31 Tribal (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). Perhaps one of the most important services that community colleges offer is the invitation to non-traditional, diverse students from minority and immigrant cultures to attend, perform successfully and attain a certificate or an associate's degree, for a nominal cost. In 2010, the total enrollment of public 2-year colleges in the U.S. was 7,284,613, which was 52.6% of all enrolled students in higher education institutions (public, private nonprofit, private for-profit). Of the 7,284,613 students American Indian totaled 78,432, Asian totaled 394,280, Black totaled 1,025,841, Hispanic totaled 1,218,926, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander totaled 24,604, and White totaled 3,878,766. Other races or ethnicities included in the data were students who identified themselves as two or more races (109,310), race/ethnicity unknown (458,378), and nonresident alien (96,076) (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2011).

Strategic goals from a variety of community colleges indicate that minority and immigrant students are an important, intentional part of the culture. Phrases such as 'we promote a global perspective, transcultural values and competencies,' 'we embrace diversity through broadened concepts of self,' and 'we celebrate the diversity of ideas and cultures' indicate that diversity is welcome and intentional. One particular group of minority students that may need further encouragement to attend community colleges are American Indian students. Are there barriers or challenges that may keep American Indian students from feeling welcomed into a community college's environment and completing a certificate or degree? For the purposes of the current study, the term American Indian or Indian is utilised as a demographic descriptor, rather than its common counter-term Native American, to maintain alignment with United States census reports. Additionally, Horse (2005) and Thornton and Sanchez (2010) state that both terms may be used interchangeably and that it is more a matter of personal preference rather than political correctness. Horse further delineates American Indian to define a citizen of one of "America's indigenous nations" [sic] (p. 62).

According to the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2001), the enrollment percentages of the American Indians in degree-granting institutions of higher education has consistently lagged behind all other ethnic minority group percentages that were measurable from 2004-2010. The only exception was the year 2010 when the Pacific Islander minority group fell slightly below the American Indian group, 0.3% and 0.9% respectively. The American Indian population thus experienced a slight drop from 1.0% of the total enrollment population during the academic years 2004-2009, which is consistent with the overall census population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Additionally, the reports of enrollment of the American Indian in institutions of higher education show comparatively low percentages, measured against those of other minority cultures, as well as those of the White culture.

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Many hypothesize that cultural conflict and discontinuity bear some of the responsibility of the attrition rate of the American Indian college student (Brayboy, 2006; Huffman & Ferguson, 2007; Kinney, 2007; Powers, Potthoff, Bearinger, & Resnick, 2003; Reyhner, 2006). The current study investigated cultural discontinuity as a possible reason for the attrition and/or retention rate of the American Indian college student. The aspects of an Indian student's culture and how he/she integrates, or integrated, those aspects into the mainstream college setting were investigated. Other factors not studied that affect attrition and/or retention are 1) access to financial aid (Tierney, Sallee, & Venegas, 2007), 2) familial support, leadership, non-interference (Garrett, 1995), and 3) teachers' cultural understanding (Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux, & Baeza, 2006).

Related literature

Official American Indian education policy grew out of the treaty system and began during the Washington presidency in 1792. Most treaties during the treaty period of 1778-1868 (Spirling, 2011) included some type of provision for the education of the American Indian in continued efforts at civilization. Nevertheless, the waves of agreements and treaties during the treaty period may have led to the eventual demise of the American Indian culture. As Reyhner (2006) explains, the education of a pre-contact American Indian youth was predicated upon two distinct divisions: social and vocational. Cajete (2005) expounds on the ideas of an historical American Indian education affirming its relational and communal components. Cajete states that, "living and learning were fully integrated" prior to the exposure of European ideals and was based upon seven foundations; "the environmental, the mythic, the artistic, the visionary, the affective, the communal, and the spiritual" (p. 73).

A meta-analysis conducted by Burk, (2007) found that American Indian/Alaska Native students' culture appeared to be disregarded in higher education classrooms, due to rigid course requirements. Burk noted that curricular materials and pedagogical methods were traditionally Western-styled. Burk further hypothesized that, "the inherent implication for American Indian/Alaska Native students is that unless they forfeit cultural heritage, beliefs, and identities, the American system of higher education may obstruct or suppress their personal and academic development" (p. 5). Furthermore, a traditional American Indian education would frown upon the mainstream classroom's culture designed to elicit behaviors such as asking questions, interrupting, speaking for others, telling others what to do, or even arguing with other children, as well as with the teachers (Garrett, 1995).

DuBray (1985) juxtaposes traditional and mainstream culture, in an effort to point out their conflicting natures. The traditional American Indian cultural values are comprised of sharing, cooperation, non-interference (unsure as to how to affect change), living in harmony with nature, a preference to live in the present, and a deep respect for elders. However, the mainstream European-American cultural values emphasize saving, domination, competition, individualism, mastery over nature, a preference to live in the future, and a reverence for youth, leaving the traditional American Indian student negotiating a path through the two extremes (Aragon, 2004; Brayboy, 2005; Burk, 2007; Cajete, 2005; DuBray, 1985; Horse, 2005; Juneau, 2001). Many American Indian students are faced with the additional challenge of overcoming culturally-ingrained stereotypes, especially those that are part of a larger reservation community who then leave their traditional cultural base to immigrate with the mainstream population at Eurocentric colleges and universities. It is in this type of environment that the American Indian student must persevere, exhibiting the characteristics of resiliency. While several definitions of resiliency abound, LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, and Whitbeck (2006) reference Masten stating, "All resilience definitions include the capacity to face challenges and to become somehow more capable despite adverse experiences. Most definitions emphasize that resiliencies a process, rather than a fixed constitutional attribute, influenced by everyday decisions." (2006, p. 194)

In another study, Huffman and Ferguson (2007) gathered data over five years regarding American Indian students attending a predominantly non-Indian university. They sought to assess the college experience among this population. Using survey data and statistical analysis they found that the more traditionally cultural Indian students with reservation backgrounds experienced more cultural conflict than did the Indian students from non-reservation backgrounds who may not be involved in traditional cultural activities. Additionally, these students also expressed a greater satisfaction with their college experience. The researchers noted that cultural traditionalism and cultural conflict presented the most significant problems. Huffman and Ferguson further delineated two theoretical approaches to cultural conflict discovered through their research, at both the micro-level and the macro-level. Micro-level researchers define cultural conflict as those cultural misunderstandings that Indian students needed to traverse as they progressed through a European-dominated college setting. Conversely, the macro-level researchers define cultural conflict as representing factors outside the control of the American Indian student, which were most often situated within historical contexts.

Using qualitative data from previous studies, Lee and Cerecer (2010) concluded that the cultures of traditional Navajo and Pueblo students were in conflict with the school setting and affected motivation and persistence to succeed. Their study underscored the idea that school administrators and instructors must work to build coalitions and community with local tribal education leaders and parents. Doing so will enhance campus climate and affirm identities of American Indian students. In their study, Powers, et al. (2003), sought to assess the effects of seven variables on the educational outcomes of American Indian students. Those seven variables included motivation, quality of instruction, parental involvement, school climate, family income, cultural programming, ability and prior achievement. The model used in this particular study concentrated on the ecological perspective where "intra-individual and systemic influences transact to shape development and learning" (p. 20). The goal of the Powers, et al. study was to determine if an increase in a school's cultural continuity led to increases in academic achievement for the American Indian population served. Through the use of structural equation modeling, the authors discovered that cultural programming was significantly correlated with 6 of the 12 scales; reported as, "achievement ($r = .19; p < .003$), school presence and participation ($r = .17; p < .009$), motivation ($r = .17; p < .008$), home-school collaboration ($r = .20; p < .002$), quality of instruction ($r = .130; p < .044$),

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and school personnel supportiveness ($r = .149; p < .021$)” (p. 32). Additionally, Powers, et al. attributed the most successful educational outcomes to school climate with an overall effect of .807. The authors agree that creating a school climate where American Indian students are given the most opportunity to succeed should include culturally-based programs; furthermore, their review of the literature pointed to cultural discontinuity as a key factor to the educational success of the American Indian/Alaska Native student.

Recent efforts of the United States government to improve the academic outcomes of American Indians include establishment of education goals as directed by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force (1991), the National Indian Education Study (2011) and an Executive Order issued by President Obama and signed on 2 December 2011, which mandated American Indian students be given more opportunities to learn native languages, culture and history and stronger preparation for higher education. Specifically, The Order further acknowledges that the government “has made little or no progress in closing the achievement gap between AI/AN students and their non-AI/AN student counterparts, and that many Native languages are on the verge of extinction” (Executive Order 13592, p. 1). Other hallmarks of progress rely on the commitment of educators and their institutions. Such would include a commitment to 1) making changes in the delivery of instruction, 2) the adoption of curricula that presents all students with the opportunity to view the history of the United States and the formation of its government from varied and valued perspectives, 3) a consistent belief that student work (irrespective of the culture with which the student identifies) should be held to a high standard, and 4) building relationships with students of various cultures to provide welcoming environments, including the parents and the community in the process of education (Baxter, 2009; Burk, 2007; Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Guillory, 2009; Lee & Cerecer, 2010).

Data collection and analysis

Huffman (2003) states, “The insights provided by students themselves would most assuredly enable scholars to more fully appreciate the complex and dynamic relationship between community background and the experience of higher education” (2003, p. 12). Therefore, the study was conducted following the “Vancouver school of doing phenomenology,” which involves the researcher working side-by-side with the participant (identified as the co-researcher) to co-construct meaning and interpretation of the phenomenon (Halldórsdóttir, 2000, p. 51). This type of study was developed from the work of Joan M. Anderson at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. Halldórsdóttir explains that, “The Vancouver School of Doing Phenomenology is a unique blend of description, interpretation, explication and construction and has proved to be a methodology that can lead to systematic explication of human experiences” (p. 53). This particular methodology encourages the researcher and the co-researcher to enter into a dialogue where the researcher’s interpretations of the co-researcher’s experiences are confirmed or disconfirmed. Table 1 provides a delineation of the 12 stages involved in the Vancouver method, followed by how those stages were integrated within the current study.

The Vancouver Method	
Stage	Description
1	Select dialogue partners
2	Silence
3	The dialogue
4	An awareness of the words
5	Consideration of the essences
6	Constructing the essential structure of the phenomenon for each case
7	Verifying the single case construction with the co-researcher
8	Constructing the essential structure of the phenomenon from all cases
9	Comparing the essential structure with the data
10	Identifying the over-riding theme which describes the phenomenon
11	Verifying the essential structure with some of the research participants
12	Writing up the findings

Table 1: Halldórsdóttir, S. (2000). The Vancouver School of Doing Phenomenology

An introduction letter and survey link was sent to 238 American Indian students who were listed on enrollment records the semester prior to the study period to designate a survey pool comprised of students currently attending the study community college district, along with 87 American Indian students who had experienced attrition as part of a selection strategy known as homogeneous sampling. Forty currently enrolled students and one formerly enrolled student responded positively to the invitation and initial survey. From the survey respondents, a smaller group of ten currently enrolled American Indian students agreed to additional, one-on-one interview sessions. From the group of ten students agreeing to one-on-one interview sessions, five students responded to the

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invitation to arrange a convenient date and time to carry out further dialoguing sessions. All of the interview participants were currently enrolled American Indian students. The number satisfied the requirements of the Vancouver school methodology.

The interview protocol used was designed with the Multicultural Awareness Project for Institutional Transformation (MAP IT) survey (Banks et al. 2001) as a guide which was set forth to assist educators in creating school environments that respect and benefit from their diverse populations. This type of protocol helped the researcher understand a co-researcher's response to specific questions. All interview responses were recorded and all names, as well as any other identifying characteristics, were kept confidential.

Following the Vancouver methodology, after "dialogue partners" were identified (stage 1), a silent stage was entered (stage 2) where time was given to quiet the mind and prepare to "receive" new information regarding the phenomenon under study (Halldórsdóttir, 2000). The dialoguing sessions occurred (stage 3) and at the completion of each interview, verbatim transcripts were prepared where responses to each protocol and follow-up question were transcribed (stage 4). After complete transcriptions were made, a brief departure from the Vancouver method was needed where all transcribed data was forwarded to an individual with extensive experience and research publications regarding multiculturalism and the development of multicultural curricula. That individual provided triangulation of the data, which was a verification of actual dialogue and transcription. The transcriptions then rested (revisiting stage 2) with the researcher for review and for initial individual case construction of the phenomenon to isolate emerging themes (stage 5). At the completion of this stage in the process, the individual case constructions were subjected to member checking by the co-researchers, whereby individual interview participants reviewed transcribed material for accuracy (stages 6 & 7).

The dialoguing sessions were recorded and transcribed, while clarifying and probing questions, which were gathered via further sessions and electronic mail, were copied from their original response source and pasted below their appropriate transcription. They were then subjected to close examination through metasynthesis (stage 8). All interviews and dialoguing sessions were open coded (stage 9), a strategy used to analyze data for recurrent themes and to categorize those themes into chunks of data (Glesne, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The process was repeated until a saturation point was attained, at which time theories began to emerge (stage 10) that assisted in explaining the phenomenon under study. The emerging themes then interpreted the phenomenon; and the interpretation went through the verification process with the co-researchers (stage 11).

Emerging themes

The first theme that emerged from the transcribed, coded and analysed data was that students perceived the college did not do enough to demonstrate or to celebrate the American Indian culture. According to Guillory and Wolverson (2008), "in the case of the American Indian, history and research show that creating the right environment is a critical component of persistence and degree completion" (p. 69). Therefore, one could surmise the absence of American Indian cultural perspectives and cultural reinforcements on community college campuses would result in an increase in the attrition rates of that student population. However, this was not the case. All of the co-researchers indicated that the absence of specific American Indian cultural perspectives on the college campus did not hinder their ability to function within the college environment.

Two students expressed disappointment in the campus' absence in recognising the presence of American Indian students, but this did not seem to have any bearing on the students' attrition or retention. Again, this theme contradicts Baxter (2009) who pointed to the importance of creating and sustaining an atmosphere on college and university campuses that effectively met the cultural needs of the American Indian students whom they served in order for those students to achieve academic success. One student, Shari commented, "I'm not here for anyone else; I'm trying to get through this." The perceived absence of American Indian cultural perspectives was neither a factor in her decision to enroll at the college campus, nor a factor in her continued success.

When explaining the role the American Indian culture played in a sense of belonging on the college campus, Shari again indicated that it was not important, declaring "Not much really". Though Riki, another co-researcher, knew some of his American Indian background, the fact that the American Indian culture was not well represented on his particular campus did not affect his ability to persist. Riki commented, "I don't pay much attention to that [how the American Indian culture is represented on the college campus]. I'm here to get my degree. I don't really notice Indians or not Indians or if they are grouped together."

A second theme consistent in all of the interviews and dialogues with the co-researchers was the apparent lack of impact that the American Indian culture had on their success or their continued enrollment within the college district. The co-researchers that attended the college district under study neither lived nor had lived on reservations and were not raised with traditional Indian cultural values. This finding was consistent with the research conducted by Huffman and Ferguson (2007), who concluded that students without a traditional American Indian background fared better than their traditionally cultural peers. In addition, these non-traditional American Indian students expressed a greater satisfaction with their college experience. The exception was Raquel who was raised within the Choctaw tradition. However, Raquel also stated that while being raised with Choctaw cultural traditions was important, those traditions and cultural experiences did not have a significant impact in the way she interacted with the college campus she attended. All co-researchers viewed themselves as normal college students seeking a degree, one commenting, "we're pretty American actually." Education appeared to take center stage and the traditional Indian culture was distant or not at all important.

Within the group of co-researchers, there was an appropriate mix of traditional college students, those having enrolled in college immediately following high school graduation, and of non-traditional college students, those returning to school from the workforce

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or from the home. Interestingly, the co-researchers were non-culturally unified, meaning not tied to any one culture and not expecting others to be tied to any one culture as well, which helped maintain a focus on completing their education. The researcher noticed in all of the interviews, the co-researchers indicated culture was not particularly important as it related to their completion or non-completion in the college setting. Examples of this phenomenon were expressed by Riki and Roberto. Riki said, "We all belong here if we are getting a degree, right?" Roberto commented, "While I've attended a few cultural events [on campus] it's generally always been so that I could expose my Chinese wife to different aspects of American life."

A third emerging theme that surfaced was that of resilience. Four of the co-researchers had experienced difficult family situations or life circumstances. Without exception, all co-researchers expressed determination to complete their goals of college or degree completion. An inner strength of purpose and perhaps grit was displayed in their oral and written articulation as well as in their body language. It is possible these co-researchers were exceptional in demonstrating the characteristic of resilience.

Findings

The findings indicated that none of the participants attributed factors related to culture as being significant in their decision to maintain enrollment within the community college district under study. The analysis of the data gathered through this phenomenological study revealed the American Indian students attending the community college district under study were unconcerned as to whether or not the American Indian culture was represented on the college campus, in contrast to studies cited in the literature review (Aragon, 2004; Brayboy, 2005; Burk, 2007; Cajete, 2005; DuBray, 1985; Horse, 2005; Juneau, 2001). While there was general agreement an American Indian club or organization might be helpful in light of the other cultural-specific clubs and organizations present on the campuses, the absence of such a club or organization did not hinder the educational process of the American Indian students. Co-researchers chose to continue their enrollment because of a yearning or a need to accomplish the task of obtaining a college degree that would give them and their families a sense of pride in their accomplishments. None of the American Indian co-researchers experienced attrition as would have been expected in the absence of support systems (Brady, 1996; Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Cole & Denzine, 2002; Garrett, 1995; Powers, Potthoff, Bearinger, & Resnick, 2003) and the one co-researcher who withdrew from her program did so out of a desire to enter the military. She expressed her intention to re-enroll once her military service was completed.

Other factors that may affect attrition and/or retention include 1) access to financial aid (Tierney, Sallee, & Venegas, 2007), 2) familial support, leadership, noninterference (Garrett, 1995), 3) and teachers' cultural understanding (Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux, & Baeza, 2006). However, in the current study, co-researchers indicated completion of their degree or certificate was highly important, even in the face of familial pressures or life circumstances beyond their control. Rather, the co-researchers gave the following reasons as impetus to stay in the college setting: changing life circumstances, being a first generation college student, and/or pride in an accomplishment. No student in the current study had considered dropping out from the college. Military commitment was the only reason for temporarily leaving the college setting.

Implications for practice

The results suggest some American Indian students attending a large urban community college may not make decisions to remain or to leave the college setting based on cultural factors. The co-researchers were immersed in the college environment and in their classes, and cultural identity seemed non-significant. The lack of cultural identity phenomena may be a prevailing trend in community college students due to age, social media, video, political persuasions, apathy or simply caring for other goals and interests rather than culture. While cultural factors may not make a difference to some American Indian students, as reported in the current study, it may be that other American Indian students would respond differently to the survey, interviews, dialoguing sessions and clarifying questions about culture. Community colleges do well to continue steps to ensure equal representation of all cultures that comprise their student body (Baxter, 2009; Banks et al, 2001). As administrators of these colleges go about the business of developing policies aimed at increasing inclusivity of multicultural student bodies, an awareness of specific cultural complications is essential. Explicit policies of this nature, afford faculty and staff the direction required to successfully guide all students thru the college experience.

Recommendations for further study

Further research studies are recommended in order to provide continued insight into the possible phenomenon of cultural factors and completion of college degrees or certificates, especially for American Indian students. Understanding trends in this area may be helpful in developing appropriate courses and programs for all students, as well as in meeting the needs of American Indian students and providing cultural awareness and support to such students.

In that this was a small-scale study at one urban community college, a similar design and study located in an area of American Indian cultural predominance would be helpful for comparison analysis. Students who attend mainstream colleges located near or on tribal lands may identify various cultural factors that are barriers to college completion, such as the practice of non-interference. As stated earlier, non-interference is characterised by a sense of being unsure as to how to affect change in a schooling system that has been "personally discriminatory, unsupportive, and historically detrimental to their culture" (Powers, et al., 2003, p. 23). More insights

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into whether this characteristic is connected to culture or not would be warranted. On the other hand, there may be factors in those locations that contribute to academic success and/or college completion, for example increased familial support.

Another area to investigate is the use of technology in studies of cultural identity or non-cultural identity. For example, soliciting and examining closely co-researchers' responses to a specific follow-up question regarding the use of technology in their lives and throughout the college experience could be analysed for themes and trends. One hypothesis emerging from the current study was that the use of technology enabled the co-researchers to move from their cultural ties to cultural non-identification. It is through programs like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social media which provide individuals with the opportunity to interact or interface with a wide variety of people globally, that cultural identity may become a non-issue; therefore, perhaps the acceptance of various cultures and/or unification of culture becomes easier. Researching the frequency and purpose of use of social media among not only the American Indian, but also the college student body as a whole, might shed light on the construct of cultural non-identification.

Finally, a future study regarding the characteristic of inner resilience as a contributing factor to college completion would shed light on the emerging theme that surfaced in the current study. Understanding how resiliency is shaped and developed among college students, both in minority groups and in all groups, would give colleges and schools a lens for counseling support, program development and foundational work with students. Thornton and Sanchez (2010) propose that resiliency can be developed and that it is the responsibility of stakeholders in the educational environment to provide opportunities to teach and to nurture resiliency in their American Indian student populations. Additionally, in light of the theory of cultural discontinuity as a construct for the attrition of the American Indian on college campuses, stakeholders could make concerted efforts to lessen the cultural divide by bridging the chasm that exists. In fact, according to Guillory and Wolverton (2008), "in the case of the American Indian, history and research show that creating the right environment is a critical component of persistence and degree completion" (p. 69).

Concluding remarks

Thornton and Sanchez (2010) defined resiliency as, "the ability to cope with stress; a positive capacity of an individual to respond under pressure" (p. 455). As such, the students in the current study displayed resiliency through their persistence in maintaining a focus on their degree or certification completion despite familial pressures or difficult life circumstances. While American Indian college students may encounter cultural discontinuity when they enter the arena of higher education, their ability to develop and sustain internal mechanisms that contribute to higher levels of resilient behaviours may factor into the success they attain (Thornton & Sanchez, 2010).

Community colleges promote a mission of welcome to diverse populations and focus on processes that address needs of various cultures. Therefore, students of differing cultures, as well as differing beliefs and value systems, come together. Jones (2013) explains that "community colleges enrolling a more racially heterogeneous student body appear to have a normative environment in which students develop a greater understanding of people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds" (p. 263). It was in such an environment that the co-researchers for the current study were enrolled and subsequently may have experienced better transition and exhibited greater persistence towards their goal of completing degrees or certification programs.

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