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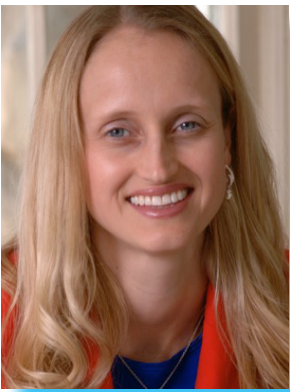
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Native American College Students:

A Group Forgotten



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Stephanie J. Waterman, PhD, Onondaga, Turtle clan, is an Associate Professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, in Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, and coordinates the Student Development/Student Services in Higher Education program. She is a co-chair for the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators Indigenous Peoples Knowledge Community Research and Scholarship committee. Her research interests are Native American college experiences, First Nations/Native American Student Affairs units, Indigenous methodologies/pedagogy, college transition, and critical race theories. She is a co-editor of *Beyond the Asterisk: Understanding Native Students in Higher Education*, (Stylus).

Kristen E. Wilmott

Top Tier Admissions

Tara Leigh Sands

University of Rochester

Melissa Raucci

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Stephanie J. Waterman

University of Toronto

In the process of searching for literature on Native American college students, I felt deterred. At times my quest felt like a continuous search for the same articles again and again . . . In the transcripts [of the study], students talk at length about other university agents [who] mentored them or supported them at some point in their college experiences. Where is the research on that? (researcher memo)

The four authors of this article include three non-Native researchers with the primary task of researching Native American college student experiences. Assigned a literature review and data analysis by our Native faculty member, we found an alarmingly small number of published research studies on Native American college students even as their enrollment increases (DeVoe, Darling-Churchill, & Snyder, 2008). This article is a result of the Native faculty member's discovery of a lack of research, and her encouragement to record our struggle.

Conceptual Framework

We know from our expansive literature search that in the United States, Native American students are roughly 1% of the college-going population and have a poor graduation rate (Aud, Fox, & Kewal Ramani, 2010; DeVoe, Darling-Churchill, & Snyder, 2008). We

know engaging in research that is less report-centered and statistically based must center on an active conversation which allows for enhanced understanding of Native American students, families, culture, and communities (Rolo, 2009; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003).

Our axiological approach assumed Native American college student research would be available—this was a “worthy” topic for us (Wilson, 2008), and we thought, for the academy. Our “shared values” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 31) find significance in this population, and indicate that for the research to be successful and accurate, research cannot be on Native Americans, it must be with Native Americans. Collaboration with tribal communities, connection with Native American elders and cultural leaders, informed consent, and invited research experiences are a must (Burk, 2007; Laughlin, 2001; Sparks, 2000).

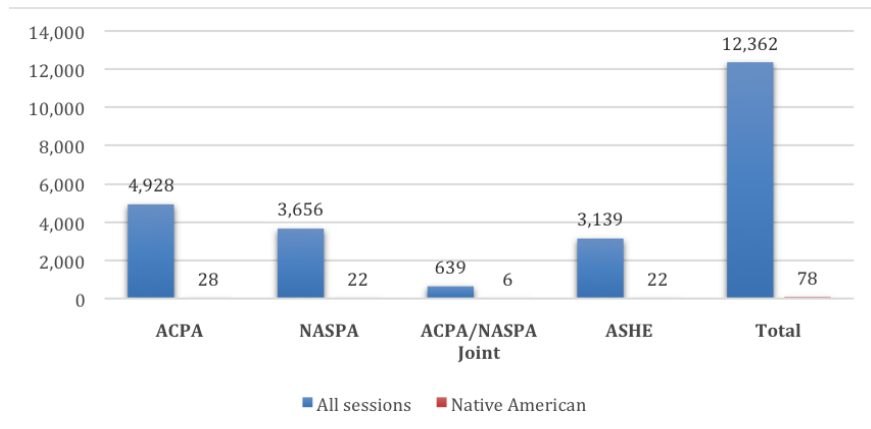
An added conceptual frame of Indigenous feminism offered a deeper glimpse into our formation of assumptions on the research that we hoped to uncover. Indigenous feminists unpack intersections of gender, heteropatriarchy, sovereignty, and colonialism, (Ross, 2009) and “seek to go beyond a ‘politics of inclusion’” (Smith & Kauanui, 2008, p. 248).

Methodological Design and Qualitative Research

Our analysis is, in part, an extension of McClellan’s dissertation study that addressed “the social construction of Native Americans by new student affairs professionals in the Southwest” (2003, p. 14). In his examination of resources available to student affairs professionals, he provided a count of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) conference programs and journal articles from their associated journals— *Journal of College Student Development* (JSCD); the *NASPA Journal*, renamed the *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* (JSARP) in January 2010—that focused on Native Americans from 1991-2000. We extended the time period to 1991-2011, an even 20 year period, and included the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) conference programs; ASHE’s associated journal, *The Journal of Higher Education*; as well as *The Review of Higher Education*, and the *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*. These journals inform our discipline and are desirable publication venues for higher education/ student affairs faculty.

ACPA and NASPA national conference sessions on Native Americans are also rare. While ACPA and NASPA regularly have conference sessions on areas such as multiculturalism and inclusion, specific references to Native Americans are rarely mentioned in conference session descriptions, overviews, or roundtables. Instead, as we reflected, Native Americans are often ignored as a cultural group given their small numbers. Refer to Figure 2 for a more detailed description of conference session topics specific to Native American populations.

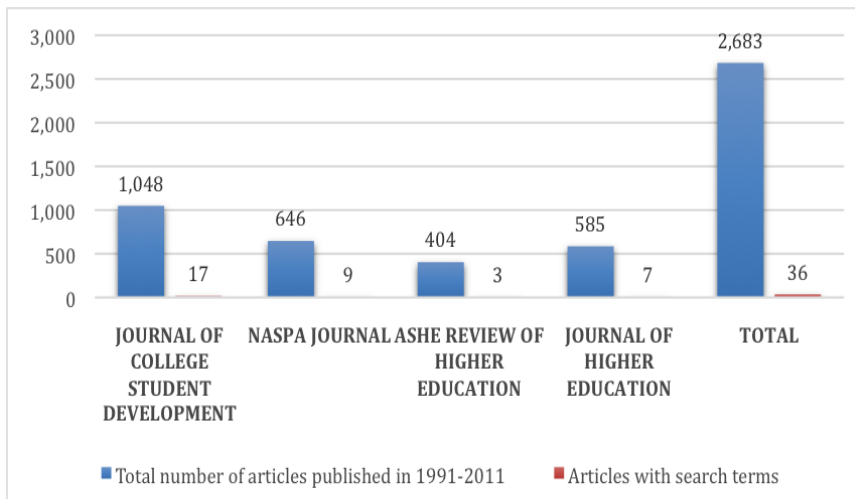
Figure 2: Conference sessions from 1991 to 2011



Findings and Discussion

As our findings revealed, shown in the Figure 1 below, only 1.6% of the articles published in the JSCD from 1991-2011 mention our keywords in the article’s title or abstract.

Figure 1: Journal articles published from 1991 to 2011



Native representation in 1% or less of the literature over a 20-year period is not enough to accurately portray Native America. There are presently 566 federally recognized tribes, approximately 200 state recognized tribes, and tribes without formal U.S. recognition (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Native people are diverse with differences in language, culture, spirituality, social economic status, and educational backgrounds. While many similarities among tribes do exist, to think that 1% of the literature available can adequately inform our discipline about this population is not acceptable.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

Three PhD students dedicated one year searching for scholarly works that could contribute to our understanding of the Native American college student experience and uncovered only a handful of articles pertinent to our search. Higher education professionals often working on limited resources, funding, staff

support, and time are asked to provide adequate support for Native American students based on information that took our research team many months to uncover. This study's results indicate a research agenda specifically addressing Native American populations must be developed in an effort to better serve Native American students in their journey toward college degree completion.

Additionally, we urge researchers and practitioners to seek Native American scholarship and data in their own work. It is overwhelmingly Native people who make the few presentations and papers that exist. Thus, we recommend journal boards, associations, tenured faculty, department chairs, and higher education policy leaders intentionally, actively, and consistently seek to include Indigenous people and perspectives. Contact with Native American service organizations, Native community centers, Native Studies programs, and communities will enhance scholarship and develop relationships to further enhance ethical practice.

Furthermore, if this call for research continues to go unanswered, we must consider the negative ramifications not only for Native Americans, but for all underrepresented populations. These ramifications include issues regarding access to education, poverty, unemployment, crime, political unrest, and loss of cultural traditions and languages (Tippeconnic, 2000).

Conclusion

Findings from this inquiry indicate that scholarly research regarding the experiences of Native American students in higher education unfortunately remains sparse. With significant gaps in research, many higher education professionals continue to erroneously perceive Native cultural and family values as obstacles to retention (Guillory, 2009; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Furthermore, these same agents who are intended to function as networks of support on campus have few scholarly resources to guide their approach in working with Native students. Native students face a myriad of obstacles upon entering a higher education system where professionals often fail to recognize Native students as a unique cultural/political group, but also continue to implement inadequately informed campus programs. The ultimate goal of this article is to highlight the deficit in current research pertaining to this population and encourage researchers to focus on Native students as more than just a statistically insignificant portion of the college-going population. There is no doubt a gap in the literature exists; it is the collaboration between tribal communities and higher education agents touted in President Obama's 2009 address that can expand the knowledge of Native American student experiences thus resulting in a more culturally inclusive approach to Native college student success.



Image by Natalie Battaglia