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Native American College Students: A Group Forgotten

Kristen E. Willmott has a PhD in Education, with a concentration in Higher Education/Educational Leadership, from the University of Rochester in NY. She has a background in higher education administration, admissions, and institutional research having worked as an Admissions and Financial Aid Officer for the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University for four years. Dr. Willmott is the Director of Top Tier Admissions, an admissions consulting firm that works with students from grade 5 to graduate school, based in Massachusetts. Her research focuses on academic tenure, work-life-family management, underrepresented college student recruitment, and undergraduate academic persistence.

Melissa Raucci is currently an academic advisor for college programs in the David T. Kearns Center for Leadership and Diversity at the University of Rochester (UR). The mission of the Kearns Center is to support first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minority students throughout the educational pipeline by transforming lives through educational opportunity. She is also a doctoral student in the Warner School of Education at the UR, looking to complete her degree by the summer of 2017. Her research focuses on the experiences of first-generation women in doctoral programs.

Tara Leigh Sands, is a doctoral student at the University of Rochester and works in the field of fraternity and sorority life. She is passionate about student success as defined by the student. Her research focuses on reverse transfer students and their academic journeys. Tara Leigh serves as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrator’s Region II representative for the Indigenous Peoples Knowledge Community.

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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
University of Rochester

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 1991-2001, 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.

Findings and Discussion

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

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
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.