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Ways to Increase Retention Rates Among American Indian/ Alaskan Native Students at Community Colleges

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Ways to Increase Retention Rates Among American Indian/Alaskan Native Students in
Community Colleges
by
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Abstract

American Indians/Alaskan Natives (AI/AN) pursue higher education disproportionately compared to other populations. Literature indicates that a sense of belonging significantly impacts AI/AN students' persistence rates at community colleges. Sense of belonging and support from community colleges and families directly influence student success in higher education. AI/AN students are grounded in their community and have desires to build their cultural capital. Obtaining a degree will strengthen their community and, ultimately, their nation. It is essential for AI/AN students and parents to feel equipped with resources and ways community colleges support marginalized students. Creating a student and parent orientation, access to a family education specialist, and attending AI/AN social programming contribute to student empowerment and persistence. The program will provide resources for students' academic, cultural, and spiritual well-being.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

It is well documented that American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) students have a lower graduation rate in higher education (Guillory, 2009). Although AI/AN student college enrollment has doubled since 1993 (National Center for Educational Statistics), AI/AN students still have the lowest college enrollment and graduation rates of any other ethnicity at U.S. colleges and universities, making up about one percent of the student population (Chee, Shorty & Robinson Kurpius, 2019; Guillory, 2009). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), between 2009 and 2020, AI/AN student enrollment decreased by 35% at 2-year institutions 8,151 students graduated with their associate degree from 2020-2021 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Post-secondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2020 and Fall 2021). These data indicate that AI/AN students are not retained at the same rates as their peers, and more specifically, community colleges fail to help AI/AN students succeed academically. If community colleges do not implement new strategies for AI/AN students' success, AI/AN student retention will likely continue to decline.

Importance and Rationale of the Project

According to Chee et al., (2019), academic success is a factor related to the messages one receives about themselves or their self-beliefs. When students do not have a positive sense of belonging, their motivation, confidence, and overall academic retention can be negatively affected (Chee et al., 2019; Guillory, 2009). Retention rates among AI/AN students are impacted by a lack of role models and mentors, and engaging with a campus culture that does not accommodate cultural differences (Tierney, 1992). Like any college student, AI/AN students

may not feel a sense of belonging or significant ties to their current institution. Although this project is focused on retention rates at community colleges, all institution types should take note of AI/AN students' academic success.

Biculturalism can be described as living in and with two cultures simultaneously; biculturalism is influenced by an individual's emotional and behavioral characteristics and their relationship with human social structures (LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993). AI/AN students have a strong tie to their tribal traditional culture as a foundation, and institutions should find ways to allow AI/AN students to use their identity to balance two cultures simultaneously, ultimately increasing their likelihood of succeeding in college (Huffman, 2001; LaFromboise et al., 1993). Huffman (2001) noted AI/AN students with strong ties to their tribal culture might experience cultural conflict with the dominant culture on campus. There are a variety of factors that could contribute to the academic and bicultural success of indigenous college students. Some of these include connecting with campus resources, such as multicultural offices, tribal, and financial support (Campbell, 2007; Huffman, 2001). Understanding AI/AN biculturalism is a way of life for AI/AN students, community colleges should value students' tribal culture by implementing ways for their culture to be a part of their experiences.

Background of the Project

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), American Indians and Alaskan Natives makeup 1.3% of the total population, one of the smallest groups in the United States, and this is predicted to remain constant until 2060. Besides Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders, with a staggeringly low percentage of 0.3%, AI/AN's population is among the smallest groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). According to National Center for Education Statistics (2022), full-time AI/AN faculty and staff represent less than 1% of all institutions.

Faculty at institutions are important for AI/AN student persistence because faculty bestow academic instruction and mentoring, influencing student persistence (Lopez & Tachine, 2021). Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2014) reported that AI/AN students have increased academic success when they connect with AI/AN-identifying faculty and staff. Institutions need to hire faculty members who identify as AI/AN because they could be seen as role models for AI/AN students. These faculty members have overcome various cultural and financial barriers to succeed (Solyom & Castagno, 2014).

In 2019, 25% of AI/ANs over the age of 25 had an associate degree or higher, compared to the 42% of all those over the age of 25 (PNPI, 2021). While the data predicts AI/AN's population to remain the same over the next couple of decades, it is critical community colleges create effective programming and outreach for this population of students. A few ways this can occur is by building a sense of belonging for AI/AN students and their parents. Since 79% of AI/AN students are more likely to attend a public 2 or 4- year institution rather than a private one, designing an approach that involves family and community while finding ways that build their nation would be a good start in retaining students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; PNPI, 2021).

Statement of Purpose

There are a variety of cultural factors that could make it difficult for AI/AN students to be successful in higher education. Many AI/AN students feel isolated, alienated, academically inadequate, and marginalized, all reasons college students may stop out of the academic program they are pursuing (Guillory, 2009; Windchief, Arouca & Brown, 2018). AI/AN students have a deep connection and responsibility to their families; it is common practice for students to have an open conversation with their parents about if pursuing higher education is a good idea for the

family (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). For this reason, designing an orientation specifically for AI/AN students and their parents shows families the community college's commitment to welcome their students and tribe. The orientation will include a student and faculty panel for students and parents to ask questions and get a general idea of their community college's goals and missions. A family education specialist will be working closely with the Native Peoples Club at Mid Michigan Community College, navigating both AI/AN students and parents on strengthening relationships, obtaining resources on and off campus, and building their cultural capital (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). The Natives Peoples Club will create social events tailored to AI/AN students and their families, with the goal of community building.

HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) Family Education Model (FEM) is grounded in retention strategies in AI/AN students focusing on ways for students who feel powerless to obtain personal and cultural power. Furthermore, with the help of the family education specialist, societal gaps will close, allowing AI/AN students and parents to feel they have a sense of belonging within the community college.

Objectives of the Project

The desired outcome for one orientation for AI/AN students and their parents is to create an inclusive environment for both populations to feel a sense of belonging to Mid Michigan Community College. In most cultures, college students value independence, and their journey through higher education is typically individualistic (Lopez & Tachine, 2021). Rather, the desire to give back shapes AI/AN students' reciprocal exchange of support with other AI/AN students (Lopez & Tachine, 2021). In addition to increasing a sense of belonging for AI/AN students and families, the orientation aims to provide participants an opportunity to hear about faculty and student experiences navigating higher education. The time spent learning about the family

educational specialist is designed to help students and families learn about the resources and tools available at the community college. This role serves as a liaison between students, parents, tribes, and community colleges. The learning outcome for both students and parents is the ability to leave feeling prepared with resources and knowledge about the institution. HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) describe the family education specialist to help families make the right decision. Together, family education specialists and the families share cultural strength-based decision-making, building on the cultural resilience of students, families, and tribes (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002).

Definition of Terms

Indigenous: Native

American Indian/Alaskan Native: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (Including Central America) who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community attachment (Data Glossary, April 7, 2023).

Sense of Belonging: How students perceive available social supports on campus and whether they feel connected (Strayhorn, 2012).

Retention Rates: Metrics for assessing the progress and success of colleges and universities (Millea et al., 2018).

Nation-Building: The Political, legal, spiritual, educational, and economic processes through which Indigenous peoples engage to build local capacity to address their educational, health, legal, economic, nutritional, relational, and special needs (Brayboy et al., 2014).

Tribal Community College: Public institutions federally recognized by Indian tribes or the federal government, with the majority of NA/AN student enrollment.

Cultural Capital: An asset embodying cultural value (Throsby, 1999).

Scope of the Project

This project is focused on strategies to increase retention rates among AI/AN students at Mid Michigan Community College. Mid Michigan Community College is located near Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, home to 1.94K AI/AN individuals in Mount Pleasant, Michigan (Data USA, 2020). Mid Michigan's core values reflect the institution's mission, purpose, philosophy, and beliefs (Mid Michigan College's Mission Statement & Core Values, n.d). Furthermore, the community college takes pride in valuing people, integrity, learning, community, and excellence creating a caring, inclusive, and safe learning space for equity and equality for all students. Through a combined orientation including AI/AN students and their parents and access to the institution's family education specialist, the desired outcome is for families to feel equipped with resources and comfortable with the institution's missions and goals. Social activities hosted throughout the academic year are put on through the Natives People Club with the goal that AI/AN students will find a sense of belonging and community on campus.

This project will work with students and parents to increase their sense of belonging, ultimately providing tools and resources for students to feel academically prepared and successful. The orientation program and the family education specialist could be implemented at all colleges and universities within higher education; however, I feel the best practice would be for community colleges located near AI/AN tribes because there is a greater population of AI/AN individuals. There are other cultural reasons why community college would be best implemented, such as students being needed at home or financial barriers (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). This will take place at Mid Michigan Community College, near Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe; there are more AI/AN students compared to other community colleges, which could make it difficult to have the proper resources available to AI/AN students. Some

other limitations include the institution's budgeting, access to resources, ability to have a family education specialist, and demographics of the institution. This project would best be implemented in areas with high AI/AN populations and tribal community colleges.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The United States American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) population is not a monolith but is a diverse culturally and linguistically diverse group (Rogers, Churchill, Shahid, Davis & Mandojana-Ducot, 2022) with 574 different tribes recognized as sovereign nations by the U.S. Government and approximately 60 state-recognized tribes (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2021; Rogers et al., 2022; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). Sense of belonging, family support, and community ties are all essential for AI/AN students to be successful in higher education (Lopez, 2018). Using theoretical frameworks help connect real-life circumstances to research helps one understand AI/AN students' history, culture, and overall context of what AI/AN students need to succeed in higher education. While AI/AN students have strong ties to their families and community, there needs to be access to resources and activities that encourage students to find connectedness to their community college (Guillory, 2008). This literature review will describe various frameworks, family, community college support, and tribal connections that will help increase persistence rates among AI/AN students.

Theoretical Framework

Mosholder, Waite, Larsen and Goslin (2016) describes cultural wealth theory as building off theories of cultural capital. Cultural capital is valuing ideas and various ways of contributing that can be used to gain more within a particular society (Rueda, Monzo, & Arzubiaga, 2003). Cultural capital is learned in a community, and contributions to community cultural wealth are learned through values, beliefs, information, understanding, skills, and engagement in practices (Rueda et al., 2003; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Mosholder et al. (2016) shared that students in the United States with a cultural background other than White, middle class, or with a first

language other than English, are often seen as problematic students. Waterman and Lindley (2013) describe AI/AN obligation to community history, memory, and culture are representations of *community* well-being based on kinship rather than the individualist mindset most of the United States practices. AI/AN students rely not only on their cultural tradition's stability but are also invested in continuing the practice of their traditions (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Yosso's (2005) categories of cultural wealth include aspirational, navigational, social, familial, and resistant capital; while, Yosso's work is directly related to the Latino community, the categories explored apply well to AI/AN students (Mosholder et al., 2016).

The Community Cultural wealth model is conceptualized from critical race theory by challenging traditional interpretations of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capitals refers to the hopes and goals students may have despite AI/AN difficult situations (Mosholder et al., 2016). Within AI/AN community, cultural capital can be manifested through passing inspirational stories, advice, and hopes from parents and family members (Mosholder et al., 2016). Navigational capital is the basic competence individuals use to better navigate politics, social, workplace, and educational systems in areas not typically set up for minoritized individuals (Mosholder et al., 2016). Yosso (2006) describes navigational capital as simple or complex, such as AI/AN students navigating through higher education when English may not be their first language. Social capital refers to the coming together of resources from people and the community they surround themselves with and can be manifested into sharing knowledge by utilizing navigational capital (Yosso, 2006). Social capital is particularly useful for AI/AN students new to otherwise unfamiliar communities, in this case, their institution (Mosholder et al., 2016). Familial capital includes shared cultural knowledge between family members and carrying out necessary family duties (Mosholder et al., 2016). AI/AN families are often what

ground students, especially when entering new social situations; students being a part of other social entities, such as sports, religious gatherings, and school clubs, can help support familial capital (Mosholder et al., 2016; Yosso, 2006). Mosholder et al. (2016) describe resistant capital as the most prevalent within AI/AN populations. This concept refers to verbal and nonverbal cues and lessons underrepresented groups share, often creating a sense of worth for oneself. This is often done when marginalized groups try to protect themselves from negative messages from the large society because challenging societal inequalities can be burdensome and self-defeating (Mosholder et al., 2016). In the next section of research and evaluation, student experience and engagement, community college, and student retention will be represented.

Research and Evaluation

Student Experience

When students start their first year at an institution, a flood of emotions can occur from feelings of anxiety, stress, excitement, or confusion, many factors contribute to student experiences. For some students, their first steps in predicting unfamiliarity within institutions and their practices can be particularly challenging (Rose, 2021). Financial aid, food security, housing, study skills, and a feeling of belonging on campus all contribute to the student experience and engagement on campus (Rose, 2021). There are a variety of reasons an individual chooses to pursue post-secondary degrees, and Rose (2021) describes some students wanting to improve their economic future, become role models, or wanting to remedy past failures. While there are various reasons, each specific to that person, for attending community college, students' experiences will be impacted by their interests, goals, and social circles (Rose, 2021). For AI/AN students, the decision to pursue post-secondary institutions integrating different cultures and identities often comes with a series of social setbacks and feelings of isolation (Walton & Cohen,

2011). Minority-identifying students may find it especially challenging when there is a lack of AI/AN identifying faculty, staff, and other students (Campbell, 2007; Patterson, Silver Wolf et al., 2021; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Windchief et al. (2018) found that AI/AN students who felt unwelcomed, isolated, misunderstood, and marginalized could overcome their feeling of marginalization once they found a connection with their supporting faculty member. Strong academic programs and faculty support significantly influence AI/AN students to want access to resources and ultimately finish their academic program (Guillory, 2009). AI/AN faculty members tend to have a different strategy for teaching compared to White culture by understanding "we" in a community, learning together, rather than the "I" mindset that is geared toward an individualized education (Brayboy et al., 2014). Faculty members identifying as AI/AN provide that support and share with the student's success. In doing so, students will be more successful in sharing with other indigenous students in their community (Brayboy et al., 2014). When AI/AN student has academic success, it plays a more important role in their community as a collective effort of success in their community college, family, and tribe (Brayboy et al., 2014).

Community College

Community colleges are often described as uniquely American institutions or people's colleges because they provide education to everyone without prejudice (Leeder, 2012). Leeder (2012) describes community colleges' missions as entirely focused on students and student learning. Faculty are focused on teaching, allowing small class sizes, and students get face time with their professor over a graduate student assistant (Leeder, 2012). Librarians focus on student learning by expanding their basic information literacy instruction efforts without addressing graduate course content (Leeder, 2012). Since there is a diversity of students, it's common for

students to enter community colleges who still need to learn basic study and computer skills (Leeder, 2012). Community college librarians use their knowledge to help students feel comfortable when asking what they think are "stupid" questions while also addressing the large mix of academic, professional, technical, and basic skills compared to what four-year institutions may offer (Leeder, 2012). There are various reasons why community college students are different, the largest being that students must work harder to get into college (Leeder, 2012). Over half of the student population at a community college are considered first-generation college students who overcome significant obstacles such as family obligations, language, and financial challenges (Leeder, 2012). As a result, most students are more motivated by the time and money they invest in their education than a four-year institution (Leeder, 2012).

Tribal Colleges

The impact on AI/AN students in higher education has been shown to positively affect participation, retention, and graduation rates by providing programs and classes that are more culturally sensitive (Boyer, 1997). Tribal colleges are deeply involved in a wide range of communities involving basic education, counseling services, tribal languages, and economic development initiatives (Martin, 2005). The average age of tribal college students is 28 years old, with 64 percent being single moms with an 86%-degree completion, a completely different student demographic compared to a traditional community college (Martin, 2005). Students experience tribal colleges understanding students' values and their role in family and community while providing flexible policies allowing students to maintain familial and tribal obligations (Martin, 2005). Most students appreciate the proximity tribal colleges are to their home community, the one-on-one attention received from faculty and staff, and the culturally relevant and sensitive curriculum (AICF, 2003). A large reason students attend community college is due

to a variety of reasons, some of which is close to home, allows students to live at home and the cost is much cheaper compared to a four-year institution (Leeder, 2012).

Traditional Community Colleges

Community colleges should commit to increasing academic and social integration by organizing administrative, academic, and student support programs responsive to AI/AN students (Martin, 2005). These programs will increase comfort levels for AI/AN students and become part of campus academic and social systems (Pavel, 1999). If community colleges carry out these recommendations, it will reduce the feelings of anonymity, hostility, and alienation many AI/AN students experience in mainstream institutions (Martin, 2005). Martin (2005) describes community colleges should also be more family-friendly; organizing family events on campus once or twice per academic year may assist in maintaining family ties that are important to the success of AI/AN students. Teaching methods emphasizing cooperative learning, such as group work, may be more appropriate for AI/AN students who value family and tribe over individual advancement (Martin, 2002). Mainstream institutions that have established AI/AN study programs and provide a broad range of support services have experienced higher persistence rates (Wright, 1990). Community colleges geographically close to AI/AN communities should form partnerships with tribal colleges and tribal leaders when developing culturally sensitive programming (Martin, 2002). Martin (2002) describes faculty members at mainstream institutions may have an area of expertise that could be valuable to tribal colleges. Likewise, tribal college personnel has knowledge useful for faculty about life on the reservation. Overall, institutional commitment is necessary, and improving participation and persistence rates in AI/AN students at community colleges could become a reality if institutions provided commitment and leadership, culturally relevant programming, and student support systems (Martin, 2005).

Student Engagement

There is a high focus on ways to retain students at a variety of institutions (Guillory, 2009). Community colleges are failing AI/AN students in student retention. Guillory (2009) mentions each institution needs to value AI/AN students' families, faculty, and social support systems. Some ways to increase AI/AN retention include community colleges having AI/AN student support systems, institutional commitment, and allowing flexibility in their classes due to cultural elements (Guillory, 2009). American Indian students are deeply connected with their culture, and while school is valuable, AI/AN students' ties to community and family are considered more important (Campbell, 2007 & Lopez, 2018). Nation-building can be described as a set of core values that build legal, political, cultural, economic, health, spiritual, and education among indigenous communities (Brayboy et al., 2014). Lopez and Tachine (2021) mention AI/AN students' desire to give back to their community and nation-building exists, then community colleges contributing to nation-building will increase AI/AN student persistence. Encouragement from family and student motivation was found to be a critical attribute in AI/AN students' academics and overall retention in their institution (Lopez, 2018; McKinley, Lilly, Liddell & Knipp, 2021). Waterman (2012) found that AI/AN college students who described their families as supportive in their post-secondary education made a significant difference in their academic success.

Student engagement depends on the institutional resources and organization of opportunities and services that attract student participation (Laird, Chen & Kuh, 2008). Student engagement is challenging at a community college level, as it is the preferred institution for part-time and working students, compared to a four-year institution; community college students tend to be older, financially independent, and more likely to be married (Hirschy, Bremer &

Castellano, 2011; Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019). Lopez and Tachine (2021) describe AI/AN students as giving back to their tribal community in a post-secondary context means acquiring a college degree as it advances efforts to their nation-building. Because of AI/AN students' deep sense of nationhood, the desire to give back to their community increases persistence rates as they focus more on giving back to their community than themselves (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno & Solyom, 2012).

Community colleges can demonstrate a commitment to diversity to help retain AI/AN students by establishing relationships with nearby tribes (Rogers et al., 2021). Rogers et al. (2021) describe hiring a liaison for AI/AN students to help their study skills, access resources, and organize events for students and their families. As a faculty and staff member, visiting tribes to gain a more in-depth understanding of their culture and being flexible with class attendance and assignments will create a collaborative partnership, demonstrating the institution's commitment to the needs of their students and local community (Rogers et al., 2021). Chee et al. (2019); LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993) found AI/AN students who have a strong identification with their tribal culture will also help them balance their ethnic identity between two cultures simultaneously. Rogers et al. (2021) suggest that post-secondary institutions need to show AI/AN students that it is possible to maintain their cultural identities with their tribal communities while simultaneously succeeding academically in predominantly White institutions.

Community colleges must create environments welcoming for AI/AN students. This can be achieved by creating safe spaces for AI/AN studies and incorporating culturally relevant themes into the curriculum (Rogers et al., 2021). Furthermore, cultural support groups and professors highlighting culturally diverse perspectives in classrooms limit AI/AN students feelings of having to correct others or estrangement within the community. HeavyRunner and

DeCelles (2002) Family Education Model (FEM) retention strategies were first designed and implemented at a tribal community college but could be implemented at other community colleges. Although this paper is focused on Mid Michigan Community College, there is a higher rate of AI/AN students in attendance as it is near the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, which could be successful with the FEM retention strategy (Martin, 2005). The FEM was designed to improve educational access for AI/AN students and those supporting students in their persistence to degree completion (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). There are three areas needed in the development of (FEM); AI/AN students and families need the college to act as a liaison providing social services during times of crisis; tribal colleges must enlist, develop, and structure the ability of family members to support their students; colleges must engage family members in college life, such as partnering and involving them in social activities (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). These suggestions provide families to feel included in what their students are doing on campus as well as students maintain their sense of family at home and college (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). AI/AN students who felt the support from their family and tribe made the transition to higher education easier and were less likely to stop out (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Rogers et al., 2021). The FEM steps away from the individualistic ideology that pursuing higher education is a task put fully on the student; while some of that is true, ways to increase AI/AN students retention require a sense of community and family involvement (Guillory, 2009; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002).

Historically, many efforts to increase AI/AN student retention within the mainstream American systems in post-secondary education have failed (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). A solution is obtaining a family education specialist who acts as the liaison, as mentioned in the FEM and between AI/AN students and parents, institutions, and tribes. The family education

specialist uses the FEM as a guideline to help create choices, opportunities, collectivism, partnerships, and collaboration of interactional and analytical skills (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Deeply embedded in the culture's value system, in a community college setting, the family education specialist builds on cultural resilience in students, families, and tribes while sharing a strength-based decision-making process (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002).

Orientation

Orientation programs must balance meeting the formative needs of first-time students and equipping them with the tools needed to successfully navigate their new education environment (Mayhew, Vanderlinden & Kim, 2010). The primary mission of an orientation program is to aid in the successful transition for new college students, as a successful orientation program is linked to student success and retention (Mayhew et al., 2010). Orientation specific to AI/AN students and parents allows families to feel the institution provides ways for parents to be involved in their educational journey and learn about various resources (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Patterson Silver Wolf et al. (2021) discuss higher stop-out rates among underrepresented minority college students, often leading to students questioning if they belong on a college campus, as AI/AN students are among the most underrepresented minority students who often struggle with a sense of belonging. A combined orientation with AI/AN students and their parents could bridge the gaps otherwise seen in a traditional orientation where students and parent supporters are separated (Martin, 2005; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Successful new student orientation programs at a tribal college consist of a one or two -day experience in the summer before starting, and the orientation is offered to incoming freshman and their parents (Martin, 2005). Mainstream community colleges should also implement a combined orientation for

students and their parents. Following student evaluation sharing, student participants become better acquainted with other new students at the institution (Martin, 2005).

Summary

Family support can be seen through how students are encouraged, as many family members value higher education, expecting their students to return and find ways to use their degree in their tribe (Makomenaw, 2014). Makomenaw (2014) described how students' motivation, finances, and location are a large driving force for community college students. Community college support could be seen as valuing AI/AN students' cultural capital and access to resources and creating ways for students to feel a sense of belonging (Mosholder et al., 2016). AI/AN students' desire to give back to their community increases persistence rates as they focus more on giving back to their community than themselves (Brayboy et al., 2012). Within AI/NA programming, recognition of students' history, cultural wealth, and connection to family and community are all important components for AI/NA students to be successful (Mosholder et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Community Colleges are uniquely positioned to serve an AI/AN small population of students. This could be because it is a small population of individuals while community colleges support more students with different cultures. AI/AN are severely underrepresented in community colleges (Brayboy et al., 2014). As a result, community colleges should focus on creating support programs, faculty representation, financial assistance, and an overall understanding that AI/NA students are community-based individuals rather than the individualistic mindset most students share (Brayboy et al., 2014; Gándara & Li, 2020; Patterson et al., 2021). In the next chapter, I will implement my project, including a combined student and parent

orientation, familiarity with the family education specialist, and social activities for AI/AN students.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

Historically and in recent years, higher education institutions have struggled to recruit and retain American Indian/Alaskan Native students, and once they are recruited, it can be an even bigger challenge to retain them (Guillory, 2009). While enrolled, AI/AN students may feel isolated, alienated, academically inadequate, and marginalized, all factors related to students' decision to stop out of the academic program they are pursuing (Guillory, 2009; Windchief et al., 2018). In this chapter, we will discuss ways Mid Michigan's community college utilizes its Native Peoples student group to create a combined student and parent orientation, working with the family educational specialist, and a minimum of two social events to help increase a sense of belonging during students first year at this institution. Designing and implementing a combined on-campus orientation for AI/AN students and their parents and families will allow the family to feel they are a part of the process. The family education specialist works closely with the Native Peoples Club by building the cultural resilience of students, families, and the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). In general, family education specialist has strengths, including a deep understanding of AI/AN spirituality, bilingualism, biculturalism, kinship, and a sense of belonging to the community (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). This role will value, assess, and encourage students' cultural identity while implementing ways for self-authorship growth (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). The desired outcome for this role to work closely with the Native Peoples Club is to encourage students and parents by utilizing them as point persons for resources on and off campus. For this population of individuals, students may feel torn between working on their academic program or being more present at home (Martin, 2005). By creating inclusive environments for not only students but their families, welcoming

them to on-campus activities such as social functions could eliminate those possible resentful feelings families may have toward their students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002).

Institutional Context

Mid Michigan Community College was founded in 1965 in Harrison and Mt. Pleasant, Michigan (Mid Michigan, n.d). Mid Michigan community college was preferred for this project based on the vast AI/AN community within Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe is home to a large population of AI/AN individuals. Data USA (2020) estimated 2.76% of the total population makes up 1.94K American Indians in Mt. Pleasant. Mid Michigan's core values include people, integrity, learning, community, and excellence (Mid Michigan College's Mission Statement & Core Values, n.d.). Mid Michigan believes in valuing diversity in people and ideas by honoring success for students, employees, and teams across the college. A few of the institution's goals for students include encouraging student success, engaging the community, and ensuring institutional effectiveness (Mid Michigan College's Mission Statement & Core Values, n.d). Within this community college, only 1% of the student population makes up AI/AN students (Mid Michigan College, 2022). Like many other institutions in the United States, a small number of AI/AN students are in attendance. The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) shows Saginaw Chippewa Tribal College's total AI/AN student enrollment is 76%. There needs to be a system in place with better outcomes in retaining AI/AN students at Mid Michigan Community College. Institutions can get more involved with these students by being inclusive and sensitive to AI/AN culture (Martin, 2005). Mid Michigan College's Mission Statement & Core Values. (n.d.) openly displays their connections with the community by creating resources, events, activities, and educational programming to engage the surrounding communities.

Project Components

Community colleges often fail to see the connection between institutional values and student/family values, impacting students' ability to commit (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002), which may heavily impact a student's ability to be successful in higher education. The difference between AI/AN culture and white culture is AI/AN groups are grounded in the deep connection between student, family, and tribe (Brayboy et al., 2014; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). White culture in post-secondary education consists of an individualistic mindset of going through higher education independently, assuming they already have the necessary skill set to navigate their way (Brayboy et al., 2014). The Native Peoples Club at Mid Michigan will design and implement an orientation for AI/AN students and their parents. The desired outcome from a combined orientation is to establish trust between students, parents, and the community college by including family support, empowerment, and recognizing American Indian values. The family education specialist works within the Native Peoples Club as a resource for indigenous populations. It will be important for AI/AN students and parents to be in contact with this person because they will act as the liaison between indigenous families, Mid Michigan community college, and Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. The Native Peoples student group will host a minimum of two social gatherings within the first year that are inclusive to AI/AN families to the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. Creating a sense of belonging for indigenous students in their first year will increase their likelihood of finishing their second year (Martin, 2005; Mayhew et al., 2010).

Orientation

This orientation is organized by the Native Peoples Club, specifically for AI/AN first-year students and their parents. It will be held for one day only, and although it is highly

recommended to attend in person, there will be a virtual option for those who cannot be present. A recording of the orientation will also be provided for those who cannot attend the in-person or virtual event. There will be an initial greeting from the community college, sharing their excitement about the day ahead. Students and parents will not be split into separate orientation sessions (Mayhew et al., 2010). First, the orientation will host a Q/A session with faculty and staff emphasizing ways faculty and staff have experience working with AI/AN students and ways they are sensitive to their culture. Secondly, there will be another Q/A session to follow from students in the Native Peoples club on campus discussing ways they found a sense of belonging in their first year and collaborating with the institution's family education specialist.

The individual leading and facilitating the orientation will have a cultural understanding of the deep connectedness of family and tribe. Based on this understanding, the campus resources supporting students and families will be featured: Native Peoples Club, student counseling and wellness resources, student accommodation services, campus cupboard and food pantry, advising and mentoring, and library and learning center. This part of the orientation schedule is meant to describe various resources available at Mid Michigan along with a brief overview of the community college's mission, goals, and relay who they are expected to hear from. The desired outcome will be for the parents and students to feel equipped with campus resources, along with parents finding ways to be encouraging when difficulties arise for their students. All individuals will be able to ask questions and express their hopes and concerns.

Faculty and Staff Panel

Research indicates that students who have connections with an AI/AN staff or faculty member may find ease when feeling unwelcomed, isolated, misunderstood, and marginalized on college campuses (Windchief, Arouca & Brown, 2018). Students and parents will attend a

faculty and staff panel highlighting past experiences working with AI/AN students and describing their culturally inclusive material, methods of support, and personal insight on working with AI/NA students. The panel will discuss their flexibility with students who communicate cultural reasons why they might miss class and assignments. Students taking courses at community college will be given grace for extenuating circumstances such as funerals or other cultural traditions that may interfere with class attendance and coursework. There will be a set list of frequent questions the panel will answer first then it will go into open question and answer. Taking the time for the panel to explain their thoughts and actions in different situations may be comforting for those in the audience. Parents and students will leave feeling confident in their professors and supporting staff. To see the questions asked by the panel moderator, refer to Appendix B.

Student Panel

Minoritized students frequently face social setbacks and feelings of isolation which may cause feelings of not belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2011). A moderator will ask a second-year student panel from the Native Peoples Club to discuss their experience with transition and how they adapted to Mid Michigan Community College. The panel will discuss their experiences with the Native Peoples club, inclusive socials, and ways they found a sense of belonging through their connections with the family education specialist. There will also be a more in-depth conversation about how and what it means to access the student counseling and wellness resources, academic support, campus cupboard, and student accommodation services. The desired outcome is for parents and students to describe the various resources available. The student panel will have a list of set questions the moderator asks and then open to floor questions students and parents have. See Appendix C for a list of questions asked by the moderator.

Family Education Specialist

The family education specialist is meant to serve as a resource to serve students' goals and their parents. Building relationships in collaboration between AI/AN students, parents, Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, and Mid Michigan Community College will help students navigate connections on campus (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). The family education specialist position works closely with the Native Peoples Club, supporting empowerment within the minoritized community in addition to being a point person with cultural understanding and access to resources. Since this person acts as a liaison between the student, parent, Mid Michigan Community College, and Saginaw Chippewa Indian tribe, these partnerships will create an environment for students to thrive and be successful during their post-secondary education journey. Since minoritized students often feel unwelcomed, isolated, misunderstood, and marginalized on college campuses, the family education specialist will use their tools to help individuals who are powerless to obtain personal, political, and cultural power (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Windchief et al., 2018). During scheduled meetings with the family education specialist, students and parents will walk through the family education specialist's tools of assessment, commitment, collaboration, communication, and evaluation. Based on HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) family education specialist roles, an initial assessment will document the student's goals, attributes, expectations, and self-assessment.

Asking what goals students and families have in their desired outcomes for them personally and educationally. Next, the family education specialist will describe their commitment to the family by sharing with the students and parents they are seen, valued, and respected at Mid Michigan. They will discuss how the college's administrators, faculty, and staff are giving their full support to increase students' sense of belonging. Following commitment,

they will share resources for collaboration across campus. Involving various individuals on and off campus, such as faculty, staff, student, parents, Saginaw Chippewa Indian tribe, and family education specialists, all team members supporting AI/AN student success. At the next stage, communication, the family education specialist will provide tools and strategies to help student and family success, including study strategies, round tables, or topics including the student's career goals. Communication provides ways the institution can empower minoritized students and parents. Finally, the evaluation of academic performance and sense of belonging will start at the beginning of the first year to the graduation of the student. Since this role works closely with the Native Peoples Club, the family education specialist will highly encourage students to attend at least two social events put on by the club. The student and parents will fill out evaluation surveys upon their graduation to measure the effectiveness of the family education specialist role. Adjustments will be made accordingly after post survey of students and parents. Although meeting with this individual is not required, it is highly recommended.

Sense of Belonging

Feeling a sense of belonging is a balanced relationship between involvement and engagement. Astin (1999) describes involvement as a formulation of the amount of physical and psychological energy college students devote their time. He suggests involvement as behavior, referring to what students do, compared to what students think or feel. On the other hand, engagement can be measured by the time and energy students commit to their educationally purposeful activities that extend to students participating in activities leading to student success (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). With the combination of involvement and engagement, Strayhorn (2012) mentions a positive relationship between involvement in academic and social activities that tie into students' belonging on campus. Mid Michigan community college honors Indigenous

peoples and their sense of belonging by implementing ways Native Peoples club partners with the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, family education specialist, and creating social events involving students and their families (Mid Michigan College, n.d.). Native Peoples Club hosts interactive socials, activities, and programming for students and their families to participate. Students attending these socials will increase involvement and engagement within the community, immensely increasing the likelihood of student retention and a sense of belonging (Brayboy et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2012).

Project Evaluation

To evaluate the effectiveness of the orientation day, parents and students will be sent a post-orientation survey created by the Native Peoples Club. Survey questions will be outlined by measuring what learning outcomes were obtained through the orientation. Learning outcomes for parents and students know how to access basic resources on campus, acknowledge faculty and staff cultural sensitivity and flexibility, and know how to schedule an appointment with the family education specialist. They will be asked questions on the effectiveness of having a combined orientation for parents and students. Families will then be asked open-ended questions pertaining to ways of improvement in future years. The data collected will be benchmarked for future orientations. Although one orientation day will not significantly increase the likelihood of retention, the data collected will contribute to tracking AI/AN student retention rates from those who participated in orientation day versus those who did not. The success of the orientation will be determined after collecting the surveys and comparing the success of orientation through retention rates from previous years.

There will also be a short survey following families' first year working with the family educational specialist. The desired outcome is to give structured feedback on how this individual

could improve upon working with themselves and future families. The learning outcomes will prove if students and families succeed in this role, showing they are equipped with the tools necessary for success. Some examples include acknowledging they have choices and opportunities, how to access resources on and off campus, and their ability to show how their diversity is a strength. Their connection with this social worker will be a written response with an opportunity for an open conversation.

Project Conclusion

Personal and environmental factors must be considered when exploring student persistence and promoting retention (Chee et al., 2019; Tinto, 1993). By implementing a combined orientation, I focused on the FEM as a retention strategy among AI/NA students by involving their parents and family education specialist. Students from Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe may engage, resist, and challenge white ideologies and practices forcing Mid Michigan Community College to engage in ways that increase a sense of belonging for students (Brayboy et al., 2014). Native Peoples Club create spaces for AI/AN students, parents, Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, and family education specialist by utilizing resources provided through Mid Michigan Community College. Although a combined AI/AN student and parent orientation and family educational specialist is not implemented at a traditional community college, it could be crucial for retaining AI/AN students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002).

Plans for Implementation

For this project, the Native Peoples Club provides ways for AI/AN students to feel comfortable attending a non-tribal community college. For the club to create its combined orientation, working closely with the family education specialist and putting together ways for families to participate in their post-secondary education, including social gatherings or dances,

will increase students' sense of belonging and overall increase retention. Although the idea of a family education specialist was originally designed for a tribal community college, the retention strategies provided by this role suggested designs that could be implemented at community colleges close to a tribe. There is value in making it well known to AI/AN students and parents the lengths Mid Michigan Community College will go to for student success by implementing what was previously discussed. The implementation of a combined orientation and family education specialist could vastly change how community colleges operate concerning AI/AN students. There are various resources to consider for this orientation day to be successful such as budgeting and prep time for both panels. The Native Peoples Club must diligently manage time, organization, key speakers, and social gatherings. Since the Native Peoples club has organized the combined orientation, influenced AI/AN students to schedule meetings with the family education specialist, and created social gatherings on campus, other community colleges may struggle to find a club as involved as this one. However, if this was implemented at more community colleges, further research and benchmarking could share success and failures with other community colleges close to an AI/AN tribe.

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Appendix A

Schedule for AI/NA Student and Parent Orientation

10:00 am.: Welcome, the introduction of orientation leaders, and an overview of the schedule.

10:30 am.: Students and parents will hear from the faculty and staff panel.

11:10 am: Students and parents will hear from the student panel.

11:50 am: Orientation conclusion.

Appendix B

Questions asked by the moderator During the Faculty and Staff Panel

1. How do you demonstrate culturally inclusive material and methods of support?
2. In what ways are you able to be flexible when it comes to cultural factors disrupting academics?
3. What are your personal insights on working with AI/NA students?
4. What are ways you find the institution to be inclusive for AI/NA students?

Appendix C

Questions Asked by the Moderator to the Student Panel

1. In your experience, do you feel you found your sense of belonging in this community college?
2. In terms of adjusting to higher education, what were some ways that proved to be helpful to you?
3. Do you feel you have a good grasp on how to access resources on and off campus?
4. Is your family also on this higher education journey with you? In what ways has the institution integrated family through your education journey?