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NEW RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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New Research Perspectives on Native American Students in Higher Education

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This chapter begins with a brief history of higher education's role in assimilation, oppression, and removal of Indigenous people. A short literature review outlines the progression of higher education literature from deficit focused ideologies to current research that decolonizes and centers of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. "Sharing circles" as an Indigenous methodology is described. Centering Indigenous experiences in higher education and Indigenous knowledge systems focus on ways that Western forms of education can be used as tools to strengthen Native nations.

Within the last 15 years we have witnessed an increase in the scholarship written by and with Indigenous practitioners and scholars in higher education.
(Davidson, Shotton, Minthorn, & Waterman, 2018, p. 13)

When we gather, as Haudenosaunee, our Gaiwi:oh, Words Before all Else, are spoken. These words are a Thanksgiving for all of Creation. We are thankful for the waters, people, four legged animals, for birds, and the fishes, and for plants and berries; in other words, for all of Creation. We strive to come to one mind, a good mind.

We start all of our functions this way and it sets a tone of agreement, not on every specific thing, but at least for peace in our minds, for keeping an open mind. We acknowledge the universe and each other and then all agree to that.
(Thomas, 1992, p. 11)

I am thankful for my family and colleagues, that I am able to do this work and to inform others about Indigenous students and research. I am thankful to be able to think and work on Haudenosaunee territory shared with Anishinaabe peoples that is part of the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit River. I am thankful that Mother Nature continues in her duties.

I begin this paper about our Thanksgiving as an example of how the perspectives of Indigenous scholars are centering our ways of being, our Indigenous Knowledge Systems, in our practice and research. It is part of who I am as an Indigenous scholar. Early higher education research was typically conducted from a deficit approach with dominant ideologies and methods by non-Indigenous researchers (Smith, 1999). Now research is being undertaken that not only is based in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) (Minthorn & Shotton, 2018), but also allows researchers to explicitly state their positionality. Early institutions not only had a purpose to assimilate, to Christianize and not educate, they also deceived others to raise funds and recruit students (see Carney, 1999, for the particularly troubling story of Samson Occum and Dartmouth College). This system is the basis for higher education today and these ideologies remain in many forms. Indigenous scholarship pushes back against the settler colonial system. In this paper, I use the terms American Indian, Indigenous, and Native American interchangeably as they all three are often used in the literature. I begin with a brief history of higher education's role in assimilation, a short literature review, then research by Indigenous scholars for Indigenous communities, ways that occurs, and last methods and examples of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in research. I conclude this paper with thoughts about the future of new research perspectives on Native American students in higher education.

Higher Education's Role in Assimilation

Higher education on Turtle Island is complicit in assimilation, oppression, and removal efforts of Indigenous people (Adams, 1995; Carney, 1999). The colonial colleges played on the desires of the English to "spread the gospel" among the

“heathens” (Wright, 1988, p. 2). Complicated by funding from England and other Christian fundraising, Harvard University, for example, was able to expand their institution while neglecting their charter to educate Indigenous men (Carney, 1999). As “heathens,” on lands the colonists desired, education was a form of removal, not only physically and psychologically, but also a tool of removal of Indigenous ways of being (Wright, 1988).

The boarding school era was a formal policy of removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities into “schools” characterized by General Pratt’s philosophy of “Kill the Indian in him and save the man” (Adams, 1995, p. 52; Carney, 1999). The ideology that Indigenous ways of being needed to be replaced with that of white Christian ways has driven educational policies for at least 100 years. The boarding school curriculum was vocational in its focus, included hard physical work, and survivors reported physical and sexual abuse (Adams, 1995). Indigenous education has been framed as a “problem,” with Indigenous students thought of as “at-risk,” in need of change, and in comparison to White students (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Some universities supported boarding schools including my alma mater, Syracuse University (SU) (New York State Legislature Assembly, 1889). SU sits on Onondaga territory. It is likely other current universities supported boarding schools in some way. Some institutions began as boarding schools such as the University of North Carolina, Pembroke. Few of today’s institutions regularly incorporate Indigenous Knowledge Systems and courses into their curricula nor formally recognize the Indigenous people of the land they occupy; a reflection of these unacknowledged settler colonial legacies.

Early Higher Education Literature

... research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions.
(Smith, 1999, p. 5)

Western-style formal education for Native people was not a neutral endeavor (Stein, 2018). Settler colonial ideologies influenced the racist policies and day-to-day interactions in classrooms. The same ideologies were involved in research methods and methodologies (Smith, 1999). Before moving to current research regarding Native students, a short broad literature review is shared to provide context.

Literature through a deficit lens has compared Native American students, families, and culture to that of settler colonial White middle-class standards. An example is Deyhle's (1995) study of Navajo youth who faced daily racism in and out of high school with some non-Native teachers acting with open hostility toward the students. Some teachers discounted student experiences, which is essentially invalidating students' realities. Some teachers lowered expectations and a non-Navajo academic counselor said: "I've never met a Navajo that planned far in the future, to like go to college. It's more [about] what to do tomorrow and the day after" (Deyhle, 1995, p. 415). Close family ties were viewed as problematic; a common theme throughout the literature. Counselors could not "comprehend" that students wanted to stay on the reservation (Deyhle, 1995, p. 418). Deyhle writes, "Their typical comments include[d]: 'He said he wanted to be a medicine man! [fn] He can't really mean it'" (1995, p. 418). Had that student said he wanted to be a Christian priest, I imagine that teacher's response would have been positive; through a settler colonial perspective, any nation strengthening or cultural continuance has to be erased, devalued, and replaced with

that of dominant culture and values. Deyhle's study was published in 1995; however, in my dissertation study with data conducted in the early 2000s, a high school counselor at a school in New York State with a large Native population told students that "Natives don't go to college" (Waterman, 2007, p. 28). Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, and Solyom (2012) reminded us that "Making communities healthy through the pursuit of self-determination and tribal sovereignty is rarely acknowledged within the paradigms that guide higher-education discussions about recruitment, retention, and success" (p. 3).

Next, this section I will provide examples of literature based on themes since the 1980s. Because of space limitations and the purpose of this paper, only some representative literature is discussed. Literature in his period featured quantitative studies (Falk & Aitken, 1984), comparisons to other students (Cibik & Chambers, 1991), and studies that focused on the Native student (Dodd, Garcia, Meccage, & Nelson, 1995). Terminology used "American Indian" more than contemporary literature does, reflecting a change in political climate in addition to regional differences. Cultural discontinuity was posed as a possible reason for attrition (Ledlow, 1992), and Sanders (1987) discussed culture as a possible barrier to attainment. Maintenance of cultural integrity was a theme, often discussed as resistance to assimilative systems of education (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Huffman, 2001).

Western methodologies stand aside, apart, and attempt to create distance, as if the researcher could remove part of their brain and a life-time of socialization, to analyze, to dissect, and to objectively interpret data. A number of scholars have called for decolonizing research methodologies—a deconstruction of Western methodologies that are based on ideologies of settler colonialism that oppresses, others, marginalizes,

imposes binaries, and external definitions (Kovach, 2008; Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson, 2008). By centering Indigenous ways of knowing, researchers are positioning themselves in their research and engaging in Indigenous methodologies that values relationship, respect, a responsibility to community (Wilson, 2008).

The “Words that come before all else” help us work together in a good way, for the good of all of us. This way of being is in conflict with higher education climates that were built upon and continue to promote individualism, competitiveness, (Shotton, Lowe & Waterman, 2013) and researchers who “mine” communities for their own benefit (Smith, 1999) in isolated disciplines that seek a single truth. Pushing back against research imperialism has impacted not only Native/Indigenous research, other marginalized researchers are pushing back as well (Patel, 2016).

Higher Education Research by and for Indigenous Scholars and Practitioners

Fundamental to decolonization and the reclamation and re-storying of research methods (Minthorn & Shotton, 2018) is that Western methods are often incompatible with Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Every researcher’s worldview is the lens through which research is conceived, executed, analyzed, and reported. Native scholars have rejected majoritarian deficit narratives and the research through lenses of drop-out rather than push-out (Reyhner, 1992), exploring and celebrating our strengths rather than comparison with White, middle-class standards. Three of these perspectives discussed next are cultural integrity, community cultural wealth, tribal critical race theory, and explicit ways Indigenous Knowledge Systems informs our research.

Cultural integrity

Mainstream Western education had no intention to maintain the cultural integrity of Indigenous students or the cultural integrity of “othered” groups. Anderson (1988) described the “structure, ideology, and content of black education as part and parcel of the larger political subordination of blacks” (p. 2) and included in this book the history of schooling and colleges by Blacks for Blacks. Joel Spring (2001) has written several books about Western cultural domination of U.S. schools. Yet, Native students have valued their traditions and their maintenance of their cultural integrity, sometimes leaving Western educational environments in order to preserve their integrity (Huffman, 2008). Huffman’s (2001; 2008) work discussed the agentive resiliency of Native college students. Guillory (2008), Jackson and Smith (2001), HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002), and Waterman (2007) are just a few examples of scholars who found that students used their culture as their “anchor” (Huffman, 2008, p. 187) to form Native resiliency to complete degrees (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Going home often or attending an institution close to home is a way to support one’s cultural integrity (Waterman, 2012). Drawing on one’s culture and community is a source of strength and wealth which is in contrast to deficit models (Brayboy et al., 2012).

Community Cultural Wealth

Through Critical Race Theory (CRT) Yosso (2006) challenged Bourdieuan conceptions of culture to identify the *funds of knowledge* (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005) in communities of color that students bring with them to schooling. Yosso identified five categories of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, familial, and resistant (2006). By identifying community knowledge and resources as sources of

wealth rather than as deficits and barriers, community cultural wealth (CCW) is a strength-based way to explore cultural integrity and Native students' experiences (Lindley, 2009; Mosholder, Waite, Larsen, & Goslin, 2016; Waterman & Lindley, 2013).

Tribal Critical Race Theory

Through an Indigenous perspective, Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2006) extends Critical Race Theory to the Native experience. While CRT recognizes that racism is part of the fabric of North American society, TribalCrit extends racism to its beginning, in colonization. A key tenet of TribalCrit is the power of story in the sense that this is how we theorize, how Indigenous Knowledge Systems is shared (Brayboy, 2006). Story in this sense is different from counter-story in CRT, as it is not in opposition to the master narrative. Counter-story, counters the master narrative, and while can be critiqued as being in comparison to whiteness and the dominant ways of being, it is a powerful tool to disrupt majoritarian story. Story is at the center of Native thought, of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and of our ways of being. It has been in practice since long before settler contact and has operated even when dominant forces tried to silence us. Story happens within our "alter-native" spaces (Grande, 2004, p. 169) away from a settler colonial gaze. Story is our shared knowledge directly connected to land and Creation (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Extending cultural integrity and community cultural wealth as theoretical frames, scholars engage Indigenous Knowledge Systems to explore Native American higher education.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Ways of Being

Wildcat defines *indigenization* as "the act of making our educational philosophy, pedagogy, and system our own, making the effort to explicitly explore ways of knowing and systems of knowledge that have been actively repressed for five centuries. (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001, p. vii)

Scholars *are* making higher education research and literature *our own* and *explicitly* engaging in our own systems of knowledge. The Three Sisters agricultural practice serves as a metaphor for many of our teachings. The three sisters work in reciprocity: the corn provides a sturdy stalk to climb, the squash discourages pests and other plants while covering the ground to preserve moisture, and the beans produce nitrogen which benefits all three plants and the soil. Kimmerer (2013) described that “There are layers upon layers of reciprocity in this garden: between the bean and the bacterium, the bean and the corn, and the squash, and ultimately, the people” (p. 134). It is in relationship and gratitude that we observe in Creation that informs our work. The understanding of cultural nuance, which is often unrecognized or devalued by dominant research methods of inquiry, is the strength of Indigenous Knowledge Systems methodologies. This is an exciting time and for us and the benefits extend to everyone in higher education.

Examples of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

“Be confident in our Indigenous ways of research”
(Maori member of the audience in Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016, p. 277)

Indigenous Knowledge Systems center Indigenous protocols and responsibilities. Tachine et al. (2016) wrote about the use of “sharing circles” in their study of Native students’ college access and transition experiences (p. 278). Challenged by a Maori member of the audience during a presentation in which they were using “focus groups” and “sharing circles” interchangeably (Tachine et al., 2016, p. 277), Tachine et al. shared how their Indigenous approach centered “tribal cultural protocol and storytelling” describing the use of sharing circles in their “project as an Indigenous methodology” (p.

278). They discussed three characteristics of the Sharing Circle methodology: recognition, responsibility, and relationships. The authors recognized the complexities of being researchers with insider/outsider status. Tachine and Yellow Bird are Indigenous but not always the same tribal affiliation as the participants in the study; Cabrera was not connected to his Indigenous heritage. The research facilitators introduced themselves by stating their tribal affiliation and role in the study. Most study participants introduced themselves in their language and by clan and community. Study participants, including the facilitators, were able to position themselves in relation to each other “reinforcing traditional communal relationships” (Tachine et al., 2016, p. 287). Food and drinks were offered during sharing circles which is a “customary practice in many native cultures” (p. Tachine et al., 2016, 287) and the circles were not limited to an hour, and some circles “lasted up to four hours” (p. 286). The authors write that the participants were engaged in hearing each other’s stories, and that there were few interruptions. They were respectful of one another and demonstrated the responsibility to hear story with others who they are in relationship. Extending the time of the sharing circles is an example of recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and being in relationship.

Many Native communities have a saying, “Indian Time,” which is often interpreted as being late; however, it also means to spend the time necessary as the occasion demands. I have encountered many complaints from Indigenous people that a meeting ended too soon or we moved on to a new topic before we were finished with the first or that not everyone was heard, and the frustration was expressed because “we weren’t done yet.” Mainstream focus groups encourage a time limit so as to not inconvenience the participants. Sharing personal information on the part of the

facilitator(s) is discouraged, as well as having prior, or developing, relationships with participants (Seidman, 2006). Tachine et al. (2016) clearly articulate why sharing circles centered Indigenous Knowledge Systems, which increased trust, relationship and responsibility, resulting in an in-depth “holistic view of” participants’ experiences (p. 291). An understanding, especially through lived experiences and shared cultural constructs, informed their analysis rather than being considered a bias as it could be through Western research methodologies. The authors also write about reaching out to Tribal representatives regarding the usefulness of their study. University representatives who worked directly with Native students and students were consulted to help co-construct the research questions. As researchers from universities, Tachine et al. (2016) stated that they “had a responsibility to conduct ourselves in ethical standards and practices above and beyond adhering to the university’s responsible conduct of research policies” (p. 285). I encourage readers to explore recent publications that center Indigenous research methodologies. Sharing Circles was one example of how Indigenous Knowledge Systems can enhance our understanding of research.

Where We Go from Here

By centering Indigenous experiences in higher education and Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous scholars focus on ways that Western forms of education can strengthen our Native nations (Brayboy et al., 2012). “Ultimately, for us, the process of nation building consists of legal and political, cultural, economic, health and nutrition, spiritual, and educational elements with the well-being, sovereignty, self-determination, and autonomy of the community as the driving force for nation-building” (Brayboy et al., 2012, p. 13). Economic development is one component; however, there

are many ways to strengthen nations through higher education. According to Waterman and Lindley (2013), “Obtaining a college degree to become a teacher to strengthen a tribe’s language program is an example of nation building” (p. 128). The point is to use elements of Western educational systems to be independent and self-determinate, not reliant on external definitions and limitations to strengthen communities. Understanding cultural nuance and Indigenous Knowledge Systems informs nation building.

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are rarely discussed in mainstream higher education literature. Yet, these institutions center and serve Native communities, with most located on Native territories (AIHEC, n.d.). Their role in nation building and in preparing Native students for educational degree attainment is underreported (Makomenaw, 2014; Sanders & Makomenaw, 2018). In Willmott, Sands, Raucci, and Waterman’s¹ (2015) review of 20 years of Native American focused literature and conference presentations in the main higher education and student affairs organizations (*Journal of College Student Development*, *NASPA Journal* now *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, the *Review of Higher Education*; ACPA: College Student Educators International, Association for the Study of Higher Education, and NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) found only one journal article that discussed tribal college students specifically and one that discussed student affairs funding at TCUs out of 2,683 total articles.

¹ This study was an extension of McClellan’s 2003 dissertation, “Multiculturalism as a ‘technology of othering’: An exploratory study of the social construction of Native Americans by student affairs professionals in the Southwest.”

Nation building involves decolonization (Brayboy et al., 2012). Imposed systems of identity, governance, policies of language removal and even nutritional guides have to be deconstructed in order to restore Indigenous ways of being. For example, deconstructing the dominant settler colonial based curriculum to expose the master narrative of manifest destiny and Western expansion opens up opportunities for critical thinking and re-storying of Indigenous histories, the role of women, and Indigenous and land-based science. Respect and recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems requires a responsibility to our relationships with each other, Indigenous nations, and Creation. In *Indigenizing programs for Native American student success*, (Waterman, Lowe, & Shotton, 2018), the chapter authors described post-secondary access programs designed by and for Native communities. These programs are examples of ways Native nations are strengthening their communities by using Western forms of education as tools, without giving up their cultural integrity, through Indigenous ways of being. Another example is *Universities and Indian country: Case studies in tribal-driven research* (Norman & Kalt, 2015), which includes eight “collaborative research projects undertaken at the request of Native communities and organizations and carried out under the auspices of Harvard University’s Native American Program (HUNAP), the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education” (p. vii). Nation building is at the heart of this program as graduate students enrolled in Nation Building are exposed to Indigenous law, politics, social issues, etc., as well as hearing from Indigenous leaders. In Nation Building II, students apply that knowledge after Native nations identify needs and interests.

Throughout this paper I have focused on strengths and rejecting deficit narratives. This does not mean Indigenous scholars cannot critique or only find positive outcomes in research. For example, in Guillory and Wolverton's (2008) research, participants in their study described family as their greatest support in their educational journeys. Participants also indicated that their families were barriers. Scholars are tackling tough questions that have so far gone under-explored. Nelson (2015), Nelson and Tachine (2018), and Youngbull (2018) are some scholars who are exploring the complicated issues regarding financial aid. Others are examining data reporting (Sanders & Makomenaw, 2018) and using statistics to examine external constructs through Indigenous lenses to explore persistence (Lopez, 2018), identity (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014; D. Oxendine, 2016), and sense of belonging (S. Oxendine, 2015). Quantitative research entails a methodology that essentializes and abstracts, and that has largely been a tool used by non-Indigenous researchers without the input of Indigenous worldviews (Walter & Andersen, 2013). Because the Native population is small, especially on a postsecondary campus, sampling can be difficult rendering Native data to an asterisk (Shotton et al., 2013). Indigenous statistics is a growing field with great promise.

As scholars we need to remember that Native communities likely do not have access to academic journals; for research to reach our communities, it must be shared in ways that are accessible to our communities and as jargon-free as possible. Also, scholars write about nation building, but do Native nations use the same term (Lopez, 2019, personal communication)? In the same vein, reciprocity is a key motivator for most Indigenous students to attend and complete postsecondary education. Reciprocity

is often used interchangeably with giving back; however, the centrality and depth of meaning of giving back for Indigenous students may not be adequately conveyed to institutional administration and practitioners. It can mean giving back to an urban Indigenous community as well as one on a territory. Place, home, land, family, and community are key for the majority of Indigenous students. Institutions need to understand that in order to adequately support our students.

Conclusion

In this paper I broadly reviewed the research with regard to Native students in higher education and then discussed trends in the literature. Indigenous scholars have been making the research our own through Indigenous Knowledge Systems and shared Sharing Circles as an example. Like the Three Sisters we are all related and reliant upon each other and respect the relationship and responsibility to our relations as foundational to our research. I close with a few “concluding thoughts” from the authors of Minthorn and Shotton’s (2018, pp. 212-213) edited text:

- One truth is that all institutions of higher education are on Indigenous land, and institutions have to begin with acknowledging that.
- It is important for Indigenous people to do this work, incorporate ancestors’ knowledge and contemporary Indigenous perspectives.
- It is important to position Indigenous identity from the political relationship that we have with education as a trust responsibility and the land on which institutions sit.
- Methodologies are beings.

- Research is very personal. From a Western perspective, research in general is static and you separate yourself. We are saying it is okay to incorporate yourself into your research, to be yourself.
- Indigenous knowledges have value and relevance to transforming higher education.

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