Tribal Colleges: Playing a Key Role in the Transition from Secondary to Postsecondary Education for American Indian Students

Donna Brown

Tribal colleges were created to provide access to quality higher education for American Indians. One of the goals of tribal colleges is to prepare students for further study at mainstream institutions when their program of study is not available at the tribal college level. The unique benefits of attending tribal colleges include the convenience of being able to remain close to home and family, the cultural components of the tribal college curriculum, and a strong sense of community. This study affirms, from the student's perspective, the reasons American Indian students benefit from attending tribal colleges. The primary method of data collection in this qualitative study was in-depth interviewing. The article concludes with recommendations to ease the transfer process for those students who intend to transfer to a mainstream institution after their tribal college experience.

Tribal colleges are defined as institutions of higher education that have been formally sanctioned by one or more tribes. Ideally, tribal colleges combine the preservation of tribal history, culture, and traditions with academic preparation, vocational training, and basic adult education (American Indian Higher Education Consortium [AIHEC], 2000; Belgarde, 1994; Boyer, 1997; Raymond, 1986; Tierney & Wright, 1991). Tribal colleges were developed in response to the lack of access to higher education for American Indian people, and the low rate of success American Indians were experiencing in mainstream institutions. For many years, evidence has suggested that American Indian students were not graduating from college at the same rates as non-Indian students. According to O'Brien (1992), "A 1989 survey of those institutions serving almost 75 percent of American Indian students found that more than half of those students (53 percent) left after the first year; three out of four did not complete their degrees" (p. 1).

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the perceptions transfer students from tribal colleges had upon entering the University of North Dakota (UND) regarding their own readiness to attend a four-year institution. Overall, the participants indicated that their experiences at their respective tribal colleges were excellent. With the exception of some of the faculty being "too lenient," they felt that the tribal colleges prepared them well for attending UND. Participants recommended that friends and family attend a tribal college before transferring to a four-year institution. The tribal colleges represented in this study were Turtle Mountain Community College, Sitting Bull College, and Fort Berthold Community College. The participants transferred to UND with grade point averages of 3.0 or higher and had completed 45 or more cumulative semester credits transferable to UND. Fifteen students fit within these parameters and 11 students participated in the study.

Introduction

Throughout history, American Indians have faced many overwhelming barriers to the attainment of higher education. Poor preparation for college, disproportionate high school dropout rates, cultural differences, and limited financial resources were just some of the hurdles that prevented Indians from attending college (Boyer, 1997; Stein, 1988; Tierney & Wright, 1991). According to Boyer (1997), "Indian students were often discouraged from attending college by their own teachers who, inspired by misguided kindness or overt racism, did not want to see Indian students enter the more rigorous life of higher education where, in their view, failure was likely" (p. 20).

The issue of access was somewhat addressed by the enactment of the 1944 GI Bill and the Higher Education Act of 1965. The GI Bill paid for tuition, fees, books, and supplies, plus a living allowance. The living allowance varied according to the marital status of the veteran as well as the number of children in the veteran's family (Platt, 1995). As a result of the GI Bill, approximately 2,000 American Indians were enrolled in some form of higher education during the late 1950s (Tierney & Wright, 1991). The Higher Education Act generally focuses on improving the quality and affordability of higher education by strengthening the educational resources of colleges and universities and providing financial assistance, such as the Pell Grant, for economically disadvantaged students in postsecondary and higher education (Higher Education Administration, 2003). If, through these means or others, an American Indian student was fortunate enough to arrive on campus, the odds of succeeding were heavily against them. As Boyer (1997) noted:

> Especially since [the enactment of] the GI Bill and the Higher Education Act, the federal government, as well as individual colleges and universities, had encouraged Indian students to enroll. But as more did, it became clear that access did not guarantee academic success. The dropout rate for American Indians remained at 90 percent or higher at many institutions. (p. 25)

For example, the people of the Navajo Nation obtained access to higher education institutions by providing scholarships for their students to attend

college. However, they were disappointed to discover that over 50% of the recipients were dropping out of college by the end of their freshman year. "It was clear that higher education, whether public or private, as provided in 1959 was not able to meet the needs or overcome the culture differences Navajo college students brought with them to college" (Stein, 1988, p. 39). This lack of success generated discussions by the Tribal Education Committee of the need for a Navajo controlled higher education system, which led to the establishment of Navajo Community College, now known as Diné College. Diné College, whose main campus is located in Tsaile, Arizona, was established in 1968 as the first tribally controlled community college in the United States. Today, five community campus locations in Window Rock, Chinle, Ganado, Kayenta, and Tuba City serve Arizona residents, while a campus in Shiprock and a community campus in Crownpoint provide educational services to New Mexico residents.

Problem

There can be no doubt that without the cooperation and assistance of mainstream higher education institutions, some of the tribal colleges in existence may never have been established. There are examples of cooperative, trusting relationships between tribal colleges and mainstream higher education institutions such as the relationship between Arizona State University (ASU) and Diné College. From the conception of Navajo Community College, the first tribal college, to present-day operations, ASU constituents were involved in discussions with Diné College staff. According to Nichols and Monette (2003), "The ASU staff had trust in the TCU [Diné College] and allowed the tribal college staff to determine what were appropriate qualifications for instructional staff, based on tribal cultural values" (p. 126). In addition to Diné College, Sitting Bull College (SBC), formerly Standing Rock Community College (SRCC), had strong support from the administrators of Bismarck Junior College (BJC) beginning with the planning stage. According to Stein (1988), "Faculty and support staff at BJC also played a pivotal role in assisting SRCC get off to a good start by providing instruction and support service where required" (p. 164).

However, in many cases, the need for tribal colleges has been in question since their very inception. For example, in 1972, when the Turtle Mountain tribal officials began seeking accreditation for their college, Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC), they approached the North Dakota Board of Higher Education for support. The North Dakota Board of Regents was reluctant to support the idea of a community college on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation because they felt the existing state institutions were adequate to serve the tribal members (Stein, 1988). "Because board officials thought it was humorous that an Indian tribe wanted to establish its own college, it passed the TMCC application to the smallest and weakest state institution" (Nichols & Monette, 2003, p. 123). Reluctantly, North Dakota State University, Bottineau Branch (NDSU-BB), entered into a relationship with the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Tribe. A resolution was passed in 1973 bringing TMCC into official

existence as a chartered institution of the Turtle Mountain Tribe. "The college began the first courses in the fall of 1973 under the banner of TMCC" (Stein, 1988, p. 143).

Similarly, Montana state officials, already supporting eight higher education institutions, did not perceive a need for a tribally controlled college on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, nor on any of the other reservations in the state. According to Stein (1988), "Blackfeet Community College was free to develop under tribal jurisdiction, but the state would not assist in that development nor contribute any fiscal resources" (p. 207).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the perceptions transfer students from tribal colleges had upon entering UND. Specifically, this study focuses on these students' perceptions of their readiness to attend a four-year institution. This study also sought to identify ways in which UND could help to improve the success of tribal college transfer students, what the tribal colleges could do to improve the success of tribal college transfer students, and what UND and the tribal colleges could collaboratively do to improve the success of tribal college transfer students.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design. This approach is not a comparison of groups (i.e., Indian vs. non-Indian), but allows the researcher to explore the experiences of this particular group of tribal college transfer students in detail. The primary method of data collection used in this study was in-depth interviewing. The strength of in-depth interviewing is that we can come to understand the details of people's experience from their point of view, rather than drawing conclusions based on preconceived notions. Seidman (1998) said, "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 3).

The participants were interviewed on two occasions, early in the fall semester of 2001 and early the following spring semester of 2002. Most of the information gathered was reported by the participants, except for grade point averages and number of credits, which were confirmed by official UND documents.

In the planning stages of this study, the researcher identified tribal college graduates entering UND in the fall of 2001 as the potential subjects. However, the documents available to the researcher did not indicate which students had actually received degrees from tribal colleges. The researcher then decided to use another method of selection based on cumulative credits and grade point averages (GPAs). Tribal college transfer students with 60 or more semester credits and a GPA of 3.0 or higher were identified. The rationale for the parameter of 60 credits or more indicated to the researcher that these students had significant experience at a tribal college, as opposed to only taking a course or two. The rationale for

the parameter of a 3.0 GPA or higher was that it demonstrated that these students had performed well academically and could be expected to continue to do well at UND. Within these parameters, the sample size (*n*) was less than five. By changing the semester credits to 45 or more, the indication was that the participants still had a significant experience at a tribal college and more potential subjects were identified. The following were the final parameters: students transferring to UND from a tribal college, GPA of 3.0 or higher, and completion of 45 or more semester credits prior to transferring to UND. In addition to these parameters, the study only included students who had entered UND during the fall of 2001. Fifteen students fit within these parameters. The potential participants were contacted by letter shortly after classes began in August 2001. The letter provided a brief explanation of the study, listed the benefits that might result from the study, and an invitation to participate. The letters were followed by phone calls during which 11 students who agreed to participate were scheduled for their first interviews.

Participants

There are five tribally-controlled colleges in the state of North Dakota: Cankdeska Cikana Community College in Fort Totten, Sitting Bull College in Fort Yates, Fort Berthold Community College in Newtown, Turtle Mountain Community College in Belcourt, and United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck. All of the participants attended a tribal college in the state of North Dakota, however, not necessarily the college governed by their respective tribes. The tribal colleges represented in this study were Turtle Mountain Community College, Sitting Bull College, and Fort Berthold Community College.

Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC) is located in Belcourt, North Dakota, on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation. TMCC was chartered in 1972 by the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. Sitting Bull College (SBC) is located in Fort Yates, North Dakota, on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe chartered SBC as Standing Rock College in 1973. Fort Berthold Community (FBC) College is located in New Town, North Dakota, on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. FBC was chartered in 1974 by the Three Affiliated Tribes of the Arikara, Hidatsa, and Mandan (AIHEC, 1999).

The participants came from a variety of backgrounds, but they had several things in common. They were all enrolled members of federally recognized tribes of North Dakota including Standing Rock Sioux, Spirit Lake Nation, Turtle Mountain Chippewa, and Hidatsa. Furthermore, they were all strongly connected to their tribal communities. Most of the participants' previous college experiences had been at tribal colleges. If a participant had earned credits from any institution other than a tribal college, the tribal college was the last institution attended before UND. These students differed, however, in their reasons for transferring to UND. For some, their education began at the tribal college with intentions of transferring to a four-year institution. Others were drawn to UND by a specific degree

program. Finally, some made the decision to move to Grand Forks and attend UND when they were reasonably certain they could survive financially.

The participants ranged in age from 21 to 48. Six were married at the time of the interviews and five were not. Seven of them had children and two were single parents. Seven were not first-generation college students, but six were the first of their siblings to attend college. Their majors included biology, business, computer science, criminal justice, education, nursing, and clinical lab science. Profiles of the participants are included in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Student Profiles

	Age	Married	No of Children	First Generation	First of Siblings	Major
Adeline	22	N	Y/1	N	Y	Biology
Donna	25	Y	Y/2	N	Y	Pre-Business
Ian	20	N	N	Y	Y	Nursing[a]
Jonathan	21	N	N	N	Y	Computer Science
Joy	22	Y	N	N	N	Biology
Linus	38	Y	Y/3	N	N	Criminal Justice
Michelle	24	N	N	N	N	Biology
Molly	26	Y	Y/2[b]	Y	Y	Education
Star	26	N	Y/2	N	N	Education
Tammy	38	Y	Y/4	Y	N	Education
Two Moons	48	Y	Y/2	Y	Y	Science

Note. All names are pseudonyms.
[a]Changed major from physical therapy in the fall to nursing in the spring.
[b]Third child was born between semesters.

Limitations

1. This study is limited specifically to tribal college transfer students at UND.
2. This study is limited to American Indian students who transferred to UND in the fall of 2001.
3. This study is limited to students who transferred to UND with grade point averages of 3.0 or higher and who had completed at least 45 cumulative semester credits prior to transferring to UND.
4. This study is limited to students from North Dakota tribal colleges.

Findings

When asked the question, "Would you recommend that others attend tribal colleges before attending four-year institutions?" the answer was a resounding "yes." Overall, the participants indicated their experiences at their respective tribal colleges were excellent. For various reasons, they highly recommended that friends and family attend a tribal college before transferring to a four-year institution.

The proximity of a tribal college increases access for many students. One of the participants spoke of the convenience of the location of her tribal college. She said, "At [tribal college] you were right down the street. It's so convenient for you to just go to college right there." For many students, tribal colleges serve as a beginning point for postsecondary education, especially if they cannot immediately leave their geographic location to attend a four-year institution (Dell, 2000).

Donna said, "I always recommend taking everything [possible] down there [at tribal college]." She stated she appreciated the supportive atmosphere of the tribal college:

> It was really supportive. If they couldn't help you they tried to find a way to help you. They're really helpful and really supportive. Even when you're no longer their responsibility they care about what you're doing and how you're doing it.

Faculty members often play key roles in students' success. Students at tribal colleges experience high levels of support from faculty, which ultimately enhances retention. However, this support needs to be balanced with appropriate challenges so that students could succeed in predominantly White environments, as most four-year institutions are categorized (Ortiz & HeavyRunner, 2003).

Joy advised her sister to attend the tribal college before UND. "I told her to go one year and then leave, but she stayed for two years."

When asked about attending a tribal college, Linus said:

> It's probably the best move I made as far as going back to school is concerned. At the time, I didn't have the confidence to come right to a four-year school. Definitely, without a doubt, [tribal college] gave me that confidence. Besides, it was right at home and I had my family there. Also, I knew the teachers. It's a really nice school and the timing was right I guess. It pointed me in the right direction.

Star highly recommended the tribal college she attended:

> At [tribal college] they helped me feel strong enough that I could come here and make it. Especially the women there, they're cultural and they make you feel like you're empowered and strong and that you're, you're a star, not just a number. I would suggest that any one of my brothers and sisters and anyone of my family start there before they go to a university because it's such a good start.

Being an older-than-average student, Tammy said, "For advice that I would give to younger students, I think they should go to tribal college first before they come here because it's pretty scary here. And then transfer right away instead of waiting." She waited ten years after attending a tribal college to attend UND. "It's surprising how much I forgot."

Two Moons is also an older-than-average student. He waited 30 years between earning his general education degree (GED) and attending tribal college. When asked if he thought it was a good idea for him to attend tribal college before

UND he said, "Definitely, without a doubt. I don't even know if I could make it if I wouldn't have been there first."

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of previous studies which indicate that it is beneficial for American Indian students to attend tribal colleges prior to attending mainstream institutions. For example, in 1999, a study of tribal college graduates was commissioned by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium and administered by the Sallie Mae Institute. Almost 75% of the survey respondents who continued their education at another institution thought that the tribal colleges provided "excellent preparation" or "good preparation" for their advanced studies (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2000).

Ortiz and HeavyRunner (2003) recommended native youth attend tribal colleges as a way to prepare for transferring to mainstream institutions of higher education. Because some American Indian students are underprepared academically for college study, the tribal colleges can provide remedial courses in a more comfortable environment and at a lower cost than they can be obtained at mainstream institutions.

Summary

The participants recommended that other American Indian students attend Tribal Colleges and Universities before entering a mainstream institution. Overall, the participants indicated that their experiences in tribal colleges were excellent. Many felt that they would not have attended UND if they had not first attended a tribal college. The findings of this study were in line with much of the literature (AIHEC, 2000; Dell, 2000; Nichols & Monette, 2003; Ortiz & HeavyRunner, 2003) which indicated that the convenience of being able to remain close to home and family, the cultural components of the tribal college curriculum, and the strong sense of community are just a few of the reasons American Indian students benefit from attending tribal colleges.

Recommendations

When recruiting American Indian students to attend four-year institutions, it would be helpful for enrollment services personnel to be aware of the advantages of attending tribal colleges for potential transfer students and recognize that some would be better served by attending a tribal college before transferring to another college or university. According to Nichols and Monette (2003), an Indian student has a better chance of succeeding at a mainstream institution if he or she attends a tribal college first because tribal colleges are specifically charged with serving tribal students.

> Ideally, a tribal college student obtains foundational knowledge about native culture, history, and language. Upon transferring to a mainstream institution of higher education, the student used this knowledge as a source of strengthened identity, which helps him or her succeed in the mainstream institution of higher education. (p. 127)

Although the North Dakota tribal colleges currently have strong course articulation agreements with the University of North Dakota, it is highly recommended that other tribal colleges and mainstream institutions continue to explore possible opportunities for collaboration, including the development of articulation agreements. Articulation programs, sometimes called two-plus-two programs, are agreements between two colleges that allow a student to complete his or her first two years of instruction at a junior or community college before making the seamless transfer/transition to a four-year institution where he/she will complete the last two years of college.

Finally, it is important for mainstream institutions and tribal colleges to cooperate and collaborate for the sake of the most important stakeholders, the students. For those who intend to transfer to mainstream institutions the tribal college has proven to be an important, even necessary step, to reaching their academic goals.

Donna Brown is a member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Tribe in North Dakota. She is presently Assistant Director of American Indian Student Services at the University of North Dakota (UND) in Grand Forks. She is a former recipient of a Bush Leadership Fellowship, which enabled her to complete her final year of doctoral courses as well as her dissertation, which focused on the tribal college transfer function. Donna was awarded a Doctor of Education from UND in August of 2002.

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