

# American Indian/Alaska Native Voices in the Model of Institutional Adaptation to Student Diversity

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Richardson and Skinner (1991) in their Model of Institutional Adaptation to Student Diversity (MIASD) assert that state higher education boards have significant influence on the degree to which institutions respond to student diversity. The purpose of the study (conducted in the 2001-2002 school year) reported in this article was to determine whether the MIASD remains a useful diagnostic model in examining institutional responsiveness to American Indian/Alaska Native issues at three land-grant universities located in Washington, Idaho, and Montana. A two-part analysis first examined the policies in the three states and policy interpretation at each state's respective university based on the parameters set forth in the model. Phase two of the analysis compared nine faculty and 30 American Indian/Alaska Native student perspectives about campus diversity initiatives based on the same guidelines. This paper reports the findings of these analyses and discusses the applicability of the MIASD as a state/institutional diagnostic model.

**I**nstitutions of higher education remain a symbol of hope to communities where hopelessness often prevails. For many, the concept of a better way of life and a chance to increase opportunity provides the impetus to pursue a college education. However, for minority students, college enrollment trends reveal that adjusting to, persisting through, and graduating from a college or university is a challenge. For example, recent data show that as of 2005, American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) represented approximately one percent of all students enrolled in college. Most of them attended two-year institutions—typically within the tribal college system (U.S. Department of Education as cited in the *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 2007-2008). AI/AN graduations were equally low, with American Indian/Alaska Natives earning 0.8 percent of all associate's, bachelor's, and advanced degrees conferred in that year (U.S. Department of Education as cited in the *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 2007-2008). Year-to-year persistence rates are uncertain, with some estimates as low as 15% (Astin, 1982; Benjamin, Chambers, & Reiterman, 1993; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Larimore & McClellan, 2005; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Pavel, Swisher, & Ward, 1995; Tierney, 1992; Tijerina & Biemer, 1988; Wright, 1985).

### **American Indian/Alaska Native Higher Education Persistence Factors**

Factors, such as pre-college academic preparation, family and financial support, supportive and involved faculty, and institutional commitment are crucial elements to these students' ability and/or desire to persist in college (Almeida, 1999; Astin, 1982; Barnhardt, 1994; Brown, 1995; Day, Blue, & Raymond, 1998; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986; Lin, 1990; Patton & Eddington, 1973; Reyhner & Dodd, 1995; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). In some cases, it is even more important that students maintain connections to tribal communities and attend tribal ceremonies to reduce feelings of isolation (Barnhardt, 1994; Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986).

Administrators and faculty who recognize the desire to retain strong tribal identities, in lieu of assimilating into the mainstream university culture, can use this factor as a source of motivation in degree attainment (Belgarde, 1992; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Tierney, 1991; Wright, 1985). For instance, participation at Native student centers can lead to academic and social engagement for Native students and, subsequently, contribute to retaining this particular group (Belgarde, 1992; Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Carney, 1999; Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Cross, 1993; Jenkins, 1999; Lin, LaCounte, & Eder, 1988; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Wright, 1985).

Similarly, helping these students deal with instances of campus hostility and difficulty in transitioning from the high school social environment to that of college also impacts whether AI/AN students decide to stay or leave college (Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Lin, LaCounte, & Eder, 1988; Osborne, 1985; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Spaight, Dixon, & Nickolai, 1985; Tinto, 1993). In fact, as far back as 1985, Wright specifically suggested that to assist AI/AN students in making the successful high school-to-college transition, universities must consciously take into account their academic, social, cultural, and psychological needs.

Research on AI/AN persistence also shows that faculty makes a strong contribution to promoting their academic integration (Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Hornett, 1989). Tierney (1991) suggested that Native and non-Native faculty and staff alike can foster Native student success. Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997) also argued that non-Native faculty and staff can play a key role in cultivating a welcoming and supportive environment for Native students.

### **State Roles in Minority Student and American Indian/Alaska Native Persistence in Higher Education**

Another controlling influence on persistence in higher education is the role of state governing boards and their ability to create policy that directly affects university environments. The state role in increasing minority participation has become, over the past 30 years, more critical than ever. In 1987, the first education summit in the nation's history, which brought all the governors together with the President of the United States, reflected the recognition that the baton

of educational policy leadership has passed to the states (Callan & Finney, 1988). The focus of the summit was on research and development designed to stimulate economic growth and post-secondary education (Newman, 1987). A key component of economic growth involved addressing the lack of minority participation in higher education. Because minority groups, such as Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indian/Alaska Natives, represent a substantial portion of the population in certain states, it stands to reason that an opportunity exists to tap into a major source of economic revenue by increasing enrollment and participation from these groups.

It has been through policy that states have moved forward to further advance minority achievement in higher education. To do so, Callan and Finney (1988) asserted that state leaders must assess the political culture of the state and the policy tools most likely to encourage proportional enrollment and comparable achievement of minorities. McDonald (1988) argued that six types of resources and constraints are particularly significant in the choice of a policy instrument: institutional context, governmental capacity, fiscal resources, political support or opposition, information, and past policy choices. A study by Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt (1989) of education reform in six states suggested that policies are shaped primarily by four dominant values: quality, equity, efficiency, and choice.

In contrast, Richardson (1989a) looked at the policies themselves and categorized them by type: planning and priority setting, inducements and capacity building, mandates, and accountability and evaluation measures. His contention was that examining these various approaches to policy, their underlying assumptions and values, and how they are applied to the problem of minority participation and achievement in higher education helps to identify effective practices (Callan & Finney, 1988). For example, in Florida, courts “created an extremely persuasive environment for articulation between 2- and 4-year institutions” by ensuring that all associate degree recipients are guaranteed admission to 4-year institutions [mandates] (Callan & Finney, 1988). In Michigan, the governor established a commission on the future of higher education with an emphasis on the improvement of educational opportunities for minorities [planning and priority setting]. In Arizona, the Arizona Board of Regents both broadened and sharpened the focus of a 1989 plan for minorities by bringing together representatives of higher education and advocates and community leaders of minority interests [planning] (Richardson, 1989a). In 1986, the New Jersey State Board of Higher Education began requiring each public institution of higher education to: summarize its activities to increase minority enrollments, including its recruitment and retention activities; submit strategic plans for addressing declining minority enrollments and report annually on its progress; establish special committees of trustees to recommend new policies; and establish permanent working groups of faculty and administrators [planning, mandates, and capacity building]. The Board also asked its budget committee to take into account minority recruitment and retention in considering budget requests

[accountability] (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1987). And finally, the New Mexico legislature commissioned a study on the status of American Indians in higher education that led to a series of recommendations, which included enforcing affirmative action, appointing American Indians to the Board of Regents, increasing funding for recruitment/retention and student financial aid for American Indians, and facilitating summer/off-campus programs [mandates, planning, capacity building, accountability] (Callan & Finney, 1988). Most states, however, do not engage in such targeted efforts to support American Indian/Alaska Natives (and other underrepresented groups) in higher education.

With the exception of the study on the New Mexico legislature, focus on the relationship (or lack thereof) between state policy and institutional interpretation of policy has not been directly taken into account nor has the connection or disconnection between AI/AN students and those who have the power to create change within the institution.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Given the states' role in increasing minority participation and graduation rates, specifically American Indian/Alaska Natives, within the mainstream colleges and universities, it seems paramount to determine where mainstream universities stand in relation to their state governing boards and how this relationship affects AI/AN persistence to graduation. To help states and institutions of higher education accurately examine this relationship, Richardson and Skinner (1991) developed a diagnostic model, the Model of Institutional Adaptation to Student Diversity (MIASD). Additional description of the MIASD and its application to the study of institutions under examination is provided later in this article.

The purpose of the study (conducted during the 2001-2002 academic year) reported in this article was to determine whether the MIASD remains a useful diagnostic model in examining institutional responsiveness to AI/AN issues at three land-grant universities located in Washington, Idaho, and Montana, namely Washington State University (Pullman, Washington), the University of Idaho (Moscow, Idaho), and Montana State University (Bozeman, Montana). And, if not, what changes can be made to the MIASD to help states and institutions accurately capture their ability to meet the unique needs of AI/AN students. A two-part analysis first examined the policies in the three states and policy interpretation at each state's respective university based on the parameters set forth in the model. Phase two of the analysis compared faculty (three at each university) and AI/AN student (approximately ten per university) perspectives about campus diversity initiatives based on the same guidelines. This paper reports the findings of these analyses and discusses the applicability of the MIASD as a state/institutional diagnostic model.

### **Study Methodology**

A qualitative methodological approach to research was deemed appropriate for this study (LeCompte, Millroy, & Preissle, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1984). The

rationale for using the qualitative approach stems from recommendations of leading researchers in the field of American Indian/Alaska Natives and Higher Education who believe that it is the most appropriate means of capturing the AI/AN student experience (Pavel, 1992; Tierney, 1991). They assert that American Indian/Alaska Natives are the experts at being Native, and thus it is imperative that their voices be heard when creating policy that can directly or indirectly affect their educational lives. During a 1990 Indian Education Conference at Montana State University-Bozeman, William Tierney stated:

What we need now are sensitive studies that move beyond statistical surveys and charts...Rather than research about American Indians for policy makers in Washington D.C., or Helena (Montana), we need studies by and for Native Americans about their relationship to the world of higher education (Tierney, 1990).

Given the lack of qualitative studies on the American Indian/Alaska Native student experience it is important to add to the sparse body of knowledge (Garrod & Larimore, 1997; Larimore & McClellan, 2005).

This study also used a multiple case study-like approach (Merriam, 1998; Richardson & Skinner, 1991; Yin, 1994). The multiple case study approach lends itself to a cross case-analysis for the purposes of discovering similarities and differences among the institutions under study (Merriam, 1998). Multiple case or comparative case studies involve collecting and analyzing data from several cases (Merriam, 1998). In a multiple case study, there are two stages of analysis: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. The within-case analysis involves gathering data so the researcher can “learn as much about the contextual variables as possible that might have a bearing on the case” (Merriam, 1998, p. 194). Once the within-case analysis of each case is completed, cross-case analysis begins. It is at this phase in the analysis process that the researcher attempts “to build a general explanation that fits each of the individuals’ cases, even though the cases will vary in the details” (Yin, 1994, p. 112). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the researcher then examines “processes” and “outcomes” that are common across cases. Study researchers then report the responses of the AI/AN students and faculty regarding campus diversity in comparison to the placement of each institution along a continuum within the MIASD according to its criteria to determine its effectiveness as a state/institutional diagnostic model.

The three universities under study—Washington State University, the University of Idaho, and Montana State University—were chosen for several reasons. First, all three are each state’s land-grant university. Second, they are located in close proximity to large populations of AI/AN students representing several different tribes. Third, the three universities have similar AI/AN student enrollments in total number and percentages to overall student enrollment. Fourth, they serve rural areas. And finally, because AI/AN students have a tendency to attend college on or near their home communities (Benjamin, Chambers & Reiterman, 1993) choosing these particular institutions was logical.

### **Study Participants and Interview Process**

The AI/AN students chosen for the study<sup>1</sup> were selected based on availability and experience, resulting in the participation of mostly juniors, seniors, and a few graduate students. Students were invited to participate by a primary contact, an American Indian staff member, who was in frequent contact with the students. The following AI/AN tribes were represented through student-participant self-identification: Arapaho, Blackfeet, Chippewa/Cree, Colville, Coeur d' Alene, Cree, Crow, Fort Peck Assiniboine, Hidatsa/Chippewa, Hopi, Lakota, Lummi, Makah, Navajo, Nez Perce, Northern Cheyenne, Salish-Kootenai, Sioux, Walla Walla, and Yup'ik. All students grew up on U.S. Indian/Alaska Native reservation land or "border towns" (towns near U.S. Indian reservation boundaries). Students' ages ranged from 18 to 43 years with an average age of 26 years old. Nine of the 30 students interviewed reported being first generation college students with neither parent ever attending college. Nineteen of the 30 students reported having at least one parent who attended college earning college credit but never completing a post-secondary degree (seven of the 30 students) or having at least one parent who has earned either an Associate Arts, Bachelor's, or Master's Degree (12 of the 30 students). Two of the 30 students did not report family educational history. The students majored in various disciplines, such as biology, business management, forestry, American Indian studies, and education.

Focus group interview sessions with the AI/AN students took place at each respective university's multicultural student center or Native student center. The students who comprised the focus groups were asked a series of open-ended questions (Appendix A). Sessions lasted between 90 to 100 minutes. The researcher used an audio recorder and hand-written notes to record the student responses and observations during the focus group interviews. The researcher, the student participants (including some small children of the students), and the Native student counselor were present during each focus group interview. In addition, personal background information was obtained through a brief questionnaire distributed at the end of the focus group sessions. Focus groups (Morgan, 1998) consisted of 9 students at Washington State University, 10 students at the University of Idaho, and 11 students at Montana State University for a total of 30 student participants.

The faculty, both teaching and non-teaching, were selected on the basis of their influence and ability to directly impact, positively and negatively, the experience of the students they encounter through teaching, counseling, and advising (Astin, 1982; Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Hornett, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Some taught Native students in the classroom (i.e. disciplines including business, American Indian studies, audiology, and science education) others served as academic advisors and tutors, while others were counselors. In every case, each faculty member seemed to express concern for the academic, social, and psychological well-being of the Native students with whom they came into contact on a daily or weekly basis. In essence, faculty are "street-level

bureaucrats” who accommodate the demands placed upon them by administration while confronting the reality of the classroom or counseling experience (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1994). In addition, since AI/AN students rarely have day-to-day contact with senior-level administrators or state representatives, the faculty “are” the institution for these students.

Individual interviews were conducted with three faculty members at each institution<sup>2</sup> (nine faculty total) for up to one hour, depending on availability. Faculty interviews were conducted at the offices of each faculty member. Each faculty member was asked a series of open-ended questions (Appendix A). Similar to the focus group interviews, the researcher used an audio recorder and hand-written notes to record the faculty responses and observations during the individual interviews. Only the researcher and the faculty member were present during the each individual interview.

### **Policy and Diversity at Three Institutions**

The three northwest states in this study, Washington, Idaho, and Montana, include U.S. Indian reservations within their boundaries. We examined each state’s policies pertaining to American Indian education. These policies are then compared to the perceptions of faculty and AI/AN students at the study university in each state about campus diversity efforts as they pertain specifically to Native students.

#### Washington

The State of Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB): The political climate of the Washington HECB at the time of the study might best be described as capricious. Several policies on minority participation and diversity had been adopted, which established measurable and accountable statewide goals in enrollment and retention. The Washington HECB actively evaluated data about minority degree completion, employment, and institutional climate data in 1987, 1991, 1995, and 1996. Then, in 1998, the practice was suspended after the passage of Initiative-200 (I-200) with its focus on abolishing preferences based on race or gender in public contracting, higher education, and employment.

Washington State University (WSU): The university focused most of its efforts on “first contact” or recruitment initiatives. Consistently, the approach at WSU had been to appoint a diversity task force or design team for recommendations to the senior administration, which were neither acted upon nor supported with appropriate resources.

Any administrative concerns regarding I-200 reflected external pressures from the community to address the perceived injustice of the initiative. For instance, minority groups within and outside of the university demanded that the administration do something to create diverse representation within the institution. Previous to I-200, reduced enrollment among students of color led the administration to address the impact of scholarships traditionally used to recruit them. The result was the establishment of the academic achievement and diversity

scholarship award based on criteria, which included GPA, demonstrated leadership, volunteer involvement, financial need, and racial background. After I-200 passed, which eliminated the use of race in the selection process, a sharp decline occurred in minority student scholarship applicants and minority student enrollment. Ironically, due to the political status of American Indian/Alaska Natives as members of separate sovereign nations, I-200 did not affect the institution's ability to provide scholarship dollars ear-marked specifically for AI/AN students.

The passage of I-200 also led to misconceptions and disconnected responses about the university's affirmative action plan. The outreach, cultivation, and development of individuals from underrepresented groups encouraged both by the Governor's office and by WSU's affirmative action plan were construed by some administrators (e.g., chairs, deans, and vice presidents) as illegal. As a result, active recruitment of minority faculty, administrators, staff, and students ceased. In response, the Center for Human Rights at WSU directed the campus administration to provide outreach and targeted recruitment of minority faculty and staff, but not students. The university's affirmative action plans were reviewed for consistency with the Governor's Directive No. 98-01 and amended through a university policy statement entitled "Implementation of Initiative Measure 200."

In addition, the university president appointed a diversity task force and diversity design teams to make recommendations. They developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the local and regional American Indian tribes and established the "Plateau Center Project." In this project, the university works in collaboration with the local tribes to pursue research projects for faculty and students and to develop programs that benefit Native peoples of the Pacific Northwest. Additionally, a multicultural peer mentor program, which had been in existence for the past 20 years, also showed potential in terms of meeting the university's diversity goals.

Faculty and Student Responses (Washington State University): When describing the university's approach to diversity, a faculty member claimed, "One can take a pro-active approach and one can take a reactive [approach] and when diversity issues come up, it sounds like something [the university] needs to react to." This same faculty member noted that the university sets up unnecessary diversity committees. She stated: "They [the graduate school] were asking tribal representatives what it is they wanted in terms of educational opportunities and there was a committee that was formed and met for a while to try and come up with some strategies and it kind of fizzled out. There was also the Native American Advisory [committee] to the President...I haven't heard anything about what they're doing recently" (personal interview, December 14, 2001). Another faculty member at the university commented:

Each new administrator who comes [in] designs their ways of collecting data and incorporating a new strategy [for diversity]. At the same time there's that challenge of feeling like we've been through this before and nothing's really



changed... We need to quit seeing diversity as something that this department is established to deal with, or this academic department, or the Human Resources and Diversity Offices...that they are [solely] responsible for diversity. So, that's how I think [the university] has dealt with it [diversity]. They've compartmentalized it...I think the administration deals with it by trying to lump us [together]. (personal interview, December 7, 2001)

Yet another faculty member suggested, "A lot of people have been taking this 'well, let's wait and see' kind of attitude toward diversity. The administration has been reactive... I don't [think] I would call it proactive" (personal interview, December 4, 2001).

Similarly, seven of the nine (78%) AI/AN students interviewed at WSU shared negative sentiments. Students accused the university of a lack of support, group lumping, and patronization. For instance, one student claimed, "Instead of looking at us [underrepresented populations] as individual groups that encompass one diverse group, they tend to group us all together and put us in the same category." Another student suggested, "We're just pushed into a corner and our issues are not addressed at all" (focus group interview, October 29, 2001). An angrier student contended:

I don't think they really deal with anything. I think they try to give us some money and then say, you guys do something for Native American Month... expecting us to do programs...but I've noticed before that you'll see a [diversity] program done because the university wants to prove they're doing things for diversity; they're going to show up to these events and take pictures of students...to prove that they have a diversity atmosphere but they don't give us additional funding. (focus group interview, October 29, 2001)

According to the students, the only time the university addressed diversity issues on a broader scale was during negative or "racial" incidents. One Native student explained, "Two years after that incident with being called 'Injuns'...that whole incident was just pushed under the carpet, even all the so-called hearings...It was just crap, because what came about? What came from it? Nothing!" (focus group interview, October 29, 2001). In effect, diversity, for the students interviewed, was seen as an institutional priority only during times when the university was asked publicly to address its stance on diversity, when a racial incident occurred, or if a university sought financial contributions from local tribes to support diversity and other initiatives.

### Idaho

The State of Idaho Board of Higher Education (ISBHE): There was no written state policy regarding minority participation and diversity for Idaho's public institutions of higher education with the exception of an anti-discrimination policy. The ISBHE demonstrated a marked indifference toward student diversity and, in general, seemed to reflect the political will of the people of Idaho. State representatives suggested that the state of Idaho has no accountability measures for fostering diversity initiatives and does "just enough" to keep up with neighboring states. One university official suggested that there is a perception

that the state actually works against the American Indian tribes of Idaho. These sentiments lent support to Idaho's reputation for unresponsiveness and lack of concern about proposed legislative diversity initiatives, especially those promoted by American Indians tribes from Idaho. In addition, relations between the state of Idaho and the American Indian tribes had grown worse due to the states attempt to push legislation to place a 5% tax on all gaming casinos operated and owned by American Indian tribes of Idaho.

University of Idaho (UI): The University of Idaho appeared to function completely independently from the political and legislative climate in its approach to diversity. Provided that little or no guidance was given by the state on issues related to American Indians, the UI was left to address these issues by itself. At the time of the study, the university offered a few services designed to meet the needs of American Indian students, for instance the Office of Multicultural Affairs, American Indian Studies Program, PACE Peer Mentor Program, the American Indian Teacher Recruitment Program (which ended as of Fall 2002), American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES), and the Native American Student Association.

Despite the university's attempt to serve Native students, the programs offered did not integrate students into campus life. Native students at Idaho, at the time of the study, did not have a Native resource room where academic support, computers, or a gathering place were available. The university provided only one multicultural recruiter (a non-Indian) who was responsible for recruiting students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Time pressures for this individual precluded attending to the specific needs of any one student population, let alone AI/AN people.

The UI did have a Memorandum of Understanding with local and regional tribes and a newly appointed Special Assistant to the President for Diversity. Yet, the woeful financial situation of the state of Idaho, which impacted its state funded colleges and universities, seemed to mitigate any aggressive diversity efforts.

Faculty and Student Responses (University of Idaho): The faculty members interviewed at the UI posed a similar view of the university's diversity responsiveness to the one provided by faculty at WSU. Diversity remained an issue of finding more resources to expand recruitment efforts. A professor stated, "When I chaired this student [diversity] committee for a while, we repeatedly made recommendations that we needed to expand our recruiting efforts and recruit in areas that had more diverse students. Basically that hasn't happened because it requires resources being allocated there as opposed to somewhere else, and that hasn't been done" (personal interview, November 14, 2001).

One strategy for addressing diversity at the UI was to create a "special assistant" to the president. On this issue, one faculty member stated:

It is a huge initiative right now. That is, at the most important levels both with the central administration, the president, the provost, my dean as well as with faculty, staff, and students. Last year, the University hired a new Special Assistant to the President for Diversity and Human Rights. His specific mission

is to help develop a diversity plan to complement our own strategic plan that was instituted a few years ago, which has a number of diversity initiatives, but I think it needs to be strengthened. (personal interview, November 14, 2001)

For other faculty on campus, diversity was a matter of replying to problems or situations only when they arose or when complaints were voiced. One faculty member claimed, "We really had to fight to have a Native American Advisory Board hold any kind of power to influence curriculum or influence policy...Until the [AI/AN] students or staff speak up-I mean [they] really have to raise hell to pretty much get anything accomplished!" (personal interview, November 14, 2001).

Similar to the students at Washington State University, the Native students at the University of Idaho held the perception that their university lacked the cultural sensitivity to the unique needs of its Native student population. Seven of the ten (70%) students interviewed had decidedly negative perceptions of the university's commitment to its diverse student body. Whether grounded in truth or not, the university's perceived indifference toward AI/AN issues was repeatedly echoed.

One student claimed: "I feel it pays lip service to the issue of diversity and the prime reason is for the teacher recruitment program itself. We service a lot of diverse students and we try and get them to the College of Education and the university, [yet] it turns a blind eye...really. And I feel that it just pays lip service." Other students felt the university gave the responsibility for dealing with AI/AN issues to specific Native-oriented programs on campus. One Native student claimed: "[In] dealing with Indian students, the only thing that I've ever seen [are] the workshops the Native American Student Association puts on. I've never really seen people from the colleges themselves do it, but it is always just the association, the Native American Student Association" (focus group interview, October 23, 2001).

### Montana

The State of Montana Board of Regents (BOR): The BOR for Montana State University demonstrated a sincere commitment to the American Indian tribes in its state through the adoption of several policies that recognize the uniqueness and cultural heritage of Montana's federally recognized American Indian tribes. This sentiment was reflected in state constitutional law, which stipulated that the "state of Montana recognizes the distinct and unique cultural heritage of the American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity" (Montana Code and Constitution Website, Article X, Section 1, Subsection 2; [http://leg.state.mt.us/css/mtcode\\_const/const.asp](http://leg.state.mt.us/css/mtcode_const/const.asp)). However, when efforts were made to provide financial support for these policies, they were among the first to be cut by the state legislature. As a result, these policies act as symbols of commitment giving little power to those charged with enforcing them.

Montana State University (MSU): At the time of the study, Montana State University offered 26 American Indian programs including Advance by Choice

(ABC), American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES), Montana Apprenticeship Program (MAP), and American Indian Research Opportunities (AIRO), to name a few. All of these programs were designed to help increase the level of American Indian participation in the sciences, engineering, and math. MSU housed one the largest American Indian student centers in the Pacific Northwest with a full-time advisor, computers, resource library, and a number of different resources available to the Native students. MSU appeared to design most of its programs and implement strategies for the purpose of creating an environment where American Indian students could feel comfortable.

Faculty and Student Responses (Montana State University): One faculty stated: “There are different departments and administrators on campus who are interested in promoting and increasing diversity. The president of our university is committed to increasing diversity. The Native American Studies Department is actively recruiting minority students.”

All faculty members supported these ideas. Regarding the university leadership, one faculty member stated: “Under the previous president...there wasn’t a real aggressive approach toward recruiting and critically analyzing what we need to do and getting out in Indian country and our [new president] has made that commitment” (personal interview, November 19, 2001).

Yet another faculty member believed that MSU’s commitment to its AI/AN students was genuine. He stated:

In the last 25 years, we’ve developed the Center of Native American Studies, which has a traditional track of teaching, research, and service...Even during times of retrenchment, the university has allowed us to at least survive where we were at; we have not had to give up people or resources. The university has really supported us...working with and encouraging other departments and colleges to take responsibility for their American Indian students who take their courses; who are in the majors. And so that’s resulted in the last ten to fifteen years, we have programs on this campus – getting close to thirty different programs on this campus - that work with American Indians in [whatever] shape or form. (personal interview, November 19, 2001)

MSU was seen by its faculty to meet the demand for diversity through a proactive administration, led by its president, increased efforts to secure extramural funding through grant dollars for diversity-related programming, and continued support and protection of resources for its Native American studies program.

However, in spite of the numerous Native-oriented programs, students at MSU held extremely negative perceptions about their experiences. Of their first year experience, one student noted, “I noticed it [racial prejudice] a lot when I first came here” (focus group interview, October 23, 2001). The students in the group voiced frustration and characterized the university as being unsupportive, unwelcoming, and even hostile toward its Native student body. Although some claimed their experience improved over time, the majority felt they were an unheard voice within the university community.

The interviews with the Native students reflected the racial tension within the university and the community off-campus. One student claimed, “There’s a

lot of in-state ranchers, farmers, whatever. And they are so prejudiced. I mean, no one like-sits around me in class, no one talks to me and I don't want to go out of my way to talk to them because I'm afraid that they'll kind of give me the shaft. Racism back home is bad, but it's worse here." Similarly, another student said: "I lived just right off the reservation and the racism is bad there, but when I came over here, it's, like, worse here than it is there." And yet another student claimed: "[The] negative energy [at the university] just kind of builds and it has an effect on people's performance in the schools...they've got to make minority students feel comfortable in that learning environment" (focus group interview, October 23, 2001).

#### Enrollment Findings: An Added Dimension

Among the participants in this study, the AI/AN students' perception of marginalization was also evidenced by low enrollment and graduation rates. At Washington State University, of the total number of students attending, 1.4% self-reported as being of AI/AN descent. The most recent graduation rate (1997-2003) among American Indian/Alaska Natives from Washington State University was 42% with 16 graduates out of a 38 freshman cohort. At the University of Idaho, 1.3% of the undergraduates self-reported as being AI/AN. The graduation rate (1997-2003) at the University of Idaho was 23% with 3 American Indian/Alaska Natives graduating out of a 13-freshman cohort. And despite all the policies, programs, and practices in support of their Native students, Montana State University reported that the enrollment of American Indians, which peaked at 2.5% in the fall of 1996, had since declined to about 2.0% of the total university enrollment. The graduation rate (1997-2003) of American Indian students from Montana State University was 26.2%, with 11 Native students graduating from the originally entering freshman cohort of 42 students.

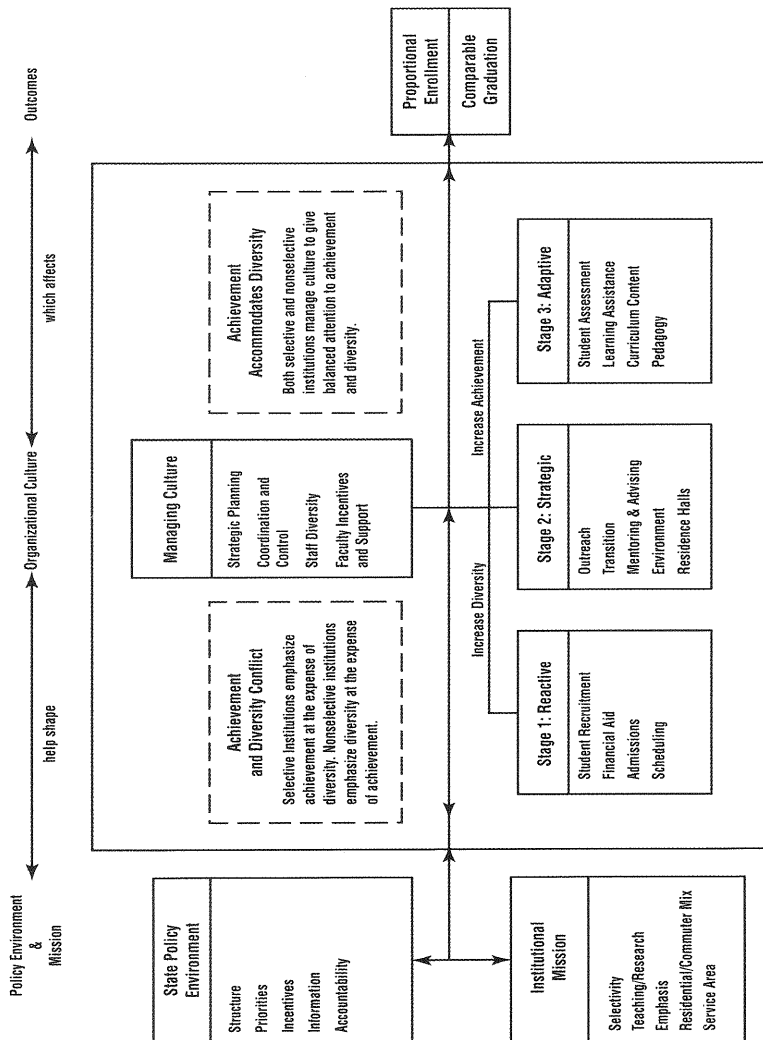
#### **The Model of Institutional Adaptation to Student Diversity (MIASD)**

To further examine this state/institutional relationship in regards to AI/AN students and its impact on the Native student experience at the institutions under examination, the researchers used the MIASD to assess its usefulness as a diagnostic model. The model consists of a series or continuum of developmental stages including the reactive, strategic, and adaptive stages described by Richardson and Skinner (1991, p.7) as follows:

The *reactive stage* occurs when institutions are under pressure to improve their equity performance for minority groups and react by focusing their diversity efforts solely on new recruitment initiatives, retooling financial aid packages, and special admission programs for minority students. The *strategic stage* is a product of the success of the reactive stage as institutions develop outreach, transition, and academic support services designed to help a more diverse student population adapt to the university environment. The last, the *adaptive stage*, is characterized by institutional assessment, learning assistance, and curricular renewal. Faculty members become involved in this stage to change educational practices, curriculum content, and teaching practices.

# Richardson and Skinner (1991)

## A Model of Institutional Adaptation to Student Diversity



The use of the model here appears appropriate because it delineates the critical role that the state plays in encouraging an institution to embrace diversity. Plainly stated, it helped the researchers focus on policy that works to increase the enrollment, participation, and graduation of American Indian/Alaska Natives at each institution under study.

The model suggests that as faculty and staff adapt their behaviors in response to initiatives from campus administration (and state entities), the organizational culture shifts to provide a more productive academic and social environment for students who differ in preparation or culture from those an institution has traditionally served. Richardson and Skinner (1991) claim: "The environment an institution provides for minority participation and achievement can be viewed as the observable product of an invisible culture" (p. 13). In order for an institution to meet participation and graduation goals for minority groups, institutions must adapt their environments to accommodate greater diversity without relinquishing their commitment to high standards of achievement for all students. In the end, analysis of outcomes related to minority participation and graduation yields clues to the nature of an institution's culture.

The authors of the MIASD submit that state policy will exert little to no influence or impact on an institution if no mandates, policies, or accountability measures exist (Richardson & Skinner, 1991). Of greater concern are state policies that work against university diversity initiatives. The inference is that if there is no guidance from the state, then universities are left unaccountable and diversity efforts suffer. In other words, in order for an institution to meet participation and graduation goals for minority groups, an adaptation of its environment to accommodate greater diversity without compromising academic standards needs to occur. And, state policy in the form of priorities, issuance of mandates, fiscal incentives, and accountability measures must be in place to foster such endeavors.

### **Applying the MIASD to Study Institutions**

The following section highlights an examination of each state through the lens of the MIASD.

#### Washington

With the passage of I-200, the state of Washington seems to have moved from a strategic to reactive phase. WSU, itself, also appears to be reactive in nature. Most of what WSU did in response to diversity can be characterized as planning with little to no action taken as a result of recommendations. Statements made by both faculty and students support this assumption. They catalogued reactionary approaches to dealing with diversity issues, lack of follow through, and inconsistency of approaches across administrations as evidence.

In general, the university reacted by designating an office or creating a position specially designed to handle diversity issues: the approach was to lump all minority students together instead of creating specific, uniquely tailored

strategies, coupled with financial support, to attract and retain them. Some transitional steps (e.g., MOUs and comprehensive partnerships with the state's American Indian populations) were being made at WSU that could move the institution from the hasty postures of the reaction stage toward the more tactical and deliberate processes typical of the MIASD strategic stage. In addition, the recent establishment of the Office of Equity and Diversity at WSU also shows some progressive steps toward the strategic stage in the model.

### Idaho

The lack of purposefully designed policy related to American Indian education places the state of Idaho squarely at the reactive stage (or perhaps in some sort of pre-reactive stage). It is apparent that the lack of state policies on student diversity keeps the University of Idaho in the reactive stage. Much of the work done to meet the needs of the AI/AN students is in reaction to the demands of the students themselves and the local American Indian tribes. University reaction includes the appointment of a Special Assistant for Diversity to the President and the creation of a Multicultural Affairs Office. Faculty and student perceptions also validate the placement of the university at this early model phase. However, some American Indian programming, an MOU, a newly created Native student center, and a recently appointed University Tribal Liaison to the American Indian tribes of Idaho represent progressive steps that could help the university transition to the strategic stage of the model.

### Montana

The strategic stage of the MIASD best describes both the state and Montana State University's positioning on the continuum. Montana has well-thought out policies in place but little in the way of either an accountability system or particularly strong funding support attached to these policies. The strategic stage describes a university that seeks to develop outreach, transition, and academic support services designed to help a more diverse student population adapt to the university environment. At MSU, senior administration and faculty seem to show support through the allocation of resources for such programming.

In stark contrast, the student perception of institutional responsiveness to AI/AN issues was decidedly different than the state policy or the faculty perceptions of institutional responsiveness to their unique needs. The strong perception that the university was culturally insensitive and even hostile places the university at the reactive stage of the MIASD. It could be argued that the multitude of programs implemented for American Indian/Alaska Natives are designed to partially offset the racial tension that exists between Native and non-Native students on campus and between the campus and the larger community. Any institutional responses to American Indian/Alaska Natives will remain at the reactive/strategic stage until the state decides to put some financial 'muscle' behind its policies and laws, which could potentially move Montana State University further along on the continuum, into the adaptive stage.



Table 1  
**Research Findings and Factors from the Model of Institutional Adaptation to Student Diversity**

	<b>State Policy Adaptation to Student Diversity (MIASD Factor)</b>	<b>Institutional Policy Adaptation to Student Diversity (MIASD Factor)</b>	<b>Faculty Perceptions of Institutional Adaptation (Total = 9)</b>	<b>Student Perceptions of Intituional Adaptation (Total = 30)</b>
<b>MIASD Reactive Stage Evaluation</b>				
Washington State University	WA State Policy: • Initiative 200 Policy	WSU response: • Misinterpretation of I-200 Policy • Scholarship and Recruitment Issues	Faculty (n = 3): • No follow through • Inconsistency of administrations • Ineffective committee	Students (n = 9): • Racial Lumping • Reactive to “racial incidents”
University of Idaho	ID State Policy: • No written diversity education policy • Anti-discrimination Policy	UI response: • Multicultural Affairs Office • Special Assistant for Diversity to President	Faculty (n = 3): • No financial resources allocated • Diversity an issue only during crisis	Students (n = 10): • Lack cultural sensitivity • Lip service • Lack of institutional commitment to Natives
Montana State University				Students (n = 11): • Racial tension • Cultural superiority held by White students • Hostile environment
<b>Movement from MIASD Reactive Stage Toward Strategic Stage</b>				
Washington State University	WA State Policy: • Governor’s Directive No. 98-01	WSU response: • Amended policy statement on I-200 • Office of Equity and Diversity • Plateau Center Project		
University of Idaho	ID State Policy: • Student Anti-discrimination Policy	UI response: • Programs, e.g. AISES, PACE, American Indian Studies Program • MOU with Tribes • Tribal Liaison to tribes of Idaho		

MIASD Strategic Stage Evaluation				
Montana State University	MT State Policy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constitution, Article X, Section 1, Sub 2</li> <li>• Montana Indian Education Policy</li> <li>• Recognizes tribal law/rights</li> </ul>	MSU response: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 26 American Indian/Alaska Native Programs: ABC, MPA, AIRO</li> <li>• Largest Northwest American Indian Student Center</li> </ul>	Faculty (n =3): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proactive and supportive administration</li> <li>• Consistent financial support</li> </ul>	
MIASD Adaptive Stage Evaluation (none noted)				

Overall, from the state and institutional perspectives, all three states espoused concern for and recognition of diversity concerns (even though Idaho has no set policy). Similarly, university programs and faculty perceptions of these programs indicate specific efforts made toward adaptability in serving AI/AN students. The researchers added an intermediary stage to the MIASD to account for a transition phase between the reactive and strategic stages where states and institutions were neither completely reactionary nor entirely strategic. Both Washington State University and the University of Idaho have in some instances moved into this transition phase. Table 1, however, captures the more pessimistic view of students' at all three institutions, which places even Montana State University at the reactive stage.

### Discussion of Research Findings

The findings of this study support the use of the Model for Institutional Adaptation to Student Diversity to assess the relationship between reported state and university policies across the three states and institutions of higher education that were examined. These findings reveal consistency in the placement of state expectations of higher education, reported university policies, and faculty perceptions of institutional adaptation to AI/AN students.

Policy and faculty statements at Washington State University and the University of Idaho reflect the reactive stage on the continuum, where AI/AN issues are poorly understood and few voices are sought from Native constituents. A racial incident, declining enrollment of Native students, and poor retention and graduation rates among AI/AN groups are some of the circumstances contributing to the reactive posturing of these universities. Faculty responses suggest more emphasis needs to be placed on following through on institutional commitments made to its Native students, such as an increase of financial support for recruitment initiatives or community-based/service learning programs with the local American Indian tribes. Such actions could be achieved through writing grant proposals to funding agencies interested in strengthening relationships or establishing partnerships between institutions of higher education and local American Indian tribes. The administrative support (or lack thereof) mentioned

by the faculty could be offered in the form of release-time from teaching duties for faculty to pursue proposal-writing or fund raising opportunities while simultaneously working with local tribes to develop those partnerships.

As AI/AN awareness increases, WSU and the UI could move toward a realization of the benefits including increased Native faculty, staff, and students; more Native-related programming; and greater integration of diversity (particularly AI/AN perspectives) into curriculum in the general education, majors, and minor degree programs, especially at these institutions that are located near U.S. Indian reservations. Such movement represents a transitional phase that could lead the institutions from the reactive to the strategic stage of the MIASD. But to realize these benefits and move into the strategic stage, it will take a demonstrated commitment by the administration via consistency and follow-through to minimize perceptions of “lip-service.”

However, although the original MIASD is a useful framework for assessing the consistency between the diversity policy language of state and higher education institutions and the lived experience of faculty, it misses important information about the lived realities of their AI/AN students. The majority of the Native students (73%) interviewed across the three universities held an extremely negative perception of how their respective universities respond to their unique needs. For example, one American Indian student claimed:

We look at Montana State University and we think it's a diverse university because on the outside it's claimed to be, because of their diversity within the college...but when it comes down to it, like these guys stated [other Indian students in the group] the [White] people don't really want to know about the [Indian] people...in your classes, if you're the only Native student, they look at you as an authority to speak for all Indians...they don't come and they don't ask for advice [about Indian people], but yet, on the outside, we're perceived as a diverse university here...what happens on the inside versus what happens on the outside, it's two different things. (focus group interview, November 19, 2001)

The contrast between student responses and the reports from the faculty and the analysis of state and university policies is particularly evident in the case of Montana State University, where students, as in the above example, reported being a discarded group on campus despite proactive state policies, stated university objectives for special programs to serve them, and faculty reports of support provided to them.

By amending the MIASD to include student perceptions, inconsistencies in opinion seem to emerge especially when a state and institution believe they are making progress. For instance, adding the voices of students clearly places Montana State University within the reactive stage of MIASD as opposed to its initial placement within strategic stage of the model. And, AI/AN student perspectives at both Washington State University and the University of Idaho confirm the placement of each institution within the reactive stage of MIASD because institutionally they tended to respond to Native issues only during times of racial tension or incident.

American Indian/Alaska Native awareness within majority-serving universities requires learning the nuances and idiosyncrasies of Native uniqueness and creating an atmosphere based on those values. Even with a variety of efforts made by the university to support its Native students, the students at Montana State University collectively felt marginalized and unappreciated.

A primary source of this feeling at Montana State University might be a lack of communication between Native and non-Native students. Similarly, students at the other two institutions reported multiple incidents of racism on campus, lack of cultural sensitivity, and even hostile responses from non-Indian students, and a sense of cultural superiority held by Caucasian students of Natives. Washington State University and the University of Idaho tended to engage in “racial or group lumping” (placing American Indian/Alaska Natives under a single minority category that includes African Americans, Chicano/Latinos, and Asian Pacific Americans) especially as it relates to addressing Natives issues, further confounding the situation.

When addressing such gaps it will be important to learn what forums are provided to AI/AN students and community members (another important voice) to express their concerns at the state or university levels. The forum created through this research process might have been unique and promoted an unusually high level of angry responses. In contrast, if offered collaborative and consistent ways to express concerns, AI/AN students and their communities can more accurately inform state officials and university leadership of their concerns. As a result, a revised MIASD provided a useful examination of the relationship of state policies and mainstream universities approaches to Native community needs. Data pertinent to the model’s use could be gathered through focus groups with Native alumni, students, tribal elders, and representatives from the regional tribal communities.

Students in the study suggest that very few non-Natives take the time to understand who American Indian/Alaska Natives are and what they value as a people. Mistakenly, state and university officials in these cases believed that meeting financial needs would solve retention and graduation problems for AI/AN students. And, although scholarship and economic support was significant for students interviewed, they viewed it as a necessary but extraneous element that was only tangentially related to retention. To Native students, appreciation of diversity, their tribal affiliation, cultural practices, and values were more important than offering money for scholarships and programs.

Adding such information to the MIASD can help states and institutions more accurately explore their relationship and how that relationship impacts, positively or negatively, the AI/AN student experience at their institutions of higher education to better determine appropriate courses of action. Native issues, (i.e. student recruitment and retention, promoting a Native cultural event, or addressing a racial incident) should be the responsibility of the entire institution (i.e., central administration, faculty, staff, and students) not just the sole responsibility of a multicultural affairs office or Native American affairs division.

As further support of the findings, HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) believed that increased communication between these constituents, state officials, and university leadership, is crucial to AI/AN student persistence in higher education which was a primary component in the development of their Indigenous-based Family Education Model (FEM). The basic premise of the FEM revolves around the essentiality of creating a family-like environment for Native students by making family and tribal members an integral part of the educational process of these students. In this way, the family and tribal community can put their “fingerprint” on the educational experience, using Indigenous-based knowledge, values, and beliefs thus giving the Native student an education that is relevant and appropriate to his/her cultural background, which consequently leads to higher retention rates among American Indians (HeavyRunner and DeCelles, 2002). Other leading researchers and studies in the field of American Indian/Alaska Natives and higher education also strongly endorse the inclusion of the Native voice as the most appropriate means of capturing the Native student experience (Dodd, Garcia, Meccage, and Nelson, 1995; Garrod and Larimore, 1997; Pavel, 1992; Tierney, 1991).

In sum, the state and university policies examined demonstrate preliminary efforts to meet the needs of AI/AN students. But these efforts appear to be overshadowed by a lack of communication with and understanding of Native students. Without taking into account the voices of Native students (or those of any underrepresented group for that matter) use of the MIASD paints only a partial picture of a university’s responsiveness.

#### One Parting Comment

In the spring 2005, a lawsuit was filed against the state of Montana by the Quality Education Commission and the Montana Indian Education Association for not fulfilling its requirement to provide educational assistance to American Indian students in accordance to Article X, Section 1, Subsection 2 of the Montana Constitution. The Montana Supreme Court agreed with the plaintiffs that indeed the state had not fulfilled the law and that these services were the first to be cut during budget proposals to counteract their institution fiscal deficits. The state legislature of Montana reluctantly complied with the ruling, allocating a meager \$1.9 million for American Indian education efforts within the state’s K-12 public school system but provided no additional state funding for the Montana University System in support of AI/AN education initiatives. This latest action by the state legislature of Montana has laid the groundwork for future lawsuits. In the end, however, although funding for diversity initiatives is crucial, it is clear from this research that the adaptability of universities to meet the needs of AI/AN students rests on our ability to hear their voices.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Student quotations in this article are excerpts from focus group and personal interviews conducted during the 2001-2002 academic year. They are shared anonymously, respecting and acknowledging the many student voices who were heard but could not be represented here because of space limitations.

<sup>2</sup>Faculty quotations in this article are excerpts from personal interviews conducted during the 2001-2002 academic year. They are shared anonymously out of respect for privacy of the opinions and observations shared.

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## Appendix A

### American Indian/Alaska Native Students:

- Describe how you perceive how the university addresses issues of diversity?
- How does the university address issues relating to minority students, specifically American Indian/Alaska Natives?
- What would you consider to be three or four factors that have led you to persist through your university so far?
- What have been the three or four barriers to overcome in trying to complete your education?
- If you think about friends that have started college but not finished-what do you think kept them from doing so?
- What would be your ideal institution?

### University Faculty:

- Describe how the university addresses issues of diversity?
- How does the university address issues relating to minority students, specifically American Indian/Alaska Natives?
- What three or four factors do you believe help American Indian/Alaska Native students persist through college?
- What do you perceive as the three or four greatest barriers to completing college?
- What are some of the problems faculty see in recruiting and retaining American Indian/Alaska Native student?
- What is the relationship between American Indian/Alaska Natives students and faculty?
- Describe the ideal situation for American Indian/Alaska Native students to flourish at the university.