

# **The Impending Educational Crisis for American Indians: Higher Education at the Crossroads**

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## **Abstract**

*A significant gap exists in the post-secondary educational achievement levels of American Indian students despite significant gains attained in various avenues of education reform. A college education is a significant driver in the socioeconomic advancement of American Indian communities. Numerous factors impact the admission, persistence and timely graduation of American Indian students from institutions of higher education. These issues have a direct impact on the significantly low numbers of doctorally-prepared American Indian faculty in academia.*

*This paper provides an overview of the retention and graduation rates of American Indian students enrolled in American higher education. Also discussed are characteristics of American Indian higher education faculty. The authors provide a series of recommendations offered to increase American Indian student retention as well as increase the availability of American Indian faculty in higher education.*

## **Introduction**

Given ever increasing public demand for accountability, decreasing state tax support for public higher education, and recent expectations of demonstrating the “value added” outcome of a college education, issues of retention and graduate rates have been the latest “call to arms” for many institutions of higher learning and associated state systems. Discipline-specific and regional accrediting bodies have also shown a keen interest in utilizing retention and graduation rates as metrics to measure institutional effectiveness. The existing body of literature on this subject seem to implicate many parties, practices, and policies for higher education’s seeming inability to retain and graduate students as there are scholars examining these complex and confounding issues. The ultimate responsibility for systemic failure in student retention and graduation may rightly be found at the feet of colleges and universities, K-12 educational systems, parents, and policymakers on the state and federal level. This list could certainly be expanded to include many others. Disparity exists in the overall patterns of students matriculating, retained and graduating from America’s colleges and universities, however, the greatest gap may exist within those patterns and rates for American Indian students.

The term American Indian in this manuscript is employed to refer to individuals who identify as Native American, Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian. The terms American Indian and Native American are used interchangeably. The term minority is used here in a manner that is commonly used to refer to

individuals who are members of an ethnic minority. It is important to note that tribal affiliation is far more powerful for many Native Americans than is identification with the broader pan-Native construction (Horse, 2001). An extension of this affiliation is the idea of tribal sovereignty representing American Indians as a political, rather than ethnic, minority.

There seems little doubt that making a successful adjustment to college in order to persist and eventually graduate is a formidable challenge for many young people. It is equally clear that the challenge of college adjustment is often most difficult for those from ethnically minority groups. This is particularly true for American Indians. Among ethnic minorities endeavoring to complete a college education, American Indians have long been reported to be among the least successful (Astin, 1982; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Tijerina & Biemer, 1988). Barriers to the success of American Indians are similar to those faced by other ethnic minorities - striving to adjust to the college environment. However, for American Indians such barriers may also be rooted in central differences in perception of the world and cognitive style (Osborne, 1985; Topper, 1972; Werner, Schoepfle, Bouck, Roan, & Yazzie, 1976). Furthermore, cultural differences on the part of American Indians may place them more at odds with the dominant ethnic culture.

It seems rare, given the myriad cultural, world-view, and cognitive obstacles, that any American Indians—especially those who strive to maintain their cultural identity can succeed in a higher education system dominated by powerful and persuasive influences of the white majority culture. Despite the significance of this achievement, or perhaps because of it, little meaningful attention has been focused on American Indian achievers.

In the extreme, research on minority students focusing primary attention on those who fail can project the prejudicial, ethnocentric majority attitude that certain cultural groups are inherently deficient in their ability to persist in the college environment. Such biases, apart from obvious racial overtures, may foster lowered expectations among university faculty and administrators, and lowered aspirations on the part of minority students. For this reason, the direction of the paper will move from the relatively negative position of studying American Indian dropouts to a more positive approach by focusing attention on the successes of persisting American Indians.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that minority enrollment in degree-granting post-secondary institutions doubled during the period of 1976 to 2004 (NCES 2007-039). However, during this same period, American Indian students represented just 1% or less of the total U.S. college student enrollment (NCES 2007-039). A careful review of this research literature reveals a paucity of thorough analysis, synthesis, and recommendations regarding the issues and challenges facing American Indian students in higher education.

A principle objective of this paper is to provide an overview of the issues surrounding the retention and graduation of college students, particular American Indians. Particular attention is given to developing a retention and graduation rate profile of these students, providing observations on possible factors contributing to these challenges, and offering suggestions and recommendations on how colleges and universities might provide increased attention to improving the retention and graduation rates of these unique and important students. Implication on the affect these rates have on the availability of doctorally-prepared American Indian faculty is also discussed.

## Why Higher Education Matters to American Indians

Education is a broad independent variable and the quintessential social equalizer. Those with greater levels of education are healthier, wealthier, and generally more participative in political and civic life, more cosmopolitan, more content, more supportive of civil liberties, and more appreciative of differences of social, economic, ethnic, and religious ideologies. (Kingston, et al, 2003).

Cabrera (1978) noted that “American Indians are victims of a legacy which includes economic exploitation, military conquest, political manipulation, and social disregard” (pg. 18). Access to education, in particular higher education, has been central to the development of that legacy. (Szasz, 1999). The single most significant development in this regard has been the introduction of the tribal college movement, although many public and private non-tribally controlled institutions have made significant strides in recruiting, retaining, and graduating American Indians at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The education of American Indian students is one answer to moving this segment of American society from the lowest levels of poverty to the realization of self-sufficiency. A college degree provides opportunities for increased earnings for the graduate; thereby reducing the reliance on government (both state and federal) assistance. An individual with a bachelor’s degree or greater has the capability to earn at least four times the annual income of a high school dropout and more than twice the annual income of a high school graduate. Table 1.0 shows that earnings of American Indians, age 25 and older; lag behind the U.S. population average at all various educational categories.

*Table 1.0 Average income for U.S. population and American Indians age 25 and older by educational attainment, 2005*

	<b>U.S. Population</b>	<b>American Indians</b>
All educational levels	\$35,187	\$22,856
Less than a high school diploma	\$14,640	\$10,534
High school graduates, no college	\$24,811	\$20,721
Some college, no degree	\$31,726	\$25,966
Bachelor’s degree or higher	\$57,330	\$45,214

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2006, Note: Figures include individuals with no earnings, IHEP, 2007, p. 26.

Access to quality secondary and post-secondary education is a means to closing the socioeconomic gap between American Indian tribes and mainstream society. A higher education degree serves as a principle driver for the enhancement of American Indian communities.

## College Attendance, Retention, and Graduation Rate Patterns of American Indian Students

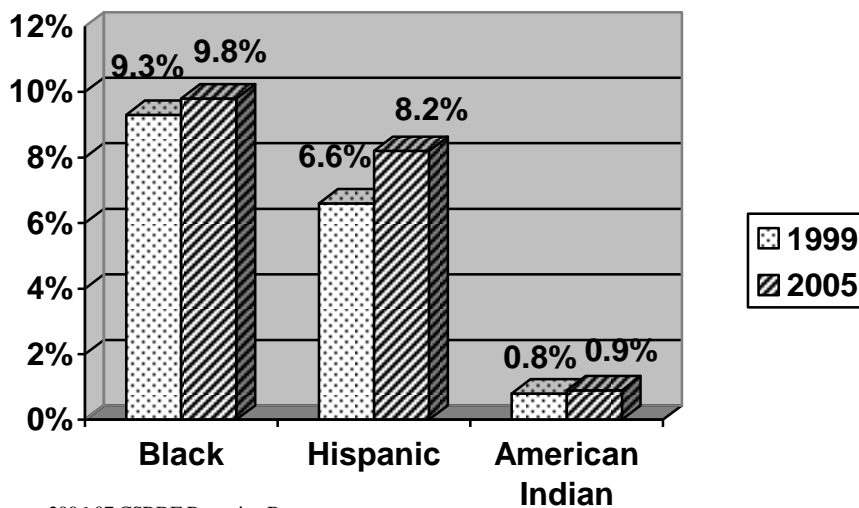
As noted previously, enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for American Indians are lower, proportionately, than any other ethnic group in the United States. For many American Indian students, departing college prior to completion of a degree signals delayed or forgone personal aspirations and

often diminished or deferred opportunities. But the attrition of these students also has a negative and detrimental impact on their campus communities because their absence diminishes the multi- and cross-cultural educational potential the learning environment has for all students (Larimore, 2005).

Recent retention and graduation data from more than 400 American colleges and universities (2007) from the Consortium for Student Retention Data include more than 4.9 million first-time, full-time freshman cohorts tracked from 1999 to 2005. Freshman attending public four-year institutions represented 80% seeking baccalaureate degrees and 15% were from private, non-profit institutions (CSRDE, 2007, p. iv).

These data reveal a greater than 50% increase in minority enrollment during this six year period. However, the representation of American Indians remained relatively low (<1%) compared the other underrepresented minority groups. Figure 1.0 represents the distribution of underrepresented minority students during the years 1999 and 2005. As these data illustrates, the proportion of American Indian students enrolled in higher education is substantially lower than African Americans or Hispanics. To provide some concrete headcounts for these percentages, the report shows the total average annual headcount of first-time freshman to be 700,722 with 70 % of these students self-reporting as Caucasian. The minority representation includes African American students at 9.4%, Hispanic students represent 7.4%, Asian students constitute 7.2% and less than 1% of the total is American Indian. In terms of real numbers, American Indian student enrollments represented just 5,818 of the 700,722 (CSRDE, 2007, p. 10).

Figure 1.0 Underrepresented Minorities as a Percentage of Total Freshman Cohort



The challenge of American Indian student retention does not begin with college enrollment. According to Tierney (1992), more than 40% of American Indians student who entered secondary education enrollment nationally, left without a high school diploma. Tierney also found that of those that do receive a high school diploma, slightly more than one-third will enroll in college, compared to nearly two-thirds of their non-Native peers.

The CSRDE data also reveals that underrepresented minority students have lower first-year retention rates than their non-minority peers. The highest first-year retention rates for this period were among Asian students (87.1%). The next highest rate is that of Caucasian students who were retained at a rate of 80%. African American and Hispanic student rates were lower (76%). To reiterate the findings of similar datasets, American Indians have the lowest rate (68.8%) of first-year retention rates for this same time period than any other ethnic group. Relative to the low retention rates of minorities, the graduation rates of underrepresented minority students are also lower than their non-minority student peers. Revisiting the national first-year enrollment data for American Indian students in 1999, only 68.8% of 5,818 freshman returned for their second year. Continuation rates for American Indian students returning for the third year of college are 56.2%. Further examination of these figures revealed that a mere 16.9% of this third year cohort returned to graduate during the fourth year of enrollment. These numbers are characteristic of the entire student population involved in the study.

These data collected from the CSRDE database provide institutions with information to continue the formulation of programs to address problem areas revealed in the course of thorough examination of attrition, retention, and graduation rate behaviors. The CSRDE cites the limitations of comparing individual institutional data with the national data collection. Care should be taken in attempting to determine specific institutional and study body characteristics for the purpose of establishing peer institutions for worthwhile assessments of retention and graduation data. For example, one important issue the report mentions when selecting peer institutions for retention benchmarking is the significance of the demographic and academic profile of the student population. Quite significant to the examination of factors contributing to the retention and graduation of American Indians are the issues noted in the report. These address the academic preparedness, part-time enrollment, student independence, age of enrolling students and employment status (CSRDE, 2007, p. vii).

Institutions must apply careful examination to such reports in their attempts to identify characteristics and trends in groups such as the critically low retention and graduation rates of American Indian students. One shortcoming of the CSRDE report is that it did not address the retention and graduation data of American Indian students enrolled in tribal colleges and universities (TCUs).

### **Barriers to Higher Education**

Several reasons are cited in the literature for the reduced numbers of American Indian students in college: the lack of high school graduates; the lack of administrative support from college institutions where the student attends college; faculty misconceptions and stereotyping; poor student relations with the college institution; and the choice of vocational careers and corresponding academic major based on the potential for monetary gain.

The paucity of American Indian high school graduates is one logical explanation for the reduced numbers of American Indians in higher education. Early studies by Jones and Wong (1975) and Birdsell (1984) documented the elevated high school dropout rates among American Indians. They reported that American Indians are under-represented among high school graduates due to educational disparity: (i.e., lack of access to resources, lack of comparable educational funding between Caucasian and minority youths). Their study (based on 1970 Census Data) concluded that America must work toward equal access to education for ethnic groups. The Birdsell study also noted a trend of high non-

completion rates among American Indian high school students. These studies have implications for recruitment of American Indian students into the profession. As long as there are fewer students meeting the entrance requirements of colleges, there will be a reduction in the numbers of American Indian practitioners graduating from social work programs. Subsequent studies have pointed to other factors beside the unavailability of students in accounting for the cause of the problem.

The high dropout rates of American Indian students from higher education may also be exacerbated by other factors identified in the literature. Lack of administrative support, faculty misconception and stereotypes, and defective student relations contributed to the high rate of dropouts in a non-empirical study by Spaight, Dixon, and Nickoli (1985).

According to Spaight et al. (1985), the goal of the university is to produce "productive, knowledgeable, middle-class White American citizens" (p. 18). Consequently, higher education administrators make the erroneous assumption that ethnic students "desire an educational experience identical with that desired by White students" (p. 18). This assumption causes administrators to promulgate policies that increase dissatisfaction among ethnic students, thus creating one more barrier to American Indian enrollment.

Faculty misconceptions of ethnic students' abilities also contribute to the difficulties faced by minorities according to Spaight et al. (1985). They describe two situations where faculties sincerely believe ethnic students are intellectually inferior to non-ethnic students. For example, in the grading process some professors will give "Cs" no matter how the ethnic student fared in the course. Also, other professors give "As" to all ethnic students in their class fearing they will be called racist by colleagues. Another difficulty addressed by Spaight et al. (1985) is the refusal of some faculty to include course content underscoring the contributions of ethnic peoples to the discipline. This lack of accurate information about the field of study contributes to the fallacy of White superiority in the specific area of intellectual pursuit. With such lack of support, racism and poor faculty understanding of American Indian cultures, the future proves difficult for American Indian students.

### **Potential Factors Affecting Retention and Graduation Rates**

A combination of unique cultural and educational characteristics and challenges of American Indian college students contributes to their particular patterns of attrition. Cultural identity, social norming, educational support mechanisms, unique student learning styles including Native ways of knowing, have been proven to impact the academic success of the American Indian college student.

Although there is significant literature on the theories affecting American Indian retention, including Euro-American theories, indigenous-based theories, and other social, psychological, and educational frameworks, much uncertainty remains about the factors and forces that influence American Indian students' ability to persist in college. Several studies have identified support from family, supportive faculty and staff, institutional commitment, personal commitment, and connections to homeland and culture as key factors in the persistence of American Indian students. Many of these studies have also identified a number of obstacles to retention and timely graduation including inadequate academic preparation, unclear and/or ill-defined academic or vocational goals, financial aid, incongruence between high school and college environments, prejudice, and social isolation.

A promising body of scholarship currently utilizes indigenous-based perspectives and theories, matched with cultural identity theory in order to develop a framework for successful retention initiatives. Of particular promise is the work of Huffman (2001), who suggests that Native American students who are able to draw strength from their cultural identity while adapting to the demands of college life are more likely to succeed in their academic pursuits than are either culturally assimilated students or those unable to establish a level of comfort within their campus environment.

Among the data identified, one potential factor acutely attributable to the high dropout rate of American Indians is age. The American Indian student is on average older than the traditional aged college student. In fact, more than one third of American Indian college students are 30 years of age or older. Frequently, this age group is categorized at a higher risk for potential dropout. With regard to gender, the majority of American Indian college students are women (63 %). The national average for American undergraduates, regardless of ethnic classification, is 58% female. The national average for first-generation college attendance among undergraduates is 39%, whereas 41% of American Indian students are first-generation college students (IHEP, 2007, p. 20).

The national average for financially independent undergraduate students is slightly greater than 50%, whereas, nearly two thirds (65 %) of American Indian undergraduates are self-supporting. Twenty percent of these students were living on annual household incomes below \$20,000. Less than one in ten American Indian undergraduates live in households with annual incomes greater than \$80,000. The national average for this comparison is significantly higher (IHEP, 2007, p. 22).

The care of dependent children is another challenge facing American Indian college students. Recent statistics reveal that nearly one third (27%) of all undergraduate students have dependent children compared to 35% of American Indian undergraduates. Additionally, data shows that 8% of American Indian students have the responsibility of dependent care other than children, weighted against just 3% of Caucasian students. These familial commitments contribute to the nearly 65% of American Indian undergraduates living in off campus housing (IHEP, 2007, p. 22).

In "Native American College Students: A Population That Can No Longer Be Ignored," Maxwell (2001) addresses the challenges that are exclusive to American Indian students. Although some of these challenges may be applicable to other minority groups, American Indians have additional obstacles specific to their tribal cultures. As indicated previously, American Indian students have strong ties to their extended family which are typically not common to the traditional non-Native nuclear family. These strong familial ties result in elevated levels of separation anxiety on occasions when American Indian students attend universities away from home (Maxwell, p. 2).

The value system of the American Indian culture fosters certain traits that may be problematic for Indian students to easily or successfully acclimate into the higher education environment. Tribal elders promote a strong sense of personal independence that may ultimately result in loneliness and seclusion when the student refuses to seek help in adjusting to this new environment. Maxwell argues that the American Indian culture promotes group collaboration which directly conflicts with the individualistic atmosphere of many college campuses. In fact, she posits that the Navajo belief that "speaking up in class is perceived as bragging," suggesting that drawing attention to oneself is contradictory to the ideology of group collaboration (Maxwell, p. 2)

This distinct profile of the American Indian undergraduate suggests a set of complex challenges which may impede a student's ability to easily obtain a college education. Familial and financial commitments which often require full-time employment make it necessary to find flexibility in class scheduling and other extra- and co-curricular activities associated with the college campus experience. The pressure to assimilate into mainstream environments, often conflicting with tribal culture, may result in internalized conflict that may hinder the Indian student from persisting and the completion of their academic degree program.

Much of this required assimilation is made less onerous when American Indian faculty and staff are available to assist American Indian students. Although no literature exists on the effect of American Indian staff on student retention, a modest amount is available on American Indian faculty. As role models, advisors, and confidants, American Indian faculty are indispensable resources for both undergraduate and graduate students.

### **Implications for American Indian College Faculty**

With ever increasing levels of diversity among student populations, mainstream colleges and universities are directing greater effort toward the recruitment and retention of minority faculty. Institutions have increased their efforts to recruit minority faculty proportionate to the overall student population. Additionally, colleges and universities have come to acknowledge that racial and ethnic diversity within the faculty fosters multicultural pedagogy serving to enhance the overall learning experiences of their students. The recruitment of minority faculty is a significant challenge to colleges and universities that is a direct result of the underrepresentation of minorities among college graduates; particularly in the recruitment of doctorally-prepared American Indian faculty.

According to Fall 2003 data released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), racial and ethnic minorities constituted nearly 15% of full-time faculty in U.S. colleges and universities. American Indian/Alaska Native populations represented approximately 3% of this proportion. American Indian/Alaska Native women constitute less than 1% of the total number of women employed full-time faculty at degree-granting institutions (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006).

The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) released the *2005 Survey of Earned Doctorates* reporting that 26,312 U.S. citizens earned doctorates in 2005 and 139 of these were American Indians. The report cited forty-three of these American Indian graduates obtained doctorates in the field of Education (NORC, 2005). This underrepresentation of doctorally-prepared American Indians is reflective of the critical issue facing the retention and graduation of American Indian students. American Indian faculty, serving as role models and mentors, will positively contribute success in the retention and graduation of American Indian college students.

However, the responsibility to serve as mentors, advisors, and role models to American Indian students and even other minority students on campus can place a heavy burden on American Indian faculty. A burden not necessarily shared by their non-Native peers. Although advising and mentoring students can be extremely rewarding, it can also be time consuming, especially when non-Native faculty and administrators refer American Indian and minority students to American Indian faculty instead of advising and mentoring the students personally. This additional burden of institutionally (or self-



imposed) responsibility becomes ever more difficult for junior faculty in pursuit of tenure and promotion.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

A cursory examination of existing research literature on the retention and graduation of minority students reveals limited scholarship addressing the specific challenges of American Indian students. More specifically, a review of many publications limited their portrayal of underrepresented minority groups to African American and Hispanic populations. As minority enrollment has more than doubled in the past thirty years, the retention and graduation rates of American Indian students have remained significantly lower than other minority groups in the U.S. It is clearly evident that American Indian students experience barriers to their access of a college degree – particularly in mainstream institutions. Federal policies have failed to address the cultural distinctiveness in the education of American Indian students.

American Indian populations maintain the highest levels of poverty among any other ethnic group in the U.S. For this reason, access to higher education will prove to be a dominant driver of socioeconomic development among American Indian communities. In fact, the attainment of degrees in higher education will not only provide economic and social welfare benefit to tribal communities but will serve as an overall benefit the entire nation. As the data clearly illustrates, there are numerous areas that should be addressed in this particular area of academic inquiry and research. One important study would focus on American Indian freshman with close examination of the congruence between student expectations prior to matriculation and their first year experiences. A careful examination of Native learning styles would also be beneficial in teacher education programs and certainly applicable to multicultural education in university environments.

As has been recognized, the success of American Indian students in higher education requires contributions from many groups. As early as elementary and secondary school, American Indian students should be encouraged to consider and plan for a college education and participate in college preparatory curriculum. Tutoring programs in the areas of mathematics, science, and reading should be provided as necessary. Teacher education programs should implement training in culturally sensitive pedagogies to address the cultural distinctiveness of American Indian students. High school guidance counselors should inform American Indian students of summer academic enrichment opportunities on college campuses to provide exposure to some level of the college experience before entering higher education. Many programs such as Health Careers Opportunity Program (HCOP), Upward Bound, and Early College support this pre-matriculation integration to the college experience.

Mainstream colleges and universities should work with local tribal governments and other community programs to improve outreach efforts to American Indian students and their parents. Open house programs for perspective students and their parents will provide opportunities for open discussion of the admission process, community college transfer procedures and availability of financial aid resources. Panel discussions and open forums with American Indian college graduates should be incorporated into all perspective student orientation programs. Mainstream colleges and universities should also establish relationships with TCUs and community colleges in their region to facilitate the process of transfers and provide opportunities for student and faculty exchange programs.

An important and necessary factor in the education of American Indian students rests upon fostering a campus culture conducive to understanding Native cultures. Campus communities should support the identities of American Indian students. This process must begin with the education of the faculty and staff to the Native ways of these students. A comprehensive understanding of American Indian cultures will bridge the gap toward establishing positive relationships with these students. At the same time, it is critical to develop individual relationships with American Indian students to avoid the stereotypical mindset that all American Indian students share the same cultural identity. This standardization of the needs of American Indian students is a driving force against the truth that all American Indian students are unique with diverse backgrounds and varying life experiences. A campus environment, working to service their individual needs, will prove conducive to positive experiences for American Indian students during the first year and even beyond to the completion of their degree.

First-year programs are critical to the retention of American Indian students on mainstream college and university campuses. The integration of academic services plays a critical role in the success of freshman students. Structured first-year programs with developmental/remedial courses serve to benefit American Indian students during this difficult transitional year. Both developmental and prescriptive academic advising sessions should be required to assist American Indian students in the decision-making process of schedule building, academic policies and procedures, and information of campus student services. Retention early-alert programs are also critical to monitoring for at-risk students.

Additionally, mainstream colleges and universities should create special social networks to support American Indian students and their families. For example, promotion of American Indian clubs and organizations, cultural events to support Native heritage, American Indian distinguish speaker programs, Parents Weekend and American Indian alumni associations. All of these and others can provide opportunities for American Indian students and their families to make the necessary connection with the university environment and encourage first-year students, particularly, to network with other American Indian students on the campus.

Establishing a connection to the university community is critical to the first-year experience of American Indian students. This is particularly important to American Indian students who find the college experience as the first time away from their families and some may have never experienced exposure beyond the tribal communities. Developing supportive relationships with university faculty, staff and other students serve as a pseudo-surrogate family for American Indian students thereby making their first-year experiences a positive factor toward their return for the following academic year. Another important factor to establishing these positive relationships with American Indian students involves the recruitment and retention of American Indian faculty and staff. A network of American Indian faculty and staff in mainstream universities offer these connections to the Native cultures that serve to close the gap between college campuses and the tribal communities of the American Indian students. Mainstream campuses should work to educate non-Native faculty in the knowledge of the diverse ways of educating American Indian students. The assumption that mainstream methods of educating non-Native students are applicable to the diverse learning styles of American Indian students is a mentality that should be eliminated.

In conclusion, mainstream colleges and universities would benefit from incorporating culturally relevant educational environments to service American Indian students. American Indian students would thrive in Undergraduate Research Centers directed by American Indian faculty where these students are encouraged to maintain a focus on their Native heritage in studies of cultural preservation, tribal government issues and economic development. Best practices in retention programs for American Indian students value the important sphere of influence and role of family and community by offering flexible policies that permit students to maintain their familial and tribal obligations as they work to balance the challenges of college curricula. A sincere commitment to providing programs that address the unique barriers to American Indian education should become a strategic initiative in mainstream colleges and universities.

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