Chapter 3
A Qualitative Study of Native American Higher Education and Student Resiliency

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the degree to which Native American culture impacts the resiliency of Native American students earning degrees at three tribal colleges in the southwestern part of the United States. This is a qualitative case study that was based on the following research question: "How does Native American culture contribute to the resiliency of Native American students who are earning a degree at a tribal college?" This chapter focuses on the concerns of Native American students, and the cultural events they may have encountered during their educational journey. The research data were collected from interviews of 18 Native American students who were in their last year of college. Themes surrounding culture, resiliency, tribal colleges, academics, and Native American role models were discovered and used to determine the impact Native American culture has on the resiliency of Native American students.

INTRODUCTION

Native Americans who navigate American systems of higher education "must absorb a great deal of factual content, and they must also place that knowledge into the context of their own tribal and community traditions" (Deloria, 1994, p. 7). As a Native American educator, Vine Deloria, Jr. went on to add that "the thing that has always been missing in Indian education and is still missing today, is Indians" (p. 62). He also acknowledged that Native Americans who serve on various educational committees easily conform to non-Indian educational vocabulary and concepts. Deloria asserted that these Native Americans leave their native heritage behind and do not attempt to incorporate Native heritage into the educational tasks they perform. He argued that Native Americans involved in education should work to address three main issues: a) recognize the cultural differences Native American students face in the classroom, b) find ways to involve family in educating Native American students, and c) seek more

academic funding for textbooks, curriculum, and teacher training. Native American educators can use educational research as a way to address these continual issues even today.

Their native culture surrounds native American students who live on the reservation, but when they leave the reservation, they must live in mainstream America's society and culture. Some Native American students chose to attend tribal colleges on or near a reservation. For these Native American students, this chapter explored the impact of their native culture on their success in completing their educational journey. Faircloth and Tippeconnic (2010) researched data from the National Center of Education Statistics and found that 50% of Native American students do not complete their education. They recommend that more research is needed on the emphasis Native American culture has on dropout and graduation rates. This chapter explores the degree to which the integration of Native American culture in the campus environment of three tribal colleges affected student success and resiliency. Three tribal colleges from the southwestern part of the United States were a part of this study. The results of this study did illuminate if native culture helps or does not help Native American students' resiliency to stay in school.

BACKGROUND

Native American education today is very different from how it began with boarding schools, where the focus was to remove the "*Indian*" from the Native American students. Historically, the U.S. government had four goals in providing academic education for all Native American students who were sent to boarding schools. The first was to civilize them by teaching them "to read, write, and speak the English language" (Adams, 1995, p.21). The next goal was to individualize them by teaching them to work for individual gain of property, money, and to learn American egotism. Also, the U.S. Government sought to Christianize them so they would "embrace an entire ethical code" (p. 23), which would allow them to be responsible for their Christianity. Lastly, the government wanted to train them for citizenship by teaching them to accept that the taking of their land was justifiable, and the only hope for their race was to join in American progress.

Adams (1995) revealed several early struggles that resulted in the resistance of Native Americans students to their education. First, Native American students struggled with being separated from their parents to attend school. Second, older Native American students struggled because they viewed their education as an "assault on their cultural identity" (p. 223). Third, Adams described their struggle in psychological terms; he stated they struggled with cognitive control. Native American culture, like other cultures, has a distinct paradigm of the world that impacts views, decisions, and actions. Adams acknowledged this as cognitive control. Native American students struggled with knowing what to think and how to act because they faced a severe culture clash between their culture and the white culture exhibited in the boarding schools. Though many Native American students struggle with their education, a growing number have persisted and continued to the point of seeking higher education.

In order to understand their resiliency, it is essential to recognize the current challenges experienced by a majority of Native American college students. These challenges include a) the perception that white campuses are hostile toward them, b) inadequate preparation for college in high school, and c) low levels of financial support (Jackson, Hill, & Smith, 2003).

DeVoe and Darling-Churchill (2008) reported "in 2007, some 44 percent of American Indians/Alaska Natives age 25 or older had attended some college or completed an undergraduate or graduate degree" (p.148). They also stated that the number of enrollments for Native American students in colleges and

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