

Chapter 12

Online Education Through an Indigenous Lens

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the challenges Native American students encounter in higher education, including online higher education, and the motivations of Native American students. Recommendations for online higher education institutions to support Native American students are offered. Tribal critical race theory is used as the conceptual framework, while oral histories are used to understand the experiences of Native American doctoral students attending online higher education institutions. Although Native American students encounter numerous challenges in online higher education institutions, Native American students have motivations influencing their persistence and sense of belonging that online higher education institutions can foster.

INTRODUCTION

How would you define the original inhabitants of North America? American Indian, Indigenous, Native, and Native American are terms that are commonly used in North America to label those who claim indigeneity. These terms are used interchangeably throughout this chapter and refer to those who self-identify as someone coming from a federally recognized, state recognized, and/or non-federally recognized tribe, or a descendant of a tribe within the United States, Alaskan Native Villages, or Canadian First Nations. Recognition of indigeneity has various levels. There is federal recognition from the United States government, state recognition, and those who do not receive either. Definitions and requirements also vary

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7712-0.ch012

from tribe to tribe, and the argument of who gets to claim indigeneity varies from person to person. It is imperative to acknowledge all degrees of indigeneity.

Education for Indigenous peoples is essential because students who receive an education and graduate with a bachelor's degree end up making more money than those who do not (Keo et al., 2019). Additionally, students who graduate will be more likely to return to their tribal communities, helping to increase economic growth on reservations (Ferguson & Huffman, 2018; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2007; Shotton, 2018). Online education is beneficial for Indigenous peoples because it can offer students an opportunity to receive an education while living on the reservation and provide flexibility for those who care for children or other family members (Hunt & Oyarzun, 2020; Pertillar, 2016).

The number of American Indian/Alaska Native students enrolling in higher education institutions continues to decline. Enrollment of American Indian/Alaska Native students in undergraduate education in 2020 was 107,300 students, a decrease of 43% from 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). For postbaccalaureate enrollment, American Indian/Alaska Native students comprised 13,800 students, a decrease of 25% from 2009. American Indian/Alaska Native students comprise less than 1% of overall undergraduate and postbaccalaureate enrollment, one of the lowest among all racial/ethnic groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Lacking from the research is the online enrollment of American Indian/Alaska Native students in higher education institutions. As for degree attainment, only 11% of 25-to-29-year-olds have completed a bachelor's degree or higher, which is also lower than any other racial/ethnic group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

This chapter examines challenges Native American students encounter in higher education, including online higher education, motivations of Native American students, and recommendations for online higher education institutions. Constructivist learning theories will be discussed throughout the chapter. Constructivist learning theories aim to explain how people use previous knowledge to understand new concepts that they are learning (Carley, 2015). Building on past experiences to internalize new information is beneficial for all students. Instructors being aware of their students' lives, upbringings, and cultures and how this impacts their academic experiences is crucial to helping students transition to online higher education successfully (Hamza, H., Hernandez de Hahn, L. 2012). Since family and community support is such an influential factor for Indigenous students, constructivism can be especially beneficial for Indigenous students because the home lives of Indigenous students are highly influential on their overall learning styles and experiences (Fish & Syed, 2018; Heavy Runner-Rioux et al., 2018; Lopez, 2018; Lopez, 2021; Marroquín, 2020; Rodriguez & Mallinckrodt, 2021; Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2021).

All three authors are Indigenous women who have been navigating higher education through online programs in their doctoral studies. Their firsthand experiences in online higher education programs are mirrored in the research they reviewed for their dissertations. When examining online education through an Indigenous lens, it is crucial to weave in oral histories, so Native American student voices are represented in academia. Storytelling has been used to pass knowledge on to the next generation in Indigenous cultures. Telling stories has been Native Americans' way to resist losing critical elements of culture, including language and history (Asmi, 2017). Personal narratives can be used to discredit the negative stereotypes that often attach themselves to a group of people. Personal narratives focus on the individuals sharing their experiences and how they see and interpret the world around them (Asmi, 2017). Therefore, short narratives from each of the authors will be used to highlight the individual experiences of Native American doctoral candidates relating to the research.

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