

## Supporting First-Nation/Native American Undergraduate Students at Non-Native Colleges and Universities in Historically Native American Fraternities and Sororities

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Within the last 20 years, the fraternity/sorority experience for Native American/First Nation students has evolved into a much more comprehensive and inclusive involvement opportunity. This population of students have self-authored and conceptualized their own student experience through the formation of fraternities and sororities to support a lived sense of community that is congruent with their cultural values. These organizations were first termed the *Historically Native American Fraternity and Sorority* (HNAFS) by Jahansouz and Oxendine (2008) and later more richly depicted by Oxendine, Oxendine, & Minthorn (2013).

This values congruence within HNAFS organizations incorporates Native American cultural values into the purpose, mission, and activities. As of 2014, there were seven HNAFS organizations which include Alpha Pi Omega, Inc. (1994), Phi Sigma Nu (1996), and Gamma Delta Pi (2001). Many of these organizations now have multiple chapters and have a true national presence. Some follow a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) model with community-based or “metro chapters” along with professional chapters. The founding of these organizations was to facilitate a sense of community at Non-Native Colleges and Universities (NNCU) and provide space to address gaps in student support or advising. An HNAFS provides for retention, a reinforced cultural identity, a sense of belonging which assists in student persistence, and support for the local tribal communities (Oxendine, Oxendine, & Minthorn, 2013). They also add further diversity to the campus fraternity/sorority community. However, this added diversity to the campus fraternity/sorority community challenges traditional perceptions by other fraternity/sorority members as well as campus-based professionals.

These perceptions are cultural barriers that HNAFS will more than likely be challenged to overcome. Often an HNAFS organization defies the presupposition of a traditional fraternity/sorority chapter. Therefore, it is necessary for student affairs and other campus-based professionals to aspire to a higher order of understanding and cultural appreciation. In higher education’s efforts to meet the needs of Native American students, it is important that there is congruence between what Native American students value in their overall student success and what the institution deems important (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Bridging the gap between what institutions *think* these students need and what the students *actually* need, can help with giving Native American students positive experiences in higher education. This article will seek to provide some tangible ways in which NNCU institutions can further engage and support Native-American college students in an HNAFS to broaden their impact and enrich their contribution within the fraternity/sorority community.

### Challenge Selective Invisibility

Native American students report a “singularity of experience” whereas they are the only representative of their culture in the majority of their lived experiences and social spaces. Across many social contexts, Native American students may selectively disclose their cultural

identity, fearing the burden of cultural representation (Jeffers & Sasso, in press). Most Americans have not had direct, personal experiences with Native Americans (Pewewardy, 1995). Many majority-culture students therefore gain a perceived cultural understanding of Native American students from indirect external sources such as the media (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2010). These misperceptions or cultural assumptions include: that all tribes have casinos, that Native American students attend college for free, and that all Native Americans share a common culture. These misperceptions are expressed subversively in the form of microaggressions and can be encountered in the classroom with faculty, in offices with administrators such as academic advisors, or with other students (Jeffers & Sasso, in press). Often, Native American students cite a perceived lack of support from non-Native faculty and staff (Belgarde, 1992; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Miheuah & Wilson, 2004; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Tippeconnic & McKinney, 2003; Fox, 2005; Wright, 1985). Native American college students report that affiliation with socially supportive groups for Native Americans on campus is a crucial part of their student success and persistence (Jackson, Smith & Hill, 2003).

To address these issues, campus-based professionals should facilitate a more seamless learning environment to connect the academic and co-curricular experiences for Native American college students. This may include connecting with dedicated faculty in facilitating the formation of new chapters and encouraging their participation in cultural awareness weeks. This could further encourage and support their formation and greater facilitate student connectedness to the institution. Native and non-Native faculty both contribute to student academic persistence, particularly when they seek to understand the concerns and issues Native students encounter and demonstrate their support and connect with Native American students (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997).

Campus-based professionals should encourage Native American students to assume a proud stance towards their culture by providing forums in which they can share their specific tribal culture to promote education and awareness. This provides for cultural identity which is important for Native American student success (Deyhle, 1995; Huffman, 2001, 2003, 2010; Jackson & Smith, 2001; Waterman, 2007, 2012). This means connecting and establishing connections on behalf of students with faculty across academic departments to facilitate co-curricular programming with intentional learning outcomes. Elevating the visibility of an HNAFS chapter requires connecting with other student engagement offices and across campus with faculty to facilitate a safe and welcoming space. This requires campus-based professionals to educate non-Native faculty and staff to become familiar with the issues and challenges of these students (Hornett, 1989).

### **Encourage Self-Authorship and Reciprocity**

Campus-based professionals should also encourage its members of HNAFS organizations to engage in leadership experiences outside of their chapter and their fraternity/sorority community. This allows individual students to self-author their own narrative and write the pages of their own collegiate undergraduate story, thus framing Baxter-Magolda's Self-

Authorship theory (1992a; 1992b; 1998; 2001; 2007; 2008). However, these self-authored leadership experiences should be culturally inclusive.

Campus-based professionals should be mindful that many leadership programs utilize a Western perspective which has historically excluded the Native American college student population (Williams, 2012). Leadership programs need to be inclusive of Native American college students and any programming for HNAFS members should be culturally considerate regarding aspects such as commitment for community (Minthorn, 2014). These types of programs should provide positive self-images, representative role models, and build Native community (Minthorn, Wanger & Shotton, 2013).

Such leadership programs for HNAFS members should include curricular components that help students self-author a narrative which includes transition back into their communities. Such culturally inclusive leadership programs should further challenge HNAFS members to consider postgraduate plans to continue lifelong membership and how they can engage in reciprocity too. For Native American college students, “home going” is a transitional and developmental experience, particularly with regard to the value of reciprocity (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Waterman, 2007). Reciprocity is a deeply rooted cultural value for Native American students. They seek degrees and meaningful experiences in higher education as an opportunity to gain important knowledge needed within their tribes or home communities to facilitate nation building of the tribal communities (Guillory, 2008). The idea of reciprocity or returning home to give back is important for Native American students, but it is often fraught with tensions with family or community members, and lack of employment (Guillory, 2008; Shotton, 2008; Waterman). Incorporating programming to address this “senior transition” may better facilitate the concepts of lifelong membership.

### **Encouraging Place & Space in Identity Formation**

Many HNAFS organizations have community and professional chapters. These provide a sense of community for its members not only within the campus environment, but after graduation. This sense of community applies to two distinctive concepts of space: home and campus. A sense of belonging is foundational to Native American college students. The home or tribal community of Native American college students is where they receive financial, spiritual, and emotional support which often buttresses against the issues they experience on campus which encourages them to persist (Heavy Runner & DeCelles, 2002). Campus-based professionals should acknowledge the important roles that family and the home community play with regard to academic persistence (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Waterman; 2007, 2012).

The idea of campus as a space for community serves as safe space for Native American students to engage in identity formation and support (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Thus, the programming calendar should respect student schedules to allow for identity formation. Programming such as mandatory weekend retreats, conferences, or other programming may not fully fit HNAFS and maybe perceived as inconveniently intrusive. Waterman (2012) suggested that student affairs professionals should be open to the desire of Native students to

return home for ceremonies, family emergencies, and to renew themselves through their family and tribal support systems (Waterman, 2012).

Horse's Perspective on American Indian Identity Development (2001) focuses on an individual's ethnic identity conceptualization as an indigenous person. Horse (2005) furthered his theory in the context of the majority White culture, and added that privilege and oppression of underrepresented populations, such as Native Americans, is a key reason why identity development and support of that identity development in higher education is crucial for ethnic minority groups. Schooler (2014) proposed that Horse's perspective on identity development among Native American students does not speak to the difficulty of their transition phases specifically, such as transitioning through stages of identity conceptualization in higher education, but simply to the ways in which a Native American may use his model's factors in determining one's Native American identity. Wijeyesinghe (2001) has noted that the level of the self-identity for a Native American is determined by whether one conceptualizes ethnic identity on one's own terms or conforming the dominant societal culture. Thus, since the majority of universities are situated in White American culture, an institution can play a large role in identity development.

Campus-based professionals can use Horse's perspective to better understand the identity development as students muddle through their collegiate experience, often unsupported and feeling invisible (Jeffers & Sasso, in press). Supporting means better conceptualizing the student experience individually and on an organizational level as chapter. This allows campus-based professionals to be intentional with their individual work with student leaders within HNAFS organizations. For example, this would mean applying Horse's Perspective (2011) with campus chapters regarding the use of the common fraternity/sorority vernacular such as "colony." Such a term certainly arises different meaning to members of the Native American student community than those from dominant populations. The historical context of this language and other terms can serve as a basis of discussion about why we use specific words based on tradition from a majority cultural lens. This empowers HNAFS organizations to have dialogue with other organizations.

## **Conclusion**

While supporting individual Native American student leaders or members within HNAFS organizations, it is imperative for advisors to be aware of their own majority cultural lens and the use of meaning-making filters informed by student development theory. To persist to graduation, Native American students must draw upon their cultural identity as a source of strength (Huffman, 2003, 2010; Jackson & Smith, 2001; Waterman, 2007; 2012). These cognitive models allow us as student affairs professionals to be intentional in our teaching and advising with our students. This is particularly salient in our work with Native American college students who need our social justice. We must help them feel like members of our communities and that they are not simply an "inconspicuous minority group," but can engage in reciprocity to concurrently uplift their fraternal organizations and their community.

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