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## **Listening to the Student Voice in Adult Education**

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**Abstract:** Tribal colleges are receiving much recognition for their successes. This study acknowledges the Crow Indian people as well as the involvement of Little Big Horn College in its own educational and social movement. The student voice represents an integral part of carrying out the institutional mission.

### **Introduction**

Native American control of the post-secondary educational process in their communities came into sharp focus in the late 1960's. The tribal college movement began when the Navajo tribe challenged mainstream educational systems and developed their own programs and institutions for their own students and founded Navajo Community College in 1968. These community colleges came about because:

a) Indian nations were experiencing very high dropouts at the state colleges and universities in the 1960's and early 1970's; b) scholarships available to tribal people were fairly limited; c) many Indian students didn't want to leave their families; d) Indian people didn't want to leave their place in the community; and e) it was very expensive for students to attend campuses away from home so economics was also an important [factor]....[Yet] the major reason tribal colleges started [was] to provide a means for tribal people to strengthen their own tribal nations....So cultural preservation is really the foundation of the tribal colleges. (Bordeaux, 1991, p. 12)

Tribal colleges are institutions for the education of adults (Conti & Fellenz, 1991). Today, 29 tribal colleges serve the diverse needs of approximately 25,000 students in 12 states. Through individual and concerted efforts, these schools have begun to impact Indian and non-Indian students in virtually every aspect of life. "Each institution is unique in how it attempts to organize and deliver services to Indian people" (Slater & O'Donnell, 1995, p. 38). Tribal colleges nationwide provide degrees in 350 programs and 179 vocation certificate programs of study to the students they serve (p. 38). "Together these colleges stand out as the most significant and successful development in Indian education history" (Boyer, 1989, p. 24).

The essential mission of each tribal college includes (a) providing a quality post-secondary education for certification, for two-year programs, or for a degree that is transferable to senior institutions; (b) providing services to the community; (c) providing a vocational education; and (d) offering a means by which the tribe(s) served may preserve their cultural integrity through the learning experience (Oppelt, 1984, p. 32). Encompassed in the mission of each college is the challenge to create and maintain practical services and programs that consider respective languages and cultures, appreciate the students' needs and backgrounds, and recognize individual

learning styles, language skills, and the effects of language differences on learning and teaching styles (National Education Association, 1991).

Little Big Horn College. Little Big Horn College (LBHC), located in southeastern Montana, has become a premier institution for providing a tribal college education because of its many outstanding characteristics. The college was fully accredited in June of 1991 through the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges. A majority of its students are Crow tribal members.

Education has always been a high priority among the people on the Crow Reservation. In the late 1800's, one of the most noted Crow chiefs, Plenty Coups, said, "Education is your most powerful weapon. With education you are the white man's equal; without education you are his victim" (cited in Bryan, 1985, p. 90). Still evident today is the importance of becoming educated without giving up tribal identity. The Crow higher education philosophy espouses "the preservation and enhancement of the Crow Language and Culture while providing an up-to-date higher education opportunity to its students" (Pease-Windy Boy cited in Stein, 1992, p. 136).

The essential mission of LBHC is to offer a general or transfer education, provide community service, afford vocational education opportunities, and offer a culturally-relevant learning experience.

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### **Statement of the Problem**

Tribal colleges are successfully meeting the unique educational needs of Native Americans; yet only a limited amount of research has been conducted to support this conclusion. While there are several studies (e.g., Conti & Fellenz, 1988; Dauphinais, 1981; Haymond, 1982; LaPointe, 1977; Hill, 1992; LeBeau, 1979; Oppelt, 1990; Wright, 1989) which have examined tribal college students, much of the literature expounds broad generalizations concerning a specific student attribute or is narrow in scope. Similarly, there is scant evidence of any discussion concerning the relationship between the tribal college mission and the students who attend tribal colleges.

Clearly, LBHC is succeeding in many ways, yet those successes have not been authenticated through the views of its students. In the case of individual students, no studies have been conducted to legitimately reveal their perspectives concerning the manner in which the college is fulfilling its mission. While it is apparent that LBHC students are respected as consumers of education, the link between the college mission and the intrinsic worth of that education must be better understood.

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### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to elicit student perceptions of the LBHC mission. Five areas were investigated to determine (a) the experiences of students with the Crow culture and language at the college; (b) the value placed on their own education by the students; (c) the degree to which LBHC's programming meets the needs of each student; (d) the psychological and sociological barriers to education; and (e) the ways in which opportunities are provided through the college mission. The testimony of LBHC adult learners helped serve the purpose.

## **Methodology**

This descriptive study utilized a naturalistic case study design. Purposeful sampling was used to select 28 participants for this study. The students sufficiently represented the wide range of characteristics among students at LBHC. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with LBHC students regarding their individual experiences while attending LBHC and how those experiences were impacted by the tribal college mission. From these interviews, categorical information was established to delineate their perceptions of the overall institutional effectiveness. These perspectives revealed a comprehensive example of the interaction between student and institution among the people of the Crow Reservation.

## **Findings**

Regarding the first area of investigation, it was found that LBHC is a thriving educational institution that is uniquely Crow. The Crow culture is prevalent nearly everywhere in the college. LBHC is a place where bilingual and bicultural people can pursue their education and not have to renounce their heritage. The traditions, history, language, and culture of the Crow people are intact at LBHC. There is a mutual exchange between student and school whereby cultural continuity and integrity are maintained.

Findings for the second critical area revealed that LBHC has an important role in maintaining institutional stability in the community. The students found LBHC to be a place for building basic skills and confidence and for enhancing self-esteem. It is an accessible institution and one that accommodates the needs of students. The college helps prepare students for transferring to senior, four-year colleges and universities.

The third category of inquiry showed how the experiences of the students in this study provide testimony to the high degree of satisfaction with LBHC meeting the academic needs of students. There are numerous opportunities to learn and meaningful applications to real life abound for this component of the LBHC mission. In respect to the general or transfer education, the vocational education interests, and the service to the community, LBHC has been successful in meeting the needs of its adult population.

Fourthly, it was found that the most pertinent issues related to student background include cultural factors, socio-economic status, and academic preparation. Students realized there were

options and resources available to them while attending LBHC. There was nothing unique to the Crow lifeway that would hinder the psychological or sociological construct of the individual in respect to the educational process in effect at LBHC. To the contrary, there was some indication of traditional Crow teachings that might serve to enhance the ability to manage most constraints faced by the individual, group, or community. Similarly, the students at LBHC are in many cases like other adult learners who attend tribal and mainstream colleges.

The findings for the fifth and final area indicated that it is obvious that the college is making a difference in the lives of people on the Crow Reservation. The programming, services, and people associated with LBHC are guided by the mission of the college and make a culturally appropriate institution available to students and community members. The college has demonstrated its institutional commitment to serve a unique student population.

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### **Recommendations**

Recommendations for each of the five categories are presented in separate statements. These statements correspond with the stated findings. First, in terms of cultural continuity, it is recommended that LBHC continue to reaffirm the cultural and tribal identity of the Crow people. LBHC should also continue to acknowledge the concept of family, community, and tribal ways of life. The college needs to continue building its community image and should also continue building bridges between the students and the world outside of the Crow Reservation.

Secondly, it is recommended that LBHC utilize the information from students' reasons for choosing to attend to continually enhance recruitment and retention efforts. It is important to blend information from student choice to completely understand the demographic profile of the student body. LBHC will do well to sustain its image as a place that welcomes students. The college should challenge its students to meet their own educational goals and expectations. It is recommended that LBHC develop ways to challenge all types of learners. For those students who are attending LBHC for reasons other than obtaining a degree, a support network could be established through accessing technology such as telecommunications and computers. It is reasonable for LBHC to provide services and programs that will assist students in improving their self-image and in helping prepare them for employment.

Thirdly, the recommendation for curricular and programmatic planning is for LBHC to emulate the ideas of excellence and opportunity for its students and members of the community. It is essential to continue building partnerships with other community and tribal programs. It is also recommended that LBHC continue to build articulation agreements with other institutions of higher learning.

In the fourth area, the primary recommendation for LBHC students is to communicate their issues. The perpetuation of the Crow language and culture must also be promoted by students. Therefore, students should strive to keep the oral tradition alive through the educational process at LBHC. The college should perceive its students as leaders of the future.

The final set of recommendations support LBHC in its delivery of a quality educational experience to its students. The college must continue dismantling the Indian student deficit model and build the self-actualization model. In addition, the college should consider the student perspective which can serve to amplify what is being perceived from their individual and collective point of view. LBHC needs to continue to listen to its students, to encourage involvement of its students, and to foster the growth of a place which imbues opportunity.

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### Summary

Little Big Horn College has been realizing new solutions and innovations to meeting the needs of its students while retaining tribal tradition. LBHC offers the potential for its students to become empowered as confidence is promoted in their students' ability to succeed academically and to enact social change. Additionally, the community has recognized that the college is a powerful intermediary between the Crow way of life (e.g., traditions, culture, language) and the modern world. The Crow culture is well intact, for now, and LBHC is playing a vital role in perpetuating and promoting it. Because of institutions like LBHC, the future holds a vision of hope for Indian people.

The value and relationship of students to the college mission must not be taken for granted. Any assessment of the college mission would not be complete unless it considers the voice of the student. The history, growth, and development of LBHC has contributed to a better understanding of the function, status, and image of other tribal colleges in Montana and perhaps the nation.

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