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A Strengths Based Examination of the Educational Lives of Alaska Native Alumni of the University of Alaska Anchorage

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Keywords: Academic success, Alaska Native students

Abstract: This paper outlines a study currently underway to explore the pre-K through postsecondary educational lives of first-generation college, Alaska Native graduates of the University of Alaska Anchorage between the years of 1975 to 2005.

Background

Access to higher education is one of the most pressing social justice issues of our time. From an economic standpoint, we know that higher educational attainment levels correlate to higher incomes. A higher income affords greater opportunities to purchase health care services, remain in stable housing, and access additional education. More importantly, in our increasingly complex, global and diverse world, quality education and access to higher education is required so that all citizens can actively participate in the decision-making processes determining the future of their communities. Despite educational intervention efforts, affirmative action, and federal financial aid, the statistical odds of earning a college degree in this country if you are poor and/or nonwhite remain much too low. In Alaska, the odds of earning a college degree if you are an Alaska Native also remain much too low.

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) detailed the decreasing odds along the pre-K through postsecondary education continuum of successful educational achievement by U.S. children raised in poverty. They estimated that a child from a poor community was twenty times more likely not to graduate from college than a child from a middle class family. The central focus of their report, *Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College*, is the students they describe as the anomalies, the students who “beat the odds”, reaching and entering the college doors despite the barriers to academic success presented by extreme poverty. Their study participants, twenty-four, first-generation college students, were asked to identify the relationships, activities, and events in their lives that they believed helped them to succeed.

Alaska Native students also experience decreasing odds of success along the pre-K to postsecondary educational continuum. Alaska Native college attendance and attainment has increased over the last three decades (Goldsmith, Angvik, Hill, & Leask, 2005). However, it lags behind the steady increase of college attendance and attainment by non-native Alaskans during the same time period. Without a college degree, Alaska Natives remain underrepresented in many professions. This paper outlines a study currently underway that is reminiscent of and resonant with the work of Levine and Nidiffer. The study seeks to examine the experiences of first-generation college, Alaska Native alumni of the University of Alaska Anchorage who beat the statistical odds and attained a baccalaureate degree. The study spans the graduation years of 1975 to 2005.

The Alaskan Context

Barnhardt (2001) asserts that “the historical, political, cultural, economic and geographical contexts of Alaska are distinct enough from other states, that the “Alaskan

variable” must be taken into account as an important factor in all decisions about education in Alaska”(para. 8). The same is true of educational research in Alaska.

The state’s land mass, home to 655,435 people covers 571,951 square miles (U.S. Census, 2004). Alaska, approximately one-fifth the size of the entire continental U.S., has only 13,628 miles of public road connecting its villages and cities. There are over 1,100 airstrips and airports. Air travel, although expensive, is a necessity for connecting residents to supplies, services, and communications. This geography poses significant barriers to providing and accessing education at all levels, pre-K through postsecondary, for all residents.

With a stated mission to serve Alaska’s diverse population, the University of Alaska system consists of three universities tied to the population hubs (60% of the state’s population resides in these cities) of Anchorage, Juneau, and Fairbanks. The most recent (2000) U.S. census data shows the state population to be 3.5% Black; 15.6% Alaska Native/American Indian; 5.4% 2 or more races; 4.1% Hispanic and the remainder as White. There are 20 different Alaska Native groups (Barnhardt, 2001). About half of Alaska’s rural population, residing in 225 communities numbering less than 500 people, is Alaska Native (Wolfe, 1996). In the villages, “many Native residents continue to practice a subsistence lifestyle and depend heavily on moose, caribou, seal, walrus, whale, fish and berries for their supply of food” (Barnhardt, 2001, para. 18).

Today, over 120 high schools serve rural students in Alaskan villages. Prior to 1976, rural students, primarily Alaska Native students, were forced to leave their villages and attend boarding schools for high school education. In 1976, the Molly Hootch case, alleging discriminatory practices by the state, resulted in a settlement whereby “the state of Alaska agreed that it would establish a high school program in every community in Alaska where there was an elementary school (which required a minimum enrollment of 8 students) and one or more secondary students, unless the community specifically declined such a program”(Barnhardt et al, as cited in Barnhardt, 2001, para. 77).

Alaska Native Students: Pre-K through 12

Complex webs of historical, economic, cultural and social factors weave through the provision of educational services to Alaska Native students (Barnhardt, 2001; McDowell Group, 2001; Alaska Natives Commission, 1994). Beginning at the pre-K level and continuing through the elementary and secondary levels these factors pose significant barriers to academic success. Among these barriers are:

1. Language and culture differences among students, parents, and school staff.
2. Ignorance of Native culture among teachers and other school staff.
3. Curriculum and learning materials that do not relate to cultural experience.
4. Standardized tests that do not take into account language and culture differences.
5. Differences in learning styles between Native and non-Native students.
6. Teaching styles and teacher training.
7. Lack of educational role models and parents' attitude toward education.
8. Problems at home, including alcoholism, neglect, and abuse.
9. Other factors that affect students’ performance, such as poverty, indifference or ambivalence toward education, boredom, and low self-esteem (McDowell Group, 2001, 10).

Alaska Native students comprised 23% of state enrollment in grades 7-12 in 2004, and 37% of students who dropped out during those years (McDowell Group, 2005). Although high school graduation rates for Alaska Native students initially increased sharply due to the locating

of high school programs in Native villages, drop out rates increased to nearly 10 percent from 1998-2001 (Goldsmith et al., 2005). The 2003-04 high school graduation rate for Alaska Native students was 47.5% compared to a rate of 67.3% for all other ethnicities combined. A high school diploma or GED is the minimum admission requirement at virtually all colleges and universities, including the University of Alaska Anchorage.

Alaska Natives and the University of Alaska Anchorage

Alaska Native student enrollment has increased nearly 80% throughout the Anchorage MAU over the last 5 years (Office of Community Partnerships, 2005). Noting a recent enrollment of 1,570 students comprising 7.9% of the total MAU student population, this report clearly shows Alaska Natives to be the fastest growing ethnic group on University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) campuses. Moore (2003), citing increased enrollments and comparative enrollment data from other UA campuses, claims that UAA has become the institution of choice for Alaska Natives throughout Alaska.

Several initiatives launched at UAA over the recent years have provided access and support to Alaska Native students attending the University of Alaska Anchorage campus. The programs have included pre-college and bridging initiatives such as the Della Keats/UDOC program for Alaska Native students interested in health careers. Campus-based initiatives such as the Alaska Native Science and Engineering program (ANSEP), the Recruitment and Retention of Alaska Natives into Nursing program (RRANN) and the Alaska Natives into Psychology program (ANPsych) provide academic and student services support for Alaska Native students admitted to UAA in these degree programs. The Office of Native Student Services, located at the heart of the campus, provides a point of consistent support and guidance for all Native Students at UAA.

The pre-college and campus-based recruitment and retention initiatives cited above are noteworthy and significant aids to Alaska Native student success, but these recent initiatives are part of a longer historical relationship between the University and Alaska Native students. In 1975, the Anchorage Senior College, renamed the University of Alaska, Anchorage, received full accreditation from the Northwest Council of Schools and Colleges. Almost concurrently, the Anchorage Community College (ACC) received TRIO funds to establish a student support program for Alaska Native students. In 1985, a Native Student Center was established on the UAA campus (Templeton, personal correspondence, August 16, 2005).

In 1995, the initiation of ANSEP marked the opening of a decade more attuned to the recruitment and support of Alaska Native students into the University. The decade has ended with the Alaska Native student population as the fastest growing ethnic population on UAA campuses. The next decade of the relationship between UAA and Alaska Native students is opening on a positive and hopeful note with construction of a new building to house the ANSEP initiative.

Successful recruitment numbers tell only a part of the story. At UAA, the “Alaska Native cohort is at most risk of all ethnic groups. Although nearly 4 in 10 students continue for their second year, only 6 percent receive a degree, either associate or baccalaureate, in five years. An additional 1 percent earns it in 6 years” (Rice, 2001, para. 15). Alaska Native students reaching the doors of the University of Alaska Anchorage arrive less academically prepared as measured by standardized tests than other students (Moore, 2003). Thus, Alaska Native students may have to spend extra time and money on remedial work before starting in their chosen degree program. Other barriers to higher education attainment for Alaska Native students include “the high cost of

college, poor academic preparation, homesickness, cultural differences, and learning styles (McDowell Group, 2001, p. 33).

Purpose of the Study

Statistically, the odds of success have been against Alaska Native students. However, an increasing number of Alaska Native students are succeeding and earning a baccalaureate degree. This study is designed to explore several questions directed at identifying factors leading to this success:

1. What events, activities or relationships across the pre-K through post-secondary educational continuum do Alaska Native alumni of UAA cite as key to their successful attainment of a baccalaureate degree?
2. When did Alaska Native alumni see college as part of their future?
3. Across these alumni stories, is there a consistent set of key individuals present in their lives, resources available, or strategies developed that they believe were instrumental to their success in earning a degree?
4. Why did they want the degree?
5. What has the degree meant to these alumni and to their communities in the years since it was granted?

Data Collection

UAA Alaska Native alumni, in graduating classes from 1975-2005, are being recruited to participate in this study. A goal of 30 interviews has been established. Attempts are being made to recruit alumni who currently reside in the villages they left in order to obtain their degree. The study researchers are using a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol in order to allow the stories of these alumni to emerge. All interviews are being recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Using Atlas TI qualitative data analysis software, the interviews are being coded and analyzed for common themes and for patterns and commonalities in the responses to the questions. Emerging themes will be identified across the interviews. These will be situated within the broader literature on Alaska Native and American Indian success in higher education (e.g. Dodd et al., 1995; Jenkins, 1995; Pavel, Skinner, Farris, Cahalan, Tippeconnic, & Stein, 1999; Wright, 1992).

Significance of the Study

This study represents the first study of Alaska Native college graduates to look beyond the numbers to explore and uncover the success stories. Many studies on both the state and national level detail the statistics on academic achievement, school and college retention and graduation rates of American Indian and Alaska Native students. There is a national literature base that explores the deficits in the educational system and focuses attention on the failures. None have sought to uncover the factors contributing to the success of an increasing number of Alaska Native college graduates. Pewewardy (2002) asserts that “the conventional “deficits syndrome” as an educational ethos and practice has been used to address the needs of American Indian/Alaska Native Students despite evidence suggesting that American Indian/Alaska Native students have definite cultural values and traits that affect learning and academic achievement (para. 23)”.

Those of us familiar with higher education are aware that higher education has its own norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Certain types of behaviors and performances are rewarded, especially individual effort and achievement that may be in conflict with various cultural identities. In 1994, the Alaska Native Commission published their report on Alaska Native Education. Among the findings was that Alaska Native children must receive through education “the skills that will enable them to succeed in life and the understanding that will continue the community’s values” (1994, p. 11). The report then explains that for Alaska Native children this requires two sets of skills and values: the traditional Native lifeways and the Western perspectives. Their education must “integrate Native and Western values so that they are empowered in both cultures. The skills and values are inseparable, for mastery of one cannot be obtained without mastery of the other (p. 11)”.

This is a study which proposes to ask what contributed to success, not what contributed to failure. Instead of a study based on the deficits and failings of the system, the students, or the teachers, this is a study focused on examining the strengths of these first-generation college Alaska Native alumni and identifying the resources they drew upon to succeed. Can the skills they developed be taught to other Alaska Native students? Can the resources they drew upon be replicated or enhanced for other Alaska Native students? Can similar key relationships be facilitated for future Alaska Native students following in their successful steps?

Throughout the University of Alaska Anchorage, there are efforts to design interventions all along the pre-K through postsecondary educational continuum that will improve the odds of educational success for Alaska Native students. We believe that the data obtained from this study can contribute to a more accurate pinpointing of where and how to assist for future college success in a way that builds on student and community strengths and assets.

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