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Resources and Resilience: An Assets Based Examination of Native Student Success

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Abstract: Alaska Native alumni of the University of Alaska Anchorage, graduating between 1975 and 2005, were interviewed to explore the key events, relationships, and activities from pre-K through higher education that influenced their decision to attend college and complete a baccalaureate degree.

Alaska Natives and Formal Schooling

The history of formal schooling for Alaska Natives, from the time of the U.S. acquisition of Alaska in 1867 to the present, is a troubled one. The initial goals of formal education in the North were to Christianize and “civilize” Alaska Natives (Darnell and Hoem, 1996). Until the 1960s, most Alaska Natives in rural communities received their primary education from missionaries, and until the mid 1970s most had to leave their villages in order to obtain a secondary education. Few Alaska Natives completed high school prior to the 1960s, and even fewer enrolled in post-secondary education (Goldsmith, Angvik., Hill, Leask, 2004).

Complex webs of historical, economic, cultural and social factors weave through the experience of today’s Alaska Native students in the formal K-16 education system (McDowell Group, 2001; Alaska Natives Commission, 1994) and the conflict remains between the western education system and traditional practices in indigenous communities such as subsistence. Beginning at the pre-K level and continuing through elementary and secondary schooling these factors pose significant barriers to academic success and the integrated education called for by Alaska Native leaders over a decade ago. Among these barriers are:

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

Although high school graduation rates for Alaska Native students initially increased when boarding schools were closed and local high schools opened in Native villages in the late 1970s and early 1980s, drop out rates increased to nearly 10 percent from 1998-2001 (Goldsmith et. al., 2004). The 2003-04 high school graduation rate for Alaska Native students was only 47.5%, leaving significant numbers of young Natives without the minimum admission requirement for virtually all colleges and universities, including the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA).

The situation for Alaska Natives in higher education seems to be changing, albeit slowly. The percent of Alaska Natives over age 19 who had completed at least a year of

college increased from 6% in 1970 to 32% in 2000, and the percent with a four year degree increased from 1% in 1970 to 6% in 2000 (Goldsmith, et. al., 2004).

Alaska Natives and the University of Alaska Anchorage

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

This trend may be due to several initiatives launched at UAA to increase access and support to Alaska Native students. 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.

Still, 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).

Our approach in this study is similar to that of Levine and Nidiffler (1996) in their examination of college graduates who “beat the odds”, reaching and entering the college doors despite the barriers to academic success presented by growing up in extreme poverty. Their study participants, twenty-four first generation college graduates, were asked to identify the relationships, activities, and events in their lives that they believed helped them succeed in attaining the degree. Our goal in this study is to create greater understandings of why some Natives succeed in completing a college degree by examining the personal characteristics, community, and family assets available to these alumni as they completed their degrees.

Purpose of the Study and Methods

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:

- 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?
- When did Alaska Native alumni see college as part of their future?

- 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?
- Why did they want the degree?
- What has the degree meant to these alumni and to their communities in the years since it was granted?

Participants

We interviewed 23 Alaska Native alumni of UAA who graduated from UAA between 1975 and 2005. We choose these dates because 1975 marked the first institutional action to support Alaska Native students on campus and 2005 was the year that UAA broke ground on the ANSEP Building. We sought to interview equal numbers of alumni from the decades of 1975-1985, 1986-1995, and 1996-2005. The opening of each decade coincided with a significant UAA initiative to recruit Alaska Native students and to provide services and support responsive to their needs.

Study participants are in the first generation of their family to earn a baccalaureate degree. Several alumni noted college attendance of parents, but they had not completed the baccalaureate. While enrolled at UAA, the participants' attendance patterns included part-time and full-time study, stop-outs for a period of time, and attendance at other colleges. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 36 years of age when they first entered UAA and from 21 to 45 years of age at graduation. Their highest reported level of college degree attainment at the time of the interview ranged from the baccalaureate to Ph.D. Reflective of the higher college completion trends among Native women than men, 15 women and 8 men participated in the study. Ethnicity of the study participants included Tlingit, Yupik, Aleut/Filipino, Dena Aina, Inupiaq, Tsimshian, and Alutiq/Athabascan.

Methods

In this qualitative study, we used a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol. A common set of questions was asked, but the intent was to allow the stories of these graduates to emerge. From the initial data-gathering stages to data analysis our research team was composed of both Native and non-Native researchers.

All interviews were taped and transcribed. Using Atlas TI software the interviews were coded and analyzed. We sought commonalities and patterns in the responses to our questions, and from these identified emerging themes. To ensure reliability in our coding, we each coded several of the same interviews separately and then compared and refined our interpretations of the codes, creating in the process a code dictionary. In our analyses we looked for patterns across the interviews according to gender, decade of degree completion, where respondents grew up - in rural Alaska, in urban Alaska, or outside the state - and several other factors. We also shared our preliminary list of codes and our interpretations of the data at several presentations to get feedback from educators and other researchers, Alaska Native and non-Native alike.

Findings

As we read the interviews, a broad group of themes and topics emerged; ranging from the challenges our participants faced in getting to and through college to the strategies they employed to their critiques of UAA. Several themes emerged that we identified as strengths or assets enabling participants to reach college and eventually complete their degree. Here, we focus on three of them.

“Cua”

The first asset emerged within a theme we called personal attributes, which covers the broad range of descriptions that our respondents used to portray themselves. In our coding we define personal attributes as “a distinctive quality or characteristic belonging to a person.” The most intriguing attributes were those that fit broadly under the umbrella of persistence and drive - the idea that many of our respondents were going to attain their goal of a college degree no matter what the obstacles. Each chose college as part of their life path because of a strong belief that it was necessary to stability and to support their own future families. Many took long and circuitous journeys to receive their degree, starting college later in life or stopping out and returning later. However they got to and through the degree, the goal remained clear and strong. Across the 3 decades of alumni experience, it was described in various ways:

Well, I like to believe that I am very stubborn. I don't give up. I face challenges and I fight through them. I work through them. I was failing. I flunked, but I retook that class. I flunked it again and I retook it again. I was that type of person and eventually I would pass it (Jane)

...for whatever reason there was something inside of me that, not only in this case but in all other cases I just refused to quit and I hate to lose. Now nobody taught me that. It's just something that's inherently inside of me that I take to every aspect of my life (John)

Our Cup'ik colleague Lily Anne Andrews introduced us to the Cup'ik concept of Cua (pronounced Chua), which she described as the yolk or essence or core of a person. We heard from many of these respondents that they had this strong core and that it kept them moving forward toward their goal regardless of the obstacles and challenges.

Self Confidence

We also heard from several respondents that self confidence was a key attribute that helped them succeed. They described it as follows:

I think you have to be confident in who you are. You have to be confident to yourself to be able to say, you know what, just because I have a degree doesn't mean I'm a better person. It just means I'm making different choices and that- and there has to be a real desire to get the degree to have to overcome that. (Beth)

Strategies

Our respondents described a number of strategies for meeting the academic challenges of college. There were many personal challenges, too, ranging from childhood trauma to divorce. We present in this paper the responses to the academic challenges. While we heard a broad range of approaches to responding to the challenges and completing their degree, several were mentioned by a number of respondents across the three decades. In particular they talked about finding friends and partners who shared their experience and provided support, and of finding ways to get help from faculty or other support resources such as tutors. An important strategy for some respondents was simply staying away from alcohol and drugs. Paul told us:

I had a problem with this math class 055, this friend of mine had a Bachelor's degree in math and I said [name], I can't understand this algebra, what's going on here? He said well [name], go buy math 055 textbook and get a couple of beers and we'll play some chess and I'll go over this with you... and we went through about two-thirds of

that book within an afternoon. I said... how come I didn't get this when I was a kid? He said well [name] you have to think back on what was keeping you at that time in your life from learning this at that time...

Several respondents talked of finding romantic partners or groups of friends who also became study partners:

...it wasn't until probably my senior year that I finally started to work, I learned that you can work with a study group and see that's something that people do all the time, and I never ever knew that. Somebody called me up and said, why don't we study for this and it was like...it was wonderful. (Nancy)

Conclusion

The greatest assets these alumni brought to the goal of obtaining a college degree were their personal commitment to this goal and their ability to adapt as obstacles were presented. They described activities and/or important relationships that fostered both confidence and a strong sense of self. The obstacles encountered from pre-K through to college graduation were daunting and included childhood trauma, drug abuse, inadequate academic preparation, financial challenges, a lack of academic and enrollment support at the university, and stopping out (as long as 20 years) to raise children or serve a jail term. Through their educational and life journey, each alumnus kept the larger goal, obtaining a college degree, as their primary focus. Carolyn stated it this way: "It was a goal that I had and I was going to do what I had to do to finish it... I don't really think that there's anything that would have stopped me."

Alumni and their families held a deep belief that a college degree would lead to a better life and more opportunities for themselves and for future generations, but still expressed ambivalence about the costs; many could not maintain their traditional skills and go to school, as the elders recommended. As we continue to analyze the data, we are exploring the western (education, money, status) and indigenous definitions of success (strong family, strong ties to the community) provided to us by the respondents and the tension and anxiety of integrating two worlds before and after graduation. Shirley graduated in 1983 and Diane in 2005. A generation apart their words resonate with one another, and demonstrate this continuing dilemma:

I knew I would never go back to my home or origin and so culturally that's really hard for someone to come from the village and to make that transition and to have it be okay within themselves and to not feel that sense of conflict. I think that support can only come from the Native community. And...I think about what is required to survive in this world of today that you can't remain totally in one world or the other. You have to be able to walk in both and I think now with the emphasis being more on those who can do that and who can wear their traditional dress but also wear the professional side of working in this world. As we start to have more models like that I think it will validate for younger people that it's okay to venture forward but also to bring something back to the community. What is it that you can give back of yourself? (Shirley)

I've always kind of dealt with this issue of, I guess, success of - contrasting view of success of the Western world versus the Native world. Western, I've always felt that having a good education and being a strong professional and having good finances is a definition of Western success whereas Native success is a big healthy family, good strong subsistence skills, living off your land and being culturally active... I struggle with that in that I feel like I'm successful in the Western definition of success but not in my culture's definition of success and so sometimes I feel inadequate culturally because

I'm off being a city girl and getting my education but I'm not trying to provide for my family or have a family or I'm not subsisting as much as I did when I was a kid and that I always struggled with but my family always let me know that - it's not that that's not important, but it's important to find balance and that I definitely needed to pursue my education. (Diane)

Implications for Adult Education Practice

Educators must move beyond a deficit model to an education model based on the strengths students and communities bring to the system. This work provides a deeper understanding of key factors in Native student success from early childhood through the college years and contributes to the national literature on indigenous student success in higher education. Many of the Alaska Native students served by the University of Alaska are adult learners, returning to school after or while raising families and pursuing careers. Their routes to and through college reflect unique challenges due to culture, distance, and history. Our study will help educators better understand how to meet the needs of these students in their pursuits.

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