

Transition from Tribal College to Four Year University: Emergence of Transition Phases During the First Semester After Transfer

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Native American college students face unusual and difficult transitions. This grounded theory study provides an exploration of the issues Native American students face in transferring from tribally controlled colleges to a traditionally white university. Using interview data, findings identified specific transitional phases, including Expectations and Apprehension, Acclimation, Reality, and Adjustment and Discouragement. Specific recommendations for further research are also offered.

Few higher education academic and student affairs and student transition professionals at four-year institutions understand the issues faced by Native Americans who transfer to their institutions from two-year tribal colleges. However, with an increased understanding, appropriate and effective transition programs can be developed to assist these students. Presented here is the literature base and grounded theory research findings in an effort to increase the transition professional's understanding of Native American transfer students' transitions in their first semester. Further, they outline a corresponding transition program for these students.

There is a recurring theme in the national student affairs conversation and in some of the higher education literature base that suggests the status quo of college student transition thinking, models, and practice may be inadequate in terms of helping Native Americans have successful collegiate transitions. Persistence, transfer, and theoretical literature are briefly discussed below in terms of transition.

Transitions and Persistence

There is a continuing concern regarding the completion of baccalaureate degree programs by Native American students. Even though Native Americans are now enrolling in higher education at increasing rates, their persistence rates are much lower than that of the general population. From 1976 to 1994, institutions of higher education experienced a 67% increase in Native American student enrollment, compared to a 30% increase in overall student enrollment. During this time, the six-year graduation rate for Native Americans was about 36%, compared to 56% overall (Pavel, Skinner, Farris, Cahalan, Tippeconnic, & Stein, 1998). In fact, Native Americans have been the least successful population in terms of entering and moving through the higher education

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system and completing baccalaureate degrees (Benjamin, Chambers & Reiterman, 1993; Henderson, 1991). From this persistence data, it could be argued that transition programs for the general population of students and even transition programs generically designed for minority students, may not be effectively contributing to the transitions of Native American undergraduates.

Transfer Transitions

Many Native American students begin their postsecondary education at one of thirty tribal colleges (Pavel et al., 1998), most of which are two-year institutions. But what of the Native American students who transfer from the tribal colleges to enroll in baccalaureate programs at a non-tribal four-year institution? Do they have successful transitions, defined as enrolling for one semester and returning for a second?

Research focused on transfer students from tribal colleges is emerging; however several contradictions exist. Some researchers have suggested that persistence rates among students from tribal colleges are comparatively low and that tribal college experiences do not lead to high levels of academic preparedness (Brod & Carlisle, 1996; Henderson, 1991; Zaglauer, 1993). In contrast, Wenzlaff and Biewer (1996) argued that “experiences at the tribal colleges allowed students an opportunity to build the self-confidence needed to transfer to a larger institution” (p. 42).

Dell (2000) answered the question in the context of a state where there are seven tribal colleges. From 1994-1999, 21% of Native American students who transferred to a Montana university did not return after the first semester. Could their transitions from the tribal colleges to a Montana university have been more successful with Native American transition programs in place?

Theoretical Framework

What theoretical thinking and modeling suggests critical transition points for undergraduates, and does it apply to Native American students?

Tinto (1998) maintained that the first ten weeks of initial enrollment are the most critical period for students. It is during this period that students make the necessary adjustments, and acclimate to the new environment, academically, socially and personally. Borland (2000), suggested that there are more critical transition points in the transitional semester. They occur after the first six hours on campus, at the end of the first six days at the institution, near the sixth week of coursework, and at the end of the first semester.

Bean (1990) produced a composite of the best theoretical models on why students leave higher education institutions. Bean maintained that environmental and background factors react with academic and social integration to influence a student’s attitude about the institution they are attending. These attitudes are then considered when making the decision to remain enrolled or to depart. However, those models were based upon traditional age, majority student populations and patterns. Therefore, his composite did

not purposefully consider the unique factors, some of which are indicative of transition points, for older and minority students, including Native American transfer students. In light of Tinto's established work and Borland's recent observations on numerous critical transition points, and the uncertainty about Native American-specific transition factors, it is important to discover transition points and factors for Native American transfer students.

Method

Using the theoretical framework described above, a grounded theory study was conducted to enhance transition professionals' awareness of the challenges faced by Native Americans who transfer to four-year institutions from two-year tribal colleges.

The Participants

The participants for the study consisted of seven Native American students who were identified as planning to transfer from a single Montana tribal college to the same Montana university in the fall of 1999. All of the voluntary participants were to begin their first semester of attendance after transferring and had enrolled full-time. All held multiple roles, such as parent, spouse, extended family member, employee, and student. Each drove between 70 and 240 miles daily to attend class at the four-year institution. Five of the seven had financial aid. Their tribal college grade point averages ranged from 2.7 to 3.9. All of the students had graduated from high schools on the reservation.

Data Collection

Data collection took place in four in-depth, semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews conducted before and during the fall 1999 semester, as well as in a fifth interview conducted at the start of the spring 2000 semester. Other data collected included high school, tribal college, and university transcript analyses. Demographic data were collected: tribal affiliation, age, gender, marital status, number of children, grade point average, employment, and financial aid status.

The interview schedule was modeled on the work of Tinto and Borland. The first interview was conducted in the week before the beginning of the fall semester: A pre-attendance perspective was desired so as to understand the transition process as it occurred. The second interview was conducted between seven and ten days after the first day of classes to gather the students' first impressions of the university. The third interview was conducted during the sixth week, immediately before midterm examinations. The design allowed for follow up on emergent themes identified during the interviews, and provided a perspective on what school was like in the middle of the term. The fourth interview was conducted the week prior to final examinations in order to identify the participants' attitudes at the end of the semester. The fifth interview, conducted the first week of the spring 2000 semester, was designed to determine why

each student was or was not enrolled. All of the students returned.

Data Analysis

Generally, the constant comparative method of analysis was utilized. Specifically, the data was clustered into patterns and themes which emerged in relation to the persistence factors found in the “Longitudinal Model of the Type of Factors that Affect Retention Decisions” (Bean, 1990). These factors were used to guide the analysis and to interpret the results, but the rigidity of the analysis was flexible enough to allow for emergent categories. The tentative categories, were then compared to each other and cross-checked as were determined, consist with the research procedures method (Creswell, 1998). The NUD•IST (QSR NUD•IST, 1997) computer program and an independent auditor was utilized to reduce bias and to assist in interpretation and analysis of the data.

Results

Four transition patterns emerged as the semester progressed: “Expectations and Apprehension,” “Acclimation,” “Reality,” and “Adjustment or Discouragement.”

Transition Phase One: Expectations and Apprehension

Expectations and apprehension characterized the period prior to the fall semester. Academically, most of the participants expected their classes to be difficult. However, all of the participants reported academic confidence, believing that the tribal college served as an opportunity to prepare for university work. Most were satisfied with their study skills and habits, and liked their schedule of classes.

Apprehension accompanied excitement. Most participants worried about the large numbers of people who would be on the campus. The word most used to describe their feelings was “scary.” They were apprehensive about the possibility of large classes, having difficulty finding their way around campus, and entering an unfamiliar cultural environment.

All of the students had registered prior to the first week and were anxious about how they would effectively resolve the personal details of their lives. Childcare was an important issue for the five parents in the group and a tiresome commute from reservation communities was also anticipated. Most had resolved issues with financial aid, although a few reported difficulties.

Transition Phase Two: Acclimation

Most of the participants displayed minor attitudinal changes the week after school started, including an altered outlook toward the level of academic difficulty and the social atmosphere of the campus. Academically, most of the participants reported that school was not going to be as difficult as they had expected, although they all reported that there would be much more reading than the tribal college amount to which they were

accustomed.

Most participants were confident in their academic abilities, but remained apprehensive about their social situation, particularly within the classroom. Most mentioned that they were “the only Indian in my class,” which for many was intimidating.

Overall, the majority of participants were becoming acclimated to the new environment. They appeared to feel at ease with their academic abilities while not being as socially confident. Their perceptions changed six weeks into the semester as they faced increased academic demands.

Transition Phase Three: Reality

The “Reality Phase,” which emerged at about six weeks into the semester included transition points related to academic, social, and personal realities.

Academic Reality. During the third interview (six-weeks), most students reported being astonished by the amount of required homework, assignments, and reading. This period was characterized by the students being overwhelmed by the academic requirements, which resulted in failures on tests. They often commented that the level of work was different from that expected at the tribal college. All but one had failed at least one test and all indicated continued amazement at the amount of required reading. There were many more papers and other assignments that were continually due. Professors were covering chapters in a single day, rather than in a week as was often the case at the tribal college.

Many students discovered their level of processing and study skills was no longer useful. One student discovered that a “critical review” of a journal article was not just a summary, but an opinion formed in response to the article and the research. Others found they were required to spend more time studying than they had anticipated, and felt distressed over the amount of reading expected of them.

Social Reality. A social life inside the classroom was important and, for most, it was their only form of on-campus socialization. To their surprise, participants discovered that students and faculty accepted them, even though they were the only Indians in their classes. They were impressed with faculty who took interest in them, expressing that they had enjoyed close relationships with their faculty at the tribal college. Since all but one participant had a spouse and/or child at home, they did not have time to socialize outside of class.

A few students described experiences of racism. Most of those experiences were related to classmates or university staff. Incidences of racism were subtle and some participants questioned whether they were actually racially-motivated or their own mis-perceptions. Their overall reaction to racism was that of indifference. Most stated that it bothered them at times, but, for the most part, they chose to ignore it.

Personal Reality. Personally, students were attempting to manage their time effectively, given their multiple roles. Outside the classroom, the extended Native American family tended to serve as the primary social unit for most of the participants. Culturally, the Native American family is large and very influential. Many students felt

pulled between family and school and were working to make appropriate and responsible adjustments.

Transition Phase Four: Adjustment or Discouragement

A division into two distinct groups characterized the final transition phase, which emerged in the fourth interview, the end of the semester. Three students had adjusted well and four had not. Academically, if a student had developed new, more effective learning strategies, they increased the likelihood of academic success (although one student did not establish new strategies and had the highest grade point average).

Newly acquired strategies included flashcards, study guides, and rules for reading. If the new strategy did not lead to increased levels of cognitive processing, it was deemed not effective. For example, a student decided to use flashcards to memorize material for psychology and history. However, he asked his wife to write them for him, diminishing the potential for meaningful exposure to and mastery of information. Rather than looking up the information, organizing and elaborating on it, he simply memorized the cards. His grades did improve slightly, but not enough to bring his semester GPA above 1.75.

Socially, a few participants felt included in their classes, while embracing their Native American heritage. One student initially stated that she was intimidated by the fact that she was in a class full of white people. However, over time, she realized that she was accepted and enjoyed her classmates.

Personal adjustment was important in the final phase. Time management continued to be an important aspect for integrating personal and academic responsibilities. Many of the participants created strict schedules for themselves and planned time for study and family responsibilities.

Successful Transitions?

Participants' initial expectations were the opposite of what they eventually experienced. Academically they were confident, but most faltered, their grades dropping drastically from those at the tribal college. Socially, they were inhibited by fears of racism, especially from faculty, but they were surprised to learn that little or no racism was occurring within the classroom. They noted that if they extended themselves, they made friends in the classroom.

A successful transition depended on three interrelated aspects of a student's life: academic, social, and personal adaptation. Although the most important aspect was academic integration, poor adjustment in one area often affected adjustment in the others. If a student was open to new experiences, academically and socially, they made constructive adjustments. Academically, if a student acquired new study strategies they performed better. Socially, participants who expanded their circle of friends to include white students appeared to be helped in their transitions. Since students were busy with family matters, it became important for them to balance their time between personal and academic responsibilities. For the most part, those who managed their time well

appeared to adjust better both personally and academically.

Transition Program Outline

The researchers present an outline for a long-term transition program to assist Native American students who transfer to four-year institutions from tribal colleges. Within the parameters of good qualitative research, the program outline is able to be generalized only to the extent that the consumer of this research report, the transition professional, finds it to fit in an institutional context.

Duration

For Native American students, a successful transition from a two-year tribal college to a four-year institution does not occur in a week-long period of time or at one point (such as a tenth week) in the first semester. Rather, the transition is a continuous and long-term process that may be structured around four transition phases. The transition program should include the strategies and interventions in the days and hours just prior to the start of the semester, soon after the first week of classes has ended, and nearer to the end of the semester. The benefit of a post-semester program component should also be considered along with other transition points discovered within one's own institution.

Academics

The most difficult element in these Native American students' transition appears to have been the difference between academic expectations at the university and those of the tribal college. Students were not expecting the increased amount of reading nor the level of learning requirements, such as the evaluation of a research article, rather than a summary as they were accustomed.

To assist Native American students in their move from a tribal to a four-year college, the transition program outline should include the following.

- A pre-enrollment bridge program between tribal colleges and the university as recommended by Henderson (1991) and Richardson and Skinner (1992). To establish this portion of the transition program for maximum impact, agreements on course transfer should be clearly communicated to the tribal college student.
- Contact with four-year institution faculty and staff should be established and maintained. Getting to know faculty as persons accepting of diverse students, as well as achieving a sense of their academic expectation levels is important. This can only happen over several meetings.
- An orientation event targeted specifically on tribal college students and their academic transitions will help Native American transfer students. This academic orientation should include realistic discussion of academic requirements, balancing time between family and academics, appropriate junior and senior

course level learning strategies, and how to establish and maintain positive learning interactions with faculty.

- All of this is predicated upon communication between institutions that will be essential and must be ongoing (Dawson & Dell, 1997).

Advising and Counseling

An intrusive advising component should also be included in the outline of a transition program for Native American tribal college transfer students. Such a strategy has been recommended by Garnett (1990), Glennon, Baxley and Farren (1985), and Lopez, Yanez, Clayton and Thompson (1988). Prior to the beginning of classes, Native American transfer students should be required to visit with academic advisors and/or counselors for:

- Appropriate completion of the registration process.
- Counseling regarding their multiple roles and social transitions.
- Information concerning study skill evaluation and development.
- A description of typical classroom instruction.
- Access to information concerning tutoring.

Acclimation

As with many persons, Native American and otherwise, it is important to spend time in a new environment to become acclimated. Providing low-pressure time on campus to acclimate prior to the start of classes is important. An introduction to student life patterns for commuters as well as resident students can be of great benefit to the multi-rolled Native American student transferring to a new institution and culture.

Mentoring

The transition program outline should also include faculty mentoring throughout the first semester and into the second. The Native American students in this study were impressed with the faculty who took an interest in them. Since they were so closely tied to the faculty at the tribal college, university faculty could enhance the transition as students adjust to their new college.

Finance

All of the participants needed financial assistance. Since typical Native American communities have very low *per capita* incomes, a transition period scholarship program or bridge-loan opportunity, or special professional assistance with financial aid long before the transition is started would be beneficial to Native American transfer students.

Further Research

Since the emergence of transition phases were based upon a limited number of students through a qualitative design, its heuristic value and replication are worth exploring. Do other Native American students experience the same transition phases over the first semester? How different are these transition phases from those experienced by non-Native Americans who transfer from non-tribal community colleges? What suggested and other transition program strategies and interventions are most effective? These are a few directions that researchers and transition professionals should pursue to better assist Native American students as they transfer from tribal colleges to four-year universities.

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