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Nez Perce College and Career Readiness: Wíiwyeteq'is "Growing into an Elder"

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Nez Perce College and Career Readiness: Wíwiyeteq'is "Growing into an Elder"

Cover Page Footnote

We express our gratitude to the Creator, our ancestors that have paved the trail before us, the Nez Perce community members who supported us and participated in this project, and the Nez Perce youth for their resilience and vision for their community.

Nez Perce College and Career Readiness: Wíiwyeteq'is "Growing into an Elder"

The Niimípuu (Nez Perce), whose traditional lands occupied a vast territory (estimated over 13 million acres) in parts of the present-day states of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, were and are a prosperous and influential tribe in the northwest United States (Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Report, 2007-2008). Although colonization threatened the traditional way of life and homeland of the Nez Perce, the resilient tribe works to develop cultural, economic, and social well-being for their community as a Sovereign Nation. One recent goal of the Nez Perce Education Department is to promote college and career readiness for young men, who enter college at half the rate of women and are often underprepared for careers. The Nez Perce Youth Mentoring Project¹ was established in 2015 to address this concern and goal by utilizing a relationship-based and culturally sustaining/revitalizing approach (McCarty & Lee, 2014).

Relationship-based interventions, such as mentoring programs, can benefit Native Americans' college aspirations and participation (Higheagle Strong et al., 2018; Windchief & Brown, 2017), especially programs that acknowledge the community context of schools (Miller et al., 2013). Schools located in tribal communities require a strong relationship with the local Tribe's education, culture and language departments to generate culturally sustaining/revitalizing interventions for Native American students that forefront tribal language, values, and sovereignty. In order to develop a culturally sustaining/revitalizing youth mentoring program, we relied on interviews with elders, community members, and cultural and language specialists to shape curriculum values and mentoring practices.

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In this paper, we highlight the experiences and wisdom of Native American men who have transitioned into college and careers. Focus group interviews with these men were part of the ongoing development of the Nez Perce Youth Mentoring Project, which seeks to help boys in grades 7 – 12 prepare for college/careers and their overall role in the tribal community. Not only are the voices of these knowledge-keepers important to inform the mentoring program, but they are also beneficial for a broader educational audience.

Indigenous Methods

This study utilized Indigenous conversational methods to conduct focus group interviews, which honor orality and relationality (Kovach, 2010). The interviews focused on Native American men's perspectives of college and career readiness for male youth in the Nez Perce community. The leading author/interviewer is a Nez Perce tribal member and worked closely with other Nez Perce collaborators (some of whom are co-authors). University Human Subjects approval and a Nez Perce research permit were obtained.

Community Participants

Thirty-two Native American males were interviewed, ranging from eighteen to eighty years old (*average* = 40), and forty community members provided written feedback in response to our interpretation of interviews. All participants identified as Native American, and all but one were Nez Perce Tribal members or descendants. Current jobs varied, including work with youth (e.g., teacher aide, youth mentor) and outdoor work (e.g., in fisheries and greenhouses). Other participants were college students, cultural/language specialists, retired elders, or in and out of work. Of the participants, 89.3% grew up on tribal lands exclusively, 71.4% earned a high school diploma, and 14.3% received a GED. In terms of education, 21.4% did not attend any college, 35.7% attended some college, 32.2% earned either an Associate's or a Bachelor's degree, and

10.7% earned a Master's degree or above. Of those who obtained a college degree, 64% attended colleges on or near the reservation.

Data Procedures, Collection, and Analysis

The Nez Perce Education Department contacted tribal departments for nominations or volunteers of tribal men who had transitioned into college and careers. Participants were informed that the interviews would help design the mentoring program. Open-ended questions were asked (e.g., *what experiences helped you prepare for college or career?*), and the conversation was encouraged to flow organically. Participants received a \$25 gift card and were notified that they could skip questions or leave at any time without consequences. Data was secured on an encrypted computer and transcribed semi-verbatim. The authors utilized inductive open-coding to identify themes, regularly discussing agreements and disagreements. A community report, which included a preliminary write-up of themes and exemplars, was presented before the Nez Perce stakeholders committee (including elders, leaders, and parents, some of whom were participants) for clarifications and revisions. A full report was distributed at a bi-yearly Nez Perce General Council meeting. Any members who submitted a feedback form ($N = 40$) received a raffle ticket for a drawing. We utilized this written feedback for the last set of revisions, resulting in the following generated themes.

Focus Group Themes

One overarching theme around traditional mentoring is *wiiwyeteq'is*, representing a person who is maturing and growing into an elder (Nez Perce Elders & Aoki, 1994). Other themes regard the values that promote career/college readiness, each captured by a traditional Nimiipuu word: *pi²nit'ipee* (reciprocal giving), *hiitem'yekin'* (a person who is well prepared and competent to handle life), *timmíyunin'* (a person who is accountable, knows well, does the

right thing, and responsible), *qa'nqa'an* (a person who is very respectful). These intertwined themes suggest that community members are more concerned with *who* young men become as people than *what* they become in terms of a vocational label.

pi'nit'ipec: “Reciprocal Giving; Making Sure That Everyone Is Taken Care of”

According to participants, the pursuit of college/career benefits not only the youth but also the family, community, and environment. A desire for reciprocity motivated many men: For instance, characteristics of a meaningful career were to “*provide a suitable living for the person and their family while doing what they enjoy to do or are passionate about,*” “*benefit your community or protecting and preserving the environment,*” and “*provide for individual family and tribes.*” One man explained that the difference between a job and career, both of which are important, is that a job involves going to work to earn a paycheck but a career is a broader manifestation of one’s previous experiences, passions, and sense of contribution.

Participants advocated for mentorship among youth and adults (particularly elders). Youth can benefit from mentors who are within and outside of their families, any gender, knowledgeable in the youth’s career of interest or in an entirely different field. As one participant said,

“I want my young people to get inspired from the things we’re exposing them to that will ultimately lead them to a meaningful path in life whether that involves education or not, because the most prominent people in my upbringing, I don’t even know if they had degrees.”

Reciprocal relationships between youth and their communities can also help youth foster cultural connections, recognize how each person brings something special to the tribe, and nurture their interconnected relationships with the land, plants, and animals.

Híttem'yekin': "A Person Who Is Well Prepared and Competent to Handle Life"

Another theme was the importance of vocational training and work experiences to prepare young men for later endeavors. The work experiences men described were not limited to long-term or formal employment but included "odd jobs" like delivering newspapers and bucking hay. These part-time jobs may be necessary to provide income during vocational training, which is sometimes unpaid. Some men described hands-on teaching ("*I learned from my dad, so as he was teaching me stuff he was not just telling me how to do it, he was showing me*"). Another person said that helping his sister care for her children prepared him for another type of responsibility: fatherhood. Other men discussed more formal opportunities to prepare for careers, including apprenticeship school for carpentry and fishery internships. On-the-job training, job shadowing, and internships at nearby locations may lay a foundation of useful skills. However, some participants stated concerns about "the lack of jobs" or "internship opportunities" in the community.

Importantly, hands-on skills are not the only necessary preparation for career planning. One participant expressed concern that "*our kids get scared to leave*" to pursue college. Leaving one's tribal community is a great cost to pursue education or work, and without adequate preparation and support, this well-intended pursuit can bring potential harm. Youth must also build intellectual and communication skills to understand *why* particular skills are important, what options are available, and how different options may align with personal and community interests. There is also a perceived need for more guided preparation toward higher education (e.g., study groups, college counselors, and tours of surrounding colleges).

Timmíyunin?: "A Person Who Deliberates, Plans and Is Responsible"

Responsibility is crucial for a meaningful career. This includes dependability, breaking cycles of poor decisions, and owning up to one's mistakes. Several community members expressed concern over the perceived lack of discipline for youth. This "coddling" (a recurrent term) may usually be intended as supportive or protective but could influence youths' accountability later in life. For instance, one freshman college student said, "*In high school they kind of babied us and made sure we did our homework... we were given lots and lots of chances.*" Another student stated, "*I wish they would not have babied us so much, it would have hurt some of us, but I feel like it would have helped us later on to become more responsible and getting our work done.*" Now in college, "*there is just so much piled up homework and you have to be responsible to remember all of it. The teachers don't stay on top of you.*" Excessive coddling could lead a person to be unprepared for future work, transitions, and expectations. Some men shared experiences that helped them learn discipline and responsibility, such as an expectation of schoolwork and chores before leisure activities and sports. Responsibility and a good work ethic are seen as part of the cycle of support between self and community.

Qa'nqa'an: "A Person Who Is Very Respectful"

Throughout their education and career endeavors, youth must also maintain a strong sense of respect. Like responsibility, this respect should be paid to self, family, community, environment, and culture. Not only should youth give respect to others, but they can also *gain* respect through working hard. In the focus group, men described the importance of listening to the wisdom of elders, staying true to themselves no matter where they are, and showing a "*longing to provide for that which supported us to be where we are at.*" This respect can be shown through small courtesies, such as "*opening a door for someone or helping somebody,*" and in conducting oneself professionally in the workplace. Respect can also be demonstrated in

more profound ways, such as recognizing that what you do (as a career, job, degree) is as important as respecting yourself (who you are) and honoring your cultural background and community (where you come from).

Conclusion

By framing each theme in this paper within a traditional Nimipuutímt concept, we sought to explore college/career readiness in a collaborative, culturally sustaining and revitalizing manner. Programs that target educational/vocational success tend to focus on schools themselves, but schools are always nested within broader cultures and unique communities (Miller et al., 2013). As our participants emphasized, a meaningful career is about more than technical skills and educational degrees: It is bound to social, emotional, spiritual, and cultural elements of a person. While it is important to address barriers to Native young men's career attainment (and to trace those barriers to structural inequities), it is also crucial to identify supportive factors (Brown et al., 2018). College access programs and discussions about preparing underrepresented students for college often focus on what marginalized youth are *lacking* (Means & Pyne, 2016). By recognizing and bolstering the rich, reciprocal support that many Native youth share with their communities, collaborative programs such as the Nez Perce Youth Mentoring Project *wíwiyeteq'is* may help young men build meaningful careers and lives.

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