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First Nations, Métis, and Inuit University Students' Share Advice for College Entry and Retention

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Cover Page Footnote

With Indigenous peoples, it is important to know and learn from the lived experiences of those who have “walked the walk” in achievement. As a guest in the Coast Salish territories, I was honored to capture such stories from former and past First Nations, First Nation’s Métis, and Inuit student in higher education. Each participant set time apart from their own studies and responsibilities to give a part of themselves in an effort to make the road easier for those who will follow. With gratitude, I raise my hands to all of you. Wado!

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Canadian First Nations Peoples and Higher Education

Indigenous peoples of Canada continue to survive in spite of the ongoing challenges that are associated with being inflicted by colonialism. And many determined First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples have learned to walk in both the Indigenous world and that of outside mainstream society. One particular path of this walk involves obtaining formal education and the cultural guidance that is needed to achieve success in this arena. Today tribal persons with higher education degrees are seen as significant attributes to bands and tribes. Particularly in impoverished communities, a college education is seen as a means to break out of generational economic depression. This is important not only for the betterment of families, but can also benefit the overall well-being of tribal communities.

However, Canada's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations continue to reflect a wide gap in college degree completion as compared to other Canadians (Schmold, 2011). And the need continues for culturally inclusive guidance to better prepare and serve these college students (Anonson, et al., 2008). As Indigenous peoples, we know that a "one size fits all" does not always work when considering the diversity of our tribes and bands (Kerby, 2015; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1993; Whitekiller-Drywater, 2010). This has led to recent political directives which call upon universities to recognize and include cultural factors needed to assist First Nations' Métis, and Inuit students in university entry and retention (Treleaven, 2018).

Study Background

It makes sense that one way to know what is needed is to hear from the students regarding what works for them and to use this information to integrate cultural strengths into higher education programming (Michalski, Cunningham, & Henry, 2017). In my research and practice, I use cultural resilience theory as a foundation for working with American Indian

Alaska Native peoples. In short, this means that Indigenous peoples have special strengths that are culturally instilled to help them with challenges. Along these lines, while serving as the Canada Fulbright Visiting Research Chair in Aboriginal Studies, I was curious as to what the current and past First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students had to say concerning the use of their Indigenous culture to help them in higher education. And in the culturally resilient spirit of collectiveness (e.g. we are all in this together if one gains, we all gain), I was especially interested in learning what advice these modern day academic warriors would offer to others who aspire to enter and graduate from college. Through information collected by student interviews, I found the following four themes: (1) Indigenous identity; (2) personal considerations; (3) education as a collective benefit for Indigenous peoples, and (4) educational supports.

Indigenous Identity

If not for possessing an identity that is distinct from the mainstream populations, it would be difficult to provide a case for the cultural differences that exist within and outside of Indigenous peoples. Identity, which was central for the informants, was described as knowing who one was as a First Nations, Métis, and Inuit person in spite of outside influences. This can be especially pertinent for individuals and their family members who have experienced the trauma of residential schools, something that was used to wipe away Indigenous culture behind the walls of what Goffman called “total institutions” (1961). This concept referred to the use of boarding schools as a means to reshape the student’s identity through a series of specific tasks designed for the “betterment” of general society (p. 4). Considering the atrocities and victimization of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples through educational systems, it was not surprising that in spite of its proposed potential benefits, formal education continued to be met with suspicious eyes and guarded hearts. A graduate student, who had retired from the public

educational system, succinctly provided the following warning to those of whom he referred to as the “young ones.” He emphasized making the most of the studies being offered but, “Don’t let the university culture change you from a First Nations person.” Yet, higher education could also be used as a way to reinforce identity via courses that focused on Indigenous topics whereas one could learn more about their own band’s history and the general history of all Indigenous peoples.

Personal Considerations

The literature and social media resources provide various types of information on how to promote the retention of First Nations students (Birchard, 2006; Mosholder, Waite, Larsen, & Goslin, 2016). However, what is usually not included is the importance of the individual personal considerations that must take place before making this commitment. As many First Nation’s Métis, and Inuit students are considered non-traditional (meaning they are older than recent high school graduates), a common factor that follows them into university is family and the responsibilities that are associated with being a spouse, partner, parent, and/or caretaker of other relatives. In addition, some students may be responsible for cultural obligations and community leadership roles within their bands and tribal organizations. These relationships and responsibilities mattered and were valued. However, this did not mean higher education was not doable, but had to be accompanied with help from others. For example, a non-traditional aged woman, who went from undergraduate to doctoral studies, praised her working husband who shared in the care of their children. She offered the following advice to others who are older and would like to attend college, “You’re never too old to make new opportunities.”

One informant with work experience in a First Nation’s support program, spoke candidly regarding the causalities of divorce and separation rates, especially for First Nation’s, Métis, and

Inuit women who enter university. She pointed out, “Be mentally ready to take on higher education and make certain your family is also ready.” She went on to elaborate upon how university exposes the student to new information, different social circles, and cultural learning opportunities which can result in a partner feeling “left behind.” Learning this later, rather than sooner, can result in the student dropping out of college to save the relationship. As a preventative step, it is critical, she said, to open communication prior to university entry and develop a plan on how everyone can work together on the investments and sacrifices.

Another distinct factor mentioned was the perception that university was something that must be *survived*. In many aspects this spoke to the ongoing struggle of balancing identity and cultural differences with that of mainstream and First Nations’ Métis, and Inuit norms. Similarly, it is common for residential school alumni to be referred to as “survivors.” It was not surprising then that a student interviewee offered this instruction to others, “Find out what works for you to survive. Don’t give up. Don’t let the system get you down.” Combining this with individual confidence and cultural humility another student added, “Believe in yourself; know your strengths. Treat others as yourself; recognize and celebrate those who support you.” Finally, in the collective spirit of giving back to others, becoming a mentor to other students after graduation was referred to as “going full circle.” In other words, putting oneself out to help others who are coming after you can help lead to their success.

Education as a collective benefit

Other positive perspectives were provided, among the challenges that were associated with the tension of surviving and persevering in a system that was not originally designed to be inclusive of Indigenous values. In spite of a checkered past that can at times continue to play out in the present (Ottmann, 2017), mainstream educational systems were not seen by the informants

as cold and aloof. With this in mind, one student mentioned the importance of intentionally looking for the good in the university system. Universities are made up of various types of people who function in specific roles which form the organization. This meant seeking out and organizing a support system of staff who can help when needed. She added, “Focus on those persons who have your best interest at heart and can be depended upon to support you on the journey to your academic goals.”

Another perception emphasized the use of empowerment needed to confront academic challenges instead of shirking from them. Duran (2006) described the benefits of acknowledging feelings such as anxiety to assist in confronting fears that involve current situations and/or those that are generationally embedded through historical trauma. To increase self-confidence under such stressful conditions, one student suggested viewing academic challenges as a way to increase “Indigenous intellectual capacity.” This meant that gain was not only for the benefit of the student learner, but could also increase cultural capital as mentioned by Bourdieu (1986). In other words, use the individual knowledge gained as a means to benefit and increase collateral for the entire group. This panoramic “eagle view” included present and future generations while keeping a mindful eye on those who linger in the past. This was exemplified by a woman who described her day to day struggles that included raising a grandchild and maintaining sobriety. In spite of it all, she carried the same determination as those who came before her. These were the ones who fought and overcame, making it possible for her secure a place in the present university system. She concluded with this point, “*All that I do is for my ancestors.*”

Educational supports

Intellectual capacity was reinforced by creating a solid learning plan and this involved knowing how to find needed resources. In particular, the students stressed the importance of

taking advantage of campus testing centers. For example, a study participant shared how she found it puzzling that other students seemed to easily grasp the course content that took her much longer to understand. It was through the assessment center that she discovered an undiagnosed learning disorder and received guidance on how she learned best. Another essential resource involved those persons who serve as academic advisors. As their job is to help throughout a students' academic enrollment, establishing a relationship early on was mentioned as crucial. Taking this initiative was explained in the following way, "Get to know your advisors: If you don't understand something, talk to them, ask them to explain it until you understand it." Relation-building was further important regarding engagement with course instructors. The student who benefitted from a learning assessment provided advice on educating faculty concerning the struggles that one may be experiencing. Finally, guidance was also offered on classroom participation and process learning, particularly regarding topics that may lack Indigenous perspectives or diverse viewpoints. A participant who encouraged critical thinking stated, "Strive to see both sides of a situation and try not to be afraid to challenge your professors in this way. The professors are here to answer questions."

Conclusion

Per the information provided by the informants, higher education attendance does not mean that one must compromise their identity as an Indigenous person. However, it does mean that one should prepare to be challenged in many respects. For some, this may mean moving out of their comfort zone of being passive to taking on a new role of self-advocacy with staff and faculty. Equally important was the benefit of having ongoing heartfelt discussions with family and loved ones regarding flexibility to accommodate the changes that all must be prepared to take on. Finally, if college is seen as something that must be survived, then be reminded that the

eventual outcome of higher education degrees are to be celebrated. And this collective victory goes far beyond the individual student's success because when one wins, we all win.

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