

**Forgotten Students**  
**American Indian High School Students' Narratives on**  
**College Going**



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## **Background**

Indigenous leaders are searching for solutions to the overwhelming problems facing their communities in a way that will prepare their people to compete in today's world, help restore much of what has been lost culturally, protect what remains, and allow them to remain true to their basic or central identity as individuals and as indigenous people. (Stein, 2003, p. 40)

There is an articulated need for higher education in Native American<sup>i</sup> nations (AIHEC, 2002; Barfield, 2003; Benally, 2004, Champagne and Goldberg, 2002; Jennings, 2004). Native American students enter the university with their own goals, to acquire skills that are useful for themselves and their community (Jennings, 2004). Tribal nations cautiously look to colleges and universities to prepare tribal citizens for participating in nation building efforts that preserve the political and cultural integrity of their people. Yet, after decades of national, state and institutional level initiatives to increase access to higher education for first-generation and non-traditional students, the college pipeline for American Indians has largely been unaddressed.

American Indian students have the highest high school dropout rates, the lowest academic performance rates, and the lowest college admission and retention rates in the nation (American Council on Education, 2002; Benally, 2004; Stein, 1999). In 1991, according to the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force study: “despite several decades of programs and efforts at both the federal and state level, dropout and achievement for American Indians did not show any marked improvement” (Cleary and Peacock, 1997, p.7).

A decade later in California, 2000 census data showed that attainment of the high school diploma has increased for all race/ethnic groups with the exception of American Indians who experienced a decline of 5.4 percent in the rate of high school completion

(Lopez, 2003). In California, American Indian students have a fifty-fifty (49.7%) chance of graduating from high school (Swanson, 2003). Among American Indian students in California who graduate from high school, only 16% graduate with “college ready transcripts,”<sup>ii</sup>(Greene and Forster, 2003). Nationally, only 17% of Native American students who graduate from high school attend any level of college, compared to the national college going rate of 67% (Benally, 2004; Chavers, 2000). Moreover, more than half of all freshman Native American students start at two year colleges, and Native students are the least likely of all student groups to complete four-year degrees (Pavel, et. al., 1998).

The near absence of American Indian students on our college campuses deprives the higher education community of indigenous perspectives and contributions to research and teaching, while at the same time depriving American Indian communities of the contributions that a formally educated workforce can make to Native communities’ sovereignty, self-determination, health, education, and economic development. While a growing body of research justifiably addresses college access for African Americans, Latinos and Asian Pacific American students (Allen, 1988; Attanasi, 1989; Cabrera, & La Nasa, 2000; Freeman, 1997; Hurtado, et. al., 1997; McDonough & Antonio, 2002; Perez, 1999; Solórzano, 1992; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Tierney, 1999, Tierney, 2001; Teranishi, Teranishi, et. al. 2004), very little research has addressed the college choice and preparation experiences of American Indian students.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Getting to college is a complex longitudinal process influenced by a strata of experiences and factors that start the moment a child enters school if not before. The purpose of this study is to better understand the complexities of college going for

American Indian students, primarily from California Native nations. Fifty-three junior and senior American Indian high school students were interviewed about their experiences in navigating the pathway to college. In this study, Native students' access to college is considered in an ecological context that includes students' school experiences, families, tribes and living in a rural reservation community. To that end, the following questions were addressed:

- What role do the students' schools play in influencing college choice and preparation?
- What role do students' families play in influencing college choice and preparation?
- What role do students' tribes play in influencing college choice and preparation?
- How are students negotiating college preparation?
- How does life as tribal citizens living on reservations in rural areas influence students' college aspirations and college preparation?
- What are students' suggestions for improving postsecondary outreach for other American Indian students?

### **A Review of College Access Literature**

The literature on college choice and access focuses on personal and institutional factors that impact postsecondary access. Personal factors generally include socioeconomic status (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997), parental knowledge, encouragement and support for higher education (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1999; Perez, 1999), peer influences (Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997) and individual academic achievement (Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit and Vesper, 1999).

Socioeconomic status (SES) is the most influential factor in college access, affecting students' college aspirations, eligibility and attendance beyond ability or achievement (Jenks, et. al, 1972; McDonough, 1997; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Poor and first-generation students tend to develop aspirations for college later than middle class students whose parents are more likely to have college knowledge and experience (Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999). Having early plans for college is critical for completing university eligibility requirements such as taking the correct sequence of courses, enrolling in honors or Advanced Placement courses, achieving competitive scores on college entrance exams and participating in extracurricular activities and community service (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997).

While research has shown that parental encouragement and support is the most important indicator of a child developing college aspirations (Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999, McDonough, 1997), parents who have not attended college often lack critical information that enable them to be preemptive in helping their children prepare for and become eligible for college (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Perez, 1999). These families must rely upon institutional agents to provide information about college.

Structurally, the K-12 school context directs postsecondary access through school practices and policies, such as tracking certain groups of students into either academic or technical education. School agents, (teachers, counselors, and administrators) also play a role in "channeling" students into college or vocational pathways (Freeman, 1997; McDonough, 1997; Solórzano 1995). Student access to college counseling within their school further determines how much information students receive about college options

and how to make themselves eligible for four-year institutions (Freeman, 1997, Orfield et al. 1984 as cited in Freeman, 1997; McDonough, 1997).

Socioeconomic status intersects with structural institutional factors (schools) affecting postsecondary access. Affluent students have access to more sources of information about college, inclusive of private counselors, than their less well off peers (McDonough, 1997; McDonough, Korn, and Yamasaki, 1997). Family income dictates residential patterns, which in turn dictate the range of public and private elementary and secondary schools students are able to attend. Race also plays a role in students' schooling. According to Solórzano (1995), the low percentages of African American, Latino, and American Indian students who are eligible for university admission can partly be explained by the cumulative effects of inadequate academic preparation, negative teacher expectations, and the tracking of students of color disproportionately into non-academic, vocational courses, making access to college seem beyond reach for these students.

Schools that educate children from affluent families are more likely to have a "college focus" (McDonough, 1997), where parents, students and school personnel expect students to attend college. In schools serving affluent communities, college counseling is demanded by parents and students to ensure that students meet competitive eligibility for selective institutions. In schools that serve primarily poor and working class students, high school graduation is often emphasized over college preparation and college information, if provided at all, is more likely to direct students to community colleges as the only option for higher education after high school. Lack of access to college counseling in most public schools is exacerbated by the student to counselor ratio, for example, in California, the average high school counselor to student ratio is 979:1 (1999-2000 CBEDS), which does

not allow for personal attention with even the best of intentions. Schools play a critical role in showing children how to get to college, and working class and children of color are often at a serious disadvantage in accessing information and resources about college from their schools.

Outside agents, such as university recruiters, also play a role in providing information and encouragement to students. However, according to Boyle (1996), even students who ranked at the top of their class in inner city high schools are less likely to have been visited by college recruiters than students who attend suburban schools. These students are also less likely to have visited a college campus, and less likely to have received the most basic information necessary for college eligibility and choice. At the same time, in many inner-city (*and rural schools*), military recruiters are likely to have a weekly presence on campus and they have been effective in making students aware of the future economic benefits of joining the service (McDonough, 1999, 2002).

American Indian students may share many similar experiences with other first-generation and historically underrepresented students in regards to schooling and college access. Nevertheless, the political, historical and contemporary experiences of Native Americans may include a unique set of dilemmas that Native students face as they negotiate their way through high school and make choices about college. It is therefore important as context to consider the historical and current educational experiences of Native Americans.

### **Historical and Contemporary Context of American Indians and Western Education**

There are more than 500 Indigenous tribes within the continental United States, each with its own unique history, culture and language. There is no singular "Native American experience" (Deloria, 1988). With this qualification in mind, many scholars

agree that despite the great diversity within and among Indigenous peoples, participation in formal U.S. education holds many harsh memories for Native Americans. Education has been one of the major battlegrounds in the confrontation between the Indian and White worlds since European contact 500 hundred years ago (Wright, 1992). Education for American Indians and Alaska Natives is based on treaty rights and the trust responsibility between the United States government and sovereign native tribes. As such, “education for American Indians and Alaska Natives has developed very differently than in has for other people in this country... is unique, complex, and not clearly understood by the majority of mainstream America” (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997 p. 114). Of the 500 plus treaties that were ratified between 1778 and 1871 in exchange for nearly one billion acres of land, more than 100 of these treaties included provisions for educational services and facilities (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997).

Western education for American Indians and Alaska Natives was predicated on the belief that Indigenous societies had no education structure of their own, and that Native values, religion and culture were ‘savage’ (Grinde, 2004). As such, education designed for Indigenous people has historically been used as a coercive mechanism to eradicate Native culture and sovereignty through assimilation (Almeida, 1997; Coleman, 1993; Deloria, 1988, 2001; Deyhle and Swisher, 1997; Grande, 2004; Grinde, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Lomawaima, 2001; Szaz, 1996; Wilkins, 2002; Wilson, 1992; Wright, 1992). Grande (2004) writes that the miseducation of American Indians precedes the “birth” of this nation when in 1611 French Jesuits opened mission schools, soon followed by Spanish and British missionaries who each developed educational systems intent on “de-Indianizing” Native children.



Native experiences in U.S. higher education date back to early colonization when the country's earliest postsecondary institutions (Harvard, Dartmouth, William and Mary) included the admission of American Indians as part of their charter (Carney, 1999; Wright, 1992). The land on which many U.S. universities now stand was exchanged for Indian treaty rights that included the provision of higher education (Carney, 1999; Tijerina & Biemer, 1988; Wright, 1992). However, participation in U.S. higher education has historically exacted a heavy price on indigenous students over the last four centuries as European Americans have attempted to "remold indigenous people into their image" through educational institutions (Chadwick, 1972. p. 4)

During the nineteenth century, as the United States expanded its territory across the frontier to the Pacific, it became apparent that forcibly removing tribes to the West would not solve the "Indian problem," and a new federal policy aimed to eradicate Indian culture through education was established (Grinde, 2004). Assimilation began to supplant removal as the primary Indian policy of the federal government (Carney, 1999; Coleman, 1993; Grinde, 2004; Szaz, 1999; Wilson, 1997). Education was seen as the panacea to managing an increasingly heterogeneous society, and great faith was placed in the ability of schools to inculcate Protestant ideology and American nationalism (Adams, 1988; Coleman, 1993). For American Indians, schooling carried the war against tribal communities into families and individuals (Wilson, 1993). What was now needed to win the war against Indian 'savagery' was an army of schoolteachers:

We are going to conquer barbarism, but we are going to do it by getting at the barbarism one by one. We are going to do it by the conquest of the individual man, woman and child, which leads to the truest civilization. We are going to conquer Indians by a standing army of schoolteachers, armed with ideas, winning victories by industrial training, and by the gospel of love and the gospel of work.

(Merrill Gates, 1891, as cited in Wilson, p. 310)

Under the assimilationist policy at the beginning of the 1800s, the federal government provided limited funding for Indian education that went to schools that were typically administered by missionary groups (Szaz, 1999). The first extensive federal funding of Indian education started in 1876, and led to the establishment of off reservation industrial boarding schools administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). In 1879, Carlisle Indian School, founded in Pennsylvania, became the first off reservation boarding school (Coleman, 1993; Szaz, 1999). The assumption behind off reservation boarding schools was that the best way to solve the “Indian Problem” was to move Indian youth as far away as possible from the “savage” influences of their parents and communities (Almeida, 1997; Coleman, 1993; Deyhle and Swisher, 1997; Grande, 2004; Grinde, 2004; Szaz, 1999, Wilson, 1992).

Tens of thousands of American Indian children from tribes across the country were forcibly sent to boarding schools without parental consent (Kelly, 1999). Szaz (1999) writes: “Incidents of enforced seizure of children to fill quotas of off-reservation schools during this period have been reported too frequently to be considered a mere exaggeration,” (p. 11). According to Almeida (1997), it was not unusual for children to be sent to school by the age of six or seven and not see their families again until the age of seventeen or eighteen. Corporal punishment was the disciplinary norm, children were punished for speaking their tribal languages, boys had their long hair cropped, and the clothes students wore to the institutions were burned upon arrival as students were forced to don Western apparel (Grinde, 2004; White Shield, 2004).

A secondary purpose of Indian boarding schools, aside from detribalizing and Americanizing Indian youth (Coleman, 1930; Grinde, 2004), was to train students to for jobs in White society. Half of the students' day was devoted to learning English and rudimentary academic skills, the other half was devoted to learning vocational skills (Adams, 1988; Coleman, 1993). Boys typically learned skills such as farming, carpentry, or blacksmithing while girls typically learned skills such as cooking, cleaning and sewing (Adams, 1988; Coleman, 1993). Several boarding schools also supplied what amounted to exploitable labor, by placing Indian youth to work for up to a few months a year in a White family or firm so that Indian students would gain vocational experience, and by being separated from their Indian peers, "gain total immersion in White life" (Coleman, 1993, p. 43).

By 1900, nearly 85 percent of Indian children enrolled in school were attending one of the 531 off-reservation schools (Adams, 1988; Kelley, 1996). Several decades of Indian boarding schools meant that traditional child rearing and community socialization practices were disrupted for more than two generations (Almeida, 1997). According to Wilson (1999):

It does not take great psychological insight to realize that, for all but an exceptional few, this drastic experiment in social engineering must have been crippling. Its subjects were systematically taught to despise everything they loved - parents, relations and culture, as 'primitive' and 'dirty,' and to believe that their only hope lay in being made over into replicas of the conquerors who tormented them. Not surprisingly, many of them ended up hating both the 'savage' and the 'civilized' and hating, above all, themselves, the battlefield where the two sides struggled endlessly for supremacy. Caught in limbo, feeling that they were full members neither of the 'tribal' world nor of the developing Anglo-American society around them, thousands of them sank into apathy, alcoholism and despair, helping to create the cycle of abuse, dependency and self-destructive behavior that still haunts Native American communities today. ( P. 321)

Off-reservation boarding schools operated along these lines until 1928 when the U.S. government released the Meriam Report, which condemned the poor quality of BIA boarding schools (Almeida, 1997).<sup>iii</sup> The Meriam Report also led to reform movements that resulted in the Johnson-O'Malley Act (JOM) of 1934, which allowed the federal government to contract with the states to provide public education for Indian students (Almeida, 1997; Goldberg and Champagne, 1996).

Despite the deep rupture that boarding schools caused in Native communities, assimilation was complete for very few Indians, and “Indian youth, separated from their White peers, developed a strong Ethnic identity with their peers from other tribes, facilitating the development of a pan-Indian identity. For the most part, Indian youth endured the schooling experience, retained a strong ethnic identity, and returned to live with their families on the reservation” (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997, 114). After the Meriam report was issued, it was believed that a more humane and less expensive way to assimilate Indian students would be to have them attend public schools close to home with non-Indian students (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997; Goldberg and Champagne, 1996, Szaz, 1999). By 1930, More Indian students were in public schools than BIA schools. Today the majority of Indian students, 85% to 90%, attend public schools, while 10% to 15% of Indian students attend BIA or tribally controlled schools (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997; Pavel, 1999; Tippeconnic, 1999).

### **American Indians in Modern Public Schools**

There is a broad body of research in Indian education focusing primarily on students' experiences in public K-12 schools. In a review of this literature, there are myriad school-based practices that I argue, have a negative affect on college going for Native American students. One of these school-based practices is second-generation

discrimination, which entails the inappropriate tracking of Indian students into special education and non-college preparation tracks, inadequate funding for school facilities and programs serving Native students, unfair disciplinary practices and low teacher expectations, each contributing to the low academic achievement of Indian students (Cleary & Peacock, 1997; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Wright, Hirlinger, & England, 1998).

Cultural discontinuity between Native communities and public schools has also been studied in efforts to understand Indian students' alienation from formal education (Claery & Peacock, 1997; Demmert, 2001; Deyhle, 1995, 1999; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Peshkin, 1997; Pavel, 1999, Reyhner, Lee and Gabbard, 1993; Yapp, 2003). Teacher attitudes, textbooks and curriculum in public schools encourage values of competitiveness and individualism which are in stark contrast to the values of cooperation and the importance of positive interpersonal relationships that are reinforced in Native families (Fixico, 2000). Cultural discontinuity is also noted as a culprit in the high dropout rates, low academic achievement and poor self-esteem of Native students (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Peshkin, 1997; Pavel, 1999). Conversely, Indian students who have opportunities to learn about and maintain indigenous values, maintain or learn their tribal language, and possess a positive identity as a Native person are predicted to have higher grades in school, lower drop out rates and higher self-esteem (Coggins, Williams, & Radin, 1997; Demmert, 2001; Dehyle, 1995, 1997, 1999; Ledlow, 1992).

Additionally, the notion of higher education as a route to social and economic mobility, as it is often perceived in mainstream society, may not be viewed similarly in many Native cultures. For recent immigrants, education is often seen as the most effective way to overcome immigrant status. Portes & Rumbaut (1996), and Siu (1996) write that,

"education represents the only avenue that can offset the disadvantage in a new country, and the only hope for the second generation." (p. 32). However, the Western value of economic and social mobility may not parallel values for success within the political and cultural heritage of many indigenous tribes (Brayboy, 2002; Smith, 2000). Wilkins (2002) writes:

For much of this nations' history, the general thrust of most racial and ethnic groups and their members has been to seek inclusion (to become constitutionally incorporated) into the American social contract; by contrast, the general thrust of most indigenous nations and their citizens (notwithstanding their American citizenship) has been to retain political and cultural exclusion from absorption or incorporation in the American polity. (pg. 201)

Collective struggles for sovereignty, self-determination and tribal development may be more culturally relevant reasons for promoting academic achievement and college going within Indigenous communities than promoting higher education as a vehicle for social and economic mobility within mainstream society.

Other factors that prevent or make it more difficult for Native students to go to college are alienation, inadequate academic preparation, the absence of role models, and the lack of information and funds (Tijerina & Beimer, 1988; Wright, 1992; Tierney, 1991, 1992, 1993; Chavers, 2001). Data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (Pavel et. al, 1998) shows that most Native American college-bound high school graduates failed to meet the criteria used to assess student eligibility for college admission. Only 2 % of college-bound American Indian and Alaska Native high school graduates have a combined SAT score of 1,100 or better compared with 22 % of all college-bound high school graduates. In a 2004 report published by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, access to accelerated curriculum, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses are minimally available to Indian students. As a result, American Indian students'

participation in AP courses, a requirement of any selective four-year institution, is lower than that of any other ethnic minority group in the US (Benally, 2004). These figures are discouraging if we consider the average eligibility requirements for four-year colleges and universities.

Given the historical mission of U.S. education to eradicate First Nations' sovereignty and culture, the historical trauma suffered by Native people in the name of education, and the incongruity between mainstream and indigenous value systems, the decision to go to college will continue to be fraught with paradox for tribal students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Cultural integrity is described by Donna Dehyle (1992, 1995) in her research with Navajo and Ute students. In her study, the world of the family and the tribe was equally important as the world of school for Navajo parents who wanted to secure a “Navajo” identity for their children because without this, their children would not be able to succeed in either the tribe or White society. Education and schooling was important, but after finishing school, the students would always be Navajo (Dehyle, 1992), just as the students who participated in this study will always be Serrano, Cahuilla, Pauite, Quechan, Luiseño, Hupa, Karuk or Yurok. Cultural integrity considers the larger ecological context in which Indian students make decisions about and prepare for college: extended family, tribal community and school, emphasizing the richness of familial and community relationships and their importance for survival.

Tierney (1999, 2001) has used Dehyle’s work on cultural integrity in the context of college access as a theoretical approach to preparing historically underrepresented students for college. Tierney (1999, 2001) argues that most college preparation programs operate at the cultural capital level, by trying to provide poor and first-generation college students

with information and experiences that are likely to lead to college going. The assumption is often that historically underrepresented students lack cultural capital and must change or assimilate, adopting mainstream culture over their own culture in order to successfully enter college. Tierney (1999, 2001) advocates outreach programs that operate under the premise of cultural integrity, affirming students' racial and ethnic backgrounds while at the same time guiding students in the development of strategies and learning activities that promote college going (Tierney, 2001).

For this study, cultural integrity is the overarching philosophical framework for college access recognizing that students' status as citizens of Native nations, and the variety of cultural practices they may engage in play a distinct role in the resources that students bring with them to school, and their experiences in making decisions about postsecondary attendance and managing the college preparation process. Using cultural integrity as a lens is a way to privilege students' knowledge and bring their perceptions to the forefront in order to generate a better understanding of college going and preparation for Native students from reservation communities.

### **Study Context and School Site Selection**

California has the largest population of American Indians/Alaska Natives (AIAN) in the United States, 564,269 (UCLA RGLCRPS Policy Report, 2004). By comparison, Oklahoma has the second largest AIAN population with 390,830 Native people, and Arizona has the third largest AIAN population with 87,543 Native people (UCLA RGLCRPS Policy Report, 2004). AIAN people make up 1.7% of the overall California population, but 11.3% and 5.6 % of the Oklahoma and Arizona populations respectively (UCLA RGLCRPS Policy Report, 2004).



There are more than 152 Indigenous Californian tribes, including 109 federally recognized California tribes and more than 43 additional Indigenous California tribes or bands that remain unrecognized by the federal government. There are 40,000 American Indians (Census, 2000) who are citizens of one of the 109 federally recognized California Native nations, and an estimated 75,000 California Indians who are from one of the 43 unrecognized tribes (Kelley, 1999). Federally recognized tribes have reservation, rancheria or trust land. These are located primarily in rural areas.<sup>iv</sup>

The data for this study comes primarily from California Indian students<sup>v</sup> at 7 public high schools in Southern, Central and Northern California. High school sites were selected based on the large percentage of Indian students enrolled in each school site. All high school sites are located in rural areas. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of American Indian students at each school site. Table 2 shows the percentages of University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) eligibility rates, and enrollment rates of American Indian students in UC/CSU campuses at each school site.

**Table 1: Number and % of American Indian Students at Each School Site**

High School	County	Number of American Indian Students	% of AI Students Within Total School Population
Inland Empire	Riverside	60	5
North Valley	San Diego	140	12
East Sierra	Inyo	90	12
Two Rivers	Humboldt	207	65
San Mateo	Imperial	99	45
Siskiyou	Siskiyou	64	8
Up River	Siskiyou	33	31

*Source: EdData, Educational Data Partnership, California Department of Education, 2000.*

Note: School names of have been replaced with pseudonyms

**Table 2: Percentage of AI Student UC/CSU Eligibility and Enrollment in 1999 Compared to School Wide Eligibility Percentages and Enrollment**

High School	% of AI Graduates Eligible for UC/CSU	% of Total School Graduates Eligible for UC/CSU	% of AI Graduates Enrollment at UC/CSU	% of Total School Graduate Enrollment in UC/CSU
Inland Empire	33 (n=1/3)	57 (n=111/213)	0	10 (n=11/111)
North Valley	*	*	0	*
East Sierra	3 (n=1/27)	45 (n=71/157)	0	21 (n=15/71)
Two Rivers	8 (n=3/35)	17 (n=10/58)	33 (n=1/3)	30(n=10/33)
San Mateo	0	6 (n=2/31)	0	*
Siskiyou	*	*	0	*
Up River	2 (n=1/5)	40 (n=14/35)	*0	*17 (n=6/35)

Source: UC/CSU Eligibility: EdData, Educational Data Partnership, California Department of Education, 2002 UC/CSU Enrollment: California Postsecondary Education Commission.

Note: School names of have been replaced with pseudonyms \* No data available

## Methodology

In her book Decolonizing Methodologies, Smith (1999) draws on Harding’s distinction between method and methodology: "A research methodology is a theory and analysis of how research should proceed...and a research method is a technique for gathering evidence" (p. 143). Methodology is important because it frames the questions being asked, and determines the research process or methods. The qualitative nature of this study is based on the assumption that the naturalistic technique, listening to stories of people’s experiences, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is more compatible with “traditional Indian ways of knowing,” (Crazy Bull, 1997, p. 18). To that end, one-on-one interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol designed to elicit in-depth information from participants about how family and school influence college aspirations, how students are navigating college preparation, and students’ suggestions for improved outreach. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

## Sample

Fifty-three students participated in interviews. Higher education information workshops offered to all Native students at each school site provided the context for recruiting students for the study. The total number of interview participants at each site reflects the number of students at each school volunteering to participate in interviews. A sample breakdown by school, gender, and grade is noted in Table 3. Interview selection criteria included students in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade, with college aspirations, and a grade point average of 2.3 or higher. Students in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades were selected because these students are more likely to have experienced stages or benchmarks associated with preparing for college, such as having developed a predisposition for college, searching for colleges, and making final choices about which institution to attend (Hossler, Schmit and Vesper, 1999).

Since the focus of the study is to understand what influences student college-going and college preparation experiences, only students with college aspirations were chosen for interviews. College aspirations included plans for attending either a two-year or a four-year institution. Students with a GPA of 2.3 or higher are eligible for entering the California State University system and community colleges<sup>vi</sup>. One-on-one interviews were then conducted in order to allow students' to share their perceptions and experiences navigating college pathways.

**Table 3: Student Sample by Gender and Grade Level - Total Number of Students 53**

High School	No. of American Indian Students Interviewed	Gender		Grade Level	
		Male	Female	11 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>
Inland Empire	8	4	4	3	5
North Valley	4	1	3	3	1
East Sierra	10	5	5	4	6
Two Rivers	11	5	6	3	8

High School	No. of American Indian Students Interviewed	Gender		Grade Level	
		Male	Female	11 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>
San Mateo	8	4	4	3	5
Siskiyou	6	3	3	3	3
Up River	6	3	3	2	4

Note: School names of been replaced with pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis**

Each tape-recorded transcript was analyzed and coded. From coded transcripts, emerging data patterns were the basis for interpreting students' experiences.

A peer review process is a component of this study that includes Native faculty and Native educators. The peer review process is an essential part of the study for two reasons.

Methodologically speaking, a peer review can be used as a "lens for establishing credibility from persons external to the study," (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 129). A peer review can also corroborate the validity of data interpretations by someone familiar with the research, data and/or the phenomenon explored (Cresswell, 1998; Cresswell and Miller, 2000; Isaac & Martin, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

As a non-Native researcher, I continually grapple with my own subjectivity, assumptions, experiences and position of privilege in choosing to work with Indian students. Furthermore, I was unable to do member checks with individual student participants. Three American Indian university scholars and two Native educators reviewed my writing and reporting of the data at different points as the study progressed and offered feedback on thematic categories and writing.

### **Findings**

Six main themes emerged: 1) leaving the reservation 2) family influences on college going 3) school influences on college going, 4) college negotiation and

preparation, 5) tribal support for college going, and 6) students' suggestions for improved outreach.

### **1) Leaving the reservation**

The majority of students in this study (40 out of 53) live on a reservation and described tightly knit kinship systems that include large, extended families, causing many students to feel conflicted about choosing to go away to college. For example, when asking a student what her biggest obstacle would be in going to college, she commented, "Leaving the rez ...because I've lived there all my life and I never want to leave." A Paiute student from East Sierra said, "I think I will get a little homesick [going away to college] because I have a lot of close family, my grandma and all my cousins are right next door." A female Yurok student from Two Rivers shared:

I live in rural area, and to be away from my family is a big thing. I have tons of relatives, at least 80 first cousins alone, and I'm around them constantly. They live within 20 miles of me, and that's going to be hard to get used to, not having my family around because they support me.

Several students also talked about how leaving the reservation to go away to college might result in potentially traumatic breaks from religious traditions, culture and language. A senior class Yurok female student from Two Rivers stated:

Tradition and culture are a huge part of your life here, to leave them and go some place different and do something different - it's like another world...My grandma has been my language mentor for almost four years now and when I leave- that will be it. She's getting old and she's one of a handful of fluent speakers.

A Yurok student in her junior year, who plans to attend "one of the UCs" and major in chemical engineering, is concerned about having to leave the campus in the middle of October in what would be her first year of college to help her family host the clan Jump

Dance. The Jump Dance is a sacred, week-long religious ceremony. This echoed a similar concern voiced by a Paiute student, now a freshman at a private university. When interviewed during her senior year the spring before college, she said she was “already worried” about needing to take time off in the middle of her second semester at college to come home to participate in her tribe's Cry Dance.

## **2) Family Support and Encouragement**

Most of the students will be the first in their family to go to college or the first hope for completing a college degree. Students lived with parents, grandparents, or an aunt, and reported that family members encouraged their aspirations for higher education. However, the majority of parents/guardians had either no college experience, or a limited amount of college experience, and absent these opportunities, they did not have the college knowledge to help their children prepare for college. One student’s comment echoed that of many other interviewees, “I know my parents have a lot of questions because of me being the first to go to college, and they don’t really know how to go about it. It’s confusing to all of us.”

Parents supported college aspirations in a variety of ways. A Yurok student, the senior class President at Two Rivers High School, said that her family supports her aspirations to go to college by figuring out creative carpooling so that she can get to and from sports practice and myriad extracurricular activities that make riding the school bus unfeasible. This is no small task when considering that it takes an average of 50 minutes, on a mostly one-lane road, to get back and forth from school. On her particular reservation there is no electricity, so families must use generators, which can be costly to run and should not be run unattended.

My mom will stay up, or sleep on the sofa till I'm done [with homework] and then she'll turn off the generator. Last night I was up until 2:00 am because I got back late from a volleyball game.

Many students also mentioned that their parents encouraged or even “pushed” them to go to college because they hoped that their children would be more financially successful than themselves. One senior student told me, “My mom took some community college, [and she is always telling me] I want you to do better, I want you to go to college.” Another student shared, “My dad doesn't have a high school diploma, and it's hard for him to help us with our homework and he's like ‘I don't want you to be like this’.”

One young woman articulated the sense of both hope and loss felt in sending a child to college by sharing “[My parents] are happy for me, they're sad for me.” While her family supported her desire to go away to college, they were deeply saddened by the thought of her having to leave the reservation and how this might affect her and her family.

### **3) School influences on college going**

When students were asked about sources of college information within the school, most students indicated that talk about college was not prevalent in their classrooms, and that school counselors were “too busy” to meet with students. One male student expressed frustration with attempts to get information from the college counselor, “...So far, she [college counselor] keeps shipping me to military people, but I don't think I'm going that route.” Several students mentioned that they had friends who were going into the military and military recruiters were more common than college recruiters at each high school campus. The same male student who was counseled to talk to military recruiters in response to his questions about college pointed out that at his school, military recruiters are quite friendly, and walk around the school approaching students during the lunch period,

but no one approached students to tell them "Hey, you're smart, you should be going to college."

Students involved in school sports tended to have much more information about different types of colleges, course requirements and entrance exams such as the SAT. Coaches and team members offered students both support and encouragement for college going. A senior from Inland Empire High school (Serrano/Tongva-Gabrieliño) reported , "I mostly talk about [college] with my basketball team because all of us are actually planning on going college." A male athlete from the same school who participated in basketball and track shared, "[college] is really reinforced. If you're an athlete, [coaches] want you to go on to the next level."

#### **4) College Negotiation and Preparation**

Many students felt that they were "on their own" getting information about college. One student expressed frustration over lack of support, "It's not shown to students, you have to go get it yourself." Many students expressed anxiety about college admissions expectations, and scholarship eligibility. More than half of the students (35 out of 53) said that they expected to start at a community college by default, since they felt that their GPA would keep them out of four-year colleges. As one student confided, "I never really think about [four-year universities] because their expectations are so high, [and] I don't think I can meet up there." In actuality, all of these students had grade point averages that would make them eligible for the Cal State University System. However, they were not familiar with eligibility requirements and had not taken required courses nor had they taken the SAT.



Students tended to be more familiar with community colleges. This is partly due to the fact that students knew of family members who had attended a community college, and partly due to the fact that there were no four-year universities close to any of the reservations where these students lived. At East Sierra, the closest postsecondary institution, a two-year college, was 200 miles away, although this college provided limited offerings of some courses in the town. All of the students reported knowing family and friends who went to a community college, but only a couple of students reported that they knew of a family member who graduated from a community college, transferred to a university or graduated from a four-year institution.

#### **5) Tribal Support for College Going**

When I asked students about how their tribe encouraged or supported college going, students discussed financial support. In California, some tribes are able to provide full financial support to college bound youth while other tribes lack the resources to help students pay for college, or can only provide students with limited amounts. Most students reported that their tribe would provide some assistance, but most students were unclear about the steps they needed to take to request college money from their tribe, and were unsure about how much scholarship money they might receive. Part of this may be due to the fact that most students had not started planning for college until the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and most of the seniors interviewed during a period from February through May had not yet applied to a college.

Most students were not approached by a tribal representative about college funding, nor had they received any kind of letter while in high school that described potential funding. Students needed to initiate the process and it was clear from several students that information about financial resources affected beliefs about the possibility of

college. As one young woman shared, “Money is the big fear, it hinders you from going [to college] and it encourages you to stay [in town] because you can find work here and once you get a taste of money, and you don’t have to depend on anyone else, it’s tempting to just stay here.”

Students felt that in general their tribe supported the *idea* of higher education, but that there is not direct talk or action taken to further students along college pathways. One student expressed the following, “We get grants or scholarships from the tribe, but they don’t really talk to us or encourage us [to go to college].” Although one tribe had hired tutors to work with high school students. Often the tutors provided both academic support and information about college. When talking with one student from this tribe with a tutor about how his tutor had influenced his college plans, he responded, “...When I told her that I wanted to be a tribal chairman, she took me seriously...she then went on the internet [to look up programs] I might like and brought papers back to me...She’s the one that got me papers on Davis...and said she’d help me get in there.”

### *Indian Gaming*

Several students who were citizens of gaming tribes stated that they felt that “per caps” from Indian gaming lowered college aspirations for many students. Per caps (per capita) are casino revenues paid to enrolled tribal members from federally recognized tribes with Indian gaming. While each tribe individually decides how it will share casino revenue within the community, generally, tribal members receive their “per cap” when they turn 18, or when they graduate from high school. This amount can be anywhere from less than \$200 a year to well over \$40,000 a year. For example, one senior class student shared, “I think some students don’t think [about college] because they’re going to get

their money and that's all they're going to do. I know I have to do something after high school because what if the money stops? Then what am I going to do?"

At Two Rivers, students from local tribes who qualify<sup>vii</sup> get "18 money," a one-time dividend up to \$30,000, which may be a disincentive for starting college immediately after high school. As described by a Yurok student:

You get a huge sum of money. You're getting between \$10,000 and \$30,000, and most people work a year to make that much money and when you turn 18 you get it all in one lump sum. You just made a living in a day on your birthday. I think that kind of sidetracks [students from going to college] because they know they have money to support themselves and they choose to stay here.

#### **6) "In Your Face!": Students' Suggestions for College Outreach**

Students had clever ideas for improving college outreach. The best slogan, suggested by a senior, was that College needs to be "in your face." When asked to elaborate, he said that effective outreach means that:

[College needs to be] in your face!...The more we hear about college, the more reality sinks in our brain, and if I had someone in my face about college, I'd be alright now, but college hasn't been in my face so I never really thought about it...I'm not going to lie, coming out once a year like this is like giving a teenager a fish but not teaching him how to fish so he can keep on eating. You give this information but you're not really here making sure he's on the right step – you need to check on him.

A senior Juañeno student from North Valley High School, who participates in AVID,<sup>viii</sup> a college outreach program that operates in her high school, compared what she knows about the hidden curriculum of college preparation compared to other students who are not in AVID shared:

[The school] needs to start from scratch when telling students about college. For example, they think they are providing information by making announcements about SAT deadlines, but this is meaningless to students who do not know why they should take the SAT and where they should go to get more information about it.

Students wanted more one-on-one contact from anyone- college counselors, college recruiters, tutors, or outreach personnel. When asked if the ethnicity of college admission representatives made a difference in recruitment, several students indicated that the college message would be more powerful if delivered by another Native person who would know what it is like to live on a reservation and share similar values with students.

#### *American Indian Role Models and Native Recruiters*

Students need someone familiar with their life experiences to can help them to negotiate pathways to the very different world of higher education. The closer the messenger is to the student's family/tribal community the more influential and credible the message may be to students unsure about college. A Paiute student shared that hearing, "I know you're scared, but you really need to go [to college]....meant more," coming from a relative on her father's side of the family who lived on the reservation, than the more frequent encouragement from relatives on her mother's side of family who are White and do not live on the reservation. She felt that these relatives could not relate to her apprehension of having to leave the reservation to go away to college, nor could they understand what she felt that she would have to give up in regards to family ties, culture, and Tribal religious practice.

Postsecondary outreach and recruitment efforts play an important role in providing students with information about college. At three of the school sites, Native American recruiters from local postsecondary institutions had visited their school and held a workshop especially for Indian students. When asked if the ethnicity of college representatives made a difference in the recruitment process, students noted that having

another Native American person talk to them about college made a difference for several reasons. A Paiute student from East Sierra commented:

It's not as much a racial thing as understanding what's it's like coming off the reservation because all reservations are a tight knit family, and this makes it harder to leave." "...Having someone who is one my side, and who understands what is really important to me as a Native person [is what is important].

Another Paiute student shared that talking with Native recruiters was especially helpful, "because they knew what kind of benefits we could get because they had gotten them, or who we could talk to, or where we needed to go to get our own benefits and scholarships." Students also indicated that Native recruiters were also more likely to talk about college going in a culturally relevant context, encouraging Native youth to attend college as a means to better serve one's community and contribute to their tribe's sovereignty and self determination.

## **Discussion**

Most of the students felt that they had to make tough decisions about leaving home to go away to college. Wilkins (2002) writes that "Tribal peoples, unlike any other groups in the United States, are sovereign nations not minority groups. A sovereign nation is a distinct political entity, which exercises a measure of jurisdictional power over a specific territory" (pg. 47). Going away to college for Native students can be compared to international exchange. Leaving the reservation to go to college represents entering another world, separating from extended family, culture, and to varying degrees, language, in order to enter a postsecondary institution where students expect that there will be very few other students like themselves.

The majority of students in this study lacked critical information about how to get to college and most students felt that they were “on their own” in regards to getting college information. Families supported college aspirations but in most cases did not have college knowledge to help their children prepare for higher education. First generation college students are at a disadvantage because they must get all of their information about college from their school. Some students received support from school agents for college going while other did not. Students indicated that they need someone who will sit down with them “one-on-one” and explain college options, financial aid, and what they need to do to become eligible for college. Furthermore, schools need to "start from scratch" by providing students with college information in a holistic and comprehensive manner.

While a handful of college bound students received a great deal of encouragement and support from a teacher or counselor, the majority of students in this study were not getting the message that they are college material at school. In this case, yearly visits from a Native university recruiter and college fairs had a positive influence in terms of getting students to think about higher education. However, without structured, reinforced encouragement and support, students are no closer to getting into college.

Students participating in pre-college outreach programs were the most informed and savvy about college preparation. Without having the ability to change the school culture, such that all students are viewed as college material, and taught and advised accordingly, outreach programs provide an important safety net to students. By offering information, academic support and college advising to make up the gap in school support for college going, on-site outreach programs can provide a critical link to college. This link is strengthened by the participation of the school’s Title VII Indian education liaison

and/or other tribal community members. Tribal and/or other Native involvement in established outreach programs at local school sites is a way to include Native cultural integrity in these programs, and ensure that Native students have opportunities to discuss college going in a culturally relevant context.

Tribes supported students' college going by providing monetary support, the amount of which varied greatly by tribe. Two tribes hired tutors to work with high school students. If increasing the number of college graduates is a community priority, tribes can make students and their families aware of financial support for college going, and what students need to do in order to access tribal monies long before the student's senior year of high school. This would include information about college preparation; such as the types of courses students need to take in order to be eligible for college. This is important since several students in this study expressed that hearing the message about going to college was more powerful when delivered by relatives and other tribal citizens.

Tribal communities can also help students get to college by providing encouragement and support for college going at community meetings and gatherings, setting the bar for education higher than high school graduation. For many understandable reasons, there is a schism between formal Western university education and tribal education, wisdom and training. A university degree does not necessarily grant one status in a tribe as it does in majority culture. Reconciling tribal education and spiritual values with formal education may support college going and completion by demonstrating to students that they do not have to choose between a being successful in college and being a full-fledged member of their community.

Students indicated that it was important for them to learn about college from someone who could understand the conflicts they would experience in leaving the reservation. It was also important to get college information from someone who was familiar with what they as Native students needed to do to access financial support from their own tribes and from other organizations that provide financial aid specifically for American Indian students.

Native college students are especially important role models to other Native high school students because they have the cultural credibility to deliver messages about the importance and possibility of higher education. High school students can believe through the examples of American Indian College students that it is possible for them to successfully go to college. American Indian recruiters generally are also in a better position to address the potentially traumatic cultural difference students will encounter when they leave tight knit reservation communities. American Indians have the highest attrition rate in higher education (Pavel, Skinner, Farris, Calahan, & Tippeconnic, 1998), suggesting that students need more than academic preparation in order to make the transition from home communities to the university and back.

For a variety of reasons, most students indicated that they were much more likely to begin at a community college. This is consistent with statistics that show that most American Indian students start at community college (Pavel, Skinner, Farris, Calahan, & Tippeconnic, 1998). Indeed, only a handful of the fifty-three students (12 out of 53) reported that they were eligible to begin at a four-year institution. Unlike tribal colleges, community college transfer and degree attainment rates reveal that Native students are often not persisting and are less likely to transfer to four-year institutions than other student



groups. By providing transfer support to Native community college students, there are opportunities to significantly increase in the number of American Indian students in four-year institutions.

Targeted counseling and outreach programs operating at the community college level may be one solution. Forming partnerships between community college EOP/TRIO programs and Title VII liaisons, tribal education personnel, or other Native involvement may be one way to augment existing college services by providing additional, culturally relevant support. Tribal colleges provide many models for increasing Native college student persistence and transfer.

### **Implications**

If Native American students are to be viable candidates for college admission, understanding their experiences in navigating college pathways is a necessary first step to designing recruitment and outreach responses that are relevant to students' lives. Cultural integrity places students' experiences as members of Tribal communities at the forefront of research and outreach. Low college participation rates are in part reflective of the mismatch between cultures. Western values of economic and social mobility are at odds with the political and cultural heritage of many indigenous tribes (Brayboy, 2002; Smith, 2000). Tierney (1991) observed that for many Indian students, family obligations are paramount and college graduates often feel a strong sense of obligation to their home communities. Tribal students seeking an education grounded in their cultural perspective rarely find this in a typical university setting and may conclude that higher education is irrelevant to their lives.

Increasing access to higher education for Native students coming from a reservation must include: 1) academic preparation and college counseling that begins before high school to make students aware of postsecondary options and eligibility requirements, and at the same time supports their efforts to become prepared for college, 2) postsecondary outreach efforts that are responsive to students' experiences growing up in tribal nations and 3) students need to know there will be support once they get to college to help them transition back and forth from Tribal communities to higher education communities.

<sup>i</sup> The terms "American Indian," "Indian," "Native American," "Indigenous," "Native," and are used interchangeably.

<sup>ii</sup> This figure – 17% of Native high school graduates attend some form of postsecondary education is compounded by the fact that American Indian students have about a 50-50 chance of graduating from high school (Swanson, 2004). While the drop out rate for Native students varies by state, the reported high school drop out rate does not capture the large number of Native students who drop out of school at or before the eighth grade. Therefore, among the precious number of Native students who graduate from high school, only 17% are entering some form of postsecondary education. Note, most Native students enroll in two-year institutions.

<sup>iii</sup> Ogbu uses the term "voluntary" minorities to refer to immigrant populations, in particular Asian Pacific Islanders and Latinos. The term "Involuntary" minority is used to describe the minority status of American Indians and African Americans who were brought over as slaves. Ogbu contends that "voluntary" minorities tend to perceive U.S. educational opportunities as a vehicle for economic and social mobility to a greater extent than "involuntary" minorities.

<sup>iv</sup> There are about 110 federally recognized tribes in California and approximately 60 Native communities that are not federally recognized.

<sup>v</sup> There are 4 students with tribal affiliation other than that of California Native that were interviewed.

<sup>vi</sup> I am very grateful to Jason Lewis, Director of American Indian Recruitment at UCLA for accompanying me on several school site visits. Mr. Lewis initiated contacts for several site visits, helped present higher education workshops to students, and interviewed some of the students.

<sup>vii</sup> Special thanks to the Title VII Indian Education liaisons, tribal education coordinators, and school site personnel for facilitating opportunities to recruit Native students for the study and for helping to arrange the higher education workshops for students, and in some cases families, that were delivered as a component of this study.

<sup>viii</sup> California State University admits students on a sliding scale based on GPA and SAT scores.

<sup>ix</sup> The qualification process for "18 money" varies for each tribe. Some tribes have requirements for length of residence on the reservation, or require that a student have applied for 18 money by a certain age.

<sup>x</sup> AVID- Advancing Via Individual Determination, a state funded, school based outreach program that provides college information classes for students, and counseling and tutoring so students are successful in challenging academic courses needed for entry into 4- year institutions.

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<sup>i</sup> The terms "American Indian," "Indian," "Native American," "Indigenous," "Native," "First Nation," and "First people" are used somewhat interchangeably. Native American generally refers to a wider group including Alaska Natives and Hawaiian Natives, while American Indian refers to one of the 500 or more Native tribes on the continental United States.

<sup>ii</sup> Using data from the 1998 NAEP High School Transcript Study, Greene and Forster (2003) distinguish "college ready transcripts" as those that show that the student received a high school diploma, and the completion of coursework typically required of four-year institutions: four years of English, three years of math, and two years each of natural, social science and foreign language.

Off reservation boarding schools did not go away completely, and a few still continue to operate, although under contemporary guidelines.

<sup>iv</sup> Los Angeles County, as an incorporated area, has the largest urban AIAN population in the country (115,311 or 1.2%), and the city of Los Angeles has the second largest city population of urban Indians in the United States (41,866 or 1.1%) (UCLA RGLCRPS Policy Report, 2004). Native people living in urban areas are more likely to have an affiliation with a tribe in another state. Collectively, the 564,269 American Indians living in California have tribal affiliations with more than 270 different tribes across the country, and live in all parts of the state, making the population extremely challenging to accurately describe, and even more difficult to provide effective recruitment and outreach services that reach a population that is not only culturally diverse but geographically diffuse.

<sup>v</sup> There are 4 students with tribal affiliation other than that of California Native that were interviewed.

<sup>vi</sup> California State University admits students on a sliding scale based on GPA and SAT scores.

<sup>vii</sup> The qualification process for "18 money" varies for each tribe. Some tribes have requirements for length of residence on the reservation, or require that a student have applied for 18 money by a certain age.

<sup>viii</sup> AVID- Advancing Via Individual Determination, a state funded, school based outreach program that provides college information classes for students, and counseling and tutoring so students are successful in challenging academic courses needed for entry into 4- year institutions.

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