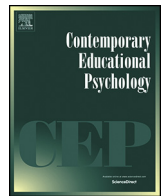




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Centering indigenous college student voices and perspectives through photovoice and photo-elicitation

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ABSTRACT

Using arts-based inquiry and drawing on photovoice, photo-elicitation and visual narrative, in this study we explore how Native American college students experience space and place at the University of New Mexico, a large, research-extensive university in the Southwestern United States. The objective of this study is to more clearly understand how Native American students view their educational environment. Student perspectives will be framed through an artistic inquiry coming directly from the students and their interpretations of space, place, and community. This study is designed to ultimately inform the institution, local tribal communities, and the existing body of research on how participants viewed their college-going experience in relation to space and place, and how we might more adequately serve Native American college students. Initial findings indicate the critical importance of cultural centers, houses, and designated cultural spaces for Native American students, as indicated in the literature. Though Native students may experience struggles and successes similar to other student groups within the context of higher education, it is critical that student affairs professionals, administrators, faculty, and other educational leaders acknowledge how discourses of colonialism and genocide inform higher educational spaces, as well as the experience of Native American college students.

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1. Introduction

While there is a growing body of scholarship focusing on college access, recruitment and retention of historically underrepresented populations in the field of higher education, Native American populations are largely absent from the discussion (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). In this paper, we present the initial findings of an ongoing study at the University of New Mexico,¹ a large, research-extensive institution in the American Southwest. Addressing the paucity in research focused on the college-going experience and retention of Native American college students, the aim of this study is to situate Native American college students as both subjects and researchers in exploring how they internalize and interpret space and place at the University of New Mexico.

Considering the critical role that the arts have played in the struggle for social justice in education, particularly for communities of

color (Desai & Marsh, 2005; Marsh & Desai, 2012; Quinn, 2006), this study is informed by arts-based inquiry (Finley, 2003, 2005). Specifically, we draw on photovoice (Jennings & Lowe, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997), photo-elicitation (Harper, 1988, 2002; Witherspoon-Arnold, 2012), and visual narrative to create a space for participants to construct a visual narrative (Bach, 2007) and make meaning of their college-going experience through their own eyes, and in their own words. In posing these questions, while also examining the primacy of place, we hope to gain preliminary insight into how research-extensive universities can more adequately meet the needs of Native American college students through policy and practice, which we contend can serve to improve their college-going experience, which ultimately contributes to retention. This article seeks to articulate the value of arts-based inquiry in more adequately understanding the unique experiences of Native American college students at research-extensive institutions.

Using photovoice, narrative, and photo-elicitation, we construct a visual narrative representative of the daily experiences of Native American students at the University of New Mexico, in the various educational spaces they occupy on a regular basis, through their eyes, and in their own words. Though federal data sets and quantitative data generated by the institution provide an overview of the challenges presented in the retention of Native American college students, an arts-based inquiry approach provides a more

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¹ The University of New Mexico will be referred to henceforward as UNM.

nuanced understanding of how Native American students make meaning of and experience college. Through arts-based inquiry, Native American students can be positioned as both researcher and subject, toward the end of generating input on how policies and practices can be more adequately tailored to the needs of their community both on and off campus, while promoting social justice (Castleden & Garvin, 2008; Finley, 2003).

1.1. Literature

Native American college students are becoming more visible in higher education as their enrollment in, and graduation rates from, postsecondary institutions doubled between 1976 and 2006 (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). Despite this increase, Native Americans have the lowest enrollment rates of any ethnic group, and their attrition rates are on the rise (Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, & Nitzarim, 2013). Harrington and Harrington (2011) have cited low high school graduation rates, a lack of programs and services, insufficient administrative support in college, as well as faculty bias and stereotyping as potential contributors to the low number of Native Americans enrolling in college. Declining retention and attrition rates have been traditionally attributed to factors including but not limited to inadequate college preparation, lack of institutional support and commitment, as well as cultural and social isolation (Huffman, 2001; Lundberg, 2014; Maxwell, 2015; Reyhner & Dodd, 1995). In a recent study exploring Native American student retention from a psychosociocultural perspective, Thompson et al. (2013) found that separation and alienation from community as well as ineffective coping skills in navigating educational barriers impacted Native student retention. As a result of their study, the authors recommended that institutions of higher education should work with Native students to develop their coping mechanisms in relation to educational barriers, create a more welcoming and inclusive climate, and establish stronger connections with Native communities in support of Native students. However, Thompson et al. (2013) cite a small participant sample size as a potential limitation of their study. A small participant sample size is a recurring limitation to educational researchers seeking to identify barriers to success for Native American college students, as they make up less than 1% of the college-going population in the United States (Brayboy et al., 2012; Shotton et al., 2013). This limitation parallels our concern regarding the efficacy of campus racial climate surveys in seeking to better understand how Native American students are experiencing their respective higher educational journeys in comparison to other groups.

Reviewing the literature on Native American college student persistence, Mosholder and Goslin (2013) identified skill development, family and peer support, appropriate role-models, awareness and use of financial aid, and a culturally sensitive school environment as central to Native college student persistence. Building on the importance of a culturally sensitive environment, Harrington and Harrington (2011) express that "It is important for colleges to foster a campus culture conducive to understanding and respecting Native cultures" (p. 3). Though limited, these sentiments are echoed throughout the literature on Native American college-going and retention (Adelman, Taylor, & Nelson, 2013; Flynn, Duncan, & Jorgensen, 2012; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Makomenaw, 2012; Maxwell, 2015; Oxendine, 2015; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013; Shotton et al., 2013, 2007). In relation to campus racial and ethnic climate reports, though they may be helpful in locating potential areas of concern, more needs to be done to understand the nuanced experiences of Native American college students, particularly given their low numbers. As noted by Minthorn (2014), Native American students necessitate support services, development programs and safe places as essential pieces of their lived campus experiences. For the purpose of this paper, we center the voices of Indigenous college students

so that we may gain insight into how they perceive their college experience, in their own words, and through their own eyes. In engaging them in the research process, it is our intention to provide insight into how we can better retain and serve them.

2. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, we use critical arts-based inquiry to (1) examine the factors that shape Native American students experience and sense of belonging at the University of New Mexico; as well as (2) their perspectives on the manner in which their identities can be expressed, and how they experience community within the institution. As expressed by Finley (2008), "Arts-based inquiry is uniquely positioned as a methodology for radical, ethical, and revolutionary research that... can be used to advance a subversive political agenda that addresses issues of social inequity" (p. 71). While we do not feel that asking Native American students how they experience and perceive higher education is subversive, the overall exclusion of Native American student voices in higher education, and education research, positions this work as highly political, particularly given the fact that the majority of land grant and research-intensive universities are located on lands appropriated or stolen from Native peoples. Further, arts-based research is particularly valuable in conducting research with marginalized populations as it:

1. Makes use of emotive, affective experiences, senses, and bodies, and imagination and emotion as well as intellect, as ways of knowing and responding to the world;
2. Gives interpretive license to the researcher to create meaning from experience;
3. Attends to the role of form in shaping meaning by representing research in many different arrangements appropriated from the arts;
4. Exists in the tensions of blurred boundaries (Finley, 2005, p. 72)

2.1. Site

This article presents the preliminary findings from an ongoing study exploring the experiences of Native American students at the University of New Mexico. Situated in the heart of Albuquerque, the main campus of UNM reported in the spring of 2015 that it served 25,816 undergraduate, professional, and graduate students (University of New Mexico, 2015). Though the university has five branch campuses located throughout New Mexico serving an additional 7296 students, for the purpose of this article, only data collected at the main campus will be reported. It should be noted that the University is designated a Hispanic-serving institution (HACU, 2015), with approximately 39.96% of its student population self-identifying as Hispanic. 39% of UNM students identified as White, 2.36% as African American, 3.32% as Asian, and 0.15% as Native Hawai'ian. 3.12% of students identified with two or more races, while 2.06% chose not to identify their racial/ethnic identity. 5.15% of UNM students self-identified as American Indian (p. 14). In their most recent report, UNM (2007) had an overall retention rate of 76.6%, while reporting that the retention rate for Native American students was 66.3%, the lowest of all cultural and ethnic groups.

2.2. Participants

The participants in this study were undergraduate Native American students at the University of New Mexico. They each self-selected to participate in this study, for which they either received a recruitment e-mail through a student listserv or a recruitment flyer hanging up in places where Native American students study and find community on campus. There were a total of seven student participants in this study. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on

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