

# Student Development in Tribal Colleges and Universities

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*Tribal colleges play a powerful role in the personal development as well as the academic development of American Indian students. By providing access, exposure to native culture, personal support, preparation for further education, and a sense of empowerment, tribal colleges are influential in advancing self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, intellectual development, acculturation, and identity development of their enrolled students. While theories of student development have helped to explain the psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development of students in American higher education, very little research has specifically investigated the development of American Indian students, particularly those enrolled in tribal colleges. Theories of adult development and learning, acculturation, and identity development are gaining greater attention in the human development literature and have potential for enhancing understanding of the development that American Indian students experience. These theories, however, rarely consider the effects of higher education on*

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*development. In this article, we present a brief overview of several adult development, acculturation, and identity development theories, along with what little research does exist relating these theories to American Indian students. We speculate about the impact that tribal college environments have on development and discuss potentially influential factors in these environments that enhance development. Finally, we present implications for practice and future research focusing on the development of American Indian students in tribal college settings.*

Attending college can have a powerful effect on the development of students. Being exposed to new ideas and ways of thinking; being challenged to consider different perspectives; learning skills of analysis, synthesis, and critique; as well as interacting with other students and faculty in and out of the classroom, provide opportunities to grow intellectually, interpersonally, and personally (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). For many students in tribal colleges, the impact of attending college often goes far beyond learning content knowledge and obtaining a degree. Unfortunately, traditional theories of psychosocial development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), cognitive development (Perry, 1968; Baxter Magolda, 1992), and moral development (Kohlberg, 1976; Gilligan, 1982) that have been used to explain the process of growth and change during college have focused almost exclusively on White middle and upper class traditional-aged populations. Newer models of acculturation and racial and ethnic identity development provide descriptions of how members of nondominant populations come to define who they are to themselves, to others with whom they share an ethnic heritage, and to the dominant culture. Several theorists have specifically examined American Indian identity development and acculturation (Choney, Berryhill-Paake, & Robbins, 1995; Horse, 2001). In addition, since the majority of American Indian students are adults, theories of adult development and learning (e.g., Freire, 1970, 1973; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Rossiter, 1999a, 1999b) can provide assistance in understanding and working with this population.

In this article, we specifically discuss the development of American Indian students in tribal colleges. The tribal college movement began

in 1968 with the establishment of the first college—now called Dine College—on the Navaho reservation (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 1999). Developed to provide an alternative to Western educational methods and to address high attrition rates at mainstream institutions, tribal colleges are tribally controlled educational institutions, mainly 2-year, located primarily on Indian reservations (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 1999). There are currently 36 tribal colleges located in 14 northern midwestern and southwestern states, as well as Alaska (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2007). In 2006, over 27,000 students were enrolled in academic programs at tribal colleges (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2006). Tribal colleges are particularly powerful educational venues for American Indian students as they are “unique institutions that combine personal attention with cultural relevance, in such a way as to encourage American Indians—especially those living on reservations—to overcome the barriers in higher education” (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 1999, p. A-1). Since the process of student development must be considered within a context, we first provide an overview of the cultural values and worldview of American Indians as well as the characteristics of students who typically enroll in tribal colleges. We examine and critique traditional student development theories in relation to American Indian students. We then discuss several approaches to the study of adult development, learning, acculturation, and identity development that are applicable to this population. We conclude by examining how tribal colleges specifically enhance the development and learning of American Indian students and implications for research and practice.

## American Indian Worldview and Cultural Values

Important differences exist among American Indians with regard to culture and identity due to tribal differences and affiliation that make broad generalizations difficult. However, there are some commonalities with regard to the values and worldview of American Indians that are important to recognize since they provide a foundation for American Indian student development and shape its direction. Core values held by many American Indians include the following:

- *Sharing*—In many American Indian cultures, honor and respect is gained by sharing what one has with others and by giving away

possessions (Garrett & Walkingstick Garrett, 1994; Herring, 1997; Oppelt, 1989; Sage, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2003).

- *Cooperation*—Family and tribe take precedence over the individual, Indians dislike competing, and they work hard to avoid conflict (Garrett & Walkingstick Garrett, 1994; Herring, 1997; Oppelt, 1989; Sage, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2003).
- *Noninterference*—Indians are taught not to interfere with others and to observe rather than react impulsively; they respect the rights of others to make their own decisions (Sue & Sue, 2003).
- *Present-time orientation*—American Indians focus on the present rather than the future; they are not concerned with deadlines, punctuality, or planning (Garrett & Walkingstick Garrett, 1994; Herring, 1997; Oppelt, 1989; Sue & Sue, 2003).
- *Being versus doing*—Indians see their purpose in life as developing their inner selves; they focus on “being” rather than working hard to accomplish external goals (Garrett & Walkingstick Garrett, 1994; Herring, 1997).
- *Extended family orientation*—The extended family takes precedence over the self; Indians identify themselves as members of their family and tribe (Garrett & Walkingstick Garrett, 1994; Herring, 1997; Oppelt, 1989; Sage, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2003).
- *Respect*—Indians show respect by listening to others, avoiding eye contact, and speaking softly and in moderation; Indians are particularly respectful of authority figures and elders, valuing the wisdom and knowledge older people possess (Garrett & Walkingstick Garrett; Sage, 1997).
- *Harmony and balance*—The Circle of Life (spirit, nature, body, and mind) represents a sacred relationship among all living things; each person is seeking a balance between himself or herself and the universe (Garrett & Walkingstick Garrett, 1994; Herring, 1997).
- *Spiritual causes for illness and problems*—Many Indians believe that illnesses and personal problems are caused by disharmony between themselves and the universe or by witchcraft (Oppelt, 1989).

- *Group dynamics*—Indians make decisions by consensus, and all individuals must have an opportunity to have input (Oppelt, 1989).
- *Importance of the tribe*—Persons see themselves as extensions of the tribe; self-worth is determined by the contributions one makes to the tribe; pressure exists to conform to tribal expectations (Garrett & Walkingstick Garrett, 1994; Herring, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2003).

While we again caution readers against overgeneralization of these values without additional research regarding specific tribes, the group orientation, cooperative emphasis, spirituality, and focus on the present found in many American Indian cultures result in a very different worldview than that held in White culture with its emphasis on individuality, independence, competitiveness, and future orientation (Katz, 1985). In many cases, the assumptions embedded in traditional student development theories based on White populations limit their utility when working with American Indian populations; and other approaches, such as those presented in this article, must be considered.

## Characteristics of American Indian Students at Tribal Colleges

Tribal college students are unique as a group and do not mirror the image of the traditional American college student. For example, Martin (2005) reported, “The average age of tribal college students is twenty-eight; sixty-four percent are women; and a larger percentage are single parents” (p. 81). As is the case for many other students of color, most American Indian students attending college, including those enrolled in tribal colleges, are first-generation college students (Ambler, 2002; Belgarde, 1996) who are often uncomfortable and anxious about being the first members of their families to go to college. Kidwell (1994) also noted, “Students [attending tribal colleges] tend to be adults who have family responsibilities and who are looking for a way to enhance their income levels” (p. 253). Moreover, many Native American students choose tribal colleges because of their proximity to home and low cost, and because they “value culturally relevant higher education” (Wright, as cited in Ortiz & HeavyRunner, 2003, p. 216) available at tribal colleges and universities.

Most tribal college students enroll on a part-time basis and have jobs outside of school (Belgarde, 1996; Fann, 2002). In addition, they stop out more frequently than students at other community colleges, usually because of financial concerns (Fann). The income level of students attending tribal colleges is far below the national average (Belgarde), with an estimated 85% living at or below the poverty level (Fann).

The majority of tribal college students are unmarried women (70%) in their early thirties who have at least one child (Belgarde, 1996; Boyer, 1997; Fann, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics found that in 1996–97, 68 percent of all tribal college degrees were awarded to women (as cited in American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2000). A study conducted by Harder+Company Community Research in 2002–03 for the American Indian College Fund (“Campaign of Hope,” 2003) suggested, however, that the average age of students attending tribal colleges is falling, indicating that greater numbers of American Indian students just graduating from high school may be viewing tribal colleges as a preferred option. Cunningham and Parker (1998) also pointed out that the graduation rates of tribal college students are comparable to those of students attending other community colleges and that a significant proportion of tribal college graduates remain on their reservation to give back to their communities.

In considering the development of students in tribal colleges, the unique characteristics of this population, along with their Native heritage, must be taken into consideration. As a group, these students are older, poorer, less familiar with the college experience, and more likely to be single female parents than students in other college settings. These factors are particularly important as we examine the developmental issues Indian students face, how they address these issues, and ways in which tribal colleges can support them in this process. One advantage for American Indian students attending tribal colleges is that they are in settings that include other students and administrators who look like them and share a common heritage.

## Traditional Student Development Theories

Nevitt Sanford, an early student development theorist, defined devel-

opment as “a positive growth process in which the individual becomes increasingly able to integrate and act on many different experiences and influences” (as cited in Evans et al., 1998, p. 4). Traditional student development theorists have examined how individuals resolve psychosocial issues centering on self-definition and interactions with others (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), the development of cognitive complexity (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1968), and moral decision-making processes (Gilligan, 1977; Kohlberg, 1976). While each of these aspects of development are certainly influenced by the college experiences of Native American students, research has for the most part failed to examine the extent to which current theories are applicable for this population.

Consideration of cultural values is particularly important when considering psychosocial development, since the importance of particular developmental tasks and ways in which individuals address them are strongly influenced by culture. For instance, autonomy is a much more valued trait in White culture than in Native cultures where cooperation and contributing to the good of the group is prized. And interpersonal competence in Native cultures may mean deferring to one's elders and showing respect by avoiding eye contact, while in White culture individuals who forthrightly state their opinions and maintain direct eye contact would be considered interpersonally competent. Unfortunately, no research has specifically examined psychosocial development among American Indian students.

While cognitive development has been hypothesized to be a universal process and many studies have validated Perry's (1968) scheme (see Evans et al., 1998), it was based on White, predominantly male, upper-middle class, traditional-aged students attending an elite private college. Baxter Magolda's (1992) study of cognitive development, while including women, also involved traditional-aged, full-time, overwhelmingly White students. Recently, Love and Guthrie (1999) challenged the assumption that cognitive development is similar for all populations, stressing the important role of culture in this process. They hypothesized that American Indians, because of the value Native cultures place on the group, may exhibit a relational pattern of intellectual development, similar to women in Baxter Magolda's study. However, no studies have specifically examined cognitive development of American Indian students.

Moral development involves the transformation of thinking that occurs relative to what is considered right or necessary when making moral decisions (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Kohlberg (1972) suggested that morality is based on the person's understanding of justice, which he defined as "the primary regard for the value and equality of all human beings, and for reciprocity in human relations" (p. 14). Gilligan (1982) presented a contrasting view of morality centering on care and responsibility and involving the balance between one's own needs and the needs of others that she hypothesized was more indicative of the reasoning process used by women. Arvizu (1995) conducted a study of moral orientation at three tribal colleges (Little Big Horn, Salish Kootenai, and Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institution), finding that, like the White women in a study conducted by Liddell (1990), Indian women had higher Care scores than did Indian and White men. The Indian women also scored higher on Justice than American Indian men or White men and women, contradicting Liddell's finding that, for Whites, men tend to score higher on Justice than women. However, in Arvizu's study, the Care and Justice scores of the Indian students were significantly correlated ( $r = .52$ ), while they were not for the White students in Liddell's sample ( $r = .22$ ). Interviews with students at Little Big Horn College help to explain the latter result. The students indicated that three of the dilemmas on the instrument used, the Measure of Moral Orientation (Liddell; Liddell, Halpin, & Halpin, 1992), made little sense within a Crow context where all relationships are viewed contextually. This finding calls into question the validity of the instrument and, again, points out the importance of interpreting theory and research through a cultural lens.

## Sociocultural Approaches to Adult Development and Learning

Given the limitations of traditional student development theory for understanding American Indian students, exploration of other, potentially more appropriate theories is warranted. Since many Indian students are nontraditional in age, adult development theories are worthy of consideration. Unfortunately, dominant theories of adult development and learning, like traditional student development theories, view these processes as situated within the individual, an assumption that is Eurocentric in nature (Alfred, 2002). However, several innova-

tive approaches have been introduced in recent years that are based on a constructivist perspective. These approaches view culture, context, and community as critical dimensions of development and learning and examine aspects of power and privilege embedded in situations, including educational institutions, in which these processes take place (Alfred). Three sociocultural theories—narrative, situated cognition, and emancipatory learning—have potential for conceptualizing the experiences of American Indian students. Again, we caution that the connections we propose have not been empirically examined.

### Narrative

Pointing out that the assumptions of traditional stage models of development are culturally biased in that they reflect the values of White middle and upper class U.S. society, Rossiter (1999a) argued that educators must focus on assisting students to achieve their own developmental goals rather than forcing students into patterns of growth and development dictated by culturally inappropriate theories. She suggested that narrative offers an approach to understanding development that places control of the developmental process in the hands of individuals themselves as they make meaning of their lives through the stories they create. Narrative theorists argue that change and individuals' responses to it cannot be predicted. Each person's life story and the way it unfolds are unique and must be respected. According to Garrett (1996), the narrative approach is particularly appropriate for American Indian populations that have a strong oral tradition of storytelling. As an example of the utility of this method, Garrett presented an interpretation of the bicultural identity development of a Cherokee elder using the elder's narrative account of his life.

The narrative approach suggests that development is a "storied" process and views "story as a metaphor for human life" (Rossiter, 1999b, p. 77). Relating personal stories gives people a chance to think critically about their experiences, make meaning of them, and look at themselves differently as a result (Chapman, 2004; Clark, 2001). Through telling stories the storyteller changes (Chapman).

Clark (2001) argued that the purpose of personal narrative is to shape a coherent sense of one's life purpose. Coherence consists of two components: continuity and causality (Linde, 1993). Individuals need to

be able to see how the events in their lives hold together and build on each other while also being able to explain changes that take place in their identities over time. To achieve a sense of coherence, personal narratives must be continually reworked to incorporate new perspectives and experiences (Rossiter, 1999b).

Rossiter (1999b) noted that “the narrative approach to development is holistic in that it acknowledges the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions of meaning making. It also takes into account the biological and environmental influences on development” (p. 78). Personal narratives are very much influenced by how people see themselves, what they view as important, and how they interpret happenings, which are all dictated by cultural values and norms. In addition, the reactions of others around them to their stories help persons understand and reframe their experiences (Clark, 2001).

Rossiter (1999b) identified four aspects of narrative—contextual, interpretive, retrospective, and temporal—and went on to explain the contribution of each dimension to an understanding of adult development. The contextual dimension of narrative refers both to the relationship of the event being considered to the person’s goals, values, and other events in his or her life as well as the cultural setting, time, and place in which the event occurs. The individual and the cultural are integrally interconnected in life stories and must be considered as one entity to understand development (Rossiter, 1999a).

In discussing the interpretive dimension, Rossiter (1999b) pointed out that narratives go beyond merely reporting what has occurred; they also involve an explanation of the meaning of the experience for the individual. Through the process of “telling and retelling their stories [people] organize and reorganize their lives” (Hermans, 1999, p. 1210). As such, their identities evolve.

The retrospective aspect of narrative underscores that all narratives are historic—they explain events that have already occurred. As Rossiter (1999b) noted, “often the developmental significance of a decision or event is not recognized until after the fact” (p. 81). An event that is at first interpreted as insignificant may later seem very important in the light of new information, feedback from others, or insight gained as one recounts the story over time.

Rossiter (1999a, 1999b) also discussed the temporal dimension of narrative, noting that narratives are fluid and unfold over time. As the person reflects on the past and anticipates the future, “an understanding of past and future is continually evolving in the present” (Rossiter, 1999b, p. 82). People’s stories constantly change based on passage of time, to whom one is telling the story, the response one receives, and the situation in which the story is told (Hermans, 1999).

Rossiter (1999b) offered implications of the narrative approach to learning. We discuss each in reference to Native American Indian students. First, Rossiter (1999b) stressed that “learners are experts on their own development” (p. 83). Educators need to be respectful of the expertise that tribal college students bring to the setting. By paying attention to the stories shared by students, educators encourage learning and development of insight.

Rossiter (1999b) also noted that “narratives mediate change” (p. 83). Individuals tell stories to make sense of experiences. Situations that create dissonance must be understood to ease discomfort, and stories are developed to explain what is happening (Rossiter, 1999a). Listening carefully to the stories students at tribal colleges share about their experiences can provide educators with information about the impact—positive or negative—that college is creating.

The third point Rossiter (1999b) made is that “the telling of the life narrative leads [to] development” (p. 83). Providing opportunities for tribal college students to share narratives about their decisions to enroll in college, their experiences in college, and the role a college education plays in their lives is a way to enable students to make sense of the new experiences they are having and incorporate them into their larger life narrative. This process enables them to take control over their experiences.

Finally, Rossiter (1999b) explained that “adults re-story their lives in the process of transformative learning” (p. 84). In creating or modifying one’s life story, development occurs that can change the direction of one’s life by expanding one’s perspective, uncovering the limitations of one’s current way of thinking, and encouraging actions that are new for the person. As Native students tell their college-going stories, new ways of thinking about themselves, their goals, and their potential

open up. Educators must ensure that opportunities for self-expression and meaning-making are provided to students in tribal colleges.

Hermans (1999) stressed the importance of the listener in the storytelling process. In summarizing the role of educators who view development through a narrative lens, Rossiter (1999a) explained,

It is a process of coming to understand, in which the emphasis is on listening and receiving rather than on analysis, explanation, or categorization. . . . When we understand development as the unfolding of life story, we can assume the role of engaged audience member as we come to know learners . . . and wait in hopeful puzzlement for the story of each learner to make sense. (p. 69)

### Situated Cognition

Theorists who take a situated cognition perspective view learning as based in the context in which individuals find themselves rather than as an internal process (Fenwick, 2000; Wilson, 1993). As Wilson wrote, “adults no longer learn from experience, they learn in it, as they act in situations and are acted upon by situations” (p. 75). In any particular situation, the individual, the surrounding setting and culture, the available learning tools, and the activity in which the person is engaged are tightly intertwined (Fenwick).

According to Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989), learning must involve culture, activity, and concept as these three components cannot be understood separately. Clancey (1997) explained, “Every human thought and action is adapted to the environment, that is, *situated*, because what people *perceive*, and how they *conceive of their activity*, and what they *physically do* develop together” (pp. 1–2). The meaning of a situation and the truth of knowledge obtained cannot be determined without considering what is significant in the context (Fenwick, 2000). Knowledge is socially constructed and learning occurs through the process of social interaction; it takes place as people interact in a particular cultural context (Brown et al., 1989; Hansman, 2001; Wilson, 1993). In this process of social exchange, learners become more self-confident and more involved in the community as they come to view their participation as more meaningful personally and to others (Fenwick, 2000).

Unfortunately, most educational practices are based on a model that presumes that “knowledge is individual and self-structured, that schools are neutral with respect to what is learned and that concepts are abstract, relatively fixed, and unaffected by the activity through which they are acquired and used” (Brown et al., 1989, p. 37). Brown et al. argued that a more appropriate educational approach is “cognitive apprenticeship” (p. 37) in which students are introduced to meaningful practices through active engagement in group settings similar to apprenticeship programs used to train craftspeople. Undertaking a significant task associated with an activity with which the student is familiar reinforces that the student already possesses important knowledge that can be used as new tasks are encountered. As students work on tasks in different ways, they learn that more than one solution is possible. Collaboratively, they develop methods for solving problems through discussion and exchange of ideas, and in the process become contributing members of the community and culture. Important aspects of group learning include: solving problems as a collective, assuming different roles in the process of completing the task, pointing out strategies that do not work and assumptions that are off-target, and developing skills of working together (Brown et al.).

Fenwick (2000) stressed that “the educator’s role is not to develop individuals but to help them participate meaningfully in the practices they choose to enter” (p. 254). Situating learning in meaningful, authentic locations rather than those that are artificially constructed is crucial (Brown et al., 1989; Hansman, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Learning must take place “in the real world of human activity” and in “the culture in which the knowing and learning have meaning” (Wilson, 1993, p. 77). Learners learn best from each other within communities that share a common purpose and goal, particularly when they are given responsibility and authority to determine their own learning experiences (Hansman). To accomplish this goal, educators need to engage in a process of enculturation; first modeling behavior using appropriate tools in authentic activities, then serving as coaches as students become more engaged, and finally empowering students to take on increasingly independent responsibility for the activity (Brown et al., 1989).

Some research has investigated learning styles of American Indian students, mostly at the precollege levels. In summarizing this body of lit-

erature, Hilberg and Tharp (2002) concluded that American Indian students tend to demonstrate “(a) a global, or holistic, style of organizing information, (b) a visual style of mentally representing information in thinking, (c) a preference for a more reflective style in processing information, and (d) a preference for a collaborative approach to task completion” (n. p.). They recommended that educators use observational as well as collaborative instructional techniques and present information using holistic and visual methods to enhance learning when working with American Indian students. Principles of situated cognition appear to be compatible with these styles.

### Emancipatory Learning

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator who worked with impoverished peasants, wrote about the potential of education to transform society (Freire, 1970, 1973). He believed that social change would only occur if individuals were empowered and that educators have a responsibility to help individuals achieve this goal (Clark, 1993; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). According to Freire (1970), liberation should be the end point of education; this goal, which Freire called praxis, is defined as “the action and reflection of men [*sic*] upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 66). Freire contended that both action and reflection are necessary for a person to be whole (Manning, 1994). He also saw people as being responsible for the society in which they live (Clark, 1993).

Embedded in Freire’s approach is an understanding of the roles played by power and oppression in education as well as more broadly in society (Baumgartner, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). As Merriam and Caffarella noted, “Education for Freire is never neutral” (p. 324). Traditionally, it has been the vehicle by which dominant groups have indoctrinated oppressed groups to accept their station in life and the norms established by those in power. In contrast, Freire saw education as having the potential to enable people to think critically, see themselves as having power, and take action to transform society, a process Freire (1973) called conscientization. Freire (1970, 1973) identified a three-stage process in the development of conscientization: (a) a fatalistic level in which individuals unquestioningly accept the authority of those in power and assume change is impossible; (b) a midpoint where people begin to question the status quo and start to realize that

they may have some role in the way their lives unfold; and (c) critical consciousness, where people develop an understanding of the forces that contribute to privilege and oppression and become convinced that they can create change that will lead to a more equitable society and a better life for themselves and others (Merriam & Caffarella). Movement through these stages occurs as a result of reflecting on one's situation, taking action to change the situation based on new understanding gained through this reflection, and then critically reflecting on what one has done (Freire, 1970).

In the "problem-posing" educational process that Freire introduced, teachers and students engage in dialogue to "humanize and liberate" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 324). Freire (1970) advocated a collaborative approach to education that calls on students to take an active role in their learning. By examining the circumstances of their lives, learners' consciousness is raised and they are empowered to take action to resolve issues they face (Manning, 1994; Merriam & Caffarella). In this process educators must view and treat students as equals rather than in the paternalistic manner often demonstrated by educators who see themselves as being superior to the students with whom they work (Manning).

While Freire's theory has most frequently been used to guide literacy campaigns in third world countries (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), its potential for application in tribal college settings is evident. Education has been used throughout U.S. history to oppress American Indian people by indoctrination into a White view of the world and attempts to obliterate American Indian culture and history (Garrett, 1996). Tribal colleges, controlled by American Indians, have the opportunity to create an educational system based on Freire's principles of dialogue, praxis, and conscientization in which American Indian students are empowered to transform their consciousness and change their lives.

## Acculturation and Identity Development

Recently, theorists have begun examining the process of acculturation and identity development in the lives of Native American Indians. It seems likely that the tribal college environment could have a significant influence on both processes. Unfortunately, little research has

directly examined this hypothesis; the following discussion will overview acculturation and identity development theories and suggest some ways in which tribal college attendance might affect development in these areas.

## Acculturation

While many writers have assumed that acculturation involves unidirectional movement from a traditional culture to a majority culture (e.g., Atkinson, Lowe, & Matthews, 1995), Berry (2003) argued, "It is essential to make the distinction between orientations toward one's own group and toward other groups" (p. 22). In the case of American Indians, Choney, Berryhill-Paapke, and Robbins (1995) described acculturation as "the degree to which the individual . . . accepts and adheres to both the majority (White/Euro-American) and tribal cultural values" (p. 76). Garrett (1996 [adapted from LaFromboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1990, p. 638]) identified four basic levels of acculturation for American Indians:

1. *Traditional*—Generally speak and think in their native language; practice only traditional customs and beliefs.
2. *Marginal*—May speak both the native language and English; may not, however, fully accept the cultural heritage and practices of their tribal group nor fully identify with mainstream cultural values and behaviors.
3. *Bicultural*—Generally accepted by dominant society; simultaneously able to know, accept, and practice both mainstream values and the traditional values and beliefs of their cultural heritage.
4. *Assimilated*—Generally accepted by dominant society; embrace only mainstream culture and values. (p. 2)

Choney et al. (1995) viewed acculturation as a more complex, fluid process. Their model depicts four areas of human functioning consistent with the domains of the medicine wheel (an Indian way of conceptualizing the human condition based on the Circle of Life): cognitive, behavioral, affective/spiritual, and social/environmental. Different levels of acculturation—traditional, transitional, bicultural, assimilated, or marginal—may occur within each of these areas. Choney et al. noted, "Responses unique to each level represent ways of coping

developed according to influences and demands of each individual's environment and the context or social situation in which responses occur" (p. 85). They also stressed, "No value judgments are placed on any level of acculturation" (p. 85). However, Garrett (1996) saw bicultural competence as an important goal for American Indians in that it is associated with a strong sense of self as well as the ability to successfully negotiate across cultural boundaries. Garrett hypothesized that American Indian students who were bicultural would experience less difficulty in college because of their comfort with a wider range of social situations and interaction patterns.

Because American Indians can fall into any level of acculturation, it is difficult to say at which level most students attending tribal colleges operate. However, Choney et al. (1995) noted that American Indians "who remain on reservations . . . tend to have different cultural values than do those [who reside in urban areas and] experience societal influences (i.e., economic, social, educational) that serve as catalysts for cultural change" (p. 75). Because tribal colleges are committed to preserving the traditional values of Native culture while preparing students to function effectively within White American society, they are likely to have a powerful influence on the development of a bicultural identity. As Kidwell (1994) noted, although the educational history of American Indians has been one associated with forced assimilation and loss of identity, education has also proven to be "a bridge of communication" (p. 254) between American Indians and dominant American society. This is particularly the case in tribal colleges.

### Identity Development

Harris (1995) defined identity as "an individual's sense of uniqueness, of knowing who one is, and who one is not" (p. 1). As Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested, developing a clear sense of one's identity is an important developmental task that students often address in college. A significant aspect of identity development is defining the roles that ethnicity and race will play in one's life. While race and ethnicity are often equated, they are distinct concepts. Helms (1990) defined racial identity as "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3). Ethnic identity, on the other hand, refers to identification with "a segment of a larger society whose members

are thought, by themselves and others, to have a common origin and to share segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients” (Yinger, 1976, p. 200). Sadowsky, Kwan, and Pannu (1995) noted that race is a social construction “based on a sociopolitical model of oppression” (p. 133), while ethnicity is not linked to such a model. They did, however, acknowledge that members of ethnic groups often experience prejudice “when their ways of life come into conflict with those of the White dominant group” (p. 133).

Identity development among Native Americans is complex. As Horse (2001) stated, “Those who are searching for a single racial identity model that fits all American Indians are cautioned that such a model would assume coherent and commonly held ideas of race and ethnicity among American Indians. Such may not be the case, given the wide diversity among Indian peoples” (p. 91).

Horse (2001) described American Indian identity development as a three-tier process. It begins with the family and/or clan affiliation, then the tribal group, and finally the general Indian population. Indians place their families and tribal affiliations before themselves. Acceptance by the tribe, as well as self-identity as an Indian, is important. For Indians, acculturation may be the most important aspect of identity development (Choney et al., 1995; Garrett, 1996; Horse).

Language plays an important role in the identity of American Indians. Horse (2001) noted, “For many Indians, the task of language preservation is synonymous with identity preservation” (p. 93). Sage (1997) further explained, “A cultural change must take place when language from another and different culture is adopted, for whatever reason” (p. 37). It is important to American Indians that their native languages continue to be used from one generation to the next, as language is not only a part of their cultural identities but also their heritages.

Horse (2001) identified several factors that influence the individual and group consciousness of American Indians:

1. how well one is grounded in the native language and culture;
2. whether one’s genealogical heritage as an Indian is valid;
3. whether one embraces a general philosophy or worldview that

- derives from distinctly Indian ways—that is, old traditions;
4. the degree to which one thinks of him or herself in a certain way—that is, one's own idea of self as an Indian person; and
  5. whether one is officially recognized as a member of a tribe by the government of that tribe. (p. 100)

While one's early upbringing is the most influential factor in developing one's consciousness of what it means to be an American Indian, tribal colleges are playing an important role in enhancing identity development among American Indian students, as discussed in the following section.

## How Tribal Colleges Influence the Development of American Indian Students

At the most basic level, as Boyer (1997) pointed out, “tribal colleges offer access to higher education” (p. 58). They provide opportunities for American Indian students to pursue higher education in a supportive, comfortable environment. Because tribal colleges offer the opportunity to complete a GED, admit anyone with a GED or high school degree, and are located on reservations, students who do not have access to other institutions of higher education or who are intimidated, afraid, or uncomfortable in a non-Native environment are able to learn and grow (Ambler, 2002). As Amiotte and Allen stated, “One of the key reasons for the tribal colleges' success has been the belief and practice that students can remain Indian, can practice tribal traditions and retain tribal values and also be successful students” (as cited in Pavel & Colby, 1992, p. 1).

Second, an important part of the mission of these colleges is the preservation of tribal language and culture (Boyer, 1997; HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003; Horse, 2001); and students attending these colleges find themselves in institutions that support and deepen their spirit, values, and traditions. For perhaps the first time, students who attend tribal colleges are encouraged to learn about their heritage (Boyer). As a result, they develop self-respect, pride in themselves as American Indians, and a stronger sense of personal and tribal identity (Boyer). Tribal colleges enhance understanding of tribal cul-

ture both through the curriculum and by using teaching techniques that are grounded in American Indian values and philosophy (Boyer; Cunningham & Parker, 1998). For instance, cooperative learning activities replace academic competition, students are allowed to retake tests until they succeed, and natural phenomena are studied through direct observation (Boyer). In addition, tribal colleges encourage scholarship related to American Indian history, language, and culture and support collections of American Indian oral histories, documents, and records that promote cultural learning (Cunningham & Parker). These educational practices reflect the principles of situated cognition and emancipatory learning discussed earlier.

Third, tribal colleges are aware of and respond to the unique needs of their students, such as providing transportation and daycare centers, which enable poor students with families to stay enrolled (Boyer, 1997). Faculty and staff know their students well and help them address academic and personal issues they may face, offering academic advising, career planning, tutoring, study skills assistance, financial counseling, and alcohol and substance abuse counseling (Boyer). Tribal colleges also provide opportunities for mentoring. Mankiller (1991) cited mentoring programs that connect senior level Native students, faculty, and staff with incoming first-year students as “one of the most effective college-level retention mechanisms” (p. 6) for American Indian students. Belgarde (1996) noted that tribal colleges provide assistance not only for enrolled students but also for their families, supporting the American Indian cultural value of connectedness and family orientation.

Fourth, tribal colleges provide seamless learning opportunities between local tribal communities, colleges and universities, and K-12 education. Barden (2003) described the importance of local, regional, national, and international community partnerships with tribal colleges and universities that have aided in providing learning opportunities for students and community members. In addition, Barden also discussed how tribal colleges and universities collaborate with one another; such “intra and intertribal partnerships” (p. 119) benefit both members of the college and local communities. Benham (2002) highlighted several successful programs across the nation that connect tribal colleges with the local native community. One example is Brigham Young University – Hawaii, in which an advisory committee com-

posed of members from the local native community, elders, students, and educators founded a cultural center aimed at scholarship and learning “that teaches native values and languages, and creates cultural-educational projects that involve community organizations” (p. 4). It is clear that tribal colleges have made inroads to establish connections and partnerships with community agencies that reinforce the importance of community as an integral piece in the learning process that goes beyond the walls of the academy. Again, these efforts appear to successfully use concepts associated with sociocultural theories of learning.

Finally, tribal colleges help to prepare many students for the transition to a 4-year institution off the reservation. The experiences students have at tribal colleges contribute to their development by increasing their understanding of other higher education opportunities. Many tribal colleges also provide specific programs designed to inform students of what to expect at predominantly White institutions and how to best handle such an environment (Cunningham & Parker, 1998). American Indian students who attend tribal colleges and then move on to predominantly White 4-year institutions are four times as likely to complete degrees as Indian students who go straight to institutions off the reservation (Cunningham & Parker). Boyer (1997) pointed out that tribal colleges produce graduates who “leave with both a better understanding of their own cultures and the ability to take part in the larger American society” (pp. 25–26). And, most importantly, students who attend tribal colleges leave empowered to negotiate the boundaries between their Native culture and dominant American culture. Gagnon (1997) described tribal colleges as “institutionalized avenues of cultural brokering” where students learn to “balance the integrity” of the two cultures (p. 15).

Achieving this sense of empowerment is perhaps the most significant developmental outcome of attending a tribal college. Faculty and administrators at tribal colleges “develop strategies and policies that emerge from a vision of working *with* Native Americans toward a participatory goal of emancipation and empowerment” (Tierney, 1996, p. 311). This goal not only assists students to succeed at tribal colleges and in other institutions of higher education they may attend, but also to develop as competent, self-aware individuals who have a strong sense of who they are and what they want to accomplish for themselves and for their tribes.

## Implications for Practice and Research

The lack of research specifically examining student development in tribal colleges and development of American Indian students generally is of concern, particularly for educators working in tribal colleges. The most obvious implication to come out of our literature review is the need for studies of all aspects of American Indian student development and the impact of the tribal college environment on student development. Qualitative approaches seem particularly appropriate, given the cultural bias found in existing instruments and the need to hear the voices of American Indian students within a cultural context. Until such time as research gives educators better data to support their efforts, existing student development theories and models of acculturation and identity development must be considered within the context of American Indian cultural values and worldview. Educators must not assume that theory based on White populations is necessarily applicable to American Indian populations or that all Indian populations are the same. That said, existing theory still provides a starting point when considering aspects of development that are likely to be effected by tribal college attendance and environmental factors that can potentially enhance development.

Because of the clear and culturally grounded missions of tribal colleges, their small size, and the commitment of tribal college faculty and staff to their students' success, these environments are powerful forces in the personal and academic development of American Indian students. The empowered, self-aware, and skilled graduates of tribal colleges are well prepared to combat the oppression American Indians continue to experience and actively demonstrate the unique contributions that Native people are prepared to make to American society.

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