



College Choice and Transition Experiences of First-year Native American Students at the University of Arizona

A mixed-method approach

NOVEMBER 2016



THE UNIVERSITY
OF ARIZONA

Acknowledgments

College Choice and Transition Experiences of first-year Native American students at the University of Arizona (UA) was conducted by members of the UA's Center for the Study of Higher Education (HED), which has significant representation of Native graduate students, and a noteworthy service learning initiative, Native SOAR (Student Outreach, Access, and Resilience), that has earned national recognition. The study was designed by Native¹ doctoral students in consultation and guidance with HED faculty, as part of a larger initiative, the Native American Applied Research Initiative (NAARI).

Support was provided by the UA Executive Office of the President and the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management.

Many thanks to LuAnn Leonard (Tohono O'odham/Hopi), a member of the Arizona Board of Regents, who stressed the need to understand the experiences of Native American students as they transition to a university. We would also like to thank the Native graduate students who sparked this conversation including Natalie R. Youngbull, Christine Nelson, and Greg Redhouse. We also would like to thank the advisory members who helped us in the initial phase of this report including Kasey Urquidez, Rudy McCormick, Steven Martin, Angela Baldasare, Christine Salvenson, and Jeff Orgera. We thank Dr. Jenny Lee and Native SOAR for their support in the completion of this report. Moreover, thank you to Amanda Cheromiah for the images throughout the report. Last but not least, we would like to thank the Native students and family members who shared their stories with us.

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*The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent an endorsement of the funders.

¹Native American students are a racialized and political group on college campuses, coming from specific cultural (ethnic) orientations, and frequently representing sovereign nations (Brayboy, 2005). We use a variety of terms for Native American in this report. They include Native American, American Indian, Native, Indigenous, and specific Tribal affiliations. The wide variety of terms is indicative of the diversity and racialized/political status of this population.

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All photography courtesy of Amanda Cheromiah

Executive Summary



The purpose of this research report, as of the larger Native American Applied Research Initiative (NAARI) is to move “beyond the asterisk” (Shotton, Lowe, and Waterman, 2013) in regard to data about and the success of Native college students. In too many cases, scholarship and institutional research about college students have limited data on Native students that studies and reports represent Natives with an asterisk or footnote referring to non-representation of Native students because of the small or insignificant numbers for the study. At the University of Arizona (UA), data gathering efforts have experienced low response rates by Native students to surveys. A principal purpose of the NAARI and this report is to generate practice-relevant data about college choice, transition, and first year experiences of Native American students.

In reporting results from our study, we consider students’ perspectives on how practices at the UA are facilitating and inhibiting access, validating and invalidating a sense of belonging, and overall success for first-year Native students. We highlight parent perspectives and their concerns with their student transitioning from home to a university. We also report on key methodological steps toward conducting inclusive research with Native students. Lastly, we offer recommendations to foster effective data gathering that lends to developing robust strategies for improving Native college students’ access, engagement, educational persistence, and graduation.

Our results are broken into four sections: 1) methodology: inclusive research with Natives, 2) college choice: family-centered process 3) first-year experiences: transition and sense of belonging, and 4) parent perspectives: financial fear and disconnection.

Methodology: Inclusive Research with Natives

- ▶ Working with Native American Student Affairs (and other Native-centered programs) helped increase response rates of institutional student surveys.
- ▶ The study was a mixed-methods approach that included “sharing circles,” an Indigenous qualitative method, to gain an in-depth perspective of Native students’ experiences.
- ▶ Family (e.g. parent/s) perspectives expanded a greater understanding of Native students’ transition experiences.

- ▶ Collaborating with Native Nations is important to improving college success of their Tribal citizens and in future Native Nation building.

College Choice: Family-centered process

- ▶ Early intentions (elementary age) and the home community environment (where most adults in the community were college educated) influenced Native students' college enrollment.
- ▶ Native students were more likely to have been counseled by a teacher or counselor to attend a community college rather than a university.
- ▶ Advisement from parents, teachers, and university representatives influenced Native students' decision to attend the UA.
- ▶ The UA's proximity to a student's home played a vital role in their college choice. Financial aid support and UA scholarships significantly influenced students to attend the UA.
- ▶ Parents and family members are crucial allies for higher education institutions to improve college success of Native students.

First-Year Experiences: Transition and Sense of Belonging

- ▶ During the first weeks of college, Native students felt isolated after being separated from family.
- ▶ Native students felt disconnected when they were unable to practice their Native ceremonies on campus and frustrated with a lack of support for engaging in these ceremonies.
- ▶ Native students experienced racism from non-Natives on campus and through social media, which further marginalized them.
- ▶ Going home on a regular basis and obtaining family support are sources of strength for Native students to persist in college.
- ▶ Native American Student Affairs and Native specific programs across campus served as a cultural affirming and validating place for Native students.

Parent Perspectives: Financial fears and disconnection

- ▶ Parents struggled to pay for the increasing cost of college creating financial hardship and fear.
- ▶ Parents were concerned with college hidden costs, and wanted the institution to provide an explanatory and understandable billing statement of all associated costs such as student fees, recreation fees, etc.
- ▶ Tribal scholarship and college loan processes were unclear, and generated confusion and frustration.

- ▶ Parents supported their student by utilizing and sacrificing unconventional means to pay for college, such as early withdrawal of 401K plans, pawning jewelry, and cashing in aluminum cans.
- ▶ Parents felt an impersonal connection to the university. Most times, their only communication from the university were billing statements or notices about money being owed.
- ▶ Functions at the university (e.g., Family Weekend) are expensive and did not foster parents' sense of feeling part of a community that understands and respects their dire economic situation.

Based on our findings, we outline key recommendations to the UA. These recommendations serve as starting points toward making changes that will enhance Native student success at the UA.

1. Enhance and expand the current research project on Native college students to improve Native college student success.
2. Engage Native community perspectives that will foster students' connection to home and family.
3. Build and foster a relational bridge between Native families and the UA.
4. Create a comprehensive college financial awareness and planning program for parents.

In studies and reports about college students, Native students are not included, or are an asterisk indicating that their numbers are too small to be included in studies. This lack of representation of Native students in the research has detrimental repercussions in trying to understand and address what we can do to improve college success of Native students. This study helps us to better understand the challenges first-year Native students face in college and how we can develop effective institutional practices that will facilitate their success.



Background & Context



Native American students are a small but growing population on college campuses nationally. At the UA, enrollment for Native American students have steadily increased; however, in 2012 those rates decreased (1,097) and continue to lag behind the rates of underrepresented ethnic minority and students. In 2014, the total enrollment of Native students reached 1,201 (2.84% of the total White population of 42,236). The number of Native American first-time, full-time freshmen has also decreased, from an all-time high of 212 in 2010 to a drastic low of 144 in 2012 (Arizona Board of Regents, 2014). The decreased number of Native American student enrollees indicates that there is much room for improvement at the UA not only in terms of enrollment rates, but also in terms of persistence and graduation rates. As of 2013, the first year persistence rate of Native Americans at the UA was about 75.9%, compared to about 83% among White students. The four-year graduation rate of Native American freshmen students starting in 2010 is 22.6%, compared to 46% of White students. Six-year graduation rates among Native American freshmen starting in 2008 is 45%, compared to 62% for White students (Arizona Board of Regents, 2016). Unfortunately, a large attainment gap continues, with Native American students having the lowest enrollment, retention, and graduation rates among underrepresented and White student populations.

There is scant research on the college experiences of Native American undergraduates, especially with regard to their transition to college and their first-year experiences.

Too often, the research literature provides only a footnote or an asterisk about Native Americans, indicating that the numbers are too small that they cannot be included in the study. There is also a tendency to aggregate all ethnic minorities together to address problems and develop programs in a “one size fits all” approach (McClellan, 2003). As a result, most higher education institutions have not developed sufficiently disaggregated data practices for ethnic minority students, which in the case of Native American students, results in a failing effort to recognize their distinctive histories, culture, and current situations. Without the research, professionals in higher education have little to no guidance on how to better serve Native students and close the educational achievement gap.

The UA has an opportunity to be at the forefront of developing culturally effective practices, based on research, to enhance the experience and success of Native American students. Founded in 1885 as the state's land grant university, the UA has an obligation to serve Arizona's Native Nations. Notably, the UA is on the ancestral lands of the O'odham people, a recognition that remains embedded in the hearts and minds of Native people. This initiative is the beginning of positioning the UA as a leader to advance the success of Native American students.



Methodology: Inclusive Research with Natives



TRIBAL SUPPORT

A necessary initial step in our work was to first consult with Native Nations and to inform them of the study and get their input and support. The core research team (faculty and students from Higher Education) reached out to four Native Nations: Hopi, Navajo, Tohono O'odham, and Pascua Yaqui. These Tribes were chosen because of the large numbers of their students who are enrolled at the UA. The tribes were supportive of the research study and exempted a more formal research approval process since the data gathering would be conducted off their Tribal lands. However, each Tribe advised us to inform them of the findings of the study as the information could potentially be of benefit to their Nation.

OUR APPROACH

Using an exploratory mixed method approach designed to yield both a broader and a deeper understanding of Native American first-year student's experiences, we explored the following research questions:

1. *What are the perspectives and experiences of entering Native American students?*
2. *What factors influence Native American students' college choice and how is this similar and/or different from their non-Native peers?*
3. *What factors and characteristics contribute and inhibit to Native American students' sense of belonging?*
4. *What are the experiences of the parents of Native American college students as it pertains to supporting a successful transition to college and to overall student success?*



Data for this project derived from three sources: Institutional records housed by the UA Office of Institutional Research and Planning Support (OIRPS); two surveys developed and administered through the Division of Student Affairs and the Center for the Study of Higher Education (UA Entering Student Survey and Follow-Up Survey); and sharing circles with Native American students and parents.

Quantitative Method. The surveys focused on a broad set of constructs, which include demographic characteristics, college choice process, sense of belonging on campus, mentoring/support, and student involvement on campus. All first time, full time UA students were invited to complete the surveys. The final sample yielded $n=4,035$ students completing the survey representing 58% of the entering class. Increased attention for data gathering was given during the summer of 2012 to increase the response rates of Native American students.

A total of 124 (86% of the entering Native freshman) self-identified first-year Native American students participated in the Entering Student Survey and 34 (23% of the entering Native freshman) students participated in the Follow-up Survey.

Generally, having a 15% survey response rate is a good indicator. Having 86% and 23% of the entering Native freshman take part in the surveys was an excellent indicator. Overall, we had over 28 Tribal affiliations represented.

Qualitative and Indigenous Method: Sharing Circles. To gain a deeper understanding of Native students' perspectives and experiences, sharing circles were conducted. Sharing circles are an open-structured, conversational style methodology that respects story sharing within a Tribal cultural protocol context (Kovach, 2009). The development of the sharing circle protocol was informed by scholarly literature (e.g., Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, in press), and by experiential practice as several of the research team members are Native American and work closely with Native college students. Sharing circles are traditional Indigenous forms of communication to discuss issues and topics in a supportive and non-confrontational manner (Rothe, Ozegovic, & Carroll, 2009). Participants involved in a sharing circle have greater control on what is discussed, allowing for all who participate an opportunity to offer input. Furthermore, sharing circles potentially allow for students to "tell the collective story" as a way to cyclically "give back" (Lavelle, 2009) and increase success for future Native students. We maintained consistency in our data gathering with the student sharing circles by following similar constructs developed in the quantitative approach, particularly for the college choice section of the study.

We also conducted sharing circles with parents. Our purpose in interviewing parents was to further understand and examine their students' experiences as we recognized the value and influence that family has on Native college student success (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). For the parents the constructs that we focused on included, but were not limited to knowledge about college, familiarity with the college preparation process (orientation, financial aid, residence life, student support services, etc.), and family expectations and support system at home.

A total of 7 student sharing circles were conducted yielding a total of 24 student participants during the spring 2012 and fall 2013 semesters. Students in the sharing circles were recruited from Native American Student Affairs, and this had the unintended outcome of sampling a large portion of students who grew up on tribal reservations (n=10, 43.4%). The sharing circle data represented more reservation high school students, which was substantially higher than those in the survey data. A total of 5 parent sharing circles were conducted yielding a total of 19 parent participants during the summer and fall 2013 semester. The Tribal representation of these sharing circles included Hopi, Pascua Yaqui, Tohono O'odham, and Navajo. Student sharing circles occurred on the UA campus. Parent sharing circles occurred in Gallup, New Mexico and in Flagstaff and in Tucson, Arizona. All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT AFFAIRS (NASA) AND AFFILIATED OFFICES/STAFF THAT PROVIDE TARGETED NATIVE STUDENT SUPPORT

To meet our goal of increasing the response rates of Native American students for the Entering Student and the Follow-Up Survey, we partnered with NASA and other affiliated offices/staff that work closely with Native students. The following are ways we worked with those areas:

- ▶ NASA staff helped us create an appropriate recruitment flyer/email that increased Native student participation. For example, a tailored recruitment email was disseminated to all Native undergraduates. The email was sent on behalf of Principal Investigators, Karen Francis-Begay (Assistant Vice President for Tribal Relations) and Gary Rhoades (Department Head of Center for Higher Education). The email acknowledged both PI's background (e.g., tribal affiliation) and connection to prior work in advocating for underrepresented populations.
- ▶ NASA disseminated information of our research study through their various communication outlets (e.g., listservs, social network).
- ▶ NASA invited us to events where Native students would be present. We were able to share the research study and invite them to participate.
- ▶ We connected with key people on campus who have direct contact with Native students such as the Resident Assistant of the O'odham Ki: Wing (a Native American living community), the instructor of the American Indian Studies freshman success course, and Native American clubs and organizations. Through these avenues, we were able to effectively recruit Native students for the research study.



College Choice



Student college choice is the prevailing way of framing the decision making process to continue formal education beyond high school (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provide a three-phase model: predisposition, search, and choice to help us understand what a student goes through when selecting and attending a college. In the predisposition phase, students first determine whether or not they would like to continue their formal education beyond high school. The search phase is where students search for the attributes and values that colleges possess, and then identify which colleges to consider based upon those learned attributes and values. Lastly, the choice phase is when students decide which college to attend. We examined each stage of the college choice process (predisposition, search, and choice) and the influence of multiple factors at each phase. We did this by first analyzing the results from the Entering Freshman Survey. We then conducted sharing circles to get a deeper understanding of the college choice process for Native students.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS ON COLLEGE CHOICE

Predisposition stage

For the predisposition stage, we explored what factors influenced Native and non-Native (White and Latino/a) students' decision to pursue higher education. We focused on students' experiences, sources of knowledge, and college choice attitudes.

For students' experiences, results indicated that the community environment and participating in a UA college tour impacted Native and non-Native students' college interest. Peers and the community were very important during the predisposition stage. We found that Native students attended colleges where a majority of their high school peers were also enrolled in college. Furthermore, if students lived in a neighborhood or community where most of the adults graduated from college, that educated environment influenced students' college enrollment. Lastly, visiting the UA and participating in a campus tour, impacted students' decision to attend the UA.

When we analyzed factors among Native and non-Native students' experiences, we found a relationship between Native and White students' experiences with the FAFSA (Free Application

for Federal Student Aid) and need-based financial aid. Completing the FAFSA and being eligible for need-based aid had a significant influence on Native and White students' decision to go to college. This makes sense given that the FAFSA is a key step in preparation to go to college. When students learned that they were financial need eligible that also increased their decision to attend college.

For sources of college knowledge, which are the individuals (high school teachers, high school counselors, mother/female guardian, and father/male guardian) who influenced students' college decision process, we again found that Native and White students shared similar sources of knowledge. High school teachers and father/male guardians were sources of influence. This is an important factor to note, especially given the scholarly attention on the important role school counselors have in college planning (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2009) and the lack of father figures in Native families (Tachine, 2015).

Lastly, for the college choice attitudes construct, planning to attend college from an early age (elementary school) impacted Native and non-Native students' decision to go to college. Particularly for Native students, these results align with the National Indian Education Study Part II report that found a majority of fourth and eighth grade Native students had indicated that they were thinking about attending college (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012).

For Native and Latino/a students specifically, there were minimal distinctions on the college choice attributes based on the constructs selected. These results suggest that Native and Latino students sought other college knowledge sources that we did not survey for. What we may be seeing in this stage is more of a reliance on the community environment in shaping their college choice pathways. More research on these particular populations in this specific time frame (pre-disposition) needs further attention.



Table 1*Predisposition results of t-test for Native American and Latino Students*

	Native American			Latino				
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	t	df
Predisposition Experiences								
I attended an SAT/ACT test preparation workshop	.42	.499	43	.33	.471	643	1.173	684
I took an official tour of the University of Arizona campus	.37	.489	43	.53	.5	643	-1.994	684**
I completed the FAFSA and I am eligible for need-based financial aid	.86	.351	43	.8	.401	639	.970	680
The majority of graduating seniors from my high school attend a four-year university	.38	.492	42	.6	.49	635	-2.826	675**
Most of the adults in my community/neighborhood have graduated from college	.21	.412	43	.43	.495	632	-2.839	673**
Sources of Knowledge								
High school teachers	2.56	1.053	43	2.44	.972	665	.764	706
High school teachers	2.40	1.041	43	2.72	1.024	664	-0.596	705
Mother/female guardian	2.65	.923	43	2.36	1.029	661	1.799	702
Mother/female guardian	2.05	1.022	43	2.19	1.066	657	-0.859	698
College Choice Attitudes and Experiences								
The decision to attend college was made on my own, without the assistance from others	3.34	.911	41	3.32	.856	624	.186	663
Prior to college I have a teacher encourage me to go college	3.44	.743	41	3.27	.873	619	1.189	658
I have been planning to attend college since elementary school	3.51	.810	41	3.73	.606	622	-2.129	661*

Example: *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 2*Predisposition results of t-test for Native American and White Students*

	Native American			White				
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	t	df
Predisposition Experiences								
I attended an SAT/ACT test preparation workshop	.42	.499	43	.40	.490	1830	.275	1871
I took an official tour of the University of Arizona campus	.37	.489	43	.61	.489	1831	-3.089	1872**
I completed the FAFSA and I am eligible for need-based financial aid	.86	.351	43	.49	.500	1816	4.792	43.994***
The majority of graduating seniors from my high school attend a four-year university	.38	.492	42	.78	.415	1821	-6.110	1861***
Most of the adults in my community/neighborhood have graduated from college	.21	.412	43	.80	.401	1813	-9.517	1854***
Sources of Knowledge								
High school teachers	2.56	1.053	43	2.11	.913	1893	3.156	1934**
High school counselors	2.40	1.041	43	2.40	1.041	1893	1.388	1934
Mother/female guardian	2.65	.923	43	2.64	1.005	1895	0.54	1936
Father/male guardian	2.05	1.022	43	2.57	1.046	1888	-3.236	1929***
College Choice Attitudes and Experiences								
The decision to attend college was made on my own, without the assistance from others	3.34	.911	41	3.27	.851	1790	.503	1829
Prior to college I have a teacher encourage me to go college	3.44	.743	41	3.25	.928	1778	1.304	1817
I have been planning to attend college since elementary school	3.51	.810	41	3.83	.519	1785	-3.794	1824***

Example: *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Search stage

In the search stage, where students search for attributes and values that colleges possess, all students were influenced by either a counselor or teacher advising them to attend a community college.

These results may explain a teacher or counselor providing all the higher education options that students can pursue, including community colleges. However, careful attention is needed to avoid a “cooling out” effect (Clark, 1960) such that community colleges may limit students’ potential to acquire a bachelor’s degree.

Table 3*Search results of t-test for Native American and Latino Students*

	Native American			Latino			t	df
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n		
My choice of colleges was limited based on my SAT/ACT test scores	1.93	.932	41	1.93	.914	615	-0.011	654
I had at least one teacher or counselor advise me to attend a community college	2.49	1.165	41	2.13	1.056	617	2.081	656*

Example: *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 4*Search results of t-test for Native American and White Students*

	Native American			White			t	df
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n		
My choice of colleges was limited based on my SAT/ACT test scores	1.93	.932	41	1.93	.923	1766	-0.044	1805
I had at least one teacher or counselor advise me to attend a community college	2.49	1.165	41	1.83	1.022	1769	4.042	1808***

Example: *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Choice stage

In the choice stage, we explored the students' sources of knowledge (university recruitment), sources of advice (high school teachers, counselors, University representatives, mother/female guardian and father/ male guardian), and influential factors (academic, financial, location, and diverse student body) that influenced their college choice.

For sources of knowledge the results indicated that recruitment materials and UA representatives were important factors on college choice for all students. Similar to the impact of college tours in the predisposition phase, the opportunity for students to interact with UA representatives had a significant influence on them during this phase. Moreover, for Native and White students the college recruitment materials they received in the mail from the UA or other colleges influenced their decision on what college to attend. The more informed the students were, be it through in-person interactions (e.g., recruiters) or college information received through the mail impacted their choice.

When we further examined sources of college advice (high school teachers, counselors, University representatives, mother/female guardian and father/ male guardian), students sought guidance from multiple individuals. First, we will share the relationship among Native and Latino

students and then discuss the connection among Native and White students. For Native and Latino students, they had similar experiences in seeking advice from their mother or a female guardian and they also had at least one parent helping them develop a college plan. This is an important factor to note because during the predisposition phase there was no relationship among Native and Latino/a students regarding sources of knowledge. Although once Native and Latino/a students got closer to selecting their college of choice, they share that seeking input from mothers is critically important. Moreover, for Native and Latino students having a parent help them plan for college was also significant. These results suggest that the mother or female guardian is the person who is helping their student develop a college plan. Consistent with the more interdependent orientation of Native people (Fryberg & Markus, 2007), we found that Native students tend to seek advice from their family more than their White peers, thus seeking advice from family may be more prominent during the choice stage.

For Native and White students, they shared in seeking advice from multiple individuals. Unique for these students is that university representatives and high school teachers had the greatest impact on their choice process. Mothers or female guardians and counselors were also significant, but did not have as much influence as the former sources. Additionally, although father or a male guardian was significant for Native and White students in the predisposition phase, results indicated that during the choice phase their role was not as prominent.

Lastly, we analyzed the factors (academic, financial, location, and diverse student body) that influenced students' college choice. Among all students, the academic reputation of the institution and receiving a scholarship(s) from the UA were important factors. These findings highlight students' consideration in selecting a college, particularly the benefits of attending a reputable institution and the financial feasibility to pay for school. But when we looked at the amount of financial aid provided by the UA, we found that Native and White students' reliance on awarded financial aid was not an important factor. Whereas for Native and Latino/a students, financial aid support provided by UA was critical in their choice process. More research is warranted to investigate how financial aid impacts college choice. Additional important constructs for Native and White students were the racial and ethnic diversity of the campus and also wanting to be near to home. Research has found that Native students' ability to go home helped them persist in college (Waterman, 2012).

In this study, we also found that choosing a college that is near home is of importance, which asserts the value that family and home has on not just persistence, but also on college choice and enrollment.

Table 5*Choice results of t-test for Native American and Latino Students*

	Native American			Latino				
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	t	df
Sources of Knowledge								
Representatives from specific colleges and universities	3.05	.872	43	2.71	1.014	663	2.132	704*
Recruitment materials sent to you from specific schools	2.58	1.029	43	2.59	1.025	662	-0.039	703
Advice for Final Choice								
High school teachers	2.23	.937	44	2.16	.975	669	.435	711
High school counselors	2.20	.978	44	2.18	1.046	667	.180	709
University representatives	2.50	.876	44	2.39	1.054	663	.691	705
Mother/female guardian	3.11	.970	44	2.79	1.054	667	1.991	709*
Father/male guardian	2.50	1.229	44	2.50	1.157	661	-0.013	703
College Choice Attitudes and Experiences								
I consulted with family members when deciding which school(s) to apply	2.98	1.012	41	3.03	.949	617	-0.369	656
At least one of my parents played an active role in helping me plan for college	.21	.412	43	.10	.305	637	2.145	678*
Influences on College Choice								
The academic reputation of the university	2.70	.883	40	3.09	.763	585	-3.127	623**
I received scholarship(s) from the University of Arizona	.43	.501	42	.60	.490	641	-2.201	681*
I wanted to be near home	2.17	.834	41	2.40	1.146	621	.102	625
The amount of financial aid support provided by the university	2.98	.891	40	3.46	.779	583	-3.785	621***
My parents wanted me to attend	2.08	.997	40	2.24	.991	582	-1.022	620
The racial and ethnic diversity of the student body	2.45	.932	40	2.31	.977	585	.883	623

Example: *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 6*Choice results of t-test for Native American and White Students*

	Native American			White				
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	t	df
Sources of Knowledge								
Representatives from specific colleges and universities	3.05	.872	43	2.36	.987	1889	4.530	1930***
Recruitment materials sent to you from specific schools	2.58	1.029	43	2.28	.998	1885	1.943	1926*
Advice for Final Choice								
High school teachers	2.23	.937	44	1.79	.873	1908	3.309	1950***
High school counselors	2.20	.978	44	1.86	.967	1906	2.323	1948*
University representatives	2.50	.876	44	2.00	.967	1898	3.416	1940***
Mother/female guardian	3.11	.970	44	2.78	1.035	1909	2.126	1951*
Father/male guardian	2.50	1.229	44	2.68	1.074	1904	-1.093	1946
College Choice Attitudes and Experiences								
I consulted with family members when deciding which school(s) to apply	2.98	1.012	41	3.26	.843	1771	-2.162	1810*
At least one of my parents played an active role in helping me plan for college	.21	.412	43	.14	.351	1825	1.198	1866
Influences on College Choice								
The academic reputation of the university	2.70	.883	40	3.04	.749	1676	-2.796	1714**
I received scholarship(s) from the University of Arizona	.43	.501	42	.68	.467	1823	-3.414	1863***
I wanted to be near home	2.17	.834	41	1.78	.792	1681	3.087	1720**
The amount of financial aid support provided by the university	2.98	.891	40	2.78	1.036	1670	1.190	1708
My parents wanted me to attend	2.08	.997	40	2.07	.935	1669	.049	1707
The racial and ethnic diversity of the student body	2.45	.932	40	1.90	.843	1672	4.075	1710***

Example: *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

While this data provided a broad look at Native students when compared to their non-Native peers, we also wanted to dig deeper and capture cultural nuanced insights that may not adequately be addressed through surveying. Thus, employing a qualitative approach was warranted.

SHARING CIRCLE RESULTS ON COLLEGE CHOICE

In talking with students in the sharing circles, we learned more about the powerful role that parents and family have in shaping Native students' college ideologies, and later influencing their decisions to attend the UA. For many of the students, college was introduced by family members either through messages that championed seeking higher education or by observing older family members and their experiences in college. Many of the students shared that the UA was not their first choice. However, for some of these students, after speaking with their family and wanting to attend a college that was closer to home, students chose the UA.

Family help formed predisposition college ideologies

Many of the Native students who took part in the sharing circles were raised in rural, Tribal communities, far from a Non-Native College and University (NNCU). College planning and preparation resources and activities that are provided by higher education institutions are scarce in rural communities, which is one reason Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) were established in the 1960's (Brayboy et. al, 2012). Despite the location barrier, Native families created a college culture among these students by having a family member pursue college or through messages that championed a college education in the home.

Brian, a Native college student, mentioned that college was part of his every day life, despite living in a location far from the nearest college. Brian shared:

One significant thing that made me have a better idea of college was when my mom attended college classes through a remote campus. ... She would always go to college classes. She would be gone for about three or four hours and she would always go over there. ... My mom wanted us to go to college too so maybe my mom is primarily the influence. Since I've described that college was sort of my everyday life or it was in my everyday life. Well not that we really lived in any place where colleges exist, we live in a pretty remote location.

Brian grew-up on the Navajo reservation, in a rural community located approximately 150 miles away from the nearest college. Despite the distance, college courses were available for community members through remote access. Often these courses are provided through video satellite or through a web-based format. Witnessing his mom attend classes through a remote campus enhanced Brian's awareness and understanding of college.

Shane also lived on the Navajo reservation in a location far from the nearest college. Shane shared memories of traveling with family to drop off a cousin at Fort Lewis College that sparked his awareness of college. Shane stated, "I was thinking that it was pretty far away for school. Well because she lived in [states town] so it was mysterious to me about the very different geographical location of where she was going to school. My mom told me that she was going to college." At the age of six, Shane recalled traveling with family, and being curious about the geographic landscape, and listening to his mother explain that his cousin was going to college. For Shane, that trip to a college campus with family sparked his interest in what college was about.

Another way family influenced college ideologies among students was through messages regarding the importance of education. For Cynthia, a first-generation college student, her family imparted that education was a pivotal pathway of success for her and her family:

My family instilled the whole education thing on us since very young, since I could remember, because they would always say that education is the key to our success. So that's what I go by. And it didn't really hit me until my mom had my little brother and I was about six, and that's when I realized that I have to be a role model, because he needs someone to look up to, and I'm the first person in our family to go to college.

An interesting point Cynthia made was that “**education is key to our success**” (emphasis added). It demonstrates how her success does not belong solely to her, but to her family and community as a whole. Thus, it was not surprising that Cynthia credits her family with instilling education as a key to success. Moreover, at an early age of six years old, Cynthia formed ideas of being a role model to her younger sibling. This is an example of a reciprocal exchange, a value common among collective communities (Brayboy et. al, 2012). Cynthia wanted to fulfill her family's values by being first in her family to attend college, while also giving back by serving as a role model to her younger siblings.

Direct and indirect family support: Search process

Family helped with the search process in direct and indirect ways depending upon whether family had experience in attending college or not. For those students who had a family member who attended college, they had a more direct approach in the search process by knowing what forms to complete and by being connected to the college environment. For some first-generation college students, they felt alone in the application process, but family indirectly helped by sending them reminder messages and traveling to submit required documents in time.

Several students relied and connected with their older siblings who were attending college to help them search and apply for a school. Clarissa attended a large-urban high school with college search resources available. Although her school provided resources, Clarissa relied on her older siblings during the search process. Clarissa elaborated:

Both my parents went to college. And then all of my older siblings went to college too so they were able to advise me on what to do and what not to do. They were telling me what forms I needed to send in, what I needed to do to submit certain things and what to fill out and all of that. Yeah since they had been through it, they already knew what the process was and they were kind of helping me along the way. ... It was mainly my family, my older siblings.

Clarissa's parents both attended college and though neither parent acquired a degree, they instilled college aspirations in their children. Therefore Clarissa had older siblings who were in college at the time when she was applying to colleges. Having family members who were familiar with the college application process helped Clarissa as she navigated through. Brian and Erin also had older sisters who were in college at the time of their search process. Brian recalled visiting his sisters at their college campus, which helped him make the decision to apply to that school. He stated, “My sisters went to school at the UA, so whenever I visited I really saw that they had



a pretty neat campus and the school covered a wide range of stuff. It was a pretty nice area in my opinion.” Erin remembered watching her sister apply to college. Therefore, she followed her sister’s lead. She shared, “I think it [college application] went pretty easy because I’d seen my sister do it before so I just got online and did it.”

We would like to note that for some Native students like Sheila, the UA was the most favorable option because she wanted to continue the “family tradition” by following her family’s alma mater, which again highlights the powerful role family members have in the college choice process. Sheila attended high school in Tucson. Having family members that attended UA, Sheila formed ambitions to attend the same college. Sheila explained, “The reason why I applied was, it was family tradition and my family went to University of Arizona so it was kind of expected. But I really wanted to go to UA too because I grew up nearby, and UA is in my blood.” Sheila’s search process was streamlined as she aspired to follow her family’s college pathway. For Sheila, Brian, Erin, and Clarissa the search phase was not as difficult because they had family members who were attending school and thereby could help with the application process or familiarize them of the campus environment. They also had family members who were college alumni that created a collegial family culture. However, for first-generation college students, their experiences differed.

First generation college students had a different experience in their search process when compared to those students who had a family member who had experience in applying to college. First generation college students felt alone, but their family supported them in ways that they could. Sophia explained her experience:

I was just kind of on my own and I’m the oldest. It was kind of hard. I didn’t really explore college or get information or do research.... I was just like a guinea pig, we [Dad and Sophia] would do things wrong, we would miss deadlines, and we would have to do this and it was kind of tough.

Throughout the process, Sophia “pushed off” applying to college. But it was her dad and mom who intervened and guided her to complete applications. She shared, “My dad would be like, ‘you better do that.’ And then in one week I would send everything off. My mom drove me around to get papers and send them off.” For Sophia, her parents could not help her directly with the application, but they helped indirectly by encouraging her to complete applications and also by traveling to sites (offices, post office, etc.) to ensure that the necessary documents were sent.

College choice and “close to home.”

Students applied and got accepted to various colleges, including prestigious, elite colleges, across the nation. As students approached making the final choice on which college to attend, a powerful influence in their decision making process was being close to home and family so they could attend traditional ceremonies and were told by parents to stay close.

Being able to travel home from school and be with family on a regular basis influenced some students’ decisions on where to attend college. Kaylene was accepted to a handful of colleges and eventually chose UA, which was approximately 350 miles away – a day’s drive. Kaylene described why she decided to attend UA, “Home is very important to me and I knew I was going to miss it so much so it [college] had to be somewhere close to home or the closest to home that I can get, so that I can go home every now and then.” Sophia had a similar viewpoint as she shared:

I don’t think like my family said like, “you can’t go far.” It was me starting to realize at the last minute that I was planning on going half way on the other side of the United States. It kind of hit me that I didn’t want to be that far. ... I started realizing how homesick I would get or how alone I would be because I’m really close to my family and so I just kind of had to choose the University of Arizona.

The UA was the last school she applied to and one that she almost did not apply to. Initially, Sophia aspired to attend college far from home and she had an opportunity to go to school far from home. However, as she stated she eventually chose to attend college closer to home.

When students were probed about why they chose to attend college close to home, a deeper understanding of how cultural traditions and family shaped their decision emerged. Tammy considers herself to be closely tied to her Navajo traditional ceremonies, as they were an integral part of her upbringing and sense of self. She at first decided to attend college out of state, but changed her mind to remain in state. **Being able to attend ceremonies was an important consideration of her college decision-making process.** Tammy shared:

I ended up changing my mind knowing that there is a really long distance between home and where I would be going to school. For me, I’ve been really tied to my traditional part of my life and that’s a really big part of me and I wasn’t exactly ready to go that far and just let go of all of the ceremonies and not to be able to go home to those kinds of things.

Often traditional Navajo ceremonies are conducted within the ancestral lands of the Navajo people, which are predominately located within the boundaries of her reservation. Therefore, she selected to attend a college that was close by so that she could drive home to participate in ceremonies. For Clarissa, she decided to stay close to home because of her mother's concern that she would leave and not return home. She shared:

For me, they [my family] didn't like the idea of their child being so far away from home because they always had the idea that when you leave, that you're not going to come back. That's what happened to my mom because she left the rez and she stayed in [states city], but she still goes back but yeah she didn't like the idea that one of us is going to leave and not come back home.

Clarissa's mom moved away from the reservation after she graduated from high school and did not return to live on the reservation. Because of her mom's past experience with leaving home, Clarissa felt like her mother believed that a similar experience could happen for Clarissa.

First-year Experience: Sense of Belonging



Sense of belonging has been identified as a key outcome of college students' experiences, which in turn, affects students' intention to persist (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007) and graduate (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). Strayhorn (2012) described the concept of sense of belonging as, "[The] perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus." (p. 3). Scholars emphasized the importance of assessing students' sense of belonging in ways such as whether students feel they are part of the campus community, and in particular, using these analyses to understand how institutions can meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012).

To further explore Native students' first-year experience we investigated their sense of belonging at the UA. Findings indicate that many Native students experienced racial microaggressions on campus and structured disconnections from their home communities. Native American Student Affairs (NASA) or Native specific programs on campus provided a "home away from home" environment. While these services and programs were important in helping students create a more localized sense of belonging, it only was necessary to the extent that the culture of the institution served to invalidate the Native students' culture and perspectives.

ISOLATION, DISCONNECTION, AND MARGINALIZATION INHIBITING SENSE OF BELONGING

Isolation and familial separation. The first few weeks of college is a pivotal time when student affairs practitioners focus attention on social activities and students' adjustments to campus (Woosley, 2013); however, during that timeframe most Native students in our sample frequently described feeling isolated. Sarah stated, "**When I first came here like the first few weeks I didn't feel like I belonged here.** I, like I said I felt alone you know I didn't know anybody." Christina shared similar sentiments:

I didn't know who to talk to. And you get in your dorm a couple days before school actually starts so I didn't know what to do, I didn't know where to go, I didn't know where to go get food. I didn't talk to anybody really. I would go see my friends from high school who I knew also had a dorm on campus and I think that's the only people that I talked to. I didn't know what the hell was going on. ... I was really lonely just because I didn't know what to do all day. Normally I would just be with my family but I didn't know what to do. That was a lonely time.

In Christina's case she acknowledged that she was accustomed to being with family. Being apart from them and having a limited understanding of the college campus culture made her feel socially isolated. Students like Christina and Sarah felt estranged during a time when colleges are making efforts to connect with students.

Other students shared how not belonging extended beyond the first week. Hannah discussed how she felt like she did not belong, especially during challenging times:

I still feel like I don't belong but then it's kind of like you just kind of have to deal with it... Just like during finals week or when you start stressing, like now. When you do bad on a test or something or when you have to pull all-nighters and when you have no money.

For Hannah she admitted that at the time of the sharing circles, she felt she did not belong, and this stemmed from a combination of factors (e.g., academic stress and financial hardship). These sharing circles occurred in early May as students' entered final exam time. For Hannah, belonging meant being able to cope with the academic demands of the institution and the social stressors of college life, including exam time and even financial stability. Hannah's situation is an example of how belonging is continuous and extends beyond the first weeks of school. Although Hannah was in college for almost a full academic year, she still felt like she did not belong, especially during tense times. She shared that belonging was connected to levels of worry, such that when she was stressed, her sense of belonging decreased.

Disconnection: Separation from cultural traditions. When students elaborated on why they felt disconnected, they revealed stories of not being able to practice their Native ceremonies or lifestyles. Hannah explained further about her thoughts of belonging, "I can't do stuff like I did on the reservation here, like go to squaw dances or to Kachina dances [traditional ceremonies]. You can't ride horses or go out to the ranch." Not being able to participate in traditional ceremonies influenced Hannah's feeling of being connected to campus. Being separated from ceremonies was difficult for some students. Sarah was in the same sharing circle as Hannah and as Hannah talked, Sarah was nodding her head in agreement. After Hannah was finished with what she was sharing, Sarah stated:

I'm so used to being around my horses and my grandparents and everything like that even squaw dances you brought that up like those things I'm used to and not doing them here is like you know, why? Like why don't you have it here?

Sarah longed to participate in ceremonies, ride her horses, or even be close to her grandparents. She questioned why she had to leave so much of her core self at home in order to pursue an undergraduate degree.

Marginalization: Racialized encounters. There were several students who discussed how racist encounters furthered their sense of campus isolation and marginalization. For example, Melissa shared a story of an experience she had in class that made her confused and frustrated:

And he was asking me what I was, “What tribe are you? Where are you from?” And I told him that I was Navajo and Hopi and then he said, I remember this specific line, “You don’t sound like a Native.” And I was taken aback because I didn’t understand what he meant by that.

Melissa continued her story by explaining that she was surrounded by friends who encouraged her to probe the person about why he made such a comment. She shared:

And he’s like, “I just met a lot of Navajo students that I went to school with in [state’s town] and you don’t sound like one of them.” I was like, “Well how are we supposed to sound? Do we all sound the same?” And he was like, “No, you speak more intellectually. You actually have better grammar.”

Melissa then elaborated on how that conversation caught her off guard and questioned her belonging. She articulated:

He said racial slur after racial slur and I was just staring at him because I didn’t know how to fathom what he was saying. ... It’s a different kind of conflict that you have to deal with because you’re so used to interacting with people of your own kind. I didn’t anticipate for that to happen. ... And so there was that one incident that made me feel like, “Well, is this how it’s always going to be? Is this what all Native students deal with? Because if it is, I don’t want to be around this kind of thing to where it’s going to bring down my vibe.”

Melissa was surprised with this encounter where her Native identity was questioned by the way she spoke English and wondered whether that type of situation would occur again.

Stacy had a similar experience, however her encounter occurred via Facebook. Through a non-university public Facebook page titled, UA Confessions, students can anonymously confess their, “deepest, darkest, sometimes wildly inappropriate secrets” (Facebook, 2013). From that forum, Stacy discussed how anonymous comments were made regarding Native students. She shared:

My friends were talking about UA Confessions, and I was like let’s see what this is all about. One of the things I remember seeing was, ‘Wow, Native Americans have it so easy. They have everything handed – they’re waited on hand and foot.’ And I was just like, ‘You guys don’t know how hard we had to bust our asses to be here [college]. And you just make it seem like we’re just taking the government’s money. What money are we getting? I don’t see any of that anywhere?’

Stacy later stated this experience made her feel, “like I don’t belong.” In short, **Native students’ sense of belonging becomes unstable due to societal stereotypes and ignorance.** These contexts of disconnection, isolation, and marginalization, draws Native students to more culturally-affirming, racially-safer campus spaces.



CREATING A “HOME AWAY FROM HOME”

Familial affirmation from afar. For most Native students, family members did not attend the same college nor were family members living near the college. However, family still had a powerful way of creating a sense of belonging for their student through their meaningful words of encouragement. Ella stated:

I believe, I think it's just that the feeling of belonging here [campus] was coming from, probably from my family's point of view saying like, “We're proud of you. You're actually going, you're going to college, you're going to college at the University of Arizona, in Tucson.” That's a huge, big thing to my family. It's just the feeling that I belonged here knowing that [I'm] making my family back home proud. That made me feel happy here with everything.

This example of Ella's experience reflects her cultural orientation of how powerful family, despite being miles away, created a sense of belonging for students while they were at college.

Cultural affirmation: Native student center and programs. Several students identified the Native American Student Affairs (NASA) center as a place where students could “be themselves” and ultimately provided a “home” environment. As discussed above, Sarah struggled with belonging during the first few weeks of college. It was not until Sarah utilized the NASA center that she began to feel like she could be herself:

NASA is where all the Natives hang out and that's where everything got easier. I could be myself there. I could laugh and joke around like how I would be at home. So NASA really helped me to transition.

Sarah mentioned that she was able to connect with Native students through sharing jokes because the center provided a place where other Native students could congregate, and have a shared understanding on such things as jokes. Heather specifically described NASA as, “a home away from home,” and an integral aspect of home is a family bond. This bond contributed to their sense of community and belonging.

At the NASA center, students developed family bonds and recognized each other by familial terms in their Native languages. Heather explained, “It’s funny too because they will start calling you “yáázh” (Navajo term for my child) and stuff like that or “shideezhí” (Navajo for little sister).” Sarah further elaborated how familial relationships were discovered through tribal clans. At the NASA center, students were able to find out who they were related to through their tribe’s clan system. She stated, “You figure out each other’s clans and you really connect.” For these students, identifying clan kinships, is a powerful way to create relationships with familial relatives, especially in unfamiliar places.

Native centered programs were also recognized as contributing to Native students’ sense of belonging. During Stephanie’s freshman year, she took part in a retention program tailored for Native students. Stephanie described her participation in that program:

Luckily I was in the First-Year Scholars Program so I was around a bunch of other Natives and we were all from kind of the same area. I had a lot of people to talk to if I was ever missing home. It’s the little things that make a difference like where to eat, where do you go when you’re not in class. I think that for me I just felt comfortable here so I felt like I belonged here, everybody else is here with me.

Stephanie recognized that through participating in the Native-centered program, she was around other Native students that she could talk to and socialize with. She then stated that she was not alone, rather “everybody else is here with me” suggesting that her sense of belonging was tied to being connected to others who were similar to her.

Parental Perspectives



Many of the parents who participated in the sharing circles expressed general satisfaction with the staff and faculty, and curriculum at the UA, and believed that their children were generally satisfied with the university, as well. However, the sharing circles revealed issues specific to Native American families, such as paying for college and feeling disconnected from the UA.

PAYING FOR COLLEGE: FINANCIAL FEAR, FRUSTRATING PROCESSES, AND UNCONVENTIONAL SOURCES

All parents talked about concerns over paying for their child's college education. Financial fear entailed not saving money for college due to a lack of available discretionary funds and awareness of college planning strategies, worry about how to get funds to pay for college and anticipated future debt. Tribal scholarship and college loan processes generated frustration and confusion. Parents made sacrifices by utilizing unconventional means to pay for college, such as early withdrawal from 401K plans, pawning jewelry, and cashing in aluminum cans.

Financial fear. Many parents did not have discretionary income or knowledge of how to save money for college. Saving money was difficult, as many did not have disposable income to put aside for future college expenses. Terry explained how poverty plagues many Native people and that funds are designated for everyday needs, which results in some Native peoples inability to attend college. He stated:

I think some families want their child to go to school to help out with finances, too. So, poverty has a big role in retention of students, too, or students going to school. ... Poverty is the number one issue in everything that we do on Navajo even in students going to school and staying in school because it's really sad to see that a grandparent or a mother or father saying, "You should stay here and go to work down here at Giant [gas station] so you can help pay for the utilities. You can go to school after we get, you know, after your brothers and sisters grow up a little bit.



Patricia explained that her parents were uneducated and not in a position to assume financial wealth in order to save for college. She shared, “My parents, you know, they grew up in a mud house [traditional O’odham dwelling] or up in the village [rural area]. And so, they were never educated in terms of how the stock market works, what the financial system is, things like that.” Patricia’s parents lived in a modest home, a traditional style structure that often has no running water or electricity. She explained their living conditions as a way to describe that if her parents lived in modest means, they most likely would not be aware of formalized, Western ways of saving money. In turn, Patricia’s parents did not learn until later in life about college saving strategies.

With the lack of savings and adequate disposable income for college expenses, parents worried about their child finding funding so that they could persist in college. Sarafina had an older daughter who did not acquire a college degree due to financial challenges. Because of her older daughter’s experience, Sarafina was concerned for her current college daughter falling into the same situation,

The biggest concern is the financial capability to finish school because again my daughter left school for that reason. She couldn’t pay her tuition or outstanding bills so she could not re-enroll the next semester in that school until she could pay those off. ... So the only biggest concern would be just having her [current college daughter] to be able to get the financial resources to complete school because it is very hard to work and to go to school.

Not only was tuition and paying for housing a financial burden, but the everyday expenses were also a burden. Sarafina further explained, “ You struggle mainly with the incidental expenses, like everyday expenses of little things to make life a little bit more friendlier, happier, to enjoy your college years. ... They want to go out on Friday and have pizza. Whenever they want to come home, it costs money.” Valerie shared similar thoughts, “The scholarships and the money that he

[son] did get covered for his tuition, room and board to stay in the dorm, but the little things, the extra things that he needed money for, traveling, he just didn't have." Sarafina later stated, "A lot of success depends on them getting the money because none of us or very few of us have the extra cash to fully pay for your child's tuition."

And for some parents, they were worried about the future financial debt that their child would eventually have to pay. Michael shared:

I hate to think about it, but it's the reality. ... I fear seeing that bill at the end of the tunnel and how she's going to repay that. ... It's just in the back of my mind. I see that statement coming in and you have to start paying it back. That's my worst fear for her [daughter].

Most parents fear the increased financial debt imposed on their children. However, in these stories, when poverty plagues a community, parental fears may be heightened.

Tribal scholarships and college loans: Frustrating processes. A prevalent misconception of Native students is that they attend college for free, especially because of casino money and other tribal funds (e.g., Nelson, 2015). In contrast to these myths, we found that many Native students and their families in our sample, as shared earlier, were struggling to pay for college. Students and their parents searched for scholarships and loans to pay for their college expenses, and sometimes encountering difficulty as they sought financial help. Natalia, a mother of four relocated to Phoenix for employment after living on the Navajo reservation. Her daughter was accepted to the UA and was the first in the family to attend a university. Natalia's daughter applied for tribal funding through the tribal on-line system, and later found out that she was denied because she did not turn in a hardcopy application on time. However the application process timeline was not clear which frustrated Natalia and her daughter. Natalia explained:

Even though she [daughter] applied online and within the deadline, but she didn't provide her hardcopy paperwork by the deadline, so she was not funded for the school year, for the fall semester. They [Tribal office] said, "Well, she missed the deadline, so we can't fund her for that." I'm like, "What the hell? Why do you even have an online thing, because the online application is the same thing that was in paper." I said, "Why do you even have an online process when you want the hardcopies?" I said, "Nowhere in there did it state that. That you have to have your hardcopies into the office at this time."

Natalia's daughter was denied Tribal funding, but she received federal Pell Grant funds and the Wildcat scholarship. However, she still did not have enough to cover the fall balance due. Natalia took out a parent loan to help pay for her daughter's schooling. Unfortunately, the loan process was also confusing and stressful. Natalia elaborated:

The Financial Aid office was no help. I kept calling them and emailing them. Ok what do you do? I'm not understanding this process when I went online. ... I don't know how much I need. You know the bill says this, so if I get a bill of \$9,000, do I only get \$9,000? And they're like, "Yeah, that's all you do." You know those people were no help because it was just confusing. I've never had to do this. It's confusing. Help me figure out how to get the money, so I can get my daughter's school paid so she doesn't get dropped. ... It was very stressful. ... It was a nightmare.

Later, Natalia found out that the \$9,000 loan that she took out was divided into two semesters, which again was not explained to her earlier. This scenario meant that the balance was still not paid in full. Natalia had to take an additional \$7,000 loan for a total of \$16,000 to pay for her daughter's first year of college.

Cashing in retirement, pawning jewelry, saving aluminum cans: Unconventional means for funding college. In order to meet the high cost of college, many parents made distressing financial decisions such as withdrawing from their retirement to offset the cost of their child's college tuition. Michael is a father of three who lived on and near the Navajo reservation throughout his life. He graduated from high school nearly 25 years ago. Since that time, he worked in construction and was not familiar with college cost. His daughter Hope was an outstanding student-athlete destined to be the first in the family to attend college. Since she was a young girl, she had her heart set on attending the UA. When she got accepted to her #1 choice (UA), Hope was thrilled and Michael was proud of his daughter. He told her, "Well, wherever you go, I will support you financially and whatever you decide to do, I'll be right behind you." However, he later admitted that he did not realize how much college cost and was shocked when he saw the bill:

For me as a dad, like I've said earlier, I didn't know anything about financial aid. I never knew anything about how much it would take to go to school. ... Our bill was like something like \$8,000 and I almost got off my chair, "Where do I come up with this?" That's when I sat down and started looking at all the charts. I said "Damn, they charged freshmen \$30 just to walk on campus." ... It took a big chunk out of our cost of living for us. When I realized that I had to pay, I had to dig into my 401k, and that's when I took a loan out. Actually, I did a hardship withdrawal on my 401k to pay for her. I guess as parents, we have to be more educated to look at it from the business side.

When Michael saw the \$8,000 cost, similar to Natalie's story, he did not grasp that that price only accounted for one semester. He later understood that they would be charged that same amount next semester. To pay for that balance, he withdrew more money out of his 401K retirement savings. A similar scenario occurred for Phyllis, a mother who did not have the financial resources to pay for her daughter's tuition. Phyllis and her husband withdrew money from their retirement to support their daughter, "We did the same thing and went for the 401k and paid for her school like that. But to help the other students, the new students that come in, I think the parents and their students need to really understand the cost of higher education." Having gone through the financial process, Phyllis recommended that parents' and students' need to fully understand the cost of going to college so they would not, like her, have to mortgage her future so her daughter could have one.

Parents resorted to other unconventional ways to help pay for their child's college expenses. Sylvia, a single-parent mother of two had a difficult time paying for her son's tuition. She shared a pivotal moment when her son confided to her his thoughts about attending college. He was working on his college application and Sylvia asked him, "What have you not told them [college]?" Her son responded, "I really want to go to college. I always wondered how I was going to pay for college because my mom's a single parent and we saved money, but we didn't save enough." Corey is now attending the UA, but Sylvia still reflects upon his words and mentions she helps with alleviating college costs. She explained, "It still makes me cry because we still have

it [college application] and when I read it, it's like, 'Oh, my gosh. I can't believe this. So, if he needs money, I can go pawn my jewelry, I can go get money.'" Knowing that Sylvia did not have adequate savings to dig into, she would often resort to pawning her Navajo jewelry in order to get additional money.

Joan and Terry had two children who were the first in their family to attend college. One child attended an Ivy League university on the East coast and the other child chose the UA. Having two children in different colleges was a learning experience as well as financially demanding. Joan commented, "I didn't even know where to start from and it's like, how do we, when she got accepted into college, I said, 'How do we pay for this?' I don't even have the money you know." Joan is a saver. To help with expenses, she saved aluminum cans in order to receive some money by taking those cans to local recycling dealers. She shared her experience:

It's just, you know, like I always tell my kids, you know, I know how to save. I know how to save, you know, really save money for this and that or whatever. From an early age, I guess, when I was in the third grade or so, I started saving aluminum cans. I save. I save. So, right now, like at home, they're all crushing stuff [cans]. ... I'm trying to tell Terry, "Let's take it to Tucson. I think it's a good price out there."

Terry later commented, "Every cent works." While Terry and Joan were talking, Sylvia was agreeing and also joined in by confessing that she saves cans to help her son's schooling. Sylvia stated, "Well, that penny thing, too, that's what I did with Corey, I make him pick cans and crush them and we take them in." Finding any means necessary, including taking cans in for money, parents demonstrated their desire and resourcefulness in helping their child get a college degree.

FAMILY DISCONNECTION AND OUT-PRICED AT THE UA

Parents expressed that they had minimal contact with the university. When asked what family events they took part in at the university, some parents expressed that they knew about Family Weekend, but were often unable to attend due to financial constraints. Some parents recommended that Native centered family events should be offered at the UA.

For parents like Michael, he wished that the university would send more information to parents, especially because his daughter Hope was first in the family to attend college. He commented, "I think a lot more parents will be informed on what's going on. I mean, it's nice for the university to extend a hand out to the parents starting to at least in a way, in our case, we're here for the first time." Rather than, "extend a hand out to the parents" Michael stated that, **"The only thing I receive are the bills."** Another parent, Maggie commented that she did not receive much communication, but what she did receive was information from the Parent's Association, "I didn't got a whole lot of email other than from the parent, the main one. I think it was the parent association or something like that. And it was mainly just around the time when they were having that thing in October." Parents often hear about university events from their children, but they would like more direct communication from the university.

Parents expressed that the only family event they knew about was the UA's Family Weekend held in the fall semester. However, several parents commented that they did not attend because Family Weekend was too expensive, particularly in terms of time off work and

the expense of traveling to the event. Sheila commented, “Family weekend, we wanted to do it, but you know financially it wasn’t, we weren’t able to. And so we didn’t, we ended up not going.” Another mother, Debby shared a similar viewpoint, “I got an invitation, but I didn’t go because of the same reason, the financial.” To attend family events at UA is difficult because of the added cost that families cannot afford. Many Native parents are just trying to figure out how to pay for college.

Some parents suggested that the UA should have family events specifically geared toward Native American families. One parent said, “I would like maybe a more intimate type of gathering just for Native students . . . because that’s how we are, we are a close-knit family. We feel more comfortable with that type of setting.” Rather than the larger, more general events, Native families may feel more comfortable with smaller events where they have the opportunity to get to know other Native American families and get more acquainted with the university.

Recommendations



Based on the success and findings of our project, we outline key recommendations for the University of Arizona. These recommendations are a start to moving “beyond the asterisk.” The data gathered enhances our understanding of Native students’ experiences so that we can effectively increase recruitment, foster a smooth transition into the university, and enhance academic success leading to graduation from the university.

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS: ENHANCING AND EXPANDING DATA GATHERING ON NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

1. *Improving response rates to surveys of Native American students to ensure visibility and inclusion.* More research is needed that explores the heterogeneity of Native college student experiences. We have yet to learn about the experiences of out-of-state Native students, non-traditional Native students (i.e. older, veterans, or students with children), urban Native students, differences between male and female Native students, and Native students who do not utilize the Native American Student Affairs (NASA) center or are affiliated with Native-centered programs. To achieve goals in improving response rates of diverse Native students, connections and trust with key Native specific areas (e.g., NASA) is vitally important as they have direct contact with students and they also offer effective outreach and culturally-relevant strategies (e.g., tailored email for Native audience) to students. We recommend offering paid research jobs to graduate and undergraduate students to help with data gathering and transcribing. In so doing, we grow junior researchers to get more involved in conducting rigorous, Native-centered research.
2. *Expanding data gathering strategies to include individual interviews and sharing circles.* Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, including Indigenous methods, added value to the data gathered. Quantitative data is scarce in national research; therefore, this report is contributing greatly to the scholarship. The Entering Student Survey provided rich comparison data where we were able to analyze Native students and other racial/ethnic populations. Furthermore, the value of students’ stories through the use of an Indigenous methodology (e.g., sharing circles) added depth not provided through surveys alone.

Employing Indigenous methodology can be labor intensive, but critically important when accounting for Tribal cultural protocols and culturally, nuanced perspectives.

3. *Enhancing data gathering to include families (e.g., parents) to broaden understanding of Native students' experiences.* Connected to recommendations 1 and 2, gathering data from family members of Native students is also critical to broadening our understanding of Native experiences and higher education in general. As we learned from this study, parents offer informative and practical recommendations to support Native student success.
4. *The importance of Native people being at the center of and driving this initiative.* Using Indigenous frameworks when doing research with Native students and families is critically important. Often research theorizes and frames studies from a non-Indigenous perspective, which has the harm of further marginalizing Native experiences. Moreover, Indigenous methodology asserts Indigenous ways of knowing in research and future research initiatives must be in partnership with Native Nations to advance the well-being for Native Nations and our nation at large. We worked with four Native Nations (Hopi, Navajo, Tohono O'odham, and Pascua Yaqui). With over 22 Native Nations in the state of Arizona alone and over 500+ tribes across the United States, we must do more to include more Native students.

SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE TRANSITION RECOMMENDATIONS: ENGAGING NATIVE COMMUNITIES BY FOSTERING STUDENTS' CONNECTIONS TO HOME AND FAMILY

5. *Include families more in campus life.* Colleges should view parents and families as allies to Native student success. Beyond Family Weekend, consider other ways Native families can be included in campus life. For example, provide information to parents and families that serves as a toolkit to help them encourage and motivate their student during stressful times. Students may have family members who can conduct traditional ceremonies on campus. They should be invited to serve as a resource when there is a need for a ceremony. Regular communication with parents via a student life newsletter that showcases Native students, but also provides tailored family content and resources, is another way to help families feel connected to campus.
6. *Increase support of the NASA center and other Native centered programs.* The NASA center remains an important site for cultural validation, connection to campus, and overall sense of belonging. However, we know that NASA has one full-time professional staff member and 2 part-time graduate students to serve over 1,200 Native American students. There is definitely a need for more professional full-time staff to enhance the social, cultural, academic, and spiritual programming and services through the center. In addition to staff, there is a need for more funding to provide programs and services. The center has not increased in space capacity since its inception in 1989 with just over 230 Native students. So the need for more space is also a recommendation to keep up with the increasing number of Native students attending the UA. The Native student center cannot be expected to be a panacea for all Native issues on campus. The UA needs to enhance inclusion and cultural competency across all areas of campus.

7. *Create institutional policy and spaces that allow for Native students to practice their spirituality.* For the majority of the Native students, connection to spirituality and to their customs/traditions were critically important to their sense of self and belonging. UA can adopt an institutional policy that would allow students to practice spiritual traditions like smudging. South Dakota State University and the University of North Dakota, are universities that have adopted such institutional policies. In addition, providing a space that would allow for ceremonial practices on campus would be important. Many universities have created such spaces on their campuses.
8. *Address “cultural competency curriculum across campus” as drafted by the Marginalized Students of the University of Arizona List of Demands that was presented to administration during the 2015-16 academic year.* This is a systemic issue that would entail a larger conversation with a goal to create a campus culture that honors and respects diverse populations.

EARLY OUTREACH RECOMMENDATIONS: BUILD A RELATIONAL BRIDGE BETWEEN NATIVE FAMILIES AND UA

9. *Increase support for UA’s Early Academic Outreach.* Build upon Early Academic Outreach’s (EAO) approach to introducing college knowledge to youth and families. Native students are starting to talk about attending college as early as elementary age. University staff and current Native students can visit, meet, and talk about college with Native youth in elementary schools located on reservations and urban areas to capitalize on their early college interest. EAO is doing a lot of this work currently, but needs additional financial support to broaden and strengthen efforts in Native communities.
10. *Provide and enhance college resources to schools, particularly reservation schools.* Native students asserted that high school counselors and teachers helped them with college applications and their final college choice. Findings revealed that Native students were more likely to come from communities where the majority of adults did not attend college. Therefore, school settings are a vital source for obtaining college information. However, students are not receiving adequate college information from their high schools, particularly high schools on tribal reservations. Therefore, enhance relationships with high school counselors and teachers and provide them with up to date admission information and deadlines, scholarship opportunities, and other resources (e.g., NASA, Native SOAR) that may help them be a resource to students.
11. *Leverage proximity to increase Native student enrollment at the UA.* Findings demonstrated that many Native students selected the UA because of its proximity to home. The UA has an excellent opportunity to stress that a “world class education” is in close proximity to their home as a way to increase Native student enrollment. Strategies include:
 - *Tailor materials with a theme, “closer to home,” to attract Native students.* Promotional materials were important to Native students in their college choice, therefore, try using a catchy message that appeals to Native students. Consider having current Native students help in the creation of recruitment material.

- *Feature stories of current UA Native students through on-line videos and recruitment material where they share their experiences living close to home. Visually seeing current students and graduated students (alumni) can be a positive recruitment tool.*

PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS: COMPREHENSIVE COLLEGE FINANCIAL PLANNING AND CONNECTION WITH PARENTS

- 12. More clarity about the total costs of attending the UA. Break-down the entire college cost including tuition and all institutional fees.*
- 13. Provide financial college planning workshops to parents early.*
- 14. Reevaluate need-based aid to account for ways low-income students are able to receive personal discretionary and emergency monies.*
- 15. Consider avenues where events like Family Weekend or Homecoming could be made available for free to low-income families. Offer travel stipend support and free sporting event tickets to needy families so that they can take part in campus events.*
- 16. Build upon successful mentorship programs like Native Student Outreach, Access, and Resiliency (SOAR). Parents recommended that university should implement a mentoring program where a designated person understands the experiences that are specific to Native American students, and can consistently be there to help them succeed toward college completion. Native SOAR is doing this work. Therefore, financial support to continue and expand their efforts is needed.*

Conclusion



The applied research project yielded much value for a limited investment. It achieved its purpose to enhance survey response rates that make for statistically reliable analysis and comparison of Native students with other student populations. The project also generated important data from interviews with Native students, as they entered college and at the end of their first year. An Indigenous approach to gathering the qualitative data known as “sharing circles” was a first for the researchers on this project and further provided rich information. Overall, the project yielded important insights about student experiences that connect to feasible, actionable strategies for practitioners at the UA, in relation to fostering a smoother transition into college, as well as increasing the recruitment and success of Native students. In short, the project provides a roadmap that can help guide the UA to effectively recruit, retain and graduate Native students.

The involvement of tribal leaders and representatives to advise and support the UA on Native American student success efforts is important. In 2007, the Native American Community Council was formed and currently consists of 17 members who are elected tribal leaders, tribal and community college representatives, local non-profits and education organizations, businesses, and students. In 2013, the Council submitted a “Strategic Recommendations to the President Report” to President Ann Weaver Hart, stating their guiding priorities in support of the overall UA strategic goals of engagement, innovation, partnership, and synergy. The councils priorities are: 1) Centralize Tribal Relations and Native American Student Affairs within the Executive Office of the President under the Assistant Vice President for Tribal Relations; 2) establish sustainable mentorships and relationships for Native American students on and off campus for and through NASA; 3) Increase cultural awareness across campus to support and sustain authentic and innovative partnerships and student services; and, 4) strengthen partnerships between Tribal governments, enterprises, and communities. This report supports and affirms these goals in support of strengthening Native student success.

Fortunately, there has been an overall increase across the nation of Native Americans pursuing postsecondary education. A majority of students are committed to getting a college education and returning to their home communities and make a contribution to improving economic, social, health, and education conditions. This effort is a form of Native Nation

Building whereby Native Nations make efforts to increase their capacities for self-rule and for self-determined, sustainable community and economic development (NNI, 2016; Brayboy, et al, 2012). Native Nations rely on an educated workforce to build its economic base therefore, postsecondary institutions must commit to helping Native American students successfully complete their college education. There is a significant financial investment made by tribal scholarship programs and other Native American scholarship organizations to provide funding resources to students while they are in college. Tribal funding sources should hold the UA accountable for their financial investments and commit to providing support programs and services to help students persist and graduate.

The UA has made progress in building relationships with Arizona's Native Nations but it could be better. In February 2016, the Arizona Board of Regents approved a Tribal Consultation Policy 1-118 that will guide the state universities in partnering and working with Native Nations. The emphasis of the policy is to recognize and respect the sovereignty of Native Nations and acknowledge the long-standing government-to-government relationship thereby seeking consultation with tribes when activities involving research, initiatives, agreements, and policies that may have foreseeable implications for tribes (Arizona Board of Regents, 2016). This policy is the first and only for state university systems but one that is important as universities advance their interests to collaborate and partner with Native Nations. We are excited to share this report during a time when positive movements are occurring for Native communities at a state-wide level and look forward to the future work with Native Nations and the UA.

Finally, there were important unintended effects of this research as well. The project helped fund two Native graduate students, one of whom has since graduated with a PhD. Amanda R. Tachine graduated from UA's Center for Higher Education in May 2015 and is currently a postdoctoral scholar at Arizona State University where she continues to advance research on



Native education. In April 2016, she was awarded dissertation of the year award from the American Educational Resource Association (AERA), Division- J: Postsecondary Education division. This is an honor for Amanda, for the UA, and the Native community. This initiative has additionally supported Native graduate students' professional development as components of this research project have been presented at the largest meeting of the largest educational association in the world (AERA) and the largest higher education association as well (Association of the Study of Higher Education, ASHE). It has resulted in multiple manuscripts, one of which has already been accepted for publication in the International Review of Qualitative Research, which allows this project to get national and international visibility on Native student success. Additionally, this initiative underscores the value of the intellectual community of Native students and of supportive faculty and students at the Center for the Study on Higher Education and in other parts of the university. The Native American Applied Research Initiative (NAARI) efforts were not isolated, as much of this work would not have been completed or as in-depth without the relationships and connection with academic departments, programs and services on campus that strive to support Native students including Native Student Outreach Access & Resiliency (SOAR), Native American Student Affairs, Early Academic Outreach, American Indian Students and the like.

This small-scale effort by Native students, professionals, and allies provided large-scale outcomes that we hope will serve the broader campus community and beyond.

Thus, our research dedicated to improving access and success of Native undergraduate students had an unintended positive consequence of “moving beyond the asterisk” by also being an avenue of success for Native graduate students.

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