Improving the Recruitment and Retention of Native American Students in Psychology

Timothy Thomason, Northern Arizona University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/timothy_thomason/31/
Improving the Recruitment and Retention of Native American Students in Psychology

Timothy C. Thomason

Northern Arizona University

Author Note: Timothy C. Thomason is a Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Citation for this article:
Abstract

This article establishes the need for more Native American psychologists and describes practical methods for universities to use to recruit, retain, and graduate more Native American students. Reasons for the underrepresentation of such students in psychology training programs include differences in worldview, demographic and geographic factors, and the lack of adequate marketing to members of this population. Recruitment and retention efforts can be improved in many ways, including increasing financial aid, using advertising, personal faculty outreach, and establishing Native American resource centers on campus. Such efforts address the need to increase the number of Native American psychologists in the future.
The Need for More Native American Psychologists

There is a great need to increase the number of Native American students in psychology, especially in clinical and counseling psychology. While reliable statistics are difficult to find, in 1995 it was estimated that nationally, there were fewer than 200 Native American psychologists, or less than one percent of all psychologists (Trimble & Bagwell, 1995). A more recent source stated that there are only about one hundred Native American psychologists currently (Utah State University, 1999). Even using the more liberal figure, since there are about two million Native Americans (U. S. Census, 1990), this means that there is roughly one Native American psychologist for every 10,000 Native Americans, which is less than one-fifth of the number of psychologists available in the general population (LaFromboise, 1988). Overall, ethnic representation in psychology, as reflected in graduate program enrollments and degree recipients, did not change from 1985 to 1995 (Aponte, Rivers, & Wohl, 1995). In the ten year period between 1987 and 1997, a total of 86 Native Americans earned a doctorate in clinical or counseling psychology (National Research Council, 1999). The number of graduates averaged 14 per year, with no significant yearly increase during that ten year period.

It has been estimated that about 80% of Native American psychologists are involved in research, education, or administration rather than direct service, so it can be assumed that the vast majority of Native American people who seek psychological services receive them from non-psychologists who are also non-Native American (LaFromboise, 1988). Most mental health services for Native American people are provided by paraprofessionals, who may be poorly trained for this
function. While there is little evidence to suggest that non-Native American mental health workers provide inadequate services to Native American people, it is obvious that Native American psychologists would often have some advantages over non-Native Americans. Besides their presumed deeper understanding of Native American culture, they would also likely have more credibility with Native American clients. They would tend to be more familiar with Native American culture-bound syndromes and less likely to under-diagnose or over-diagnose Indian clients (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

According to Paniagua (1994), it is generally assumed that racial/ethnic similarity of therapists and clients reinforces the therapeutic relationship. However, he cites research which found that although racial match has an influence on length of treatment, evidence was not found that it strongly influences the outcome of treatment. Although this research did not include Native Americans, perhaps the results would have been similar had they been included. The consensus seems to be that while racial/ethnic matching is desirable for the positive effects it may have, it is rarely possible to implement this practice in mental health centers. This is especially the case regarding Native Americans, since there are so few Native American psychologists and mental health workers.

Although there are very few Native American psychologists, Native Americans tend to experience more psychological problems than non-Native Americans. The rate of alcoholism in Native Americans is three times that of the general population, and Native Americans are ten times more likely to die due to alcoholism (Services, 1989; Thomason, 1996a). The prevalence of depression and suicide is also much higher in Native
The suicide rate of Native American adults is over twice as high as that of the general population, and the rate of suicide of young adult Alaska Natives is ten times the national average (U. S. Congress, 1986). Although the problems are serious, it should be noted that the vast majority of Native Americans are mentally healthy and most are not depressed, suicidal, or alcoholic. The point is that although the rate of such problems is higher in the Native American population than in the general population, there are many fewer Native American psychologists and mental health workers available to address the problems.

The lack of an adequate number of Native American psychologists is a multifaceted problem. Due to the Euroamerican assumptions of modern psychology, some Native American young people may simply not be attracted to it as a career. Some may see it as too focused on pathology; some may object to its emphasis on the individual instead of the group; some may object to its emphasis on statistics, experimentation, and assessment. Clinical psychology is often seen as tied to the medical model and the use of a diagnostic manual which gives only minimal attention to cultural factors (the DSM-IV). Relatively little has been written on Native American psychology, and until recently almost nothing has been written on what clinical psychology has to offer Native Americans (Thomason, in press).

There are several relatively new approaches to clinical and counseling psychology which avoid some of the problems of the traditional medical model, although these approaches may be less well known to people outside the field of psychotherapy. These brief therapies have much to offer multicultural clients who are seeking practical assistance. The strategic and solution-focused approaches
emphasize helping clients find solutions to immediate concerns rather than focusing on psychopathology (deShazer, 1985; Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982; Quick, 1996; Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 1996). The solution-oriented approach has also been applied to alcoholism treatment (Berg & Miller, 1992). Some psychotherapeutic approaches with Native American focus on groups and networks rather than on the individual (LaFromboise & Fleming, 1990). These less pathology-oriented approaches appear to have great promise for use with Native American and other multicultural populations.

Other reasons for the lack of Native American psychologists may be more directly related to educational factors. The number of ethnic minority students in graduate programs is often directly related to the number of ethnic minority faculty in the programs, and currently Native American faculty account for less than one percent of all psychology faculty (Aponte, Rivers, & Wohl, 1995). The vast majority of psychology training programs at universities have no Native American faculty members, and this situation does not appear to be improving. Prospective Native American students have very few psychologist role models. In addition, becoming a psychologist requires entering a demanding educational program with a commitment of several years duration, and the income potential of psychologists is less than that of many other occupations which require a similarly rigorous and lengthy commitment, such as medicine, law, and engineering.

The reasons for the under-representation of Native Americans in psychology can provide some clues to improving the recruitment of Indian student to psychology programs. As a field, psychology must do a better job of communicating to the public, and especially Native
American and other ethnic minority young people, the benefits of a career in psychology. The major benefit is the opportunity to help people cope with and resolve their psychological problems, but the practice of psychology also provides a good standard of living and the chance for a stimulating, creative, and challenging career. If the profession of psychology demonstrates its cultural sensitivity to the unique needs and concerns of Native American people, more Native American students will be attracted to training programs in psychology.

Barriers to Attracting Native American Students

Several demographic and geographic factors have an impact on the ability of psychology training programs in universities to attract Native American students. One factor is the relatively small size of the population. Given the fact that there are only about two million Native Americans, the number of Native American young people who obtain B. A. degrees and consider graduate school each year is very small. In 1990, only 9% of Native Americans completed a college degree, compared to 20% of the total U. S. population (U. S. Census, 1992). These students have many potential career fields to consider, and the psychology programs are "competing" with other academic areas and with each other to attract Native American students. Some years, even psychology programs at universities in states with high Native American populations do not have a single Native American applicant.

Another important factor is the geographic concentration of Native American people in certain areas. More than half of the Native American population lives in just six states: Oklahoma, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Alaska, Washington, and North Carolina (U. S. Census, 1992). Such concentrations can be problem for universities in other states
because many Native American people prefer to stay as near their home as possible. White students seem to be much more likely to be willing to move a long distance from home, away from their family and support system, which are so important for most Native Americans. Native American society is extremely close-knit, which is a strength in many ways, but it means that Native American students who move far from home may feel guilty about it and have more trouble adjusting than White students. Native American students from reservations may also need to travel back home frequently to care for relatives, assist members of their extended family, or participate in tribal ceremonies and celebrations.

Students in rural and reservations areas can be quite isolated and difficult to reach by standard recruitment methods. For example, on the Navajo Nation many homes lack electricity and telephones, and they may be many miles from the closest towns, cities, and universities. Contact by mail and telephone may be impossible or unreliable, so maintaining contact with prospective students can be a real challenge. On the other hand, about half of all Native Americans live in urban areas (Stock, 1987), and they may be as easy to contact as any other students.

The educational attainment of Native Americans has traditionally been somewhat limited by the lack of financial resources. Poverty can limit the quality of students' educational development, and make them less likely to pursue education beyond high school or college. In 1990, the median family income of Native Americans was $21,750, and 31% of all Native Americans were living below the poverty level. Over half of Native Americans living on reservations were living below the poverty level (U. S. Census, 1992). However, many Native American students are
eligible for financial aid for college and scholarships for graduate school, which helps overcome this barrier.

Admission criteria can be a barrier for some Native American students. Universities have the right (within legal limits) to restrict admission to students they think have the potential to succeed in their programs, but the criteria used should be unbiased and objective. For example, the use of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is an artificial barrier, since there is little relationship between GRE scores and success in graduate school (Williams, 1997). Even some relatively minor issues such as excessively high application fees can discourage some Native American students.

To some degree, faculty in psychology training programs in universities may feel they can safely ignore the Native American population as a pool of potential students. The reasoning could be that the pool of potential applicants is tiny, they may be a long distance away, and they are hard to contact. Why not just focus recruitment efforts on members of more populous and more proximate ethnic minority groups, such as African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos/Latinas? The answer to this question, of course, is that Native American psychologists are needed to meet the needs of Native Americans who have psychological disorders. Recruiting and training Native American students is the right thing to do. No other reason should be necessary to justify an intensive effort to recruit Native American students to psychology training programs.

Recommendations for Improving Recruitment Efforts

Psychology departments can increase their attractiveness to Native American students by deciding to make this effort a priority. A process
of self-examination and evaluation, possibly with the help of a consultant, can be followed by establishing a task force to address the issue. The specific goals, objectives, methods, and timelines should be agreed to and put in writing. Such an effort requires the commitment of the entire department, and the support of the administration, and the effort is best seen as a continuous process rather than a quick fix. Two or three years of recruitment efforts may be required before they begin to show results. For example, it may be necessary to target college freshmen and sophomores to encourage them to major in psychology, as a prerequisite to attending graduate school in clinical or counseling psychology later.

The recruitment of Native American faculty members would help provide role models, advisors, and mentors for potential Native American students. Granted, this can be a challenge, since doctoral level Native American psychologists are rare, and are actively recruited by many universities. After a Native American faculty member is on board, the department should be careful not to give that person all the responsibility for recruiting Native American students. To be successful, multicultural student recruitment is a task best shared by the entire department, and not limited to the ethnic minority faculty members.

Improving recruitment efforts need not require major financial outlays. There are some costs, but grants may be available to support recruitment and retention efforts. Costs can include travel for faculty to visit schools and tribal agencies, publication costs for brochures and advertisements, and possibly funding for scholarships. Fortunately, there are many forms of financial aid and scholarships available for Native American students (Thurber & Thomason, 1996). In fact, many of
the scholarships available only to multicultural students go unawarded each year due to a lack of applicants. While faculty members should be aware of the main sources of aid for Native American students, the responsibility for helping students seek and find financial aid can rest with the financial aid officers at the university, assuming they have had diversity training and are culturally sensitive to the needs and concerns of specific groups.

A listing of practical recommendations for improving recruitment efforts would be quite lengthy and is available elsewhere (Thurber and Thomason, in press). However, an overview of recommended recruitment efforts can be described here. The main thrust of recruitment efforts should be in the areas of marketing, public relations, and communications. The challenge is to make Native American people who are prospective university students aware of the need for more Native American psychologists, the benefits of a career in psychology, and the availability of training programs at universities or professional schools. Each different recruitment method differs as to its cost and effectiveness.

The easiest recruitment methods include advertisements in tribal newspapers and newsletters and printed brochures which can be distributed in a variety of ways. Advertisements placed in national Native American newspapers, such as Indian Country Today, reach thousands of Native Americans every week. Such advertisements and brochures should be written in clear, simple language and perhaps with Native American-themed artwork to make them more attractive. To be most effective, the artwork should be tribe-specific and reviewed by a tribal member regarding its appropriateness. Copyright-free Native American-style clip art is readily available in books and computer files.
For advertising to members of large tribes, such as the Navajo, it might be advantageous to have advertisements and brochures written in the tribal language, although most Native American young people speak English. Brochures and posters can be posted in reservation high schools, colleges, tribal buildings, recreation centers, and anywhere prospective students are likely to see them. It should be noted that recruitment efforts for graduate psychology programs should target adults as well as adolescents and young people.

Faculty recruiters can visit high schools and community colleges on reservations to talk to students about careers in psychology. There are also many career fairs, college fairs, powwows, and Native American events such as craft fairs where a university could have a booth for a small fee. One faculty member or student affairs staff member could sit at the booth and talk to prospective students. The goal would be to compile a list of interested prospective students so they can be sent more information later and invited to visit the campus.

While on campus, prospective students can meet with faculty and current Native American students, tour the campus, and meet with financial aid officers. Some universities have one day per term designated as an open house for prospective ethnic minority students to visit. While it is obviously most cost effective to have such events open to all such students, faculty and staff should be sensitive to the different needs and values of the students, and some events limited to prospective Native American students may be appropriate.

Some universities have established a Native American Center and/or a Native American dormitory on campus so students can meet socially and provide support for each other. Simply having a Native
American Center will be a big attraction to prospective students. Psychology departments may be able to designate a room in the building as a Native American Resource Center, with sofas, Native American artwork on the walls, and a wide selection of reading matter, including Native American newspapers, psychology journals, and a bulletin board for announcements. Such a room would show a real commitment to making Native American students feel accepted and comfortable.

The personal touch is especially important when working to recruit Native American students. Prospective students must get the clear sense that the university faculty and staff understand and value Native American traditions and culture. Personal interactions must be culturally sensitive and appropriate (Thomason, 1996b). It may be necessary for university faculty and staff to receive training in cultural aspects of communication and interaction with Native Americans. Faculty and staff who travel to reservations should work hard to establish working relationships with school teachers and counselors who can extend the recruiter's reach and assist with student contacts. Regular visits to reservation high schools and community colleges may be necessary to establish good working relationships with school and college staff and faculty. Listings of Native American tribes, agencies, and tribal colleges, with contact information, is available in directories (Thomason, 1995a; 1995b). Recommendations on how to make counseling services culturally appropriate can be found in Herring (1997); McFadden (1999); Paniagua (1994) and Thomason (1993; 1995c).

Recommendations for Improving Retention Efforts

As important as recruitment is, it does no good to recruit Native American students if they drop out of school before graduating.
Intensive supportive services must be available to assist students in completing coursework and other requirements successfully. Universities have an obligation to teach ethnic minority students using culturally appropriate methods. For example, it is well known that different students have different learning styles. Students can adapt to teachers, but teachers must also adapt their practices to students. This can be a controversial topic, since some faculty members prefer the approach of being "colorblind" in terms of treating all students the same and having all students meet the same standards. However, a strong case can be made that ignoring race and sex is racist and sexist.

Increasingly, university faculty and staff are recognizing the advantages of valuing the diversity which ethnic minority students bring to the campus. Most university faculty and staff know that the Americans with Disabilities Act requires that reasonable accommodations be made for students with disabilities who have special needs. Similarly, reasonable accommodations should be made for Native American and other ethnic minority students, who may speak English as a second language and differ in many ways from Whites. Native Americans reared in reservation and rural areas grow up learning the traditional values, religion, non-verbal behavior and communication style of indigenous Native American culture, which is many thousands of years older than Euroamerican culture. Since these differences enrich American culture, Native American students should not have to totally reconstruct themselves in order to succeed in a Euroamerican university. It is reasonable to expect that both the Native American student and the university will have to make some adaptations to meet each other half-way.
Some of the recommendations for improving recruitment, such as having Native American faculty members and having a Native American Resource Center in the department, will also facilitate the retention of students. An example of a reasonable accommodation for Native American students from a reservation is to allow them to return to the reservation as needed to attend ceremonies or deal with family issues. These absences might be seen similarly to absences other students take for religious reasons. Obviously, if the absences are excessive (as determined by instructors) the student can be encouraged to drop the course and take it again at a better time.

Another idea for improving retention is to establish a mutual support group for Native American students, who could meet regularly, either with or without faculty involvement. Separate meetings could be held regularly for faculty to provide academic and career advisement. Help could be provided with negotiating the university bureaucracy, working with instructors, and brainstorming solutions to academic problems. Inservice training could help teachers learn how to teach Native American students in an effective and culturally appropriate manner (Reyhner, 1994; Rhodes, 1994). As with all students, tutoring and training in study skills should be readily available and should be provided by people with demonstrated competency in working with diverse populations.

Faculty can also work to provide mentoring relationships with new ethnic minority students. Personal interest and involvement on the part of faculty members is perhaps the single most important aspect of a student retention program. Native American students could be surveyed every semester regarding their satisfaction with the program, and
responses to student suggestions could be provided regularly in meetings with students. Native American students who are having difficulty and are considering dropping out should be contacted, and assistance should be offered to keep the student in school. Students who do drop out should be contacted and asked for feedback, to help prevent future dropouts.

Native American graduates of the university should be surveyed to determine their satisfaction with their education, their current job, and so on. Such information could be collated and used as a motivator for current students (and also used in student recruitment). Some departments may choose to develop an advising guide specifically for Native American students, to address common concerns and questions. Such a guidebook could also make prospective students aware of the special programs and services available for Native American students at the university.

It has been noted that rather than drop out of school, many Native American students “stop-out;” that is, they take a semester or a year out of school in order to work or attend to personal or family needs (Benjamin; Chambers; Reiterman, 1993; Chavers, 1994). In order to retain these students for eventual graduation, it is necessary to stay in contact with them and encourage them to return to school when appropriate.

Mentoring has been recognized as an important method for facilitating the retention of Native American students in psychology (McShane, 1988). The mentor, who can be either an advanced student or a teacher, becomes a model as well as an ally who can help the student prevent and deal with problems. Professional organizations such
as the Society of Indian Psychologists and the Council of National Psychological Associations for the Advancement of Ethnic Minority Interests promote the development of mentoring programs.

The American Psychological Association provides and coordinates a variety of efforts to promote the development of ethnic minority psychologists. The Minority Fellowship Program provides financial assistance to ethnic minority students who are enrolled in APA-approved doctoral psychology programs (APA, 1999a). APA’s Office on Ethnic Minority Affairs is a co-sponsor of Diversity Project 2000, which recruits ethnic minority students into psychology careers (APA, 1999b). The American Psychological Society (1999) also coordinates programs on ethnic minority student recruitment and retention.

Conclusion

These are only a few suggestions for improving recruitment and retention efforts. Many of the ideas available in books and articles on general student recruitment can be adapted for use with Native American students. In addition, the American Psychological Association has published several helpful guides to promote ethnic minority recruitment and retention in psychology. These include a series of four brochures with the overall title Psychology Education & Careers Guidebook (APA, 1998); Visions & Transformations (APA, 1997); and Ethnic Minority Perspectives on Clinical Training and Services in Psychology (Myers, Wohlford, Guzman, & Echemendia, 1991).

Regarding the recruitment and retention of Native American students, the problem is not so much a lack of ideas, but rather a lack of commitment and determination to remedy the problem. But as more
people become aware of the severity of the problem and the availability of solutions, perhaps real progress will be made.
References


Thurber, H. J. and Thomason, T. C. (in press). Strategies for the recruitment and retention of Native American students. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University (Available from AIRRTC, P. O. Box 5630, Flagstaff, AZ 86011)


