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Journal of College Student Development, Volume 62, Number 5, September-October 2021, pp. 613-618 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2021.0060>



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Giving Back: Deconstructing Persistence for Indigenous Students

Jameson D. Lopez Amanda R. Tachine

College degree attainment is critical for Native Americans because increasing professional positions such as lawyers, health practitioners, and educators are integral to nation-building, which refers to the pursuit of increased capacity to self-determine and self-govern for sustainable tribal communities and economic development (Native Nations Institute, 2018). Considering the historical and current injustices imposed on Native communities through settler colonialism and the ongoing occupation and control of Indigenous lands (Nash, 2019), nation-building is essential. It encompasses Indigenous knowledge (epistemology and ontology) systems (Brayboy & Maughn, 2009) that warrant further understanding in higher education research. Research that investigates nation-building as a construct is a critical analytical direction that may have lasting implications for how researchers measure persistence for Indigenous students.

Nation-building and giving back represent a cyclical relationship rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing. To give back in a postsecondary context means to acquire a college degree to help advance efforts of nation-building. Therefore, students' *desire to give back* is an Indigenous teaching that emphasizes relationality,

relationships, reciprocity, and a deep sense of nationhood (Reyes, 2019). Brayboy and colleagues (2012) theorized that persistence rates for Native American students increase when they focus on the desire to give back to a broader community rather than on themselves. Other research suggested the desire to give back influences college persistence among Indigenous students (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010). The desire to give back also shapes Native students' reciprocal exchange of support (feeling supported and supporting other Native students), desire to nurture relationships, connection to home/land (place), and interest in altruistic behaviors (Reyes, 2019; Waterman, 2007). This study built upon earlier qualitative research using a quantitative analysis to operationalize the desire to give back. We hypothesized that if the desire to give back is a factor for persistence among Native Americans and an association between giving back and nation-building exists, then contributing to nation-building may relate to the persistence of Native American students.

Native student's persistence rate from the first to second year is 57%, which is lower than their White peers at 67% (Lopez, 2018). For the Cocopah and Quechan Tribes in this sample, first-to-second-year persistence rates are

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62%, which are lower than White peers at 67% (Tachine & Lopez, 2020). Researchers often explain college persistence by a student's ability to integrate into the institution, relying on normalized understandings rooted in individualism and meritocracy (Lopez, 2018). However, scholars should consider investigating whether (and how) the desire to give back (student's pursuit of higher education to increase the capacity of one's tribe to self-determine and self-govern) influences Indigenous college persistence. Thus, this study focused on the following question: How does a desire to give back relate to first-to-second-year persistence among Cocopah and Quechan students?

METHODS

We used Indigenous data collection techniques, which involve expanding the sampling frame by using Indigenous knowledge systems, such as creation stories, which teach about how life began and include answers to many aspects of life. Using creation stories allowed us to collect data according to precolonial borders imposed on Indigenous nations. Thus, Indigenous knowledge systems support measuring culture according to Tribal definitions and increasing sample size (Lopez, 2020).

Participants/Sampling

Researchers used a sample of Cocopah and Quechan college students based on their shared creation story (see Table 1) to address the asterisk phenomenon that excludes Native students from quantitative research (Shotton et al., 2013). Additionally, one of the researchers is a citizen of the Quechan Tribe, which ensured the research respected tribal protocol: the interconnected anchors of recognition, responsibility, and relationships (Tachine, Yellow Bird, et al., 2016). In spring 2017, researchers invited Cocopah and Quechan college students who completed at least one

semester of college between 2007 and 2017 to take the survey. Addresses for 200 participants were obtained from the Quechan and Cocopah higher education departments. A total of 102 participants, or 51%, responded and met the suggested criteria for logistic regression analyses (Field, 2013). Of these, 24% were currently enrolled and had completed one semester, 31% had not completed college, and 45% had completed an undergraduate degree.

Constructs

Regression analyses tested Lopez's (2018) American Indian/Alaska Native Millennium Falcon Persistence Model (AMFPM) using the Scale of Native Americans Giving Back (SNAG; Lopez, 2020). The AMFPM model theorized that Native American postsecondary persistence is related to family and tribal support (measured by items such as: "My family talked about college with me" and "Tribal members [other than family] asked about my academic progress in college"), academic performance (high school GPA), institutional support (measured by items such as: "College interferes with my traditional values" and "My academic advisor ensured I took all required courses for my degree"), cultural identity (measured by items such as: "I can speak my tribe's language" and "I participated in tribal ceremonies prior to attending college [e.g., cremation ceremony]"), and giving back. The SNAG is a web-based instrument on the surveymonkey.com platform and was developed from the theoretical framing of the AMFPM model and expert feedback. It was validated using an exploratory factor analysis, which extracted four hypothesized factors. The scale used an oblique rotation, and only factor loadings greater than .30 and loadings on a single factor were retained. The four-factor solution had acceptable levels of internal reliability for empirical research (i.e., Cronbach's alpha > .7). Participants' current feelings about giving back were measured on a 10-item Likert scale,

Table 1.
Sample Demographics

	Quechan	Cocopah	Quechan & Cocopah	Total
Female	57%	14%	11%	82%
Male	13%	3%	2%	18%
2-year college	58%	12%	8%	78%
4-year college	13%	4%	5%	22%
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	18	68	36	1.73
High school GPA	2.0 or below	4.1 or above	2.6–3.0	1.05
College GPA	2.1–2.5	4.1 or above	3.1–3.5	.93

ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Items included:

1. I notice positive change in the tribal members that I encourage.
2. I help organize community events (i.e., Indian Days, Pow Wows, community dinners, etc.).
3. I currently volunteer with an American Indian community other than my own.
4. If possible, I always try to buy from tribal businesses.
5. I pray for my tribal community.
6. I try to visit my tribal homeland as much as possible.
7. I participated in community gatherings before coming to college (i.e., Indian Days).
8. I planned on using my education to help my tribe.
9. I strongly wanted to “give back” to the tribal community I am an enrolled member of.
10. One time, the tribe canceled our Easter egg hunt because all the powdered eggs blew away.

The final item used humor to measure relationship to tribe and community (see Lopez, 2015), a nuanced approach that speaks to an understanding of the social conditions and connections of and to the community.

Analysis

Researchers conducted two regression models. Table 2 presents the results of the model, including the standardized coefficients for odds ratios, statistical significance, and standard errors. Reporting standardized coefficients facilitates the interpretation of relative effect sizes for future research (Cohen et al., 2013). Two variables controlled for in the model need further explanation: high school GPA and mother’s educational attainment. First, high school GPA may not seem to be a reliable indicator of future academic performance for adults with an average age of 36. Many Native American college students are of non-traditional age, and previous high school academic achievement can relate to college performance for this population (Lopez, 2018). Second, mother’s educational attainment is an indicator of academic achievement (see Tachine & Lopez, 2020). The results suggested the independent variables may distinguish between Cocopah and Quechan students who persisted from the first to second college year.

FINDINGS

The first analysis used a logistic regression model examining first-to-second-year persistence and the second analysis used a multiple regression

Table 2.
Predicting Native American Postsecondary Achievement

Variable	First-to-second-year persistence			College GPA	
	β	SE β	Wald Statistic	B	SE B
Desire to give back	1.115**	.048	5.231	.034**	.015
Family tribal support	1.025	.046	.293	-.021	.015
Cultural identity	0.914	.066	1.822	-.015	.020
Institutional support	0.943	.075	0.606	.031	.024
Female	0.093**	.935	6.421	-.031	.219
High school GPA	1.673**	.246	4.373	.392***	.080
Age	0.910	.147	0.415	.059	.049
Mother's education	1.285	.195	1.651	-.021	.062
AI/AN support services	2.809*	.549	3.542	-.158	.175
4-year college	.945	.659	.007	-.538**	.215

Note. The logistic model showed good model fit evident by non-statistically significant results on the Hosmer-Lemeshow test, χ^2 ($n = 102$), $df = 8$, $p = .171$, and small and medium effect size indices when interpreted using Cohen (1992; Cox and Snell $R^2 = .230$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .311$). We also examined persistence from student first-to-second-year persistence and found tribal support (Wald = 3.993, $df = 1$, $p < .05$), mother's education (Wald = 4.429, $df = 1$, $p < .05$), and identity (Wald = 4.179, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) were statistically significant predicting first-to-second-year persistence. Cronbach's alpha was performed with all factors .7 and exploratory factor analysis loadings on all factors with .3 and above.

* $p < .05$, one-tailed test. ** $p < .05$, two-tailed test. *** $p < .01$, two-tailed test.

model examining college GPA. Model 1 tested whether giving back, institutional support, tribal family support, cultural identity, academic performance (high school GPA), college type (4-year college), and student demographics related to first-to-second-year persistence. Of the independent variables researchers examined in the model, giving back, gender (students were given a range of gender identity options, but their responses fell along the traditional binary), high school GPA, and American Indian student support services (AISSS; a binary measure of presence on campus) were statistically significant. Of the students, 32% indicated that their institution had an AISSS. Table 2 presents the statistical significance, standardized regression coefficients, and standard errors for the multiple linear regression model. The model tested whether the independent variables (i.e.,

giving back, family support, institutional support, tribal identity, high school GPA, mother's educational attainment, AISSS, type of college, gender, and age) related to college GPA (dependent variable). Of the statistically significant independent variables researchers examined in the model, giving back and high school GPA were positive influences on college GPA. Attending a 4-year college had a negative influence on college GPA. Multiple R^2 indicated that approximately 31% of the variation in college GPA is accounted for by the independent variables, which is a medium-sized effect according to Cohen (1992). Furthermore, a post hoc power analysis found the estimated power to predict multiple R^2 at .99, meaning the high statistical power decreased the probability of making a Type II error (concluding there was no effect when there was one).

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, there are limitations to external validity because of the inability to generalize to the larger Indigenous population. The second limitation relates to the ability to make causal or directional interpretations about the relationships observed. Finally, the study covered experiences over a long time span (i.e., some students were currently enrolled in college while others left college many years before). As a result, readers must exercise caution interpreting student perceptions. However, these methods were necessary to obtain a large enough sample for analyses, and the data set in this study is the best one available on Quechan and Cocopah college students to date.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how Native American students' giving back, as an element of nation-building, influences postsecondary persistence (measured by first-to-second-year persistence) among Cocopah and Quechan students. This research supported theorized notions of Brayboy et al. (2012) that persistence rates increase for Native American students when the desire to give back is a motivation for college completion. However, the data do not directly indicate that Native students consider giving back to be nation-building. Further research should investigate whether giving back means nation-building for Indigenous students. Further, if a desire to give back influences persistence for Cocopah and Quechan students, does this also hold for other Indigenous students? If so, what does this tell us about how persistence is typically measured? Researchers must critically examine normalized constructs and outcomes and ask whether these measures align with students' epistemological and ontological orientations. Future research should continue to operationalize giving back according to the items used in this study.

The study provides additional evidence that the AMFPM relates to Indigenous persistence. The logistic regression confirms that all five of the AMFPM (family and tribal support, academic performance, institutional support, cultural identity, and giving back) may relate to Native American postsecondary persistence. The findings include some of the first quantitative analyses to support that giving back (rooted in Indigenous knowledge) increases persistence, in that acquiring a degree to give back advances efforts of nation-building.

As institutions continue to refine their methods of student retention and student success, it is imperative for higher education faculty and administrators to examine postsecondary persistence among Native populations that account for giving back to the community. The findings operationalize giving back and should prompt researchers, practitioners, and administrators to reexamine how they support Indigenous student persistence. Also, by centering their efforts on supporting students' desire to give back, higher educators may simultaneously increase the persistence of Native American students and meet the needs of tribal nations. For example, Tachine, Cabrera, et al. (2016) found that the presence of a Native student center on campus created a sense of belonging, which is a theoretical antecedent to persistence. Additionally, the University of Arizona (2020) has a multi-generational mentoring program where Native graduates and professionals mentor Native undergraduates, who in turn mentor Native high school students in the local Tucson area. This program is premised on giving back and nation-building.

CONCLUSION

Colleges have the opportunity and responsibility to reimagine their programs and initiatives to align their institutional efforts with tribal aspirations for nation-building. One way

to educate and build on the goals of Native nations is to first ask tribes what their institution can do to contribute to the efforts of a tribe's nation-building. After talking with tribes, institutions can then create programs oriented around nation-building. To align institutional efforts with tribal aspirations links directly to treaty rights, federal and state policies, and the

ethical good of giving back to the first peoples of the land that universities benefit.

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