Karina Kletscher
INST 620
User Analysis

Tribal College Students and Their Libraries in Minnesota

A distinguishing characteristic, and cruel contradiction, in American culture is our spirit towards immigrants seeking freedom from tyranny and oppression. We celebrate a history of cutting across the continent exploring and homesteading in a manifest destiny craze. But this perspective is highly contentious and hypocritical; new immigrants are denied this optimism and narrative. And even worse, peoples who came before are also denied their past, briefly summed up in short passages as if these first nations were rightly displaced and no longer exist. In denying Native American nations their history, culture, and land, these communities have become the underserved groups of our larger community, if they are even considered members at all. Barely acknowledged by the hegemonic history or the communities that surround reservations, I have been curious to know how tribal nations grapple with disparities in their narratives and the relations to information access. Specifically, how have institutions like tribal colleges and their librarians sought to close education and information gaps to these communities and ensure that college students are equipped with the literacies and tools they will need to fully engage in the global society? How can I, especially as an emerging information professional, be a better ally to these communities and institutions?

## The Tribal College

Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) are located on or near reservations across the United States, including Alaska, as well as Canada. Chartered by the local tribes, these institutions provide affordable and accredited higher education and broader opportunities to students while remaining connected to their culture and community. This is significant due to the lack of resources available to many American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) communities which are typically geographically isolated and suffer from information and financial poverty (U.S. Census Bureau). TCUs must meet three criteria: be tribally chartered, have a board with a Native American member majority, and a majority of Native Americans in the student body (“About Us”). In 1994, federal legislation conferred TCUs with land-grant status, increasing their visibility and allowing them to share resources with other land-grant institutions such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, 1999). This has enabled TCUs to participate more heavily in the Academy without further stretching already limited funding. As sovereign nations on federal trust territories, states are not obligated to support the TCUs as they do mainstream community colleges, such as utilizing property tax revenue (Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, 1999). In addition, limited funding compounded by rural locations means that there is a high faculty/staff turn-over and TCUs are often behind technologically (Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, 1999).

**More Than Just a College, More Than Just a Library**

Despite historic and ongoing struggles, TCUs are important beacons in their communities. They enable students to seek affordable higher education without a full disconnect from their heritage where they may be taught by role models who look like them whether these instructors are local elders or AIAN faculty who have pursued advanced degrees themselves (Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, 1999). TCU curriculum is an intersection of cultural values and philosophies with western education standards and practices, which more academic institutions should look to when trying to bridge cultural and academic divides. But curriculum is just one important intersection. TCU campuses, especially their libraries, are the major access point for entire reservation communities. They serve adult education, safeguarding tradition and culture, particularly language, preserving materials in collections and archives, and general community centers where tribal members can gather to meet or to use the available technology (Bradbury, 2009; Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, 1999).

**Northern Minnesota TCUs**

There are currently thirty-seven TCUs across the United States, four of which are located in northern Minnesota. These institutions are the Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, Leech Lake Tribal College, Red Lake Nation College, and White Earth Tribal and Community College. These institutions typically operate on an open charter for admissions, enabling non-American Indian students to attend, promoting and practicing their commitment to diversity and inclusion while remaining true to their values. The Minnesota TCUs under review all offer Associates degrees and certificates with partnerships with local state colleges for transferrable credit (“Who We Serve”). Additionally, these TCUs honor Chippewa values in their missions, incorporating these tenets and traditional Chippewa education into their curriculum and practices (“Gaa'Oziskwaajimekaag Gabe-gikendaasoowigamig”; “Home: FDLTCC”; “Red Lake Nation College”; “WETCC Home”). Honoring and balancing the journey towards skill-building and spiritual growth, while also emphasizing that learning is a lifelong pursuit to seek in education, mentors, and elders ensures that Chippewa students echo tradition in modern education, bridging home and school (Bradbury, 2009; Peackock & Wisuri, 2009).

## Why Minnesota? Why TCUs?

My ancestors, and myself in turn, benefitted from verbal masks like the reorganization acts which removed native peoples from their Minnesota land so that mine could move in, whether or not my ancestors knew it at the time or regardless of their own history of oppression and future working on the land. I then was raised in Arizona on ancestral Pima lands, growing up five minutes from the Salt River Reservation, shopping and passing the time in native-owned retail and entertainment centers. Arizona elementary and middle schools are named for ancient and modern tribes and the highways are decorated with Pima and Hopi symbols, but students are not taught the full history and implications. Meanwhile, reservation and suburban residents rarely mingle or at least

don’t speak of it while street signs like Indian School Road are the only eerie markers of the sinister history that society loves to lazily gloss over.

As I prepare to begin preliminary stages of the academic job search, I have been thinking about the kinds of institutions I would want to align myself with and work towards a better future. I want to not only educate myself on the broader history and acknowledge the sociocultural implications but also become a better ally to help instigate that positive change. I am inspired by the persistence and educational blend of TCUs, how the institutions honor students and their intersectionality. If I think about moving back to Arizona or Minnesota, I would want to ensure I know all my career and impact possibilities.

## Chippewa Nations of Northern Minnesota – An Overview

There are currently eleven tribes in Minnesota, four of which are Dakota Sioux. The four TCUs located in northern Minnesota are all associated with tribes of Chippewa descent, also referred to as Ojibwe in regions outside of the American midwest (“About Anishinaabe”). While the Chippewa are spread across five American states and three Canadian provinces, the homes of the leading Chippewa nations that control the Minnesota TCUs are the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (MCT) and the Red Lake Nation. The Chippewa are the second largest nation in the U.S. and are one of the few still residing on ancestral lands (“About Anishinaabe”), though these are unsurprisingly significantly reduced due to the history of unfair, complex treaties and government reneging. Minnesota Chippewa bands and reservations that are not associated with MCT or the Red Lake Nation nor a TCU will not be discussed as part of this analysis.

### Red Lake Nation

Of these four TCUs, only Red Lake Nation College falls under Red Lake Nation sovereignty. This is due to the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians’ resistance to the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act which encouraged Chippewa bands to join together and form elected governments (“Tribal History & Historical Photos”). To this day, the Red Lake Reservation is a ‘closed reservation.’ Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians are the sole owners and occupants, excepting the few approved non-American Indians, and control all access (“Tribal History & Historical Photos”). The nation’s resistance and independence has maintained the Chippewa culture unique to the Red Lake Band, preserving many traditions including the language. Chippewa is the primary language for most middle-age and older adults (“Miskwaagamiiwi-zaaga'iganiing”).

While the Red Lake Nation has held onto much of its independence and traditions, it has still struggled like other Chippewa bands. Despite large businesses on the reservation like the casinos, Red Lake Nation Foods, and Red Lake Builders (“Miskwaagamiiwi-zaaga'iganiing”), employment is limited, resulting in high unemployment rates and high level of poverty, as indicated in Table 2. In fact, Red Lake Nation seems to be behind each of the other bands who host TCUs in every category from internet access to education attainment, which indicates a high level of information poverty and information inequity. It is both unsurprising and laudable that a community

just shy of 5,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017) developed and maintains the Red Lake Nation Community College to enable its members to work towards higher education close to home and the larger community.

**Minnesota Chippewa Tribe**

The Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (MCT) consists of six member reservations, three of whom host an eponymous TCU. These are the Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, Leech Lake Tribal College, and White Earth Tribal and Community College ("About Us"). As briefly mentioned, these bands came together under various land and reorganization acts set forth by the U.S. government in the 19th century ("Tribal History & Historical Photos"). Unfortunately, this cooperation still left the MCT open to defaults on agreements regarding land ownership – or land in general – and sovereignty. Due to complicated agreements, forced cessions, and fraud, much of the reservations' lands are no longer owned by the bands themselves and are instead held under federal, state, county, or private ownership ("Gaa-waabaabigbiganikaag"; "Gaa-zagaskwaabiganikaag"; "Nah-gah-chi-wa-nong"). This also means that the elected officials from the reservations work more closely – for better or worse – with federal agencies, law enforcement, and public school districts. While the Fond du Lac Reservation has a much smaller population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017), it stays within a close range to its MCT counterparts in terms of income, education, and internet access as indicated by Tables 1-4.

Table 1. Population Demographics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017)

| | Total population | Male (Total) | Female (Total) | Total Median Age | Ages 15-34 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fond du Lac | 4,011 | 2,055 | 1,956 | 38.2 | 696 |
| Leech Lake | 11,456 | 5,789 | 5,667 | 38.2 | 1,346 |
| Red Lake | 5,873 | 3,134 | 2,739 | 22.1 | 1,156 |
| White Earth | 9,799 | 4,956 | 4,843 | 35.8 | 1198 |

Table 2. Household Demographics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017)

| | Median Household Income | Unemployment Rate | % Below Poverty Level |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fond du Lac | 52,850 | 7.9 | 13.4 |
| Leech Lake | 43,641 | 11.3 | 20.2 |
| Red Lake | 34,717 | 24 | 31.3 |
| White Earth | 41,691 | 9.4 | 18.7 |

Table 3. Internet Access (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017)

| | Total Households | % with Computer | % with Broadband |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fond du Lac | 1,526 | 76.1 | 58.3 |
| Leech Lake | 4,488 | 81.9 | 69.2 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Red Lake | 1,507 | 69.1 | 53.7 |
| White Earth | 3500 | 74.5 | 61.1 |

Table 4. Higher Education Demographics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017)

| | College or Grad School Enrollment | % Attained High School Graduate or Higher | % Attained Bachelor's Degree or Higher |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fond du Lac | 206 | 87.5 | 16.8 |
| Leech Lake | 378 | 89.6 | 17.5 |
| Red Lake | 186 | 73.9 | 6.6 |
| White Earth | 233 | 86.8 | 13.6 |

## Needs Assessment

### Information Needs

Research has shown that AIAN students enrolled in TCUs and mainstream four-year colleges have very similar information needs, despite institutional differences. These needs are:

- College and vocational opportunities: Many students have little experience with the variety of colleges or career opportunities depending on their exposure to life on or outside of reservations or formal advisement (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Keith, Stastny, & Brunt, 2016).
- Navigating the academy: Like many other first generation students or those away from home for the first time, understanding and adapting to academic culture and its expectations can be jarring (Jackson et al, 2003; Keith et al, 2016; Young, 2018) and includes many other requisites for success such as hard skills like technology literacy and soft skills like information literacy, in addition to procedures and etiquette such as communication with faculty.
- Personal and social skills: Depending on home life or cultural values, AIAN students may not have developed features of independence and assertiveness that is tied to navigating the academy and necessary to higher education's demands in schedules, workloads, asking for help, or taking credit for one's work (Jackson et al, 2003; Keith et al, 2016).
- Interpersonal relationships: Similar to the first two needs, AIAN students are (un)intentionally looking to build relationships with like-minded peers as well as mentors in faculty and staff who can act as informal information sources and communities of support outside of their families or home communities (Jackson et al, 2003; Keith et al, 2016)
- Resources: Students are likely unfamiliar with campus resources or partnerships that exist purely for student success and wellbeing (Jackson et al, 2003; Keith et al, 2016).

### Barriers

Due to TCUs' unique nature and blend of western and native educational and cultural philosophies, students at TCUs face a slightly smaller number of barriers than their

peers at mainstream institutions (Johnson, 2013). However, these cultural, social, familial, and institutional barriers are by no means less potent or harmful. These include:

- Under preparation: Schools in remote areas or with varying levels of integration into public systems and poor funding can produce AIAN students who are often underprepared for higher education's demands and decoding the academy's culture (Jackson et al, 2003; Keith et al, 2016).
- Isolation: Despite native communities within the TCU community, first-generation AIAN students often face isolation due to disconnects with their family and friends who may not understand higher education's demands or feel that the student is selling out to Western academic and vocational ideals (Jackson et al, 2003).
- Family or personal history with mental health issues: AIAN communities, particularly those on reservations, are more likely to experience high rates of drug or alcohol abuse and domestic violence than other minorities in the U.S. and still face disconnects from available support resources.
    - Family or personal history with substance abuse and/or domestic violence is typically seen as a result of mental health as previously mentioned, cycles of poverty, and generational trauma (Bradbury, 2009; Jackson et al, 2003; Keith et al, 2016).
- Poverty: AIAN communities are also more likely to face generations or cycles of poverty, which impact students' ability to attend college, attend or maintain coursework for a variety of reasons related to material affordability and/or external jobs, and access necessary food and shelter (Bradbury, 2009; Jackson et al, 2003; Keith et al, 2016; Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, 1999).
- Faculty and staff turnover: With remote campuses, closed communities, and tight budgets, TCUs have trouble retaining faculty and staff which prevents students from making personal connections with faculty and administration or having consistent, comfortable places to ask questions (Bradbury, 2009; Jackson et al, 2003; Keith et al, 2016; Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, 1999).

## Conclusion

While I believe in holistic, student-centered pedagogy as part of my own emerging teaching philosophy, this is a practice stressed throughout the cultural and educational literature regarding AIAN student populations at tribal colleges. These are students who are both epitomizing intersectionality and bridging worlds between their identities as Americans and American Indians. Like any young adult, they are developing their worldviews and figuring out where and how they fit into this national and global society. With this comes stress and anxiety typical to any first-year student but increases with first-generation students or those students whose home life or inaccessibility to technology makes keeping up with higher education even more challenging or seemingly unattainable. General stress also does not account for more serious mental health issues such as historic trauma, alcoholism, and drug abuse which are often found in reservation life.

In order to overcome cultural, social, familial, and institutional barriers unique to AIAN youth, tribal college students require holistic care and teaching at all levels within the institution from the classroom to the library. This means that educators must be trained in these pedagogies but more importantly the native philosophies that enable TCUs to perform and support their students so well. Knowledge in the native culture not only would help students bridge home and school life, traditional and academic culture, but would make room for understanding cultural differences and eliminate deficit perspectives.

These barriers should also indicate that the contexts of TCUs should be taken into greater consideration; their students, operations, and place within their larger native communities are uniquely designed and executed in response to student and community needs and barriers. While they need to be more fully addressed, these issues represent how the TCU library and greater institution fall outside of traditional Western ideas of siloed responsibilities, assessment, and success, and ultimately funding schemes that are meant to bolster an institution's pursuit of student success and wellbeing.

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