

# Creating a home away from home environment

for Native student success By Amanda R. Tachine, Ph.D. Higher Education

Understanding Native college students and their experiences is important to the broader goals of improving equity in higher education; however, too often research provides only an asterisk or footnote about Native students because their numbers are so small that many argue they cannot be studied (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Thus, Native students are excluded from educational conversations and thereby rendered “invisible” (Brayboy, 2005). There is also a tendency to aggregate all ethnic minorities or Tribal Nations together to address problems and develop programs in a “one size fits all” approach. As a result, most higher education institutions have not developed nuanced practices for Native American students, which results in a failing effort to recognize their distinctive histories, culture and current situations.



Amanda Tachine & her eldest daughter,  
Photo by Amanda Cheromiah

Specifically, limited knowledge exists in understanding Native students’ sense of belonging on campus. Sense of belonging is, “[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” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Sense of belonging is especially important because it is directly connected to increasing student persistence. However, missing from the sense of belonging literature is the relationality among students, their families, and home communities in developing their sense of belonging. Framing sense of belonging with the peoplehood model (Holm, Pearson, & Chavis, 2003) is a promising approach to creating a home away from home environment for Native students.

The peoplehood matrix is a holistic framework that addresses four intertwining factors including language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land (Holm et al., 2003). More specifically, sacred history acknowledges a shared understanding of where Native people come from and presents the concept of kinship, or one’s ancestral relationship with others. Land provides a view into the important connection and dimensions between Native identity and their environment. Language can set a group apart by way of its nuances, references, and grammar. Language is not only based upon spoken words, but also includes, “ways of knowing, ways of socializing, and other nonverbal communication” (Battiste, 2008, p. 504). Finally, ceremonial cycle encompasses the profound role that spirituality has on Native peoples livelihood, and is linked by way of language, sacred history, and place.

In creating cultures of support for Native students, we must consider how we are engaging in practices that uplift Native students’ sense of belonging. By viewing sense of belonging with a peoplehood matrix framework, we have an opportunity to assert Indigenous language, history, spirituality, and connections to a place/land in our programs, initiatives, policies, and practices. We must understand that personhood sense of belonging must be embedded into the structures of higher education if we are to truly strengthen Native college student success. Our Native students are extremely precious. We must do our best to provide a college culture environment that makes them feel at home.

\*From the article entitled *Home Away From Home: Native American Students’ Sense of Belonging During Their First Year in College* by Amanda R. Tachine, Nolan L. Cabrera, and Eliza Yellow Bird. The full article can be retrieved at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00221546.2016.1257322?journalCode=uhcj20>.

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