

## From the Reservation: A Theory Regarding the Development of Native American Students

Nathan C. Winters

*Native American students are a diverse yet underrepresented population in higher education. Little research has been done regarding identity development of these students. This paper focuses on influences to Native American identity and the commonalities between the experiences of traditional-aged students from reservations and adult returners to college. It concludes with a proposal for a developmental theory for Native American students from reservations structured around Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson's (2006) transition theory.*

There are nations within our nation. In fact, according to the most recent available data, there are over 560 tribal nations within the United States representing the Native American/Alaska Native peoples (Brayboy & Castagno, 2011). Even though the number of tribal nations may appear large at first glance, it is important to note that the Native American/Alaska Native populations only make up approximately 2% of the entire United States population, leaving no doubt that native peoples can be considered a marginalized, minority population (Brayboy & Castagno, 2011). Statistics also show a gap in higher education enrollment and achievement for these students. For example, in fall 2009, the total number of undergraduate students enrolled in degree-granting institutions was approximately 17,565,300 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011b). Of that number, approximately 76,500 identified their race as American Indian/Alaska Native, representing 1% of the total undergraduate student enrollment at degree-granting institutions (NCES, 2011b). Also, 57.2% of all first-time, full-time, degree seeking students who started school in 2002 obtained their degrees in six years or less (NCES, 2011a). When looking at only those who identified themselves as American Indian/Alaska

Native in that same cohort, the six-year completion rate drops to 38.2% (NCES, 2011a). This population is also underrepresented in prestigious private and four-year colleges and conversely overrepresented in less-prestigious public colleges and two-year institutions (Lowe, 2005). This achievement gap begins early on in the educational career of students. For example, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, 16.1% of American Indian/Alaska Native individuals aged 16 to 19 were not enrolled in school and did not complete a high school diploma, a percentage double that of white students (Brayboy & Castagno, 2011).

Approximately one third of Native Americans live on Indian Reservations (Brayboy & Castagno, 2011). While this represents a decrease over the past few decades (Brayboy & Castagno, 2011), it remains important to consider the backgrounds of students who are coming from reservations. In Shannon County, South Dakota, where the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is located, a strong sense of ethnic identity is evident with 96% percent of the 13,586 residents of the county self-reporting as American Indian/Alaska Native in the latest U.S. Census (2010). There is evidence of academic struggle on the South Dakota reservation: Of individuals who are

age 25 or older, 78.9% hold a high school diploma and 12.9% percent hold a bachelor's degree, compared to 88.8% and 24.6% for the rest of South Dakota respectively (U.S. Census, 2010). At Pine Ridge however, there are stories of success. For example, the reservation is home to Red Cloud Indian School, a private, Jesuit-run K-12 institution that does not charge tuition and operates almost entirely on private donations (ABC News, 2011). In 2010 there were 39 graduating seniors who planned to attend post-secondary institutions or complete additional job training (Red Cloud Indian School, 2010). Over the years, 45 Red Cloud students have received the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship (Red Cloud Indian School, 2010).

Coming from an area where students share a common ethnic identity, questions remain regarding the unique developmental needs of those who transition from a majority to a minority status at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Horse (2005) has theorized common aspects among Native American people that influence identity development. However, Horse (2005) asserts that no true model of identity development exists because of the diverse nature of the population itself. In order to help those working in higher education settings understand the transition process and resulting identity development of Native American students moving from reservations to PWIs, a theory addressing this topic must be developed.

This paper will review influences on American Indian "consciousness" (Horse, 2005), experiences of Native American students, and Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson's (2006) transition theory. Commonalities will also be drawn between the experiences of Native American students and adult learners. By using existing

literature on the collegiate experiences of Native American students, this paper will present a theory of the transitional process and development of students from reservations who move from a majority to a minority status. This paper concludes with a discussion of limitations, suggestions for future research, and implications for student affairs.

### **Influences on American Indian "Consciousness"**

The existence of an identity development theory for Native American students is absent from the literature, which includes both students from reservations and whose ancestral heritage is mostly or completely Native American (Horse, 2005). However, Horse (2001) developed a framework to provide understanding of Native American racial identity based primarily upon the collective and individual experiences. Horse (2001) refers to these individual and group commonalities as a "collective consciousness." For example, one commonality in the identity development of Native American individuals is shared cultural tradition. Horse (2001) describes how culture is transmitted in identity development through naming ritual. Massive ceremonies are associated with naming in many Native American cultures, and often there is great significance attached to those names, such as honoring important family ancestors (Horse, 2001). Horse (2005) also proposes five influences that affect Native American "consciousness" which include (a) "the extent to which one is grounded in one's Native American language and culture, one's cultural identity"; (b) "the validity of one's American Indian genealogy"; (c) "the extent to which one holds a traditional American Indian general philosophy or worldview

(emphasizing balance and harmony and drawing on Indian spirituality”); (d) “one’s self-concept as an American Indian”; and, (e) “one’s enrollment (or lack of it) in a tribe” (p. 65). While this idea of understanding a “collective consciousness” can provide a framework for understanding the development of Native American students, Horse (2005) does not refer to this idea as an identity model.

Horse’s concept of “consciousness” relates to Pavel and Inglebret’s (2007) ideas about individual identity and success in higher education. The authors present four areas related to cultural identity: individual, family, community, and tribe (Pavel & Inglebret, 2007). The idea of cultural identity and the linkage across these four areas are connected and interact with each other in three phases of higher education: transitioning in, program enrollment, and returning to serve. This represents a number of challenges that Native American students from reservations could potentially face, including understanding how they can apply and live their culture in the collegiate setting, but also simultaneously discovering for themselves how their experiences can be translated back to furthering the development of their own Native American community (Pavel & Inglebret, 2007).

### **Experiences of Native American Students in College**

A small number of studies have addressed the factors that contribute to the success of Native American students, most of which are framed from an individualistic point of view (Brayboy & Castagno, 2011). Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) conducted a study that involved qualitative interviews with 15 Native American college students who grew up on reservations and were

successful in completing their course of study. A number of themes emerged from this study, including “(a) family support, (b) structured social support, (c) faculty/staff warmth, (d) exposure to college and vocations, (e) developing independence and assertiveness, (f) reliance on spiritual resources, (g) dealing with racism, (h) nonlinear path, and (i) paradoxical cultural pressure” (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003, p. 548). Jackson and Smith (2001) also found similar themes in a study on the transitional experience for 22 Navajo Indians. These themes are consistent with the insights of Horse (2005) as well as Pavel and Inglebret (2007). Finding common themes in experiences provide a ground for the development of a theory related to the transition from majority status on a reservation to minority status at a PWI.

Another interesting and critical component in developing this theory is the similarity between traditional-aged Native American college students and adult learners. For example, Waterman (2007) conducted a study of 12 students who identified their tribe as Six Nation Iroquois Confederacy, with most of these students living on reservations. Waterman writes, “Because the participants remained strongly connected to their communities and their families, they resembled adult returning students even when they were college aged and living in a residence hall” (p. 29). In other words, they tended to resemble adult returning students because most participants in the study were unable to name friends from college that did not share a common background (Waterman, 2007). These students also received the vast majority of their emotional and social support from their family and native community (Waterman, 2007). Family ties are also recognized as being an important consideration when working with adult

returning students (Kasworm, 2003). Similarly, Guillory and Wolverton (2008) found family support to be a critical factor determining whether or not Native American students persist in higher education. Besides the connection of family support between Native American students and adult learners, there also seems to be a connection regarding the lack of engagement in the social life of the university. For example, Fairchild (2003) argues that involvement for adult learners looks very different from that of traditional students and that adult learners are usually not interested in involvement opportunities targeted at traditional-aged students. Waterman (2007) also found Native American student involvement and engagement with the university more closely relates to the experience of adult learners. The role of peers in the lives of Native American students also relates to the role of peers in the lives of adult returning students. Shotton, Oosahwe, and Cintrón (2007) found that peer mentors, specifically those from a similar cultural background, could be a vital component to whether or not Native American students succeed in college. Relationships with peers have also been shown as vital to the success of adult returning students. Lundberg (2003) found in a study of adult returning students that one of the best predictors of success for this population is frequent engagement in educationally centered conversations with peers. Thus, the role and impact of peer engagement can be a predictor of success for both Native American students and adult returning students.

The support and role of faculty in the lives of Native American students and adult returning students is an additional parallel between these two student populations. Jackson et al. (2003) found that when Native American students reported high levels of

engagement with faculty and staff, they also reported that these individuals cared for them, acted as resources, and provided a personal connection to the institution. Lundberg (2003) found that the quality of relationships between administrators and students was a strong predictor of learning for all students and the strongest for students aged 30 and older. This suggests that a model to explain adult learners' experiences could be applied to the experiences of Native American college students from reservations. One theory about adult students is transition theory (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) which is used to address that population's experiences of returning to college. This theory will provide further support for how Native American students from reservations experience the transition to college.

#### **Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson's (2006) Transition Theory**

Transition theory arose out of a number of studies and research related to the counseling of adults and specifically as a result of Schlossberg's earlier work (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Transition theory serves as a framework to understand change and allows counselors and other individuals to provide guidance and intentional support for individuals moving through a transition (Goodman et al., 2006). Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) argue in favor of applying transition theory to adult students in their book *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults*. In light of the connections drawn between adult learning and Native American students, transition theory (Goodman et al., 2006) is appropriate for understanding the development of how Native American

students move from a majority to a minority status.

Goodman et al.'s (2006) theory identifies three common stages through which individuals transition (see Figure 1) referred to as *moving out*, *moving in*, and *moving through* (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 50). Moving out is characterized "as ending one series of transitions and beginning to ask what comes next" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 50). The moving in phase involves becoming

acclimated to the new situation or "learning the ropes" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 49-50). The moving through phase is usually characterized by questions such as "Did I do the right thing?" and "Can I commit to this transition?" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 50). It is important to note that transitions are viewed as cyclical, ongoing processes with the end result of moving through the three stages having a positive outcome or a negative outcome depending on the

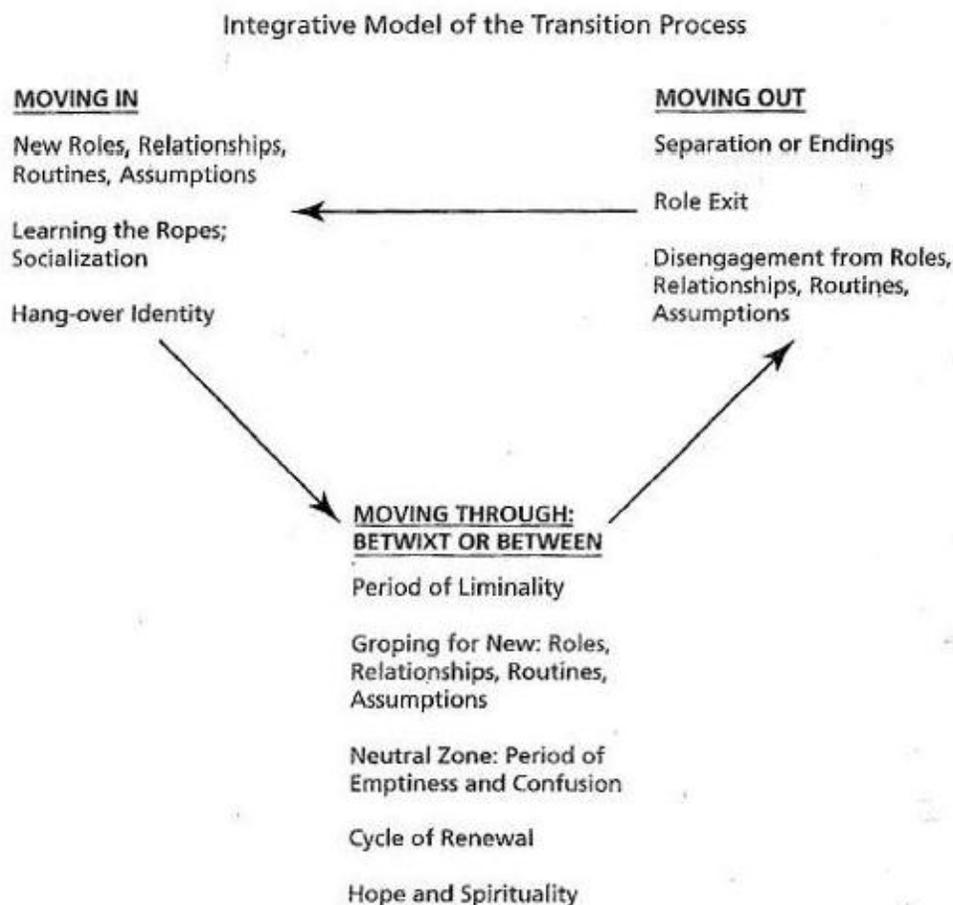


Figure 1. Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2012) integrative model of the transition process. Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world* (4th ed.). New York: Springer Publishing Company, LLC. Reproduced with permission from Springer Publishing Company, LLC.

experience and support received (Goodman et al., 2006).

Goodman et al. (2006) also report that four variables, referred to as coping resources and titled the “4 S System,” influence transition. These four variables are situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman et al., 2006). Each of these variables has different components and varies from person to person, allowing for the individuality of every person to be taken into account (Goodman et al., 2006). According to the theory, how a person utilizes these resources will determine the degree to which the transition is positive or negative.

### **Theory for Movement from Majority to Minority Population**

Based upon a review of the literature, a theory has been constructed regarding the development of Native American students from reservations in terms of moving from a majority population to a minority population (see Figure 2). In this model there are three stages of transition that match the stages described in Goodman et al.’s (2006) transition model, but with the addition of a fourth stage called *integration*. The names of the first three stages were modified from Goodman et al.’s model to more accurately describe the experiences of Native American students.

The first stage is *departing* or the moving from the majority culture of the reservation to a being a minority at a PWI. This stage involves the individual making the decision to attend college outside of their established comfort zone on the reservation. The individual, community, family, and tribe could all be reasons why a student would

choose to go to college or to not move out at all (Pavel & Inglebret, 2007). For example, one student at an Ivy League institution said she chose to leave the reservation she lived on because she wanted to be able to contribute back to her tribe in the future (Brayboy, 2004). This is an important stage in this theory because if an individual never decides to leave, there will be no opportunity to interact with diverse individuals. The triggering motivations also relate back to “consciousness” as identified by Horse (2005), such as wanting to contribute back to the tribe.

The second stage in this theory is *arriving*. According to the literature, when Native American students from reservations move to a new environment, they experience culture shock. Pavel and Inglebret (2007) write:

The distance you travel may be great—not so much in physical miles but in the distance from our Native cultural values and upbringing to the culture of the college or university that you attend, particularly if you choose to attend a predominantly white institution. (p. 156)

This is consistent with the findings of Jackson, et al. (2003) regarding instances of both active and passive racism directed at the Native American students. Many students also describe how their norms do not match their new college environment (Jackson et al., 2003). For example, one student described how he or she had a hard time reconciling the norms of their native culture with those of the dominant culture, including the native norm of not looking a person of authority in the eye out of respect or the dominant culture’s expectation to speak up in class (Jackson et al., 2003).

### Developmental Model of Native American Students from Reservations

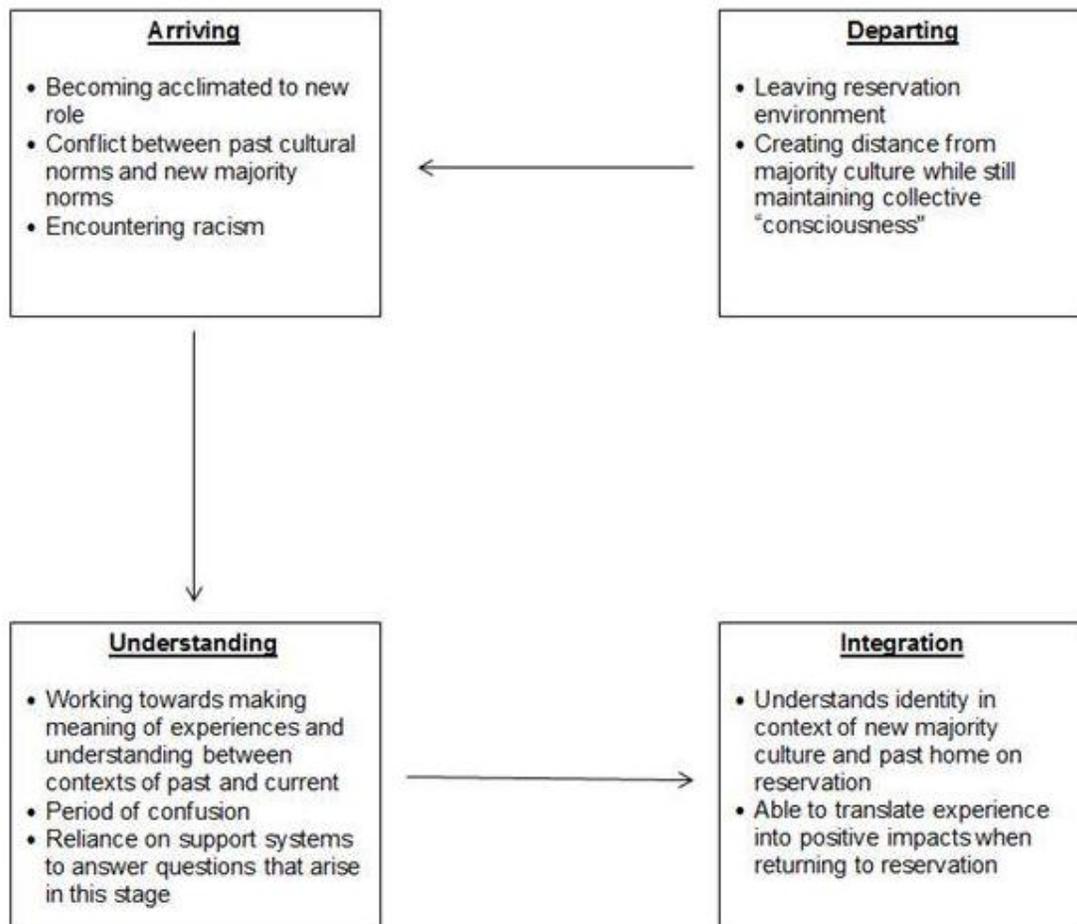


Figure 2. Model for the proposed theory of development for Native American students from reservations.

The third stage is called *understanding*. Consistent with Goodman, et al.’s (2006) theory, this stage is characterized by an understanding for how things work in the college environment. This is where students from reservations begin to work through cultural pressures and become more independent and assertive (Jackson et al., 2003). Jackson et al. (2003) directly relate growth in independence and assertiveness as an adaptation to the dominant culture and provide an example of a student who felt his shyness begin to dissipate as a result of the

atmosphere that promoted open dialogue. With regard to cultural pressure, students described having issues coming to terms with how their reservation culture was going to accept them after having getting a college degree and living in a new environment (Jackson et al., 2003). These situations are examples of how struggle and confusion can occur with regard to balancing the dominant culture with students’ strongly held “consciousness” of their native culture.

The final stage, called *integration*, addresses the strong sense of responsibility

that Native American students feel about using the knowledge gained from their college educations to help people to their reservations (Jackson et al., 2003; Pavel & Inglebret, 2007; Waterman, 2007). This implies that the student has reconciled (or integrated) living in both the majority culture of the reservation and as a minority at a PWI. It may also indicate the strong effect that Horse's (2005) "consciousness" can have on individuals throughout their experience in higher education.

It is important to note that regression in this developmental model may occur. Evidence shows that a lack of support for helping Native American students understand the new diverse environment can result in them giving up and moving back into their comfort zone on the reservation (Brayboy & Castagno, 2011). Many students end up taking time off from school for reasons such as marriage or caring for a family member (Brayboy & Castagno, 2011). Providing multiple forms of support coming from sources such as faculty, cultural centers, and even family members appears to be critical for student success.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This theory attempts to explain the very complex and fluid experience of being a Native American student transitioning to a PWI. It is important to note, as Horse (2005) says, that because the Native American community has so much diversity in it, defining the Native American identity broadly can limit the understanding and appreciation for diversity within the identity itself. However, this theory can help to inform practice by explaining what identity development processes might be occurring since previous research has focused solely on what influences success or failure for this

student population. It is also necessary to continue finding ways to understand and assist this student population in student affairs practice given the small amount of literature on the subject.

For future research, this theory should be tested through longitudinal studies of students from specific reservations to understand not only their experiences in college but also what occurs after they have graduated. Using such information would allow researchers to develop a theory of holistic development for Native American students similar to the work done on Latino/a students by Torres and Hernandez (2007). In addition, based on the arguments in this paper, practices for working with returning adult learners should be examined and applied in order to assist underrepresented, marginalized student populations.

### **Implications for Student Affairs Practice**

Student affairs professionals can utilize this theory to further understand the unique experiences of Native American student at PWIs. One key aspect of this theory is that the developmental process begins with the student deciding to leave the reservation to attend college. Admissions staff and other recruiters can take this into account when recruiting students by understanding that the first steps for success or failure could occur before the student even arrives on campus. Staff in cultural centers, multicultural affairs offices, and other departments can utilize this theory as well. This theory demonstrates that this student population will experience a number of moments of dissonance that they will need to make meaning of, including understanding their role as both a student and reservation member, as well as adjusting to new cultural norms and encountering

racism. Goodman et al. (2006) propose that support from others and strategies for working through these challenges can help determine to what degree the transition will be positive or negative. For example, an orientation program targeted to this student population and increases in other support services might aid in retention and

persistence. This developmental theory can inform the work and creation of these programs and services by providing a new understanding of this understudied student population. Student affairs professionals are in a unique position to serve Native American students and could make the crucial difference for these students' future success.

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*Nathan C. Winters plans to graduate from the HESA master's program in 2013. He received a Bachelor of Journalism degree with an emphasis in print and digital news, magna cum laude, from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2011. At Indiana University, Bloomington, Nathan serves as a Graduate Supervisor in Ashton Residence Center and works in the Office of Student Ethics and Anti-Harassment Programs.*