

# Understanding Cultural Dissonance to Enhance Higher Education Academic Success

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**Abstract**—This research documents a qualitative study of selected Native Americans who have successfully graduated from mainstream higher education institutions. The research framework explored the Bicultural Identity Formation Model as a means of understanding the expressions of the students' adaptations to mainstream education. This approach led to an awareness of how the participants in the study used specific cultural and social strategies to enhance their educational success and also to an awareness of how they coped with cultural dissonance to achieve a new academic identity. Research implications impact a larger audience of bicultural, foreign, or international students experiencing cultural dissonance.

**Keywords**—Bicultural Identity Formation Model, Cultural Dissonance, Higher Education, Student Success

## I. INTRODUCTION

FOR those involved professionally in educational settings, there are many reminders that education is an emotionally charged space. Consider the young person who is the first generation in her family to attend a university and the family responsibility this holds.

Consider the young single mother who is going to university to better her life with her child or also think of an international student who is leaving his home to go to a foreign land to study and learn. Inherent in these cases is a sense of personal, social, and cultural conflict. In this sense, conflict and more specifically cultural conflict is a reality in Higher Education.

One group of learners who experience a high degree of cultural conflict are Native American's who leave their local communities and attend mainstream higher education institutions. The concern within the academic community for learners like this is that there is often a high rate of academic failure leading to low completion rates.

Learning from those who have succeeded in the mainstream university system and who have come to terms with cultural conflict is essential for creating university campuses where academic success is achievable for all learners.

In considering this issue of cultural conflict in Native American students, two major theoretical frameworks have been established: the cultural discontinuity hypothesis and the macrostructural explanation [11].

Within the first framework, the cultural discontinuity hypothesis expresses the idea that some groups do well in school because their personal cultures synch well with the school culture they are attending. So for Native American students, there are inherent discrepancies among Native cultural values, worldview beliefs, and behaviors with mainstream Western pedagogy that impede academic success [1]. In the second theoretical framework, [17] illustrated that educational macrostructural cultural realities challenge preexisting conceptions of knowledge and negatively impact inclusion in mainstream social structures that is beyond individual control. In other words, such things as course textbooks that exclude Native American history, little access to educational mentors, and/or weak social support systems within higher education institutions all impede Native American student success. In fact, cultural conflict or dissonance and the stress related to it have been hypothesized as the major factor in student dropouts [16].

For students coming into a foreign academic learning space, Huffman (1993) theorized that student success is dependant on social, cultural, and academic skills that occurs at both the microcultural and macrocultural levels. He observed that the necessary skills for success are developed through interaction of four internal stages: (a) initial alienation, (b) self-discovery, (c) realignment, and (d) participation. This process is documented as the Bicultural Identity Formation Model. When students have achieved the social and scholastic ability to participate in both cultures, they have then reached the point of transculturation and are better equipped to adapt to the foreign learning environment enhancing learner success (Huffman, 2001). The theory of transculturation purports that American Indian higher education students increase their cultural repertoire, adding the needed skills while keeping their Native heritage intact by becoming transculturated. As a result, they do not experience cultural loss or loss of self-identity. The development and retention of cultural autonomy is perceived in the research as essential to Native students' academic success.

## II. RESEARCH CONTEXT

Theoretically, threat to identity issues may deter many Natives from seeking mainstream higher education. There are, however, pressing reasons for Native American students to participate in mainstream education. Patricia Monture, a professor at Dalhousie Law School pointed out that for Natives, a university education is essential to attaining tribal self-determination (Kirkness&Barnhardt, 1991). Since Native representation in higher education is crucial to the self-determination movement, the necessity for tribal input into all

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disciplines is essential for the protection of future Native interests. Interest and demand are demonstrated by requests for educational reform, coming both from the tribal people themselves and from the United States congress in its *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. This act continues to assist students in need through postsecondary and graduate school. The following items are suggested reasons why policy and strategic planning are necessary to continue to encourage Native American attendance in mainstream higher education institutions.

#### A. *Environmental/Economic*

“Congress and the Supreme court must become cognizant of value pluralism and the unique position of Native nations within American constitutionalism” (Toosie, 2002, p.30). For example, a need exists - that can be achieved through higher education - for tribes to know how to use federal agency decision-making processes to help meet tribal government needs in determining their cultural sovereignty (Suagee, 2002).

#### B. *Technology and Change*

Tribes need to promote sustainable development calls for tribal education in emerging technologies and renewable energy. This “ability to control change is an element of sovereignty” (Pommersheim, 2002, p. 24). The capability to control and regulate change increases with tribal educational expertise in areas of science and technology.

#### C. *Opportunity*

The Self-determination and Education Act of 1975 has further created a growing impetus and interest in education for Natives. Opportunities grow for Native college graduates both on and off the reservation. A study by the Institute for Higher Education (IHEP) found that 91% of college graduates from tribal colleges and universities are employed or attending college a year after graduation (*IndianCountryToday*, May 8, 2002). Urban Indians are now returning to the reservations, bringing their job skills with them, thus increasing job competition. They also bring with them new information and new ideas.

#### D. *Distance Learning*

The future of new technologies offer tribal communities other options for educational and job opportunities. Distance learning through higher education institutions has the potential to serve American Indian tribal communities in their own regions, bringing them the newest information right to their doorstep.

#### E. *Motivation*

The Society of American Indians (1908), Indian Defense League of America (1920), and the National Congress of

American Indians (1944) and most recently, American Indian Movement (AIM) existed as collective movements of Native peoples. These movements inspired a culture of wanting to succeed in mainstream education that has developed throughout the century. “The newer generations of activist Native Americans were often urban based and college-educated” [3], p.6.

### III. PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of eight Native American respondents in order to determine successful strategies and adaptations of their experiences in mainstream higher education as bicultural or transcultural participants. The identified levels towards transculturation are developed within the student in four stages, according to theory: (a) alienation, (b) self-discovery, (c) realignment, and (d) participation. The effort of the research is to look for the factors that lead to Native student success.

### IV. RESEARCH QUESTION

The following grand tour question guided this research:

*What are the cultural, social, academic, and personal qualities that are exemplified in Native American students who successfully completed graduate studies in mainstream higher education institutions?*

### V. RESEARCH DESIGN AND THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

The Social Constructivist paradigm was utilized in this research as a means to expand knowledge pertaining to the bicultural process. The design of this research was to include multiple perspectives of Native American participants where a ‘taking back of the Native voice’ is a part of the pedagogy laid out by Paolo Freire (1998) in his work with adults in Brazil. The Social Constructivist Paradigm, according to Lincoln and Guba (1994), has a dimension both historical and sociocultural. The choice of this theoretical construct is a match to the holistic worldview of the Native American participants involved in this study.

#### A. *Participants*

Eight respondents (four men and four women) were in this study. They were all leaders in their communities promoting education and understanding for and about their people. The participants all attained a graduate degree from a mainstream university and they were also employed in fields benefiting the education and success of their tribes. All participants were interviewed over three meetings of one hour each time.

#### B. *Data Analysis Process*

The participants’ strategies for success were collected and coded according to the four known stages of transculturation: alienation, self-realization, re-alignment, and participation as determined from the Bicultural Identity Formation Model.

This was then linked to the four student adaptation categories of personal, social, cultural and academic. The individual adaptation strategies were compared and contrasted for units of meaning. These themes and patterns were then examined for validity and reported in the narrative. This was achieved through the application of trustworthiness to the data analysis process. Trustworthiness in this study was achieved through authenticity criteria determined by Guba and Lincoln (1985) to have fairness, ontological and educative authenticity, and catalytic and tactical authenticity. Member checks were followed in cases of unclear responses or in cases of need for additional feedback. Unpredicted outcomes from the interview questioning determined new directions and methods for analysis. Allowances for the incorporation of new themes and categories were a part of the discovery process of the data analysis. Metaphors, word repetition, and shifts in content meaning were considered and documented among participants and used in the recognition of themes and patterns.

### C. Data Analysis Construct

Four categories determined from the research were used to organize the data analysis. These categories are: cultural, social, academic/macrostructural, and personal. Theoretically, the stages of student transculturation interact at four perceivable levels: (a) alienation, (b) self-discovery, (c) realignment, and (d) participation. Each stage applied to the four categories was considered for the interactions of the participants' adaptation strategies. The data was further organized under the five Native American values of respect, generosity/compassion, wisdom, to be brave and/or to have courage, and to act in responsible ways, which includes speaking in truth, so that our people may live [13].

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

*The following lists the key conclusions from this study:*

- 1) All participants used the five Native American values as both psychological and practical support as they experienced the various stages of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model and made the transition from Native American educational systems to mainstream higher education.
- 2) Consistent with theory, the participant's comments showed them going through the four stages of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model.
- 3) The participant's comments revealed that when they reached the participation stage of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model, it was at this point that they began to feel that they could achieve and be successful in the mainstream environment.
- 4) Language and intercultural proficiency are necessary to achieve transculturation.
- 5) The holistic thinking or whole-concept learning style of the Native American worldview requires student

realignment into the compartmentalized learning style of the mainstream educational environment.

- 6) Native American students were academically empowered through the development of English proficiency. Finding a mentor in the mainstream higher education setting was expressed as very important to student success due to its link with the five Native American values.
  - a. Native students flourish with mentorship focused on skill development, self-esteem building, and problem solving.
  - b. Mentors are important to Native American student learners because of the preference to learn by precept and example.
- 7) Native student learning would be accelerated through the application of a Bicultural Identity
  - a. Formation Model and inclusion of the five foremost values of Native Americans into mainstream higher education support infrastructures.
- 8) Native students require faculty with cultural understanding, a respectful posture, and a willingness to communicate.
- 9) Curriculum including Native American history, persistent issues, and contributions to the U.S. should be inclusive.
- 10) While biculturalism may exist at various stages of development in an individual, the fourth level of participation in the transculturation process, which allows full participation in both Native and mainstream cultures increases the possibility for Native American students to succeed in mainstream higher education.
- 11) Trust is a most important issue in the success of Native American students.

## VII. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The model for the study has been designed utilizing the four stages of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model, the four constructs used to organize the study, and the five foremost values of the Native American. This model (See Figure 1) is designed to show the Native American values of the participants supporting the student through the four constructs into the four stages of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model. According to the data analysis, this study revealed that as interpersonal values filter upward through the dimensions of cultural, social, academic and personal, the student works through the stages of alienation, self-discovery, realignment, and participation drawing upon innermost values as needed for their psychological and personal support.

The alienation difficulties that students have within the higher education system may result in cultural dissonance that is suggested as a major cause of student failure.

The second stage of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model is self-discovery. The participants in this study revealed that by drawing on the five foremost values of the Native American throughout the stages of self-discovery and alienation, they become self-actualized with reduced cultural dissonance and stress and without cultural loss or loss of self-identity. The self-discovery process reaffirms the identity of the student in relationship to the mainstream educational environment.

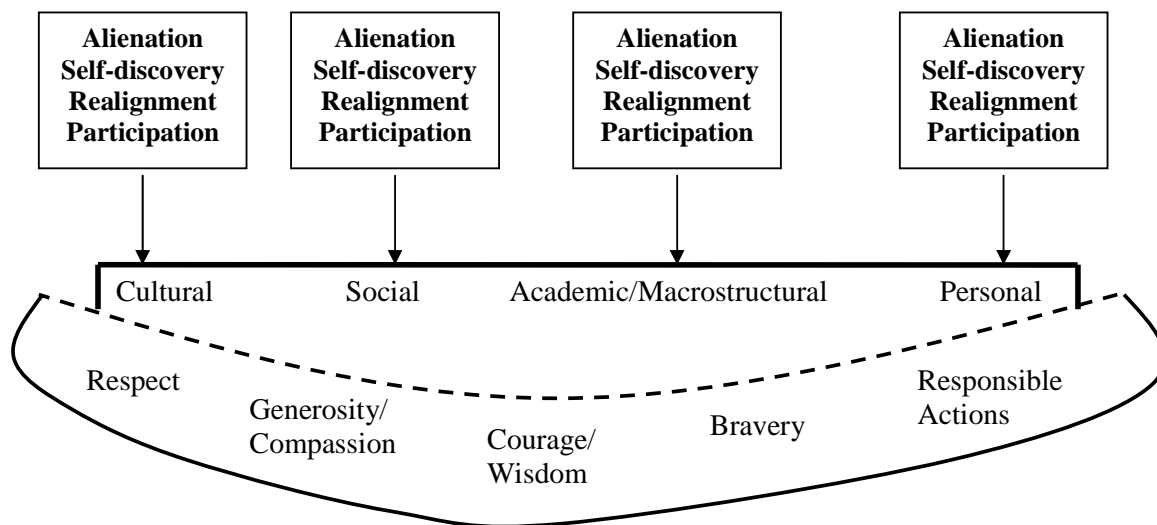


Fig. 1 The Native American student transculturation process

What is important about this finding from this research is that it shows our participants going through the bicultural identity process in each of the four constructs. Traditionally, the Bicultural Identity process was seen just as a single holistic entity. The values have now been shown in relationship to the Bicultural Identity Formation Model as supporting values rather than over-arching values. The participants revealed that as they experienced the mainstream higher education learning environment in this more detailed process, it enhanced their participation in both cultures, in their intercultural effectiveness, and through to transculturation. The first stage of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model lists alienation. All students encounter alienation in new systems at different degrees. For those students who are entering a new cultural, social, academic, and personal environment, those stages of alienation may be more pronounced, complex, and most difficult to organize into life world experience.

At this point, the participants learned to take care of self-esteem through self-discovery within the demands of the new academic cultural environment and approached intercultural effectiveness throughout the stage of realignment, thereby adapting to new cultural needs and academic expectations. The participants "receive power from their traditions while enriching those traditions, helping them evolve, and ensuring their survival" [21], p. 69.

The third stage of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model is the stage of realignment in which the participant took the identity they have actualized and used it to filter the experiences of the new environment through the five foremost values. By drawing personal and psychological strength from the values, the participants worked through the new expectations and relationships in the new environment, determining appropriate responses through observation, practice, and demonstration without cultural loss.

The fourth stage of transculturation or “walking-between-worlds” was identified in the participants as being able to fully participate in both cultures at the same time because they had developed the skills necessary for school success and intercultural competence. It has been revealed through the data analysis that the fourth stage of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model, transculturation, does not occur as a predictable linear occurrence. It is a process in which the participant appeared to weave in and out through the four stages of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model utilizing the five foremost values of the Native American to integrate new materials, knowledge, and ways of being. It required the participants to interact at all four levels of the Bicultural Identity Formation model and in all four of the constructs: cultural, social, academic, and personal. The five foremost values of the Native American supported their academic endeavors and guided them with each value incorporated in different degrees within the stages.

As the participants gained strength from the five Native American values, the value of respect for themselves and other participants within the intercultural exchange increases and allowed them to understand, through empathy, within the self-discovery process, the perspectives of cultural participants and enabled them to express their own perspectives through realignment in appropriate academic forums within the foreign academic culture. Transculturation facilitates student success because the increased ability for full participation allows benefits of ‘insider insight’ unavailable to those who are unable or unwilling to fully commit to the immersion learning experience. Higher educational institutions are an immersion learning environment for Native American students no matter what their level of biculturalism is. The goal of transculturation is to be able to interact in both cultures simultaneously, not in one or the other.

The wisdom gained through self-discovery, intuition knowledge, and education allows the student to integrate the realignment process into the skill development necessary for full participation within both cultures. The value of acting in responsible ways assists and motivates the student in reaching their goals. While this may appear to some to be a solitary endeavor, the Native preference for group work demands the building of strong support groups. Such support groups assist the individual Native American student in determining the source of alienation and supply coping skills to surmount the emotionally draining experiences of cultural dissonance. A good mentor match requires strong commitment on the behalf of both individuals and full participation of those students who truly wish to be mentored and desire this type of intimate personal, social, and academic interaction.

#### VIII. DISCUSSION

The Native American realignment into the mainstream educational environment requires skills necessary for school

success. Some of those skills may be accessed and attained through specialized classes and student support programs. Skills may also be taught by mentors, individual professors, gained by observation of successful students, and through student groups. The skills that are focused on through student support programs address academic issues that students might need in realigning to mainstream academic expectations. The personal skills build within the stages of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model if the student has not previously developed them. Ultimately, the student takes ownership of their learning and becomes responsible to develop the knowledge of systems that they need to achieve in the mainstream educational environment.

When some teachers in mainstream education report that they do not observe differences in Native students, it may mean that those specific students have acquired surface behaviors of fitting into mainstream that allow them to harmonize with the group. Some teachers say they have had Native students but ‘don’t find anything different.’ In all probability, they have been working with acculturated students. The success rates of Native American students show that those outward signs of adaptation or fitting-in do not reflect the internal conditions of those who may not be comfortable, working to the best of their abilities, or successfully understanding the educational climate. When those symptoms of dissonance have progressed further to delinquency or dropping out, the differences become most apparent and result in academic failure. The implication of this process of failure in Native American students puts a certain degree of responsibility on the shoulders of the higher education leaders.

Therefore, realigned perspectives, attitudes, knowledge, behaviors, and skills facilitated through the mainstream educational institution will allow students to effectively interact with others who are different from themselves in the context of today’s global society. This realignment is recognized as an important focus in the success of Native American students in higher education. In addition, the teaching of interaction management, ‘the ability to take turns and terminate discussions’ (known to be essential in intercultural communication competence), is acknowledged as important to the student’s learning experience. This ability can keep cultural boundaries from invasion and prevent arguments in uncomfortable situations. It empowers the student. Interaction management is a road to better communication.

Therefore, this study affirms the research in the recommendation that bicultural students need educators who help them examine their lives to understand the molding of societal forces so that they may become better prepared to deal with cultural dissonance as it occurs. Native American students need to develop the ability to make intercultural judgments and adjustments to succeed in the academic world and to meet the level of transculturation. The data affirms the

research that student empowerment is developed through English proficiency and through mentorship focused on self-esteem building and problem solving.

Educational pedagogies focused on interactive methods encourage participation. Role playing and simulation would benefit the development of all four stages of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model. Visualization techniques incorporating pictures, graphs, and colored writing implements are effective according to the hands-on, visual, and experiential learning style preferences of the Native American student. All participants defined themselves as whole-concept, hands on, experiential learners; therefore, education directed towards a 'return to traditional' teaching methods: exploratory learning, hands-on, and development of a person's talents and skills-using that as a strength, has the best potential for Native Student learning. Educators must keep in mind the ways in which Native student's best learn: co-operative group work, cooperation, harmony, and balance of hands-on learning.

In addition, Native American students are advised to learn more about culture while in university. Cultures of other countries impact the United States now more than ever and its worldview component has become important to many higher education courses. While cultural traits of immigrants once were more similar to the Native ways, American culture has amalgamated into something new and different. The adoption of a positive outlook towards change is a skill important to student success and intercultural participation within the culture of higher education institutions. Cultural change need not preclude or negate tradition.

The data responses of the participants in this study to the psychological coping skills advised for the Native American student outnumbered the frequency of responses to intercultural communication improvement needs and interpersonal relationship development requirements. This finding affirms that the reduction of cultural dissonance and stress must be addressed within the university system in order for universities to be effective in negotiation of intercultural differences. Change must also be addressed. When bicultural students cannot identify the cultural codes or clues they need to make appropriate decisions, they must have instruction or assistance to help them identify those particular cultural markers and choose the behaviors they must assume. Students need to become insiders to become transculturated because being an insider in another culture is intercultural competence.

The alienating bicultural barriers to effective teaching and learning at the intercultural level are best approached by the student through overcoming alienation by self-discovery, realignment, and intercultural participation - the four stages of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model. This would suggest that for all "foreign" students, the building of strong support systems is very important. Working in groups allows the participation stage of transculturation identified in the study to

be the best opportunity for success for foreign or international students in higher educational institutions. This research supports that transculturated students who are able to participate have a better chance for academic success.

Therefore, the application of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model with its addition of the five supporting foremost values of the Native American has been affirmed in this research as a directive for Native American student success. The five Native American values support the students in their journey into mainstream higher education. But not just the Bicultural Identity Formation Model in its entirety, but an awareness that bicultural students will weave in and out of this model as they address the cultural, academic, personal, and social transformations they must make. In addition, the strong support systems and mentorship advised in the data provide the group work many Native students prefer and create additional opportunities for transculturation. It seems that all higher education students will go through this cultural transformation in some form or another. Whether it is a learner coming from a small town to attend the big university or the international student coming from France to study in Canada or the young mother who is trying to balance work, school, and raising a child. All will experience cultural dissonance. Universities can be a guide to all these learners if they establish programs that help these learners to find their supporting values and then use them as foundations through the elements of the Bicultural Identity Formation Model within the cultural, academic, personal, and social adaptation/transformations they will experience.

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