

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS COUNCIL

AGENDA ITEM: 5.H

DATE: June 19, 2013

SUBJECT: Draft of AIAN College-Going Study

In October 2012, SDBOR research staff presented a project proposal to members of AAC regarding an upcoming study on college-going among American Indian students in South Dakota. The project involved a series of focus groups comprising current AIAN students conducted on the campuses of BHSU, NSU, SDSU, and USD. Analysis of the study's data is now complete, and the attachment provides a preliminary draft of this work. The executive summary offers a quick overview of the study; further details about the project's goals, method, and findings are given in the main report.

AAC members are invited to offer feedback on the draft. It is anticipated that a final version of this report will be presented to the Board of Regents later this year.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

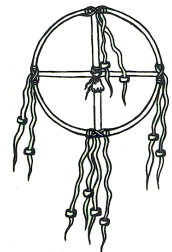
Information.

Like two different worlds:

American Indian perspectives on college-going in South Dakota

An interpretive study
conducted on behalf of the
South Dakota Board of Regents

May 2013



Executive Summary

The higher education “pipeline” tends to be a brittle, tangled, and severely fractured one for young American Indians. These students’ odds of successfully completing a four-year degree from a mainstream college or university are perhaps the slimmest faced by any demographic group. Compared with all other major racial groups in the United States, these students “have the highest high school dropout rates, are least likely to have completed college preparatory courses in high school, and have among the lowest college entrance and retention rates in the country,” (Jones-Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, and Solyom, 2012, p. 1). Indeed, the US Census Bureau (2010b) reports that only 13.0 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives 25 years or older hold a bachelor’s degree or higher, tied for lowest among all major racial or ethnic groups and less than half the rate recorded for whites.

The current study was undertaken in the fall of 2012 to generate a descriptive account of young American Indians’ global perspectives on college-going in the South Dakota context. What do American Indian prospective students think about their pathways to college? What considerations both push them toward and pull them away from the doors of higher education? The study used a focus group design to interview 49 current American Indian undergraduates at four Regental institutions: Dakota State University, Northern State University, South Dakota State University, and the University of South Dakota. Group sessions covered a broad range of topics, including: the desirability of postsecondary education, expectations of the college experience, motives for attending college, factors in college choice, and known barriers to entry.

Analysis of the study’s narrative data revealed a number of key themes, all of which are discussed comprehensively in the full report. These themes are summarized below, organized by category:

Obstacles and Anxieties

- ***The Reservation Effect.*** In general, students living on reservations face a comprehensive array of challenges that are rooted in profound economic, academic, and social disadvantages. The stark poverty that dominates many reservations in South Dakota leads many families to focus on more immediate priorities than college readiness.
- ***Financial Challenges.*** Many students lack the ability (or *believe* they lack the ability) to pay for college. Students also may lack the financial literacy required to manage a personal budget.
- ***Lack of Mentorship.*** Particularly on reservations, high school students lack college-knowledgeable mentors whose advice might otherwise ease the path to college. These students are left to “fly solo” in managing all aspects of the college-going process.
- ***Fear of Leaving Home and Family.*** The notion of family is central to Lakota and Dakota cultural traditions. The sense of mutual dependence that defines many American Indian families can lead prospective students to feel as though the choice to enter college would constitute an abandonment of their familial responsibilities.
- ***Fear of Culture Shock.*** Especially for students living on reservations, college ambitions can be seriously undermined by anxieties about the college experience, including fears of stereotypes, racism, culture shock, and the proverbial “unknown.”

- ***Fear of Alienation.*** For some American Indian students, the decision to enter white culture to enroll in college comes at the cost of alienation from friends and family. This response from others, sometimes labeled as “resentment” or “jealousy,” can range from passive snubbing to flagrant disparagement.
- ***Other Barriers.*** Other barriers that commonly prevent American Indian students from entering college include: failing to graduate high school, abuse of alcohol or other drugs, incarceration or probation, teen pregnancy, single parenthood, and a lack of quality information and engagement from colleges.

Reasons for Attending College

- ***Supporting the Family.*** Providing a comfortable and secure future for one’s family is a leading motive for the broader American Indian population, and often emerges as a compensatory reaction to past experiences with poverty.
- ***Setting an Example.*** Completing a college degree is seen as an important and transformational way of setting a positive example for others, particularly in a population that tends to lack college-goers.
- ***Service to Tribe.*** Starting college often is seen as a jumping-off point in the path to imparting a lasting impact in tribal communities, usually through the delivery of high-need professional services.
- ***Escaping.*** For many students, attending college offers a means by which to escape the realities of the reservation experience, and perhaps even more so, to escape the destructive “status quo” attitude that pervades reservation life.
- ***Beating the Odds.*** Motivated partly by the perceived hopelessness of reservation life, the notion of “beating the odds” or “proving oneself” is a unifying refrain for this population.
- ***Other Motives.*** Like any other student, American Indian high schoolers are spurred by any number of other “typical” aspirations, including: earning a healthy paycheck and enjoying a comfortable lifestyle, studying a particular field or entering a specific profession, having interest in participating in collegiate athletics, being encouraged by others to pursue college, or winning a good scholarship.

Mediating Influences

- ***Family Influence.*** Families play a critical role in the decision to attend college. While many students receive encouragement from their families, such support is sometimes mixed with clear signals of skepticism or doubt about succeeding in college. Simply having family members who are college graduates can make the idea of attending college seem more possible.
- ***Tribal Influence.*** Tremendous variation exists across the state with respect to tribal support – emotional, financial, or otherwise – of prospective college students. Some students experience robust support from their tribes; for others, signals from tribes can be muted, erratic, or implicitly negative. Though exceptions do exist, students tend to find frustration in dealing with tribal financial aid systems, which they often describe as disorganized, fragmented, and non-responsive.

- **School Influence.** South Dakota school districts (particularly those on reservations) vary wildly with respect to staff quality and organizational culture; consequently, major disparities exist in the messages students receive about going to college. Especially in some federally-funded tribal high schools, students sometimes perceive an implicit bias working against American Indian students' efforts to advance to college.

Factors in School Choice

- **Family Factors.** Familial considerations – such as a campus's geographic proximity to home or a family's past experiences at a college – are among the most salient drivers of college choice.
- **Other Factors.** American Indian students are likely to be especially sensitive to other specific characteristics of a college, such as impressions about campus diversity, campus size, affordability, programs offered, and the availability of student services. Personal attention from a college recruiter also can have a powerful effect on a student's attraction to a particular campus.

Recommendations for Improved Access and Success

- **Improved Outreach to High Schools.** Campuses should deploy more vigorous and meaningful outreach to Native high school students, particularly on reservations. This outreach should not be limited to conventional recruitment activities only, but rather should incorporate a family-centered, holistic approach that involves: supplying information, offering modeling and mentorship, and providing help with admission and scholarship paperwork.
- **Additional Strategies.** Other actions that may improve college-going rates of American Indian students include: providing more scholarship and grant aid, expanding American Indian student centers and programs, publicizing distance education opportunities, and enhancing the American Indian cultural footprint on campuses.
- **Focus on Retention.** Colleges must continue to develop academic programs and student services that better reflect the family-centered orientation of tribal life. This task involves building a stronger sense of community by cultivating deeper relationships between students, their campuses, and their communities.

This report now proceeds to a review of the socioeconomic and educational contexts of the current study. Emphasis is placed on the unique (and often inauspicious) circumstances facing the US indigenous population. Next, attention turns to the study's analytic approach, research findings, and essential conclusions. The report attempts to give full voice to the study's participant group by preserving and emphasizing the original narratives offered by participants. The report concludes with a list of recommendations for improved institutional practice.

Study Context and Analytic Approach

Study Context

That postsecondary educational attainment among American Indians is low should come as no surprise given the myriad disadvantages faced by this group across the lifespan. Regardless of their origin, these disadvantages are pervasive, persistent, and in many cases insurmountable. The CDC's National Center for Health Statistics (2012) reports that, among major racial or ethnic groups, American Indians account for the highest rates of teenage childbearing (18.0 percent of live births in 2008), no prenatal care during the first trimester (55.8 percent of live births in 2008), and no health insurance coverage (44.0 percent of the population under 65 years of age in 2010). An astounding 65.8 percent of live births among American Indians are to unmarried mothers, compared to only 35.7 percent among whites (Ibid). In further comparison with whites, American Indians experience markedly higher rates of infant-neonatal-postneonatal mortality, no visits to healthcare offices or clinics by children under 18 years of age, illicit drug use by persons 12 years or older, and reduced access to medical services (Ibid). All other disadvantages aside, these risk factors alone can be crippling to postsecondary readiness.

Economic conditions for many American Indians are equally ominous. The US Census Bureau (2010a) estimates that American Indians' annual median family income is \$41,945, substantially less than the \$67,424 earned by white families. Approximately 16.7 percent of American Indian families earn less than \$15,000 each year, compared with only 5.9 percent of whites; on the other end of the spectrum, 28.8 percent of white families earn more than \$100,000 per year, compared with 13.1 percent of American Indian families. Only about one in ten (11.1 percent) of white Americans live below the poverty threshold. In contrast, 26.4 percent of American Indians – including 33.3 percent of those under 18 years of age – live in poverty (Ibid). In fact, no major racial or ethnic group experiences a higher poverty rate than American Indians. The impoverished and (typically) rural living conditions of most American Indians combine to foster other associated problems as well. American Indians experience higher unemployment, lower phone coverage, lower broadband internet access, and lower home computer ownership than white Americans (US Census Bureau, 2010a; Jones-Brayboy et al., 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

The socioeconomic distress experienced by many American Indian families no doubt undermines the academic wellbeing of students, at both the P-12 and the postsecondary levels. American Indians between the ages of three and five are less likely than any racial comparison group to be enrolled in preprimary education programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Moving up the primary school ladder, survey data suggest that American Indian fourth and eighth graders show comparatively low rates of school attendance, less access to home computing resources, and a lower likelihood of having books at home (Mead, Grigg, Maran, & Kuang, 2010).

Progression and learning outcomes among American Indian high school students are further indicative of an immense achievement gap. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2011) reports a 2009 national high school status completion rate of only 82.4 percent for American Indians; the analogous figure for whites is 93.8 percent.¹ Further, many of the American Indian students who complete high school show signs of under-preparation for postsecondary work. Greene and Forster (2003) found that only 21 percent of American Indian high school completers finish school with a

¹ NCES's "status completion rate" summarizes the percentage of all 16-24 year-olds not currently enrolled in high school who hold a high school credential.

college-ready transcript. Standardized assessment data bear out this observation. The College Board's *Advanced Placement* (AP) program reports that only 43.9 percent of American Indian AP test takers meet conventional passing score thresholds (e.g., a score of three or higher), compared to 61.8 percent of white test takers (College Board, 2011). American Indians also tend to score significantly lower than the general population on ACT and SAT college entrance examinations (ACT, 2010; College Board, 2010).

Of those finishing high school, a disproportionately small number actually matriculate to an institution of higher education. NCES (2012) data indicate that American Indians accounted for approximately 1.0 percent of enrollments in all degree-granting postsecondary institutions in Fall 2008, a figure roughly equivalent to American Indians' overall population proportion in the United States. However, these enrollments were disproportionately low at four-year institutions, particularly in the private non-profit sector. Beyond the issue of underrepresentation at four-year institutions, American Indian college students also tend to struggle along the path to degree completion. Only 39.4 percent of American Indians enrolled at a public four-year institution complete a bachelor's degree within six years, the lowest of any group (Ibid). Only one in four (25.6 percent) of American Indian students at two-year institutions complete a credential within three years (Ibid).

The cumulative result of the above conditions is a vast inequity in educational participation and attainment between American Indians and other racial groups, particularly whites. A mere 13.0 percent of American Indians over the age of 25 currently hold a bachelor's degree or higher, tied for lowest among all racial or ethnic groups and less than half of the figure estimated for whites (29.3 percent) (US Census Bureau, 2010b).² This attainment gap serves only to further exacerbate the social, economic, and health disparities from which it originated. Like playing with an unshuffled deck, past outcomes are perpetually re-experienced by succeeding generations.

Research Setting

South Dakota is a large and predominantly rural state. Though the state is heavily white (85.9 percent), a sizable proportion of the state's population is American Indian (8.8 percent) (US Census Bureau, 2010d).³ Given that American Indians represent only 0.9 percent of the US population, South Dakota's relative Native population is among the highest in the nation. Approximately 62.8 percent of the state's 71,817 American Indian population live on one of the state's nine federal reservations and off-reservation trust lands (Ibid, 2010c).⁴ Most American Indians in South Dakota are affiliated with the Lakota- or Dakota-speaking tribes of the Sioux nation.

South Dakota's American Indian population is perhaps the most economically disadvantaged in the United States. The US Census Bureau estimates that American Indians in South Dakota had a 2010 per capita income of only \$9,191, and further reports that South Dakota had the highest American Indian poverty rate (48.3 percent) of any US state in 2007-2011 (2010a; Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenet, 2013). Conditions are especially poor on reservation lands. A staggering 78.9 percent of persons living in Wounded Knee, SD (on the Pine Ridge Reservation) lived below the poverty threshold in 2010; the per capita income was \$6,102 (US Census Bureau, 2010a). Several of South Dakota's reservation-land

² A similar proportionality exists for graduate degree holders: 4.4 percent of American Indians (over the age of 25) to 10.8 percent for whites (Ibid).

³ South Dakota's total population was 814,180 as of the 2010 Decennial Census (Ibid).

⁴ These reservations and off-reservation trust lands, in order of 2010 American Indian population are: Pine Ridge Reservation (16,465), Rosebud Indian Reservation (9,515), Cheyenne River Reservation (5,990), Lake Traverse Reservation (4,032), Yankton Reservation (2,845), Standing Rock Reservation (2,706), Crow Creek Reservation (1,811), Lower Brule Reservation (1,339), and Flandreau Reservation (373) (Ibid).

counties frequently rank among the poorest counties in the United States. Perhaps not surprisingly then, educational attainment is correspondingly low among the state's American Indian population. Only 11.6 percent of American Indians hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 26.4 percent of the state's white population (US Census Bureau, 2010b). That bachelor's attainment is even this high owes in part to the state's tribal colleges. Two (of only eleven nationally) tribal colleges offering four-year degrees are located in South Dakota, as well as the only two tribal colleges that award graduate degrees (NCES, 2013).

In Fall 2012, $n=772$ American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) students were enrolled in the Regental university system. AIAN students make up a disproportionately small share of the undergraduate student body in Regental system (3.1 percent) relative to statewide population proportions (8.8 percent) (South Dakota Board of Regents, 2013; US Census Bureau, 2010d). AIAN students are more often female, older, and enrolled for fewer credits. AIAN students also tend to show evidence of poorer educational preparation and weaker retention outcomes (Ibid). Table 1 provides a snapshot of AIAN enrollment data from Regental institutions in Fall 2012, as well as a summary of retention outcomes of the Fall 2011 entering cohort.

Table 1
AIAN Undergraduates in the Regental System:
Fall 2012 Enrollments and Fall 2011 Retention Outcomes

| | <i>AIAN</i> | <i>Other</i> |
|---|-------------|--------------|
| <i>Number (Fall 2012 Headcount, Unduplicated)</i> | 772 | 24,276 |
| <i>Percent of Total</i> | 3.1% | 96.9% |
| <i>BHSU (Fall 2012 Headcount)</i> | 238 | 3,736 |
| <i>DSU (Fall 2012 Headcount)</i> | 75 | 2,797 |
| <i>NSU (Fall 2012 Headcount)</i> | 79 | 3,050 |
| <i>SDSMT (Fall 2012 Headcount)</i> | 95 | 2,006 |
| <i>SDSU (Fall 2012 Headcount)</i> | 270 | 10,848 |
| <i>USD (Fall 2012 Headcount)</i> | 230 | 7,460 |
| <i>n Male (Fall 2012 Headcount)</i> | 341 | 11,392 |
| <i>Percent Male</i> | 44.2% | 46.9% |
| <i>n Female (Fall 2012 Headcount)</i> | 431 | 12,884 |
| <i>Percent Female</i> | 55.8% | 53.1% |
| <i>Mean Age (Fall 2012)</i> | 25.3 | 23.6 |
| <i>Mean ACT Composite (Fall 2012)</i> | 21.1 | 22.9 |
| <i>Mean High School GPA (Fall 2012)</i> | 2.78 | 3.30 |
| <i>Mean Attempted Credit (Fall 2012)</i> | 12.8 | 13.6 |
| <i>Fall 2011 to Fall 2012 System Retention</i> | 56.6% | 75.7% |
| <i>Fall 2011 to Fall 2012 Insitutional Retention</i> | 51.6% | 72.2% |

Administrative Planning

The project concept was vetted through two SDBOR councils (AAC and SAC) early in the fall of 2012. Council members were provided with a project proposal and were invited to offer feedback. These briefings were beneficial in gathering input, generating interest, and encouraging campus participation as needed. Once the detailed proposal and project materials were finalized, IRB approval for the project was secured at both USD and SDSU.⁵

Question Development

A preliminary question list was generated following the review of literature, and then was distributed to an ad hoc review group. This group included representatives from campus student life staff, student advising staff, admissions staff, diversity staff, American Indian support services staff, graduate students, and faculty. After input was gathered, a semi-structured interview protocol was finalized which focused on several key areas:

- Obstacles confronted in the path to college
- Sources of motivation for going to college
- The role of family, tribes, and K-12 schools in making the decision to go to college
- Reasons for choosing a particular college
- Suggestions for how colleges might improve access for American Indian students

Participant Recruitment

Participation in the study was open to on-campus undergraduate students who had graduated from a South Dakota high school and were listed in the SDBOR student data system as having a (self-reported) “American Indian or Alaska Native Alone” racial classification. Expecting a relatively low participation rate among those invited to join the study, all students matching the above characteristics were invited to participate.⁶ Students were recruited through an initial invitation email, followed by a follow-up reminder email. Students were offered a small campus bookstore gift card and complimentary beverages during the focus group session as an incentive for participating.

Data Collection

A total of seven focus groups were conducted: two at USD, two at SDSU, one at NSU, and two at BHSU.⁷ Altogether, 49 students participated in the project. Each group was conducted on-campus by a two-person moderating team in a private meeting room during the late afternoon or early evening hours of a school night. After each focus group, participants were asked to provide responses to a brief written questionnaire in order to supply the analysis with basic demographic data (see Table 2).⁸ All sessions were recorded using a digital audio recorder.

⁵ Facsimile copies of IRB approval letters are shown in Appendix A.

⁶ Facsimile copies of the invitation and reminder emails are provided in Appendix B.

⁷ The four sampled SDBOR institutions were selected on the criterion of having an American Indian student population that was sufficiently large to support participant recruitment. FY2012 SDBOR Fact Book figures indicated American Indian student headcounts in excess of $n=100$ persons at BHSU, NSU, SDSU, and USD. The exclusion of DSU and SDSMT from the research design was not expected to impair the quality of the research, either methodologically or substantively.

⁸ Reproductions of all participant handouts are given in Appendix C.

Table 2
Participant Characteristics

| | Group | n | % |
|--|---|----------|----------|
| Total Participants | - | 49 | 100.0% |
| By Gender | <i>Male</i> | 11 | 22.4% |
| | <i>Female</i> | 38 | 77.6% |
| By Age | <i><19</i> | 10 | 20.4% |
| | <i>19-20</i> | 10 | 20.4% |
| | <i>21-22</i> | 8 | 16.3% |
| | <i>23-24</i> | 6 | 12.2% |
| | <i>25+</i> | 15 | 30.6% |
| By Campus | <i>BHSU</i> | 17 | 34.7% |
| | <i>NSU</i> | 5 | 10.2% |
| | <i>SDSU</i> | 13 | 26.5% |
| | <i>USD</i> | 14 | 28.6% |
| By Grade Level | <i>Freshman</i> | 12 | 24.5% |
| | <i>Sophomore</i> | 10 | 20.4% |
| | <i>Junior</i> | 6 | 12.2% |
| | <i>Senior</i> | 20 | 40.8% |
| | <i>Other</i> | 1 | 2.0% |
| By Enrolled Tribe | <i>Cheyenne River Sioux</i> | 10 | 20.4% |
| | <i>Crow Creek Sioux</i> | 2 | 4.1% |
| | <i>Fort Peck Assiniboine & Sioux</i> | 1 | 2.0% |
| | <i>Oglala Sioux</i> | 13 | 26.5% |
| | <i>Rosebud Sioux</i> | 7 | 14.3% |
| | <i>Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate</i> | 3 | 6.1% |
| | <i>Standing Rock Sioux</i> | 3 | 6.1% |
| | <i>Three Affiliated Tribes</i> | 2 | 4.1% |
| | <i>Yankton Sioux</i> | 6 | 12.2% |
| | <i>(blank)</i> | 2 | 4.1% |
| By High School Type[†] | <i>High-Density Reservation High School</i> | 27 | 55.1% |
| | <i>Other Public or Private High School</i> | 21 | 42.9% |
| | <i>(blank)</i> | 1 | 2.0% |

[†] Note: "High-density" is a term used by federal researchers that relates to the relative concentration of ALAN students in high schools. In this table, "High-Density Reservation High Schools" are those on-reservation schools where ALANs make up at least 50 percent of the total student body, with a minimum of 20 ALAN students enrolled in Fall 2011. "Other Public or Private High Schools" include all on-reservation and off-reservation high schools not meeting these enrollment criteria. District enrollment data provided by SDDOE.

Analysis and Findings

All analysis was conducted using the NVivo 10 software platform. The analysis of focus group transcripts proceeded using an iterative data coding method by which key concepts and themes were identified. Perspectives that were voiced frequently, extensively, intensely, and with high specificity were most likely to be seen as theoretically meaningful. With these criteria in mind, many of the perspectives voiced by participants can be distilled into four essential areas of discussion: obstacles and anxieties, reasons for attending college, mediating influences, and factors in school choice.

Obstacles and Anxieties

The Reservation Effect. No student's path to college is without complications. Fears about getting accepted, paying for school, and leaving home can be sources of anxiety for almost any prospective student. Yet for American Indian high school students living on reservations, "complications" can be a transcendent feature of life. Indeed, the difficulties of reservation life were echoed throughout the interview sessions, often in terms suggesting that reservations embody a separate, isolated world marked by a pervasive poverty unrivaled in white culture. Participants shared stories of substance abuse, alcoholism, violent crime, unemployment, family dysfunction, lack of running water, electricity, and other basic necessities – all stemming from cycles of chronic poverty, and all contributing to a pronounced survival mentality on reservations. One participant framed the situation this way:

"There's a thing called privilege in the non-Indian world. And that just doesn't exist in the Indian world... Have you been to a reservation? You can see the difference between that and, say, Pierre, South Dakota. And the things that are going on in Pierre and the things that are going in, say, Crow Creek, are just so upside down. It's unreal. That people can survive like that."

The stark poverty experienced on most reservations gives rise to a host of associated problems. A number of participants indicted reservation high schools – particularly federally-subsidized tribal high schools – for contributing to already difficult social conditions. Inconsistent quality standards, an unstable pool of inexperienced teachers, lenient disciplinary structures, and a culture of low academic expectations give rise to a "status quo" social norm in many reservation schools.

"So they're not preparing you, they're just pushing you through. They're just giving them worksheets from day to day, they don't pay attention to who's here or not here or anything, they just go along with the motion."

"When I was in high school there was people graduated who couldn't even hardly spell their name. You know, it's like he said, they weren't trying to teach them anything, just get them out the door."

Apart from the perceived shortcomings of reservation school systems, participants also reflected on other "toxic" elements of reservation communities. Several mentioned the continual presence of "drama" in their hometowns, and seemed distressed by the extent to which personal grudges, vendettas, and power struggles come to dominate everyday life:

"Coming from Pine Ridge, like everyone knows everything about everyone. If someone hates someone, someone's in love with someone, someone has kids with someone, someone hurt this

person, someone shot this person. It's just the constant drama. And from that you get all of these toxic – it's just negative.”

“There's these wannabe gangsters and people shooting and stabbing or running over people. Because this person was with that person's baby mama, and it's just dumb. A lot of dumb fighting, or this person doesn't like that person so they went and broke into their house.”

The above considerations combine to suggest that non-essential ambitions – such as going to college – are necessarily displaced or subordinated in the reservation context. The multidimensional poverty of reservation life creates conditions under which immediate needs (e.g., acquiring food) take on a far more vital sense of importance than do other aspirational goals (e.g., earning a college degree). Consequently, pursuing a college education can seem like a distant priority. In the words of one participant:

“You're coming from households that – they have bigger problems. And it's not sending the kids off to college... Your parents aren't thinking ‘I'm going to save up my money so you can go to college.’ It's ‘no, I'm going to save up my money so we can live.’”

Yet even in the face of these hardships, participants reported that reservations exert a certain magnetism that can make the prospect of leaving for college seem especially difficult. Several explanations for this were given, including the isolation of life in the reservation, the strong role of family within broader tribal group, and the fear of leaving the familiar for something completely foreign.

“I meet a lot of people who live on the reservation, and I don't know why, but like they just don't want to leave the reservation.”

“Because we was brought up with our family. It's like – it's so tight knit. You know who your family is, you know where they come from, you know like the history, stories and stuff of all your family. And some like they've never been off the reservation more than a week. And they always come back. That's all you know.”

Put simply then, when it comes to college-going, students living on reservations face exceptional obstacles. These obstacles are rooted in profound economic, academic, and social disadvantages, but also exist as a product of the cultural and historical perspectives of American Indian communities. South Dakota's reservations tend to be deeply insular environments where cultural exchange is rare. Indeed, many participants noted that most of their friends and family have never left the reservation for an extended period. Reservations often constitute both the physical and the symbolic headquarters for their respective tribal groups, and serve as the focal point for a variety of cultural activities and ceremonies. Further, given the sometimes inseparable relationship between one's family and one's tribal community, reservations take on an even deeper sense of personal identification. In sum, young people who are socialized in this setting likely face a level of separation anxiety that not only exceeds that faced by their off-reservation Indian peers, but also is wholly incomprehensible to most non-Indian students.

Financial Challenges. Participants described a host of financial issues that obstruct efforts to attend college. Many American Indian students in South Dakota (and many of this project's participants) matriculate from impoverished reservation communities, so it comes as no surprise that the costs of college were seen by the group as a crippling deterrent. Participants offered a cascade of concerns about the overall cost of tuition and fees, and described the deterring effect that high sticker prices have on characteristically poor American Indian students. Beyond the core costs of college, however, students also pointed to other indirect expenses – such as books, transportation, and living

expenses – as equally dangerous stumbling block. Several students recalled personal stories of friends or acquaintances who were prevented from coming to college (or dropped out after arriving) due to an inability to cover seemingly minor out-of-pocket expenses. In many cases, students’ families have no help to offer. Participants pointed out that many reservation families not only lack liquid resources, but also lack the ability to secure credit for private loans. As recounted by one adult student:

“Every time I tell my kids stories about my first year here, I said when I needed something – if I was out of money – I didn’t have anybody to go to. Because my dad didn’t have money, my mom didn’t have money. I said I think I remember my dad coming once and handing me \$20. And that was it, the entire time. So there was no support.”

Panelists also lamented a pervasive lack of basic financial literacy among American Indian youth, and indicated that this unfamiliarity with financial aid processes and personal budgeting can quickly derail a college career. Not understanding the mechanics and limitations of financial aid awards, students quickly become frustrated, or worse, insolvent. Since many of these students have had little or no experience in managing a personal budget, particularly at the scale required for postsecondary study, many students become overwhelmed or paralyzed:

“Or even money management, that’s another big thing. ‘You have this much money to last you this semester. This is how you’re going to do it.’ Nobody tells you how to do that. You’re just expected to know it. That’s why most kids can’t even make it through a semester.”

Lack of Mentorship. Many of the study’s participants were first-generation college students, and consequently reported not having any role models or mentors who could help navigate the path to college. In the absence of such role models, many students may not consider attending college in the first place. For those who do, the lack of an informed support system – or in some cases, the lack of any support system at all – places even greater demands on prospective students. These students are left to “fly solo” in managing all aspects of their college and financial aid applications.

“It was up to me, whether I wanted to go to college or not. It just seemed like I didn’t have no one behind me so it was up to me to make the choice if I was going to go or not. I was the one had to fill out the FAFSA, I’m the one had to fill out all the information. I did all that. I mean, I didn’t get help from anybody.”

“Because there’s a lot of them – parents, you know, they don’t have that education. So the students coming out of high school, they say, ‘well my mom and dad don’t have it; why’s it going to be important for me? How’s it going to change my life,’ you know?”

Fear of Leaving Home. Leaving home can be difficult for anyone, but in some ways the idea of leaving home can leave American Indian students feeling especially torn. Several participants noted the centrality of family in the Lakota and Dakota cultural traditions, and the problems this presents with respect to the decision to leave for college. In particular, the reciprocal relationship between the family and the individual – that is, the idea of mutual dependence – can lead students to feel as though their choice to enter college would constitute an abandonment of their familial responsibilities. Students living on reservations may be especially likely to experience this conflict, given the cultural traditions, ceremonies, and heightened sense of family kinship that often accompany reservation life.

“Some of them, they’re like the older kids in the family and they need to help with their younger siblings or other family members. Or maybe some of them live with their grandparents, and they help their grandparents. There was a couple of students here that ended up leaving and

going back. They were doing good in school but they ended up leaving because they needed to go back and help their grandparents. And other family members or younger siblings. Help their single mom or whatever. You know, help the family.”

[Moderator] “Do you think that’s a kind of situation that’s unique to Native students?”

“Yes. Because a lot of Native Americans, well, they’re raised – the ones raised on the res that were raised with the culture and traditions – it’s a lot about your family. Your family comes first...I think a lot of Native Americans kind of have a similar experience with that. A lot of their families don’t want them – they don’t want them to go far. And then it’s like, ‘oh well, I can’t go to the one I want to, then I won’t go’ or ‘ok well I need to stay and help.’”

The perceived choice between venturing out on one’s own or sticking with one’s family is not limited only to the initial decision to enter college. Panelists reported that this conflict persists well into students’ college careers, and often can compound with other emotional struggles until returning home seems like the only option. One student described this dilemma using vivid imagery:

“...if someone’s aunt dies or someone’s mom dies or someone’s brother dies – I mean, the reservation, it’s not an easy place to live. There’s a lot of death on the reservations. And you know when someone dies you obviously you go back to their funeral...and when you go back then you’re going to be like talking to those people again. And then you’re going to realize you miss them. And they are going to miss you, and like you said you depend on them, they depend on you...I think that’s why a lot of Native Americans don’t stay in college, is because they don’t necessarily feel that support or because they feel like they’re needed at home to support those other people. I just think that there’s a lot of like – to me, an image of hands like grasping at people and like pulling them back.”

Fear of Culture Shock. The decision to enroll in college can be shaped not only by anxieties about what one leaves behind (e.g., family and culture) but also by concerns about what will be encountered on the other side (i.e., college life). In the context of American Indian college-going, these concerns may include fears about stereotypes, racism, culture shock, the proverbial “unknown.” Some viewed these fears as sufficiently beleaguering to steer prospective students away from college.

“A lot of Natives go through what you call culture shock. They can come to college and they’ll go through it and go home within half a semester. Or not even last that long. I went through it. It was pretty bad for like a year. A lot of it is unknown. How am I going to pay for this? Do I know anybody over there? Is it far enough away or is it close enough to family? How often can I come back? What’s the environment like? Is the town like racist?”

Once on campus, numerous participants found that this angst was not unfounded.

“...you get looked at by the non-Indian culture and you see this. In the stores, down the streets, you know. Even here on campus. Where they look at you and they automatically say, well, he’s a Native American. Sometimes they look right through you when they walk by you, like you don’t exist.”

“I used to wear my hair in long braids. I cut my hair off and it’s a totally different life now. I walk into a store and get some respect, people talk to me now, whereas before they wouldn’t. Things like that. The stigma of the long hair – ‘he’s a wild Indian,’ you know?”

Fear of Alienation. Another of the most intensely expressed barriers to college centered on students' premonitions that their participation in college would result in some level of excommunication by their families and tribes. Especially with respect to peers, participants anticipated (and later experienced) being stigmatized or treated suspiciously by family and former friends. This response from others, sometimes labeled by participants as "resentment" or "jealousy" can leave a lasting impression on students who venture – or think about venturing – into white culture to attend college. Such treatment can span a wide gamut, from passive cold-shouldering to hostile verbal abuses:

"I know this kid. He's like the exact opposite of my family. He's like really good at sports, he runs his mile under five minutes. He's really good in sports, got tons of scholarships to go to college. He's in my grade. But his parents didn't want him to go. He's one of those people that he like comes from that family that's like 'who are you trying to be? You're not better than us. What are you doing? You stay here. This is what we've all done.' So I know it was really hard for him."

"I get a lot of crap for being in college. I've been told a lot that I've changed and I think I'm too good now."

"That's kind of what happened to me because I went back this summer to my old hometown in Montana and some of our friends refused to talk to me just simply because I was going to college. Also others were supportive, but it still hurt that those ones wouldn't talk to me because I was going to college."

"For me it's almost like they're upset because they can't do that, they don't have that opportunity to do that. It's almost like they're jealous and they're going to rub it into your face to make it sound like it's horrible. Like, 'oh just because you got an education, doesn't mean shit.'"

Several group members speculated about the reasons for this reaction from others. Some hypothesized that tribe members feel threatened by changed people, or bristle at the idea of seeing "someone smart coming in" to challenge the status quo:

"I see it as them feeling that, because you went to college, you changed. It's 'you're us or you're them.' And when you're out there learning things and changing and you come back, you're different."

Another panelist, having been disparaged back home for "sounding like a white person," suggested that some view the Anglicization that occurs on white college campuses as running counter to Native culture and language. Similarly, another traced the root of the problem to historical stigmas about anyone willing to integrate with white society:

"The whole thing of the jealousy thing stems back to early times, when there were traditional people that didn't want nothing to do with the Wasichu society. And then there are those that were camped right around the forts. They called them the hang-around-the-forts or the loafers, where they just took whatever the US government would give them...So there's a jealousy going on between them – the ones that were traditional and the ones that were you know making friends with the Wasichu and things like that."

Anti-elitist sentiment against college students may also stem from a broader cultural resistance to Western notions of higher education and credentialing. One participant noted that degree-holding individuals sometimes conceal this fact (i.e., that he or she holds a degree) from other members for fear

of inviting the same backlash described by the students in this study. At any rate, the sort of anxiety provoked by the prospect of this negative treatment could be a deal-breaking deterrent for some prospective students:

“You know, it’s one of those things that if all you know is your family and you left and you came back and they kind of turned on you, I mean that can be a scary thing. If that’s all you’ve ever known is your family has been this close-knit thing. Now you left for a semester, you came back and they’re turning on you? That could be very traumatic for a person and could cause them to just ‘ok, I’m done. I’ll stay home too.’”

Other Barriers. Participants mentioned an array of other barriers that commonly prevent American Indian students from entering college, including failure to graduate high school, abuse of alcohol or other drugs, incarceration or probation, teen pregnancy, and single parenthood. Also, a number of panelists lamented what they saw as a paltry effort on the part of colleges and universities in South Dakota to provide outreach and quality information to prospective American Indian students. Participants tended to feel that many of the mediums through which colleges provide information to prospective students (i.e., college fairs, mailed materials) tend to be too gimmicky, and lack useful information. Alternatively, most students would benefit from a greater focus on substantive information, such as a basic orientation to the college experience, resources for acquiring funding for Native students, and information about what to expect from day-to-day life at college.

Reasons for Attending College

A central mission of the current project was to gain a better sense for the specific reasons American Indian students cite for pursuing postsecondary education. When asked about this, students offered a great diversity of motives for entering college, some of which can be seen as unique to this population. It is important to note, however, that many students cited multiple reasons, or described evolutions in their sources of motivation over time. Many of the adult students, for example, were currently involved in their second or third stints in higher education, and described considerable differences in their initial reasons (as young people) and later reasons (as adults) for jumping into college.

Supporting the Family. First and foremost, students in this study saw attending college as a way to ensure a secure future for themselves and their families. A number of the panelists in this study were adult students, most of whom already had families of their own and often were single parents. For these individuals, providing a stable income for their children was a consuming concern underpinned by a strong sense of urgency:

“I dropped out of high school three times my senior year. I got married in high school. And we had three children following that and then all of a sudden it struck me that, you know, you’re a dad now and you’ve got to do something for these little ones that you brought into this world.”

“My wife, we just got married this summer finally. But we’ve been together since then. But we got two kids, so you know you can’t fail at that point.”

Others framed this motive in the context of their own past experiences with poverty. Participants in nearly every group reiterated the common mantra of wanting to “better our lives” or “better our future” in order to create new opportunities for their families:

“I’ve seen a lot of my family not go to college and struggle with their lives and I just didn’t want to go through that or put my children through that.”

Setting an Example. In a similar vein, these themes of “providing” and “bettering” were overlaid in many instances with an expressed desire to set a positive example for others, often as a compensatory reaction to their own perceived lack of role models. Some students focused this goal on their own families; others spoke of a responsibility to provide transformational modeling to tribal communities that have long suffered from an unfavorable public image. Both motives imply a felt sense of stewardship for future generations:

“My cousin went through college and she got two degrees, and she raised her kid the whole time she was at college. And she came home and she’s like, she’s the first person really in my family to do that, aside from one of my aunts who was a doctor. But I looked up to her like she was my role model. I mean, just because she did it all. And I was so proud of her, and I wanted someone to look up to me like that one day. And I guess that’s kind of what I was hoping for more when I went to college. Because I wanted to be a good role model for my siblings, for my family and friends, and for my tribe. I wanted them after I’d gone off to college to look up to me and be able to say ‘yeah I can do it.’”

“[Getting an education] elevates a lot of things in the thinking of a Native American man who are very very looked at very very negatively all the time...they’re either dealing drugs or drinking or beating up their women. Crazy stuff like this. It’s important you know that people see Native American men with educations in positions that are about a career. And when that is out there and little ones are seeing that, then that ignites a little thing inside them too.”

Service to Tribe. The sensed duty to serve one’s family and tribal community emerged as another key consideration in Native students’ college-going deliberations. Many students cited the appeal of using a college degree to deliver a lasting impact in their home communities. One hoped to build a veterinary practice on the reservation; several intended to become teachers or nurses in their hometowns. When asked specifically about this notion of affecting change in one’s family and community, one student (whose mother is white and father is Native) conjectured a particular service orientation among tribal people:

“Mom is always encouraging me to go out into the world and find a place away from home that I want to make a home. She doesn’t necessarily want me to return home. Where, my desire is to return home and help my people out. And I definitely know that that comes from my dad’s side, because my dad’s the third generation of tribal leaders. I mean, he wasn’t the tribal leader but he served on tribal council. And he strives every day to help Indian country and agriculture. And I definitely feel that duty to go home and help out where I can among my reservation. Whereas with my mom’s side of the family I don’t necessarily feel that.”

“I think that goes back to like the roots of Native Americans and Indians and their culture. It’s really like stuff with community, you know?”

While in the above cases this desire to serve the tribe takes the form of trying to improve conditions on reservation lands, other students instead hoped to help others by modeling the benefits of leaving the reservation entirely:

“I have siblings. I have two sisters and a brother, and I want to show them they can get out of Martin and off the reservation. They can do something great. And they can bring great things back to home if they want to do that.”

Escaping. The above view segues into another group of motives, one that takes a decidedly colder stance toward reservations, and in particular, to the hopelessness, desolation, and violence of reservation life. Many students reported wanting to attend college primarily as a means to escape the realities of the reservation experience, and perhaps even more so, to escape the destructive “status quo” attitude that pervades reservation life. Some outlined this motive as an escape from something specific, like racial intolerance or trouble with the law. One student described it as wanting to “get away from the drama.” For others, the urge to flee was more generalized:

“You’re growing up and the reservation itself is bad, and you see a lot of things going on. And you see what other people expect of you and people try to bring you down. At the same time, it’s just like, well should I just stay around, you know? Just fit in? Or should I just leave and be different? So that’s what I chose. I fought to go off to college.”

Beating the Odds. Indeed, it is the perceived hopelessness and idleness of reservation life that motivate some students not just to escape, but to excel in the college setting. Whether wanting to succeed as a family’s first college graduate, uproot family members’ expectations for failure, or challenge persistent cultural stereotypes, the idea of “beating the odds” or “proving” oneself was a unifying thread across the groups:

“Same here. I mean I can relate, like, a lot. My family had a lot of doubt too. They even questioned, asking, ‘are you even still in college? Shouldn’t you be done by now?’ Like, it motivates you.”

“I want to make my life better for myself and my family. Not to become a statistic. And for me, not to become a statistic is really personal. Because I watched my dad become a statistic. He became – he literally became the alcoholic that sat in White Clay. And it killed him. And I don’t want to become that. It’s just like a constant reminder. You know what that did to the family, and you know what that did to the people around you, and to yourself. Don’t become that.”

“That was something that kind of pushed me too. I don’t want people to have the ideas they do about Native Americans and – what is that called – the stereotypes – I don’t want it to be that way. So I guess that was like something else that pushed me to go to college.”

Other Motives. Other reasons given by panelists for choosing to enroll in college were typical of any student population: ambitions of earning a healthy paycheck and enjoying a comfortable lifestyle, wanting to study a particular field or enter a specific profession, having interest in participating in collegiate athletics, being encouraged by others to pursue college, or winning a good scholarship. However, given the opportunity to speak freely about their leading motives, panelists in this study spoke most frequently and most passionately about issues that are tightly linked to the their families and tribal communities. It follows that these objects of attention would impose their own influence in the decision to seek a postsecondary degree.

Mediating Influences

Family Influence. For many on reservations, family is “all you know.” Echoing existing literature, participants in this study tended to affirm the critical role of families in the decision to attend college. The family-centered orientation of indigenous cultures serves to elevate the salience of opinions and perspectives offered by family members. By one student’s reckoning, “in most reservations, it’s your family that pushes you towards it.”

In general, participants in this study tended to report receiving supportive and helpful messages from family members. Families were described not only as key brokers of attitudes toward college, but also as important sources of administrative help. As one student asserted, “if it wasn’t for [my mother], I probably wouldn’t be here. She helped me fill out the paperwork, like my financial aid.” Students spoke to the positive role played by parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family in the decision-making process, particularly those family members who either 1) had already attended college themselves, or 2) recognized the utility of higher education in improving or escaping reservation life.

Of course, salient family attitudes can cut both ways. Some students reported seeing conflicting signals from family members, such as encouragement from one parent but discouragement from the other, or encouragement from parents but discouragement from extended family members (or vice versa). In such cases, participants attested to the importance of receiving decisive encouragement – sometimes in the form of a specific intervention – from supportive family:

“We kind of had issues with that with my dad’s, some of his close family. A lot of them would like call me out, like ‘Oh you’re going to college you think you’re better than the rest of us. Who are you trying to be? Who are you trying to impress?’ That’s like why they’re not part of our family anymore.”

Overt discouragement from family was not uncommon among group members. Some attributed this to the fact that many reservation families having more pressing concerns than sending children to college, and thus react unreceptively to the idea. Other families objected to students’ wishes to study non-lucrative fields (e.g., music). A sizable group of students recounted that their families’ discouragement came in the form of a “waiting for you to fail” attitude that communicated flagrant doubt about students’ chances for success. One student, recalling her first attempt at college – which ended after one year – described this “tough love” approach as “an Indian thing”:

“And it didn’t work out. And when it didn’t work out, they weren’t surprised. You know, as far as the support there, I think it’s kind of a tough love situation. I think that’s kind of an Indian thing. You go until you break and then you ask for help...You’re going to try and you’re going to fail, period. There was never a question. It wasn’t ‘if,’ it was a ‘when.’ When you fail, you’re going to move back home.”

Tribal Influence. Tribal networks were found to be another pivotal a source of financial and moral support – or opposition – to American Indian students. As with families, students’ impressions of their tribes’ roles in the decision to attend college varied dramatically. Some students lauded their tribes’ efforts to disseminate information about scholarships and other funding opportunities, supplying actual financial support, and offering personal encouragement for attending college. On this point, signs of positive moral support or “cheerleading” were most commonly associated with tribal leaders and least commonly associated with peers. At the same time, other students highlighted the mixed or negative signals they received from their tribal communities. Some reported that members of their tribes openly

questioned students' college plans, and that such naysayers matched advocates in equal numbers. Other students reflected on what they saw as a passive, hands-off approach by their tribes. Testimonials from several students suggested that some tribal communities are silent on the question of going to college, and this lack of involvement can make the path to college appear that much murkier.

In conversations about tribes, no topic elicited a greater number of heated reactions than the discussion about tribal financial aid.⁹ While most of the participants in this study had indeed received such financial support, many expressed deep frustration with the process for acquiring these funds from their tribes. A heavy majority of students characterized this process – or lack thereof – as disorganized, fragmented, and lacking any clear set of procedures. Consequently, many students reported that their efforts to obtain tribal financial aid were met with tedious or flaccid bureaucratic responses:

“I contact people I know that work for the tribe, and I’ll try to get information – and I would call these people and these people would never be in their offices. It’s just, they’re really hard to contact.”

“Mine was the same as hers. Like you can call and ask for help but they don’t either call you back or they just blow you off. They don’t really help that often.”

“Even now when I apply for a scholarship, it is a big runaround. You talk to five different people and they don’t know what you’re talking about. And then they lose your paperwork, blah, blah, blah.”

A number of students alluded to politicization in their tribes' financial aid processes. Discussing the likelihood of receiving financial support, one student summarized that, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know, and who you’re related to.” Some suggested that the “runaround” forced by financial aid offices is deliberate, and is meant to feign incompetence as a disguise for deeper problems:

“A lot of times they do give you that runaround. They’ll lose your paper on purpose, I feel. I feel like they’ve lost my paperwork on purpose. So you got to use the same thing that they use, you know, my family’s going to get that money. That’s how it works, you know, that’s the reality of it. As far as my tribe goes. But so then you have to play the same game. I have to call my uncle and say ‘hey call this guy, get my paperwork through.’ And then my paperwork gets ‘found.’”

“From my experience, I’m from [town name], so my husband’s family is from there. I knew what goes on. My family’s been on tribal council and my husband. And all the politics that goes on. He was on the education board which approved the applications for funding. And he and two other guys who have their degrees and or masters and doctorates, quit the panel because number one they didn’t go by the rules. The council said you will go by the rules in funding, but those rules didn’t apply when it came to those council members’ families. And so they would take the money that they made everybody else follow by rule, and give it to someone who was someplace else but is a member of the council family. So I hate to say it but it’s true. What we all know by experience.”

⁹ As a point of context, it should be noted that tribal financial aid offered by South Dakota tribes can take a variety of forms. Some students described receiving fixed stipends of \$500 to \$1,000 at the beginning of each semester, some noted earning grant dollars (around \$50) per completed credit hour, and others mentioned receiving a subsidy meant to cover miscellaneous expenses like books and computers. Most such awards are based on some combination of initial or continuing eligibility guidelines, including academic performance, choice of major field, and demonstrated financial need.

Overall then, discussion of the tribal influence on college-going tended to focus on students' negative appraisals of the tribal financial aid process. Students seemed generally reticent to impugn their own tribes, prefacing their remarks with statements like "Nobody wants to say it, but it's true." Nonetheless, several students noted that this problem is widespread in tribal communities, and that this condition has a deterring effect on prospective college students. Those growing up off the reservation noted feeling especially unlikely to receive financial support from their tribes. In these and other cases, several participants said that they would not have received funding if not for the aggressive intervention of a family member. Others recalled sidestepping the entire issue (that is, avoiding tribal funding altogether) due to anxiety about the service obligations that may be attached to the funds.

School Influence. Interview data suggest that in addition to families and tribes, prospective college-goers also receive strong signals from their K-12 schools, signals that can either spur or suppress one's momentum toward college. From conversations with students who enrolled in multiple school systems over their K-12 school careers, it became clear that students can be influenced by a school's organizational culture with respect to college-going. Where one school may collectively or abstractly "expect" its students to advance to college, another school may drive students toward nothing beyond a high school diploma. The general impression given by students is that the latter organizational culture – one that fosters low, "status quo" expectations of students – tends to be more characteristic of public schools on reservations, particularly federally-funded tribal schools with high Native populations. One student described the differences between two public schools this way:

"I feel like there definitely is, and I feel like I went from one extreme to the other. The first high school I went to [*a BIE tribal high school*], I did feel like it was more so of a 'let's figure out how I can make this assignment so everybody can pass it so they'll pass the class' rather than 'let's challenge these students.' And when I went to [*regular public high school*], it was, I felt, like the exact opposite. And I mean...everybody kind of had the mindset that the next step is college, not the next step is to stay home. I mean they definitely – it was a 360 for me. It was weird going from one atmosphere to the next." [*Bracketed annotations added by the author.*]

A number of participants were especially cognizant of the tendency for tribal high schools to resemble the description of the above student's first high school. Students also made note of a pervasive "high school is your life" attitude in tribal high schools, whereby students see high school as a personal zenith that is likely to be followed by a lifetime of difficulty. This attitude effectively traps students into a self-limiting *carpe diem* mentality that further obscures the priority of further education, and creates an environment where college readiness becomes a distant concern.

Many participants discussed the role played by school staff in the college-going process, particularly teachers and guidance counselors. One dismaying theme emerging from these accounts is that, because school districts vary wildly with respect to staff quality, major disparities exist in the signals students receive about going to college. Multiple participants – citing what they interpreted as ulterior motives of school staff members (particularly guidance counselors) – noted the existence of an implicit bias working against American Indian students' efforts to advance to college. Students recounted that some counselors "hand-pick" those students they see as deserving of college guidance, and that often such choices systematically disfavor Indian students:

"Well when I was in high school our guidance counselors, they weren't – they only pushed certain kids – or even wanted to acknowledge that certain kids were going to go. Even if you went and asked them they would kind of just push you off."

“I know back in my school, our teacher, guidance counselor had hand-picked and selected students that he thought had the most potential. So he lined this thing up with the colleges and he left the rest of the kids in the class. And it was only about five of us, and I was one of them. And even then, he had done that to all the Native American students, but he left in all the white students. You see it happen.”

“The guidance counselor just – she was – I don’t know – she was really different. She favored more of the Caucasian students...she had certain ones picked out. Like she told me – I already had said that I would take a year off. But she told me that I would be better off going to the military than college. And I graduated like top rank in my class.”

“I went to [high school name]. That school’s kind of – at the time I was in high school – was probably about 50-50 Caucasian to Native American. And a lot of preference was shown to the Caucasian students.”

“I think that like the bias against Native people going to college was never overt. Like the teacher never really actually said anything, but you kind of knew. It’s like, you know, if there were Native students that were missing from class or whatever, nobody batted an eye. But if other students were gone, they’d be like ‘oh I wonder where so-and-so is.’ So I think it was a little bit more subtle.”

“I remember the science teacher telling one of the boys – he asked about getting a recommendation for college – and he said ‘you’re not college material.’ And that was it. I mean he never got further than that. I don’t know what his grades were, but he was very good in basketball. And I think he was hoping to go on to at least [college name]. But he got cut off at the knees right there.”

This is not to say that all participants shared these experiences. Many students spoke of the constructive, nurturing influence of teachers, guidance counselors, and other staff members. In some cases, even just a few words of reassurance or encouraging advice from a staff member were seen as crucial events in the journey to college. In addition, several students drew attention to the importance of various transitional and college preparatory programs for high schoolers, such as *Upward Bound*, *Indians Into Medicine (INMED)*, and *Gear Up*.

Factors in School Choice

Family Factors. Queried about their reasons for choosing a particular college, students described a variety of considerations. Perhaps not surprisingly, familial considerations emerged as by far the most commonly cited reason for selecting a college. For instance, many participants mentioned feeling more comfortable with a particular college simply because a close relative – a mother, father, brother, sister, aunt, or uncle – was a former (or current) student there. In addition, students from both reservation and non-reservation communities noted a personal preference – or perhaps sensed an obligation – to remain geographically close to family. Students said that attending a nearby college would enable them to travel home more frequently, to assist in the care of young or elderly relatives, to continue their participation in tribal or family ceremonies, or simply to avoid the feelings of loneliness that come with leaving one’s family support system behind. As related by one participant:

“Even growing up off the reservation, I have that same perspective on family. And even now, I’m sticking around here in [town name] because of family. And if I could choose, I probably

would have gone back to [out-of-state college] to graduate, but because of family I don't have that choice.”

Moderator: “So you really do feel restricted, sort of?”

“Yeah, there's family obligations that are more important than education. Or where that education comes from, or what degree it is.”

Other Factors. As attested here and elsewhere in this report, the notion of family underpins many American Indian students' college choice decisions. However, other prominent reasons for selecting a particular college also were mentioned, including:

- ***Impressions of the college's openness to American Indian students.*** These considerations include perceptions about racial intolerance or discrimination on campus; the availability of American Indian student services, organizations, facilities, and other resources; the availability of American Indian Studies or Native Studies programs; and views about the size of the current population of American Indian students.
- ***Affordability, and/or the availability of scholarship or grant aid specific to American Indian students.*** Several participants noted that some out-of-state colleges offered Native-specific funding opportunities, and that the absence of such resources at in-state institutions left students feeling less “wanted” by those colleges.
- ***Recruitment efforts.*** A surprising number of students recounted personal anecdotes about the positive encounters they had had with college recruitment officers or other campus staff members. In short, personal attention from college staff can have a powerful effect on a student's attraction to a given campus.
- ***Other typical factors.*** Such considerations might include the size of the campus or college town; majors and programs offered; availability of services for adult students, such as daycare or off-campus apartments; ease of transferring in credit earned at another college; perceptions about campus mission (e.g., land grant vs. liberal arts).

It should be mentioned that participants in this project (who all were enrolled at a Regental university) tended to express somewhat chilly stances toward the state's tribal colleges. These appraisals – based on perceptions about limited degree programs and professional prospects, less appealing campuses and websites, and the lack of opportunities to enjoy the residential college experience – led most students in this study to rule out tribal campuses as college options. One student saw her local tribal college as “kind of a ‘just’ thing,” in that she found the idea of “just” attending tribal college to be somewhat unappealing. Others viewed tribal colleges as “a good place to start,” that is, a stepping stone to a traditional university, but perhaps not the best fit for themselves.

Recommendations for Improved Access and Success

Many of the issues raised in this study speak to the need for redoubled engagement by the Regental system, a point raised frequently by participants. Indeed, several participants pointed out what they saw as the “social responsibility” of the state’s public institutions not just to recruit American Indian students to their own campuses, but also to act as *general* facilitators of American Indian college-going – regardless of where students choose to matriculate.

By an overwhelming majority, students in this study felt that the most important step universities can take to improve access for American Indians is to deploy more vigorous and meaningful outreach to Native high schoolers. Participants from reservation communities were especially assertive about the need for additional attention from colleges. Students in these schools many times not only lack even a basic understanding of what postsecondary education entails, but also feel invisible to colleges. Consequently, participants suggested that universities should strengthen their presence in these schools. One major point of advice is that such outreach should be ongoing, not sporadic. A single visit from an admissions representative cannot provide the kind of sustained support that many students need to make and execute the decision to go to college. In contrast, consistent visits with follow-up communication are likely to prove much more effective. Such efforts should not be limited to typical recruitment activities only, but rather should incorporate a family-centered, holistic approach that involves:

- ***Supplying information.*** Especially in reservation schools, high school students are likely to benefit most from information about college preparation and entry requirements; the advantages of earning a college degree; the fundamentals of researching and applying to college; support services on college campuses; cost and financial support; and available programs of study. This information would be useful not only to high school juniors and seniors, but also to younger students (e.g, grades 6-8), whose academic trajectories still are pliable. Further, such information should be directed not only to students themselves, but also to students’ families.
- ***Offering modeling and mentorship.*** As put flatly by one participant, “as far as getting the Native American population, when you have some old white guy telling you about how awesome [college name] is, that’s not going to affect you.” In other words, the choice of a messenger is critical. Participants suggested a host of specific ambassadors, including: current students; recent graduates; dedicated admissions counselors and recruitment officers; and representatives from student organizations, sports teams, and specific fields of study. In all cases, representatives should themselves be American Indian. Echoing the advice of one participant, the fundamental message of these ambassadors should be, “Here we are. We’re doing this, and you can too.”
- ***Providing help with admission and scholarship paperwork.*** The administrative workload encountered during the college search process can be both confusing and crushing, particularly for those lacking knowledge of the process. In some cases, assistance provided directly by college representatives may be the only clerical support many students receive.

Aside from improved outreach to high schools, study panelists provided a multitude of other suggestions for improving the college-going rates of American Indians. These recommendations included boosting scholarship aid to American Indian students; publicizing American Indian student centers; expanding and improving the quality of American Indian Studies programs; assigning on-campus mentors or “buddies;” promoting distance education options; and cultivating a deeper American Indian cultural footprint on college campuses through Native artwork. Participants also urged colleges and universities toward a renewed focus on American Indian student retention, in that such efforts also would improve initial college-going rates by inspiring greater confidence among prospective students. To this end, students advised that campuses develop student services that imitate the family-centered orientation of tribal life, and in so doing, instill students with a deeper sense of attachment, commitment, and acceptance.

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Appendix A1 SDSU IRB Approval Letter



Office of Research/Human Subjects Committee
SAD Room 124
Box 2201 SDSU
Brookings, SD 57007

To: Daniel J. Palmer, Director of Institutional Research, South Dakota Board of Regents

Date: September 14, 2012

Project Title: American Indian Perspectives on College-Going

Approval #: IRB-1209001-EXM-SDBOR

Thank you for taking such care in completion of the request and research protocol. This project is approved as exempt human subjects' research. The basis for your exempt status from 45 CFR 46.101 (b) is:

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

If there are any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others, or changes in the procedures during the study, contact the SDSU Research Compliance Coordinator. At the end of the project please inform the committee that your project is complete.

If I can be of any further assistance, don't hesitate to let me know.

Sincerely,

Norm

Norman O. Braaten
SDSU Research Compliance Coordinator

Appendix A2 USD IRB Approval Letter



October 15, 2012

The University of South Dakota
414 E. Clark Street
Vermillion, SD 57069

PI: Daniel J. Palmer **Student PI:** None
Project: 2012.181 - American Indian Perspectives on College-Going
Review Level: Exempt 2 **Risk:** No More than Minimal Risk
USD IRB Initial Approval: 10/15/2012
Approved items associated with your project:
 Survey
 Advertisement
 Consent Statement (attached)

The proposal referenced above has received an Exempt review and approval via the procedures of the University of South Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Annual Continuing Review is not required for the above Exempt study. However, when this study is completed you must submit a Closure Form to the IRB. You may close your study when you no longer have contact with the subjects and you are finished collecting data. You may continue to analyze the existing data on your closed project.

Prior to initiation, promptly report to the IRB, any proposed changes or additions (e.g., protocol amendments/revised informed consents/ site changes, etc.) in previously approved human subject research activities.

The forms to assist you in filing your: project closure, continuation, adverse/unanticipated event, project updates /amendments, etc. can be accessed at <http://www.usd.edu/research/research-and-sponsored-programs/irb-application-forms-and-templates.cfm>.

If you have any questions, please contact: humansubjects@usd.edu or (605) 677-6184.

Sincerely,

Sandra Ellenbolt

Sandra Ellenbolt, JD
Director, Office of Human Subjects Protection
The University of South Dakota
Institutional Review Boards
(605) 677-6184
LJT00000003159

Appendix B1

Example Invitation Message to Participants

Subject: Participation in Study about American Indians in Higher Education

Hi _____,

My name is Daniel Palmer and I am a researcher for the South Dakota Board of Regents, the organization that oversees the state's public university system. My office is conducting a study about the perspectives of American Indian students on the decision to go to college, and I would like to ask for your help with this project.

I am in the process of organizing a series of small group discussions on your campus, each of which will include about ten American Indian students at your university. **I would like to invite you to participate in one of these group discussions.** These groups will discuss a range of topics, but will focus mainly on how students make the decision to go to college. In appreciation of your time commitment, you will receive a \$50 bookstore gift card should you choose to join a discussion session.

There will be a total of two discussion sessions held on your campus, and if you choose to participate, you can pick the one that works best with your schedule:

Option 1: Tuesday, November 13th, from 3:00-5:00pm

Option 2: Tuesday, November 13th, from 7:00-9:00pm

There will be a limit of ten participants for each session, and spots will be reserved on a first-come first-served basis. **If you are willing to join a small group discussion, please register online [HERE](#).** The registration deadline is **Friday, October 26th**, after which the final participant list will be locked. After registration, you will receive additional details for the time and location of the discussion session in a subsequent email.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, every effort will be made to ensure your confidentiality. Any identifying information you provide during the small group discussion will not be shared or published by the research team in any form.

I would really appreciate your willingness to share some time to talk about your experiences and insights. This project is important to many people, and your participation will give you the opportunity to have your views heard at the highest levels of the university system.

I hope to hear from you soon!

Best Regards,

Daniel Palmer
South Dakota Board of Regents
306 East Capital Avenue, Suite 200
Pierre, SD 57501
(605) 773-4676
danp@sdbor.edu

Appendix B2

Example Reminder Message to Participants

Subject: Reminder – Participation in Study about American Indians in Higher Education

Hi _____,

You might recall that I contacted you last week about participating in a small group discussion about the factors that led you to attend college. I hadn't yet heard back from you, so I wanted to follow up with you again. Just to refresh your memory, you are invited to join one of two possible discussion groups:

Option 1: Tuesday, November 13th, from 3:00-5:00pm

Option 2: Tuesday, November 13th, from 7:00-9:00pm

In appreciation of your time, you will receive a \$50 bookstore gift card for participating. If you would like to take part, please register [HERE](#) by **Friday, October 26th**.

Thanks!

Daniel Palmer
South Dakota Board of Regents
306 East Capital Avenue, Suite 200
Pierre, SD 57501
(605) 773-4676
danp@sdbor.edu

Appendix C1

Session Handouts – Information Sheet

| |
|---|
| Information Sheet: Perspectives on College-Going |
|---|

Project Director: Daniel Palmer
Phone Number: 605-773-4676
Email: danp@sdbor.edu

Description of the Project:

This project is being conducted by the South Dakota Board of Regents, the governing body for the state's public university system. A series of group discussions will be held as a means to better understand the views of current American Indian students about the decision to go to college.

Nature of Participation:

You will be asked to join in a group discussion along with other students from your university. The session will be recorded using an audio recorder (no video) as a way of improving the project's subsequent analysis. Following the discussion, you will be asked to provide responses to a short questionnaire that asks for some basic demographic information. Altogether, participation in this project should require approximately 90 to 120 minutes of your time.

Benefits of Participation:

You will have the opportunity to take part in an engaging discussion about the factors and decisions that lead young American Indians to enroll in college. Your active participation will give your university (and the state's entire university system) important insights on this issue.

Compensation

You will receive a bookstore gift card in the amount of \$50 at the end of the session. In addition, you will be provided with a copy of the final results of this project on your request.

Potential Risks:

No physical or psychological discomfort is expected to arise as a result of participating in this project.

Confidentiality:

Because of the nature of this session (a group discussion), confidentiality of your participation cannot be guaranteed. All participants are asked to not disclose the identities or opinions of the other participants in the session. Any potentially-identifying information generated from the session's audio recording will not be shared or published in any form. No personal identifiers will be recorded on the closing questionnaire, and no effort will be made to link your questionnaire with your name. Finally, all audio and data records will be destroyed following completion of the analysis.

Decision to Quit at Any Time:

You are under no obligation to participate in this project, and are free to withdraw your participation from this research at any time. Expressed willingness to join the group discussion will serve as implied consent to participate in this project.

You may retain this form for your records and future reference. If you have any additional questions or complaints about this study, contact the project director at 605-773-4676 or danp@sdbor.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you can contact the SDSU Research Compliance Coordinator at 605-688-6975 or sdsu.irb@sdsu.edu.

Appendix C2

Session Handouts – Closing Questionnaire

Closing Questions

1. What is your gender?

- Male
 Female

2. What is your age?

years old

3. Are you an enrolled member of a U.S. American Indian tribe?

- No
 Yes, I'm a member of: _____

4. Which option best describes your educational background?

- I graduated from high school
 High school name: _____ (example: Summit High School)
 High school city/state: _____ (example: Summit, SD)
 I completed a GED
 Other _____

5. What is your current grade level in college?

- Freshman
 Sophomore
 Junior
 Senior
 Other _____

6. Are you attempting to earn a degree?

- No
 Yes, I'm attempting to earn:
 An associate's degree
 A bachelor's degree

7. Do you have a college major?

- No
 Yes, I'm majoring in: _____

8. What is your current college grade point average (GPA)?

. (example: 2.65)

9. If you have any further comments you would like to share, feel free to do so below.