

1-1-2013

# Challenges to Recruit and Retain American Indian/Alaskan Native students in Social Work Programs: The Impact on the Child Welfare Workforce

Suzanne L. Cross  
*Michigan State University*

Angelique Day  
*Wayne State University, angelique.day@wayne.edu*

Lucas J. Gogliotti  
*University of Michigan - Ann Arbor*

Justin J. Pung  
*Loyola University Chicago*

---

## Recommended Citation

Cross, S., Day, A., Gogliotti, L., & Pung, J. (2013). Challenges to Recruit and Retain American Indian and Alaskan Natives into Social Work Programs: The Impact on the Child Welfare Workforce. *Child Welfare*, 92(4), 31-53.  
Available at: [http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/soc\\_work\\_pubs/27](http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/soc_work_pubs/27)

# Challenges to Recruit and Retain American Indian and Alaskan Natives into Social Work Programs: The Impact on the Child Welfare Workforce

---

**Suzanne L. Cross**  
*Michigan State University*

**Angelique Day**  
*Wayne State University*

**Lucas J. Gogliotti**  
*University of Michigan*

**Justin J. Pung**  
*Loyola University Chicago*

There is a shortage of professionally trained American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) social workers available to provide services including child welfare services to tribal communities. This study used a mixed-model survey design to examine the perceptions of 47 AI/AN BSW and MSW students enrolled in social work programs across the United States to determine the challenges associated with recruitment and retention.

The findings are supported in the literature. Findings indicate that social work academic programs have not made substantial gains in the recruitment and retention of AI/AN students over several decades. Students identified the following seven major barriers to successful recruitment and retention: (1) a lack of AI/AN professors; (2) a shortage of field placement agencies that serve AI/AN clients; (3) conflicts between students' academic obligations and responsibilities to their families and tribal communities; (4) students' feelings of cultural isolation; (5) the need for AI/AN role models and mentors; (6) a lack of understanding by universities of cultural customs and traditional values; and (7) racism. Implications for policy and practice are offered.

---

**Acknowledgements:** A portion of this study was supported by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, which is funded by the US-DHHS, ACF, Children's Bureau, Award #90CT0145. This research was also funded, in part, by a Council on Social Work Education Senior Scholar Award.

The recruitment and retention of American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) into U.S. higher education institutions in general, social work programs, and, specifically, child welfare workforce retention programs (Mathias & Benton, 2011) has been a longstanding problem (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007) and continues to be a struggle (Dennison, Poole, & Qaqish, 2007). If we want to increase the number of American Indian and Alaskan Native social workers trained to work in child welfare agencies, action needs to be taken to address this important this issue.

AI/AN students “earned only 0.8% of all degrees (60.5% earned by females) awarded in 2008–2009, although this population is 1.7% of the total U.S. population” (U.S. DOE, 2011). It is important to note that 42% of AI/AN students attempt some form of higher education; however, only 13% receive bachelor’s degrees or higher (Adelman, Taylor, & Nelson, 2009). Also, the problem of “dropping out” and “stopping out” of a higher education degree program is often financially devastating, and may result in discouragement and limitations of further attempts to attend a university or college in the future (Hernandez, 2006). Lowe (2005) indicated that the literature on American Indian student experiences in higher education is limited, with much of it in popular media sources such as regional newspapers and magazine articles. In 2013, the authors’ opinion continues to agree with Lowe’s conclusion from 2005. The literature review has a limited number of references that address this topic—even less for those majoring in social work.

There are a number of reasons why AI/AN students do not complete a degree program. This includes a lack of representation of their cultures within the curriculum, which increases the experience of isolation and loneliness. Also, racism is a factor, and there is a lack of supportive reference groups. These issues stress the importance of universities developing culturally relevant curricula and methodology (Blue & Day, 1998–1999). The 40 tribal colleges and universities (TC&Us) have accomplished this specific need by institutionalization of culturally grounded curricula. This method has been successful in increasing the graduation rate to as high as 75% within TC&Us

(Huffman, 2011; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007). Embracing the inclusion of culturally relevant curricula may increase AI/AN graduates, specifically in social work and child welfare, which will benefit AI/ANs in need of social, behavioral, and human services.

Public and private human service organizations, including child welfare agencies, have made attempts to address employee recruitment, turnover, and retention. The high rate of turnover in the child welfare workforce poses severe consequences to the field, which include the lost investments in the recruitment and training of employees, perceptions of legitimacy with the general public, and quality of services provided to children and families (Slack, Doyle, Cummings, Borrego, Fuller, & Cook, 2002; Ellett, Ellett, Ellis, & Lerner, 2009). The state and federal governments have issued mandates to improve the child welfare workforce staffing (Mathias & Benton, 2011); one strategy includes the recruitment and retention of AI/AN social work graduates with an interest in working in child welfare and tribal communities.

Tribal human and social services departments have worked to increase the participation of tribal members employed in their communities' workforce by offering placements on reservation land and negotiations with tribal colleges and universities to have students transfer to universities to earn a BSW and/or MSW degree (CSWE, 2010). This effort has been limited, as there is a lack of tribally employed MSWs available to provide supervision. An additional limitation includes the distance of tribal nations from universities, as the vast majority are located in rural areas. This distance limits the number of students who can participate in field placements at tribal nations-centered social service agencies.

However, there have been successful efforts used in rural areas to recruit and retain child welfare workers (Slack et al., 2002). It may be beneficial for tribal nations and universities to give some consideration to these rural efforts, which may be effective in their communities. Another strategy is the recruitment of AI/AN tribal members in child welfare workforce programs. In some situations, professionals from the same ethnic/racial backgrounds may be more

able to establish a rapport with clients and enhance their participation in clinical treatment (Perry & Limb, 2004). As a result, the AI/AN social workers who value service and the cultural traditions of their people may be likely to commit long-term to their present positions on the reservation (Huffman, 2011). Also, many AI/AN students plan to return to work for their tribal communities or urban Indian centers to provide services for AI/AN children and families or another segment of the population upon graduation (Tirado, 2005; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Thus, using this model would behoove child welfare agencies that service AI/AN clients to attempt to recruit AI/AN employees through participation in field placement partnerships with schools of social work and retain them once they have completed their social work degrees.

In the discipline of social work, which is the major gatekeeper into the child welfare workforce, AI/ANs have only earned 0.9% of bachelor's in social work (BSW) degrees and 0.8% of master's in social work (MSW) degrees nationwide, as reported by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in 2011. The rationale for AI/ANs' selection of social work as a major, and ultimately child welfare, as a career of choice includes: (a) the "many commonalities between the values of American Indians and the profession of social work" (Limb & Organista, 2006, p. 289); (b) having extended family members who are social workers; (c) those with volunteer experience in social work settings (Dennison, Poole, & Qaqish, 2007, p. 357); (d) those interested in the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), AI/ANs who value service, and the cultural traditions of their people; (e) and a desire to return to work for their reservation communities (Huffman, 2011) or urban Indian agencies; and (f) the practice of talk therapy which resembles a part of traditional healing for individuals and groups (Hernandez, 2006). Additionally, Ellett and colleagues (2009) report that professional commitment (i.e. human caring of specific populations like AI/AN) is the strongest correlate of child welfare employees' intent to remain employed in the profession. Child welfare employees who are exposed to specialized curricula and training in the field of child welfare as social work students stay longer than child welfare employees

who were not exposed to specialized training prior to securing employment (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005).

The literature review and the findings of the present study identify seven major areas that impact AI/AN student retention in higher education programs, including social work schools and programs, as they are the most responsible for preparing the child welfare workforce. These areas include a lack of understanding on the part of university-based training programs of AI/AN cultural values, student divisions between commitment to academe and their tribal communities, the lack of AI/AN faculty on college campuses, student experiences of isolation, the persistent racism on campuses and the local, off-campus communities, and a lack of field placements that included AI/AN clients. Each of these major areas is described below.

## Cultural Values

Over the past 25 years, researchers have found that AI/AN students who have a strong and positive ethnic identity are more likely to form a firm psychosocial anchor and complete a college degree (Huffman, 2011; Huffman, 1999; Okagaki, Helling, & Bingham, 2009; Brayboy, 2004). Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg (1986) found “the Sioux students who identified as traditional had a better chance for persistence in college compared with nontraditional Sioux” (p. 37). Huffman and Ferguson (2007) indicated that “these individuals also reported frequent experiences with cultural conflict, which they were better able to manage as they derived confidence from their ethnic identity and heritage. As a result, they were eventually able to succeed in the mainstream academic setting” (p. 68).

Brayboy (2004) explored the experiences of three American Indian students attending Ivy League universities in the 1990s. This researcher found that the students were able to use strategies that helped them maintain a connection with their cultural and tribal backgrounds. As a result, they were able to preserve their individual and group identities despite living in an uncomfortable and often oppressive context within the academic community.

In AI/AN tribal nation communities, both on and off reservation land, the family is one of the most important factors in the pursuit, attrition, and the successful completion of a degree program (Wilkinson, 1980). Often, AI/AN students stop out of college as a result of family issues to secure employment to support other family members or provide direct care, which is a reflection of their cultures (Paskus, 2011; Hernandez, 2006; Cross, 1993). Family for AI/AN students, from a traditional cultural standpoint, includes extended family members, which may include the majority of their tribal nation. The goal of AI/AN people is not simply to survive as individuals, but to survive as a community (Wilkinson, 1980); this is reflected by their push for the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Universities, social work program administrators, faculty, staff, and non-tribal field supervisors would benefit from an awareness of respect for AI/AN cultural values and sensitivity to the significance of family support to ensure the success of AI/AN students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Hernandez, 2006). Without awareness of this value, there will be limited increases in the enrollment of AI/AN students in social work and child welfare workforce retention programs.

### **Lack of American Indian Faculty**

American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) faculty members are crucial to the contribution of the value of diversity at universities and colleges. They assist institutions in the attainment of their diversity goals (Lundberg 2007; Wright 1990). The hiring of AI/AN faculty in all disciplines, including social work, is critical, as these faculty can increase recruitment and retention of AI/AN students by functioning as role models and sharing their expertise (Perry, 2002; Wright, 1990). AI/AN faculty members are likely to engage in meaningful relationships with AI/AN students (Lundberg, 2007; Lowe, 2005; Austin, 2005). They play a role in the recruitment and retention of AI/AN students with support, cultural understanding and an awareness of the barriers and challenges students frequently experience. In their role they can often intervene to assist students

who may be feeling isolated, are not familiar with university policies and practices, which may deter student from dropping out.

In addition to social work faculty, several universities and colleges offer American Indian Studies Programs (AISP) with professors from a number of disciplines who teach on the topics of tribal sovereignty, cultural integrity, relationships with land, Native languages, and Indian child welfare (McClellan, Tippeconnic-Fox, and Lowe, 2005), which brings “American Indian issues to the center rather than periphery” (Perry 2002, p. 50). These programs allow AI/AN students an opportunity to study topics related to their tribal nations and their role in the country. Therefore, AISPs assist the AI/AN students in the reduction of feelings of marginalization and isolation. AI/AN faculty engage in research, and often serve as a vital link between academic and AI/AN communities and service organizations (Cross, Brown, Day, Limb, Pellebon, Proctor, & Weaver, 2009; McClellan, Tippeconnic-Fox, & Lowe 2005).

## **Student Isolation**

American Indian and Alaskan Native students have experienced isolation for many years due to a lack of reflection of self as a result of the limited number of AI/AN professors on campus, students in the classrooms and in resident halls, and in the greater cities/communities where universities are located. These experiences may lead to “reduced integration, increase alienation, promote marginality, and eventually lead to student withdrawal” (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 59). These negative experiences may be offset by universities who prioritize the recruitment of AI/AN faculty in social work and AISPs. Also, the development of connections with local tribal nation communities, and support for AI/AN student organizations and groups, can compensate for negative experiences (McClellan, Tippeconnic-Fox, & Lowe, 2005; Wright, 1987). AI/AN student groups are invaluable and can serve as a reflection of self—this, in turn, decreases feelings of isolation, may increase shared cultural knowledge and continuity, and provides witness to a sense of achievement from those



students who have successfully developed resilience and strategies to cope with the demands of college (Macias, 1989). Student organizations also provide opportunities to develop leadership skills, which helps to increase self-worth (Guillory & Wolverton 2008; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007; Lewis & Gingerich (1980).

## **Persistence of Racism**

It is most unfortunate that in addition to the experience of isolation, a significant percentage of AI/AN students also experience intolerance, prejudice, and racism as part of their college experience in predominately white institutions (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Horse, 2005; Huffman, 1999; Perry, 2002). As one student stated in an article by Capriccios (2004), she felt “like some non-Indian people really have no conception of what it’s like to be an Indian student at a mainstream university in this day and age” (p. 13). One American Indian student who spoke at a Native American Student Speaks forum held at Michigan State University on February 22, 2012, stated, “Other students are not considerate of Native American students as they make fun of traditional dancing by jumping around and making noises as they put their hand over their mouths and behave in stereotypical ways.” Lowe (2005) shared that as a student at Princeton, she had to “fight stereotypes in her classes and listen to classmates voice their negative ideas and ignorance about Native American cultures” (p. 36). This is also evidenced by the following statement provided by Kevin Grover (2011) Director of the National Museum of the American Indian. “At the National Museum of the American Indian, we address a public that has been deeply influenced by the failings of the formal education system and the misinformation is imbedded in the popular culture” (p.13).

## **Field Placement Opportunities and ICWA**

All social work students need to increase their knowledge of the ICWA through curricula and its implementation in their child

welfare field placements. The social work field placement education and experience is an opportunity for all students, including AI/AN students, to develop an invaluable professional skill set to assist clients' (including AI/AN children) toward empowerment to not only improve and enhance their quality of life, but also continue the sustainability of tribal nations throughout the United States. Since most AI/AN students plan to return to work for their tribal communities (Tirado, 2005; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008), they will be providing services for AI/AN children and families and need to be prepared to support the ICWA in the face of adversity of enforcement of this law (Cross, 2006). The non-tribal students, who the authors term as "allies," also need training in ICWA across the social work curricula; many become employed in child welfare agencies, but have not specifically identified child welfare as their field of interest. Finally, training in ICWA across the social work curricula is important as many social work students, both AI/AN and non-tribal, become employed in child welfare agencies who have not specifically identified child welfare as their field of interest.

## **Present Study**

This study provides a descriptive profile of a sample of 47 students who were enrolled in accredited schools of social work between 2007 and 2010 and identified themselves as American Indian or Alaskan Native (AI/AN). In an effort to better understand the various life experiences and social interactions that influence the development of AI/AN students in regard to access and persistence through social work and child welfare workforce preparation programs, analyses were conducted with respect to the following areas: (1) sociodemographic characteristics; (2) interactions with American Indian faculty and content related to the population within social work courses; (3) need for AI/AN field placement supervisors and more opportunities for placements that serve the AI/AN population; and (4) views on the major challenges and/or barriers to success of AI/AN social work students in both undergraduate and graduate programs.

### *Methodology*

This study was informed by experiential learning theory to examine how undergraduate- and graduate-level AI/AN students majoring in social work have experienced their post-secondary education, including the preparation they received to work in the field of Indian child welfare. This theoretical framework is applicable because of its emphasis on the interactions between participants and their social environments, which may influence their college trajectory because emphasis is on the process over outcomes. Experiential learning represents continuous cycles of action and reflection that involve concrete experience, reflection on that experience, formulation of generalizations, and the testing of those generalizations in other situations (Kolb, 1984).

### *Sample*

The data collected for the study were gathered from a sample of 47 AI/AN students who were enrolled in accredited social work degree programs nationwide. Responses from students were gathered from ten states. These students identified as being from one of twenty-nine tribal nations; each tribal nation was represented by one or two students with the exception of the Navajo Nation with eleven tribal members represented. Seventy-four percent of the students reported they were not the first in their family to attend college. Additionally, only 63% of the student reported that they had received a unit of instruction (one class period) on the ICWA in their academic coursework.

MSW and female students made up the majority of participants. This gender distribution is reflective of the population of students who enroll in social work programs and who often make up the child welfare workforce.

### *Procedures*

Data was gathered by the research team using a within-stage, mixed-model survey design. It employed phone interviews, face-to-face interviews, and mail-in survey options. Mixed-methods research is

**Table 1**

Characteristics of the American Indian/Alaskan Native Social Work Student Participants ( $N = 47$ )

	Students	Gender	
	( $N$ )	Female	Male
BSW	18	16	2
MSW	28	25	3
PhD	1	1	0
Total	47	42	5
	(100%)	(89.4%)	(10.6%)

a “class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study” (Johnson & Onweugbuzie, 2004, p. 17). The selection of the 12 closed-ended response questions and the three open-ended questions that comprised the survey were informed by the literature review. The closed-ended questions queried the students on background information and family history of college attendance, source of scholarships, experiences with faculty, culturally relevant curriculum, social work placements, and whether they were exposed to a unit on the ICWA. Adding open-ended questions within the survey instrument employed in the study provided a venue for the researchers to discuss directly the quantitative survey findings under investigation from the perception of the AI/AN students. Open-ended questions queried students on the challenges they faced in their educational journeys and whether they had an American Indian professor of record who impacted their experience. The survey took approximately twenty to thirty minutes to complete. The data was gathered over a period of two and a half years beginning in 2008. A university-based institutional review board approved the study. Informed consent to participate in the study was gathered prior to data collection.

### *Analysis*

Quantitative responses were entered into SPSS Version 16 software and analyzed using frequencies and descriptive statistics. Field notes

from the phone, face-to-face interviews, and open-ended responses from the surveys were compiled in a Word document and uploaded into NVIVO 7 research software (QSR International, 2008), then analyzed for themes using an In Vivo coding process (Saldana, 2009). In Vivo coding uses the direct language of the participants as codes rather than researcher-generated words and phrases. This coding method was selected as most appropriate because it ensures the analysis is grounded from the perspective of the students who participated in the study.

Two researchers trained in qualitative analysis methods reviewed and coded the compiled field notes and open-ended survey responses independently to ensure reliability. Their codings were then compared before jointly developing thematic categories through consensus. Interpretive disagreements were resolved by presenting supportive evidence. The focus of the analysis was on the following primary research question: What are the major challenges and/or barriers for success of AI/AN social work students in both undergraduate and graduate programs who may be interested in entering the child welfare workforce? Findings prompted further investigation into the literature to determine if themes were unique to the present study, or studied by previous researchers. Data that fell outside the purview of the major research question will not be discussed in this paper.

## Findings

In response to the open-ended survey questions, the 47 AI/AN social work student participants identified several barriers that have impeded their educational success and offered solutions to eliminate these barriers. The seven major themes that emerged from the data and the number of students whose responses support each theme are listed in Table 2. Each is described briefly below.

### *Theme 1: Lack of Access to AI/AN Faculty*

The majority of the students (70%) believed that it was very important to have access to AI/AN faculty. One of the most frequent

**Table 2**

American Indian/Alaskan Native Students' Perceptions of the Barriers to Enrollment & Retention in Social Work Programs ( $N = 47$ )

Major Themes	<i>N</i>	%
Lack of access to American Indian/Alaskan Native Professors	33	70
Lack of access to AI/AN field supervisors and professional agencies to serve as field placements that provide services to the American Indian population	17	36
Long distances between college campus and home community; responsibilities to family, extended family, and the tribal community in addition to academic responsibilities; difficulty in managing time and travel	12	26
Feelings of cultural isolation	11	23
Lack of access to role models and mentors who are AI/AN in the campus community	10	21
The need to be engaged in the culture, customs, traditions, & spirituality	9	19
Students felt that the campus community was not respectful; they experienced racism & stereotyping by other populations in the campus community	9	19

reasons given for wanting AI/AN professors was the need for role models and mentors (21%). Students indicated that contact with AI/AN professors would increase their knowledge and improve their ability to provide more culturally sensitive services to AI/AN clients in the future. The students shared their belief that there are talented and creative AI/AN professors who are able to teach social work coursework. The students also felt that an AI/AN professor would make them feel validated. For example, a student enrolled in a social work course taught by an American Indian professor shared, "This experience profoundly shaped my college experience in many ways, my life...it was powerful to see my story being told."

***Theme 2: Lack of Field-Placement Opportunities Available to Work with the AI/AN Population***

Over one-third of the students were concerned in regard to the lack of opportunities to study and train under American Indian social workers in their field placements. Also, they were distressed by the lack of opportunities to participate in field placements that involved working with AI/AN clients. Only 34% of the students were offered opportunities to participate in field placements that included tribal

nation's agencies and/or urban centers. A student stated, "I specifically requested to be placed with my tribal nation's social service agency, but was denied because the agency was not registered with the university."

### ***Theme 3: Family Obligations and Distance Impede Academic Success***

More than one-fourth of the students reported family responsibilities and transportation as barriers to completion of their social work degrees. Many AI/AN students live in rural areas with mountainous terrains or deserts. They drive long distances, which is time-consuming and a financial challenge. Often, they do not relocate to the campus community because of family obligations. This is captured by the following quote: "In my program, half of the Indian students travel significant distances to attend class." One student recommended social work programs offer courses at off-site locations near American Indian and Alaskan Native communities to address the challenges posed by the students' family obligations and transportation.

### ***Theme 4: Feelings of Cultural Isolation***

Nearly a quarter of the students mentioned lack of support as a barrier to persistence in college. This lack of support contributed to feelings of isolation, loneliness, homesickness, and lack of self-reflection in those students on campus, as well as a lack of access to AI/AN mentors, professors, and student organizations. Some of the students experienced culture shock and did not feel a sense of belonging; one student noted that "The lack of support-if you can't build a supportive network-many students become lonely and homesick more often than not ... sometimes it makes you wonder, 'well, what am I doing here?'" The AI/AN students felt that they needed access to strong support systems, which enforce their tribal and cultural identity so they can better address the barriers they may face in the environments of mainstream universities.

***Theme 5: Lack of Access to Role Models and Mentors***

Twenty-one percent of the students reported the need for AI/AN role models and mentors who participate in the campus communities, collaborate with tribal nations and urban Indian centers. Students indicated a need for mentors to engage them in their research. This involvement would provide additional motivation to succeed in their social work programs. Also, the support from an AI/AN would be beneficial for those students experiencing culture shock and/or from long distance away from their home communities. Mentorship from AI/AN faculty and staff—especially in the beginning of the education process—is important. One student reported the benefits she experienced from mentor relationships were influential to the success she experienced in college: “I have had great mentors and examples to follow.”

***Theme 6: The Need to be Engaged in the Culture***

Nearly 20% of the students reported the importance of being engaged in the AI/AN culture, customs, traditions, and spirituality. The barrier of a lack of cultural support for students may result in dropping out of the programs, as it is difficult for students to feel stripped of their cultural norms for a number of months or years. The students explained that they do not feel validated in the campus communities, classroom, curriculum, textbooks, or through other educational entities. One student shared, “Barriers to success include lack of support from professors, lack of accurate material taught in textbooks, lack of experience from the professors who teach, and lack of cultural sensitivity with the American Indian population.”

***Theme 7: Racism***

Nineteen percent of the students listed prejudice, discrimination, and/or lack of cultural sensitivity as barriers for success in the completion of their BSW and MSW degrees. Student reported feeling that their social work programs viewed AI/AN social work content as less important, and that the AI/AN population did not receive the same considerations as other cultures that were more readily used as



examples. Also, the material on American Indians/Alaskan Natives taught in the required textbooks was often not accurate; incorrect information can lead to negative appropriations of the AI/AN population within the classroom. One student summed this up: “There is a lack of support from professors. There are underlying feelings of ‘they [AI/AN] don’t deserve the help.’”

## **Discussion and Implications for Policy and Practice**

This study highlights the life experiences and social interactions that influence the development of AI/AN students’ pursuit and persistence in completion of social work degree programs—those most likely to be subsequently recruited and employed in the child welfare workforce. Some of these challenges are familiar (i.e. access to AI faculty, feelings of cultural isolation); others are less well known (i.e., participation in field placements that allow students to serve AI/AN clients). The themes point to several policy and practice recommendations aimed at breaking down barriers to educational attainment for this population, which include increasing the preparedness of students in working with AI/AN children and families.

These currently enrolled AI/AN graduate and undergraduate students share their justification for the need for AI/AN faculty members in the classroom who are comfortable and able to teach an accurate history, cultural differences, and current social issues of the population to both AI/AN students and non-tribal students. The faculty role models/mentors offer AI/AN students a self-reflection to decrease the feelings that come with isolation. Also, AI/AN faculty role models/mentors provide a connection to the AI/AN urban, rural, and reservation communities and increase diversity for universities.

Another major concern is the lack of AI/AN field placement supervisors and field placements offered at AI/AN tribal nations and urban Indian agencies. The current situation is unreasonable for two reasons. First, social work programs as supporters of social justice and equality are duty bound to make changes to advocate for inclusion of opportunities to assist all populations. Secondly, as indicated by the

findings of the literature review and this study, the majority of AI/AN social work students want to return to their home communities to work with their tribal nations. The child welfare workforce stands to gain considerably by employing job applicants (i.e., AI/AN social work graduates) who possess knowledge of child welfare and stronger personal and professional commitments to tribal communities.

The results of the study, which are supported by the literature review, indicate that family obligations are an integral part of the traditional cultures of the AI/AN. This may require students to leave campus and return home. In addition, the distance traveled to attend a university was seen as a barrier for several of the interviewed students; they travel several hours from rural areas, through mountain ranges or deserts, to obtain their social work education.

It may be disappointing to learn that AI/AN social work students experience cultural isolation and racial discrimination while attending predominately white universities. This experience was documented in the 1980s (Lin, LaCounte, & Eder, 1988), the 1990s (Canabal, 1995), and the early 2000s (Larimore & McClellan, 2005; Weaver, 2000), and continues for AI/AN students today. Universities need to address AI/AN students' experiences of harassment, stereotyping, and disrespect if they want to increase graduation rates.

The seven major themes identified in this study, and others identified in the literature, may provide a foundation for making modifications in social work research, policy, and practice. The following recommendations are the basis for essential transformation in social work education: (1) Initiate efforts to increase the number of AI/AN faculty to provide role models/mentorships for students, teaching in classrooms for AI/AN and non-tribal students, add to the diversity of the universities, and build relationships with tribal nations and urban American Indian communities. (2) Increase the number of field placement opportunities with tribal nations in urban, rural and reservation communities. (3) Reduce the AI/AN students' feelings of cultural isolation by providing peer support with their reference group and networking opportunities on and off campus. (4) Foster efforts to reduce racism, stereotypes, and the lack

of respect that AI/AN students continue to endure in predominantly white academic settings.

Promising practices identified in the literature included the development of online course offerings; however, it is important to consider the population's value of group focus, therefore having some aspect of interaction among students (Al-Asfour, 2012). Additionally, universities need to accept the responsibility to encourage AI/AN students to "synthesize mainstream theory into their own cultures" (Macias, 1989, p. 48) and need to investigate and be explicit in addressing racism, stereotyping, and the harassment of AI/AN students (Perry, 2002). Higher education institutions must also facilitate opportunities for AI/AN students to affirm their strong cultural identities (Huffman, 2011; Okagaki, Helling, & Bingham, 2009).

Implications for future research include investigation of how tribal colleges and universities employ culturally relevant strategies for the recruitment and retention of AI/AN students in social work programs or two-year transfer programs. Not all tribal colleges have social work programs. Therefore, the students would need to transfer to four-year colleges. Additional queries could also be made with tribal social workers who are presently employed in child welfare agencies to assess the specific training needs that can improve child welfare workforce preparation programs.

A major strength of this study is that it increases the knowledge base to the limited literature available that captures the voices of AI/AN students enrolled in social work education programs. Although the study utilizes a small and purposive sample, the group of AI/AN social work students in the present study is larger and covers a greater geographic area than previous studies (Weaver, 2000; Brayboy, 2004). It is important to note that their experiences and opinions may not represent those of the larger population of AI/AN students who may have an interest in pursuing a social work degree but have not yet been accepted, or those who may have dropped out of a degree-granting program. Additionally, more in-depth, audio-recorded interviews with individual participants would allow the research team to assess resiliency factors for students who

did not identify barriers to their educational trajectory, as this was not queried in the survey.

## **Conclusion**

A comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strengths that affect recruitment and retention of AI/AN students in social work programs who may practice in the field of child welfare requires the perspectives of all stakeholders (i.e., administrators of universities and child welfare agencies, faculty, field placement supervisors, and AI/AN undergraduate and graduate social work students). The student voice is especially needed in the recommendations for change in education policy and practice, but is often not consulted. University administrators should be informed and make decisions that are sensitive to the fact that educational, social, and traditional activities that support the strong cultural identity of AI/AN students directly impact their success. Increasing the number of AI/AN social workers in the workforce is an ideal starting place for practice improvements to reduce the number of AI/AN children in the child welfare system. These students are most likely to possess basic knowledge of native cultures and family life, grounded in the historical and contemporary factors that, when not understood, increase the likelihood of AI/AN children entering into the child welfare system. Students with AI/AN ancestry are naturally positioned to move beyond the mechanisms of mere compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act. They are better able to extend professional practice to include cultural perspectives on parenting and the role of children in tribal communities—which, in turn, includes the ability to recognize healthy expressions of Native values in family functioning (Bussey & Lucero, 2013). In sum, social work programs that successfully recruit, retain, and graduate AI/AN social work students are likely to increase the competency of the child welfare workforce.

## References

---

- Adelman, H.S., Taylor, L., & Nelson, P. (2009). Native American students going to and staying in postsecondary education: An intervention perspective. Unpublished manuscript. Los Angeles: Department of Psychology, UCLA.
- Al-Asfour, A. (2012). Online teaching: navigating its advantages, disadvantages and best practice. *Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, 23(3) 20–23.
- Austin, R.D. (2005). Perspectives of American Indian nation parents and leaders. *New Directions for Student Services*, 109, 41–48.
- Blue, E.T., & Day, P.A. (1998-99, Winter). A literature guide: Resources for holding institutions of higher education accountable: How do they serve American Indian students? *Tribal College, Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, 10(2), 29–31.
- Brayboy, M.J. (2004). Hiding in the ivy: American Indian students and visibility in elite educational settings. *Harvard Educational Review* 74(2), 125–141.
- Bussey, M. & Lucero, N.M. (2013). Re-examining child welfare's response to ICWA: Collaborating with community-based agencies to reduce disparities for American Indian/Alaskan Native children. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35, 394–401.
- Canabal, M.E. (1995). Native Americans in higher education. *College Student Journal*, 29(4), 455–457.
- Capriccios, R. (2004). On-Campus American Indians deal with ignorance, racism and invisibility at mainstream colleges. *American Indian Report*, 12–15.
- Cross, S.L. (2006). Indian Family Exception Doctrine: Still Losing Children Despite the Indian Child Welfare Act. *Child Welfare*, 85(4), 671–690.
- Cross, S.L. (1993). *A cross-sectional study of selected four-year public and private colleges and universities in the United States with American Indian (Native American) student support program*. (Doctoral Dissertation).
- Cross, S.L., Brown, E.D., Day, P.A., Limb, G.E., Pellebon, D.A., Proctor, E.C., & Weaver, H.N. (2009). *Final Report: Status of Native Americans in Social Work Higher Education*. Alexandria, VA: Task Force on Native American in Social Work Education, Council on Social Work Education.

- Council on Social Work Education (2011). 2010 Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States: A summary. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.
- Curry, D., McCarragher, T., & Dellmann-Jenkins, M. (2005). Training, Transfer, and Turnover: Exploring the relationship among transfer of learning factors and staff retention in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review, 27*, 931–948.
- Dennison, S. T., Poole, J., & Qaqish, B. (2007). Students' perceptions of social work: Implications for strengthening the image of social work among college students. *Social Work, 52*(4), 289–384.
- Ellett, A.J., Ellett, C.D., Ellis, J., & Lerner, B. (2009). A research-based child welfare employee selection protocol: Strengthening retention of the workforce. *Child Welfare, 88*(5), 49–68.
- Gover, K. (2011). Native mascots and other misguided beliefs. *American Indian Magazine, Fall 2011*, 10–13.
- Guillory, R.M. & Wolverson, M. (2008). It's about the family: Native American student persistence in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education, 79*(1), 58–87.
- Heavy Runner, I. & DeCelles, R. (2002). Family education model: Meeting the student retention challenge. *Journal of American Indian Education, 41*(2), 29–37.
- Hernandez, J.A.A. (2006). Empowering students for success: Colleges share best practices for keeping students on track. *Tribal College Journal, 18*(1), 13–17.
- Horse, P.G., (2005). Native American identity. *New Directions for Student Services, 109*, 61–68.
- Huffman, T.E., (1999). *Cultural masks: Ethnic identity and American Indian higher education*. Buckhannon, WV: Stone Creek Press.
- Huffman, T., & Ferguson, R. (2007). Great Plains research. *A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences, 17*, 61–71.
- Huffman, E.T. (2011). Plans to live on a reservation following college among American Indian students: An examination of transculturation theory. *Journal of Research in Rural Education 26*(3), 1–13.
- Huffman, T., Sill, M., & Brokenleg, M. (1986). College achievement among Souix and White South Dakota students. *Journal of American Indian Education, 25*(2). 32–38.

- International, Q.S.R. (2008). NVivo 9: Home. Retrieved from [http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx).
- Johnson, R.B. & Onweugbuzie, A.J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14–26.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: experiences as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Larimore, J.A., & McClellan, G.S. (2005). Native American student retention in U.S. post-secondary education. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2(9), 7–32.
- Lewis, R.G., & Gingerich, W. (1980). Leadership characteristics: Views of Indian and non-Indian students. *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work*, 494–497.
- Limb, G.E., & Organista, K.C. (2006). Change between entry and graduation in MSW student views on social work's traditional mission, career motivations, and practice preferences: Caucasian, student of color, and American Indian group comparisons. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 42(2), 269–290.
- Lin, R. L., LaCounte, D., & Eder, J. (1988). A study of Native American students in a predominantly white college. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 27(3), 8–15.
- Lowe, S.C. (2005). This is who I am: Experiences of Native American students. *New Directions for Student Services*, 109, 33–40.
- Lundberg, C.A. (2007). Student involvement and institutional commitment to diversity as predictors of Native American student learning. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(4), 405–416.
- Macias, C.J. (1989). American Indian academic success: The role of indigenous learning strategies. *Journal of American Indian Education*, Special Edition, 43–52.
- Mathias, C. & Benton, A.D. (2011). Social justice through the education of a rural and tribal child welfare workforce. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 5(2–3). 282–296.
- McClellan, G.S., Tippeconnic-Fox, M.J., Lowe, S.C. (2005). Where we have been: A history of Native American higher education. *New Directions for Student Services*, 109, 7–16.
- Native American Student Speaks, (2012, February 22). Michigan State University, Lansing, MI.

- Okagaki, L., Helling, M.K., & Bingham, G.E. (2009). American Indian college students' ethnic identity and beliefs about education. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(2), 157–176.
- Paskus, L. (2011). Retentions strategies rely upon tradition, innovation. *Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education, 22*(4), 9.
- Perry, B. (2002). American Indian victims of campus ethnviolence. *Journal of American Indian Education, 41*(1), 35–55.
- Perry, R. & Limb, G.E. (2004). Ethnic/racial matching of clients and social workers in public child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review, 26*. 965–979.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Shotton, H.J., Oosahwe, E.L., & Cintron, R. (2007). Stories of success: Experiences of American Indian students in a peer-mentoring retention program. *The Review of Higher Education, 31*(1), 81–107.
- Slack, M.K., Doyle, M., Cummings, D.M., Borrego, M.E., Fuller, K. & Cook, S. (2002). Strategies used by interdisciplinary rural health training programs to assure community responsiveness and recruit practitioners. *Journal of Interprofessional Care, 16*(2). 129–138.
- Tippeconnic Fox, M. J. & Lowe, S.C., (2005). Voices from within: Native American faculty and staff on campus. *New Directions for Student Service, 109*, 49–57.
- Tirado, M. (2005). Indian country 101- Universities prepare Indian students for careers and life on reservations. *American Indian Report, 12*–15.
- U.S. Department of Education (2011). NCES 2011-033, Indicator 26. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72>.
- Weaver, H.N. (2000). Culture and professional education: The experiences of Native American social workers. *Journal of Social Work Education, 36*(3), 415–428.
- Wilkinson, G.T. (1980). On assisting Indian people. *Social Casework, 61*(8), 451–454.
- Wright, D.J. (1987). Minority students: Developmental beginnings. *New Directions for Student Services, 38*. 5–15.
- Wright, B. (1990). American Indian studies programs: Surviving the 80s, thriving in the 90s. *Journal of American Indian Education, 30*(1), 17–24.