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Training American Indian and Alaska Native Social Workers for Indian Country

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ABSTRACT
This study reviews student’s perspectives of an American Indian and Alaska Native Indian Studies center in a Master of Social Work degree (MSW) program from the Brown School at Washington University in St Louis. The article describes the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies many contributions over the years and how it continues to grow in innovative ways. This article begins by considering the social, economic, and historical circumstances that make Native-focused training in social work critical to the future of Indian Country. The article then discusses the founding of the center, the curriculum, program offerings and the effectiveness of the center’s services. Additionally, results of the evidence indicates that financial assistance and support programs are strong factors in recruitment, student motivation to pursue a degree, and persistence to completion of a Master of Social Work credential. Lastly, the paper offers recommendations for recruiting, retaining and graduating American Indian and Alaska Native graduate students.

KEYWORDS
Social work; American Indian; Alaska Native; curriculum; American Indian studies program; higher education; research evidence

There is a great need for American Indians and Alaska Natives in the field of social work. The overwhelming majority of Native tribes “continue to battle extraordinary health and social challenges.” Poverty is a primary concern, followed by disease, mental health issues, drug and alcohol addictions, unemployment, violence, and victimization (Bubar, 2009, p. 61). Rates of cancer, once rare in this population, are now on the rise, and rates of diabetes have almost reached epidemic proportions (Roubideaux, 2005). Statistics show that American Indian/Alaska Native women have the highest incidence of sexual assault, with 7.2 per 1,000 reported in 2000 compared with 4 per 1,000 among African American women and 3 per 1,000 among white women (Bubar, 2009). Further, as Blume and Escobedo (2005, p. 77) note, “liver diseases, often linked to substance abuse, were the sixth leading cause of death for Native peoples in the United States in 2001. ... Unintentional injuries and suicide … were the third and eighth leading cause of death respectively.” Estimates by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism show that “75% of all unintentional injuries among American Indian/Alaska Natives are alcohol related” (Blume & Escobedo, 2005, p. 77). Alcohol-related deaths are over seven times higher among American Indians and Alaska Natives than in the overall U.S. population.
Moreover, as Brave Heart (2005, p. 175) notes, those “with alcohol abuse disorders are more likely to also suffer from a psychiatric disorder,” and “Natives have high rates of mental distress at 13% compared with 9% in the general population” of the United States. While little research is available on psychiatric disorders among Natives, anecdotal evidence suggests “alarming rates … of psychological problems … including mood disorders … pathological reactions to violence and trauma, and suicide” (Gone & Alcantara, 2005, p. 113).

Unfortunately, many states and local communities ignore the plight of Native people. Non-Indian leaders often view services as the domain of the Native peoples themselves, their employers, or the federal government. The Indian Health Service (IHS), the federal agency charged with providing primary care and public health services for Native populations, is woefully underfunded and understaffed. IHS facilities are often inaccessible and may not offer the most current preventative care (Chino & DeBruyn, 2006; Roubideaux, 2005; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003). American Indians and Alaska Natives can become “invisible” in a system where delays are common and shuffling among clinicians is inevitable (Westermeyer & Graham, 2005). Not surprisingly, American Indian and Alaska Native communities often have a distrust of the dominant society, which they associate with a 500-year history of oppression and domination. This distrust is heightened and further barriers are created if programs are seen as imposed from the outside. Social workers, though well intentioned, have often added to the distrust. Historically, they have provided services that stressed assimilation into the dominant culture rather than social justice. For example, social workers helped remove American Indian and Alaska Native children from their homes and communities placing them in non-Native boarding schools and foster homes. There is a need for Native-designed interventions (Brave Heart, 2005).

Purpose

In order to best serve American Indian/Alaska Native communities, it is critical to understand the culture, social structure, and politics of those being served. For American Indians and Alaska Natives, an important principle is sovereignty – that is, the U.S. government’s recognition that American Indians and Alaska Natives have rights to self-government and self-determination (Weaver, 2000). Thus, effective support must emerge from a comprehension of such principles and from a genuine understanding of the particular Native community being served, not from the norms and prescriptions of an outside culture. Social workers and activists who seek to help should strive for cultural competency, which is working in a way that is appropriate to the behaviors and expectations of a cultural group (Hawkins & Walker, 2005). Brave Heart effectively illustrates the lack of cultural competency by describing misinterpretation of Native norms:

Mature, psychologically healthy Native behavior in a number of tribes includes generosity, interdependence, valuing the good of the community over oneself, humility, and respectful reserve in front of strangers, which could be misconstrued as dependency, masochism, passivity and withdrawn behavior, and depression by non-Native therapists (Brave Heart, 2005, p. 169).

Therefore, Brave Heart asserts that “culturally based, culturally congruent, and culturally grounded practices that emerge from Native community should be supported … and
valued” (Brave Heart, 2005, p. 184). The Native traditions of healing and wisdom should not be ignored. Rather, social workers must find ways to demonstrate their commitment to the community and must, in developing programs or interventions, integrate cultural content and involve the community (Chino & DeBruyn, 2006; Hawkins & Walker, 2005; Moran & Davis, 2005). This is where American Indian/Alaska Native social workers have vital roles. Who better to understand and respect sovereignty? Who better to implement interventions with cultural appropriateness? Who better to dispel cultural barriers and suspicion?

If helping poor and disadvantaged populations is one of the main commitments of social work, the unique history and status of American Indians and Alaska Natives should make them a main priority of the profession (Limb, 2001). According to a study done by Gordon E. Limb, past assistant director of the Buder Center, almost 40% of American Indian students surveyed in an MSW program grew up in low socioeconomic situations; compared with other master of social work students, they expressed stronger career interests in serving “economically disadvantaged people” (Limb, 2001, p. 54).

Chino and DeBruyn (2006) document a major movement in the direction of tribal self-determination to deal with complex American Indian/Alaska Native health concerns. Many tribal public-health professionals use strategies for community capacity building and community empowerment as they begin to take control of their own health services. However, because of the disparity between Western “ways of knowing” and Native approaches to knowledge (Chino & DeBruyn, 2006, p. 597), tribal capacity-building must take into account both the traditional culture and the dominant Western culture in which it operates.

Thus, recruiting and retaining American Indian MSW students with such interests is critically important. By offering their views and experiences on culturally appropriate services to tribal communities, American Indian and Alaska Native social workers become invaluable resources on practices, policies, and laws that affect these groups. As they move toward more autonomy with regard to their own welfare, Native communities send these students off with the hope and expectation that, upon completion of their studies, they will return to facilitate change from within. Returning to their native lands, American Indian and Alaska Native MSW scholars can build and sustain collaborative approaches with tribal peoples, keeping social justice in the forefront of Native issues (Bubar, 2009). To gain an understanding of the relationships among retention, persistence, and attrition among Native American students in higher education, we collected respondent-reported data on financial support, factors influencing degree completion, and decisions to attend Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.

**Background**

In 1990, the Buder Center was established within the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis. The Center’s mission has been to prepare future American Indian leaders to practice in tribal and urban settings, enabling them to make significant contributions to the health, wellness, and sustainable future of Indian Country. In order to fulfill its mission, the Buder Center recruits qualified American Indian and Alaska Native scholars, supports them in a demanding course of study, develops curriculum focused on American Indian and Alaska Native populations, and conducts research to develop policy
that directly impacts Indian Country. To date, the Buder Center has served 178 American Indian/Alaska Native social work students from 74 tribes/nations and 28 states. Twenty-nine of these 178 went on to pursue a terminal degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.); three others have earned Master of Business Administration (MBA) degrees, and six have obtained their jurisprudence degrees (JD).

The Kathryn M. Buder Scholarship has funded approximately 10 American Indian/Alaska Native students attending the Brown School’s MSW program each year. In addition to covering tuition and living expenses for two years of study, the scholarship provides assistance toward the purchase of books. The Buder Center also provides academic support and mentoring to American Indian and Alaska Native students who receive funding from other sources.

In collaboration with the Brown School’s Office of Admissions and Recruitment, the Buder Center serves as a recruiter for American Indian/Alaska Native students. Recruitment involves hosting prospective students visiting from tribal colleges, participating in graduate-school fairs attended by American Indian/Alaska Native students, training Buder alumni to support recruitment by serving as ambassadors, and developing networks by attending American Indian/Alaska Native conferences. Because of the Buder Center’s recruitment and substantial funding efforts, American Indian/Alaska Native students make up 3% to 4% of the graduate students each year at the Brown School. Since the Buder Center opened, 93.6% of Buder students have graduated, a percentage that far exceeds the national average rate of 61% for social work students (Baum & Steele, 2017).

**Research on the perspectives of buder center alumni**

In 2013, the Buder Center undertook research on the experiences and perceptions of American Indian/Alaska Native alumni who graduated from the Brown School and were affiliated with the Buder Center. This was the first comprehensive effort to gather data from alumni since the center’s founding. Three objectives motivated the research effort:

1. To gain a better understanding of factors influencing American Indian/Alaska Native students to pursue graduate study at the Brown School and to participate in Buder Center programming.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of the center’s services in supporting retention and graduation of American Indian/Alaska Native students.
3. To increase understanding of the lived experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native students during their time at the Brown School.

By assessing alumni perspectives on these matters, the center sought the insights required to enable improvements to programs, services, research, and curricula. Additionally, the data may inform other graduate programs as they consider replicating strategies to ensure success.
Methods

Sample selection

Contact information was gathered for all Brown School alumni who received full or partial financial support, took the American Indian courses, or actively participated in Buder Center events when the 2013 research effort began. The overwhelming majority of these alumni (98%) are American Indian/Alaska Native, but approximately 2% are non-American Indian/Alaska Native alumni who participated in Buder Center programming and/or courses. The sampling frame includes 91 individuals for whom contact information could be located. They were sent an email containing a link to an online survey and invited to participate. After completing the survey, respondents were invited to share their contact information if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview and/or interested in entering a drawing for a gift card. To preserve the anonymity of survey responses, any contact information shared by participants for either purpose was stored in a separate database from the one that held their survey responses.

Criterion-purposeful sampling was used to select a diverse group of alumni from the respondents who completed the online survey and indicated willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. The selection criteria included geographical region of residence, Buder scholarship receipt/non-receipt, and age at entry into graduate school. Through the sampling process, we selected at least one participant (1) from each of four geographical regions specified by the U.S. Census Bureau (Region I is located in the Northeast, Region II is located in the Midwest, Region III is located in the South, and Region IV is located in the West); (2) from one of two Buder scholarship-receipt categories (scholarship recipient and scholarship non-recipient); and (3) from one of two age-range categories (younger than 30 at time of program entry and 30 or older at time of program entry). This process generated a list of 16 individuals. Researchers sent them emails to confirm participation and arrange an interview. Interviews were completed with 12 respondents who confirmed their desire to participate via email. One of these respondents was not American Indian; this response has been excluded from the qualitative analysis because their experience as a non-American Indian/Alaska Native differed so greatly from those of the American Indian/Alaska Native respondents.

Measures

The quantitative online survey was designed to explore the factors that influenced respondents’ decisions to pursue graduate study at the Brown School and to participate in Buder Center programming. It was also designed to investigate the effectiveness of the center’s services in supporting the retention and graduation of American Indian/Alaska Native students.

The survey asked respondents to rate their understanding of American Indian/Alaska Native culture and of their tribe/nation’s culture, the strength of their connection to the American Indian/Alaska Native community, whether they had established relationships with American Indian/Alaska Native communities, and their perceptions concerning a traditional lifestyle. Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they, as
American Indian/Alaska Native students, had unique needs and faced unique barriers. Respondents were asked to provide two sets of responses for each of the items related to American Indian/Alaska Native identity. We asked them to (a) characterize how they would have responded to each item before attending the Brown School and (b) to characterize how they responded to the item in light of their experiences at the Brown School.

The online survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete and all responses were anonymous. Collection of the survey data began in July 2013 and ended in October 2013. The survey was completed by 69 of the 91 alumni in the sampling frame (a response rate of 76%).

Analysis

Quantitative survey responses were analyzed to identify trends and correlations between variables. Using an online sample-size calculator, we determined that the study required approximately 90 participants to achieve a 60% completion rate for the population target goal, a 95% confidence level, and a 6.4 confidence interval. Because the completion rate was 76%, the quantitative findings are suggestive but not necessarily representative. Moreover, the findings pertain to an understudied population and may provide valuable insights for future research.

Results

Characteristics of American Indian/Alaska native students

The survey collected data on respondents’ age at the point of matriculation in the Brown School, and the proportion of sample members in each of four age groups was fairly similar: 24.64% were between the ages of 23 and 25 years when they entered the Brown School, 26.09% were between the ages of 26 and 29 years, 17.39% were between the ages of 30 and 35 years, and 15.94% were between the ages of 36 and 45 years. A small proportion reported starting the Brown School at age 22 or younger (11.59%). Even smaller shares reported starting between the ages of 46 and 55 years (2.90%) and after age 65 (1.45%).

Sources of financial support

Respondents were asked to identify sources of financial support received during their tenure at the Brown School. The majority of participants reported support from a Buder scholarship or fellowship (79%) and student loans (72%). Tribal scholarships (33%), paid employment (28%), other scholarships (21%), and fellowships from the American Indian Graduate Center (20%) were also significant sources of support. Very few participants reported receiving support from family contributions (7%), the Indian Health Service (7%), tuition waivers (1%), or other sources (7%).
Factors influencing degree pursuit and completion

As mentioned, the survey sought to investigate the various factors that motivated American Indian/Alaska Native respondents to pursue degrees. Rates of graduation are lower among American Indian/Alaska Native students than among students in any other racial/ethnic group. Understanding the conditions of graduate schools and the state of student preparedness will inform efforts by universities to develop support programs that address attrition, persistence, and graduation rates among American Indian/Alaska Native students. As seen in Figure 1, many respondents reported that access to financial assistance (77%), motivation to face a new experience (65%), and access to a support system (59%) were key factors influencing their completion of an undergraduate degree. When asked about their decision to attend graduate school, respondents indicated that financial assistance (81%), motivation to face a new experience (61%), and institutional responsiveness to American Indian/Alaska Native student needs (46%) were key factors in that decision.

Factors influencing brown school attendance

An overwhelming majority of participants had heard of the Buder Center before attending the Brown School. Large proportions of them had learned about it through a career fair (95%), a conference (95%), a pow wow (95%), a Washington University faculty member (94%), a university staff member (88%), or their undergraduate institution (91%). Participants also reported that they knew of the Buder Center from the Internet (79%), friends (76%), and Washington University alumni (72%).

Figure 1. Factors influencing decision to pursue degree.
When asked specifically about the decision to attend the Brown School, majorities indicated that they were influenced by the availability of financial assistance from the Buder Center (72%), the reputation of the Brown School (67%), the Buder Center’s mission and goals (64%), the encouragement they received from their support system (57%), the reputation of the Buder Center (55%), and the reputation of Washington University (51%).

Buder Center recruitment efforts may also have played a role in respondents’ decision to attend the Brown School. When asked about those efforts, respondents indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the information they received regarding the requirements of the Buder scholarship (72%), with help provided by Buder Center staff during the application process (61%), with information provided by Buder Center staff regarding financial assistance (61%), and with responses received from Buder Center staff on all questions related to available scholarships (58%).

**Satisfaction with the Buder Center services**

Respondents were asked to evaluate their satisfaction with the support provided by the Buder Center and their satisfaction with the Center’s career-development programming. In response to items on Buder’s support for students, a majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their involvement with other American Indian/Alaska Native students was helpful (81%) and their overall educational experiences were relevant to their career (80%). Smaller proportions of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Buder Center’s orientation program was helpful (57%), that the Buder Center advocated on their behalf (70%), and that the Buder Center’s resources met all of their needs (65%).

The survey also inquired about perceptions concerning the Center’s career development programming. A large proportion of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Buder Center staff encouraged their professional development (75%). A much smaller proportion agreed or strongly agreed that the Social Welfare Policies and Administrative Practices track course was applicable to their career (70%), that the Community Development track course was applicable (62%), or that the Individual Practice track course was applicable (58%). Satisfaction with Buder Center services by scholarship recipients. Responses on satisfaction with Buder Center student support and career development programming motivated us to investigate whether satisfaction was correlated with Buder scholarship receipt, and the results of this analysis indicated important differences. Compared with respondents who did not receive Buder scholarships, counterparts who received them reported in much larger proportions that they agreed or strongly agreed with a statement that Buder Center student support is effective. Similar differences were observed in respondents’ reported perceptions of Buder Center career development programming. Larger proportions of Buder scholarship recipients reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the Buder Center’s career development programming was helpful.
**Effectiveness of buder center services by strength of connection to American Indian/Alaska native community**

The survey measured respondents’ degree of connection to the American Indian/Alaska Native community by asking them to react to the following statement: “I had a strong connection to an American Indian/Alaska Native community prior to attending Brown School.” Results suggest that students with strong connections and those without strong connections had very similar levels of satisfaction with Buder Center student support services. However, the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed that the Center met all their needs as a graduate student was much larger among those with strong connections (73%) than among counterparts without strong connections (44%). There were also some differences between the two groups in satisfaction with career development services provided by the Buder Center. A much larger proportion of students with strong connections indicated that the Community Development track course (69% vs. 44%) and the Individual Practice track course (61% vs. 50%) were applicable to their career. However, a smaller proportion of students with strong connections agreed that Buder Center staff had encouraged their professional development (71% vs. 89%).

**Influence of brown school attendance on perception of American Indian/Alaska native identity and connectedness**

The survey asked respondents to rate their understanding of American Indian/Alaska Native culture and of their tribe/nation’s culture, the strength of their connection to the American Indian/Alaska Native community, whether they had established relationships with American Indian/Alaska Native communities, and their perceptions concerning a traditional lifestyle. Respondents were also asked to rate the extent to which being an American Indian/Alaska Native student imposed unique needs and unique barriers. Two sets of ratings were solicited: One expressed the responses they would have given prior to attending the Brown School and another expressed their responses in light of their experiences in attending the school. The two sets of ratings are intended to elucidate the school’s influence on these perceptions.

Participation in Buder Center and Brown School programs appeared to increase participants’ depth of understanding of American Indian and Alaska Native culture. In response to the statement, “I had a deep understanding of [American Indian] culture,” 46% indicated that they would have strongly agreed prior to attending the Brown School attendance, and 59% strongly agreed that they had such an understanding after attending the school.

Interestingly, participants reported very little change in their perceptions concerning connections to an American Indian/Alaska Native community. The following survey question illustrates responses to the statement: “I had a strong connection to an American Indian/Alaska Native community.” Percentages remained fairly flat across the time periods: 52% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement before attending the Brown School and 54% expressed the same after attending the Brown School.

Very little change was observed in respondents’ reports on their understanding of their tribe/nation. We used the following statement to examine change in that understanding: “I had a deep understanding of my Tribe/Nation’s culture.” Percentages remained flat across
the time periods: 52% of respondents reported that they strongly agreed with the statement both before and after attending the Brown School.

However, participation in Buder Center and Brown School programs appeared to significantly increase ties between respondents and American Indian/Alaska Native peoples. We measured this with responses to the following statement: “I have established relationships among American Indian/Alaska Native peoples.” The percentage expressing strong agreement increased from 57% prior to Brown School attendance to 81% following Brown School attendance.

Attendance at the Brown School appeared to slightly influence respondents’ perceptions of what it means to live a traditional lifestyle. We examined changes in those perceptions by soliciting responses to the statement, “I live a traditional lifestyle.” Responses remained fairly flat, except that the percentage of alumni responding “neither agree nor disagree” increased from 26% to 33%.

Participants’ perceptions that American Indian/Alaska Native students have unique academic needs appeared to shift somewhat after their attendance at the Brown School. We measured this with responses to the following statement: “I believe American Indians/Alaska Natives have unique academic needs compared to other students.” A larger proportion indicated that they strongly agreed after Brown School attendance (58%) than did so before (48%). A similar shift occurred in participants’ perceptions of their personal needs, which we examined with responses to the statement, “I believe American Indian/Alaska Natives have unique personal needs compared to other students.” A larger proportion strongly agreed with the statement after Brown School attendance (59%) than did so before (48%).

Attending the Brown School was associated with a decline in the percentage of participants who perceived issues in their past to be barriers to their success. We examined that perception through responses to the following statement: “I have experienced personal issues in my past that created barriers to succeeding.” A smaller proportion strongly agreed or agreed after Brown School attendance (30% and 26%) than did so before (39% and 28%). In addition, the proportion of participants expressing disagreement with this statement increased from 6% to 13%.

Discussion

Between 1990 and 2018, the Brown School has conferred degrees on 146 American Indian/Alaska Native MSW students, 104 of whom received funding from a Buder scholarship. Of these 146 alumni, 20 went on to pursue a terminal degree, nine subsequently earned a doctorate (Ph.D. or Ed.D.), one earned a Master of Business Administration (MBA), and five have obtained Doctor of Jurisprudence degrees (JD).

Importance of financial assistance

An important finding in this research is that the availability of financial assistance was reportedly the most important factor influencing the completion of both undergraduate and graduate degrees. In fact, such assistance appears to have played an important role in the recruitment of American Indian/Alaska Native students and in supporting them during enrollment. A majority of respondents indicated that the availability of such
assistance from the Buder Center influenced their decision to come to the Brown School, and almost 80% of respondents reported that a Buder scholarship was an important source of financial support. Much smaller percentages reported receiving scholarships from their tribes/nations, other sources, and the American Indian Graduate Center. These results suggest that the Buder scholarship is a key source of financial support for American Indian/Alaska Native students at the Brown School. The Buder scholarship covers full tuition and provides a stipend, yet 72% of respondents identified student loans as a source of financial support. It is common for American Indian/Alaska Native students to provide emotional and financial support to family members. Redistribution in general, and this support in particular, is important in Native value systems. Such priorities may prompt American Indian/Alaska Native students to seek extra funding that can be used to support family members (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004). These results suggest the need for close review of the financial aid packages offered to American Indian/Alaska Native students. Such reviews should broadly consider the important role of financial aid in American Indian/Alaska Native persistence.

Recipients of a Buder scholarship appeared to influence perceptions of services provided by the Buder Center. The proportion of respondents who said they agreed or strongly agreed that the center’s educational services (orientation and advocacy) were effective was much larger among Buder scholarship recipients than among non-recipients. And we found similar differences in reported perceptions concerning the Center’s career-related services, which a higher percentage of recipients endorsed as helpful. These results suggest that the Brown School’s American Indian/Alaska Native students have a better educational experience and derive greater benefits from that experience if they have access to all of the resources offered by the Buder Center. However, this finding raises important questions regarding the experience of American Indian/Alaska Native Brown School students who are not Buder scholarship recipients.

Satisfaction with Buder center services and with the Brown School

Fairly high proportions of respondents reported satisfaction with the Buder Center’s student support and career development programming. Areas of strength appeared to be the facilitation of student involvement with other American Indian/Alaska Native counterparts, provision of educational experiences relevant to a social work career, and encouragement of professional development. Responses appeared to indicate that student support could be improved through adjustments to orientation and advocacy, as well as to the array of available resources. The findings also suggest two ways to improve the center’s career development services: increasing the relevance of Buder Center courses to career goals and providing greater assistance with post-graduation job placement.

Satisfaction with Buder Center services differed sharply by Buder scholarship receipt and somewhat by the extent of the respondent’s connectedness to the American Indian/Alaska Native community. The percentage of respondents who endorsed the effectiveness of all Buder Center services was much larger among Buder scholarship recipients than among non-recipients. Another intriguing finding emerges from responses to the statement that the Buder Center supported “all of my needs.” The percentage of respondents endorsing this statement was larger among individuals with strong connections to the American Indian/Alaska Native community than among those without such connections. It could be that
students without strong connections need much more support from the center in order to complete such tasks as locating a practicum in Indian Country. Similarly, a much larger proportion of alumni with strong connections reported that the Buder Center community development and individual practice courses were applicable to their career. Differences in perceptions of course relevance may be explained by differences in awareness of how to integrate and apply course knowledge to Native communities, with stronger awareness among respondents who have stronger connections. Students who lack strong connections to Indian Country may find it more difficult to relate classroom knowledge to work with particular American Indian/Alaska Native communities. The implications for American Indian and Alaska Native course offerings help to increase academic knowledge related to American Indian/Alaska Native populations. The Buder Center, in collaboration with the Brown School, has offered the following courses since its inception: “American Indian Social Welfare Policies and Administrative Practices,” “Community Development with American Indian & Other Indigenous Communities,” “American Indian Societies, Cultures, & Values,” and “Social Work and American Indians.” The newly established “Leadership Development and Evaluation in Indian Country” supports Buder students in reflecting on the skills they learn through planning the annual Washington University in St. Louis Pow Wow. In addition, all students who complete the Buder curriculum graduate with a concentration in American Indian/Alaska Native Studies.

**Shifts in perceptions of American Indian/Alaska native identity and related barriers after brown school attendance**

Participation in Buder Center and Brown School programs appeared to change alumni’s perceptions of factors related to American Indian/Alaska Native identity. Participation appeared to increase depth of general understanding of American Indian culture but not understanding of respondents’ own tribe/nation. This result is not surprising, as Buder Center curricula and programming focus on American Indian experience but do not emphasize the history or culture of any particular tribe/nation. Attending the Brown School (and participating in Buder Center activities) was associated with a substantial increase in the percentage of respondents reporting that they had established relationships with American Indian/Alaska Native peoples, although there was very little change in the percentage reporting connections to an American Indian/Alaska Native community. Further research is required to explain these apparently contradictory responses. In addition, attendance at the Brown School appeared to slightly influence respondents’ perceptions of what it means to live a traditional lifestyle. The proportion reporting that they “neither agree nor disagree” increased after Brown School attendance. It could be that exposure to American Indian/Alaska Native students from different tribes/nations and to experiences at the Brown School complicate the perceptions of what it means to live a traditional lifestyle.

Participation in Buder Center and Brown School programs also appeared to shift alumni’s perception of identity’s ties to academic needs and barriers. The proportion of respondents endorsing the belief that they have unique academic and personal needs as American Indian/Alaska Native students increased following Brown School attendance. This is perhaps a result of being in a community of American Indian/Alaska Native students. Brown School attendance was associated with a decrease in the percentage of respondents who indicated that issues in their past were barriers to success. This suggests that completing
a degree at the Brown School increased respondents’ self-efficacy and confidence in the ability to achieve goals despite difficult past experiences. This increase in self-efficacy, if substantiated, is striking given the difficult barriers reported by respondents in the qualitative portion of the study. Those barriers include the influence of historical trauma, family conflict, and concerns about stereotypes.

**Recruitment of American Indian/Alaska native students**

The availability of financial assistance, internal motivation, and the perception that the educational institution was supportive of American Indian/Alaska Native in meeting their needs appeared to play important roles in respondents’ decisions to pursue graduate school. When asked about factors that influenced the decision to attend the Brown School, a majority of respondents indicated that the availability of financial assistance from the Buder Center was a primary factor. Other important factors included the reputations of the Buder Center and the Brown School, the Buder Center’s mission and goals, and the encouragement from respondents’ support system.

An overwhelming majority of participants had heard of the Buder Center before attending the Brown School, suggesting that the Center is a well-known entity in Indian Country and may play a role in attracting American Indian/Alaska Native students to Brown. Career fairs, conferences, pow wows, undergraduate institutions, and contact with Washington University faculty members were the most common sources of information about the Buder Center. These findings suggest that recruitment of American Indian/Alaska Native students to the Brown School may be most effectively accomplished through the collaboration of the Buder Center, the Brown School admissions office, and Brown School faculty.

**Recommendations for recruiting and graduating American Indian and Alaska native graduate students**

It is critical to be strategic in recruiting and graduating AI/AN graduate students. Recommendations to build capacity in Indian Country, particularly for institutions that serve American Indian and Alaska Native students, are listed below:

1. The following are recommendations that address the recruitment of Native graduate students:
   - Organize campus events with those who recruit students to discuss barriers Native students face when applying and strengths Native students bring;
   - Develop trusting relationships with tribal communities and Native organizations at the state, regional, and national levels;
   - Strengthen relationships with tribal colleges;
   - Increase and expand available scholarships and fellowships for Native students to apply for.
2. The follow are recommendations that address the graduation of Native graduate students:
   - Organize campus and community engagement initiatives to promote education and awareness of Native culture;
   - Strengthen relationships with Native professional organizations and affiliations;
(c) Encourage students to utilize existing student support services;
(d) Develop plans of action to ensure students succeed and become positive ambassadors after they depart;
(e) Increase awareness among faculty and staff regarding Native students as a unique cultural group via workshops and trainings and provide opportunities for them as well as the practicum field site team to visit tribal communities;
(f) Provide professional development opportunities for student-to-faculty and student-to-staff interactions by encouraging Native students to present their views in the classroom;
(g) Increase community connections including the local Native community groups among Native American students.

(3) The following are recommendations that address both recruitment and graduation of Native graduate students:
(a) Aggressively seek external funding to help financially support students during their degree programs;
(b) Create an inclusive and welcoming environment which reflects a Native worldview;
(c) Assist the institution in efforts to recruit and retain Native tenure track faculty;
(d) Encourage increased levels of culturally responsive research on Native topics;
(e) Provide culturally responsive academic curriculum.

Conclusion

This report presents findings from a study conducted on the experience and perceptions of American Indian/Alaska Native alumni who completed MSW degrees at Washington University’s Brown School between 1990 and 2012. This is the first study of its kind conducted by the Budler Center. Findings suggest that American Indian/Alaska Native students have unique academic needs and may face diverse barriers that make it difficult to attend and complete graduate school. Financial assistance, provided in the form of scholarships and stipends, appears to be an important factor in recruiting American Indian/Alaska Native students to the Brown School’s social work program and in retaining them through graduation. The opportunity to be part of a community of Native students, combined with the academic and career support provided by the Budler Center, also appears to have been helpful in retaining American Indian/Alaska Native students and enabling them to finish their degrees.

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