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American Indian Social Work Students: Factors that Influence Success in Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Many barriers exist for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students pursuing advanced degrees. The Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis has a higher than average graduation rate for AI/AN students. The purpose of this article is to understand the lived experiences of AI/AN students at the Brown School and how the experiences influence graduation rates.

Methods: This study collected data from Brown School alumni who were associated with the Buder Center between 1991 and 2013; nine interviews were analyzed.

Results: Six themes were identified: 1) AI/AN student cohort, 2) social work skill development, 3) service to AI/AN communities and people, 4) success as balance, 5) cultural identity, and 6) resiliency.

Discussion: Institutional supports were described by participants as factors that affected their success in the program; these combined with student characteristics, beliefs and attitudes influenced the high rate of AI/AN student graduates at the Brown School.

KEYWORDS
Native American; American Indian; social work; higher education; graduate school; culture; student support

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people make up 1.7% of the total population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau [Census], 2012). According to this report (Census, 2012), 2.9 million people identify as AI/AN alone, while 2.3 million identify as AI/AN in combination with at least one other race. Approximately 60% of AI/AN people live in metropolitan areas, while the remainder of the population lives on reservations and in other rural areas (U.S Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2018). This racial and geographic diversity is one factor that leads to differences in cultural traditions, as well as social, economic, behavioral and environmental disparities. Although these cultural differences are often viewed by mainstream society and professionals as barriers to implementing evidence-based programs and services, they actually create a foundation for tribal communities facilitating the creation of services and programs.

Social work in Indian country

Historically and now, AI/AN people across the country experience a variety of injustices that make the need for social work in this population essential. However, there have been instances in the past in which AI/AN people and tribal governments have justly viewed the efforts of social workers as harmful. For example, the removal of AI/AN children from
their homes with the goal of assimilation, the forced sterilization of women and the ongoing federal–tribal relationship that leaves tribal communities with insufficient resources to ensure adequate behavioral health care for their people (Weaver, 2013).

Despite these historical injustices, data and trends also show that there is a need for social workers in AI/AN communities. AI/AN people have the potential to benefit from the presence of culturally respectful social workers in their communities to combat rates of poverty, violence and substance use. As evidenced by the DHSS (2018), 26% of AI/AN people live at the poverty level, compared to just 11% of non-Hispanic Whites. Violence is also experienced at much higher rates than other groups, with more than four out of five AI/AN women and men having experienced violence in their lifetime (Rosay, 2016). Substance use rates are also at a higher level with 9.7% of this population having had an alcohol use disorder compared to the national average of 5.9%; and 4.1% compared to the national average of 2.9% for illicit drug use (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2017).

Culturally respectful social workers may also provide much needed mental health services, foster care and environmental support for AI/AN communities. AI/AN people experience mental health issues at higher rates than average and at younger ages. Between the ages of 10–34, suicide is the second leading cause of death for this group; for girls between 10–14 suicide is the leading cause of death and 4 times the rate of white 10–14 year old girls (DHHS, 2017). According to SAMHSA (2017), 6.3% of AI/AN adults experienced a serious mental illness, compared to just 4% of all adults in the United States. Despite the fact that the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 was enacted to protect AI/AN children and support tribal sovereignty, these children are overrepresented in foster care. One study found that AI/AN children are two times more likely than their White counterparts to be investigated, at which point they are then two times more likely to have these allegations confirmed and finally four times more likely to be removed from their homes and placed in foster care (National Indian Child Welfare Association [NICWA], 2017). Food insecurity is experienced at twice the rate of white Americans and experienced more by urban Indians compared to rural (Jernigan, Huyser, Valdes, & Simonds, 2017). Environmental injustices that tribes and communities experience include issues related to land, water and resource rights, to name a few. These environmental issues, along with additional ones such as mining, pipelines and others, often stem from broken treaties with specific tribes, unethical business practices or misinformation. These can exacerbate the disparities described above, as well as create additional public health concerns within these communities.

Social workers are professionals that have the capacity to reduce these disparities and do so in a way that honors traditions, values culture and recognizes and respects tribal differences. To ensure individual and community needs are met in Indian Country it is imperative to train students who are from these communities, especially AI/AN students, in the field of social work.

**American Indian/Alaska Native social work education barriers**

Many barriers exist for AI/AN students who wish to pursue a degree in social work. In general, AI/AN students that pursue any type of higher education face a variety challenges, including “under-preparation, adjustment difficulties to the academic community,
problems with family and self, cultural differences, social isolation, and monetary complications,” (Keith, Stastny, Agnew, & Brunt, 2017, para. 2). Those enrolled in predominantly white institutions face struggles related to cultural identity as well (Guillory, 2012). Some of these challenges may arise because many AI/AN students are first generation college students, which makes navigating higher education systems more difficult to understand. Seven barriers that exist for first generation college students within social work programs are identified:

“(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,” (Cross, Day, Gogliotti, & Pung, 2013, p. 31).

Despite these barriers, AI/AN students at the Brown School succeed. This success can be seen best within institutions that offer support and carry out best practices for these students.

**American Indian Alaska Native social work education best practices**

When it comes to best practices in retention and graduation of AI/AN students, there are several factors to consider, notably institutional factors. **Institutional support** plays a part in all student’s success; however, it is a critical factor in AI/AN student graduation. Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) offer students a unique opportunity to learn in an environment that combines cultural relevance with studies that support community vision (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2001). The major goal of a TCU is nation building, combining cultural education with Western thought to graduate students who are committed to Indigenous nations (Garland, 2013, Chapter 6). Students enrolled at a tribal college or university are eight times less likely to drop out (White House, 2009). Students who demonstrate persistence may be more likely to graduate from any institution. In his review of the literature, Lopez (2017) identifies four areas that supported AI/AN student persistence: family support, institutional support, tribal community support and academic performance. Institutions that support students have higher graduation rates; this support can take the form of academic programming, cultural identity supports, family and community support and larger institutional-wide support of culture as its mission.

The Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis has institutional support in place for AI/AN students; it is one of the only programs in the country that has an American Indian/Alaska Native studies concentration within their Master of Social Work (MSW) program, supported by an American Indian Studies Center. The Brown School was established in 1925 and is a top ranked school of social work. This concentration was created to ensure students who wish to work in Indian Country receive an education that can be translated to positive social change in AI/AN communities. Within the Brown School, the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies (Buder Center), established in 1990, has a mission to prepare future American Indian leaders to practice in tribal and urban settings, making significant contributions to the health, wellness and the sustained future of Indian Country. The Center provides career, social and cultural support for AI/AN students, engages AI/AN communities locally and nationally, conducts research and collaborates with faculty at Washington University and St. Louis organizations. The support provided within the
Brown School to Buder students has been informally observed through higher than average graduation rates.

Nationally, in 2016, less than 1 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students were enrolled in full-time MSW programs (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2017). At the Brown School, that number was 3.7%, more than 4 times the national average. Graduation rate is defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) as the percentage of students who completed the program in 150% of the prescribed time. Of all full-time students who begin graduate programs, the national completion rate is approximately 61% (Baum & Steele, 2017). Since 1990, when the Buder Center was established, the Brown School has graduated 177 AI/AN students. This translates to a graduation rate of 93.6% of self-reported AI/AN students who received their masters degree at the Brown School.

Research indicates that significant barriers exist for minority and AI/AN students obtaining advanced degrees. Research has also shown best practices exist to retain these students and ensure they graduate. The purpose of this research study was to understand the lived experiences of MSW Brown School AI/AN students and how those experiences influenced their higher than average graduation rate at the Brown School.

**Methods**

The qualitative data utilized in this study comes from a larger study conducted by the Buder Center at the Brown School in 2013. The original study was approved by the Washington University in St. Louis Institutional Review Board. Data collected from the study was quantitative data in the form of surveys and qualitative data in the form of phone interviews.

**Participants**

The original study collected survey data from Brown School/Buder Center alumni who either attended or graduated between 1991 and 2013. All alumni (N = 91) whose contact information was known were invited to take part in an online survey. After completion of this survey, participants indicated interest in being part of a follow-up interview.

Previous researchers used purposive sampling for the qualitative interviews, developing criteria to select participants from those who indicated interest in the follow-up interview. A diverse sample was selected and one or more alumni were invited for an interview based on geographical region, status of scholarship type (Buder Scholarship recipient or Non-Buder Scholarship recipient) and age (younger than 30 or 30 and older at the time they began the graduate program). Geographical regions, Region I – Northeast, Region II – Midwest, Region III – South and Region IV – West, were based on the U.S Census Bureau (2010). Additionally, for this study, participants needed to self-report as American Indian/Alaska Native.

Eleven phone interviews were conducted with participant representation from each of the above criteria. One interview was excluded from qualitative analysis because the participant did not meet the inclusion criteria and a second interview was excluded from the qualitative analysis because the audio file was damaged.
Measures

Researchers developed a semi-structured guide and audio recorded the interviews with permission from each participant. Participant interviews were conducted via telephone call and lasted between fifteen and sixty minutes. The following interview questions were asked to elicit a broad range of responses from participants.

1. What experiences did you have with a difficult situation while in graduate school? How did you handle it? Was it effective? What would you do differently?
2. Define your idea of success. What was your purpose for establishing goals? How were you able to meet these goals whether they were personal, cultural, or academic?
3. Describe your journey of American Indian/Alaska Native cultural development. Do you believe your time at the Brown School contributed to this journey? If so, in which ways? Were there any skills you acquired at the Brown School that are transferrable to your life today?
4. Describe an instance that may have affected you or someone close to you in the past that may have created some barriers to your success during graduate school.

Analysis

Qualitative interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. The codebook was developed by researchers with experience in qualitative and quantitative data analysis based on the interview questions. Three coders, the same researchers with qualitative data analysis, worked separately. Each of the nine transcripts were coded by two of the three researchers using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Discrepancies amongst applied codes were resolved through merging the two coded transcripts of each interview, then reconciling any coding difference in the transcripts through discussion and adjusting the coded text. This process led to one transcript per interview that was analyzed to identify themes. Researchers used an inductive grounded evaluation, which is “a set of systematic inductive methods for conducting qualitative research aimed toward theory development,” (Charmaz, 2004, p. 441). After coding was complete, team members extracted coded data and identified emerging themes.

Results

The analysis revealed six major themes that participants discussed during their interviews. The Buder Center was mentioned within each theme but was not categorized as its own theme because of its presence throughout.

American Indian/Alaska Native student cohort

Creating space for a group of AI/AN students to come together and learn facilitated the transfer of tribal knowledge, traditions, ceremonies and history. Participants described not feeling socially isolated because there were other AI/AN students within the program.
Many indicated that involvement in the Buder Center led to feelings of connectedness to Native culture and to AI/AN peoples.

Participant 7 shared that, “I had a ready-made community when I got here.” Many students described the cohort as a family and community for while in the program. Participant 2 stated, “I think because it was almost like, you were family, you got so close to them, so close to my, you know, my Buder peers that, um, it was like family.”

The presence of an AI/AN student cohort also allowed students to experience tribal diversity, expand their knowledge regarding tribal communities and learn from one another. As the following quotes show, students were able to engage in thoughtful dialogue exchanges to facilitate learning.

“I think it really opened me to being more aware and understanding of other Native cultures not only my own, but others. And different personalities and seeing different peoples take and perspective of them, really, um, brought in my perspective but, um, also made me more aware and cognizant that everyone’s tribe isn’t like mine, and everybody, every tribe has their own, we have commonalities but we’re different and, um, it’s a good thing and, um, as long as there is respect there will always be like collaboration to be able to work, to be, um, a stronger Native community and Indian Country,” (Participant 2).

While the AI/AN student cohort was described as family and a community, some participants shared that like most families, conflict did occasionally occur. “The American Indian community at Brown was very small, so you sort of automatically become really close knit, but it’s good and bad and has its pros and cons and sometimes it got complicated,” (Participant 5). Despite this observation, the student cohort was viewed positively by participants because it facilitated learning about other tribes, feeling connected to their own, feeling supported and avoiding social isolation.

Social work skill development

Participants felt that the social work skills learned in the Brown School and within the AI/AN classes directly benefitted their professional careers in Indian Country. Many indicated that the professional skills (communication, leadership and direct practice) gained and other experiences assisted them in the development of effective programs to combat disparities in a culturally respectful manner, one that honors traditions and respects tribal differences.

Most frequently mentioned was the development of communication skills. Participants shared examples of giving presentations within the program, which allowed them to develop public speaking skills and facilitate difficult conversations. Participant 2 described the content as, “presenting and giving … informing people of Native culture, Native way of life.” Similarly, Participant 4 spoke about their experience as:

“a really good experience, preparing that presentation and being ready for those kind of, you know, silly questions you might get from people, but not, reacting … but you want to say, say something different that gets the message across.”

Participants described their development of professional skills related to speaking with people different than themselves, which allowed them to convey information and messages in an engaging non-confrontational manner. Participant 4 reflected on what they took away from giving presentations:
“I think I learned a good balance of making sure [my perspectives] were reflected, but at the same time presenting new ideas, in a way that, people are gonna take it in and feel like, “oh, ok I learned something in a good, positive way,” and instead of like, “whoa, I’m like blown away and I just don’t know if want to listen to that anymore.”

Participants also shared that they gained direct practice social work skills in the program, which they use in their work today. “I think the Brown School just helped with the general social work skills and how that relates to my clients and their situations,” (Participant 3). Additionally, having a better understanding of self in relation to the client, Participant 7 remarks, “My first semester certainly ignited in me that it was … to be a successful social worker, I first had to be an authentic person.”

Participant 7 reflected:

“The skills that I developed through the AI [American Indian] classes as well as the MSW classes again was to learn to appreciate the differences, learn to meet folks where they are and help them.”

Some participants spoke about other skills they gained while in graduate school, such as using computer software for GIS and budgeting, for example. Participant 6 shared:

“I still got the book on organizations … I took a lot of administration courses … how to budget, how to budget using software. At that time, software was just coming in and we could use it for numbers, you know, and research. The research software that the school had.”

Another skill that one participant spoke about was developing leadership skills and confidence during their time in the program. “I felt like through the Buder Center they made you feel like you could develop those skills and you could be a more confident student and leader,” (Participant 4). The skills gained by participants while in graduate school were utilized before and after graduation and were described as helpful for AI/AN students in their careers.

**Service to American Indian/Alaska Native communities and people**

The motivation to pursue a graduate degree for interviewees was a desire to work for AI/AN people and tribal communities. Participant motivation was aligned with the goals of the Buder Center and the values of social work. The following quote describes one participant’s motivation for their degree. “Commitment to American Indian issues and using education to serve my people,” (Participant 5). For this participant, it did not matter if the community served was their own tribal community or a different one; the critical factor was service to AI/AN communities and people in some way. Life experiences, such as previous work experiences and personal trauma, were also motivations that participants mentioned in interviews.

**Success as balance**

For the majority of participants, success was not defined as achieving a specific status or earning a certain amount of money in their career. Success was described as balancing the demands of academics, work and family, as well as maintaining health in multiple areas of life, during and after graduate school. As the following quotes illustrate, success was not
specific to academics but instead success was described holistically. “I think for me feeling successful was like I had a balance … I still had my identity, but at the same time I did well in my classes and felt good about doing that …,” (Participant 4); “Success for me means being well in all areas of your life – in your personal health, your mental health, your spiritual health, and in relation to your family,” (Participant 8).

Although success focused on balance, some participants shared that finding the balance between obligations was difficult during the program. For example,

“There were times where it would you would have to pick work, homework over doing a Buder event or a Buder thing and, um, that was tough to do, it was tough to do cause you wanted to, you know satisfy the Buder Center and on the other end it was like well something else is going to suffer …,” (Participant 2).

When a participant described multiple obligations, the goal was always to stay in balance. Participants felt that having a good understanding of what needed to be done to become and stay balanced helped to make a more confident decision.

**Cultural identity**

Students from a variety of tribes create the foundation for increased cultural understanding and diversity of thought. Every participant believed that cultural identity played an important role in their experiences at the Brown School. Families, and communities have experienced cultural loss at one point and some participants spoke about coming into the program with little understanding of their cultural identity, but having left with more knowledge about tribal traditions and an increased understanding of their own cultural identity. Others indicated arriving with a strong sense of cultural identity and gaining an increased understanding of different tribes and feeling personally connected to other AI/AN people in general. Participants described opportunities to connect with a diverse group of AI/AN people because they developed relationships with their student cohort, the AI/AN faculty and the local AI/AN community through the preparation and planning of the Washington University in St. Louis Pow Wow.

One participant described the Brown School as a place to experience a different aspect of AI/AN culture for the first time. “I grew up in a Native community, but again we did not grow up in the community where there were tribal ceremonies and things like that. So my first Pow Wow was when I came here,” (Participant 7). For others, the program was a place where they were able to increase their own knowledge about traditional ways and become more secure in their cultural identity. Participant 7 further describes graduate school as a place to expand their awareness about tribal traditions, “So coming to the Brown School made me more aware of the traditional way and how each tribe is different and distinct and the needs of each tribe, each region.” Additionally:

“Grad school became the blessing that I needed it to be ’cause it helped me to peel away another layer of the onion of self-identity of learning who I was as a Native person and how my identity was emerging and how it would all not only affect me, but everybody around me,” (Participant 7).

Participant 8 states that, “I think it definitely did contribute to my American Indian identity through the peer relationships that I developed with other students, the other American Indian students.”
Identity was further developed and discussed not only because of personal relationships but because of academic courses related historical events and policies in Indian Country:

“I felt like I had bits and pieces in my head, but it all wasn’t like laid out together and I think grad school really helped me lay the timeline of Indian history and sequence and then it kind of made more sense to be able to see oh ok this is why things are this way because of boarding school or a lot of, there’s a large Native population because of the relocation and Native policy,” (Participant 2).

Cultural identity was a common theme in participant interviews. Identity development was associated with relationships, the Buder Center and the Brown School, all three enhancing student personal cultural identity.

**Resiliency**

All participants described overcoming challenges and barriers during graduate school. Multiple participants shared that while at the Brown School they lost an immediate family member, but felt that continuing the program was a way to honor this individual. Participants also mentioned financial difficulties. The following participant shared how they overcame financial obstacles and that it helped their family, not just themselves: “I was able to get scholarships throughout my, all my degrees that I have. And so, to help not burden the family with, you know, my pursuit of education,” (Participant 5).

Some participants spoke about being a first generation college student in a masters program. One participant specifically discussed how their family supported education, but that they did not understand what they were doing.

“They didn’t understand it but they appreciated it and they encouraged it … They didn’t understand it. They still don’t today. They don’t know what I do. So I’m very fortunate in that way. But, but, in the beginning it created a little barrier because like when I started college, like undergrad, I didn’t even know a master’s degree existed,” (Participant 5).

When disclosing challenges or barriers, participants also discussed how they overcame them. Resiliency is a theme because despite the many challenges students faced while in graduate school, they overcame or resolved it. AI/AN students in this program relied on their families, as well as their AI/AN student cohort, their social work skills and their practice of balance to persist through obstacles they encountered.

**Discussion**

The results of this study identified six main themes that AI/AN alumni of the social work program at the Brown School described or experienced when asked about their time during graduate school, which can be seen in Figure 1. These themes include: 1) American Indian/Alaska Native student cohort, 2) social work skill development, 3) service to American Indian/Alaska Native communities and people, 4) success as balance, 5) cultural identity, and 6) resiliency. Themes one and two highlight important institutional components that are essential to AI/AN student graduation rates within this specific social work program. Additionally, these institutional components affect graduation rates by indirectly facilitating current, but changing, student characteristics, beliefs and attitudes (themes three through six). For example, the presence of an AI/AN cohort (institutional) allows
AI/AN students to explore and honor their own cultural identity (student characteristics, beliefs and attitudes), which leads to higher graduation rates.

The social work skills learned during the program are valuable to AI/AN students during their time within the program, as well as when they graduate. When faced with a barrier, students often identified these skills as ways to overcome it. Barriers faced by students included family responsibilities, tribal obligations and occasionally institutional situations, all of which were described as supports as well. During their time at the Brown School, many participants indicated the difficulty of balancing academic workload, with Buder Center commitments, such as annual Pow Wow planning, community presentations and classes. This study suggests that because AI/AN students are held accountable for participation in AI/AN courses, events and ceremonies, they learned skills to organize their time efficiently and effectively. These skills were later valued in professional careers post-graduation. Overall, students felt supported in ways that allowed them to remain connected to their families through cultural practices and traditions, while also remaining in good standing academically.

The situation of the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies within the Brown School is critical for AI/AN student completion of the social work program, providing a means to address institutional barriers and provide support to AI/AN students. The Buder Center financially, culturally and academically supports American Indian and Alaska Native social work students in the program. The Center develops and supports the AI/AN cohort at the school, as well as provides support through curriculum, programming and other advisement, acting as a built-in community within a larger institution (institutional components). Additionally, the diversity seen within the Buder students promotes a transfer of tribal knowledge felt to facilitate personal cultural identity and strengthen understanding. These aspects of the Center successfully address common educational dilemmas for AI/AN students, including financial, family, cultural, isolation, limited institutional knowledge, commitment, support and value of AI/AN culture and others (Cross et al., 2013; Guillory, 2012; Keith et al., 2017).

Previous research shows that American Indian/Alaska students face a variety of barriers when pursuing degrees, of which may include problems with family and self, monetary
complications, and conflicts between students’ academic obligations and responsibilities to their families and tribal communities (Keith et al., 2017, para 2; Cross et al., 2013, p. 31). Despite these barriers, AI/AN students at the Brown school graduate. Faced with many of these same barriers other American Indian/Alaska Native students face in different degree programs, AI/AN participants in this study emphasize the importance of an AI/AN student cohort, skill development, individual resiliency, cultural identity, balance and AI/AN communities as key factors in their completion of the program.

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