

Niila Myaamia (I Am Miami): Identity and Retention of Miami Tribe College Students

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Abstract

Some Native American college students, like many college students, engage in a complex process of identity formation that involves discovering their culture. This ongoing identity formation process impacts various aspects of their lives including academic achievement and sense of belonging. This study examined the process of one cohort of Native American college students, Myaamia Tribe (Miami Nation), as they matriculated through a predominantly White institution that shares their tribal name. Results suggest that identity is influenced through a series of courses designed to provide deeper learning about tribal culture and language. The relational bonds to other tribal students and the cultural knowledge that emerged from the series of culture courses not only influenced identity development but also contributed to academic retention and success.

Keywords

identity, Myaamia, Native Americans, college student retention

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Status of Native American Students in Higher Education

The current college student population comprises 39% ethnic minority students (students historically underrepresented in colleges and universities), with approximately 61% of the 21 million 2- and 4-year degree college enrollees categorized as White. Further, the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) now counts the nation's population at just more than 300 million and predicts that by 2042, ethnic minorities will become the majority. There are 5.2 million (1.7%) Native Americans with projections suggesting that number will grow to 8.6 million by 2050 (U.S. Census, 2012a). While reports about Native American high school student graduation rates or high school completion rates vary (ranging from 69% to approximately 80%), Native American students enroll in college at dramatically lower rates. Further, approximately 70% to 90% of Native American college students discontinue their college education, resulting in 13% of Native Americans, 25 and older, reporting a bachelors' degree compared with about 31% of the general U.S. population (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, 2012). Of the 2005 cohort of 18-year-old Native American/Alaskan Native undergraduates attending 4-year institutions, the 4-year graduation rate was 22.5% (17.9% for public institutions; U.S. Census Bureau News, U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012).

While we recognize and respect the vast diversity of cultural and lived experience that exists within the Native American population and use caution in arriving at simplistic generalizations, there are some consistent educational outcomes among this group worth noting. Historically and collectively, retention, persistence, and graduation rates have not been optimal for Native American collegiate scholars. According to Larimore and McClelland (2005), tribal colleges report some success in retaining Native American students; however, predominantly White institutions (PWI) fail to replicate these results. Numerous scholars suggest that college academic success is tied to student adjustment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), but others point to a variety of additional influential factors, such as financial support, prior academic preparation, identity formation, academic and interpersonal support (Guillory, 2009). Sparse research on identity development and academic success of Native American students exists, and there is a tendency to treat these students as a monolithic group assuming that their educational aspirations, adjustment, and identity development are the same.

The current project adopts a longitudinal and case-specific approach to address this topic. For this study, we consider the question: How does a sample of Native American students from the Miami Nation attending a mid-size, predominantly White, liberal arts institution grapple with identity development and collegiate adjustment given their participation in a series of culture and

language courses? Second, how does this adjustment and identity impact academic success as measured by retention and graduation rates? We examined identity development and collegiate adjustment by administering a modified version of the Native American Identity Scale (NIS; Gonzalez & Bennett, 2011), interviewing a sample of the students and accessing institutional retention and graduation data for this sample.

College Adjustment and Retention

Adolescents struggle with a sense of self, especially during the college years, and students who identify as an ethnic or cultural minority in particular spend this time examining their cultural selves (Phinney, 1993). For the students attending PWIs, the search for self may be especially challenging depending upon the nature of their prior development and context of the college setting. Umbhau (2010) emphasizes that culture, language, and individual voice are all important to college success for Native American students. In Watson's study (2009) of 2-year Native American college students (Choctaw), findings suggest that ethnic identity impacts Native American college students' adjustment. Guillory's (2009) study of 4-year Native American college students also highlights ethnic identity as well as the importance of family, tribal connections, and social support.

Ethnic minority college students not only face added adjustment challenges during college, but these challenges potentially hinder their academic success. While much of the general research in the area of academic success and retention is grounded in theories informed by Tinto's model (1993, 2004), this article merges this framework with other empirical work (Dixon & Chung, 2008; Nes, Evans, & Segerstrom, 2009) and culturally sensitive frameworks (Boyer, 2009; Garrod & Lattimore, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2004; Orsuwan & Cole, 2007) that focus on Native American and Pacific Islander students in settings like Dartmouth, Hawaiian institutions, and tribal universities. These cultural frameworks emphasize the importance of familial factors, tribal connections, and commitment to education in retention of Native American students. Historically, Native American students were urged, as well as most other ethnic minority groups, to assimilate and embrace the majority world-view in order to be successful. Today, adhering to one's indigenous culture is believed to be important for academic success. Along with other identity development theorists, Huffman (1991, 2001, 2008) and Guillory and Wolverton (2008) have advanced the use of a culturally grounded perspective in the examination of collegiate retention. From this point of view, education is not an end in itself but rather the knowledge of self is the grounding for the education one receives and the meaning one makes of it. Gonzalez and Bennett (2011) and Trimble (2010), among others, highlight the centrality of ethnic identity to psychological health, educational success, and social interaction throughout the college adjustment experience.

Leveraging Tinto's retention model along with resiliency theory and Gonzalez's adaptation of Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavons' (1998) Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) scale, one can critically examine the nature of the educational experience for Native American students attending PWIs (Garrod & Lattimore, 1997; Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002). In addition, attending a PWI versus a tribal college creates differences in various aspects of the academic and social experience both internally (individually based) and externally (group-based). Individual student factors like prior academic preparation, financial support, goal aspiration, and access to a family system, along with institutionally grounded factors like classroom context, intercultural challenges experienced by the student, all weigh heavily on the probability of success for Native American students. Student academic integration is also influenced by the climate of the institution, its faculty, and curricular experience (Cibik & Chambers, 1991).

Dimensions of adjustment are important to study not just because of the impact on academic success but also due to the extended impact on general well-being in life. Numerous psychological studies have consistently highlighted the importance of adjustment for youth and adults across ethnic groups. Kenyon and Carter (2011), for example, examined the relationships among ethnic identity, sense of community, psychosomatic symptoms, positive affect, and feelings of depression among students from a tribal high school. They reported that 85.3% of study participants self-identified as American Indian/Native American, and those individuals tended to have a positive "sense of community." Specifically, adolescents identified as the "achievers" scored significantly higher than the other comparative groups on "sense of community" and "positive affect" demonstrating the positive impact of culture on well-being. A similar finding was reported for Native American youth throughout California High Schools (Schweigman, Soto, Wright, & Unger, 2011).

Cultural and Ethnic Identity Development

Culture also plays a significant role in the college adjustment and retention experience. Decades of study lend support to the notion that the level of cultural affiliation impacts adjustment and ultimate educational success (Umbhau, 2010; Wright, 1990, 1991). Watson, among others, reports findings to suggest that (a) dissonant ethnic identity (different cultural and racial experience) is negatively related to adjustment, (b) high levels of racial or ethnic immersion-emersion is connected with lower levels of adjustment, (c) a positive relationship exists between identity internalization (successful identity resolution) and successful adjustment, and (d) conformity does not relate to any level of adjustment at all. Being unaware or diminishing one's identity sets the stage for increased anxiety when ethnicity becomes central to one's experience.

Further, Huffman (2008) reports that the degree to which Native Americans can gain a sense of self, direction, and cultural support dictates the degree to which they can meet collegiate demands and thrive. As noted earlier, theoretical work has typically viewed ethnic and cultural identity as an important aspect of self-concept. It is defined as a person's self-perception and self-identification with a group of people with whom there is a shared cultural heritage (Phinney & Chavira, 1995). The emergence of ethnic identity hinges upon developing an understanding and acceptance of one's own ethnic group. Research supports the connection between ethnic identity and social adaptation, emotional adjustment and healing, and academic achievement (Gone, 2009; Yasui, Dorham, & Dishion, 2004). For many Native Americans, there exists a knowledge void, as it relates to their language and culture. According to Krauss (1992, 2000), the majority of North American Native American languages (which comprise 3% of languages spoken world-wide) is endangered, and of the 175 indigenous languages spoken in the United States, only 20 were being taught to the younger generation. Despite this stark picture, current efforts are underway to revitalize and reclaim language and cultural knowledge (Hinton, 2013; White, 2008). The effort of the Myaamia Tribe is one such example, and thus serves as the foundation for this project. Given this research context, how are the variables in question (identity, culture, retention) defined in this study?

Identity defined. For this study, we reject the notion of racial identity, as it is often framed in social science literature. Race is sometimes viewed as a variable that typically assumes common physical attributes and uniform biological commonality. Rather than accept this idea of race, we advance the concepts of culture and ethnicity as the theoretical underpinnings guiding this study.

Culture defined. Culture is typically defined as a set of traditions and customs, beliefs, history, language, and experiences inherent within and shared by a group and transmitted to subsequent generations. Ogbu (1995) frames it this way; it is who we are (identity, codes of conduct), what we do (what we build and produce), and how we interact (social patterns). Phinney's definition of ethnic identity is a "dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's sense of self as a member of an ethnic group" (2003, p. 63). Native scholars often see culture as shared across contiguous intergenerational groups. In our view, it also possesses an adaptive dimension. Our research goal, in part, was to understand how this sample of college students (Miami Nation) crafted their emerging identity from their learning experience.

Retention defined. Retention is considered maintaining enrolled status for consecutive semesters of matriculation. While the ultimate goal of retention is graduation, the measure of successful college graduation per federal guidelines

is to use a 6-year benchmark. Universities, however, track graduation at 4-year, 5-year, and 6-year increments.

The intersection of identity, college transition, and ultimate academic success is key to understanding educational attainment of Native Americans. We note that this transitional period of identity formation and goal attainment extends far into adulthood and is a struggle for all students (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004). The variation of success is further complicated by the fact that Native American students transition from a variety of geographic locations. While the college transition experience for Native American students differs from context to context (reservation experience vs. non, urban vs. rural), all of these students still have an adjustment to make. Collegiate transition is made even more difficult if the student is transitioning from a reservation (Huffman, 2008). To facilitate adjustment however attempts to replicate family and other indigenous structure within the higher education institution are encouraged (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). In addition, there have been several barriers that especially infringe upon retention of Native college students, namely inadequate financial resources and lack of academic preparation. Yet, there are three factors identified as contributing to persistence; family, giving back to tribal community, and on-campus social support.

While Native identity is frequently thought to be negatively impacted by an urban socialization (Straus & Valentino, 2003) or intermarriage, Lucero (2010) found that urban Native American students actively go through an identity searching process that she defines as struggle, catalyst, reconnecting or connecting, and then integrating. What she notes as missing throughout this process is a system or programs that target or specialize in focusing on cultural identity.

In this study, a program is examined that intentionally creates space for identity formation, recognizes potential transition challenges, and has a support network to mitigate college adjustment barriers. It is within the context of this experience that the development of expressed identity, adjustment, and impact of the college experience on a sample of Native American students within a tribal-based university program is measured. The next section presents the study context, setting, and method, followed by the study design and study findings.

Method

Setting

Founded in 1809, Miami University is a liberal arts, doctoral intensive (Carnegie classification) university with a main campus enrollment of about 17,000 students (15,000 undergraduate and 2,000 graduate) located in southwestern Ohio. In the undergraduate population, the university has about 82% White students and 18% domestic minority and international students (according to

institutional labels: approximately 840 nonresident aliens, 600 African Americans, 440 Latinos, 350 multiracial, 300 Asians, 40 Native American/Alaskan, 9 Pacific Islander, Hawaiian, and 170 race unknown; Office of Institutional Research, 2012).

The relationship between the Miami Nation and Miami University was nonexistent until 1972 when Miami Tribe Chief Forest Olds visited the university and forged a relationship with then Miami University President Phillip Shriver.¹¹ In 1991, the University created a scholarship (Miami Indian Heritage award) for Miami tribal students and initially enrolled three students, and from that time, the Miami tribe student enrollment grew. From these early efforts and with the evolution of the Miami tribe cultural work, the Myaamia Project was created in 2001 and provides support and coursework on cultural information and language revitalization for Miami tribe students (and the campus as a whole). It is within this context that this study emerged.

Study Design and Procedures

Participants. The target population was Miami tribal members enrolled in the university. Of the 21 enrolled Miami tribe students during the 2013 spring semester, 19 of the students participated in this study; all 19 participated were interviewed, and 13 provided responses to a survey. Thirteen were men, six women; with an average age of 20, an average group grade point average (GPA) of 3.14 among the four seniors, eight juniors, four sophomores, and three first-year students. In terms of place of residence, four were from Ohio, nine from Indiana, one Kansas, two Michigan, one Washington, one Missouri, and one from Illinois.

Design. The present study is the first phase of a longitudinal study designed to examine the impact of a tribal-led cultural education experience for college tribal members as they matriculate at Miami University. This first phase of the longitudinal study attempts to gather baseline data about the students' view of their identity, their views of the cultural education program, and the connections they are making with each other and the university. Subsequent study phases will, over time, follow students as they enter the university and collect measures of identity, reactions to their experiences with the program, and their level of academic and personal accomplishment.

In this initial Phase 1, a mixed methods research approach was used to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive measure of variables including the potential interaction among them (Creswell, 2013). Students were invited to participate in an audiotaped one-on-one interview and then asked to complete the NIS (Gonzalez & Bennett, 2011). Over the course of 3 weeks, 30-minute interview sessions were held with each participant followed by the electronic dissemination of the NIS.

Table 1. Interview Questions Asked of the Miami Tribe Students.

Interview questions

1. Think back before you enrolled in this class what did you anticipate learning in this course?
2. How would you describe your ethnic identity?
3. If you use the term "Native American," can you define that term "Native American"?
4. Do you think that the knowledge you are gaining/will gain in this course is important to your sense of who you are?
5. Did you attend the Myaamia language camp? At what age? How did it impact you?
6. Is Miami University a place where you feel comfortable or you feel you belong?
7. Do you feel that knowing the Myaamia language is part of your identity? How much does this make a difference?
8. Who do you socialize with outside of class time?
9. What does it mean to be "Myaamia"?
10. Can you give us your general views of your experience in this course?
11. What about your general experience at Miami University?

Measures. The questions used in the interviews focused on (a) students' sense of Native American identity, (b) their views of the Miami Tribal course and its impact on language and history study, and (c) sense of belonging to the tribe and to the university (Table 1).

The MMRI scale (Sellers & Shelton, 2000; Sellers et al., 1998) was used as the foundation for Gonzalez and Bennett to craft the NIS. Gonzalez and Bennett (2011) included 199 Native Americans attending pow-wows in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan in their standardization process. About 80% of participants were from what Gonzalez calls the Anishinaabe group of tribes (Gonzalez identifies them as Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Odaawa, Menominee, and Cree). The authors of this Myaamia study are only aware that the Potawatomi, Ottawa, and Ojibwe communities use the term anishinaabe as a means of self-identification. Gonzalez and Bennet included the 56-item 7-point likert scale from the MMRI and added six items specifically for Native American culture related to language retention, sovereignty, spiritual practices, and land rights. Of these 62 items, only 25 had the minimal statistical confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) loadings to be retained for the NIS (communalities ranged from 0.35 and 0.74), and they fell into four factor loadings (Centrality, Humanist, Public Regard, Oppressed minority). The Cronbach's alpha range for the subscales was .65 to .88 with all accompanying analysis suggesting reliable instrumentation. We therefore used the 25 additional questions of the NIS and added demographic items at the end (Table 2). Seven-point and 5-point likert scales were used with various survey items (7 = *strongly agree* to 1 = *strongly disagree* or 5 = *strongly agree* to 1 = *strongly disagree*), and the sample's Cronbach's alpha

Table 2. Native American Identity Scale (NIS).

Survey questions

1. I have a strong sense of belonging to American Indian people
2. Being American Indian is an important reflection of who I am
3. I am proud to be American Indian
4. It is important for American Indians to surround their children with Native art, music and literature
5. Knowledge of American Indian language is important for American Indian people
6. In general, being American Indian is an important part of my self-image
7. I have strong attachment to other American Indian people
8. I am happy that I am American Indian
9. It is important for American Indian reservations to be recognized as sovereign nations
10. American Indians should not consider race when buying art or selecting books to read
11. American Indians should have a choice in marrying interracially
12. American Indians should not marry interracially
13. American Indians should judge Whites as individuals and not as members of the White race
14. White people can never be trusted where American Indians are concerned
15. American Indians and Whites can never live in true harmony because of racial differences
16. American Indians and Whites have more things in common than they have differences
17. In general, others respect American Indian people
18. In general, other groups view American Indians in a positive manner
19. Overall, American Indians are considered good by others
20. Society views American Indian people as an asset
21. The struggle for American Indian sovereignty in America should be closely related to the struggle of other oppressed groups
22. American Indians should learn about the oppression of other groups
23. There are other people who experience racial injustice and indignities similar to American Indians
24. American Indians will be more successful in achieving their goals if they form coalitions with other oppressed groups
25. The racism American Indians have experienced is similar to that of other minority groups
26. I consider American Indian (s) to be a racial category or group

Note. Adapted from "American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research," by J. Gonzalez and R. Bennett, 2011, *The Journal of the National Center*, 17(2), pp. 22–42.

was .64. A high mean score on items affirms a higher level of identity on the measure.

Data analysis. Descriptive statistics and qualitative data analysis were used to address research questions. To gain the most from the interview data, we relied on the phenomenological reduction process of analysis. This approach

advanced by Giorgi (1975; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) includes (a) reading through each transcript to conceptualize it in a holistic fashion, (b) ascertaining natural meaning units or segments of the participant's experience that relates to the topic/question, and (c) identifying a central theme or themes for each unit, and either querying further about each theme or looking further in the interview data to confirm or ask further about the theme being examined (Giorgi, 1986; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). As a research team, we discussed the themes and confirmed a triangulation of agreement among three research team members. Quantitative assessment of likert scale ratings was performed using descriptive and a Mann–Whitney analysis.

Results

To address the study questions about *identity, impact of Myaamia course enrollment, university connection, and tribal sense of belonging*, we used interview data and the NIS data. Institutional retention data are used to determine academic outcome.

The overall results of the NIS demonstrate that this sample has a strong *sense of identity*. The first three questions of the NIS query about adopting an identity as a Native American, and mean scores suggest the identification with being Native American is strong in this sample. 92.3% (12 or 13) of the sample agreed or strongly agreed with the questions related to “*belonging to American Indian people*,” “*being American Indian is important to who I am*,” “*I am proud to be American Indian*.” The average mean (with corresponding standard deviation) on these questions was $M = 6.28$, $SD = 0.77$ (7-point scale) with the highest value (and lowest variation) being placed on the sentiment that “*I am proud to be American Indian*” ($M = 6.69$, $SD = 0.05$). A nonparametric analysis (Mann–Whitney) performed for all NIS questions comparing the combined first-year and sophomore cohort to the combined junior and senior cohort to determine if differences existed between the groups. The sum of the ranks in the first sample (freshman-sophomores) was examined and compared with the sum of the ranks of the second sample (juniors and seniors). We examined the notion that theoretically as a result of the Myaamia course experience some differences may be present.

The question “*being American Indian is an important part of my self-image*” varied across the freshmen/sophomore versus junior/senior groups ($U = 15.0$, $p < .05$) ($M\text{-rank}_1 = 25.5$, $M\text{-rank}_2 = 65.5$). An additional question approached significance but did not quite meet the threshold. In addition, the aforementioned identity questions strongly correlated with each other and correlated strongly with the item “*I have strong attachment to other American Indian people*,” and “*In general, being American Indian is an important part of my self-image*.” Using a Spearman rho, the following questions Q1 “*strong sense of belonging*,” Q2 “*being American Indian is an important reflection of who I am*,”

Q3 “*I am proud to be American Indian,*” Q6 “*being American Indian is an important part of my self image,*” Q7 “*I have a strong attachment to other American Indian people,*” Q18 “*groups view American Indians in a positive manner,*” and Q22 “*American Indians should learn about the oppression of other groups*” had the largest number of significant intercorrelations with other NIS items. They are presented in Table 3.

This identity affirmation was further echoed in the qualitative interview data. When students described how they identified themselves, they overwhelmingly stated *Native American*. However, this response was nuanced by two major factors: *environmental context* and *stage of development*. Students differentiated the context in which they were responding and to whom they were responding. The students said that if the person they were divulging to was someone they did not know well, they would respond in general terms “Native American.” If the person was somewhat known to them, or they were in a closed and safe environment, they would say “Myaamia” and engage in further conversation about what that means. One student framed it this way, “Since this class, I’ve said Myaamia Indian, but before that, [I used the term Native American]. . . I’ve learned to kind of gauge are they genuinely interested or are they just asking because they’re supposed to ask?”

When asked to define “Native American”, one student said,

I guess native to North America. But it’s a pretty broad term I’d say, because obviously there’s hundreds of tribes in these lands a long time ago, and every one of them was a lot different, it seemed like anyways.

Another student stated,

Native American I would say is pretty wide when you’re talking about a group of people.

When comparing the first-year students and sophomores to the junior and senior responses, we see a possible developmental shift. While few of the comparative *t* tests were significant (in part due to the small sample size), preliminary analysis suggests a significant difference on some identity-related items. A *t* test on the questions, “*It is important for American Indians to surround their children with Native art . . .*” ($t(11) = 2.74, p < .05$) and “*In general, being American Indian is an important part of my self-image*” ($t(11) = 3.53, p < .05$) shows higher mean scores for upper class students (juniors-seniors) versus underclass (first-year sophomores) although this sentiment is not a strongly held one. Overall, about 50% of the sample agreed with these two statements; with upper class students showing a stronger level of agreement on each item, respectively ($M = 6.14, SD = 0.12$ and $M = 4.43, SD = 0.79$), than first-year and sophomore students ($M = 4.67, SD = 0.51$ and $M = 3.17, SD = 0.40$, respectively).

Table 3. Native Identity Scale Intercorrelations.

	1	2	3	6	7	8	22
1	—						
2	.75**	—					
3	.47	.68*	—				
4	.64*	.64*	.37	—			
5	.44	.35	.57*		—		
6	.67*	.85**	.45	—			
7	.81**	.83**	.60*	.73**	—		
8	.47	.41	.64*	.24	.32	—	
9	.66*	.59*	.24	.69**	.48	.44	—
10	-.43	-.37	-.31	-.54	-.40	.05	
11	.42	.46	.50	.02	.30	.50	
12	-.55	-.41	-.56*	-.16	-.39	-.56*	
13	-.41	-.54	-.25	-.667*	-.47	.25	
14	.09	.10	-.29	.32	.31	-.56*	
15	-.32	-.01	-.33	.08	.04	-.66*	

(continued)

Table 3. Continued.

	1	2	3	6	7	8	22
16	American Indians and Whites have more things in common than they have differences	-.01	-.11	-.22	-.15	-.10	-.05
17	In general, others respect American Indian people	.17	.00	-.32	-.09	.10	-.32
18	In general, other groups view American Indians in a positive manner	.09	-.05	-.05	-.16	.02	-.05
19	Overall, American Indians are considered good by others	.02	.03	-.10	-.02	.14	-.34
20	Society views American Indian people as an asset	-.15	.14	.15	-.04	.07	-.22
21	The struggle for American Indian sovereignty in America should be closely related to the struggle of33	.12	-.09	.09	.02	.26
22	American Indians should learn about the oppression of other groups	.35	.28	.24	.41	.36	-.02
23	There are other people who experience racial injustice and indignities similar to American Indians	.51	.47	.62*	.46	.40	.62* .56*
24	American Indians will be more successful in achieving their goals if they form coalitions with other01	.45	.23	.32	.34	.00 .08
25	The racism American Indians have experienced is similar to that of other minority groups	-.40	-.21	-.12	-.04	-.54	-.12 .17
26	I consider American Indian(s) to be a racial category or group	.44	.23	.31	.12	.29	.31 .09

^aCorrelation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed). ^bCorrelation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed).

This current sample of first-year students literally came in saying, “I don’t know who I am,” or felt unsure of how to identify themselves. One student put it this way,

I am Native American, but then I’m not that much, you know. So I don’t really know how to react. I don’t know if to say that I’m Native American, ‘cause I’m not like, completely Native American, I don’t know. It’s weird. It’s a weird situation.

Another student said,

[Official forms] always asks if, you’re White, Caucasian, or you’re Native American, I was Caucasian. I never thought about it. Now I’m thinking, ‘oh kinda,’ I mean, now that I’m learning about [my identity] and I feel a little more connected with it, I guess.

This uncertainty was absent from virtually all of the juniors and seniors. The upper class students distinguished Native American from Myaamia as well.

Impact of Myaamia Courses

The Myaamia Courses are a series of six one-credit hour classes that all Miami tribe students take as a part of their Heritage Award. Three topics, each studied over the course of a year, serve as the focus for the six classes: *ecological perspectives and history, language and culture, and issues of the modern American Indian tribe*. During the senior year, students take two-credits of a senior independent study. When data were collected for this project, students were enrolled in the ecological perspectives and language and culture segments.

The NIS data suggest that this sample believes knowledge of language is important, with 76.9% (10 of 13) agreeing with this statement. The interview data suggested that the cultural immersion via the Myaamia courses helped this sample of students not only to gain a sense of self but to cope with the college experience. Two clear examples emerged. During situations on campus when the Myaamia students felt their identity was disrespected or they experienced microaggressions, their Myaamia class and family served as a solace, support, and bolstered their coping. Microaggressions refer to subtle demeaning racial/ethnic-oriented messages or acts (Sue et al., 2007). During resurrected discussions about the institutional mascot (an old stereotyped symbol) and current “fight songs” infused with stereotypical Native American references, one student said,

I think [the student defending the symbols] was just an idiot. I really appreciate [the Myaamia program] support we’ve had. Especially with, I think it was my freshman year, when the mascot issue reared up again, randomly, which was an interesting

introduction to Miami with that being an issue, I really appreciate the support on all that.

As we looked at the NIS data, the unfortunate ethnic microaggressions experienced by this sample on their college campus may in part have fueled their response to the NIS questions about “*The racism American Indians have experienced is similar to that of other minority groups.*” Eighty-five percent of the sample agreed with that statement for a mean response of $M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.69$ (5-point scale). Further, about half of the students felt that other people respect American Indians (54%, $n = 7$).

Upon examining the impact of the acquisition of knowledge about Miami culture and language on student identity, one student remarked,

I think I was very lucky to be able to get the language freshman year. On the one hand I had no idea what was happening for the first couple of weeks, but now that I've had that background, I can place everything we're talking about in class within that cultural-linguistic base that I've kind of developed.

In terms of their *connections and sense of belonging*, slightly less than half of the student sample expressed on the NIS a “strong attachment to other American Indian people” (46%, 6 of 13). However, the sample reported that they deepened their tribal and family connections because of the information they acquired in the class. Being part of Myaamia was now grounded in a deeper understanding of who they were. One student (a junior) put it this way,

I guess when I first started the class . . . it was kind of a lot to handle, I think. As I've been in class for almost two years now, I kind of feel like I'm learning more. I'm able to apply more things that we learn in class. So things like that [change, life cycle, seasons] at first I probably didn't [think about these things in multiple ways] when I was a freshman or sophomore But now, the longer, that I've been in class, the more that I'm learning, and listening to other people talk, like George I think that's one of the neat things we also learn . . . especially in nature, right now that's what we're talking about. The class is geared toward the Myaamia students, and we all kinda have a lot in common in that regard.

Another student said,

I'm just really thankful that I'm able to participate in the Program, and it's opened up a lot about, a lot of information and history to me, but also brought me closer to my family. The first two years I was here, I didn't really hang out with any of my cousins, and now we live together, I live with one of my cousins. I think this class is the reason So I'm really thankful that it's been a really good impact on my college career.

An interaction between current Myaamia students and a Myaamia Tribe member who attended the university over a decade ago illustrated that the current students recognized a significant difference between their experience and the experience of past Myaamia students. We were fortunate to have a Miami Tribe alumna visiting campus, and current students were able to hear about her Miami University experience. Current students contrasted their experiences while at the university with hers, chronicling the challenges and support systems available to them. The current students literally cringed when she shared the struggles she experienced on the campus during the 1990s. In a spontaneous moment during the discussion, one current Myaamia student stated a deeply felt impromptu comment, which we suspect reflected what was felt by all current students.

I just really wish you would have had the Tribe class, I feel so sad that you didn't. I feel like that's like really shaped my time here, because my first semester here, I hated it, I thought I was going to transfer at the semester, I'm like, 'Peace. I'm out. Hate this place, these people are so different from me,' I did not come from this background, didn't realize what I was getting myself into, knew nobody. So after first semester I was like, 'see you later. Going to transfer.' But then my friendships grew really with [other tribe students] and like we got really close and um, yeah, it was just nice to have that group of people that I always knew were going to be there. I was like, 'you guys are family, can't reject me.' I'm in with you people. So yeah.

University and Tribal Connections

Throughout the interviews, Myaamia students repeatedly spoke about how the Myaamia class and all of the relationships and support accompanying it seemed to help them develop a deeper connection with the tribe. While the Miami Nation operates more from a diaspora than a central location, these students were able to fashion ways to connect and frame how they want to "give back" to the tribal community. In addition, they also began to see how the university (despite some moments of negative tension) was attempting to create a mutually respectful relationship with the tribal community. One student shared the following about visiting the farm of one of the Myaamia tribal members who serves as a coinstructor of the class.

Also, visiting Daryl's farm, that's a really neat experience. I don't know if you guys have gone, but it's just like a family gathering, and they make you feel at home, it's not your home, but it might as well be. Home away from home.

Another student described the class in this way,

I mean, most of us feel like a personal connection to it. When you see people doing their senior projects, like last year my cousin, he's still doing research in Oklahoma, and it's awesome, what he's doing. He got a scholarship for it and everything. He's doing great things, and he's helping out the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, and it's really neat to see that stuff, how he, like, he's been doing really well.

Reflections about the university seemed to be a balance of appreciating the positive aspects of the college experience and embracing the opportunities and being philosophical and understanding about the negatives. One student put it this way,

I may have had some awkward situations when friends asked why I decided Miami and I tell them I'm a Myaamia Indian. Then they ask, 'do you get some sort of scholarship for that?' And I said, yeah, and they're always like, 'oh, well that's nice.' So, it can kinda be weird.

Two other students shared,

I feel like I fit in. And feel like, there's a lot of opportunities here. I'm a junior now, so I feel like, looking back, I feel like I took advantage of a lot of those opportunities, and it's worked out for me. There's a lot of opportunities to come. I get to take Miami University with me for the rest of my life, so that's a plus....So I do feel, like, a little closer to Miami University. Feel a little more of a connection than I did before. This kinda makes me feel special, being a Myaamia student, because not a lot of people get this opportunity, and it's an awesome opportunity.

Retention Data

As of the end of the 2012–2013 academic year, a total of 84 Myaamia students had entered the university, 48 had graduated, and 17 were still enrolled. Over the past 10 years of this university-tribe relationship, the percent of Myaamia students who have either graduated or are currently attending (been retained) Miami University is 77%. The comparable rate before the Myaamia course experience was offered was 72%. Before the Myaamia course experience, the graduation rate was 44%. To compare these Miami University data to national norms and current Miami data, the current 4-year graduation rate of Myaamia tribe students attending Miami University is 58%, 5-year rate is 66%, and the 6-year graduation rate is 68% (Miami University, 2013). As previously mentioned, according to the U.S. Department of Education-NCES (2012a, 2012b), the 4-year graduation rate of Native American college students at public colleges is 17.9% and 5-year 32.5%.

Discussion

This study is the first of a longitudinal project designed to examine the identity development, collegiate adjustment, and retention of a sample of Myaamia tribal college students. From this initial phase of the project, data suggest that a culturally grounded support system enhances the students' retention. This sample of Myaamia college students, at first, grapples with their sense of ethnic identity. This is common for adolescents in this phase of development; yet, what is unique about this identity struggle is how the culture and heritage class in which they enroll impacts their struggle. As the students engage within the courses and interact with each other and the adult Myaamia tribal members who serve as their instructors, clarity and a sense of identity grows. This is supported by the increase of NIS identity-items from freshman-sophomore to junior-senior groups from the centrality factor component of the NIS. The centrality factor items are connected with ethnicity being important to identity and self-concept. As this current group of first-year tribal students entered the institution, they reported more often than not, feeling like they could not clarify their identity or they had to choose between their multiple identities. Some also divulged exclusively claiming to be White and not acknowledging their Myaamia identity, while others had a firm grasp on multiple aspects of themselves. For those who reported an identity void, the void could have in part been influenced by a perceived racialization of Native American identity and exacerbated by possessing limited knowledge about their Miami heritage upon admission. Their exposure to the Myaamia courses and to those students with knowledge of Myaamia culture and language, however, had the affect of filling the vacuum of self-knowledge, thus contributing to self-discovery and identity development. Throughout their Myaamia courses, tribal students report discovering that Myaamia is a collective identity, a family versus exclusively individual identity. The students literally and figuratively discover their interconnectedness, sharing relatives and realizing that they are related to each other [*eeweentiiciki*].

Unlike the work of Gonzalez and Bennett (2011), with Native Americans from reservation communities, this group of Native American students (Myaamia) did not view their identity as one that is in opposition to the majority population (European Americans). They did not view the majority as "other" and use them as the oppositional reference point to gain a sense of self. Further, while this sample acknowledged the societal discrimination and prejudice that may be held toward Native Americans, they were able to grapple with that within their Myaamia community. Their college experience highlighted the fact that parts of society-at-large may hold negative views about being Native American, but they rejected those views and learned to confront them by infusing these interactions with moments of educating their peers who may express those views with knowledge from their Myaamia class.

This sample of Myaamia students uncovered deeply held beliefs about ethnicity. Ethnic minority identity in America (referred to as racial identity by Gonzalez and others) is often viewed as a biological construct as opposed to a social construct. This view may suggest that Native Americans should “look,” live, and speak a certain way. These Myaamia college students report confronting that notion within the university environment and outside of it. Potentially complicating this struggle even more is the fact that for some, their ethnic heritage is actually a combination of Myaamia and other identities (European-based or another ethnicity). A common experience for some ethnic minorities is the double bind of navigating between these identities or feeling forced to choose. As the Myaamia students learned about some of these beliefs and engaged in the process of identity formation, they reported relying on the Myaamia course experience for support with answers. Similar to some other ethnic minority communities, it was the older adult members of the Myaamia family who not only taught these students about heritage, culture, and language but also shared the tools of coping with negative social images, respectful confrontation of them, and learning how to balance their multiple identities.

This identity grounding and cultural education potentially has theoretical connections to their academic success. Consistent with numerous retention models, these Myaamia students who experienced the Myaamia courses (as opposed to students who did not have the opportunity of taking these courses in the past) were retained and ultimately graduated at higher levels. Gonzalez and Bennett’s (2011) work reviews multiple studies supporting the link between identity and culturally relevant experiences with academic success. The college adjustment process was possibly enhanced by the creation of support mechanisms, which included the courses, ready-made social networks, kinship bonds, and self-knowledge. The NCELA report calls for institutions to pay attention to the cultural context (e.g., tribal affiliation, family dynamics, language, and culture) of Native American students attending PWIs (NCELA, 2011). This report further suggests that often colleges view persistence or attrition of Native American students to be tied to financial challenges; however, the students state that campus-based social support, family support, and participation in tribal community as core components tied to their persistence.

What appears to be emerging from this sample is not only collegiate success but that their *identity is Myaamia*, although they still embrace the use of the public term Native American as an identity. In part, this is because the “Native American” or “American Indian” term is the overwhelmingly accepted public term assigned to this population. While the term *Native American* is all encompassing, it does not reflect the unique and rich heritage that is especially Myaamia. For that matter, this is true for all tribal communities. The more highly known or larger tribes (e.g., Cherokee and Navajo) are able to affirm their unique community and preserve its elements. The Myaamia are attempting to replicate this process by reclaiming culture and language. For this to be

successful, the next generation must rediscover and internalize this into their identities.

Results from this study suggest that this individual emergence of identity as well as the trans-generational identity process is emerging. The shift in sense of self, language competency, and commitment to tribe and community increases as these students matriculate through this Myaamia support program. At the same time, these students live through the common college experience. The victory at the end of the college journey for this sample of Myaamia students at this university is not only graduation but also identity confirmation.

Limitations

While these study results add to the growing body of knowledge about Native American college students' experiences, there are several limitations to note. First, the small sample size limits statistical analyses, the power of those analyses, and prohibits more sophisticated analyses. Not only are there a small number of students in the current sample, but also the scope of the study is limited to one particular Native American tribe (and should be generalized to that tribe-Myaamia). Native Americans represent a broad array of peoples and experiences, so translating these results without caveat to other college-going Native American students would be inappropriate. Second, these results represent just the initial phase of a longitudinal project. As the longitudinal series of studies continues, more confidence can be placed in future findings. Also, as the project progresses, the goal is to adjust the identity measure to be more sensitive to Native Americans who represent other components of the diaspora, namely those socialized in disparate parts from the homelands.

Implications and Future Research

While this is just the first phase of a longitudinal project, it provides a foundation for the future study of how this group of Myaamia students begins to develop their sense of self. These results potentially carry implications for other diaspora tribal communities who live in various diverse communities yet engage in grounding themselves in their cultural heritage and strive to learn about their heritage. This current investigation will not only track subsequent Myaamia college students but also extend to examining the emergence of identity of Miami Nation youth from ages 10 to 12 who may attend youth language camps to those who chose to matriculate at Miami University. Further study will continue on how language materials impact language acquisition, and how the Myaamia Center's series of courses impacts Miami tribe students. Lastly, we will continue to look at how identity formation is affected by language learning.

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Note

1. For more information about the history of the Miami Nation, Myaamia Center, and Miami University–Miami Tribe relationship, refer to the following Web sites:
<http://www.miamination.com>
<http://myaamiacenter.org>
<http://miamioh.edu/about-miami/diversity/miami-tribe-relations/>

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