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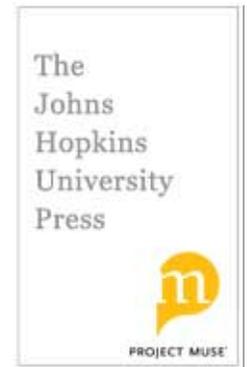
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# Stories of Success: Experiences of American Indian Students in a Peer-Mentoring Retention Program

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and Rosa Cintrón*

The underrepresentation of American Indian students in institutions of higher education in the United States is a longstanding problem. Although official figures indicate that American Indian college student enrollment nationwide has more than doubled over the last 25 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), American Indian students continue to remain among the most underrepresented groups in academe (Tierney, 1992a; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). American Indians between the ages of 18 and 24 are less likely to be enrolled in college than are their White, Asian/Pacific Islander, and African American counterparts. More specifically, only 18% percent of American Indians in that age group were in college compared with 42% of Whites, 60% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 32% of African Americans (Freeman & Fox, 2005). Minority students comprise approximately 28% of U.S. postsecondary students, with American Indians accounting for ap-

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proximately 1% of postsecondary students (Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

The underrepresentation of American Indian students is further exacerbated by attrition. In recent years, American Indians have been admitted to college at a rate higher than that of other ethnic/racial groups; however, far fewer American Indians graduate (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003). The high attrition rate at the undergraduate level leads to only 0.67% of all undergraduate degrees being awarded to American Indians (Silas, 2006).

A historical review of the literature shows that catastrophic levels of attrition have existed for many years (Reddy, 1993). Estimates for the first-year retention rates of American Indian students generally range between 45% and 54% (U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Wells, 1997), with some estimates ranging between 75% and 93% (Brown & Robinson-Kurpius, 1997). Data show that the persistence-to-graduation rates within six years among American Indian students is 36%, compared to 56% in the general population. These graduation rates are the lowest of all college student minority populations (Reddy, 1993; Silas, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Most American Indian student enrollment is concentrated in New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Arizona. Most students attend two-year colleges, and approximately 8% of all postsecondary students matriculate at tribal colleges. American Indians who complete a course of study at a tribal college before entering a four-year institution have a 75% greater completion rate (Pavel, Skinner, Farris, Cahalan, Tippeconnic, & Stein, 1998). Surprisingly, the data indicate that if American Indians persist in college and graduate, they do as well or better than the general population in terms of postgraduate salary and completion of graduate programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Integration into and adaptation to the university have long been identified as factors that affect the persistence of all students (Astin, 1982; Tinto, 1975). Brown and Robinson-Kurpius (1997) stated that social integration with peers and faculty can be crucial in the persistence of American Indian students. Other researchers have found that, if social integration can be achieved in an on-campus subunit population of similar ethnic minority students, the disintegrative effects of attending a large university can be eased (Murguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991).

Another factor that fosters success among American Indian students is the presence of structured social support systems. Many American Indian students have identified their association with American Indian clubs, multicultural offices, and other groups organized to provide social support as a critical factor in their success (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003). Many researchers believe that the creation of more support groups would improve the retention of American Indian students by helping them adapt to the

university setting (Brown & Robinson-Kurpius, 1997; Hoover & Jacobs, 1992; Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003).

Research on peer influence, student culture, and friendships in college has developed in tandem with that on integration and structured social support systems. Renn and Arnold (2003) argued that, even though peer influence has received much attention in praxis and theory, the process by which this influence develops is not clear. Despite being unable to define the process, it is clear that peer influence is a key factor in college outcomes. Bettencourt, Charlton, Eubanks, Kernahan, and Fuller (1999) introduced the concept of collective self-esteem, defining it as the extent to which individuals evaluate their social groups positively. According to these authors, "Social identification with a context-related group has the capacity to enhance positive adjustment in that context. . . . Development in collective self-esteem with campus groups may contribute to better adjustment to college" (p. 220).

In her study of female conversations, Martínez-Alemán (1997) noted that the intellectual energy in their interactions outside of the classroom was lost once they entered spaces where formal teaching took place. Most of Martínez-Alemán's research was conducted in the rather cold, male-oriented perspective of the academy, prompting us to ponder whether the actions students took to organize their own retention programs might be what Martínez-Alemán considered either an "act of resistance" or an "act of freedom" (p. 122).

Another important line of inquiry is the possible relationship between peer relationships and race/ethnicity. Antonio (2004) stated that peer factors that influence students' intellectual self-confidence and degree aspirations operate differently by race. It seems that students of color are validated by interacting closely with other non-White students. Students of color reframe their psyche "in a nonWhite frame [which] may make group diversity as influential, and in some cases, more influential than academic competencies or self-esteem in group" (p. 465). In a similar vein, Martínez-Alemán (2000) stated that women of color seek others like themselves, not only as a way to develop a positive ethnic/racial self-image but also as "a respite from racial and/or ethnic hypersensitivity and hostility and in addition exchange academic information and support" (p. 137).

Unfortunately, it appears that this type of exchange "stops the bleeding only long enough to send friends back into battle" (Martínez-Alemán, 2000, p. 147). These friendships do not appear to be permanent buffers against inhospitable college environments. This study investigated whether larger, more structured peer groups provided a more permanent positive effect on student integration and persistence. Do Native American students gain strength in numbers at the university level?

Peer mentoring has been implemented in higher education institutions across the country as a means of increasing retention (Brawer, 1996; Good,

Haplin, & Haplin, 2000; Henriksen, 1995; Highsmith, Denes, & Pierre, 1998; Santovec, 1992). According to Dunn and Moody (1995), mentoring programs help to retain students by fostering loyalty and engendering a sense of belonging. Programs that include peer mentors can also help students with networking and socializing for both academic and student activities. Good, Haplin, and Haplin (2000) found that many universities use peer mentoring with underrepresented groups to facilitate the transition to the university setting. Successful minority students often identify peer support as an important factor in their academic achievement (Hsiao, 1992).

After reviewing the literature on mentoring, Girves, Zepeda, and Gwathmey (2005) stated: "Even though there is no clear agreement on what makes mentoring successful, there is widespread agreement that it does work and that more of it is needed" (p. 451). Haring (1999) agreed that no standard operational definition of mentoring exists in the literature and considered this lack problematical. Still, this lacuna has not deterred investigation, especially into the relationship between mentoring and race/ethnicity. Freeman (1999) found that mentoring seems to be important when students are in environments culturally different from their own, even for high-achieving students. Similarly, Tantum (1997) and Madrid (2004) concluded that the ability to identify with others on a cultural level is significant in the success of minority students.

These ideas are reiterated by Jaime (2003) in a reflective piece about her academic path as an American Indian woman. She wrote:

Having strong Native role models has made a difference in my success as a student. At times when there were no Native[s] at the institutions I attended, I noticed a significant difference in both my ambition and the support I received. (p. 253)

Anagnopoulos (2006) found that American Indian students who formed networks with other American Indian students were more successful academically. Gloria and Robinson-Kurpius (2001) found that the perception of being mentored was the strongest factor in decreasing nonpersistence decisions among American Indian undergraduates.

Although same-race mentoring has traditionally been viewed with reservations because of its possible segregationist consequences, several authors have argued for its utility (Tate & Schwartz, 1993). Villalpando (1996) discovered empirical quantitative evidence indicating that same-race affiliation benefits students of color. In his qualitative follow-up study, he concluded that "peer groups empower and nourish academic success and foster the development of a critical cultural consciousness by understanding the members' condition as racialized students within the academy" (Villalpando, 2003, p. 633).

Other research findings suggest that structured mentoring programs that connect advanced American Indian students with incoming American Indian students could address issues regarding isolation (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003). In their study of American Indian persisters, Jackson, Smith, and Hill found that American Indian students who were able to connect with informal mentors through social support groups were likely to persist in their studies. These authors explained that peer mentors address potential barriers to academic success and provide models for reconciling the conflict associated with developing a bicultural identity.

A number of colleges and universities have implemented support programs for minority students. Many of these programs involve peer-mentoring components that seek to integrate students both socially and academically. The development of such programs has rarely included the input of respective American Indian communities or students. At a midsized public university in the Midwest, one such program was developed by a group of American Indian students. Unlike other retention programs, the American Indian Retention Program (AIRP) was developed and administered by the students themselves. This student-initiated, peer-mentoring retention program provides services geared toward the participants' academic success and personal development. All the components of this program are aimed at addressing the factors contributing to student success and persistence.

This study adds to the limited knowledge base on the factors influencing American Indian student success. Specifically, it confirms the effectiveness of peer-mentoring programs in enhancing student integration and persistence and the characteristics of successful programs.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

Every student approaches the challenges of college from his or her distinctive cultural base; this is particularly true for American Indian students (Benjamin, Chambers, & Reiterman, 1993). Most studies on American Indian students, however, have relied on quantitative methods, frequently based on data yielded by surveys. Hoffman, Jackson, and Smith (2005) argue that findings based on quantitative methodology are framed within a positivistic paradigm that may or may not fit American Indians. Moreover, quantitative approaches often impose a Eurocentric framework that is often in direct conflict with American Indian culture (Tierney, 1992b). Thus, a qualitative methodology may be more appropriate for understanding and capturing the experiences of American Indian students. Other researchers (Brown & Robinson-Kurpius, 1997; Jackson & Smith, 2001; McWhirter, 1997) have likewise argued that it is important to understand the distinctive cultural

perspectives of American Indian students, allowing them to describe their experiences and perceptions of postsecondary success according to their own perspectives.

A qualitative, phenomenological study is often employed in educational research to describe the lived experiences of individuals. The strength of a phenomenological study is that it can determine what an experience or a particular phenomenon means by deriving general or universal meanings from the individual descriptions articulated by those who have undergone a particular experience (Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). The meanings that American Indian students ascribe to their experiences are strongly shaped by their cultural constructs. A number of American Indian authors have argued that a participant's tribal culture is crucial when considering any aspect of American Indian participation in postsecondary education (Badwound & Tierney, 1988; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Wright & Tierney, 1991). A phenomenological approach allows exploration of the experiences of these students through a unique cultural lens (Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1990).

This study regards phenomenology as a research method, not a philosophy, and follows a postpositivistic rather than a positivistic perspective. We conducted our research in alignment with the new or American phenomenology (Caelli, 2000) with its emphasis in "culturally grounded meaning" (Benner, 2000, p. 104), in which the terms *phenomenon* and *experience* have the same meaning (van Manen, 1990) and focus groups are seen as manifestations of group phenomenology (Racher, 2003; Spieglberg, 1982).

A series of face-to-face interviews and focus groups underpinned the phenomenological framework in this study. Patton (1990) stated, "The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is . . . in someone else's mind" (p. 278). We developed the interview protocol using an open-ended approach and planned the focus groups as a stimulus for group elaboration and expression and to produce additional data beyond the individual interviews. Other researchers have also supported the use of both interviews and focus groups/group discussions as an appropriate approach to obtaining descriptions of experiences of a particular phenomenon (Ruth-Sahd & Tisdell, 2007; Wertz, 2005).

### **Setting**

We conducted this study in the spring of 2005 at a midsized, public, predominantly White (PWI) Midwestern university with a student population of approximately 27,000. The minority student enrollment was 6,679 students, with an American Indian population of approximately 1,700 (6.3% of the total student body). American Indian students represented both reservation and nonreservation communities and were very diverse both tribally and regionally.

### ***The Peer-Mentoring Retention Program: Background***

The program in this study is a student-initiated, peer-mentoring retention program geared toward freshman, sophomore, and transfer American Indian students. It was established in the summer of 2001 by a group of American Indian students who perceived the need for a retention program designed specifically for other American Indians. The program matches students with mentors who have similar academic majors, provides support for academically underprepared students, and ameliorates the potential alienation experienced when attending a PWI. Mentorship is understood as the ability to share autobiographical experiences. "The mentors sought to copy what had worked in their own lives and to avoid passing on what had not" (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996, p. 136).

In establishing this program, the students were responding directly to changes in institutional retention efforts and programming that resulted in eliminating a same-race match between incoming minority freshmen and mentors. The university also withdrew its focus on minority students, and began to match mentors with students of different ethnicities. American Indian students felt that these changes did not best serve their needs and particularly felt that American Indian students were best served by American Indian student mentors.

This program is unique in that it was developed by American Indian students who defined the mission and developed the guidelines of the program. (See Appendix A.) It provides academic and social programming geared toward the academic success, social integration, and personal development of its participants through peer mentoring. Because the AIRP is not administered by the university, it does not have the professional staff or financial support needed to establish a solid infrastructure.

Protégées in the program are American Indian freshmen, sophomore, and transfer students who are paired with American Indian junior, senior, and graduate student peer mentors. Each mentor is matched to one mentee. Peer mentors are asked to contact their protégés weekly, attend study hall with their protégé once a week, and provide regular reports on contact with their protégé to the student coordinator. The program is administered solely by a student coordinator through the university's American Indian Student Services (AISS) office and is governed by a student advisory board. At the end of each academic year, participants in the AIRP are asked to complete a program evaluation form to provide feedback for improvement.

### ***Participants***

Seven American Indian college juniors and seniors, most of whom were currently mentors, participated in our study. They were ages 19 to 22 and enrolled as undergraduates at the university where the study took place. All

had participated as mentees in the AIRP program during their freshman and sophomore years. These seven represented various tribes and came from both reservation and nonreservation communities. Most had been raised either in small rural communities or small reservation communities. Five were female and two were male. The ratio of females to males in this study may reflect the high participation rate of American Indian females in the retention program as well as the high enrollment of American Indian females at this institution.

Three of the study participants were seniors and four were juniors. Following is a description of each participant, identified by pseudonym.

*Steven:* Steven is a first-generation college student from a rural American Indian community. He is an American Indian student leader who was raised in a tribally traditional home.

*William:* Both of William's parents have college degrees. Although he grew up in an urban area, he was raised in a tribally traditional home.

*Olivia:* Both Olivia's parents have college degrees. She was raised in a rural American Indian community.

*Beth:* Beth is a first-generation college student fluent in her tribal language. She was born and raised on a reservation by a single mother.

*Regina:* Regina is a first-generation college student who transferred from a community college. She grew up in a rural American Indian community and maintains strong ties to her tribal community.

*Wendy:* Wendy is a first-generation, out-of-state college student who grew up in an urban area.

*Becky:* Becky is a first-generation college student born and raised on a reservation in a tribally traditional home. Her tribal language is her first language.

### ***Procedures***

We gained access to participants through the AISS office and the retention program student coordinator, who provided a list of all former program participants. We identified potential participants through purposeful sampling, based on the following criteria: participation in the retention program during freshman and sophomore years, current enrollment in the university, and membership in a federally recognized tribe. As a result, our pool consisted of American Indian students who had participated in the program and who had persisted in college.

We sent these potential participants letters through the AISS office, inviting their participation in semistructured focus groups and one-on-one interviews with the two American Indian researchers.

Two focus groups met in the researchers' private on-campus offices for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Each focus group consisted of three or four participants guided by a set of predetermined questions (Appendix B)

that explored their perceptions of peer mentors, their experiences with the retention program, and their perceptions of factors associated with American Indian persistence. Participants were allowed to elaborate their answers as they saw fit; exchanges occurred among the investigators and participants, as well as among participants. From the focus group participants, we invited five to participate in semistructured, face-to-face interviews with the researchers. We issued these invitations to students based on their experiences with peer mentors, experiences with the retention program, openness, and availability. These interviews, lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes, were conducted in semiprivate locations on campus with the American Indian researchers. The interviews were guided by a set of broad questions (Appendix C) designed to prompt students to describe in depth their experiences with the retention program. All the participants were asked to describe their overall experience with the program, experience with peer mentors, and personal perceptions of what contributed to their persistence.

We framed the interview format to meet Kvale's (1996) criterion—that the qualitative interview describes “the lived world of the interviewees with respect to the interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 30). Both the interview sessions and the focus groups were conducted informally to foster a conversational and comfortable atmosphere and to allow the researchers the flexibility to pursue issues as they arose.

### *Analysis*

Each of the focus groups and interviews was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using qualitative methods. We began our data analysis by reviewing the transcripts, coding the responses, and classifying them into various categories. Data classification is the process of “taking the text or qualitative information apart, looking for categories, themes, or dimensions of information” (Creswell, 1998, p. 144). All three researchers reviewed and classified data from the focus groups and interviews. We scanned the data “for categories of phenomena and for relationships among the categories” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981, p. 57), then divided the categories into themes.

Each researcher conducted successive reviews of the transcripts independently to identify an initial set of themes. Once we had completed our initial analysis, we brought our independent findings together for comparison and additional analysis (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), retaining the themes identified by all three researchers. We worked with the belief that “the results of these coding procedures reflect the emergence of theoretical categories that explain how the participants continually processed that problem” (Merriam, 2002, p. 50).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data revealed two noteworthy findings with respect to the peer-mentoring relationship. First, key elements are necessary for the initial establishment of the peer-mentoring relationship. Second, peer mentors play an important role in helping American Indian students overcome potential barriers to their academic success.

The initial development of the relationship between the peer mentor and protégé is vital to the overall development and effectiveness of the peer-mentoring relationship. If protégés did not detect specific qualities or characteristics in their peer mentors, they never established trust in the relationship. The participants discussed at length both positive and negative experiences with their peer mentors. Because these students participated in the retention program in their freshman and sophomore years, it was common for them to have two different peer mentors and thus two very distinct experiences with their peer mentors.

The researchers identified four key factors necessary for establishing a fruitful peer-mentoring relationship: (a) the peer mentor's commitment to the program and to the protégé, (b) the peer mentor's expression of genuine care for the protégé, (c) the protégé's perception of the peer mentor as admirable, and (d) the peer mentor's and protégé's ability to relate to one another. If all four of these factors were present during the initial establishment of the relationship, then a positive peer-mentoring relationship was established. If one or more of the factors was not present, a relationship failed to develop or quickly lost momentum if it had developed at the outset of the program. These factors will now be discussed in greater detail.

### ***Factors in Establishing a Fruitful Relationship***

*Mentor's Commitment to the Program and the Protégé.* Before investing in the peer-mentoring relationship, students felt that their peer mentors should exhibit a certain level of commitment to them as protégés. Those students matched with peer mentors who exhibited a strong commitment to the retention program, their protégés, and their roles as peer mentors developed successful relationships with their peer mentors. This perceived level of commitment was very important during the initial introduction of the protégé to the peer mentor and during the initial development of the relationship.

Olivia revealed her first impressions of a peer mentor during one of the initial program meetings:

I know, like, the very first meeting I went to, and there was this one guy there and he was really, like, passionate about he wanted to come in and commit to someone and be a part of that person's life. He was really, like, looking to help people, and he just wanted to guide that person. And I was just shocked.

I thought that was what I was getting into. Like, I thought I'd have someone that really wanted to make a difference and be there to, like, help me, and, you know, to be someone that I could trust.

Just as a positive attitude and a strong commitment to the program fostered the development of the peer-mentoring relationship, a negative attitude and a lack of commitment hindered the development of the relationship. Protégés described as “insincere” mentors who were involved for self-serving reasons or for their own self-enhancement. Participants explained that they could easily detect when peer mentors were not sincere about their commitment to their protégés or to their roles as peer mentors. Protégés perceived mentors as not exhibiting commitment when they failed to initiate or maintain contact, did not attend program events, or did not adhere to program guidelines. Beth explained,

Well, my first year in [the retention program] my mentor didn't even, like, . . . I never met my mentor. So, I think that in order to be good, I think they should want to be in the program and be involved with their mentee; because I didn't even get a call from them or anything. But my second time in [the retention program] it was like my mentor called me all the time. You know, just to check up on me, just to see how I was doing and everything.

When peer mentors did not exhibit commitment to the students or to the program, they were perceived as not being legitimate and therefore as untrustworthy. This perception, naturally, severely impeded the establishment of the relationship. Conversely, when students felt that their peer mentors were committed, they were seen as trustworthy and the students were more open to investing in the establishment of a relationship.

*Mentor's Care for the Mentee.* Participants reported that they experienced positive relationships with peer mentors who demonstrated genuine care for them. The issue of care was the most important factor in the continued development of the peer-mentoring relationship. When participants sensed that their peer mentors genuinely cared for them, they felt supported and were more trusting of their peer mentors. The interviewees and focus group participants identified several characteristics that provided evidence of care: showing interest in the student's progress, offering help or support, maintaining regular contact, and expressing concern for the student's well-being. Wendy described her peer mentors' care in both her freshman and sophomore years as follows:

They just seemed like they cared, like they wanted to help me, you know. They were just concerned, you know, “Do you need help with anything?” not just with, like I said, with your class work, but like finding classes or getting around [town], or getting around campus. It was just like a friend.

*Mentor as Admirable.* The study participants' perception that their peer mentors were admirable was another key component in the development of the relationship. Students discussed their desire to be associated with peer mentors whom they could admire and who would serve as role models. Peer mentors were perceived as admirable when they appeared to be goal oriented, academically successful, committed to their education, and committed to the American Indian community. Participants stated that admirable peer mentors were supportive of their academic success and capable of modeling appropriate behavior. Steven expressed his deep admiration for his peer mentor in the following statement:

And, like my second year, I mean my second mentor, he graduated last year and, you know, he's going to graduate school and he's working, he's one of my coworkers, and he's still doing, you know, I mean, he's still, I guess you could say, succeeding. I mean, he's still making a way for himself, and, like, he graduated from university level and he's still seeking to better himself.

Peer mentors who were not perceived as admirable were not viewed as positive role models. Students felt that such mentors would not positively contribute to the relationship and were incapable of fulfilling their roles. When matched with mentors whom they did not admire, the students were not satisfied with their experiences and did not invest in the peer-mentoring relationship. William described the reasons for his negative experience with his mentors in the following exchange:

William: I would say goal-oriented. If they're goal-oriented and if they're successful in college. Someone that you could look up to, and someone that you wouldn't be, I guess, ashamed to call your mentor. I feel like both of my mentors weren't like that. . . . I wasn't happy with them.

Interviewer: So, you couldn't look up to them?

William: Well, like . . . I just feel like that. I don't think that school was their priority. I thought that they were here for other reasons besides school. And that's what you don't want.

The concept of reciprocity was strongly motivating for the participants. They felt strongly about giving back to their tribal communities and understood that success in higher education would help them become active and productive members of their communities. When they described themselves as goal oriented, that goal was the ability to give back to their respective communities. Naturally, they desired peer mentors who shared these same values with regard to education and reciprocity.

*Mentor's and Mentee's Ability to Relate.* The participants' ability to relate to their peer mentors was very important in establishing the initial peer-mentoring relationship. It was evident that participants connected success-

fully with peer mentors who could relate to their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. Steven described the importance of establishing this connection:

If they [peer mentors] can relate to your circumstances also. . . . Like, for me, it was being able to identify where they were coming from, and they knew where I was coming from also. We kinda shared the same basic culture. . . . There were some subjects we could talk about pretty good. Like, um, my mentor came from the reservation, and I knew where, what town he was from, and then he knew where my family was from also. . . . And another thing that helped even further, I guess, bonding, is that we both participate in the Native American Church. . . . Every once in a while, if we'd get lucky enough, we might all go someplace. Go, you know, pray together. . . . Which is pretty good, 'cause like, uh . . . what all those people in that Native American Church say, "If you find somebody that sits around this circle, they're a good person to find." I mean they're a good person to be associated with.

The participants who shared common cultural values and experiences (e.g., spirituality, cultural values, tribal beliefs, and common backgrounds) with their peer mentors stated that they had more positive experiences. Considering the distinct cultural and life experiences of these American Indian students, having a peer mentor who could relate to their circumstances was extremely beneficial and comforting. Often peer mentors provided guidance and modeled ways in which participants could negotiate both the isolation of being American Indian at a PWI and the conflict that sometimes arose between their tribal values and institutional values. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that exposure to people from similar circumstances is beneficial to American Indian persisters (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003).

An emerging topic in the literature is the relationship of friends to learning (Martínez-Alemán, 1997, 2000). In the college environment, friendship has been defined as "the relationship bond formed between two or more students that encourages personal sharing and the desire to spend time together (Corwin, 2005). Derryberry and Thoma (2000) explained, "Close friendships do seem to be a development advantage for students in college" (p. 16). Close friends serve as a source of information and advice (Martínez-Alemán, 1997).

### ***Overcoming Potential Barriers***

The second finding revealed in this study was the important role that peer mentors played in helping American Indian persisters overcome potential barriers. The literature identified a number of barriers to American Indian postsecondary success, including lack of support, difficulty integrating into the university, difficulty adjusting to university life, personal conflict, lack

of academic preparation, and low self-esteem (Dehyle, 1992; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Huffman, 1993, 1999, 2001; Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986; Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Lin, 1985; Lin, LaCounte, & Eder, 1988; Scott, 1986; Wells, 1997). Peer mentors helped participants overcome potential barriers in three key areas: (a) connecting students to the community, (b) providing support, and (c) providing guidance.

*Connection to the Community.* Peer mentors played an important role in connecting participants to the campus and American Indian community by encouraging involvement in American Indian student organizations and peer networks. Olivia explained how her peer mentor encouraged her involvement on campus:

Um, my mentor was awesome. She always kept in constant contact with me, always made sure that we would meet up every couple of weeks if not more than that. Um, and she'd always go to the meetings, of course, with me. And so, she really, really did help me out a lot with different questions that I had and stuff like that. And then, she just introduced me to other people and, um, got me more involved and kept me updated on all that was going on and everything. So, she really made me feel at home and comfortable with, you know, with her and the program and everything.

*Support.* The American Indian persisters in this study indicated that their peer mentors provided key support during their first years of enrollment. Support came in various forms, including emotional support, encouragement, help with personal issues, and academic support. Regina described her experience with a very supportive peer mentor:

I don't know how other people's relationship with their mentors were, but me and [my mentor], like she *really* made an effort to always contact me, always call me every week, and we'd always try to have lunch, you know, at least once a month. You know, she'd always wanna meet up and talk and everything, and, um, she was always willing to answer questions that I had, and stuff like that.

Beth had a similar experience with her supportive mentor:

She was like the first person I met out there that really like, just tried to help me. . . . Or maybe it was 'cause of the program, or it *was* 'cause of the program that she really reached out to me and she helped me with a bunch of stuff, and took me places, like shopping, or grocery shopping, stuff like that. Or, she always tried to see if I . . . I know she was always going out, so like every time she went out she always invited me, and . . . I don't know, she was a really cool person, or she is nice, very nice.

The support and encouragement that participants received from their peer mentors was important to their self-esteem. It helped to reaffirm par-

ticipants' confidence that they had the resources and ability to succeed. This was particularly important because many participants were first-generation college students.

*Guidance.* Peer mentors were instrumental in providing guidance to participants in academics, developing goals, reconciling conflict, leadership, and personal development. Participants viewed their peer mentors as resources for the knowledge and experience that they had not yet gained. Participants frequently sought guidance from their peer mentors on academic issues such as choosing a major, locating academic tutoring, selecting courses, and attending graduate school. Regina described the guidance her peer mentor provided regarding her chosen major and career development:

[My mentor], she got her undergrad in [the same major]. So, I was able to ask her all these questions about, you know, about classes and stuff like that. And she was able to give me her perspective on getting her degree, and I kinda figured that I knew I was going into [this field], but I didn't know if, um, how I would put that to use in my life. And so, I would talk to her about it and she would tell me, "Well, I'm not interested in staying in [this field]; that was just my undergrad. I wanna work more toward this or whatever."

The guidance that peer mentors provided was not always related to academics; it often dealt with their protégés' personal development. Peer mentors frequently served as guides in helping participants to reconcile conflict, develop personal goals, or navigate their college experience. The perceived experience and knowledge of peer mentors qualified them as legitimate and valuable resources. Because they viewed peer mentors as having recently experienced and successfully negotiated similar situations, participants were more open to seeking their guidance. Steven discussed the value he placed on his mentoring experience in the following passage:

Uh, I know my mentor—he's an older student, he's not a, I guess, traditional student, he is much older, and I looked up to him because I knew he had went through these experiences and he also had experience in the kind of leadership position I was put into. You know, I asked from his experiences what he did, or how he handled the situation, and that's how I went about a lot of circumstances last year—was basically getting advice from him. So, like I said, advice is a significant part of it, I think.

William had a similar positive experience with his mentor:

But the first year I was a freshman, my mentor, he was pretty good, I thought. Um, he gave me a lot of advice, not really on school, but advice on life, and college experience, and life experiences, rather than more academic stuff.

Participants felt at ease with their peer mentors and felt comfortable approaching them for advice. It is important to note that participants often sought the guidance of peer mentors more readily than advice from faculty or staff.

### CONCLUSIONS

This study's findings provide important insights into the experiences of American Indian persisters with peer mentors and the role that peer mentors play in helping students overcome potential barriers to success. Moreover, the findings uncover the key elements necessary to the establishment of successful peer-mentoring relationships. Clearly, the initial establishment of the peer-mentoring relationship is vital to the future effectiveness of the relationship. The key elements vital to the initiation of a relationship between peer mentors and protégés are (a) the protégé's perception of mentor commitment to the program and to the protégé personally, (b) the protégé's perception of the mentor's genuine care for the protégé, (c) the protégé's admiration of the mentor, and (d) the mentor's ability to relate to the protégé. These qualities facilitated the establishment of trust and encouraged protégés to invest in the relationship.

These findings support previous research indicating that genuine interest, competency, commitment to the relationship, caring, altruism, and willingness to support are important characteristics of successful mentors (Alleman, 1982; Gandy, 1993). In their study of high-quality mentoring relationships, Karcher, Nakkula, and Harris (2005) found that mentors who participate in mentoring programs solely for self-enhancement fail to develop successful relationships with their protégés. Likewise, we found that when protégés perceived that their peer mentors were involved for self-serving reasons, positive peer-mentoring relationships failed to develop.

The ability of the protégé and peer mentor to relate to one another was vital to the development of the peer-mentoring relationship. An underlying theme was a cultural connection between the American Indian peer mentor and protégé. However, it would be erroneous to assume that one singular American Indian culture exists. The participants represented various tribes and tribal cultures. Although some participants shared a tribal connection with their peer mentors that could have made for stronger relationships, many of the participants related to their peer mentors on a much broader level as American Indians. It appears that the connections were based more on experiences as American Indians in the dominant society than as members of particular tribes.

The literature is divided on issues of cross-race mentoring. Although some research suggests that cross-race mentoring relationships can be

effective for minority students (Moses, 1989; Pounds, 1987; Rowe, 1989), other research indicates that they may be less effective (Hughes, 1988). The findings from this study are consistent with previous research that found positive results from same-ethnicity mentoring. Moore and Amey (1988) indicated that minority students often seek mentors from their own racial or ethnic groups and struggle to relate and learn from mentors from different groups. This finding is supported by Ugbah and Williams's (1989) study that found that African American students preferred African American mentors. Research on American Indian mentoring relationships is limited. Because the participants in this study felt a strong connection to their peer mentors as fellow American Indians, it supports the research supporting same-ethnicity mentoring.

The results also revealed important findings concerning the role of peer mentors. Peer mentors helped protégés overcome potential barriers by connecting them to the community, providing support, and providing guidance. Connecting students to the American Indian community on campus was an important aspect of this relationship. It not only integrated them into the university but also helped them to develop support networks vital to their persistence. These findings are consistent with those of Brown and Robinson-Kurpius (1997) and Murguia, Padilla, and Pavel (1991).

Other functions of the peer-mentoring relationship are support and guidance. These findings are consistent with findings from other research indicating that the provision of support, guidance, and role modeling is a key function of the mentoring relationship (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Kram, 1985). Additionally, findings on the role of the peer mentor support previous research suggesting that mentoring by a member of one's own culture helps students to recognize challenges they will face and overcome obstacles (Hoffman, Jackson, & Smith, 2005).

Though mentorship is not explicitly defined by the AIRP, the goals of the program and the duties outlined for mentors clearly communicate that the program views mentorship as a relationship that provides support and guidance. Although the participants agreed with these goals, a programmatic definition of mentorship was not provided to either the mentors or protégés. The lack of a clear articulation of a vision and definition of mentorship have serious implications for the program's overall effectiveness. The findings from this study provide important insight into this issue and help to illuminate implications for practice, not only for this program but also for similar programs geared toward American Indian students.

First, the selection of peer mentors is critical. It is important that peer-mentoring programs develop a screening process to help ensure the selection of qualified and committed individuals. The level of commitment and admirable qualities of potential peer mentors should be taken into consideration.

Those seeking to serve as peer mentors must understand their expected role and duties and exhibit strong commitment to their protégés. Mentors must be actively invested in these relationships and aware of the responsibility they assume for shaping their protégés (Kartje, 1996). The findings indicate that a cultural connection is a key factor in the ability of protégés and peer mentors to relate to one another. Pairing American Indian students with American Indian peer mentors can be a positive step toward facilitating their academic success and easing their transition into the university.

Second, it is imperative to train and monitor peer mentors to ensure that expectations are clearly understood and that they acquire the appropriate tools and skills for success. Ongoing supervision of mentoring programs as well as initial and continued training of mentors are critical components of successful mentoring programs (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005; Johnson, 1989). Continuous monitoring is needed to ensure that the relationship is progressing, to identify inappropriate matches, and to address potential obstacles to the development of the relationship.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides insight into American Indian students' experiences with peer mentors at one institution but is limited by the nature of the sample. Although the participants in this study represented various tribes and came from both reservation and nonreservation areas, our findings may not be typical of all American Indian students. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized to the overall American Indian population. Much remains to be learned about the experiences of American Indian students in higher education, particularly with regard to retention and mentoring.

The findings indicate a need for further inquiry into the development of peer-mentoring relationships for different populations of American Indian students. While this study provides insight into elements necessary for the establishment of the peer-mentoring relationship, further investigation is needed regarding the stages of the mentoring relationship. Additionally, because certain mentor qualities seem to encourage protégé investment in the relationship, further exploration of mentor and protégé characteristics is warranted.

Further investigation into the role of first- and second-generation status for American Indian students is also warranted. The literature reveals that first-generation students are far less likely to succeed in college and that there is a gap between the persistence rates of first- and second-generation college students (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). First-generation students are also less likely to develop relationships with

other students and become involved on campus (Billson & Terry, 1982; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini, Rendón, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, et al., 1994; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). However, both the first- and second-generation students in this study expressed similar needs and problems, which appeared to be related to their status as American Indian students on a PWI, not to their parents' level of education. This finding contradicts previous research that identified acculturation and managing the challenges of college as more difficult for first-generation students (Terenzini, Rendón, et al., 1994). It seems that acculturation and managing challenges for these participants had more to do with culture and ethnicity than first-generation status.

Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg (1986) found that Sioux students who identified as "traditional" had a better chance for persistence in college compared with nontraditional Sioux. They therefore concluded that attachment to cultural identity or retention of their traditional cultural heritage facilitated adjustment to and achievement at college. The interaction of ethnicity, first or second-generation status, and level of traditionalism warrants further investigation.

An interesting finding worth noting for future research is that the participants indicated less satisfying relationships with their peer mentors during their freshman year but more successful and satisfying relationships during their sophomore year. It may be that the method of pairing mentors and protégés improved in the second year and/or that protégés were more open and better equipped to receive the benefits of a peer-mentoring relationship in their sophomore year. Further investigation is needed to provide more insight into the matching of mentors and protégés.

This research provides a foundation for understanding the role of peer mentors in the retention of American Indian students. Currently, only limited research is available on the benefits of peer mentoring for this population. Further investigation into the benefits of peer-mentoring programs and the role of peer mentoring in facilitating success among American Indian students would increase understanding the factors that increase student retention. This recommendation is reinforced by the work of Betencourt, Charlon, Eubanks, Kernahan, and Fuller (1999), who suggested that "practitioners . . . should recognize the capacity of group membership to enhance . . . social and academic developmental needs" (p. 220). Moreover, researchers must further examine successful retention programs for American Indian students to develop better strategies for this grossly underrepresented and underserved population. A further research possibility is exploring how student-initiated programs (e.g., peer mentoring) serve as acts of resistance and freedom (Martínez-Alemán, 1997).

Examined together, the results may suggest that the AIRP facilitates some not-yet-identified process. It may be that this program itself creates

and fosters a success-promoting ethos. Kezar (2007) asserted, "An ethos, carefully enacted, draws students into their learning experiences by moving beyond activities that engage the mind and body to make connections with the student's spirit and heart" (p. 14). The answer lies in similar research with other students who, like the students in this study, will graciously share their stories of success.

## APPENDIX A AMERICAN INDIAN RETENTION PROGRAM

*Mission Statement:* In order to increase our retention rate we will provide services that allow our students to flourish in their quest for higher education and personal growth while at the university.

### *Guiding Principles*

- Having the necessary resources, training, and feedback will enable us to meet our students' needs.
- By empowering our mentors and students with information, we will promote their desire to engage in continuous improvement.
- Open communication, honesty, and completing work in a timely fashion will promote trust within the program and a healthy work environment.
- Working toward common goals will encourage teamwork.

### *Goals and Objectives*

- Meet and exceed our goal of a 5% increase in retention rates
- We recognize that the most difficult time for our students often occurs during the sophomore year rather than the freshmen year. We will put forth the effort necessary to ensure the retention of these students.
- Increase alliances with other minority organizations on campus
- Retention is a problem faced by all minority communities on campus. With the success of this program, we would like to work with other minority organizations to implement similar retention programs.
- Increase involvement with the off-campus American Indian community
- As a part of the retention program, we want to engage the [surrounding] Indian community as mentors for the program, thus allowing the program to help build a network for the students while building ties with the community.

### *Plan for the Program*

We have set a goal of increasing the retention rate of the freshman and sophomore class by 5%. We believe this to be a realistic goal that will produce tangible results. We plan to accomplish this goal with the following actions:

- By providing mentors for the freshmen, sophomore, and transfer students to supply them with the knowledge and support necessary to make their time at the university as successful and fulfilling as possible.

- C By providing students with tutoring and other academic assistance and services as needed for their courses.
- C By providing a safe and effective study environment to enable students to excel and succeed in their academic endeavors
- C By promoting a strong work ethic, good time management, and other skills that will enhance our students' productivity
- C By providing students with monthly social activities to help relieve stress and build relationships with other students and mentors
- C By providing students with information about the other offices and services that are available to help with all aspects of their university experience

## **APPENDIX B**

### **FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT**

The following general questions will be asked with additional prompts as needed to facilitate discussion.

- I. American Indian Student Retention
  - A. What factors do you think affect American Indian student retention?
  - B. What do you think helps American Indian students be successful in college?
- II. Peer Mentoring
  - A. What is a peer mentor?
  - B. What do you think is the role of a peer mentor?
  - C. What do you think are qualities of a good peer mentor?
  - D. How important is it to have a peer mentor from the same cultural background?
  - E. What makes for a good peer-mentoring relationship?
    - 1. What is the role of the peer mentor in the relationship?
    - 2. What is the role of the mentee in the relationship?
- III. Academic Programs
  - A. Do you think academic programs help American Indian students succeed in college? If yes, why?
  - B. What does an effective academic program include?
- IV. Social Programs
  - A. Do you think social programs help American Indian student succeed in college? If yes, why?
  - B. What does an effective social program include?
- V. AIRP Program
  - A. Why do you think students participate in the AIRP program?
  - B. What do you like best about the AIRP program? Why?
  - C. What do you like least about AIRP? Why?
  - D. To what extent do you think AIRP contributes to the retention of its participants?
  - E. If you had to develop a program to increase the retention of American Indian students in college, how would you do it?

1. What would the program include?
2. What types of programs do you think are least effective for American Indian college students?

## APPENDIX C

### ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW SCRIPT

The following general questions will be asked with additional prompts as needed to facilitate discussion.

- I. Describe your experience with the AIRP.
- II. What was your experience with your peer mentor?
- III. What was your experience with the academic tutoring provided by the AIRP?
- IV. What was your experience with the social activities programs provided by the AIRP?

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