**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Rural Indigenous students' postsecondary experiences: North and South of the Medicine Line

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**Abstract**
Indigenous students from rural communities attending postsecondary institutions can face unique challenges that negatively impact persistence and retention rates. Unfortunately, most postsecondary institutions are ill-equipped to understand and support this population. This chapter briefly outlines the challenges rural Indigenous students encounter and provides best practices developed by postsecondary institutions that can increase Indigenous student success.

This chapter focuses on the experiences of rural Indigenous students in postsecondary education North and South of the Medicine Line. A decolonizing approach recognizes that the Canada–United States border is a political construct that does not significantly impact Indigenous student experiences under colonial regimes on either side of the 49th parallel. The Plains Cree, whose traditional territories were severed by the imposition of the borderline, call it the Medicine Line because of its power to prevent US soldiers from crossing (O'Brien, 1984). Indigenous students from the North and South encounter similar challenges in their postsecondary education journeys. However, there is a gap in the literature focused on the postsecondary experiences of Indigenous students from rural communities. This chapter draws on the research findings of experts in the field and studies that include information on the educational experiences of rural Indigenous students, as well as our own 60+ combined years of experience working with Indigenous students on both sides of the Medicine Line. We begin with a demographic profile of Indigenous postsecondary students, followed by a brief overview of the history of colonialism and historical trauma that deeply affects our daily lives and our experiences in postsecondary education. We review some of the current research on the unique challenges and needs of Indigenous students in general, and Indigenous rural students in particular. We conclude with an overview of programs and practices that directly address the needs of rural Indigenous students and discuss the positive impacts on their postsecondary experiences.

**TABLE 1**  Indigenous populations, urban and rural

| Year/Nation | Population | % of total | % urban | % rural Reserves/reservations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2016 Census North | 1,673,785 | 4.9 | 51.8 | 48.2 |
| 2010 Census South | 5,200,000 | 1 | 46 | 54 |

*Sources:* Duwees & Marks, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2014, p. 1.

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

The first challenge in gaining a thorough demographic profile of Indigenous peoples in the Americas is the confusing terms. In the South, "Native American" and "American Indian" are used interchangeably, and the terms American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) are used in American census data. In the North, the term "Aboriginal" is a legal construct defined in the *Canadian Constitution Act of 1982* as "Indian, Inuit, and Metis." Most Northern "Indians" refer to their collective selves as First Nations (Azzi, 2012). We use the term "Indigenous" because it is inclusive and reflects our relationship to the land, however, there is no single term accepted by all Indigenous peoples because we are not all the same. Mostly in our interactions with each other we identify ourselves according to our Tribes or Nations. Denise Henning, tsitsalagi (I am Cherokee); Winona Wheeler, nehiyawpwat (I am Cree Assiniboine).

The second challenge is the use of the term "rural" for Indigenous communities is complicated. The demographic data for rural Indigenous populations is not fully captured in current statistics as much of the American Indian reservations, Pueblos, Rancherias, Alaska Native Villages, Oklahoma Tribal Statistical Areas, and surrounding counties that are home to a majority of AIAN people in America are gathered using outdated Census definitions and have poor data quality (Dewees & Marks, 2017). In fact, according to the United Nations (2012) official data collection on Indigenous peoples tend to be inadequate and sometimes non-existent. The reality is that Indigenous people live in many kinds of rural communities, like small villages, private property, and on vacant Crown or public lands. An additional barrier for deeper understanding is that the postsecondary experiences of Indigenous students from rural communities has not been studied or reported with much detail in the postsecondary education literature. For the purposes of this chapter we use the term "rural" exclusively to include First Nation reserves (North) and Tribal reservations (South) because there is some research data available on them. According to Duwees and Marks (2017), "Among the most misunderstood rural areas are the American Indian reservations, Pueblos, Rancherias, Alaska Native Villages, Oklahoma Tribal Statistical Areas and surrounding counties that are home to the majority of AIAN people in America" (p.1). Although incomplete and inconsistent, census data provides some demographic information (see Table 1).

The paucity of thorough census data makes it very difficult to provide a purely "rural" analysis of Indigenous students' challenges in postsecondary institutions (PSIs). What we do know is that approximately half of Indigenous peoples, and by extrapolation half the Indigenous postsecondary students, come from rural communities. Most studies do not distinguish between rural and urban Indigenous students. However, those studies that do are clear that rural and urban Indigenous students face similar challenges, but these challenges are compounded for rural students.

In the North an Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) (2011) study claims that over a 25-year period (1981–2006) there was some increase in Indigenous university graduates. In 1981, only 2% of Aboriginal Canadians aged 25–64 had university

degrees, compared to 8% of non-Aboriginal Canadians of the same ages. Twenty-five years later the numbers increased to 7.7% and 23.4%, respectively. The gap in postsecondary attainment rates between Aboriginal Canadians and non-Aboriginal Canadians increased considerably during this time (AUCC, 2011).

In the South the Indigenous undergraduate population in higher education is approximately 0.7% of the total student population and approximately 0.5% are in graduate programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019, Table 306.50). The numbers are considered insignificant and so are often left out of postsecondary research and data reporting. The available data indicates that only 10% of Native Americans who enter undergraduate programs attain bachelor's degrees and only 17% attain associate degrees (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Although there is very little demographic data on "rural" Indigenous students in higher education, there is a growing number of studies on Indigenous students from reserves and reservations and so we draw from these studies for reasons stated above.

## COLONIZATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

To understand the current experiences of Indigenous students in PSIs, it is important to better understand the larger historical context that significantly shapes their current education experiences. Colonialism is an event, a process, and it imposes a relationship. In the Americas classic colonialism evolved into settler colonialism where foreigners immigrated to and permanently occupied Indigenous lands over which they forcefully asserted sovereignty. The goal of settler colonialism is the erasure of Indigenous peoples in order to establish settler rights to Indigenous lands and resources (Wolfe, 2006). In order to justify or rationalize the theft of Indigenous lands and resources, and the near annihilation of Indigenous peoples, the settlers cast Indigenous peoples as "savages," and "uncivilized," therefore dehumanized.

Following the "Indian wars" era between 1622 and the late 19th century, the primary means by which settler governments cleared the land for settlement was through development and passage of Federal assimilation policies. The tools of assimilation were intermarriage (dilute the bloodlines) and education (Gonzales, 1992). The goal of 19th century Indian education policies was cultural transformation—cultural genocide—and settler religions provided the moral rationalizations. In the South, "Indian boarding schools" were envisioned to "kill the Indian, save the man" (Pratt, 1892, p. xi). In the North, they were intended to eradicate the "Indianness" out of Indigenous children (Fournier & Crey, 1997). These government and church run residential schools had horrific and debilitating short- and long-term impacts on Indigenous peoples. Hotbeds of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, malnutrition and disease, they caused often irreparable emotional, spiritual, physical, and psychological damage (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The intergenerational trauma resulting from the residential school system continues to have devastating impacts. It tore families apart, alienated children from their lands, peoples, and their traditions. Many experienced post-traumatic stress disorder and passed their pain and trauma on to their children (Steckley & Cummins, 2008). To this day there is cautious distrust of non-Indigenous education systems. Indigenous scholars argue that current educational systems and practices support continued colonization by reinforcing power dynamics, privileges, thought, and knowledge generated by the dominant society (Brayboy, 2005; Smith, 2012).

Many PSIs are ineffective in addressing systemic racism. Some also maintain instructional practices that ignore Indigenous cultural and cognitive learning styles of Indigenous students and many non-Indigenous faculty lack the tools to truly engage Indigenous

students (Condappa, 2018). The patterns of limited enrollment, low retention and graduation rates, and feelings of exclusion among Indigenous students indicate that PSIs are failing to adequately support Indigenous students (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Shotton et al., 2013; Shotton, Tachine, Nelson, Minthorn, & Waterman, 2018; Tippeconnic et al., 2005).

## WALKING IN TWO WORLDS: INDIGENOUS STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Existing studies on the challenges and needs of Indigenous college students from the North and the South indicate that they have shared experiences. Likewise, studies agree that rural and non-rural Indigenous students share many challenges and experiences (Malatest, 2002; Malatest, 2010; Walton, Hamilton, Clark, Pidgeon, & Arnouse, 2020). However, common challenges and experiences of rural students are exacerbated and they face additional challenges, which are further discussed below. Keeping in mind that approximately 50% of Indigenous peoples live in rural areas, the discussion that follows reflects shared Indigenous student experiences, except where data are available specifically on rural Indigenous students.

Marroquín (2020) explains that past studies took a cultural deficit approach grounded in the belief that Indigenous students "cannot succeed in college because of their cultural integrity (i.e., maintenance of cultural traditions and cultural identities) which may impede their integration on postsecondary campuses" (p. 75). According to cultural deficit theories, "Natives must assimilate to mainstream culture to be successful by Westernized academic standards" (Marroquín, 2020, p. 75). Variations of this attitude obfuscates blind PSIs about the systemic barriers that still cater to the predominantly non-Indigenous middle-class student body they were modeled to serve. Shifting the paradigm from problematizing Indigenous students to problematizing PSIs will go a long way in developing successful Indigenous student retention strategies.

Studies by Malatest in 2002 and 2010 identified seven categories of systemic challenges Indigenous postsecondary students face: financial, academic, individual, social, employment, historical, and cultural (Malatest, 2002, 2010). The argument that some PSI professionals espouse, is that non-Indigenous students face similar barriers and that Indigenous students should simply make use of existing programs and supports. However, studies specific to Indigenous students stress that these challenges are worsened by other significant socio-cultural barriers they face and, therefore, require different kinds of support (Maletest, 2010). Following, we provide brief overviews of financial, academic, and several significant challenges in the socio-cultural environments of Indigenous postsecondary students. Keep in mind again that these challenges are experienced by almost all Indigenous students but are likely more significant for Indigenous students from rural communities.

## Financial opportunities

Indigenous students face the same PSI expenses all students face—tuition, books, travel, housing, food, and day-to-day expenses—but many Indigenous students face additional expenses like childcare, extended family expenses, daily commuting (from home communities if commuting), and/or travel to and from distant rural communities of origin. Numerous studies on the economic condition of rural Indigenous people demonstrate that they have lower median incomes than others. According to the 2015 census in the North, four out of every five reserves have median incomes below the poverty

line ($22,133 per person) (Press, 2017). Census data indicates the median income on reservations in the South, per household, was $29,097 compared to the White household median income of $66,943. The disparity between incomes of rural Indigenous people and the national medians is substantial (Muhammad, 2019), meaning significantly fewer Indigenous students can rely on financial support from family. In addition, funding available to Indigenous students is extremely limited and inconsistent. In the North, there are federal postsecondary support funds allocated to First Nations but there is never enough to meet the high demand. In the South, student funding is inconsistent depending on the relative prosperity of the Tribes, and the number of potential funds is variable depending on whether the Tribes are federally or state recognized. The reality is that many Indigenous students receive very little financial support and must rely on bursaries, grants, scholarships, loans, and work. In Ontario, one third of former students stated that financial challenges were a primary reason for not completing their studies (Malatest, 2010).

## Academic opportunities

A significant barrier to accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education is the inequitable support of Indigenous students' academically. In the North, the high school graduation rates of First Nation students are approximately 36%, compared to the 72% Canadian rate (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2012a). Those students who do attend PSIs may be disadvantaged given inadequacies with the K–12 system due to lack of resources, teaching staff, and/or availability of pre-requisite courses. On-reserve First Nation schools are significantly underfunded compared to provincial schools (Assembly First Nations, 2012b).

In both the North and the South, particularly with rural and reservation schools, many students experienced difficulties with "study skills, time management abilities, or technological skills" needed to "succeed" in postsecondary education (Malatest, 2002, p. 270). Inequitable education resources result in insufficient academic preparation, a significant barrier to postsecondary enrollment and retention rates. Further, the culture and values are different from Indigenous students, leaving them to feel isolated and alienated; therefore, they find it difficult to succeed academically (Graydahl, 2010).

## Socio-cultural environment

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) assert that Indigenous student attrition may be due to cultural factors first, and are "more likely to drop out of college for non-academic reasons than for academic deficiencies" (p. 5). The most challenging barriers to postsecondary persistence are the overlapping and compounding socio-cultural factors Indigenous students face that most non-Indigenous students do not (Marroquín, 2020). Many institutions view the underrepresentation of Indigenous students from a cultural deficit perspective: "low achievement, high attrition, poor retention, weak persistence, etc.," which places "the blame on the students" (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 18). Shifting the paradigm explains Indigenous student underrepresentation as a shortcoming of higher education systems that do not respect Indigenous students, or see them as relevant, and accept no responsibility for not creating an inclusive environment. The primary socio-cultural environment factors impacting Indigenous students are racism, cultural integrity and identity, lack of supportive role models, and familial support and access.

## Racism

Among the studies we reviewed, Indigenous students reported experiences with racism, "discrimination and insensitivity and felt misunderstood, segregated and on the periphery of the larger student body" (Ottmann, 2017, p. 99). Waterman (2012) reported that "[t]he micro-aggressions and the racisms in the classroom and in the residences really dampen student enthusiasm for continuing in higher education" (p. 75). Cote-Meek's (2014) study on racism, trauma, and resistance in postsecondary education argues that "[w]ithout a doubt one of the major challenges that Aboriginal students face is racism—societal, institutional and personal" (p. 91). Examples of racism include: denial of racism, being silenced, perception of inferiority, Indigenous Studies courses perceived as "not real academic courses," being called on to be the "Native expert" or "cultural expert," and everyday racism (Cote-Meek, 2014, p. 87). Oxendine, Taub, and Cain (2020) argue that racism arising from an unwelcoming and hostile environment is "linked to lower academic self-confidence, decreased attainment, decreased academic involvement, and lower institutional commitment" (p. 268).

Another example of racism is the institutional consent of Native American sports mascots and team names. Institutions that allow these are culpable for exacting hostile environments and fanning the flames of racism. In 2011, the American Psychological Association (APA) recommended the "immediate retirement of American Indian mascots, symbols, images and personalities" (para. 1) by PSIs. The presence of these mascots, they argued, created hostile learning environment for Indigenous students, undermined these students' ability to portray their cultures in an accurate manner, and constituted " a form of discrimination against American Indian Nations that can lead to negative relations between groups" (APA, 2011, para. 3).

## Cultural integrity and identity

Students arriving on urban campuses from rural communities experience cultural discontinuity and often conflict with value systems, worldviews, institutional systems, physical spaces, and curriculum that require them to spend a disproportionate time focused on surviving rather than learning. The cultural discontinuity experienced between home, the city, and the PSI, "was a significant obstacle to persistence for many Indigenous students" (Walton et al., 2020, p. 444).

A sense of belonging in PSIs "is one of the most important factors in the retention and academic success of students" (Oxendine et al., 2020, p. 269). This is especially true for rural Indigenous students. The feeling of belonging comes from a sense of being valued in the campus community, including "peer group interactions, social support, staff support," "lack of social isolation," "connection to family," and having a place on campus like an Indigenous student center (Oxendine et al., 2020, p. 269). According to Oxendine et al. (2020) "the relational aspect of sense of belonging is most important…because identity, both in the individual student and within the Native American community, is derived from connection to a community or place" (p. 269).

When Indigenous students do not quickly adapt to institutional norms, efforts to socialize them into the dominant campus culture are often intensified, which increases their feelings of loneliness and isolation (AFN, 2012; Holmes, 2006). Indigenous students from more traditional cultural families reported strong feelings of "not fitting in." They find themselves deeply conflicted trying to maintain their traditions, cultures, ceremonies, and languages (Williams Lasher, 2016). Indigenous students are required to accept a new form

of consciousness, an orientation that not only displaces, but often devalues, their world views. For many, this is too great a sacrifice and often results in withdrawing from PSIs, resulting in feelings of failure (Malatest, 2002).

Cultural discontinuity experienced by Indigenous students in urban environments and campus cultures intensifies in the classroom. Too often PSIs do not recognize or respect the cultural knowledge, traditions, and core values Indigenous students bring. In some PSIs there is little Indigenous history and life reflected in the curriculum and programming or in aesthetics and art work on campus. Indigenous students stress a need for cultural support with programs and activities and curricula that "reinforce the importance of language, traditions and pride" (Malatest, 2010, p. 25). Culturally relevant frameworks are vital to the overall success of Indigenous students (Henning, 1999; Oxendine, 2015; Poolaw, 2018; Waterman, 2012).

PSIs must acknowledge that there is no single homogenous rural Indigenous culture and that not all Indigenous students come from a strong connection to traditional homelands or raised in tribe-specific ways of life. Students already experiencing cultural discontinuity often search for those connections in PSIs. Indigenous Studies curriculums and Indigenous social and educational support programs teach them about the history that impacted their families and communities of origin. They learn about the intergenerational trauma impacts of colonialism, they network with other Indigenous students, staff and faculty, and many gain a deeper connection to their heritages, cultures, and self-identity.

## Developing support and identifying role models

Restoule et al. (2013) interviewed over 250 postsecondary students in 2008 and learned that having Indigenous role models was a significant factor in their decisions to attend PSIs. Sixty percent reported they had a role model who attended a PSI; 84% knew at least five who completed postsecondary programs, and 90% had a cousin who attended. Having Indigenous role models is a significant predictor of success (Restoule et al., 2013).

Moving from Indigenous majority home communities into urban PSIs, where they immediately become visible minorities, is alienating and lonely for rural Indigenous students. Relationships are vital for their well-being and a sense of belonging so when students do not see themselves in the faculty and staff the senses of isolation and alienation increases. Every student in the Walton et al. (2020) study indicated that relationships with Indigenous faculty "were key factors to their success at university" (p. 440). Upon arriving at PSIs, many Indigenous students searched for Indigenous faculty for assistance, and to initiate relationships. Another study found that Indigenous faculty go out of their way to develop and maintain good relationships with communities and families to help support students.

Trusting and supportive relations with faculty and staff have a positive effect on resiliency, cultural reciprocity, and persistence (Locklear, 2019; Marroquín, 2020). Marroquín (2020) explains further, that "the more students felt supported they were more apt to preserve and maintain their cultural tradition and identity and were most likely to participate in meaningful cultural exchanges with faculty, staff, and other students" (p. 90).

## Family

Non-Native PSIs are not equipped to accommodate the unique demographic dynamics of the Indigenous student body. Many Indigenous students are over the age of 25 and

the majority are women, about half of whom are raising families and struggling with the logistics of balancing school, children, often part-times jobs, financial duress, and lack of affordable child care. Family responsibilities were consistently raised in many studies as a primary reason why Indigenous students either do not enter postsecondary programs or are unable to continue (AFN, 2011, p. 7).

Many Indigenous students also maintain strong community and family ties and responsibilities, "which can act as a barrier to completing projects and programs without interruption" (Malatest, 2002, p. 19). Family emergencies sometimes draw them home part way through a semester for extended periods of time. Some do not return; others return and struggle to catch up. For students whose home communities are a significant distance from campus, the costs and time associated with travelling seriously hamper their studies (Malatest, 2010). From Indigenous perspectives, family responsibilities are not barriers. Rather, family and community support enhanced student success—cultural continuity and preserving tribal connections essential for Indigenous students (Hale, 2002; Waterman, 2012). Many rural students report that family and community responsibilities take priority over schooling (Restoule et al., 2013). Indigenous students from rural communities face all challenges their urban cousins encounter, however, their experiences are compounded by the additional strains of moving long distances from home.

## DECOLONIZING POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS: BEST PRACTICES

In the early 1970s First Nations and Tribes, concerned about the low retention rate of Indigenous students in PSIs, created their own higher education institution. When Manitou College was created in 1973 in the North, the student success rates soon exceeded all other universities in Quebec (Stonechild, 2006). Navajo Community College (now Diné College) was created in the South a few years earlier also to meet Indigenous student needs and provide access to postsecondary for those living on reservations. The tribal college (TC) movement now includes 20 institutions in the North and 75 institutions in the South (AIHEC, 2020).

The TCs are locally accessible and provide culturally relevant environments with Indigenous faculty, staff and Elders; culturally relevant curriculum (including land based, experiential learning, and Indigenous languages); funding assistance, and marketable skills that benefit tribal communities. Tribal college students who transfer to degree granting universities, "were four times as likely to complete their degrees as those who entered as first-year students" (Stonechild, 2006, p. 131).

Student Affairs professionals and practitioners can implement practices from TCs within non-Native PSIs to increase support for Indigenous retention and completion. Other culturally affirming environments have been identified and discussed by (Belanger, 2014; Blair, 2015; Locklear, 2019; Malatest, 2010; Oxendine, 2015; Rich, 2011; Stonechild, 2006) and include:

- Space in the academy for Indigenous knowledge and anti-colonial critiques
- Indigenous student services and support programs
- Access to healthcare
- Ongoing relations with tribal colleges and [Indigenous] community partnerships
- Providing ceremonial grounds and Elders programs
- Tuition waivers or other financial supports
- Strong mentorship program

Institutions that are truly committed to decolonization and Indigenizing the academy are also addressing systemic and individual racism, hiring Indigenous faculty and staff, and supporting the familial relations and responsibilities that are necessary for Indigenous student success. Student Affairs professions in PSIs are well positioned in their work to implement the above initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

PSIs need to acknowledge that colonialism is relational and that they have the power and responsibility to create the space, programs, and systems that will significantly help to decolonize that relationship. That relationship is between those who benefit from the displacement, dispossession, and marginalization of Indigenous peoples, and those who have been displaced, dispossessed, and marginalized. Interrogating the past and present, and acknowledging how universities have benefited from colonialism, is vital toward decolonizing the institutions and creating a more inclusive learning environment for Indigenous students.

We are at a pivotal moment in our history where Indigenous people are demanding decolonization. This challenge places the ownership of campus culture and environments for Indigenous student success squarely on the shoulders of every non-Native PSI on the continent. Therefore, we encourage Student Affairs professionals to use the best practices recommended in this chapter to better support rural Indigenous students.

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