

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

An Indigenous Approach to Strategic Enrollment Management: The Native Student Journey at Tribal College and Universities

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Cultivating Native Student Success is an Indigenous approach to strategic enrollment management that builds capacity centered in the unique cultural values inherent in tribal college and universities to increase American Indian and Alaska Natives visibility, representation, and degree attainment in higher education.

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Tribal Colleges and Universities: Essential to Native Student College Degree Attainment and Tribal Nations

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are unique institutions of higher education. They are small, mostly rural institutions with student bodies that range from approximately 120-2,000 students, serving a majority American Indian/Alaskan Native (AIAN) students. Most

TCUs are located on or near reservations and are sanctioned, or chartered, by the governing body of an Indian tribe or tribes. It is not just the locations, size, and type of students TCUs serve that make them unique; it is because the missions of each TCU is to serve their students in ways that sustain their tribal cultures, language, and values. These institutions evidence the strength of their tribal nations, sovereign and political nations, with a complex and nuanced context that surrounds them. TCUs provide an opportunity to enact self-determination for tribal people and are vital to tribal generation and sovereignty (Boyer 2015). TCUs are essential to Native student enrollment, retention, and completion in higher education, and are experts in creating a sense of cultural belonging for students (Nelson 2017).

However, AIANS continue to face a college-going and college completion crisis. Only 15.5 percent of the AIAN population hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared

to 33 percent of the general population, and AIANS make up less than 1 percent of the total higher education student population (NCES 2021). TCUs enroll 11 percent of these AIAN higher education students nationally, where their student bodies are comprised of over 85 percent Native students (Hanson, Moore, Morseau and Taylor 2023; NCES 2021). The percentage of AIAN students in higher education is so small that oftentimes these students are not reported or mentioned in data statistics (Shotton, Lowe and Waterman 2023). When actual numbers are reported, Native students are more visible, making up more than 120,000 of the higher education population (NCES 2021). Of these 120,000 students, more than 20,000 attended TCUs from 244 tribal nations and 33 states (Hanson, *et al.* 2023). This is a notable number; evidence that TCUs are critical in educating their tribal members and communities, utilizing their culture values and traditional knowledge (Boyer 2015).

TCUs offer a variety of postsecondary degrees grounded in place-based education experiences of their traditional and regional Native cultures, foundational in their strategic enrollment management (SEM) plans. They are vital to Native student engagement and their journey in higher education, as most share that their goal to pursuing a degree is to give back to their communities (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, and Solyom 2012; Lopez 2021). With TCUs as a central hub in their community, these institutions are essential to what it means to be a Native degree holder, as TCUs are grounded in their local culture/s and community.

Cultivating Native Student Success: A TCU Strategic Enrollment Management Initiative

To support TCUs and their missions, the American Indian College Fund¹ initiated Cultivating Native Student Success (CNSS) in fall 2019. The initiative centers on the development of SEM planning at TCUs from an Indigenous perspective, to foster AIANS postsecondary success and TCU capacity in serving Native communities. SEM

provides a framework for improving student and institutional outcomes by enabling student access to and success in higher education, operational practices, and comprehensive institutional planning (Hossler and Bontrager 2014). Using the expertise and best SEM practices within the field of higher education, the initiative maps the process, goals, and implementation with each TCU as it aligns with their values and in ways that makes sense for their students. CNSS focuses on two overarching goals:

- Support the capacity of TCUs to improve and develop long-term changes for sustainable programming and success in enrollment management, academic planning, and expanded holistic, place-based student supports.
- Develop campus-wide plans focused on increasing Native student enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.

CNSS implementation in 2020-2023 supported five TCUs: Stone Child College in Montana, Oglala Lakota College in South Dakota, Salish Kootenai College in Montana, Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University in Wisconsin, and United Tribes Technical College in North Dakota. These TCUs represented a spectrum of location, size, course delivery methods, and where they were in the SEM planning process at the start of the initiative. TCU project teams were comprised of five to seven staff from various departments to promote communication of SEM planning across their institutions. Throughout the project timeframe, teams participated in gatherings (mostly virtual due to the pandemic, and then in person in 2022) three to four times per year, to share in their SEM planning through their traditional knowledge and cultural values, connecting on their unique and shared experiences. Individual TCU check-ins and site visits were conducted regularly by College Fund staff to build relationships and rapport as a partner and supporter in their SEM efforts.

The TCUs started their SEM initiatives by completing a comprehensive form to reflect on their institution's enrollment management landscape and to identify areas of focus and need. Through analysis of their three-

¹ The American Indian College Fund's mission is to invest in Native students and tribal college education to transform lives and communities.

to-five-year enrollment data, benchmarks and targets for their key enrollment indicators were established. Once these targets were set, they utilized traditional SEM planning templates and examples to identify areas of focus to support their institution's SEM plan. What quickly came to the surface, however, was that their cultural values did not always fit into the structure of these tools. TCUs rely on their traditional values and uphold their institutional missions particularly when addressing challenges involving insufficient infrastructure, and human and financial resources (Nelson 2017; Shotton, *et al.* 2023). With these unique aspects, TCUs utilized available SEM planning guides as a resource to deal with such challenges and leaned on their traditional knowledge to lead their initiatives. They mapped their processes, goals, and implementation in ways that made sense for them. Aspects distinctive in a TCUs plan might be values as taught to them through tradition, goals as set within their community and tribal leadership, the language in which they communicate their plans, and other cultural practices that make sense to their institution and community. The project shifted from a deficit perspective of what they were missing to where they excelled, focusing on their assets and strengths in providing a quality Native college experience.

Indigenous Methodologies: Native Nation Building Tenets and the Rs

For CNSS, Indigenous methods are utilized, centering learning and evaluation in culture and community, focusing on their assets and knowledge. The Indigenous methods for CNSS are based on the Four Rs: *reciprocity*, *respect*, *relevance*, and *responsibility*, as well as redistribution (Kirkness, Verna and Barnhardt 1990; Hampton 1993). Typically, Native students and TCUs are defined in higher education in terms of low achievement and completion rates, poor retention, and weak persistence (Brayboy, *et al.* 2012; Shotton, *et al.* 2023). From the perspective of Native students and TCUs, the emphasis of the problem is the need for higher education systems to respect them for who they are that is relevant to their world view, offering reciprocity in their relationships with others, and responsibility over their own

lives (Kirkness and Barnhardt 1993). TCUs do have lower completion and retention rates than mainstream institutions; the Rs provide a holistic framework to identify needs and supports, with community assets and traditional knowledge as a focal point for accessible resources. By utilizing the Rs as the methodology, the initiative promotes TCU and Native community sovereignty, to build sustainable and meaningful SEM practices as a collaborative.

SEM planning and implementation at TCUs aligns with the Native Nation Building principles: practical self-rule and sovereignty, capable governing institutions, cultural match, strategic orientation, and public-spirited leadership (Jorgensen 2007). These principles are relative to TCUs given most are established under the authority of tribes to establish their own education systems as an act of self-determination. From their very existence and through the ways they serve students and communities, TCUs are models of tribal sovereignty, which reflect inherent rights as Native peoples (Boyer 2015; Jorgensen 2007).

By centering this project in Indigenous methods using the Rs and Native Nation Building principles, impact is evidenced through Native student outcomes and storytelling of the SEM process through document analyses, site visits, check-ins and annual large group gatherings. Document analyses included a comparison of the TCUs' initial application to be a participant in CNSS with their reporting template that was completed at the end of the three-year grant period and mirrored the application. The TCUs utilized their application while completing the reporting template to reflect as a team about their own learning and identification of what they considered best practices. Their key enrollment indicator dashboards that were updated annually were also analyzed by TCU teams to self-monitor their progress and modify programming and practices as they felt was needed. As a partner to the TCUs, the College Fund CNSS staff also analyzed their documents and shared them in reflection with the teams. Qualitative data was gathered through site visits, where CNSS team members had opportunities to meet with more than the main project leads and grant teams to listen to other

TCU staff and faculty, and occasionally students discuss their SEM activities and development. Site visits also included invitations to TCU events that directly related to the TCU SEM initiatives, like faculty, staff, and student data walks on the early alert system at United Tribes Technical College, and the Seven Generation Summit at Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University to further engage and learn in the context of the TCUs' environments that support their place-based and holistic practices. Large group gatherings, like the annual team convenings and data summits, provided space for reflection and analyses of their practices alongside the TCU teams on their SEM development and learnings.

Due to the participatory space created for analyses and learning, an inductive approach to identifying emerging themes was employed rather than having a set of predetermined learnings to prove or disprove (McTaggart 1994). Project evaluation was driven by the goals, as stated above, to support the TCUs to 1) improve and develop long-term changes for sustainable programming and success in enrollment management, academic planning and expanded holistic, place-based student supports and 2) develop campus-wide plans focused on increasing Native student enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. How these goals were enacted, and the impacts of the work, were steeped in how the TCUs decided to approach SEM based on their values and missions. As a partner and supporter of their work in SEM development, there was intention in learning with the TCUs to reflect reciprocity, redistribution, practical self-rule, and sovereignty, supportive of an approach where themes and learnings emerged as a result of their work. This approach centered TCU Native students' experiences and community and staff voice based on cultural identity and values for program inquiry and evaluation, a cornerstone of Indigenous research and evaluation frameworks.

Emerging Learnings in the TCUs Approach to Strategic Enrollment Management

The majority of the CNSS initiative was implemented during the pandemic, where programming strengths and gaps were revealed, creating strategic shifts to

support SEM efforts for the long term. Tribal communities are where the pandemic hit hardest, revealing, and amplifying inequities. For some TCUs, housing became an issue to address, where students and staff were displaced in their communities, creating enrollment changes and TCU position vacancies that were challenging to fill due to lack of housing. The shift to online learning posed another challenge, particularly for Native language and culture courses, taught by elders with curriculum not created or meant for virtual modalities. Tribal communities lost many of their members during the pandemic, deeply affecting students and staff well beyond the classroom. These adverse impacts of the pandemic challenged TCUs to act in creative ways unique to Native students and communities through systemic approaches and their authentic way of creating belonging. Meal pick-up and drop offs, visiting students' homes and families, technological device loans, mobile wifi hot spots, emergency aid funding, talking circles, and virtual wellness efforts were a few of the many holistic supports that TCUs offered not only to students, but to some staff too, as many were community members who experienced similar circumstances of their students. TCUs found ways to quickly shift to online learning like the rest of the country. Some TCUs had systems in place for virtual learning environments prior to the pandemic and some did not. With a shared understanding of their environments and communities with respect to technology, they supported one another as they pivoted to a virtual learning space while doing their best to center their values.

Perseverance through the pandemic was drawn from a sense of community and belonging grounded in Indigenous culture and value, enhancing their SEM practices, with four key learnings that emerged of their efforts. 1) Creating Indigenous SEM plans that are active and dynamic takes time and are not necessarily reflective of traditional mainstream SEM plan structures. 2) Personnel dedicated to enrollment and retention is essential to SEM sustainability. 3) TCUs expertise in creating a sense of cultural belonging paired with holistic approaches to recruitment, advising, and student support contributed to an increase in enrollment and fall-to-spring per-

sistence. 4) Space and time need to be created for TCU teams and staff members to collaborate across institutions as they have a shared understanding of how they are uniquely situated in higher education.

Indigenizing SEM: If a traditional outline does not fit, create one that does.

A key approach to TCUs' SEM models is that they must be authentic and meaningful, which takes time, following the native nation-building tenets of strategic orientation, cultural match, and self-governance (Jorgenson 2007). Most of the five TCUs designed and implemented most of their SEM plan components over the two-and-a-half-year project period, but more time was needed to reflect on the policies, programming, and processes created to become sustainable and generative practices with impacts that can be measured longitudinally. Enrollment, retention, and completion goals were shared across the institutions. However, the creation of their SEM plans reflecting their unique culture and values, with accessible language to create buy in, was an individual effort.

Early in the project, some TCU staff attended national conferences on enrollment management and retention. It was in these spaces that they realized the strengths they had in creating a sense of belonging and connection, an Indigenous value and practice. It was a surprise for them to hear that other institutions struggle. TCUs authentically create a sense of cultural belonging, woven into all parts of the college from student services to the classroom, supporting Native ways of being. This understanding of what they do for students and communities drove their SEM planning to be more meaningful and unique to their institutions. As one TCU dean said, "In creating our plan, we are increasing our enrollment, persistence, and retention by keeping our identity. We have a strong sense of family." In this sense, SEM plans are not one size fit all; they are unique, and it's not necessary to fit into a traditional SEM framework.

Defining SEM in Their Own Words

One TCU faculty said SEM "sounds like jargon." This led to discussion of what SEM means, not only in developing common language across institutions, but in how

the term makes sense culturally. The question of what SEM means to TCUs was posed to TCU and American Indian College Fund staff after having some experience in learning about the SEM core concepts (Sigler 2017) and working with published SEM frameworks (Hossler, et al. 2014). Sixteen responses were collected, including:

SEM means getting outside the Western "box" and re-thinking the way TCUs have been thinking about higher education. It means embracing a circular holistic approach that empowers students and communities to shine brightly and grow into their best selves culturally, academically, occupationally, and socially.

SEM means caring for the student, or Zaagidiwin (love). As community members, we need to take care of each other in a proactive and supportive way that is ideally felt by the students. In other words, we want them here, and we care about their success, their dreams, and aspirations, and becoming the best versions of themselves. Accomplishing these things through higher education means that our collective community can become stronger as a result of that educational attainment. SEM is about increasing our awareness of all the specific details that can help this ideal culture of care become a reality for every student. Other educational systems may espouse a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality, but being a part of a community means that we pull each other up, any way we can.

SEM is a focused effort by the tribal college and university to enroll, retain, and graduate, future Indigenous leaders who are empowered to serve their communities.

SEM is a long-term, or perhaps a generational, project that has an impact on almost a full generation of Native students in an any given community or communities. It is something that will resonate for years to come, contributing to positive outcomes for students and communities.

SEM is an organized, culturally- and community-informed approach to participation and success with post-secondary education for tribal students and their families.

These definitions build on those created by Bob Bontrager and AACRAO. AACRAO (n.d.) states: "SEM is a

comprehensive process designed to help an institution achieve and maintain optimum enrollment, where optimum is defined within the academic context of the institution.” Bontrager (2008) defined SEM as “a concept and process that enables the fulfillment of institutional mission and students’ educational goals.” They contribute to the idea of SEM being a dynamic set of components that are put into practice, where the boundaries of SEM are pushed and stretched in new ways. These indigenized definitions provide a means of accessing and approaching current SEM concepts and definitions (Hossler, *et al.* 2014) with language and ideas that are inclusive of Native values, creating a collective understanding of an indigenous SEM approach.

An Increase in Enrollment and Retention: A Cultural Approach to Student Services

Through CNSS, the TCUs established benchmarks and targets for their key enrollment indicators that are updated annually. Once these targets were set, teams analyzed their application-to-enrollment processes and campus experiences in what they called “the student’s journey” to learn where they were meeting student needs and where they were falling short. By going through their own systems of application and registration, some found that they had created barriers with cumbersome website navigation and unstructured processes. Through this experience, they found simple and effective solutions that could be immediately implemented, like providing student email addresses right after applying rather than after registering and utilizing text messaging to make sure students met with an advisor to register. Most of the TCUs revised their orientations and created textbook purchasing supports that positively affected students’ preparation for courses prior to the first day of class. Early alert use provided another means in student support, resulting in higher retention and course pass rates. One TCU experienced a 70 percent course pass rate for students due to revisions in orientation, advising, and early alert efforts.

These small improvements increased enrollment numbers by an average of 20 percent at three of the five TCUs and increased fall-to-spring persistence by

an average of 3 percent for all five TCUs. This was particularly helpful for high school and first-generation students unfamiliar with college-going processes. These practices withstood the shifts associated with the pandemic and made the application-to-registration process easier for Native students in stressful situations.

During the pandemic, one TCU created outdoor summer community gatherings that were held weekly at their outreach centers. To promote these gatherings, current and former students who lived in the community visited homes to share about weekly events like outdoor movies and jingle dress making. Due to the consistency and participation of the events, application and enrollment numbers went up, with one center experiencing record fall enrollment. Much of TCU recruitment is by word of mouth. By having local community members share the information paired with weekly cultural activities, knowledge and trust about the TCU was created.

Holistic support also included intentional wellness support. Wellness coordinator positions, regular workshops, talking circles, and virtual resources were added to TCU plans to support this need. At one TCU, the coordinator received numerous student inquiries as well as requests from staff for their own support. The coordinator created student and staff talking circles, a traditional Native practice, to respond to the need. Creating space and making wellness a priority in TCU SEM plans through traditional cultural practices is essential for student persistence and retention. And when there is support for staff and faculty well-being too, there is even greater success in the TCU community.

Personnel dedicated to enrollment are the enrollment and retention connectors.

The student journey learnings revealed the importance of personnel dedicated to enrollment and retention. As a result, some TCUs reorganized, creating enrollment director, manager, and/or retention coordinator positions to manage the application to enrollment process and support holistic student services. TCU staff are often responsible for a variety of roles at their small institutions that larger colleges have more personnel to cover. Reor-

ganizing to prioritize enrollment management became crucial to recruitment and in communicating translatable retention and persistence information, supporting processes, which can mitigate staff turnover, a challenge at small rural institutions.

During the pandemic, TCUs provided direct financial support to address the strain students experienced. Emergency funds and tuition waivers contributed to the increase in enrollment and persistence, critical evidence that financial need is a barrier to Native student higher education access and success. With sustainable enrollment personnel at TCUs, this issue can be addressed through long-term strategic approaches as a team, rather than as a reactive solution.

Space for Collaboration: A Community of Practice

As one TCU staff member said, “it is nice to share with people who understand TCUs and our work. I don’t have to explain who we are and what we do.” The value of kinship is a common thread among many tribes. It is important to ensure that the strategies and initiatives the TCUs engage in allow for growth, confidence, and strengthen tribal identity and values. Through regularly planned gatherings, time and space to learn, listen, and dialogue together is essential to creating Indigenized SEM practices.

Due to the size and rurality of TCUs, some have program departments of one or two faculty members. Time and space for collaboration allows staff to connect and share their praxis together, so they are not so isolated. Bringing staff together who serve in similar roles promotes an intrinsic deep sense of learning with a common understanding of their values and how their institutions work.

For example, not all TCUs have institutional research departments or personnel, so reporting can fall under the registrar or admissions areas. To support this complexity, TCU staff members came together to receive support by representatives of their student information systems as a learning community. One TCU participant shared, “It was helpful in that we are not alone in cre-

ating files for the PDP². It was comforting to know that we are all doing it, but at different levels.”

Case Studies: TCU Self-Reported Reflections of SEM Implementation and Best Practices in Their Words

The TCUs involved in Cultivating Native Student Success identified their own learnings and best practices as they developed their SEM plans and processes. These best practices were provided by the TCUs in their reporting templates. They also shared their self-identified learnings at the year three final convening, where they gathered in person and had time and space to engage together about their strengths and practices. Below are some of the TCUs’ learnings in their words.

Stone Child College

Every member of the college community plays a role in our students’ experience at SCC...everyone’s interactions should contribute to the success our students have from initial enrollment through graduation.

The SEM [plan] includes strategies that align with the mission and vision of our college, making dreams happen with academic excellence, culture, and commitment. When we look at the strategies and goals of our plan, we want to make sure that the ones we chose for our plan are reflective of that vision. The processes that are included in our plan reflect the family aspect we feel our college represents in our community. We have always been the place for our community to grow and we feel that in our plan, our strategies will reflect how we continue to be the heart of our community. Our plan has helped us to increase our knowledge of the importance of marketing and the strategies we use to recruit students to Stone Child College.

The plan has helped us to really look at what strategies we are using at the college and determine if they are meeting our goals. We did notice that while most schools saw an enrollment decline during Covid, we did not at SCC. The challenges we are facing are student engagement. We are really trying to figure out how we work with students post pandemic to be engaged in their education

² National Student Clearinghouse Postsecondary Data Partnership.

and participate in all that SCC has to offer. This also had us really look at what retention is and how do we develop our retention strategies to meet that meaning.

Dual Enrollment

We increased the number of agreements with local high schools, offering 10+ courses within general education. High school instructors teach college courses to juniors and seniors that are on track with their high school coursework. The teachers are provided with our course syllabus to teach the students in the classes for the students to earn the credit. We are seeing that the students who take the dual enrollment courses do well when they come to SCC and some have most of their general education courses complete. The dual enrollment initiative provides funding mechanisms that remove financial barriers for students. Dual enrollment is one of our core student-centered pillars in our program pathway initiative.

Student Outreach

We developed a process for student outreach that includes a recruiter position who reviews what recruiting strategies are working and not working to bring students to Stone Child College. The Financial Aid Officer visits high school graduating seniors three times per year regarding the FAFSA Application process and the Scholarship Officer visits high school graduating seniors about tribal higher education grants and scholarships. Marketing outreach methods by this team include Facebook and Instagram accounts, local radio ads, newspaper press releases and direct mailing sent out each semester.

Salish Kootenai College

The SEMurai Group: Incorporating the SEM Plan Into Department Annual Plans

This is not a top-down plan; it is a campus owned plan. The involvement of many across campus is improving interdepartmental relations and developing stronger holistic approaches to our work. As a result, staff, faculty, and administration are all more aware of the work that occurs outside of their departments and how their own work im-

pacts other departments. Being able to see the larger picture outside of one's department can be an eye-opening experience that leads to a greater sense of purpose and better streamlining of services and efforts between departments.

Student Centric Rather Than Student Focused Procedures, Services, and Supports

We realized that what we were doing was generated and driven by faculty and staff and did not take into consideration the student perspective. What may work well for us does not necessarily work well for students, nor is it necessarily the best path for the students. Decisions were historically reactive instead of proactive, grounded in anecdotal information. Decision making processes have moved to purposeful inclusion of relevant voices and careful formulation of questions.

Reorganizing and Creating New Positions to Better Align With the SEM Plan

While creating our SEM plan, we recognized areas that needed more focused attention: enrollment and student services, recruitment, dual/concurrent enrollment, and first year student retention. New positions were created including Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, Director of Early College Outreach and Recruitment, and Retention Coordinator. This did not happen without trial and error. The Director of Early College Outreach and Recruitment position was originally the Assistant Director of Admissions. The position change occurred when it was recognized that early college outreach needed to be a focus under one person to coordinate efforts. The Retention Coordinator was originally the Director of First Year Retention and in its own department. There was a duplicative effort going on with the Department of Academic Success and the first-year retention work was siloed in a one-person department that made program development and implementation difficult to achieve. Reimagining the position within the context of a larger department allowed first year retention to integrate as a focus within the student success system, allowing for better collaboration of efforts and streamlined hand-offs between the first and second year of a student's college experience.

The creation of an Assistant Director of Academic Success position freed up the Director to focus on academic programming that supports student academic growth, with the Assistant Director overseeing the Success Coaches. The Retention Coordinator supports the early alert system, and coordinates with the Center for Prevention and Wellness in the community to address behavioral and wellbeing issues. Both the Assistant Director and Retention Coordinator work closely with other departments, in ways that did not happen before the creation of these positions, creating a more holistic system and approach to student retention.

Oglala Lakota College

OLC was without a full-time enrollment management director from July 2020 to December 2023. OLC emphasized the need to ensure that core enrollment management responsibilities were not neglected despite the vacancy. Between Fall 2021 and December 2023, the Foundational Studies Department Chair had the enrollment management position added to her duties, and the Student Affairs Coordinator was responsible for the alert system. Many OLC units were short-staffed, requiring employees to take on additional responsibilities. As a result, long-term planning like SEM was pushed back.

Utilizing an Early Alert System and Providing Frequent Training on Its Use

Early alerts play an integral role in retention at OLC. This system was first piloted in 2013 to increase retention and persistence of students. Since its introduction, faculty, counselors, and enrollment staff have been able to intervene sooner when a student is facing attendance and/or grade issues that could result in the student dropping out. By issuing early alerts, OLC staff can collaborate and connect with students to ensure that they have the resources they need to be successful and to get back on track, but we learned that more frequent training needs to be offered to current and new staff who utilize it. A standard of use needed to be developed as staff had differing ideas and understandings of how the early alert process works. Upon the hire of a new Enrollment Management Director, a standard of use

process was developed, and staff were trained. Training will be conducted on a semesterly basis to ensure current and new staff are consistent in their use of early alerts and how to process them. Communication is a concern as students have proven to be unresponsive when issued an early alert. This is one of the reasons we created the Virtual Student Success Sessions and included communication as a topic that students needed to understand and develop.

Wellness Services

Faculty and staff have requested the need for in-house wellness services for years. In the first year of the CNSS project, wellness services were created as a new area of student support, growing with each passing semester. Wellness services are for both students and staff and include individual counseling, group counseling, educational events and activities encompassing mental health information. Learnings have come from the welcomed atmosphere of the OLC community to learn more about mental health topics, which relates to the continued growth and interest. OLC staff have expressed pride and trust in the institution of OLC for providing the much needed culturally appropriate wellness services.

Lac Courte Oreille Ojibwe University

The Playbook

LCOOU has a Solutions Team, representing multiple departments across campus. The Solutions Team finalized the LCOOU Strategic Enrollment Management Playbook (SEMP) in 2023, a living document that guides data-informed decisions around SEM best practices for TCUs. The document is professionally printed and disbursed annually to university staff, partners, funders, and the collaborative TCU network.

At points throughout the journey, the staff on the Solutions Team also had many other responsibilities which at times interrupted the consistency and workflow of accomplishing SEM related initiatives. Though LCOOU has many beneficial systems, events, and student services programming, we are challenged at getting students active on campus.

Holistic Advising Process

LCOOU found that relationships with both faculty and student services staff led to the most successful outcomes for students. In Fall 2019, LCOOU launched the holistic advising model. This process involves a first-year advisor (student services) who welcomes the student on campus and guides the student in their first semester. In this phase, students complete any financial aid requirements, sign up for support programming, solidify any technical resources (email, Canvas, etc.) and complete remaining tasks associated with being a new student. Upon completion of the first semester students are introduced to their faculty advisor who guides them academically throughout the remainder of their educational journey.

Both faculty and staff utilized our early alert system, to communicate academic and personal needs of students. Student Services staff rapidly respond to any alerts issued. Both faculty and student services staff work together to provide holistic wrap-around support for students including both academic and personal support. Intrusive advising strategies were implemented, resulting in proactive efforts to contact students early and ensure students are well-prepared to enter the next semester. Advisors are positively encouraged through advisor appreciation lunches, advising competitions, and prizes to promote and celebrate this holistic teamwork. Academic advisors have also been encouraged by faculty, staff, and leadership to take a “hands-on” approach for asks like early registrations, ordering textbooks, applying for scholarships.

Good Grade Incentives

LCOOU Student Senate surveyed the campus body in 2021 and found many students feeling discouraged and unmotivated after the pandemic. In efforts to promote student recognition and internal motivation, LCOOU implemented the Good Grade Incentive (GGI) program. The GGI program provides handwritten congratulations notes and a gift card for students passing their courses during Mid-Term and Final grades. This process also allowed for closer monitoring and early alert responses to students earning Ds and Fs during the semester. Issuing the GGI incentivizes students to check their emails reg-

ularly, increasing knowledge of campus resources, scholarships, programs, and important academic information. A weekly announcement is sent to students via email and Canvas messages and includes information about GGI at certain points during the semester. GGI is a simple way to recognize, encourage, and incentives desired academic accomplishments. The process of issuing GGI also helps provide early alert interventions for students in need and promotes better communication strategies for students. As a result of this practice, LCOOU has seen a 33 percent increase in passing grades earned.

Retention Coordinator Position

At the beginning of CNSS, we launched the Solutions Creator position, focusing on improving retention through identifying and bridging gaps in the student experience and institutional systems. A Virtual Help Desk was created in the first year during the pandemic, as a one-stop student support service for virtual and in-person learners. The position was revised as Retention Coordinator in the second year, working with the early alert system, options for in-person and remote engagement, holistic advising, and student communication and events. The Retention Coordinator is an ear for students who need to vent, an advocate for students who need to speak and is involved in internal assessments and focus groups, using feedback to help guide the Solutions Team in making data informed decision on behalf of students. The Retention Coordinator is a vital position to LCOOU and is actively seeking new ways to move the needle towards retention, persistence, and completion for all students.

United Tribes Technical College

The Student Journey: SEM planning

One of the first initiatives of the SEM Plan at the college was to look at evaluate the application and registration process to identify barriers and roadblocks in the enrollment process. Issues with areas such as IT and the Bookstore were identified, and policies and processes were changed to remove these unnecessary barriers to the enrollment process. The college also began to look closely

at the application data and found that internal processes that involved a review of the applications were creating unnecessary delays in the application approval processes. These issues were also corrected.

A visual graphic was created that outlines the processes, or steps in the student's journey, in the recruitment phase of the student enrollment lifecycle. In addition, and key to the seamless flow of these steps, processes were refined at each step in the journey as it was developed to ensure student success as they progressed through this initial phase.

Early Alert Across the Campus

Refinement of the early alert system resulted in increases in retention and persistence rates. We believe this was the direct result of full buy-in across campus from faculty advisors, the first-year advisor, career services, wellness counselors, housing staff and safety and security. The Dean of Instruction monitored activity and encouraged full participation of all involved that resulted in the alerts, referred to as Thunder Alerts, providing a chronological reporting of alerts/concerns, interventions, student responses, and outcomes. A team presented a session about UTTC's early alert system at the national AACRAO conference in Toronto, Ontario, and were recognized with an award from the National Student Clearinghouse for contributing to the research on retention best practices.

Sharing of Data in a Variety of Ways Across All Stakeholders

The college has become much better at sharing and using institutional data, and we look forward to continuing our data engagement with all stakeholders. The goals for persistence, retention, and completion have been incorporated into other initiatives and projects across campus to ensure that there is consistency and alignment of these goals across all initiatives on campus regardless of grant project. The Office of Institutional Research has initiated data sharing across all campus stakeholders using data walks with students, faculty, and staff. Regularly scheduled data discussions with faculty have been held once a month. Students were also engaged with Early Alert and Early Alert messaging data. As a result of these data

engagement strategies, the college has revised the wording of Early Alerts based on student feedback, changes to advising and course scheduling have been discussed. In addition, the Early Alerts have been rebranded to "Thunder Alerts," and the communication and workflows for Thunder Alerts have been revised.

Considerations and Opportunities

TCUs serve approximately 12 percent of overall Native students in higher education, with 85-95 percent of TCU enrollees identifying as Native (Hanson, *et al.* 2023; NCES 2021). TCUs reach more than 80 percent of Indian Country, providing direct educational services and workforce development to thousands of students and tribal citizens each year. TCUs are critical institutions of higher education and engines of economic change and social mobility for AIAN students and Native communities, providing opportunities where none would otherwise exist (Boyer 2015; Nelson 2017). During the pandemic institutions learned how damaging the systemic barriers to access to education, healthcare, food, and other resources were impacting Indian Country (O'Keefe and Walls 2021). Since TCUs are so strongly centered in their community and guided by cultural values, these institutions quickly focused on the well-being of their students, and TCUs leveraged opportunities to ensure their students could stay connected and in school. TCU SEM efforts showed realistic, sustainable opportunities in capacity building both individually and as a network. CNSS is expanding to include more TCUs in the effort to indigenize SEM to continue AIAN student success in higher education.

The CNSS initiative took place during unprecedented times, which deeply affected Native communities. While it is essential to support students in their academic journey to degree completion, it is also important that students are seen, and nurtured in ways that align with their values and the meaning behind their own journey in higher education is fostered. TCUs are experts in creating sense of belonging by holding space for their students and communities, breaking barriers in higher education steeped in western approaches and not made for Indigenous presence (Boyer 2015; Nel-

son 2017). Retention and persistence toward completion for Native students starts with validation and an understanding of the generational traumas and current needs to support their success. Utilizing terminology and methods that center the Native student voice and ways of being creates more safety for students as they navigate the system on their own path in education.

There were limitations in this work. TCUs are strained in their human resource capacity and through the pandemic, systemic barriers including access to education, healthcare, food, housing, and other resources that impact Indian Country were amplified (O’Keefe, *et al.* 2021). Some tribal communities lost many members, deeply impacting TCU students and staff as many are connected outside of the institution walls. Due to this intense trauma, it was more important than ever to meet TCUs where they were as they reimagined the

mainstream SEM planning guides and created their own, centering traditional Native values and knowledge in their SEM approaches. This experience also amplified the need for more opportunities dedicated to TCU staff connection and interaction as advisors and advisees to one another as they navigate their uniquely situated spaces in higher education. Stretched thin, TCUs are required to report student data to IPEDs and other entities as accredited institutions in higher education. Without institutional research structures at some of the TCUs, this is a challenge. But it is clear that data is essential to telling their stories of student persistence and success and for the visibility of Native students and communities. Through CNSS, these stories need to continue to be told as other higher education institutions can learn from TCUs in putting student identities and values first.

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