The Rural Educator

Volume 45
Number 1 *Joint Special Issue Between The Rural Educator and Journal of American Indian Education*

Article 4

Winter 2024

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Recommended Citation

Youngbull, N. R., & Sanders, D. (2024). Tribal College and University (TCU) Leadership, Faculty, and Staff Perspectives on Student Success. *The Rural Educator, 45*(1), 21-32. https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1460

Research Article

Tribal College and University (TCU) Leadership, Faculty, and Staff Perspectives on Student Success

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This article highlights how Tribal college leadership, faculty, and staff members define student success. Several major factors were described across the different levels of participants and are presented as the major themes: cultivating a familial environment, mission centered, cultural knowledge and wealth, community impact, and student goals achieved.

Introduction

Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) are an extension of self-determination, being the only institutions of higher education chartered by one or more Tribal nations. They stand as a model of educational sovereignty in the existing settler-colonial educational system. The TCU movement began in the early 1960s, with the first institution chartered in 1968, through grassroots efforts from young leaders seeking access to higher education for reservation-based Tribal nations and communities (Boyer, 2015). Today, 37 TCUs span across North America, operating more than 90 campuses in 15 states and serving about 15,000 students (American Indian Higher Education Consortium [AIHEC], n.d.-b). Due to the rural location of these institutions within Tribal reservations and communities, TCUs are the only accessible higher education option for many Native/Indigenous students (Guillory & Ward, 2008). Much like many rural communities' challenges with geographic isolation, lack of equitable education, and the reality of being generally disregarded (Stelmach, 2011), TCUs remain marginalized and lie on the periphery of higher education (Guillory & Ward, 2008).

These unique institutions have dual missions to fulfill: (a) to provide relevant degree programs and (b) to revitalize Tribal cultures and languages through curricula designed by and centered around the needs of Indigenous peoples (AIHEC, n.d.-a). All 37 TCUs offer associate degrees, 16 offer baccalaureate degree programs, and five have master's degree programs (AIHEC, 2020). Overall, TCUs are growing their own scholars and leaders to develop culturally grounded curricula, degree programs, and research agendas to strengthen Native nation building (Youngbull, 2022).

Tribal colleges serve a student population that, on average, consists of a balanced mix of traditionally aged students and adult learners, a female student to male student ratio of 2:1, and single parents representing 25% of total students (AIHEC, n.d.-b). Broadly, Native/Indigenous students have complex pathways through higher education, with many attending more than one institution (Waterman, 2007). Sanders and Makomenaw (2018) acknowledge similar pathways for TCU students, including the experience of attending a non-Native college or university (NNCU) prior to returning to a TCU. Rural scholars also suggest that returning students' experiences may equip them to contribute to their rural communities (Gibbs & Cromartie, 1994; Kelly, 2009; Wright, 2012).

More Native/Indigenous students than ever before are choosing TCUs to start or continue their higher education journey (Guillory & Ward, 2008). As a result, TCUs serve an array of student needs and goals. Tribal college leaders contend with meeting accreditation standards and serving the needs of their diverse student populations, knowing that there is an emphasis on the big three factors—enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. These factors are key because they impact overall completion rates reported to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). They are not only important from an enrollment management perspective, but also for maintaining accreditation. Though these three factors play a key role in accreditation, it is how they interact with other success factors that make them central to how TCUs define student success, which leads to the research question: How do Tribal college leaders, faculty, and staff define student success?

This article emerged from a larger study that explored the perspectives of Tribal college leadership, faculty, and staff members from five

TCUs across three major topic areas: outreach, retention, and postgraduation. The aim of this research inquiry was to learn about TCU leadership, faculty, and staff perspectives on defining student success. The significance of this empirical study is that it provides greater insight into perspectives and approaches to student success at Tribal colleges, and it has implications to center more familial approaches to serving students across institution types.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses specifically on Tribal colleges and the influences of rurality within the TCU context. Much of the literature is based within book chapters and reports that describe the TCU movement, TCU missions, and best practices. There is a dearth of empirical studies about Tribal colleges, their impact within Tribal communities, and their role within the broader higher education context. This study addresses the dearth of empirical studies on TCUs and speaks to TCUs' role and influence within the broader higher education context. The literature review begins with a discussion on whom TCUs serve. The next section focuses on the dual missions of TCUs, and the final section provides an overview of the best practices of TCU student success.

TCUs and Rurality

Tribal colleges offer invaluable access to quality higher education institutions that are low-cost and unique because of their personalized student approach coupled with cultural relevance to foster American Indian student success, particularly to those living on reservations (AIHEC, 2020). Stelmach (2011) described "out-migration" messaging on postsecondary education and professional careers that rural students receive from teachers—messages that "perpetuate a hegemonic assumption that students who do not leave their rural lives are failures—educationally and socially" (p. 34). The remote geographic location of many Tribal colleges provides local access to higher education for reservation-bound Tribal students who are not interested in leaving (Sanders & Makomenaw, 2018). Sanders and Makomenaw (2018) stated, "TCUs provide students on reservations an opportunity to access higher education while staying connected to land, nation, and family" (p. 53). Tribal colleges also provide a home for Native students seeking to escape general academic systems that disregard and even subjugate cultural and traditional Native ways of learning (Lopez, 2018; Waterman et al., 2018). Additionally, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students who seek a college education in other institutions often face less than supportive experiences, or at least do not have supports similar to those they enjoy within TCUs (Cech et al., 2017; Lopez, 2018; Makomenaw, 2018).

Tribal Colleges' Dual Missions

Indigenous scholars focused on Native education and TCUs highlight the two-fold mission of these institutions (Crazy Bull & Lindquist, 2018; Guillory & Ward, 2008; Heitkamp, 2016). Like other postsecondary institutions, they are committed to educating students to enter the workforce or continue their studies elsewhere (Cook, 2016). Tribal colleges were modeled after community colleges, with an educational commitment to open access, low tuition, and community-driven educational programs (Boyer, 2015). These community college elements, along with location and funding aspects of these institutions, best fit the type of higher education institution that the early TCU leaders envisioned for their communities. Tribal colleges are grounded within and committed to preserving unique Tribal cultures, traditions, and languages (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2019; Sumida Huaman et al., 2019). Each TCU embodies a distinct cultural identity. Marroquin (2019) analyzed the mission statements of 35 TCUs and found the word "culture" was embedded in 27, and "language" was incorporated into 15. This attention to culture and language is how they differ from community colleges and where their "dual mission" comes into play.

Being mission-driven institutions, TCUs are responsive to community needs, uplift communities, actively participate in culture and language revitalization efforts, and engage in communal healing from historical traumas (Guillory & Ward. 2008; Pavel et al., 2001; Stein, 1999). Essentially, Tribal colleges can "reflect and sustain a unique Tribal identity" through their dual mission (Boyer, 2002, p. 18). Lamb (2013) found that TCU students "felt they were more academically successful because their unique cultural heritage was supported in this environment" (p. 63).

Boyer (2015) interviewed several of the founding TCU presidents and stated, "they believed Tribal colleges existed not only to teach 'useful' skills (like business and carpentry), but also to restore dignity and integrity to [Tribal] societies and their

own body of scholarship" (p. 93). Tribal colleges are a catalyst for economic and community development, and most center their mission and curriculum around the specific needs of the tribe (Bowman, 2016; Owl, 2017). They also serve as community centers for important Tribal events and convenings (Schmidtke, 2016). Thus, the dual mission of TCUs is (a) to provide higher education programs and opportunities that are (b) community, culturally, and holistically based (AIHEC, n.d.). This dual mission means offering academic and community classes with culturally relevant content (Antoine, 2018; Wood, 2019). Additionally, degree offerings, assessment approaches, and campus support structures have cultural, historical, and language components woven in (Stein, 1999; Sanders & Makomenaw, 2018).

TCU Student Success Best Practices

Indigenous researchers have identified several best practices from TCUs to help Tribal college students succeed, including maintaining family and community connections, nourishing cultural identities, and engaging in a family-based educational approach (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003; HeavyRunner & Ortiz, 2003; Waterman, 2007). The emphasis on culture and community is tied to the dual mission of Tribal colleges and minority-serving institutions (MSIs) such as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) (Conrad & Gasman, 2015), while the emphasis on family is what makes TCUs distinct from predominantly White institutions (PWIs). PWIs individualize the student experience, while TCUs center the student experience around the family and community. Similar to how rural scholars Crumb et al. (2023) emphasized rural familialism as an asset to rural community cultural wealth, this familial component of student experiences at TCUs is important to student success. As Williams (2007) stated, "A Tribal college provides a 'whole community' approach to lifelong education, based on the principle that a student does not have to abandon culture or family to obtain an education" (p. 41). This "whole community" approach allows for students to receive support and resources from within the Tribal college and from the Tribal/local community.

Theoretical Framework

HeavyRunner and DeCelles's (2002) Family Education Model (FEM), an American Indian retention model designed for Tribal colleges, served as the guiding framework for this study. It was developed in response to increased access to TCUs, as well as to improve student persistence to graduation rates. The FEM challenges student engagement theory by emphasizing how influential the family is to Native/Indigenous student persistence to graduation rates (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). The leading principle of FEM affirms that "establishing and maintaining a sense of 'family', both at home and at college, fortifies American Indian students' academic persistence" (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 30). Furthermore, the FEM calls attention to the disparity between settler-colonial educational institution values and Native/Indigenous student and family values and how they impact retention rates of Native/Indigenous college students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). FEM recognizes the value of maintaining relationships with family and community and actively applies these relationships in its approach to Native/Indigenous college student persistence and retention. Through an FEM approach, students' families should have access and feel welcome to take part in events and activities on campus. Essentially, when students' families feel welcome on campus, students will feel a sense of belonging.

With this emphasis on relationships, this study is also informed by Wilson's (2008) Indigenous Paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of familial connection for Native/Indigenous peoples through the concept of relationality. Relationality is described as the importance of relationships through Indigenous ontological and epistemological perspectives (Wilson, 2008). Wilson described family as being held in the highest regard for Native/Indigenous people as "Family is what holds us in relationship as individuals and bridges us as individuals into our communities and nations" (p. 86). The FEM provided a critical, culturally sensitive lens to gain a deeper understanding of how student success is defined at Tribal colleges.

Methodological Approach

A qualitative methodological approach led by an Indigenous paradigm guided this inquiry to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives, to discover significance through values, and to reveal rather than examine variables (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A qualitative design is often more culturally responsive to Native/Indigenous approaches and pairs well with an Indigenous paradigm, as it recognizes that knowledge is built through relationships between

and amongst beings and the environment (Wilson, 2001). An Indigenous paradigm recognizes that knowledge is relational and shared, rather than created or owned (Wilson, 2001). Individual interviews were conducted with TCU leadership, faculty, and staff participants to gain in-depth knowledge and understanding about their perspectives of TCU student success. As stated previously, this research inquiry focused on answering the question, "How do Tribal college leaders, faculty, and staff members define student success?"

Coresearcher Positionalities and Relationalities

Natalie Youngbull is an enrolled citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribe based in Oklahoma and descendant of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux (Dakota) tribes in Montana. She is an assistant professor of adult and higher education. Prior to her faculty role, she held a part-time graduate assistantship at a TCU in Arizona, served as a director of student success at another TCU in Oklahoma, and served as a program officer who administered faculty fellowships and scholarly development to TCU faculty. David Sanders is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and grew up on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in Oglala, SD. He is the vice president for research, evaluation, and faculty development at the American Indian College Fund. In this role he works with the organization, TCUs, and TCU faculty and staff to support data capacity, evaluation, and research. The researchers professionally worked together for three years, but they have engaged in a collaborative scholarly space and ongoing conversation for many years prior to sharing professional space and work.

This study is part of a larger Lumina Foundation grant-funded research project led by David Sanders. He received IRB approval from all participating TCUs (including a TCU that partners with the American Indian College Fund as the official TCU IRB for any Tribal college without an IRB office of its own), developed the interview protocol, and conducted all participant interviews during the TCU site visits or via Zoom. Then, he contracted with Natalie to analyze the batch of interviews centered on TCU student success and prepare a final report on the major findings. The findings of this study are a segment of the final report on TCU student success. The researchers met periodically throughout the data analysis process to discuss emergent themes and major findings.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Participants for this study included TCU leaders (presidents and academic deans/provosts), faculty members, and staff members from five TCUs. Thirty-five participants across five TCUs participated in individual interviews—11 leaders, 10 faculty members, and 14 staff members. Six to eight participants were included from each Tribal college. One participant in the study decided not to have their data included in the dataset, leaving 34 interviews analyzed for this research project. Though participants were recruited across five TCUs, this study was comprehensive and did not compare TCU sites.

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2005). David conducted outreach to each TCU president to obtain permission to conduct the study at their respective institutions. Each institution received compensation during the study, supporting the effort and time of an identified staff member within the institution who was identified by the president. This individual served as the point of contact for the duration of the project and helped David understand Tribal nation and institutional IRB protocols. David worked with these individuals to identify staff members who were involved in student success support services and/or programming at each institution. The TCU contact person also identified faculty and leaders who had aspects of their work in student success efforts either in their classrooms or at the institution. David sent recruitment emails to all these identified faculty, staff, and leaders once their names, positions, and contact information was submitted to him. The emails contained information about approved IRB protocols (both Tribal nation and institutional protocols), his relationship with the individual at the institution who identified them as possible participants, the number of participants being recruited, and why they were selected as potential participants. He also supplied the consent forms for their reference and collected the signed consent forms from all participants who agreed to participate. The consent form described the study, its purpose, the amount of time they would spend in the study, the total number of participants being recruited for the study, location of the interview, length of the interview, potential participant risks and benefits of the study, how the information would be reported, compensation for participation, how their identity would be anonymous, and that the interviews would

be recorded and transcribed. Recruitment began in May 2021 and concluded in September 2021.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this research project, participants participated in one individual interview that ranged from 45–60 minutes. Interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform. Interviews were conducted from May to October 2021. David initially planned to conduct interviews onsite at each participating TCU. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 protocols, these institutions were closed to visitors during the interview timeframe. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of questions focused on broadly identifying the components of student success approaches, resources, and supports at the participants' respective institutions—including recruitment, retention, and postgraduation efforts. Interviews were recorded via a voice recorder and were transcribed verbatim. The voice recordings were uploaded to a third-party online transcription service for prompt transcription. Transcriptions were de-identified and labeled by their institutional acronym and role prior to the first readthrough. Participant and institution identities are anonymous, and in the findings section participants are referred to as "TCU 1 participant," "TCU 2 participant," etc.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with open coding of the interview transcripts to remain open to all aspects of the data (Merriam, 2009). During open coding, transcripts were read through multiple times and similar experiences and perspectives were noted as emerging from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Then, analytical coding was employed to facilitate the process of coding the data and organizing the quotes, codes, and themes into categories through reflection and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). Throughout the analysis process, both researchers frequently met to discuss the coding process and emerging major findings. The full research data set is organized by themes in an Excel spreadsheet. This research inquiry analyzed the responses to how TCU leaders, faculty, and staff members defined student success from their institutional perspective.

Findings: Defining TCU Student Success

The findings in this article focus specifically on how TCU leadership, faculty, and staff members define student success within Tribal colleges. There was no single definition of student success across leadership, faculty, and staff perspectives. A TCU 1 participant described it as an "evolving question that seems to come up every year. I don't think we have found the definition yet." This lack of definition is a good thing, from their perspective, as there are several criteria to account for in defining what student success means for their institution. Rather than a single definition, TCU leaders, faculty, and staff shared several perspectives as part of defining student success at Tribal colleges. These perspectives are presented as the major findings of this research inquiry: cultivating a familial environment, mission centered, cultural knowledge and wealth, community impact, and student goals achieved.

Cultivating a Familial Environment

Tribal college leadership, faculty, and staff used terms like "collectivistic setting," "close knit," "looking out," "personal touch," and "relationship building" to describe the institutional culture. These descriptions relate to the Family Education Model's (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002) leading principle of establishing and maintaining a sense of family within the college setting. A TCU 5 participant stated, "I think here it's just there's a greater feeling of family and connectedness that doesn't exist at other mainstream institutions." This familial and connected feeling has been cultivated from a robust relationship between TCUs and the Tribal/local communities in which they are located. A TCU 4 participant remarked, "I think one way we serve is we know our students. Basically, we know their parents. We know their grandparents. They probably went to school with them along the way." And literal family connections exist across many TCUs, which plays into student success. Another TCU 4 participant described the impact of these family connections on campus:

> Somebody will say if anybody has a relative working at the college, they've got somebody watching that relative or watching their kids and grandkids and whatever. So, it's really more of a family atmosphere, definitely a small community kind of feel.

The familial atmosphere invites all staff members, including janitors/custodians, to participate actively in student success efforts. Several participants mentioned janitors/custodians as playing important roles in student success as they had daily interactions with students and informally checked on them.

The Family Education Model is designed around the family concept because Tribal college leaders identified the family as a central factor to student success (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Tribal colleges incorporate family-oriented and culturally infused campus activities that are inclusive of students' families. A TCU 5 participant explained the importance of culturally infused activities to students and the community:

> Our students are able to be themselves. They can come here, be themselves fully, and they also get to learn more about their own culture because a lot of students, I don't know if they even know everything (cultural) that is available to them when they're at home. They actually [learn] some stuff here about different things. And so I think we do a pretty good job at ... we have different classes, not even just for credit, but they have beading and quilting and just like, we have this amazing ethnobotanist that teaches about natural medicine and just cool stuff. We implemented a woman's sweat now. It's not going on right this minute, but we have sweats, we have very cultural activities, and just this sense of family that they get here too, they don't necessarily feel so homesick.

Culturally infused activities help foster a welcoming and familial campus environment. This type of environment invites students to feel a sense of belonging and build relationships across campus, which is a feeling that is not fully present across mainstream campuses for Native student populations.

Mission Centered

Tribal colleges are mission-driven institutions and, therefore, base their successes on achieving their missions. Most TCU mission statements include academic, cultural, and community components that are entwined with one another. A TCU 5 participant described how leadership is a central component of the institutional mission and is a major factor to student success:

> I think we look at success in terms of our mission and our tagline is leadership begins here. So we look at successful students develop[ing] positive campus community relationships, and they have strong work habits and they have confidence, resilience, and belief in self. And we know that if we can help students develop those positive work habits, that contribute to achieving their career goals, and they're able to work through their life challenges, and they can plan and prioritize, and realize their potential, acquire new skills and knowledge, and become contributing members, that's really student success.

Developing students' leadership capacity can impact their academic, personal, and professional growth. Focusing on leadership can also help students become contributing community members. A TCU 2 participant discussed how it is hard to quantifiably measure these components, particularly the cultural piece, but that does not make it any less important to achieving the institutional mission:

> In all honesty, we're working on the measurable piece of our student success definition. However, within every degree plan, there is a cultural component and throughout the college, we are a land grant institution, we are culturally based, we are overseen by the tribe really, and truly it's intrinsic and sometimes it's so intrinsic, it's very difficult to separate it out. Actually, that might be a good thing because then you can see a way of life vs. an add-on.

The TCU 2 participant touched upon a unique aspect of Tribal colleges that sets them apart from all other institutions of higher education in that they must be chartered by one or more Tribal nations. However, while Tribal nations only have the authority to charter a TCU, they do not govern Tribal colleges. Because of this unique arrangement, Tribal colleges are intrinsically tied to Tribal communities.

Another unique characteristic at TCUs is how they are grounded in traditional philosophies and teachings that inform the mission and purpose of TCUs. Physical campus designs are informed by Tribal philosophies and teachings, such as incorporating traditional living dwellings on campus. A TCU 1 participant detailed how the traditional philosophies influence TCU campus designs:

> So [TCUs] prepare you in ways that you're set to live in two worlds, but not forget where you come from. And I think that's the core of our institution that you're able to see why things are being shared with your traditional stories. But when you come to the college, you see [that] art up, whether it's the environment, the feeling, or even the museum itself, and just the way the college is designed.

Tribal colleges' campus structures and layouts provide students with opportunities to learn about and engage with traditional and cultural ways of knowing through traditional designs, artwork, murals, and Tribal languages. Tribal colleges' missions are strengthened by campus layouts and designs because

of the traditional and cultural knowledge they incorporate.

Cultural Knowledge and Wealth

The cultural component is essential to TCUs achieving their mission, as the purpose of these institutions is to help uplift Tribal communities through higher education. Beyond retention and degree completion, several participants mentioned cultural knowledge and wealth as equally important to the big three factors. One TCU 3 participant shared, "wellness, healthiness, happiness, and maybe the most foundational of all the ones that are top of my list are confident cultural identities. That's why Tribal colleges came into being in the first place, confident cultural identities." It is not uncommon for Tribal community members to enroll only in cultural and language classes. Completing these courses is an example of student success within TCUs as the Tribal college may be the only institution to offer these specific courses. Additionally, the knowledge and understanding gained from Tribal culture and language courses are valued differently than typical required degree coursework because of their importance in revitalizing Tribal identities and communities.

A duality exists in Tribal colleges' educational approaches that is inclusive of required coursework for accredited degree programs and Tribal and cultural knowledges. A TCU 1 participant described a balanced approach to learning the Tribal ways of being and Western ways of being:

> But here at [TCU 1], I think student success is also ensuring that students are balanced in their [Tribal] and Western ways of life. So many students, they come to [TCU 1] to relearn their language, and their culture, their self-identity. And they work on character building and take courses to complete their program degree for either their career or their workforce or their livelihood. So, in that aspect, to me, student success is knowing who you are and being grounded and to have a career that would benefit, not only yourself, your community, your people. And of course, I'd like to say most importantly, the elders. So that would be a student success definition is just as a whole individual rather than just focusing on what the Western perspective wants us to focus on.

According to the TCU 1 participant, the Tribal college is the best equipped institution of higher education to instill cultural knowledge and wealth while completing a degree. This combination will prepare students to receive the knowledge and/or training toward a career within their communities. More importantly, this focus on instilling cultural knowledge and wealth prepares TCU students to engage actively within Tribal communities.

Community Impact

In addition to being mission driven, TCUs have a community-centered approach to student success. Tribal colleges are responsive to their communities by emphasizing community feedback in the development of relevant degree programs. A TCU 3 participant described the importance of offering degree programs that serve the Tribal and local community(ies) needs.

> And as far as student success with [the TCU], we do have about 59 different programs to try to cater to the needs of our students and by keeping them here on the reservation. And so, with success, it is highly important for us to really do what we [can] do to keep our students on a reservation and to keep them on [the Nation]. And so, we do whatever is needed. We hire as many faculty members as needed for the entire university and really focus on the needs of what jobs are available on the reservation and nearby cities.

The purpose of offering relevant degree programs is to retain as many TCU graduates as possible within Tribal and local communities. This outcome is an important return on investment (ROI) measure for Tribal colleges.

Beyond the ROI measure, student success is also seen as a community benefit. The Tribal college experience can strengthen students' ties to their communities and help students figure out how to become contributing community members. A TCU 4 participant described this hope in their definition of student success.

> I would define student success as not just attaining their degree, but actually gaining something from their experience as students, as long as they're able to connect with something, whether it's in the classroom, or whether they're doing something outside, within the community through the college, something that helps them grow in some way to their benefit and to the benefit of the community. That's how I define students' success.

According to this TCU 4 participant's definition, student success is tied to community impact. The

community benefits from the success of students as they use their knowledge, expertise, and skills to build up the community.

Student Goals Achieved

It is important to acknowledge student goals in the definition of student success. Tribal college leadership, faculty, and staff participants all discussed how students come to their institution with varying goals. Some students enroll for specific courses, such as culture and language courses or courses relevant to their jobs/careers. A TCU 2 participant discussed how students' different goals are supported within their Tribal college:

> And we are just there to support them in any way that we can. Whether it's because they want to pick up a few of our Native American studies classes, so that they can learn more about their own culture or if they want to get their generals out of the way. Some just come for certificates or they just want to brush up on topics that they are not familiar with, and it's an affordable way for them to do it. At least in our eyes, we see student success as assisting our students in completing whatever goals they have when they enter our college.

Rather than try to change students' goals to fit institutional goals, Tribal colleges consider helping students achieve their goals as meeting the definition of student success.

Tribal college students face many barriers and challenges to success, and TCU leadership, faculty, and staff members are well aware of the realities of their students. They understand that for students to achieve their goals, these barriers and challenges need to be removed from their paths. A TCU 1 participant explained how removing barriers for students is part of the definition of student success:

> I think, years ago I was in journalism. I was an editor of a paper, and I remember listening to Ben Bradley of the *Washington Post*. He said his job was to try to get all the barriers out of the way of the reporters to do their job. I think that's also the definition here for student success. How do we get all those barriers out of the way that inhibit [student success]? You mentioned earlier about, and we'll probably get into a specific question, but looking at some of those barriers, asking questions. Why do we do this? What's the impact of this? Just asking questions.

Asking these questions has led TCUs to embrace a "whatever it takes" approach to help students achieve their goals. Tribal colleges tailor services, resources, and delivery toward individual student needs. This approach requires effort across leadership, faculty, and staff. Many TCU leadership, faculty, and staff members assume additional responsibilities beyond their specific roles within their respective institutions, and they describe it as "wearing many hats," so it is not difficult to understand this type of approach toward student success. Accounting for students' goals helps Tribal colleges stay true to their missions and who they aim to serve.

Discussion

The first TCU, Diné College, celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2019. Tribal colleges have much to celebrate within this first 50+ years of Tribally controlled higher education initiatives. These unique institutions continue to forge educational pathways by providing access to higher education for remote and rural Tribal communities and Native/Indigenous students who want a culturally enriched educational experience and environment. Though Tribal colleges must contend with accreditation standards that do not align with cultural knowledge(s) and practices, they remain committed to fulfilling their missions. The mission of TCUs is not to replicate the settler-colonial educational system. Rather, it is to "reflect and sustain a unique Tribal identity" (Boyer, 2002, p. 18). This timely study contributes to the conversation on how TCUs are achieving their dual mission by preparing Native/Indigenous students not only to be academically successful, but more importantly, to sustain their unique Tribal identities by defining student success from a family-centered perspective. HeavyRunner and DeCelles's (2002) Family Education Model and Wilson's (2008) concept of relationality provided culturally grounded perspectives toward understanding the importance of TCU leaders, faculty, and staff members' definitions of student success.

Most Tribal colleges, as the only U.S. institutions of higher education chartered by Tribal nations, are geographically located within remote and rurally based Tribal reservations and communities. Given the founding nature and rural locations of these institutions, TCUs have a relationality to the Tribal communities in which they are located. This relationality plays into how Tribal college personnel interact with students and community members. Students and Tribal college personnel experience more direct relationships and connections because of familial and/or community connections. The

relationality that Native/Indigenous students have at TCUs is not the same for Native/Indigenous students who attend NNCUs, which contributes to those students' experiences of isolation, hostility, and invisibility on NNCU campuses (Brayboy, 2004; Jackson et al., 2003). More research about how our understanding of "brain drain" experienced in rural education (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Sherman & Sage, 2011) might intersect with what is occurring on TCU campuses, and on how familial and culturally centered atmospheres contribute to student success, would be helpful. Tribal colleges enact relationality not only by focusing on helping students achieve their goals, but by striving to prepare them to be contributing members of their Tribal communities, equipped with both traditional knowledges and Western-based knowledges.

Tribal college leaders, faculty, and staff members acknowledged the impact of the big three factors—enrollment, retention, and graduation rates—on student success, they but did not lean toward those factors in defining student success for their institutions. Rather, their perspectives on TCU student success were more aligned with HeavyRunner and DeCelles's (2002) FEM and Wilson's (2008) concept of relationality by being culturally grounded and student, family, and community centered. Tribal college leaders, faculty, and staff members acknowledged how students' personal goals are an important aspect of student success at Tribal colleges, even if their goals are not to remain continuously enrolled to complete a degree. If a Native/Indigenous student enrolls and completes culture and language courses to become more culturally knowledgeable and fluent in their Tribal language, how can that not be defined as student success within TCUs? The big three factors are standard measures of student success across mainstream higher education institutions, and the lack of data on Native/Indigenous students within these institutions presents the need for a more holistic approach to defining student success.

This study highlights how TCUs' definitions of success are not based within settler-colonial perspectives. There is some overlap with Crumb et al.'s (2023) rural cultural wealth, particularly the rural familism construct as it describes establishing extended and intergenerational familial connections within a geographic location. McDonough et al. (2010) described how rural students remaining in their rural communities to attend the local community college can result in maintaining "the rural life" and being "closed off" to experiences beyond the community (p. 203). This perspective does not align with being a contributing member of a Tribal nation and community. Thus, it would be valuable to study the overlap between Tribal and rural contexts toward a greater understanding of student success.

HeavyRunner and DeCelles's (2002) FEM and Wilson's concept of relationality highlighted how TCU leaders, faculty, and staff members defined student success through being mission centered, maintaining familial and community connections, sustaining Tribal and cultural identities, and being student centered. The FEM and concept of relationality highlight how Tribal college leaders, faculty, and staff members centered family and relationships in their descriptions of student success. This study identified holistic based influential factors of student success at Tribal colleges. As TCUs remain open to these holistic factors of student success, these institutions will fulfill more of their students' needs and contribute to Native nation building across Tribal nations and communities.

Implications

Implications for Research

This study is the first multiple Tribal college research inquiry to study leadership, faculty, and staff perspectives of student success. Future research inquiries could expand upon this study by engaging more Tribal colleges on the topic of student success, studying TCU student perspectives of student success, and comparing alignment of perspectives. There is need to study the types of support and resources within TCUs that are influential to Native/Indigenous student success. Tribal college alumni are an important population to study for a fuller understanding of student success. Future studies could also build upon the rural context of TCUs to counter the larger perspectives of rural postsecondary contexts. It is important to diversify the literature on concepts of student success and influential types of support and resources outside of Western and settler-colonial perspectives.

Implications for Practice

Native/Indigenous students who attend NNCUs experience less than welcoming and inviting campus environments. Though there may be existing support structures on NNCU campuses, such as Native-specific or multicultural centers, Native student organizations, and events (student-organized powwows, guest speakers, traditional games, etc.)

planned throughout the year, these efforts fall short of cultivating a fully inviting and engaging campus climate for Native/Indigenous students. NNCU presidents, upper administration, and student affairs professionals can learn from Tribal colleges' factors and approaches to defining student success to foster more familial and relational campus environments. These familial and relational campus environments will not only serve Native/Indigenous students more holistically, but they will be more engaging and welcoming for all students. Though college is seen as students' first step toward adulthood, it does not have to be absent of a family-centered atmosphere.

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Suggested Citation:

Youngbull, N. R., & Sanders, D. (2024). Tribal college and university (TCU) leadership, faculty, and staff perspectives on student success. *The Rural Educator*, *45*(1), 21–32.