Improving Retention by Fostering Positive Identities Among Minority Students Through Situational Cues

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Abstract: Research recognizes that 'what occurs' at an institution of higher education (e.g. situational cues) is often more important than 'what students bring' into the institution (e.g. ethnicity, age, etc.) (Hovdhaugen et al., 2013; Tinto, 1993). These situational cues inside a learning environment are important as they cue which identities come to mind and the meaning these identities carry, which consequently influence which behaviors, choices and motivations are primed in a student (Oyserman, 2009). Research indicates that students struggle academically when these identities do not 'fit in' with a particular environment (Landau, Oyserman, Keefer, & Smith, 2014), and when they are stereotyped as being unable to succeed (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Jackson, 2010). This tutorial will discuss how situational cues influence a student's identity, and how this in turn affects retention. This tutorial will also discuss what our university learned from performing a situational cue analysis on Native American students and steps we took to correct harmful situational cues. Specific strategies for how to foster positive identities will be offered. An opportunity to reflect on how these ideas might be implemented on participants' campuses will also be presented.

Introduction and Background

Self-identity is defined as the awareness of one's personal values and the way these values impact one's interactions with others (Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens, & Oddou, 2010; Lange, 2015). Self-identity is an important quality for students to develop as "a strong self-identity means one has strong personal values and maintains a high sense of personal integrity while at the same time being openly accepting to those who are different, without feeling personally threatened" (Keeley, 2014, p. 68). Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens, and Oddou (2010) found that a "strong self-identity allows people to integrate their new cultural knowledge into existing mental models, whereas those low in self-identity are either unable to integrate new knowledge, or when they do, they experience life crises that overwhelm them" (p. 819). Individuals with a strong self-identity "can adapt culturally, but will do it in a way that maintains a strong framework of personal values, thus allowing them to maintain a sense of their personal integrity" (Keeley, 2014, p. 68).

Regarding self-identity, theoretical assumptions provide that multiple self-identities coexist within the same individual (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Markus and Nurius (1986) posited that an individual has an array of selves such as an 'ideal self' (how we would like to be), an 'ought self' (how we think we should be), and the 'actual self' (Klenke, 2007). For purposes of this paper only two components of self-identity are explored (specifically racial-ethnic identity and future identity) with regards to their influence on student persistence.

Racial-ethnic identity, defined as a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular group (Helms, 1995), is a critical part of the overall framework of self-identity (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). Racial-ethnic identity affects individual's behavior "by providing information about the norms, expectations, and behaviors relevant to group membership and by influencing the sense made of social and contextual feedback" (Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007, p. 92). Future identity, defined as a picture of one's possible future self (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2009), is also an important component of self-identity. Weinreich (1986) explained that self-identity is the totality of the continuity between how one construes

oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future. Overall, theoretical assumptions and empirical observations reveal that racial-ethnic and future identities are an important part in the framework of self-identity. Consequently, if institutions want to enhance an individual's self-identity, focusing on racial-ethnic and future identities becomes an important task for both scholars and practitioners.

Not only are racial-ethnic and future identities important components of self-identity, but they both play an important role in retaining and developing students. Research has found that academic success and retention are increased when the connection between one's self-identity and future identity is achieved (Ersner-Hershfield, Wimmer, & Knutson, 2009; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Research further evidences that students struggle academically when their racial-ethnic identity does not 'fit in' with a particular environment (Landau, Oyserman, Keefer, & Smith, 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2007), and when they are stereotyped as being unable to succeed in school (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Jackson, 2010; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002).

However, while understanding 'what' identities are is important, researchers across a range of disciplines have sought to go one-step further by exploring 'how' identities are constructed and maintained (Bryman, Collinson, Grint, Jackson, & Uhl-Bien, 2011). Researchers have found that the construction and maintenance of an individual's self-identity is "never done in isolation and is an ongoing negotiation, not a once and for all achievement" (Bryman et al., 2011, p. 509). This ongoing negotiation occurs in everyday contexts and environments. As each environment changes, it brings with it new situations and forces that highlight different identities (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). The environment relevant to the purposes of this study is within boundaries of educational institutions—educational learning environment (Booker, 2007; Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Osterman, 2000; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Petty, 2014; Usher & Kober, 2012).

Educational learning environments, defined as the "overall atmosphere or characteristics, the kinds of things that are rewarded, encouraged, emphasized, and the style of life that is most visibly expressed and felt" (Genn, 2001, p. 3), exist in educational settings throughout the world. They are found in science classes in Korea (Kim, Fisher, & Fraser, 1999), mathematics classes in Australia (Taylor, Fraser, & Fisher, 1997), undergraduate studies in South Africa (Bangeni & Kapp, 2007), digital game-based learning in Europe (Brom, Šisler, & Slavík, 2010), or throughout universities in Canada (Marshall, 2008). These learning environments have also become a focus among many national and international educational organizations (Abualrub, Karseth, & Stensaker, 2013).

Each learning environment influences how students' identities are constructed and maintained through unique environmental cues (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006; Oyserman, et al., 2007; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). Such environmental cues can be images (McKee, Nhean, Hinson, & Mase, 2006), words (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996), identity-relevant cues (for summary, see Kettle, 2011), objects (Berger & Fitzsimons, 2008), or engagement in identity-relevant actions (Mussweiler, 2006; Schubert & Koole, 2009). Differing cues thus have the potential for priming different identities, which in turn influence differing behavior, choices, and actions (Oyserman et al., 2007). Therefore, if an institution wants to help students develop a strong self-identity for retention purposes, it needs to pay attention to its learning environment and the situational cues contained therein. Additionally, a concerted effort must be made to understand the connection between an institutional learning environment and the development of a student's self-identity. To explore how a learning environment impacts such things as a student's self-identity, researchers have "strongly relied on the results reached through investigating the students' perceptions of the learning environments in which they study" (Abualrub et al., 2013, pp. 97-98).

Confronting years of low retention rates among minority students on our campus, we decided to study an area that had not been explored among minority students on our campus: their self-identities. In particular, we focused our study on how Native American (i.e. Paiute) students, who historically have had the lowest retention rates at our institution, perceive their self-identities and how our campus' learning environment and situational cues affects the development of their self-identities. This paper will review the literature on self-identity, will discuss the theoretical perspective and methodology that were used to

guide these efforts, and will conclude with an overview of how we are shifting situational cues across campus to foster more positive self-identities among minority students in a hope of improving retention rates.

Literature Review

This section provides a review of the literature regarding learning environments, situational cues, self-identity, racial-ethnic identity, and future identity. The following is an abbreviated review of the literature pertinent to this paper.

Learning Environments

The academic and social components of an educational institution create its learning environment (Tinto, 1987). There is an immense amount of research evidencing that learning environments impact students' learning, educational outcomes, and academic performances (Bigdeli et al., 2015; Froyd, 2008; Jaeger & Adair, 2014; Ong & Cheong, 2009). Positive learning environments have been linked to identity development, high levels of learning, educational effectiveness, personal development, and increased retention rates (Aries & Seider, 2007; Biggs, 1989; Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Research has shown that a positive learning environment is one that creates an atmosphere where all students, regardless of their backgrounds, (a) are engaged and valued in the classroom learning environment; (b) have access to the learning facilities and resources and student services provided by the learning organization; (c) are able to participate in building new social networks and join learning communities connected to their study interest; and (d) invite students to take risks and to question their own and their peers' thinking and acting (Jaeger & Adair, 2014; Rauste-von Wright, von Wright, & Soini 2003).

According to the research, institutional learning environments that are not 'positive' cause students to be more 'closed' to learning in an effort to protect their well-being (Boekaerts, 2010; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Chu, Babenko, Cui, & Leighton, 2014). These 'closed' environments have been found to stunt students' learning, derail them from being innovative in their thinking, and ultimately depress their academic performance (Leighton, Chu, & Seitz, 2013; McGregor & Elliot, 2005). Such closed environments also stunt identity development among students (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009).

An institutional learning environment is comprised of many categories that impact both the academic and social successes of students. These categories include engagement and value both inside and outside the classroom, access to learning facilities and resources, and connection to social networks. To understand the impact learning environments have on students, researchers have strongly relied on the results reached through investigating the students' perceptions of the learning environments in which they study (Abualrub et al., 2013). By understanding perceptions of these environmental factors, researchers are in a better position to identify which environmental categories, factors, and variables at a given institution are contributing to the development, success, and retention of students. Perceptions of learning environments are discussed below.

Students' Perceptions of Their Learning Environment

Research has consistently demonstrated that students' learning, behavior, and retention are associated with their perceptions of the learning environment (Herrmann, 2014; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Stes, De Maeyer, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2012). Such research has shown a positive correlation between students perceptions of their learning environment and grade point averages (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Pimparyon, Caleer, Pemba, & Roff, 2000); a deeper approach to studying and learning (Dochy, Segers, Bossche, & Struyven, 2005; Jaeger & Adair, 2014; Lizzio et al., 2002; Stes et al., 2012); engagement in learning (Ryzin, 2010); test performance (Chu et al., 2014; Wayne, Fortner, Kitzes, Timm, & Kalishman, 2013); and motivation (Asiyai, 2014; Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2010).

Ryzin (2010) found that "students' perceptions of the school environment were linked to engagement in learning, which, in turn, was linked to change in academic achievement and hope" (p. 1568). Similarly, Kember, Ho, and Hong (2010) found that a student's motivation to learn was enhanced through a teaching and learning environment with specific supportive conditions, including establishing relevance, interest, learning activities, teaching for understanding, assessment of learning activities, close teacher-student relationships, and sense of belonging between students (Abualrub et al., 2013). Research further discovered that "regardless of prior academic ability, students who reported a positive perception of their school's learning environment performed better on a standardized exam than did students who reported less positive perceptions" (Wayne et al., 2013, p. 376). Likewise, students who gave high marks to their school for its emotional climate and student-to-student interaction performed better than students who perceived these areas less favorably (Wayne et al., 2013).

Experiences in a learning environment shape the way students perceive themselves as part of an institution of higher education (Delpit, 1995; Lave, 1996; Roland, 2008). By exploring students' perceptions, institutions of higher education can use their learning environment as a potential leverage point for educational reform as "interventions that target students' perceptions of autonomy, teacher/peer support, and goal orientation may be able to promote engagement, hope, and academic achievement" (Ryzin, 2010, p. 1568). While researchers have explored students' perceptions of their learning environment from all around the world (Bigdeli et al., 2015; Brittian & Gray, 2014; Chang & Chang, 2010; Couto, Bestetti, Restini, Faria-Jr, & Romão, 2015; Herrmann, 2014; Jaeger & Adair, 2014), research exploring the perceptions of Indigenous students, in particular Native Americans, is sparse (Garvey, Rolfe, Pearson, & Treloar, 2009; Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 2001). More specifically, research focusing on the specific Indigenous group, Paiute Indian students, and their perceptions of their learning environment at an institution of higher education is lacking.

Students' positive perceptions of institutional learning environments not only increase academic performance and persistence, but such positive perceptions improve the way a student views him or herself. This positive view of 'self' (i.e. self-identity) has been linked to increases academic retention and persistence (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Markus, Steele & Steele, 2001).

Self-Identity

Self-identity is an important quality for students to develop as "a strong self-identity means one has strong personal values and maintains a high sense of personal integrity while at the same time being openly accepting to those who are different, without feeling personally threatened" (Keeley, 2014, p. 68). Research has shown that a strong self-identity helps students engage in the leadership process, integrate new information without being threatened or overwhelmed, be open to integrating new information, be comfortable with views and practices that differ from their own, make psychological and sociocultural adjustments, and enable them to participate and display leadership skills in novel and challenging ways (Bird et al., 2010; Kealey, 1996; Keeley, 2014; Lange, 2015; Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, & Oddou, 2010). People with high self-identity can adapt culturally, but will do it in a way that maintains a strong framework of personal values, thus allowing them to maintain a sense of their personal integrity (Mendenhall, Steven, Bird, & Oddou, 2010). In developing a strong self-identity, environmental influences play an important role. As discussed below, the learning environment at an educational institution can have a tremendous impact on whether a student develops a strong or weak self-identity.

Environmental Influences and Self-Identity

Research has shown that there are multiple influences that can develop and prime identities (Helms, 1990; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe, & Gunstone, 2000). Such influences involve private and personal factors, as well as public and social experiences (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hudspith & Williams, 1994; Lord & Brown, 2004; McDonald, Sulsky, & Brown, 2008; Purdie et al., 2000). These factors and experiences can include images (McKee et al., 2006), words (Bargh et al., 1996), identity-relevant cues (see Kettle, 2011 for a summary), objects (Berger & Fitzsimons 2008), or engagement in identity-relevant actions (Mussweiler, 2006; Schubert & Koole,

2009). MacDonald et al. (2008) discovered that self-identity can be primed through verbal and nonverbal messages as well as through a myriad of additional ways (e.g., goals, feedback, policies, values, visions, performance evaluations, etc.) (Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

In research performed by Oyserman, Smith, and Elmore (2014), it was found that simply reading a paragraph and circling first person singular versus plural pronouns or considering the ways one is similar versus different to family and friends is enough to prime and shift identities. Similarly, Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber, and Chen (2009) demonstrated that performance of participants from a variety of racial-ethnic and national groups was systematically influenced by whether an individual or a collective mindset was cued by priming students with either first person singular or plural pronouns. Similar studies reported that dramatic shifts in self-identity occur when individuals are exposed to individual focused pronouns (I/me) or collectively focused cues (us/we) in instructions to an experimental task (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gardner et al., 1999; MacDonald et al., 2008).

In sum, there are multiple influences in a learning environment, such as images, words, objects, and identity-relevant cues that prime a person's self-identity. As situations change, each new context brings with it the potential of highlighting different identities. These highlighted or salient identities influence a person's behavior, thinking, and choices, thereby impacting a person's self-identity. For purposes of this study, two components of self-identity are addressed below, specifically racial-ethnic identity and future identity, both of which focus on an important characteristic of self-identity: "personally held beliefs, interpretations, and evaluations of oneself" (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983, p. 58).

Racial-Ethnic Identity

Racial-ethnic identity is just one component of a self-identity and it refers to a multifaceted construct composed of feelings of in-group belonging and perceived appraisals of group members and stereotypes held by out-group members (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Corenblum, 2014; Quintana, 2007). As with self-identity, daily experiences in a learning environment bring numerous cues letting a student know whether his or her race/ethnicity belongs or is an outsider (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Markus et al., 2001; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Research shows that these situational cues are powerful in priming how a student sees himself or herself and the manner in which the student feels about him or herself (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Wheeler & Petty, 2001).

For example, research has found that simply bringing a negative stereotype to mind can lead to decreased academic attainment in minority students (Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002; Steele, 1997). Other research has shown that when a learning environment primes a student with a negative ethnic identity, the students' academic performance declines (Oyserman, 2009). In particular, academic performance declines if the social group associated with the salient identity (e.g. American Indian) is stereotyped as not performing well in the academic domain of interest (e.g., reading) (Markus et al., 2001; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Shih et al., 1999; Wheeler & Petty, 2001). In a study conducted by Oyserman, Kemmelmeier, Fryberg, Brosh, and Hart-Johnson (2003), students completed a math task before or after being reminded of their racial or ethnic group membership. The results from this study showed that being reminded of group membership improved or undermined math performance depending on content of racial-ethnic identity (Oyserman, 2009). In four studies performed by Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, and Stone (2008), it was found that when exposed to Chief Wahoo, Chief Illinwek, Pocahontas, or other common American Indian images, American Indian students generated positive associations but reported depressed state self-esteem, and community worth, and fewer achievement-related possible selves.

The research further provides that students struggle academically when their racial-ethnic identities do not "fit in" with a particular environment (Landau et al., 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2007), or when they are stereotyped as being unable to succeed in school (Entwisle et al., 2005; Jackson, 2010; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Orfield et al., 2004; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Steele et al., 2002). Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995) showed that African American students persisted more at math tasks if they believed that doing well in school was part of racial-ethnic identity. In another study, Oyserman et al. (2003) found that

the racial-ethnic minority academic disengagement decreased when African American, Hispanic, American Indian and Arab-Palestinian Israelis racial-ethnic identities contained both in-group and larger society ('dual identity') belongingness versus in-group only.

Daily experiences in a learning environment bring numerous cues that help a student understand whether his or her racial-ethnic identity 'belongs' (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Markus et al., 2001; Wheeler & Petty, 2001). These environmental cues are powerful in priming how a student sees himself or herself (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Similar to racial-ethnic identity, future identity is another important component of self-identity, a competency needed to increase retention. Future identity and its link to academic success and self-identity are discussed below.

Future Identity

Future identity represents a picture of one's possible future (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2009), and has been shown to steer an individual's current self-regulation toward achieving future goals (Oyserman et al., 2004). In an academic setting, future identity has been found to help students overcome challenges and experience greater academic success. Eccles, Barber, and Jozefowicz (1999) found that students are more likely to be academically engaged when achievement is congruent with how they define themselves. In two studies of students (72% African American, 17% Latino, 11% White), Destin and Oyserman (2009) discovered that when education-dependent adult future identities are chronically salient, student's school outcomes improve. Moreover, students who were guided to focus on a future identity that feels dependent on education were found to be more engaged in school than students led to focus on a future identity that feels independent of education (Destin & Oyserman, 2009).

Research also discovered that academic success is increased when the connection between one's self-identity and one's academic future identity is made (e.g. Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Hershfield et al., 2011). Destin and Oyserman (2011) found that students who described their future career success as dependent on their present academic success studied more than students who did not. Similarly, students who studied more and turned in more homework were those who believed that present success in school was "an effective means of attaining financial success" in the future (Landau et al., 2014, p. 681). Nurra and Oyserman (2011) likewise discovered that students who felt a stronger connection between their current and future 'adult' identities were those who worked harder on school tasks.

In another study, Anderman, Anderman and Griesinger (1999) found that mostly white seventh graders with positive academic future identities had improved GPA from 6th to 7th grade, especially when their academic future identities were more positive than their current academic identities. Landau et al. (2014) discovered that freshmen students at the University of Kansas who were primed to frame their academic possible identity using the goal-as-journey metaphor reported stronger academic intention, and displayed increased effort on academic tasks, compared to students primed with a nonacademic future identity. In a separate study, Oyserman et al. (2004) established that low-income students improved grades, spent more time doing homework, participated in class more, and were referred less to summer school (controlling for fall grades and the dependent variable of interest) when academic future identities were plausibly self-regulatory. Likewise, Anderman, Anderman, & Griesinger (1999), in a mixed raced sample of 6th-8th graders, found positive academic future identities predicted higher endorsement of performance goals (i.e. wanting to do schoolwork in order to prove one's competence or to appear more able or competent than other students).

In conclusion, academic success and persistence is increased when the connection between one's self-identity and one's academic future identity is made. Additionally, students who feel a stronger connection between their self and future identities are more likely to work harder on school tasks. Despite the existing studies, research exploring the perceptions of Indigenous students, in particular Native Americans at a university level, is sparse. Specifically, the researchers are unaware of any study exploring the connection between Native American students' perceptions of their learning environment and their

development as leaders through the construction of self-identities, by focusing on two of its subcomponents: racial-ethnic and future identities.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective for this research was designed to explore the connection between Native American students' perceptions of their learning environment and self-identity. Two particular components of self-identity, namely racial-ethnic identity and future identity, were explored.

A strong self-identity helps students engage in the leadership process, integrate new information without being threatened or overwhelmed, be open to integrating new information, be comfortable with views and practices that differ from their own, make psychological and sociocultural adjustments, and enable them to participate and display leadership skills in novel and challenging ways (Bird et al., 2010; Kealey, 1996; Keeley, 2014; Lange, 2015; Mendenhall et al., 2010). Self-identity is a compilation of numerous sub-identities (Abrams, 1994; Burke, 2003; Cross & Cross, 2007; Oyserman, 2001; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Two of these sub-identities are racial-ethnic and future, both of which have been linked to retention (ASHE, 2013; Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Markus et al., 2001; Shih et al., 1999; Wheeler & Petty, 2001) and provide an invaluable framework to a strong self-identity (Bird & Osland, 2006; Bird et al., 2010; Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Day et al., 2009; Mendenhall et al., 2010; Weinreich, 1986).

Just as there are multiple dimensions or aspects of self, there are also multiple influences that can develop and prime identities (Helms, 1990; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Purdie et al., 2000). Such influences involve private and personal factors, as well as public and social experiences (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hudspith & Williams, 1994; Lord & Brown, 2004; McDonald et al., 2008; Purdie et al., 2000). As environments change, each new context brings with it the potential of highlighting different identities (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Situations bring identities to mind in different ways, ranging from explicit priming to the identity's distinctiveness in a particular situation to concerns that the identity may not be validated in the context (Oyserman & Destin, 2010).

Despite this knowledge, we are unaware of any study exploring the connection between Native American students' perceptions of their learning environment and the development of a positive self-identity (racial-ethnic and future identities). We found only a handful of studies using a postcolonial indigenous research paradigm and indigenous methodologies when studying Indigenous students, regardless of the subject of inquiry. Indigenous paradigms become relevant to studies like this as they influence the choice of methods (i.e. why a particular method is chosen), how those methods are employed (i.e. how data is gathered), and how the data will analyzed and interpreted (Kovach, 2010). Kovach (2010) explained that using Indigenous paradigms guide the researcher as to how Indigenous knowledge is constructed as well as assumptions about what counts as knowledge (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006). Such paradigms also offer guidance for research methods, including sharing knowledge based in oral history and storytelling tradition (Hart, 2002; Henderson, 2000; Kovach, 2010). It assumes that knowledge is transferred through oral history and story (Archibald, 2008) and that knowledge is co-created within the relational dynamic of self-in-relation (Graveline, 1998; Kovach, 2010). In light of these gaps, this study was performed.

By understanding these perceptions, faculty and administration at institutions of higher education can develop curriculum and teaching methods that are relevant to the reality and worldviews of Indigenous students as well as better suitable to their learning styles. Moreover, institutions can enhance the development of leadership identity among Native American students through relevant experience (Moxley & Wilson, 1998), exposure to external stimuli (Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004), and Indigenous specific extracurricular and co-curricular programs (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000), as well as celebrations and rituals, developmental relationships, mentoring, and environments that facilitate self-awareness, self-assessment tools, feedback, reflection, and novel or new experiences (ASHE, 2013; Hall, 2004).

Methodology

The methods used in this phenomenological case study to collect data entailed using Indigenous methods of talking circles to conduct semi-structured interviews using identity stories and focused life stories (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009). Additionally, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the current and former directors of the institutions' Center for Diversity and Inclusion; in addition, qualitative open-ended questionnaire interviews (Yin, 2014) were given to Paiute student participants. Documentation, direct observation, and participant observation were also used.

Findings

The findings from this study are too numerous to detail in this paper, but below is a simplified summation of some of the key findings as well as the practical implications stemming from these findings. This phenomenological case study explored the connection between Native American students' perceptions of their learning environment and the development of their self-identity. Below (Figure 1) is the relational system of connecting case study concepts, themes, codes, and perceptions that emerged as part of this study:
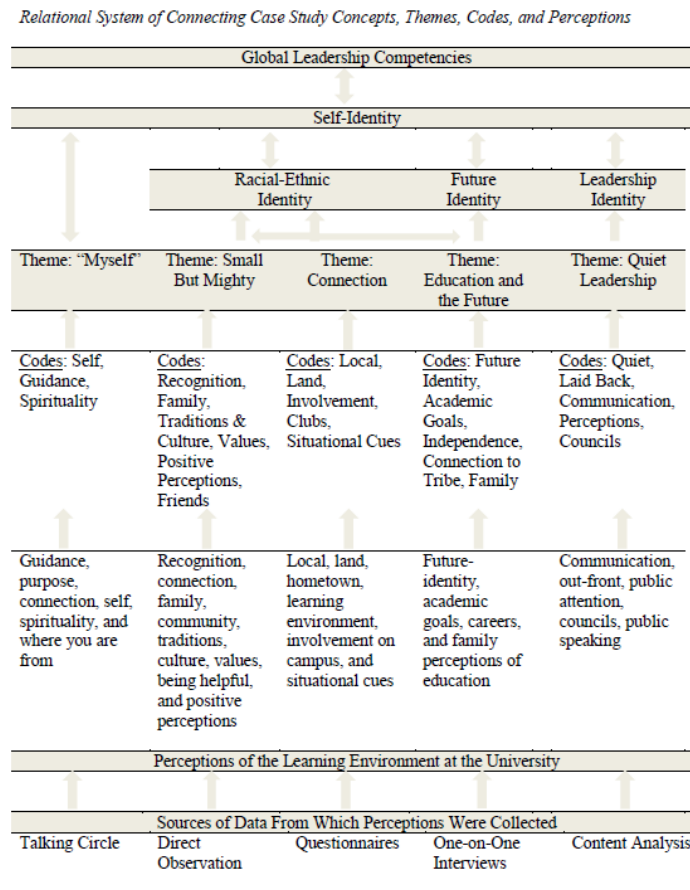
Relational System of Connecting Case Study Concepts, Themes, Codes, and Perceptions

Global Leadership Competencies				
	Self-Identity			
	Racial-Ethnic Identity		Future Identity	Leadership Identity
Theme: "Myself"	Theme: Small But Mighty	Theme: Connection	Theme: Education and the Future	Theme: Quiet Leadership
Codes: Self, Guidance, Spirituality	Codes: Recognition, Family, Traditions & Culture, Values, Positive Perceptions, Friends	Codes: Local, Land, Involvement, Clubs, Situational Cues	Codes: Future Identity, Academic Goals, Independence, Connection to Tribe, Family	Codes: Quiet, Laid Back, Communication, Perceptions, Councils
Guidance, purpose, connection, self, spirituality, and where you are from	Recognition, connection, family, community, traditions, culture, values, being helpful, and positive perceptions	Local, land, hometown, learning environment, involvement on campus, and situational cues	Future-identity, academic goals, careers, and family perceptions of education	Communication, out-front, public attention, councils, public speaking
	Perceptions of the Learning Environment at the University			
	Sources of Data From Which Perceptions Were Collected			
Talking Circle	Direct Observation	Questionnaires	One-on-One Interviews	Content Analysis

Figure 1

This study found that the concept of 'self' or 'myself' is important to Paiute participants and contains multiple sub-identities, two of which are racial-ethnic and future identities. Native American students perceive their racial-ethnic identity with a 'small but mighty' mentality that hinges on the importance of family, community, culture, tradition, and values, such as helping and caring for others. In the learning environment at the university, Paiute students generally have positive perceptions of their racial-ethnic identities, but there are situational cues which often send the message that their 'type' is not wanted, including (a) a perceived unwillingness to help find scholarships, housing, and books for Paiute students; (b) half-time dances at sporting events; (c) light-hearted comments about ceremonial regalia; (d) working with cadavers; (e) working with certain animals; and (f) the naming of the Native American Student Association (NASA) room (the Chapter House – a Navajo term).

With regards to future identities, the Paiute participants perceived their future identities as being linked to education. The link between future identity and families was likewise high among Paiute students. Some Paiute students also perceive their future identity as being linked to their tribe and community. Notwithstanding these perceptions of their future identities, this study found that families' perceptions of education can have a tremendous impact on whether or not the Paiute student achieves his or her academic related future identity. Additionally, the research found a strong connection between how a Paiute student perceives his or her ability to communicate and his or her perception of their leadership identity. The perception of leadership identity as being the one who is up front speaking consequently appears to be impacting Paiute participation in leadership roles across campus. Paiute students seem torn between being culturally quiet and their perceived need to be the center of attention with the ability to publically speak in order to be a leader. As shown below, these findings led the authors to create several new initiatives on their campus to help Native American students develop a stronger self-identity (racial-ethnic and future identities).

Practical Implications

Based in part on this research and the desire to help all Native American students and other underrepresented students find greater success at their institution, the authors of this paper implemented a three-tiered programming initiative to enhance Native American students' perceptions of their racial-ethnic and future identities, thereby increasing retention rates. In the first-tier (launched in 2015), pre-arrival questionnaires were created to help identify students who were first-generation, having financial restraints, concerned about fitting in or belonging, and many other red flags. Second, each incoming underrepresented student was assigned a peer-mentor who reached out several times over the summer to answer all questions and connect with each student. These peer-mentors also met regularly with each student during fall and spring semester to ensure each student was finding his or her place on campus and was succeeding both inside and outside the classroom. Third, we shifted the way our academic advisors treat each student (from academic based to a holistic approach) and now hand register all incoming students for their first semester. Fourth, we created a Parent and Family Service Office to ensure parents of these students have an advocate on campus to answer all their questions. Finally, we moved the Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) to a larger, more visible space on campus and created safe spaces (separate rooms within the CDI) for the Native America Student Association (NASA) and other underrepresented groups on campus.

In the second-tier (launched in 2016), we invited the education director of the Paiute Tribe to speak at Welcome Week to our 1,600 new incoming freshmen about what it means to be a 'Thunderbird' (a Paiute mythological bird, which is also the mascot of our university) as well as tips on being culturally sensitive and accepting of all. Second, Paiute members also performed a drum circle to offer a blessing on and a welcome to all incoming students. This was a top highlight of Welcome Week and something we will incorporate into all future Welcome Weeks. Third, we worked with the Paiute Tribe to obtain permission to use a Paiute word ('Tavi') to explain a cultural shift we were making on campus. Tavi is an Aztec and Paiute word that means sun or brightness. At our university, the 'Tavi way' has been adopted

as a rallying cry for us to light the way for all students and help them succeed (shine) in every way possible. Finally, we changed the name of the NASA safe space for the 'Chapter House' (a Navajo term) to that of something more universally applicable to all Native Americans.

In the third-tier (this year - 2017), we will offer personalized, in-depth visits to all incoming underrepresented students over the summer. We will also have a multicultural orientation (the day before our traditional Welcome Week) for Native American students and all other underrepresented students. Student government has been changed to now have designated multicultural representatives on governing committees. Our university is also in the process of hiring a Chief Diversity Officer and additional employee support was given to our Director of the Center for Diversity and Inclusion to provide additional academic support, tracking, and programming. We have enhanced online financial aid tutorials to help educate students and parents on all the ways to pay for college. We also plan to work with the professional development office at the university to conduct sensitivity training for all staff and faculty. Such training should center on how Paiute and other Native American students perceive particular situational cues (e.g. half-time dances at sporting events, lighthearted comments about ceremonial regalia, working with cadavers and certain animals, etc.). We are also implementing ways to create and cultivate leadership skills among Native American students through leadership workshops and seminars. This leadership seminar could be used to instruct these students on the various forms of leadership, including the more familiar tribal councils. We are exploring ways to also host more cultural celebrations on campus where Native American students are able to show case their traditions, culture, values, and history, thereby strengthening their racial-ethnic identity. We also want to provide specific outreach programs dedicated to working with local tribes and tribal bands to help families better understand the value of education. Too many Paiute students get caught between honoring familial obligations and pursuing their future educational goals. If families are more supportive of their students' academic pursuits, perhaps more will realize their academic-related future identity, thereby strengthening their global leadership competency self-identity.

With each tier we implement, we are seeing positive results. For example, before 2015, we had a five-year average of only 79.14% of Native American students returning to our institution after their first semester (fall to spring). After implementing these initiatives, we saw an 11.36% increase in Native American students returning to our institution (fall 2015 to spring 2016). Additionally, we saw another bump in 2016 (fall 2016 to spring 2017) over the five-year average in Native American students returning. We are hopeful that the implementation of third-tier will likewise produce similar outcomes in retention and student persistence among these underrepresented students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research discusses how situational cues (i.e. images, words, objects, etc.) influence a student's racial-ethnic and future identities, and how these in turn can impact student persistence. This research also addresses what our university learned from performing a situational cue analysis on Native American students and steps we are taking to correct negative situational cues. This research provides practitioners with an understanding that if institutions of higher education want to enhance the likelihood of increased retention rates among minority students, a concerted effort must be made to understand the connection between situational cues and self-identity.

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