

# Equity in Education:

## *The accessibility of higher education for Native American students*

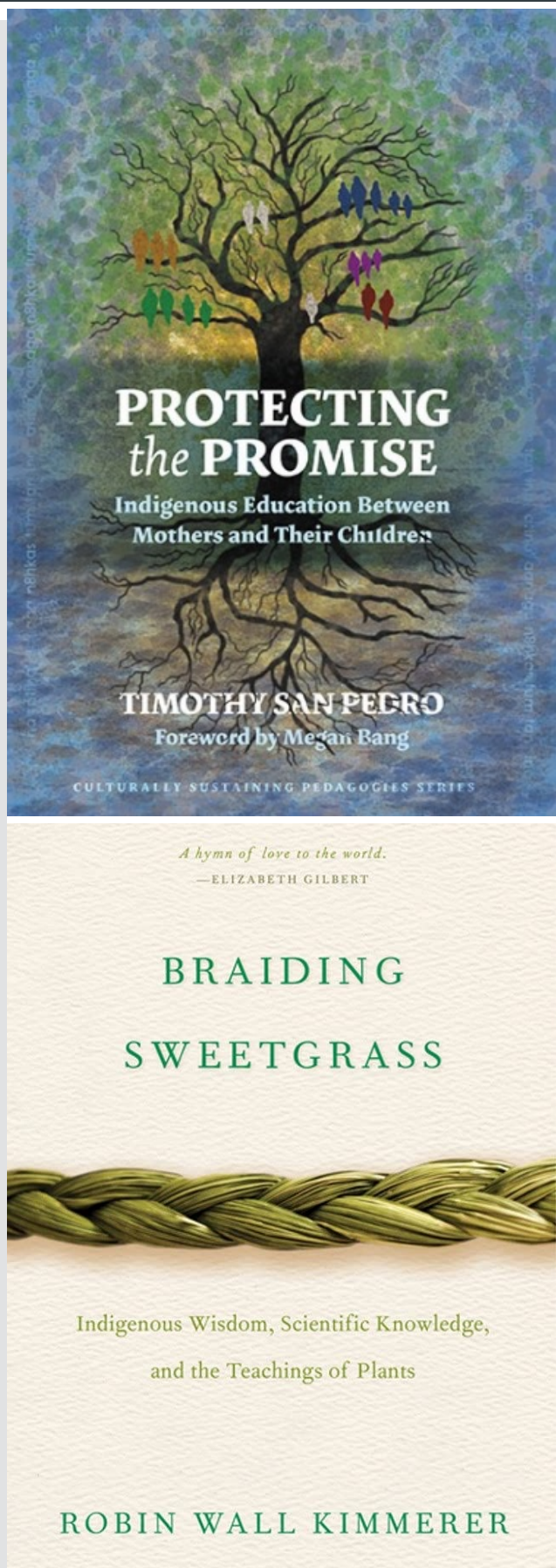
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### Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore to what extent higher education systems across the U.S. are receptive to and compatible with Indigenous systems of knowledge, and therefore to what extent these higher education systems are more accessible to Native American students. Indigenous people in the U.S. have a unique political, social, and cultural identity, being citizens of both their tribal nation and of the U.S.. Native American sovereignty grants them the right to oversee the education of their peoples, yet there is a dark history marred by federal government take-over, colonization, assimilation and neglect. This historical trauma continues to impact Native American students access to and success in higher education systems today. Ultimately, higher education systems across the U.S. continue to be structured according to Eurocentric values and agendas, which impede the success of Native American students and fundamentally undermine federally assured notions of equal access and equitable education. However, there is hope through institutional reform, collaboration with Native communities, and support in cultural vitalization efforts that equal access to education can be achieved.

### Methodology

I engaged in both qualitative and quantitative research methods, studying the literature of Native American, First Nations, and non-Indigenous authors, reading the research of Native American scholars in the field of education, and finally comparing this research with that of non-Indigenous scholars and graduate students studying both Native American and general access to higher education. “*Protecting the Promise: Indigenous Education Between Mothers and Their Children*”, authored by Timothy San Pedro, who specializes in Indigenous histories and perspectives, provided the framework for my research project. I studied statistics from the U.S. Department of Education website, highlighting graduation, retention and recruitment inequities faced by Native American college students and turned to Native educators and researchers to begin to understand the causes and solutions.



### Key words

**Accessibility:** Getting into college, having a choice in the educational institution (be it mainstream or Tribal), and having sufficient funding, educators, students, and community to succeed throughout college

**Eurocentric:** Interchangeable with mainstream, dominant, Western

**Native American:** Interchangeable with American Indian, Indigenous, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN)

**Success:** Different definition for Native Americans than the notions are in Western institutions of wealth, notoriety, prestige, climbing the corporate ladder → “success for many Indigenous students means contributing to their tribe and family” (Brayboy, 2015, 169)

### Findings

In order to understand the extent to which higher education systems across the U.S. are accessible to Native American students, I first had to research what the education systems are. The two primary institutions that provide education for Native American students are the U.S. Department of Education and the National Indian Education Association (NIEA), however, these institutions are in direct conflict on what purpose education serves. For the U.S. Department of Education, their mission is “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021) while the NIEA “advances comprehensive culture-based educational opportunities for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians” (National Indian Education Association, 2021). These mission statements highlighted to me, the systemic issues that Native American students face through Western education in the United States; they are interacting in a counterintuitive system.

#### Native American Students in Higher Education

- AI/AN students have the lowest college graduation rates among all racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.
- Native American scholar Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy argues that there are “higher graduation rates for those focused on giving back to their community” however...
  - Across the U.S. there are only 120 undergraduate, 30 master’s, and 3 doctorate programs (Tippeconnic 2017, 34)
  - While Native Students have higher graduation rates at 4-year institutions, access to 2-year colleges is more feasible, and only 22% of Native American students in 2-year colleges make the transfer to 4-year institutions (McKinley 2015, 157)
  - While doctoral degrees are (informally) required to create the institutional changes that motivate Native American students to graduate (as cited above), Native American doctoral student numbers have steadily decreased since 2008, with Native Americans now making up only 0.3% of doctoral graduates (McKinley 2015, 160)

#### What causes accessibility issues?

- Financial obstacles:** limited scholarship opportunities, limited federal and state grants for Indigenous students, and limited access to loans and other financial resources to get into and through college
- Social isolation:** due to the limited access to college education, those who do pursue college at a mainstream institution face social isolation, they may be away from family and friends in tribal communities, feel a disconnect with their family due to the institutional differences between Native and Western education, and face marginalization.
- Racism and discrimination:** stereotyping, and cultural appropriation – perpetuated by a lack of Indigenous representation in faculty, students, Indigenous art, and cultural representation around campus
- Structural issues:** e.g., lack of academic guidance, Native American courses, and inclusive curriculum → as a result of poor recruitment and retention of Indigenous faculty and unchecked course content and pedagogy.

### Indigenous Knowledge

The education of Native American students has long been used as a tool for colonization and assimilation. Native American scholar Wendy Makoons Geniusz emphasizes that Indigenous knowledge is not primitive. There are ways of knowing outside of mainstream frameworks that are integral parts of Indigenous culture. Through my research, I read the works of authors such as Timothy San Pedro, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson who triumph the resurgence of Native languages and the revitalization of Native culture. Through my future research, I hope to learn more about Indigenous ways of knowing and how these can be incorporated into Western institutions of higher education to enhance accessibility and equity.

#### A small insight into Indigenous Knowledge...

- Fundamental knowledge is derived from ancient politics, law, morals, and society.
- The world is not divided into masculine and feminine, animacy and inanimacy. There is a holistic sense of the world whereby humans, animals, plants, and other beings are considered equal (Kimmer 2013, 157).

#### Tribal Colleges or Universities (TCUs)

Studies have shown that attending a Tribal College or University for just one course result in a 75% greater completion rate for AI/AN students than those who go straight into an institution of higher education (Brayboy 2015, 159).

### Future Research

- How can we move away from White-centered, Eurocentric educational frameworks towards social and racial justice teaching?
- What does reimagining education look like: is it restructuring curriculum, retraining educators, does it require institutional reform?
- What will be the impact of offering courses based in Native American studies – where classical fields like history, writing, philosophy and psychology are taught through Native ways of knowing and in ways that are impactful to Native communities?**

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