

LEVERAGING THE SDSU-SYCUAN INSTITUTE ON TRIBAL GAMING TO ATTRACT AND SUPPORT MORE NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS: SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

BACKGROUND

In July, 2005, the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation announced a gift of \$5.5 million¹ to San Diego State University to create “the country’s first research institute and academic curriculum exclusively focused on tribal gaming” (see <http://advancement.sdsu.edu/marcomm/news/releases/fall2005/pr072505.html>). This institute is intended both to perform research and to establish a bachelor’s degree program in tribal gaming preparing graduates for management careers in casino management.

Although Native American students will hopefully occupy most, if not all, of the twenty spots in the degree program, it may be possible—through a combination of additional external grants and internal collaborative activities between the Institute and other parts of the SDSU community—to “leverage” the impact of the tribal gift in an effort to attract and support an increased number of Native American students. This paper briefly suggests specific areas where SDSU would be especially well suited to reach out to the Native American community. Specific sources of funding are not discussed. It is hoped, however, that funding might be offered by the private sector (including Native American gaming interests), charitable foundations, and the Federal government.

Possibilities relating to various existing programs are discussed. These ideas are entirely tentative and some are presented primarily for the purpose of illustration. It should be emphasized that these ideas are, of course, strictly contingent on the support of and interest in these programs by the faculty concerned. No attempt to “impose” programs on anyone is intended.

The ideas proposed in this paper have been developed by an individual who has no direct experience with Native American culture and has attempted to gain a perspective on the issues raised based largely through reading and applying concepts of value from a marketing perspective to this type of educational effort. This perspective almost certainly entails some level of naivety and the ideas presented should be interpreted with this in mind. This document is only an attempt to help the university commit to a course of

¹ The initial gift includes an initial endowment of \$5 million in addition to the first annual payment of \$474,000 in annual support.

action that will increase opportunities for Native American students. It is expected that by far the greatest insight on actual opportunities will be provided by Native American students and other members of the Native American community.

NATIVE AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Rates of college attendance among Native Americans have increased significantly since access to institutions of higher learning were greatly improved in the 1960s and 1970s. During the last two decades, this growth has continued, but at a much reduced pace. Although the total enrollment of Native American students in U.S. colleges and universities has increased 90% between 1976 and 1999, it is estimated that today only 11% of Native Americans—as opposed to 25% of the general U.S. population—obtain a bachelor's degree (Hoover, 2004; Lowe, 2005). Ironically, it appears that relative to the general population, Native Americans have actually been slightly “overrepresented” in college admissions. Unfortunately, these high—and seemingly impressive—rates of admission are coupled with drop-out rates that are the highest of any minority group (Jackson, Smith, and Hill, 2003). Part of this attrition may be result from the reality that Native American students are more likely to start their college studies at community colleges, a path that appears to be associated with lower rates of completion of the bachelor's degree. Surprisingly, a small sample study by Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) found that all of these students had attended at least three different campuses before graduating. Academic progress was also reported to be “non-linear.” Native American students are reported to complete high school at rates similar to those of other minority groups and to receive comparable scores on college admissions tests (Jackson, Smith, and Hill, 2003). Thus, *efforts are needed not merely to attract Native American students, but also to provide supports that will allow a greater number to complete their degrees.*

Attrition from college is a serious problem among all ethnic groups. Many students face serious difficulties in adjustment. Native American students, however, are especially vulnerable to certain problems. Some of these problems—especially intentional and unintentional racism expressed in the college environment—appear to be common to other minority groups. Like many other minority groups, Native Americans are more likely to be first generation college students, making it more difficult for parents to understand the college process and provide effective reassurance and encouragement. However, the cultural adjustment in entering college is often greater for Native American college students. Today, slightly less than half of Native Americans are estimated to live on reservations. Students from this background may face acute difficulties. Many lack confidence that skills from college will be usable if they choose to return to reservations. Some have reported concerns that a decision to go away to college “selling out to a new

culture and a new way of life" (Jackson, Smith, and Hill, 2003). Absence from "important cultural and family events" may cause resentment (Jackson, Smith, and Hill, 2003).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SDSU TO SUPPORT NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

SDSU, as a large university in close proximity to several Native American communities, appears to have special potential to effectively serve more Native American students. For students coming from small communities, the size of the campus may, of course, be intimidating, but one benefit of this large campus is that it is feasible to attract a larger "critical mass" of Native American students. Native Americans are by no means a homogenous group. There are large differences both among individuals and between those from different tribal traditions. Native American students, like any other group, also have varied interests. To help ensure that each individual will find others to whom he or she can relate well, a large program may be essential.

Native Americans are underrepresented at all levels of higher education, but especially at the doctoral and professional levels. To inspire more Native Americans to attend college, and to increase the visibility of potential role models during the college experience, it is essential that the ranks of Native Americans among college faculty be increased. SDSU has a unique opportunity in this regard. SDSU has many accomplished scholars and active researchers among our faculty. At the same time, faculty at SDSU are expected devote considerable attention to teaching. Thus, we attract a faculty more dedicated to teaching and mentoring individual students than one might find at other campuses achieving our standards of scholarship. Faculty who choose to mentor students are likely to have a solid understanding of the process of scholarship and to maintain strong connections with colleagues in institutions that offer advanced degrees, and particularly the Ph.D. typically required for a faculty career. These faculty members have the potential to involve students who aspire to academic careers in their research activities, accurately relate the nature of the doctoral experience and academic career, and to use connections to lobby for admission their protégés into doctoral programs.

Research has found different kinds of support to be strong predictors of academic success among Native American students. Family support appears to be an extremely critical factor that is largely beyond the influence of the institution. However, authors such as Lowe (2005) and Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) suggest several measures that may contribute to success. As one example, Native American students often face great pressures to return home to take care of temporary family obligations. Such interruptions of the college process may be culturally expected. To ensure that are able to return and continue their academic programs after the completion of these

responsibilities, it may be helpful to have staff to assist in the completion and shepherding of paperwork to secure leaves with appropriate return privileges.

SDSU PROGRAMS OF SPECIAL PROMISE IN ATTRACTING NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

Native American students—just as any other group—should, of course, be free to choose the specific majors and programs of study which are most compatible with their individual interests and goals. Thus, it is fully anticipated that, to the extent that Native American enrollment at SDSU could be significantly increased, this enrollment would be dispersed among a number of majors and programs, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Nevertheless, certain existing programs at SDSU may hold particular promise in reaching out to the Native American community. The list below is not intended to be exhaustive, but merely to suggest some areas of clear potential. In addition leveraging existing programs, the creation of a “feeder” undergraduate program intended to prepare Native American students for law school is proposed.

American Indian Studies

Although the Department of American Indian Studies (<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/dept/aminweb/home.html>) does not currently offer a major, a minor is available. Depending on resource availability and the interests of faculty in the Department, it might be possible, in the future, to offer a major. Even without a major, however, the minor may be of considerable interests to Native American students who, while majoring in another discipline, would be attracted to a broad and coherent exposure to issues in the discipline.

Nursing

Access to quality health care is sorely lacking in many tribal communities. In a 2004 report entitled “Broken Promises: Evaluating the Native American Health Care System” (<http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/nahealth/nabroken.pdf>), U.S. Commission on Civil Rights chastised the current state of affairs. Although the report focused on the gross under funding of health care services on reservations, it also recognized the significant impact of cultural as obstacles to the delivery of health care services.

The U.S. is currently experiencing a serious shortage of nurses, a shortfall that has been ameliorated to some extent the influx of foreign-educated nurses to the United States. The shortage is actually expected to get

worse given the limited number of nursing degrees issued in the United States. Given low pay, harsh working conditions, and frequent isolation of medical facilities serving a large proportion of Native Americans, it is possible that this group will disproportionately face the burden imposed by this shortage. Despite increasing salaries brought about by the under-supply of trained nurses that make entry into the profession more attractive, the growth in nursing degrees issued is held back by the acute shortage of nursing faculty holding doctoral degrees in the discipline.

The SDSU School of Nursing (<http://nursing.sdsu.edu/>) is well regarded and provides students with high quality instruction. Attracting more Native American students into this program would be beneficial in several ways. Although a majority of Native Americans today live off reservations, often in communities with a minority Native American presence, a much larger proportion of Native American graduates might nevertheless be expected to settle in Indian Country. Although there are large variations among the tribes, Native American graduates would, of course, tend to have greater familiarity with Native American culture in general and, more specifically, any specific tribe with which they may identify themselves. Finally, some Native American students who go through the program may be inspired to pursue an academic career in nursing which, in the long run, would help add diversity to the discipline and in addressing the unique needs of the nursing profession within Native American settings.

Social Work

Although specifics vary among tribes, Native American culture generally emphasizes the needs of the community and the welfare of others. Thus, many students will be motivated to return to their home communities to pursue various types of social service careers. The SDSU program in social work provides a broad foundation in a number of areas while offering specialized course work in students' specific areas of interest.

Hospitality and Tourism

The unique nature of The Sycuan Institute on Tribal Gaming will provide a limited number of students with exceptional preparation for careers in casino management. However, even students not going into this program might find the general program in tourism appealing as a way to increase tourism to Native American communities. A combination of a major in Hospitality of Tourism with a minor in American Indian Studies could provide strong preparation for this type of career. Additional coursework in business programs

could be helpful in expanding merchandising opportunities made possible by tourism.

“Feeder” Preparation Program for Law Schools

Native American tribal sovereignty is increasingly coming under attack in the American legal system. Although the courts, during some periods of time, have helped enforce some rights of the Native American population, other court decisions have negatively affected this group. Much of the law relevant to Native American issues is greatly shaped by historical precedents and specific treaties between the United States and Native American groups as a whole and with specific tribes over time. In addition, many sovereign tribes have developed their own constitutional frameworks and legal systems. A sizable representation of the Native American population in the legal community is therefore essential.

Currently, a number of law school programs offer programs emphasizing Native American issues. In relatively close proximity to SDSU, both the University of Arizona and the UCLA Law Schools offer such programs. Competition for admission into these programs is, however, intense. This is especially the case for students dependent on scholarships to avoid graduating with heavy debts. In 2003, the UCLA School of Law (<http://www.law.ucla.edu>) accepted 300 out of 7,000 applicants, or roughly 4.3%. Students in the joint J.D./M.A. degree program in law and American Indian studies represent a small portion of the overall law school. Since California educational institutions are generally prohibited from considering the ethnicity of an applicant in admissions decisions despite the benefits of diversity to the institution, preparing students who are highly competitive on traditional admissions criteria is essential.

Aspiring law students have considerable freedom in selecting an undergraduate major that will prepare them for the law school experience. However, writing and other verbal skills are understandably essential for success in a profession that is so dependent on precise and skillful communication. Performance in English language courses is likely to be weighted heavily in admissions decisions. The Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT), a standardized test intended to predict performance in the legal discipline, also heavily weighs verbal and conventional reasoning skills. Many individuals from minority backgrounds are likely to be at a considerable disadvantage in an admissions process with this orientation.

Law schools weigh writing skills heavily. Admissions applications often include one or more analytical essays and the LSAT also includes an essay part. Although formal logic may be taught based much on the same principles across cultures, there are significant differences in how logic is applied as a skill in

the practical setting. Although students in their legal careers will hopefully depend on a diversity of perspectives in analyzing legal issues, it is important that students wishing to enter law school have a thorough understanding of traditional Western logic and an appreciation of its strengths and weaknesses.

A pre-law program could be very flexible in its structure to allow individuals to pursue their unique interests in manner consistent with preparation for and admission into a law program. In terms of formal course work, students could choose one of several majors (e.g., business, tribal gaming, English, political science, history, or philosophy) and supplement this with appropriate coursework (particularly from the American Indian Studies and History Departments). The program would depend on a mixture of (1) explicit pre-law courses taken for credit, (2) “support courses” taken by students in other majors and/or as general education options by the general education population, (3) informal mentoring of individual students by faculty and local attorneys, and (4) seminars aimed at developing skills needed in preparation for law school.

The line between the first two components appears to be somewhat blurred. Explicit pre-law courses might involve an introduction to the legal profession and a course in legal research. Courses in logic and language could be either chosen from existing course offerings or be tailored as new courses specifically for the legal context.

Faculty mentoring would most likely need to be individually designed although it is anticipated that intensive writing would be included for most students. Students needing to focus primarily in one area might be assigned to one mentor while others might work with several different mentors as needed over time. A separate mentoring process might involve the individual’s specialization. It is hoped that local attorneys—including judges—would volunteer to mentor students as well. It is also hoped that

In terms of non-credit seminars, research would have to be done to identify critical skills that would need to be developed. One significant challenge might be the LSAT, a highly standardized admissions examination consisting primarily of multiple choice questions. Multiple choice exams rely heavily on so-called “convergent” thinking—the ability to provide one correct answer to a question that satisfies the expectation of the majority. This can be problematic for individuals who come from backgrounds that are based on explicitly or implicitly different expectations. A number of commercial services offer expensive preparation courses. Evidence of the effectiveness of these programs appears to be mixed, with studies finding only small performance gains by those retaking the exam. A benefit of a prolonged four year program of preparation, however, is that students have a longer set of spaced opportunities to assimilate concepts tested and strategies. Devoting a large amount of time for the primary purpose of performing well on an exam

raises serious ethical and philosophical questions. However, it is hoped that test taking preparation will help students develop more general skills that can be used both in law school and in legal practice.

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