American Indian Well-Being Model in Higher Education

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I remember conducting an oral history project on the Tohajiilee Navajo Reservation during the mid 1990s. I was often concerned about American Indian higher education and needed some type of advice to help me succeed in my master's program. I interviewed a Navajo elder and asked him, "What words of advice would you offer our younger generations who plan on attending college?" He answered, "I would tell them to remember who they are, where they are from and where they are going in life." Furthermore, the elder explained the sacredness of spiritual, mental and physical well-being and the importance of the close connections of an individual, family and community.

These three elements of well-being ignited my thinking into a broader view of helping all students succeed in higher education. As I continued my education at the doctorate level, I expanded my well-being model, which served as a major component of my dissertation that involved success and persistence factors pertaining to American Indian Graduate and professional students.

The overall purpose in developing the holistic American Indian Well-being Model in Higher Education was to create a blueprint for American Indian college students by addressing well-being factors that include: spiritual, cultural, social, professional, mental, emotional, physical and environmental pillars. The well-being model can be used as a primary means of helping college students, college practitioners and researchers in addressing issues that concern higher education. Prospective college and graduate students may find themselves asking the following questions, which are relevant to well-being factors when considering higher education. Here are the following eight pillars:

1. Spiritual Well-Being (Purpose)

Why am I attending college?

Before an individual decides to pursue higher education, he or she may ask, "Why am I attending college?" This sense of purpose includes important elements, such as an individual's beliefs, happiness and balancing well-being factors in life. Examples of spiritual well-being can relate to daily prayer, self acceptance/realization, life fulfillment and remembering teachings from those in the spirit world.

2. Cultural Well-Being (Identity)

How do I balance my culture and the modern world while I am in college?

Cultural well-being is essential for American Indian students to succeed in college, which integrates knowing who you are, where you are from and where you are going in life. This formulates the issue of identity and protecting our culture, by interpreting our past and linking our future. Examples of cultural well-being include the cultural practices, songs, Native language, rituals, artistic talent, community pride and giving back.

3. Professional Well-Being (Planning)

What are my goals for my college and professional career?

Professional well-being includes a variety of factors, including planning a successful college academic experience and future career. Professional well-being also includes the development of skills, interests, work ethic, hobbies, financial literacy and leadership.

It is essential for college students to plan ahead in fulfilling all academic, career and financial aid obligations.

4. Social Well-Being (Networking)

Do I have adequate networking skills to succeed in college?

Social well-being is defined as, "Our ability to interact successfully within a community and throughout a variety of
cultural contacts, while showing respect for ourselves and others. (WSU Well-being Site, 2009). Examples of social well-being include time management, cooperation, group work, literacy skills, intimacy, dialogue with professors and students and a circle of positive friends.

5. Mental Well-Being (Thinking)

Am I academically prepared to meet the rigors of college?

Mental well-being is defined as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, coping skills and learning how to think in a variety of ways. It can sometimes be referred to as “intellectual well-being.” (WSU Well-being Site, 2009).

Examples of mental well-being include study skills, learning styles, problem solving, test preparation, research skills, creativity and rigor.

6. Emotional Well-Being (Feeling)

Do I know how to balance my emotions to succeed in college?

Emotional well-being allows us to recognize, understand, experience and express a full range of emotions and channel those emotions into healthy behaviors that satisfy personal and social goals. (WSU Well-being Site, 2009). Examples of emotional well-being include stress management, positive self-esteem, adaptation to change, coping skills, resiliency and anger management.

7. Physical Being (Body)

Can I take care of myself and my body while I’m in college?

Physical well-being can be referred to as the ability to understand what can make our body most efficient and effective and the ability to recognize and respect our own limitations. (WSU Well-being Site, 2009). Examples of physical well-being include proper diet, exercise, drug and alcohol awareness, motivation, sex education, personal hygiene, sleep and relaxation.

8. Environmental Well-Being (Place)

Is the college that I plan to attend a good fit for me and my goals?

In many American Indian traditions, the umbilical cord of a newborn is often placed in the ground or kept in the family home for safekeeping. The umbilical cord serves as an educational seed that is planted for future growth and a sense of place. In American Indian society, the sense of place is very important and provides a foundation for learning and a physical concept of home.

As part of building one's college career, it is important to have a plan to navigate and identify all eight of the well-being pillars.

Developing A Personal Well-Being Model

As part of developing a personal well-being model for higher education, I created a circle that highlights each of the eight well-being pillars: spiritual, cultural, social, professional, emotional, mental, environmental and physical. In addition, each circle represents a particular area for each well-being pillar, such as resources, strengths, challenges and a plan of action. Students who are completing this model must carefully read each well-being resource and develop a basic understanding. There are no wrong answers, as each student labels each portion of the model with their own interpretations. The main objectives of the personal well-being model are to encourage students to think critically about well-being factors that can help them succeed in higher education.

Resources

Resources are instrumental to student success at all levels of higher education. A resource can be identified as a mentor, student support specialist, elder, community activist, leader, coach or even a family member. In addition, college campuses have various forms of resource centers that assist students with tutoring, school organizations, workshops and other events that are relevant to academic and personal growth.

Strengths

It is very important for college students to identify personal strengths that can assist in positive self-concept. Strengths are connected to the positive attributes that each person embodies; talents, thinking skills, friendliness, perseverance, dedication, knowledge of culture and other positive factors.

Challenges

Learning to identify challenges is another essential tool for developing a personal well-being model. Challenges are obstacles to succeeding in college, such as lack of mentors, homesickness, no sense of belonging, family issues and a shortage of financial aid funding.

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Plan of Action

The plan of action is a vital element of the well-being model, which identifies a possible solution in reference to addressing challenges. In this plan of action, a student may also list a timeframe to effectively solve the challenge. When using this model, it is important to know that some students may leave blanks in portions which can be addressed at a later time.

Diagram of Well-Being Model in Higher Education

If you look carefully at the diagram, the student is in the center where all lines meet. In the inner circle, a student must identify a person who would serve as a resource in that particular well-being pillar. For example, in the spiritual portion of the well-being model, a student may identify a traditional elder as a resource and list daily prayer as a strength. As an example of a spiritual well-being challenge, a student may identify a disconnection with home. In the outer portion of the circle, a student will therefore identify a plan of action, such as calling home to speak with family members at least once per week as a possible solution.

Spiritual Well-being

Resource: Traditional Elder
Strengths: Daily Prayer, Ceremonial duties.
Challenges: Homesickness; wanting to come home often
Plan of Action: Call home once a week to speak with family members.

In another example, a student may identify and connect with physical well-being. As a resource, a student may identify their younger siblings as a resource, since most young children are physically active and idolize college students. As a challenge, a student may express that he or she is eating too much junk food rather than making healthy food choices. As a solution, the student will identify eating healthier foods, such as vegetables and fruits as a plan of action.

Physical Well-being

Resource: Young Children
Strength: Role Model status for children
Challenges: Eating too much junk food
Plan of Action: Eat healthier foods such as vegetables and fruits

It is important to note that students will not complete all portions of the circle. The model serves as a foundation for college students to initiate a plan of action. Once a student identifies and completes the pillars of well-being, the final process begins of creating a life symbol in higher education.

Creating a Life Symbol

As American Indian people, well-being can often take a symbol in many forms, including animate and inanimate. For example, as a Canoncitio Navajo college student, corn was always revered as being a sacred symbol among our people. Therefore, I incorporated the eight pillars into a well-being symbol, illustrated as follows:

As part of my personal life model, I drew the straight, intersecting lines as corn stalks, because it is sacred among the Canoncitio Band of Navajos. A seed of corn resembles the umbilical cord, which my parents buried in the earth near my home. The umbilical cord represents my physical well-being and my foundation in life. As part of environmental well-being, I was nourished with love, respect and a good home. Corn also needs nourishment and proper care to grow strong and healthy. I developed my mental and emotional well-being as a teenager. I often credit one teacher who made a positive difference in my mental well-being by challenging me to reach my full potential in her classes. In terms of emotional well-being, my high school counselor was an extraordinary person, who helped me address challenges as I entered college. In this stage of a corn stalk, I developed a strong base to stand on my own. I continued to grow socially and professionally in my young college life. I became president of an American Indian club at my university to enhance my social network. I also developed my teaching skills as an educator and finished my teaching licensure.

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