

Relationality and Student Engagement: Connecting Teaching and Learning at a Tribal College

Brian Compton, Northwest Indian College

Ted Williams, Northwest Indian College

Cheryl Crazy Bull, American Indian College Fund

Institutions of higher education are driven by teaching and learning. Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are driven by teaching and learning that is connected to the culture, language, values, and history of the tribes they serve. In this article, Brian Compton, Ted Williams, and Cheryl Crazy Bull describe one TCU's intensive efforts over several years to improve teaching and learning through a college-wide initiative. Through narrative, participant reflection, and analysis, the authors find that the initiative, while still evolving, has had a great impact on the work of faculty and the experiences of the students at the TCU, particularly in strengthening faculty skills, increasing student engagement, and building a learning environment that is culturally rich, rooted in relationships, and meaningful to students and faculty. The theory guiding the initiative is that supporting and encouraging the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities of faculty leads to growth in the knowledge, skills, and abilities of student. The authors find, through their own experiences with and analysis of the impact of the initiative, that the connection between teaching and learning is strong, and the initiative's work on improving faculty skills --- primarily in the areas of teaching methodologies, content knowledge, and cultural context --- leads to increased student learning and engagement.

As Tribal college faculty, it is crucial that we embrace relationality as central to how we teach. It is through relationality that students engage with what really matters to them and find success in their educational pursuits.

This paper discusses the impact of over nine years of intensive support of a teaching and learning initiative at a Tribally-chartered post-secondary institution (hereafter the College) primarily serving students from throughout the Pacific Northwest. Since 2007, faculty, administration, and students have focused resources and instructional efforts on the institutionalization of a transformative Teaching and Learning Initiative (hereafter the Initiative). The theory behind the Initiative is that the improvement of faculty skills in the areas of cultural context, teaching methodologies, and content knowledge positively impacts student learning. Faculty learning occurs in relationship to the unique Tribal experiences of students and in response to the at-risk socio-economic environment from which most students come. The Initiative's design and implementation is informed by both Indigenous thought and practice, and Western knowledge about education and student success.

Tribal Colleges and Universities (hereafter TCUs) translate student persistence and engagement strategies as they relate to their place and cultural identities. Cajete (1999) described what must be present to create Indigenous learning, specifically in terms of building an Indigenous science framework: recognizing that Native science is learned in many ways, connecting to soul and sense of place, creating an extended family of learning, making meaningful connection to life, creating authentic learning experiences, sharing and giving voice to Native thoughts, immersion, exploration, appreciation, personal experience, health, and leadership.

Through a survey of students at Tribal colleges, Saunders (2011) found that programs at Tribal colleges that support student social and cultural interests facilitate students' paths to degree attainment, preparing students for careers and jobs that are highly valued by students and increasing student persistence and engagement: "... they (TCU students) also realize the importance of their education as preparation for life. Students want to be in a college that supports their culture, beliefs, and values" (p. 115). Students understand the intrinsic value of education for self and society. Self-actualization (the achievement of their potential) was highly rated by students responding to Saunders' survey and is described as the most valuable implication of his study.

Characteristics of TCU faculty identified by Crazy Bull (2010), that are necessary for faculty to successfully support students' Native identities and place-based TCU missions, include: faculty ability to be responsive to students and to relate to students of different cultures, faculty readiness in both attitude and ability to integrate cultural information, faculty belief in the value of both historic and contemporary Native knowledge, and the ability of faculty to teach from an interdisciplinary perspective. These characteristics, along with an appropriate knowledge base in Indigenous ways of knowing (history, sociology, political science, literature, science), are essential to creating a climate of student engagement and success.

Context for the Teaching and Learning Initiative

Tribal colleges and universities are institutions established for the purpose of providing culturally responsive, integrated, place-based education to Native students, supporting their identities while simultaneously ensuring the acquisition of Western skills necessary for contemporary life (Crazy Bull, 2015). The post-secondary educational experiences of most Native students rarely emerge from formal educational experiences that integrate Native beliefs and practices. Tribally-controlled educational institutions provide an education rooted in Native knowledge. This is a tremendous challenge because the very structure of higher education institutions, on an academic calendar year with prescribed course delivery and predetermined curricula, is foreign to the experiential, natural, and adaptive learning environments traditionally used by Native people. TCUs have to be creative in their approach to learning so students can navigate these often contradictory experiences.

At the center of the Initiative is the mission of the College, which emerges from the premise that it is through education that the College can promote Indigenous self-determination and knowledge. As a Tribal college, its primary focus is the creation of place-based, dynamic, and academically excellent educational opportunities that derive from community and individual interests and needs, and which promote the identity and value of Tribal cultures and ways of knowing. Because of its large regional service area and the fact that the College serves students from all over North America, the College acts

with sensitivity to the diverse Tribal constituencies it serves while supporting the priorities of its chartering Tribe.

Foundational to the experiences of the College is its commitment to being a community of learners for faculty, staff, and students. As a result, the College frequently finds overlapping and interdisciplinary interests across all parts of the College. The Initiative influenced academic program development and student experiences based in the learning organization nature of the College.

Historically, the College engaged in various approaches to education to attempt to adapt its self-determination model to Western delivery systems. The Teaching and Learning Initiative discussed here was initially articulated in the Woksape Oyate (The People's Wisdom) project. The current Teaching and Learning Initiative Plan (2012-2017) sustains and builds upon the goals and accomplishments of the Woksape Oyate grant which funded the Teaching and Learning Initiative from 2007 through June 2012, and aligns with the College's Assessment Plan (2012-2017), the Achieving the Dream Implementation Plan (2012-2016), the College's Strategic Plan and Core Themes (2010-2017), and other faculty initiatives, such as faculty inquiry groups.

The College started its first bachelor's program the same year that the Initiative began in 2007. In 2009, the College had its first bachelor's graduate. In that year, only 1 of the 48 graduates at the College, or 2%, were at the Bachelor's level. Since that time the number and percentage of bachelor's graduates have steadily increased. As of 2015, the College has implemented four bachelor's programs. In 2015, 32% of the graduates were at the bachelor's level. This trend towards increasing numbers and percentages of graduates at the bachelor's level is indicative of the College's shifting focus toward bachelor's level programming. This shift toward being a bachelor's level institution makes the Initiative more important as faculty must support students' development for a longer period and to a deeper level than before.

Early in this process, the College's educational leadership committed to understanding and acting from a Native research paradigm in improving teaching and learning. Several faculty and administrators read and discussed the work of the Opaskwayak Cree scholar, Shawn Wilson, who in his book, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, uses storytelling and relationship as a research methodology. Wilson tells the story of his life work as a Native researcher to his sons, weaving his story throughout his discussion of his life's research describing an Indigenous research paradigm. In this paper, the authors have adopted this approach, weaving storytelling and description as our research methodology to explore the development of a Teaching and Learning Initiative at a Tribal college, moving between the insights of a faculty participant in the Initiative and our analysis of the work and benefits of the Initiative. The authors chose this methodology because it not only resonated with the experience of our faculty researcher but reflected the commitment of the faculty and administration to model Indigenous research methods and presentation.

Teaching and learning, respect for diversity, and a place-based and relational perspective have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. Both of my parents were teachers. As a child I grew up directly across the street from and attended a laboratory school at a university that was formerly a normal school established to train teachers. Beyond being the place of my first school experience, the university was the world of many of my earliest explorations. At school I was in constant contact with innovative teaching in a diverse student-and-teacher environment; outside of school I explored the grounds, arboretum, greenhouse, pond, classrooms, labs, and other buildings of the nearby campus.

One of the most profound memories I have from childhood was spending a summer with my family in the Pacific Northwest where my father, a high school biology teacher, studied plant ecology at a local college, and where I first became acquainted with and felt a connection to the Pacific Northwest. Later, as an undergraduate student in botany, I was privileged to work with a teacher, advisor, and mentor who opened my eyes to the relationships between people and plants from local and global perspectives. He also introduced me to some of the botany and Indigenous peoples of Ecuador; it was from him that I also began to learn of Ecuador's colonial history. And he taught me a great deal about the experiences of oppressed people, given his own experiences of oppression having come from an immigrant Italian-American family. I remember him not only for instilling within me a passion for ethnobotany, but also for how he openly embraced opportunities to interact with students and others of very diverse backgrounds, many of whom experienced personal struggles in finding their own places within academia and the world at large. Through his influence and that of my parents, I eventually learned of the works of Paulo Freire and others who wrote about the educational experiences of oppressed people.

Through my experiences with my university mentor and ongoing discussions with my parents, I learned that my mentor and father had grown up together and eventually both attended the same university—the same one I did—and had positive experiences with a botany professor and department chair who mentored them as undergraduate students. They in turn helped me feel connected to that botany professor in what I would later recognize as being part of an intergenerational experience of relationality involving people, plants, and place.

Upon completion of my master's degree in botany I returned to the Pacific Northwest to pursue and complete a Ph.D. in Botany studying the relationships between plants, Native peoples, and their languages of the central coast region of British Columbia. A few years after completing my doctorate, I was offered a teaching position at a tribal college at which I continue to teach using a variety of methods that have helped deepen my understanding about the nature of interdisciplinary teaching at a Tribal college.

In this paper, Brian Compton, a faculty scholar at the College, shares the story of his growth and development as a faculty member, and the impact of this work on student-centered and student-directed learning (the authors use italics when entering into the faculty member's story to help the reader distinguish between his story and the descriptive narrative). He does so with the encouragement of his co-authors who have recognized his passion for teaching, learning, and enquiry; his willingness to share openly regarding his experiences, processes, and thoughts regarding teaching and learning; and his participation in the Teaching and Learning Initiative since its inception. His contributions are influenced in large part by his history of involvement in teaching and research with Indigenous students and communities in British Columbia, Canada, and Washington spanning three decades.

Key Components of the Teaching and Learning Initiative

There are five components comprising the formal NWIC Teaching and Learning Initiative:

- Implementation of a Native-based teaching and learning philosophy, ensuring incorporation in program and course design and with the scholarship of teaching and learning
- Incorporation of best practices into all aspects of teaching and learning including orientation, mentoring and training of full-time and part-time faculty in best practices and methodologies
- Providing opportunities for advanced study for Native faculty
- Incorporation of cultural responsiveness and integration in the faculty evaluation process
- Use of data and evaluation to substantiate the development of the intellectual capacity of the faculty with a particular focus on improvement of instructional practices, cultural and content knowledge, and the impact on student learning

These components are especially important in light of the fact that the majority of faculty at Tribal colleges are not American Indian or Alaska Native, have a range of exposure to Native communities extending from little or no experience to having lived and worked in Native communities for years, and are usually hired for their content knowledge and not necessarily for their Tribal experience. In academic year 2013-14, the TCUs employed 1,860 full- and part-time faculty. American Indians or Alaska Natives made up 19% of full-time faculty and 24% of part-time faculty, demonstrating that there is significant opportunity to implement strategies that influence non-Native faculty engagement in support of student success (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2014). In light of these circumstances, it became clear that the college needed to create an intentional process to support faculty to increase their capacity to teach at Tribal colleges. It was from this realization that we created the Teaching and Learning Initiative.

The Initiative strives to influence the knowledge base of faculty in the following areas of focus: *Knowledge of Institutional Identity, Knowledge of Students' Tribal Identity, Access to Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Promotion of a Climate of Academic Rigor and Social Responsibility, and Support for First-Year and First-Generation Students.*

Knowledge of Institutional Identity

In the first years of the Initiative, faculty had persistent opportunities to learn about the historical development of the Tribal colleges and to connect with the founders of the College and those individuals who have consistently supported the College's development in order to deepen faculty's knowledge of institutional identity. As the Initiative matured, the focus shifted to grounding the faculty in the College's philosophy of teaching and learning, and promoting greater understanding of students' sense of place and identity.

Knowledge of Students' Tribal Identity

Tribal college students come from culturally rich experiences with a strong link between their identity and their place, be that their homelands or the Tribal environment they choose to live in. Since the majority of faculty at the College is non-Native, they often lack a cultural compass from which to facilitate student learning. Deliberate interactions with Native faculty, community resources, Native administrators, and Native scholars help faculty connect content knowledge with cultural knowledge and supports the institutional commitment to student success.

Access to Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Students and community resources are the best source of knowledge about Tribal life for faculty. There is a growing body of scholarship and research available to faculty about Indigenous ways of knowing, much of it published. There are also many gatherings of Tribal scholars, researchers, and faculty including affinity groups and organizations, that also include student participants who can serve as faculty resources. A significant challenge in faculty access is the varying degrees of openness each Tribe has in publicly sharing its cultural knowledge. Part of the Initiative's efforts is to help faculty navigate that challenge and, in particular, to encourage their focus on student contributions to cultural integration and the importance of imparting content knowledge and skills.

Promotion of a Climate of Academic Rigor and Social Responsibility

Most of the students who enter the College need to take developmental education courses. Most need to take one or more developmental math courses and many also need to take developmental English and reading courses. The College emphasizes that faculty must develop and utilize approaches that continue to support student maturation of skills in English, reading, and math for success in college-level courses.

As the College has evolved from an associate degree-granting institution into a bachelor degree-granting college, faculty and students have increased their engagement in experiential and collaborative learning. Faculty create numerous opportunities for service learning, conducting relevant research, fostering critical thinking skills, and supporting students' engagement of their learning within their personal experiences, families, communities, and tribes.

Support for First-Year and First-Generation Students

The majority of students at the College are first-generation college students, meaning that neither parent has earned a four-year college degree. Schmidt and Akande (2011) found in their study of first-generation students at Tribal colleges that these students face significant challenges, including lack of role models, lack of preparation, and financial concerns. They found that Tribal colleges established

community and cultural identity that help students navigate those challenges. In addition to extensive academic and personal support, all degree-seeking students at the College take a series of foundational courses designed to ensure that students approach their education with an understanding grounded in cultural sovereignty, language, history, leadership, Tribal economies, Tribal education, and the history of tribal relations with the federal government.

Teaching and Learning Philosophy

The teaching and learning philosophy articulates the restorative role of education in strengthening the Tribal identity of students. The principles of student success that are the basis for the College's institutional student learning outcomes reflect this philosophy:

- 1) Native leadership – to acquire a quality education
- 2) Way of life – to give back
- 3) Inherent rights – to apply Indigenous knowledge
- 4) Community-minded – to utilize education through work

My commitment to a culturally- and place-based science pedagogy emerged out of my earlier family and academic experiences, work with Canadian First Nations in their traditional homelands, and the intention of supporting my students' learning. While working with various Canadian First Nations prior to teaching at the College, I was involved with numerous individuals and their communities regarding varied aspects of traditional and contemporary First Nations experiences. This included consideration of aspects of language, culture, history, geography, plants, animals, and other topics. Working on these topics with and in service to several First Nations helped me to realize not only the depth and breadth of the interrelationships between those peoples and their homelands, but of the central significance of relationality as a unifying element of those considerations.

Science Bachelor's Program Outcomes

The current program outcomes for the College's science bachelor's program reflect a focus on relationality, stating that, "Awareness of self and knowledge of relational ancestry has been, and continues to be, an essential quality of Indigenous peoples. This awareness provides guidance and accountability to carry out the work of the ancestors for future generations. Relationality and self-location position Native environmental scientists to lead in the restoration and revitalization of the environment." Furthermore, upon successful completion of this program, students will be able to: demonstrate self-location within inquiry-based research, value relationality in the practice of Native Environmental Science, and evaluate and interpret environmental laws, policies, and acquired rights, and advocate for inherent rights (Bachelor of Science in Native Environmental Science, 2015).

Another faculty member at the College, who also serves as a department chair, describes the role of place-based education as the opportunity to support the students as they link the content of courses to the physical place that is their home or, for some, to facilitate a connection to a Tribal homeland. This connection creates a contextual experience that faculty have seen increases student

engagement which in turn enhances their learning, reflected in the following writing of the faculty member highlighted in this paper:

During the summer of 2009 I attended the 29th International Conference on Critical Thinking. While attending the conference I became very aware of the dearth of Native perspectives and contexts in the discourse on critical thinking presented there. Following the conference, I began to look elsewhere for manifestations of Native experiences linked to critical thinking. I found evidence of it presented by Native authors, e.g., in the works of Michael Yellow Bird (2005, pp. 9-29), and CHiXapkaid (Pavel) and Inglebret, (2007, pp. 93-109). Other authors addressed the concept of "Indian thinking," describing it in relationship to uniquely Native perspectives, traditions and values, as well as the physical and metaphysical world (Blue Spruce & Thrasher, 2009; Fixico, 2003). While elsewhere not explicitly labeled as "critical thinking," this concept is implicit and embodied in a multitude of other aspects of Native thought and discourse using comparable language. Further, it may reside within a broader cultural context and may be implicit within established cultural practices.

Reflection on my prior teaching experiences in light of the framework of the Teaching and Learning Initiative helped me to put my ideas about the informative and transformative powers of critical thinking, place-based education, and student-centered active learning approaches into practice in my teaching. While all of these components had been part of my prior educational experiences, the Teaching and Learning Initiative helped me to focus on each of the components and see how they could come together in relation to each other. Most importantly, I became more reflective and intentional in how I could bring all of these elements in relationship and recognize and respond to them when they emerge spontaneously in my classes, as described by Crazy Bull (2010). I also realized that since these are the same skills I want to engender in my students I could be more intentional in helping students develop them. To that end, the students I work with also sometimes engage in a collegial approach to deconstructing curriculum that serves to further assist me in redirecting my efforts in education. This can then lead to the mutual construction and evaluation of new knowledge where students bring their diverse knowledge and skills to the emergent creation of content that may support or even transcend the original intended content, expanding awareness and understanding of both the content in the process and the process itself. And, as other faculty have found and noted, the inclusion of Native scholarship alongside standard texts and other curricular offerings allows for more continuous critical exploration of ideas that can yield far more comprehensive understanding of multiple bodies of knowledge from multiple cultural perspectives.

The continued practice of critical thinking, including metacognating with students, combined with transparency about the institutional and program student learning outcomes used in student and program assessment, and the broadening of academics to more fully embrace culturally-conscious considerations, can help to identify and enhance students' passions in contexts that are more inclusive and relevant than typical academic environments. This is essentially an academic framework with notable touchstones that supports students' explorations of relationality with respect to academic pursuits of significance to Indigenous peoples. The successful combination of all these elements can also support students in transcending the frequently tremendous culturally-conflicting challenges of an academic lifestyle. And it may help them to be successful in academically and culturally relevant and rigorous efforts directed at preparing them and engaging them in critically important work necessary to support of the mission of the College.

Incorporation of Faculty Development and Best Practices

One of the foundational goals of the Initiative is to increase the intellectual capital of faculty and to ensure that it results in the improvement of student learning. The College defines intellectual capacity as the ability of the faculty, students, staff, and administrators, to:

- connect to the historic and modern Native experience
- develop inter-relationships among content and cultural knowledge
- identify and practice effective teaching strategies
- utilize Native critical thinking and analytical skills
- link their personal philosophy of teaching and learning with the institutional philosophy of teaching and learning
- incorporate Indigenous assessment and evaluation methods

The College strives to provide access to best practices for faculty through shared readings, training, workshops, and conference participation. A virtual learning center and link to the Initiative through the faculty homepage on the College's website shares instructional resources and complements other faculty resources. A methodologies section on the Teaching and Learning Initiative website, called the "Toolkit," includes a collection of faculty-generated best practices. An introduction to the resources available on the Teaching and Learning website is now part of the annual new faculty orientation.

Opportunities for Advanced Study for Native Faculty

The College invested in a "grow our own" practice to increase both the numbers and the contributions of Native faculty. Several Native students and faculty pursued and earned higher degrees and participated in educational activities designed to deliberately improve their academic and leadership skills. This effort supports both the need for highly-qualified faculty as the College evolves as a four-year degree-granting institution with a growing focus on research and scholarship, and has create a cadre of Native faculty who can lead the continuous improvement process that frames the College's development and informs the teaching and learning initiative. Now Natives serve as three of the four academic department chairs, all currently pursuing their PhDs with institutional support. The fourth department chair has already earned her PhD.

Culturally Responsive Faculty Evaluation

Student and faculty evaluations now incorporate cultural indicators, assess instructional methodologies and their usefulness, and are designed to inform a continuous improvement approach for faculty.

Faculty must discover who their students are culturally, socially, and individually to more effectively support their learning. Relationship-building is a key indicator for faculty and student success and includes how well faculty know the history of Native people, attend or know about ceremonial

events, know something about the history of Indian education, and includes the willingness of faculty to explore (Cajete, 1999). Through the influences of Native presenters and what has been learned from cultural educational activities, the College's instructional leadership revised the annual faculty self-evaluation forms and process to more fully incorporate cultural indicators. This process is currently being reevaluated in order to create a more holistic faculty process from the initial job announcement and then through all aspects of faculty experience at the College. At the Fall 2015 Teaching and Learning Institute, an annual convening of faculty and a key component of the Initiative, Native faculty, who are also department chairs and academic leaders at the College, facilitated a process in which they posed a series of essential questions to the faculty asking them to self-reflect, to more intentionally and fully consider the circumstances of students' lives, to examine their own wellness and their integration of values into their courses and to explore their support of Indigenous research and methodologies. Faculty was asked to incorporate two new approaches in their teaching practices starting fall term. The faculty will report their new approaches and how those changes in approach influenced their classroom practices following the end of fall term.

In the early years of its development, the Initiative used action research in teaching and learning to introduce faculty to evaluation of their practices and to build faculty instructional resources. The application of the essential questions by faculty and their status reports is a form of action research. Faculty will then be requested to continue to evolve their approaches based upon what they and other faculty learned and to report on their findings at the end of each subsequent term.

Data and Evaluation of the Initiative

Currently the primary evaluative strategies for the Initiative are faculty and academic leadership observations, faculty evaluations, and evaluations of pre-service and in-service activities including the Teaching and Learning Institute.

Faculty members provide insight into their understanding of the historic and modern Native experience through periodic focused questionnaires and through evaluation feedback of the workshops, speakers, and other faculty activities. The annual Teaching and Learning Institute provides a place for faculty to build their capacity as teachers at a four-year Tribal college and build upon previous years' work. Evaluations of the six Institutes thus far indicate very high agreement by faculty that the Institutes help to build their capacity to teach at a four-year Tribal college. The faculty is expected to leave the Teaching and Learning Institute with concrete tools and ideas that they can apply in their classes.

Critical Findings and Observations

The Teaching and Learning Initiative has been evolutionary and emergent in its contributions. It is evolutionary as it builds the knowledge, skills, and abilities of students by supporting the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities of faculty. It is emergent in that the College community is still gaining an understanding of what the institution is learning, doing, and becoming with the Initiative. The College's development as an Indigenous institution is increasingly rooted in a deep understanding of Indigenous relationality. Kovach, et al. (2015), in a study of Indigenous experiences with post-secondary education and social work programs in Canadian higher education institutions, identified common understandings of Indigenous knowledge that form Indigenous relationality:

- 1) Indigenous worldviews are animated (“it is epistemologically a verb, not just a noun” (p.36)) and intersected with story. Story demonstrates relationships in a world that is living.
- 2) Indigenous knowledge is rooted in place and protocol; it is about connections with others and with the land.
- 3) Community is central to Indigenous knowledge.
- 4) Elders and knowledge holders are the resources that teach and reinforce values such as reciprocity and responsibility.
- 5) Indigenous knowledge is embodied knowledge in that it infuses identity and cannot be separated from the experiences, history, and life of individuals.

Faculty observes students connecting their knowledge and sense of self to their learning both in the classroom and outside of it. Their experience affirms that students stand in relationship with their place (homelands), with community, and with the education in which they are engaged.

Having taught at the College since 2002, I have had the opportunity to observe and participate in the evolution of the College prior to and following the development of its first bachelor degree program to the present. This has provided me the ability to reflect on my own development as a Tribal college faculty as well as that of the institution and its students and faculty.

The College has changed during this time from having a faculty focus on institutional student learning outcomes that essentially mirrored aspects of the general education requirements of associate degree programs throughout our state to the incorporation of institutional and program outcomes that focus on the relationship of teaching and learning to aspects of Indigenous identity, place, and community. Within the recently revised science bachelor's degree program outcomes, sense of place and relationality figure prominently, and are deliberately considered as foundational to further outcomes regarding inquiry with specific reference to Indigenous methodologies and communication with emphasis on multiple means of effective communication to a broad range of Indigenous and other audiences.

The experiences of several current and recently graduated science students demonstrate evidence of significant student engagement as related to aspects of Indigenous identity, place, and community. One student, who has since gone on to complete graduate studies and now teaches at the College, focused on aspects of fishing in her home community in northern Alaska with respect to traditional and ongoing practices and policy matters. Other students with personal and family ties to fishing have researched aspects of fishing as related to other local Tribal concerns—including traditional and contemporary aspects of halibut fishing—as well as the details of the Indigenous experiences through videography within the broader context of fishing practices and rights as championed by the late Billy Frank, Jr. and as related to the Boldt Decision of 1974.

Another student, with ancestral ties to local Coast Salish lands and culture, pursued projects related to people and plants in place, focusing on sustainable gardening with traditional food plants. His work is now reflected in a Native food plant installation at the College campus, which he has recently been employed to more fully develop following his graduation. The nature and significance of Indigenous food systems from a Coast Salish perspective is the topic of inquiry for yet another student, whose previous personal and academic experiences have been brought to bear upon a broader and more Indigenous set of topics than she had considered prior to attending the Tribal college. Her current work involves a reframing of the concept of health in Indigenous communities with respect to human and environmental considerations based on ancient, contemporary and future practice. Several other current students are examining a range of topics related to health in various cultural and community terms with a view to the much broader implications and applications in Indigenous and global terms.

Yet another student who came to the College after having had negative academic experiences elsewhere and who lacks direct connections to her ancestral lands and her people, recently declared the science bachelor's program and has continued to make positive strides despite housing, financial, and other challenges. While in conversation with her recently regarding a number of academically-challenging and related matters, I asked if the stress she was experiencing was different than she may have experienced in past academic situations in order to determine if there may be particularly unique contributors that perhaps I could help her to resolve. Her immediate response was that now her education really mattered to her. It is clear from my work with her that this derives from her experiences at the College studying and connecting with—amongst other things—aspects of botanical, ethnobotanical and Native environmental ethics topics, experiencing good mentorship from our current Science Writing Mentor, and now undertaking the development of her degree plan.

The Teaching and Learning Philosophy has served as a compatible resource in many aspects of institutional development, including the development of key concepts associated with the Bachelor of Arts in Native Studies Leadership program. The essential questions discussed earlier represent the expectation that faculty self-reflect, model wellness, affirm the uniqueness of the institution, and support Indigenous research pursued by students.

During the most recent Teaching and Learning Institute, I participated in the discussion regarding several essential questions presented by representatives of the Coast Salish Institute. And I indicated that a new approach that I would take in my instructional practice for the upcoming year would be to share the Teaching and Learning Institute essential questions with several students for their consideration and feedback. The questions were developed to be answered by faculty and deal with the faculty role in supporting self-determination for students, the society for which we are preparing students, how faculty model wellness and integrate values into their courses, and how they empower and support students in the use of Indigenous research methodologies. However, I presented them to students with the request that they also consider them from a student perspective, especially as related to their studies.

Although the number of students who participated in discussion of the essential questions was small, their feedback was compelling. Those particular students all have declared the science bachelor's program and were in the process of beginning to develop unique plans of study that include individualized studies curriculum based on their particular interests.

Their feedback included positive and reflective commentary on the concepts expressed in the essential questions, especially as related to Indigenous education. Student feedback also included how use of the essential questions could improve the curriculum of the course in which they are beginning to develop their degree plans. And it led to focused discussion on the nature and value of interdisciplinary work,

which allows for a more holistic approach to education which may involve a broader range of research considerations that may transcend the more standard approaches of Western science. This approach also allows for a focus on more humanistic matters that may draw from and relate to axiological and other aspects of Indigenous education as discussed by Cajete (1999) and Indigenous research as discussed by Wilson (2009). Their comments reflect what I perceive as a growing recognition of and attention to aspects of relationality in those students' studies and lives.

Faculty dialogues about student learning and best practices in teaching have increased along with greater comfort with self-assessment and examination of the important connection between instructional practices and evidence of student learning. Native faculty have emerged as the leaders of the scholarship and research framework that is the basis of faculty development and the Initiative, and the collaboration between Native faculty and administrators and non-Native faculty has improved and is continuing to be strengthened. Foundational knowledge about the cultural and educational experience of Native people is promoted throughout the curriculum, daily lives, and instructional practices of the College. This has evolved into greater instructional and institutional understanding of how outcomes can be used to inform teaching practices. Faculty are increasingly more adept at navigating the challenging implications of Incorporating cultural outcomes in their teaching --- i.e., that students will demonstrate a sense of place and an understanding of what it means to be a people, two of the core institutional student learning outcomes. In the context of diverse Tribal cultures and experiences and the commitment to Tribal and personal sovereignty, greater understanding of teaching and learning creates a renewed emphasis on student-directed learning.

I've noticed that there are numerous parallels between student and faculty experiences in teaching and learning. I've found that sharing my experiences in teaching and learning with my faculty colleagues may result in richly rewarding as well as sometimes frustrating conversations and interactions. I believe that each faculty member must find those approaches that work for him or her, just as I have and will continue to do. In my discussions with faculty there are often differences in how we explore and reflect on methods and philosophies but I have seen that we are moving more toward seeing these differences as challenges and opportunities for collaborative discourse and growth rather than as irreconcilable conflicts.

Activities conducted during the most recent Teaching and Learning Initiative represent in my view a significant turning point in terms of establishing Indigenous leadership in teaching and learning and more fully developing an academic framework in which all faculty, Indigenous or otherwise, may continue to improve their efforts. In particular, the focus on self-reflection and the exploration of values in support of students' academic attainment represented an opportunity for faculty and others to find common ground while also recognizing the diversity of faculty with a view to finding ways to move forward together.

As I and my faculty colleagues at the College move forward in this initiative, I am reminded of the work of Deloria and Wildcat in their book Power and Place (2001) in that the nature of improving the teaching and learning environment is an emergent process that can't be reduced to any single set of contributors but instead is an organic process and requires the ongoing best efforts of everyone in the community.

As one faculty has described throughout this paper, students learn in increasingly meaningful ways when they are given the opportunity to explore the connections and relationships among people and their geographic, historical, and contemporary place. Students demonstrate their deepening understanding of themselves in relation to the world around them. Student opportunities to lead teaching, to engage in reciprocal teaching, and to explore what type of learning works for them reaffirm traditional Tribal learning environments that are place-based, experiential, and which honor individual experiences, knowledge, gifts, and talents. Faculty have observed that students are increasingly able to deconstruct curriculum which results in redirection of the instructor's efforts and allows for a more collegial, continuous, and critical exploration of ideas that can yield far more comprehensive understanding and application of multiple bodies of knowledge and truly support the College's mission of self-determination.

Teaching and Learning Vision for Tribal Colleges and Universities

Tribal colleges serve such distinctive place-based populations with students who bring both abundant knowledge and tremendous obstacles to their college experience that a focus on teaching and learning impact is essential to student success. Faculty must be adept at serving a myriad of needs – cultural, academic, social, and spiritual. The teaching and learning initiative discussed in this paper provides a road map for how colleges can support greater student achievement and engagement.

Because, as we have seen, relationality is a significant contributor to student engagement and student engagement is crucial to students continuing their education and graduating, we believe the concepts of relationality must be more fully promoted throughout all aspects of teaching and learning at each college, as supported by the work of Kovach, et.al (2015).

Identifying the direct and indirect outcomes of more engaged student learning in a manner that can be shared with others is useful. The most likely route for this is full engagement and reporting of integrative formative and summative assessment of student learning at the course, program, and institutional levels. A core set of student performance data related to course grades, course completion, and degree attainment complement student learning outcomes assessment. These are all academic exercises that organize the Tribally-specific approach that underpins relationality. These are also exercises that require collaboration, thoughtful discussion, and diverse contributors which increase the representation of the outcomes as rooted in Tribal knowledge. This experience also integrates with the expectations of the accreditation process in a way that supports the missions of Tribal colleges.

Leadership at all levels of practice and the support of the governing systems of each college is essential to continued success and progress in achieving the goals of any teaching and learning initiative. Improving student success through faculty development requires time and resources, especially faculty time and financial support for continuing inquiry, research, and professional development.

Observable results of this effort in terms of student engagement, student and faculty collaboration, incorporation of place-based Indigenous knowledge, and the development of theories of relationality and Indigenous pedagogy need to be documented and disseminated as a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge about Tribally-controlled education and tribal colleges.

Transparency is necessary to critical thinking methodology and is recommended in terms of faculty communication to students regarding not only course outcomes, but also of program and institutional outcomes. Faculty discussion of the coordination of all levels of outcomes which will be used in student and program assessment suggests that students respond positively to knowledge of and interaction regarding the outcomes by which they will be assessed.

Teaching and learning in Indigenous education settings must be holistic and systemic in that it occurs in an integrated manner within academic curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular settings, is interdisciplinary, and responsive to Tribal, community, and student needs and expectations. When a college can establish and use a systemic approach to teaching and learning and accomplishes institutionalization through outcomes and program development as well as faculty development, student success along with Tribal priorities are furthered. Institutions can also use strategies such as action research, faculty inquiry groups, and improved faculty evaluation to increase results and positively impact student engagement.

Based on my experience in teaching at Northwest Indian College, I have come to understand that the question of what comprises good teaching and learning at a Tribal college cannot be sufficiently answered in the same ways that it would be at other institutions whose missions, educational philosophies, and curricula do not seek primarily to serve and benefit Indigenous people and their communities. With this awareness in mind, I regard consideration of relationality as a critical underpinning of efforts to continuously improve teaching and learning at the College. This approach is based on the recognition of, respect for, and application of traditional Indigenous perspectives and practices involving the importance of worldviews, values, relationships, roles, responsibilities, methods, and other matters in teaching and learning. A focus on relationality can improve teaching and learning but requires self-reflection by faculty regarding who they are as well as why and how they teach at a Tribal college. It also requires their ongoing willingness to participate in work that may seriously challenge their personal and professional perspectives on education and about themselves and may require that they change their approach to teaching and learning. Most importantly, this work and other aspects of the Teaching and Learning Initiative can contribute significantly to faculty collaboration in support of fostering student engagement and students attaining their educational goals.

References

- American Indian Higher Education Consortium (2014). AIHEC AIMS 2013-14. Unpublished dataset.
- Bachelor of Science in Native Environmental Science. (2015, June 11). *Program outcomes Bachelor of Science in Native Environmental Science*. Retrieved from Northwest Indian College website:
<http://www.nwic.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/BSNES-Program-Outcomes-Revision-Approved-by-CC-6-11-15.pdf>
- Blue Spruce, D., & Thrasher, T. (Eds.). (2009). *The land has memory: Indigenous knowledge, Native landscapes, and the National Museum of the American Indian*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Cajete, G. A. (1999). *Igniting the sparkle: An Indigenous science education model*. Asheville, NC: Kivaki Press.

- CHiXapkaid (D. Michael Pavel), & Inglebret, E. (2007) Develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills. In *The American Indian And Alaska Native Students Guide to College Success* (pp. 93-109). Westport CT: Greenwood Press.
- Crazy Bull, C. (2010). Cultural integration at Northwest Indian College: An experience of cultural restoration. In Boyer, P. (Ed), *Ancient wisdom, modern science: The integration of native knowledge in math and science at tribally controlled colleges and universities* (pp. 27-41). Pablo, MT: Salish Kootenai College Press.
- Crazy Bull, C. (2015) Woksape: The Identity of Tribal Colleges and Universities. In Aguilera-Black Bear, D., & Tippeconnic, J. (Eds) (2015) *Voices of Resistance and Renewal: Indigenous Leadership in Education*. Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Deloria, V., Jr., & Wildcat, D. R. (2001). *Power and place: Indian education in America*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum.
- Fixico, D. L. (2003). *The American Indian mind in a linear world: American Indian studies and traditional knowledge*. New York: Routledge.
- Kovach, M., Carriere, J., Montgomery, H., Barrett, M. J., & Gilles, C. (2015). *Indigenous Presence: Experiencing and Envisioning Indigenous Knowledges within Selected Post-Secondary Sites of Education and Social Work*. Report retrieved from the University of Regina website on November 20, 2015.
- Saunders, C. (2011) *Native American Tribal Colleges and Universities: Issues and Problems Impacting Students in the Achievement of Educational Goals*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.
- Schmidt, J. and Akande Y. (2011) "Faculty Perceptions of the First-Generation Student Experience and Programs at Tribal Colleges." In *Faculty and First-Generation College Students: Bridging the Classroom Gap Together*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wilson, S. (2009). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Black Point, Nova Scotia, Canada: Fernwood Publishing.
- Yellow Bird, M. (2005). Tribal critical thinking centers. In *For Indigenous eyes only: A decolonization handbook* (pp. 9-29). Santa Fe: School of American Research.