

## Attracting Native Americans to Academe: A 'Business' Model

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by Gavin Clarkson and Joseph Scott Gladstone



Dr. Gavin Clarkson

With the Supreme Court re-examining affirmative action in higher education in its new term, the topic of race and access to a college education returns as a familiar visitor to the national agenda. But for the most part the national discussion—as well it should be—is about African-Americans and Hispanics. Almost completely absent from the dialogue is our country's third underrepresented minority group, and its first peoples: Native Americans.

Outside of tribal colleges, Native American student representation in four-year colleges is appallingly low—0.9 percent. It is even lower, 0.5 percent, at the graduate level.

Numerous experts and studies have identified the presence of role models—minority professors—as one factor in encouraging

more minority high school graduates to enroll in, and complete, college. Research also indicates that students, especially non-White students in low-income communities, do better with teachers who came from similar circumstances.

For Native Americans, that's where hope really fades.

Unfortunately, the number of Native Americans on college faculties, and among the postgraduate study ranks producing future professors, is practically nil. Less than 1 percent of doctoral degrees conferred in 2013 went to Native Americans, and, according to the National Science Foundation (NSF), the number of Native American doctorate recipients is the lowest it has been in the past 20 years.

Awareness of this concern is strong among the Native American higher education community, but when it comes to solutions or fresh approaches, the tank seems to run dry.

In the business disciplines, our academic turf, the representation of Native Americans is also dismal. But we—our peers, colleagues and our supporters in the business community—have

developed some promising fresh approaches. Perhaps the sciences and liberal arts can take note and consider how to emulate some of these approaches.

As business professors, who typically walk with one foot in the world of business, we often think of minority enrollment as business people might—as marketing and human resources challenges.



Twenty-one years ago, a group of businesses and higher education organizations formed The PhD Project to attract and encourage all underrepresented minorities to earn doctorates and become business professors, essentially marketing academia as a career path. Despite the enormous challenges in reaching the Native population, there has been some success: in 1996, there were only three Native American business professors in the entire country. Today, there are 45.

The PhD Project also recognized that the dropout rate among all doctoral students, much less the fragile population of economically disadvantaged minority students, is exceptionally high. In response, The PhD Project began providing peer support, professional academic networking and enrichment for the doctoral students it recruited. The result is a near 90 percent graduation rate.

Dr. Joseph Scott Gladstone

Now that more Natives are standing in front of the classroom, we are working and collaborating toward the ultimate goal: attracting more Native undergraduates. In the business disciplines, and we suspect in others, this includes making the classroom experience relevant to the Native experience—in both content and style.

In content, Western business generally revolves around such qualities as competition, profit maximization and short-term results. Business education encompasses such themes, leading to a persistent, pervasive and potentially pernicious myth: that capitalism doesn't work in Indian country ... and it is just not compatible with Native values.

But it can be. We apply Native values to remind our students that, long ago, our ancestors were thriving entrepreneurs—traders and hunters. We know that well-conceived and -managed business enterprises can succeed economically while honoring Native values.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we have realized that, if we apply Native techniques such as storytelling and anthropomorphic symbolism to our pedagogy, business topics can indeed resonate with all students in the classroom.

Our colleague, Dr. Amy Verbos of University of Wisconsin–Whitewater, states that the “creative, inductive learning approach to management education topics” holds great promise for “reaching” Native American business students. She and others are researching and publishing extensively on this and related themes.

If these strategies hold promise for business education, perhaps they can in arts and sciences as well. Academics and thinkers in these disciplines might do well to study what we have been attempting in business schools and experiment with approaches tailored to their particular fields.

Our country needs more Native American college graduates, just as surely as it does African-Americans and Hispanics. But it's going to take some creative thought and an investment of energy to produce Native professors and mentors.

In today's increasingly diverse world and economy, it would be an investment with valuable long-term dividends.

*Dr. Gavin Clarkson (Choctaw) is a professor in the College of Business at New Mexico State University. Dr. Joseph Scott Gladstone (Blackfeet/Nez Perce) is a professor in the College of Health at New Mexico State University.*