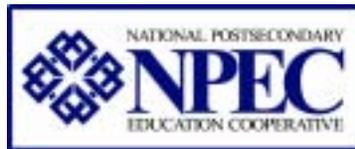




# **A Native American Response: Why Do Colleges and Universities Fail the Minority Challenge?**

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## **A NATIVE AMERICAN RESPONSE: WHY DO COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES FAIL THE MINORITY CHALLENGE?**

The purposes of this conference, as I understand it, are to address ways to challenge colleges and universities to improve recruitment and graduation rates of minority students and to provide research and policy recommendations for state and federal programs. In this paper I will focus on a particular minority—Native American (i.e., American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian) students, the least likely of all minority groups to attend and complete a university education. The available quantitative and qualitative research on this topic for Native Americans is extremely limited and not systematically focused, but it is relatively consistent in terms of the reasons for success or for a person not finishing and receiving a degree (Demmert, 2001,<sup>1</sup> Demmert & Towner, 2003<sup>2</sup>). Finally, the National Center for Education Statistics for 2005 provides a very discouraging picture regarding the number of Native Americans in higher education.

From a review of the research literature, from my personal experiences as a student, and from my experiences as a professional in the field of education (with a focus on the education of Native American and Indigenous Circumpolar students) a number of issues stand out.<sup>3</sup> These issues include (1) the numbers of Native students applying for and attending institutions of higher education is relatively low, although this may change as more and more Indian institutions of higher education are founded; (2) there is a large number of students who leave school before completing their degree or program; (3) colleges and universities do not always provide programs that support the language, cultural, or contemporary needs of Native communities; (4) there is a significant void in the number of Native university faculty; and (5) the funding available specifically for Native American students is not sufficient to provide postsecondary opportunities for all those interested in pursuing professional or advanced degrees.

From a review of the research literature, we have found that Native students who have successfully completed programs at institutions of higher education have several factors in common: a record of family support, a significant mentor or family member who has challenged or motivated them, the basic academic skills to meet the demands of university work, the financial resources for tuition and

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<sup>1</sup> Demmert, W. G., Jr. (2001). *Improving academic performance among Native American students: A review of the research literature*. Charleston, WV: Originally ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

<sup>2</sup> Demmert, W. G., Jr. & Towner, J. C. (2003). *A review of the research literature on the influences of culturally based education on the academic performance of Native American students*. Final Paper. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper Indigenous Circumpolar students and peoples refer to the aboriginal peoples of the far north living in countries or states that touch the Arctic Circle.

other costs, and comfort with their identity as Native Americans. There is also evidence that an early opportunity to develop one's language skills (Native and other languages early in a person's life) and a curriculum that has cultural as well as contemporary meaning, may both enhance students' interest and challenge them to attend and complete postsecondary schooling and university opportunities (Demmert, 2001; Demmert & Towner, 2003).

In retrospect, from my practical experiences as a Native student, I found there were several critical elements to my success. I grew up in a family of teachers and my parents and other family expected me to be successful as a student. I also had the finances necessary, was involved in athletics and other social activities, had a distinct purpose or goal, and had adequate language and other academic skills. I attended a small liberal arts college and the support from faculty certainly made a difference. I also eventually recognized that a certain amount of discipline and the ability to organize and balance my social, academic, and other personal priorities helped me successfully complete my university work. The extended family and parental support (for psychological, emotional, cultural, and personal reasons) may have been among the most important factors in my motivation and eventual success in both undergraduate and graduate work.

My life as a professional educator, with a life-long focus on the education of Native American students and Aboriginal peoples of the Circumpolar North,<sup>4</sup> has left some very strong impressions regarding the education of Native students and the ability of universities to respond to their academic priorities and to the priorities of the community in which each student has his or her traditional roots.

My great-grandfather, grandfather, and parents were born and raised in challenging environments filled with learning experiences that prepared them for the life in which they were expected to live. The teachers and mentors of the young during this period did not allow failure, for their very survival as a people depended upon their success in ensuring that each following generation was well prepared to meet any and all challenges they encountered. Among my father's people, the transfer of these skills and the knowledge necessary for those earlier generations started early in a youngster's life. This was especially true for language, kinesthetic, and other developmental skills. As these early ancestors grew and matured, these initial developmentally-critical skills were built upon with more complicated skills and knowledge as part of a natural process that emerged over thousands of years.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> This includes indigenous (the original Aboriginal) peoples from Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia whom I also refer to as Native.

<sup>5</sup> I reflect upon my own early experiences as a young person, the similarities observed in other Native peoples, and the knowledge and skills of earlier generations that have been ignored and lost in current generations.

context and cultural environments in which learning occurred supported the social, economic, and physical environments of the community and helped prepare the young for new challenges.

In a careful analysis of my experiences as a professional educator, I found some disturbing differences between the environments described above and the relative successes of the generations that experienced those environments and the environments today. Perhaps most significantly, there are high rates of failure, not only among the youth attending school, but among adults who have not developed the skills necessary to succeed in the economic, social, and physical environments that contemporary society offers. The early environments encountered by many of our young children today are not as cognitively stimulating or developmentally challenging as they were for the older generations. This may be because we do not take advantage of the natural environments to which our children are exposed, or because of the devastating influences of poverty, the lack of opportunity to work, and/or the inability to benefit from more challenging experiences and environments. Our young Native children are often exposed to substandard levels of language development. This means they have missed rich opportunities to learn Native languages, standard English, and other languages, thereby limiting a youngster's ability to compete academically against the children who have had those enlightened experiences.<sup>6</sup>

From my vantage point, with practical experiences as a teacher, as a U.S. Deputy Commissioner of Education, as a Commissioner in the State of Alaska, as a Director of Indian Education in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and finally as a researcher, I have encountered institutional problems as well as program and policy barriers that limit the opportunities of Native students in the United States. Institutionally, public schools and universities are not always responsive to the needs or interests of the Native communities they are responsible for serving. Elementary and secondary schools, concerned about the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)* regarding annual yearly progress (AYP) are limiting cognitive development by no longer allowing students to learn their Native language and are not allowing a culturally-based education curriculum because they believe these Native community priorities will limit the ability of the student to make AYP in reading, mathematics, and other subject areas. In addition, teachers who teach in the language (and that may not have a content-area endorsement) may be replaced by teachers with content-area endorsements who do not know the Native language (in some cases the language of instruction). Ironically, *Title III, English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement (NCLB 2001)*, supports the learning of Native languages as a primary focus under NCLB as long as English is one of the objectives. In direct contrast

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<sup>6</sup> A prime example of what can be done in the modern context is the Pūnana Leo program in Hilo, Hawaii, where the students start life in a stimulating social, cultural, linguistic environment that promotes three languages – Hawaiian, English, and Japanese.

to federal policies for Indians, there are states with English-only laws that are insensitive to the linguistic needs and priorities of Native communities.

The creation of Indian community colleges occurred, in part, because institutions of higher education were not responsive to the cultural, economic, legal, political, and other needs of Indian tribes and other Native American groups. Many of these community colleges specialize in issues important to the Native communities (e.g., Indian lands, fiduciary responsibility of the U.S. government as trustee, water rights, conflicts over renewable resources like fishing and hunting rights, language and cultural priorities). Some are adding 4-year programs on a case-by-case basis as other local and tribal needs are identified that are not met by public institutions of higher education. A current example of this is the training of teachers who are culturally competent and in some cases linguistically competent. This need and others are not being met, nor will they be met, by public institutions, therefore forcing the Indian community colleges to expand or initiate new programs in a variety of areas.

In terms of policies or legislation, one encounters the dichotomy of state laws regarding English as the official language (i.e., to be used as the language of instruction in public schools) and the desire of tribes to protect, strengthen, and continue use of their indigenous languages. One also encounters the monitoring of elementary and secondary student progress (for both state and federal purposes) in English, when that may be a second or third language, meaning one is testing the student's ability to translate language rather than a student's subject area competence. The dichotomy I present is that generally speaking, federal legislation supports the educational priorities of the different Native communities they are designed to serve.<sup>7</sup> In addition, President William J. Clinton and President George W. Bush signed executive orders that supported cultural and linguistic priorities of American Indians and Alaska Natives. Unfortunately, program officers in the federal agencies do not always follow the intent of the legislation or lack an understanding of how to balance executive orders, legislation, school priorities, and tribal or other Native interests.

The earlier report by Demmert and Towner (2003) presents a theory regarding the education of Native students that incorporates earlier ideas about ways to improve schools and schooling for Native American students. The theory presented in this 2003 report, referred to as the *Cultural-Historical-Activity Theory (CHAT)*, presents the theme that issues of culture, language, cognition, community, and socialization are central to learning: that the socialization of infants and young children—as well as all later socialization into new communities of practice—is accomplished through joint, meaningful activity

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<sup>7</sup> These include the Snyder Act of 1934, Impact Aid, Title III & Title VII of NCLB, the Indian Self-Determination Act, Indian Colleges Act, Native American Languages Act as primary examples.

with guidance by more accomplished participants, principally through language exchanges or other semiotic processes. Language vocabularies and routines acquired by learners through these processes are the elements that account for community, linguistic, and cultural continuity, and are the primary cognitive tools for individual and group problem solving and adaptations (e.g., culturally-based secondary socialization processes such as schooling can be facilitated by activating the learners' cognitive and linguistic tools laid down by community socialization). Primary to this hypothesis is that activity (primarily joint activity) is the setting in which language and cognition are developed and that patterns of activity have a cultural basis (Demmert & Towner, 2003).

This is an extension of two earlier theories referred to in this report as the *Cultural Compatibility Theory* which tells us that when levels of congruence between the culture of the school and the community are closely aligned, the goals of the school are more likely to be reached. The second theory, *Cognitive Theory*, suggests that introducing new knowledge through an association with prior knowledge in a person's long-term memory is necessary and that this new information undergoes some form of processing that focuses on conceptual characteristics of the new information (such as its meaning, personal and social relevance, or relationships to prior knowledge and experience) as a means of improving learning and recall (Demmert & Towner, 2003).

The report quotes Jerome Bruner regarding his position on learning and the relationship of this activity to one's language and cultural base, a quote that I use in almost all of my writings. Bruner states that "...culture shapes mind...it provides us with the tool kit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of our selves and our powers." He further states that "...you cannot understand mental activity unless you take into account the cultural setting and its resources, the very things that give mind its shape and scope. Learning, remembering, talking, and imagining: all of them are made possible by participating in a culture" (Bruner, 1966)<sup>8</sup>.

The important question for this paper is, of course, how does all of this relate to the positions presented by Smart, Feldman, and Ethington; Perna and Thomas; Tinto and Pusser; Braxton; and Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bruner, J. (1966). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA, & London, England: Harvard University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Braxton, J. M. (in press). *Faculty professional choices in teaching that foster student success*.

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (in press). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature*.

Perna, L. W., & Thomas, S. L. (in press). *A framework for reducing the college success gap and promoting success for all*.

Smart, J. C., Feldman, K. A., & Ethington, C. A. (in press). *Holland's theory and patterns of college student success*.

Tinto, V., & Pusser, B. (in press). *Moving from theory to action: Building a model of institutional action for student success*.

In the paper by Smart, Feldman, and Ethington, John L. Holland's person-environment fit theory is presented. This theory, supported by three basic premises applied to higher education settings, includes the idea "...that the choice of a career or field of training is an expression of one's personality, and most people can be classified by their resemblance to six personality types..."<sup>10</sup> based on their distinctive patterns of attitudes, interests, and abilities; that there are six corresponding academic environments, each dominated by their analogous personality type, that reflect the prevailing physical and social settings in society; and that congruence of students and their academic environments is related to higher levels of educational success."

Smart, Feldman, and Ethington study patterns of change—based on data that allows them to examine patterns of self-reported change and stability over a 4-year period in students' attitudes, interests, and abilities—and stability "within the context of the congruence and socialization assumptions of Holland's theory." They conclude that academic environments play an essential role in assisting student development in areas their institutions of choice seek to reinforce, and that knowledge about an institution's academic environment is necessary in order to understand the postsecondary success of students. According to these authors, students learn what they study, in part, because it is what the academic environments reinforce and reward. Student learning can be grounded in a combination of competencies and interests developed as a result of college experiences; this information tells us that students can move from what they are to what they hope to be.

According to this paper, in most instances students are currently assessed on their academic performance, that is their content knowledge, rather than on outcomes associated with the cognitive and affective outcomes reinforced and rewarded by the academic environment to which they are exposed. They contend that "...student performance, and ultimately their success, must be judged in relation to students' possession of the interests, abilities, and values that the respective academic environments seek to reinforce and reward at the time students enter the program." In other words, there is a high level of congruency between what the student is interested in as a course of study and what the institution is able to offer and what is valued by the faculty/institution.

In summary, Smart, Feldman, and Ethington present the thesis that student success in higher education is significantly influenced by academic environments, specifically the beliefs and pursuits valued by the institution and faculty. They conclude that this particular factor outweighs the effects of an individual's predispositions, but that balance between the two is an important aspect of a student's success.

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<sup>10</sup> These include realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional.

Perna and Thomas indicate that understanding student success in college requires knowledge about, and an understanding of, the many theoretical and methodological perspectives currently available. Student success, in this report, refers to students that have completed or successfully met 10 indicators of educational attainment organized under four key transitions referred to as (1) college readiness (educational aspirations and academic preparation), (2) college enrollment (college access and college choice), (3) college achievement (academic performance, transfers, persistence), and (4) postcollege attainment (post-B.A. enrollment, income, educational attainment). Finally, they present a conceptual model rather than a theory for understanding student success.

This conceptual model presents the thesis that closing gaps in student success requires recognition of the following:

1. *Student success is a longitudinal process.* This process begins with college readiness, includes college enrollment and achievement and ends with postgraduate and labor market experiences. Each successful step leads to success in the next phase of the process.
2. *Multiple theoretical approaches inform understanding of student success.* Student success is best understood when a variety of theories are utilized.
3. *Student success is shaped by multiple levels of context.* Students make decisions that are shaped by an individual's internal context; a person's family context; the context of the school; and broader social, economic, and policy contexts.
4. *The relative contribution of different disciplinary and area perspectives to understanding student success varies.* Different disciplines will make different contributions to understanding the nature of success and failure.
5. *Multiple methodological approaches contribute to knowledge of student success.* Differences in methodological approaches in the research provide for higher levels of research and understanding.
6. *Student success processes vary across groups.* Avenues to success may vary according to racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and other influences (family resources, institutional structures).

In summary, Perna and Thomas point out that there are four different layers related to student success. These include influences of a student's individual attitudes and behaviors; a student's experiences in and outside the home; institutional influences such as school resources, academic preparation, and educational orientations related to college success; and both direct and indirect social, economic, and policy forces.

Tinto and Pusser propose that, in spite of decades of research on student retention and attrition, a model has not been developed that provides institutions and states guidelines for programs that will result in higher levels of student success. In their review of the research literature they focus on information regarding student persistence and success and institutional conditions within colleges and universities associated with “institutional persistence” and successfully completing a degree. They continue with information that indicates access to higher education has increased, that there is a decrease in gaps between groups, but that completion rates generally, as well as gaps between completion rates of high- and low-income students have not changed, and may have widened over the past 10 years.

Tinto and Pusser note that the research base on student attrition is “voluminous” but that it has been somewhat disjointed and in need of some longitudinal work that could provide models for enhancing student success. They indicate five reasons for this that include the following: (1) much of the work assumes that knowing why students leave before graduating is the equivalent to knowing why they complete their degree; (2) too much of the research is theoretical and difficult to translate into practical application; (3) too much of the research focuses on events, sometimes external to the institution; (4) there is confusion about the definition of persistence (which is an aspect of success); and (5) much of the research has been carried out in isolation from other research. Five research-based conditions are presented that Tinto and Pusser suggest would promote student success: commitment by the institution to increase student success; high institutional expectations for all of their students; academic, social, and financial support from the institution; feedback about their performance from faculty and staff; and social and academic involvement between students and between students and faculty.

An often ignored reality is the influence of state and federal policy and financial support for institutions of higher education. These influences are significant, for as Tinto and Pusser point out, these policies and financial decisions help determine which students attend the university or college. These policies affect tuition, the number of faculty, institutional support, the quality of facilities, institutional policies and programs, outreach and recruiting, and a myriad of other factors that determine what the institution becomes.

In summary, Tinto and Pusser point out that students learn what they study, that success is built upon effort and learning, that success occurs one class at a time, that early learning, elementary, and secondary programs either prepare students for success or failure, and that teachers make a difference. They close with a comprehensive list of research activities that are needed.

Braxton presents the purpose of his paper as intending to form a “...theory of faculty professional choices in teaching role performance that contribute to student success.” The proposed theory

centers on faculty teaching because of the faculty role in influencing student success in postsecondary institutions. Other purposes of this report include the following: a description of markers related to college student success that are classified into postsecondary domains of student success; a discussion of the sources of influence on “faculty teaching role performance” including aspects of teaching role performance that contribute to the identified indicators of student success; and the development of recommendations for policy and practice for state higher education public policymakers, central college and university administration, and the chairpersons of academic departments. Braxton’s position is that faculty in postsecondary institutions bear the primary responsibility for most forms of student success in the postsecondary environment. Eight markers of student success are identified and include (1) academic attainment, (2) acquisition of general education, (3) development of academic competence, (4) development of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions, (5) occupational attainment, (6) preparation for adulthood and citizenship, (7) personal accomplishments, and (8) personal development. The examples that are included in each of these markers are many, with different levels of success for each.

In summary, Braxton’s position is that there is a complex set of related issues surrounding student success. University teaching and curriculum, student interests and choices, state and university policies and program priorities, the culture of the institution, and attitudes of all of the above, are all important factors in whether a student succeeds.

The issue of defining simple student success in his or her postsecondary undertakings becomes extremely complicated. From my narrow perspective, a simple definition of student success in a postsecondary environment would include reaching some level of personal competence in a chosen activity (i.e., in this instance a college or university) and the development of personal, physical, intellectual, social, civic, or cultural skills or knowledge that are useful and that may be enhanced throughout one’s life at some level of recognized competence.

Does one’s teaching influence what a student learns? Definitely, in many ways, as explained in this paper, teaching influences what a student learns. Does the college or university environment influence student success and what a student becomes? Environments, cultures, and experiences all significantly influence what a student becomes.

Finally, the paper by Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek begins by pointing out that 80 percent of high school graduates will require some form of postsecondary education in order to prepare them to survive economically, and deal with the complex social, political, and cultural environments they will face as adults. The authors explain that the most underrepresented groups are significantly behind Asian and White Americans in pursuing postsecondary opportunities. They continue by defining student

success in college as “...academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and postcollege performance.”

The authors clearly indicate that early preparation in the elementary and secondary grades establishes the all-important base that leads to success in college. They point out that the characteristics associated with student success include family influences that help establish a student’s aspirations, college preparation, and persistence; finances that allow students to attend without large debts; early intervention and sustained attention to potential early failures; a connection to something or someone in the college setting; institutions that advocate student success and offer student-centered activities; and a focus on assessment and accountability. They end their paper by connecting recommendations both in research and support to the findings of their research on “success in college.”

In summary, this paper presents a very comprehensive review of the research literature on reasons many student do not succeed in college (except for the American Indian, in part because there is not that much information available to report on except the 1995 Boyer report cited<sup>11</sup>). The information on institutional support and culture is consistent across the different reports and certainly worth emphasizing as an important factor in student success. Of particular interest are the domains listed as benefits for successfully completing college. These include cognitive complexity, knowledge acquisition and application, humanitarianism, interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, and practical competence.

From my own practical experiences in working with Native communities in the United States, the First Nations Peoples of Canada, the Greenlanders in Greenland, the Samis in the Nordic Countries and the limited exposure I had to the Small Peoples of the North (30 some different aboriginal groups scattered across Circumpolar Russia), I found the paper by Smart, Feldman, and Ethington on Holland’s theory and patterns of college student success to be consistent with my own thinking about the influence of culture and experiences on whether indigenous students succeed or fail in school generally and in the university specifically. Levels of congruency between the needs of the student, the community, and the institutional environment may be important factors in whether students succeed or fail. The interests and concerns of the university may be antithetical to the needs and interests of the student and the community from which the Native student comes. Equally critical to success is whether students from the Native community have been motivated to consider a profession and whether a student has been taught the skills necessary to do the required university work. I also found that the paper by Kuh, Kinzie,

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<sup>11</sup> Boyer, P. (1995). Sharing power. *Tribal College Journal*, 6(4): 6-7, 46.

Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek presented information and recommendations that are most closely aligned with my own thinking, which is based on my personal, professional, and limited research experiences.

I missed a discussion in any of the papers regarding the damage the priorities of an institution might instill when in direct conflict with the priorities of the Native community, and what this might do to a student's attitudes and ultimate success in completing a course of study. I also found missing in the discussions presented, areas that may challenge findings, experiences, research, or existing theories as they relate to Native peoples, including reports specializing on issues important to the Native communities (e.g., Indian lands, trustee/wards of the government, water rights, conflicts over renewable resources like fishing and hunting rights), discussions of exposure to a culture of "going to college" vs. living in a traditional culture of "subsistence activity" and other traditional pursuits, and a distinct reference to "cultural mores and experiences" in the theories presented and the issues of surviving or not surviving in the university setting.

Most of the research conducted has focused on White undergraduates' ages 18 – 22 who attended 4-year colleges full time, lived on campus, did not work, and were not burdened by family responsibilities (Smart, Feldman, Ethington).

An NCES 2005 report indicates the drop-out rate for Native American students is twice the national average—the highest rate of any U.S. ethnic or racial group. Nationally, high school graduation rates are low for all students. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (Orfield, G., Losen, D., Wald, J., & Swanson, C., 2004<sup>12</sup>) reports that in 2001, only 51 percent of Native American students graduated from high school as compared to 74.9 percent for Whites.

What have I gained from these papers? In part, at least the following elements that may be associated with student success:

1. Exposure to a "*culture of intellectual curiosity and pursuits.*"
2. Early "*development of language and other cognitive skills.*"
3. Family and community "*support and meeting expectations and values.*"
4. Individual student "*identity, independence, motivation, and interests.*"
5. Expectations and quality of "*elementary and secondary teachers and schools.*"

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<sup>12</sup> Orfield, G., Losen, D., Wald, J., & Swanson, C. (2004). *Losing our future: How minority youth are being left behind by the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. Contributors: Advocates for Children of New York, The Civil Society Institute.

6. Availability of “*mentors and financial resources.*”
7. University or college “*accessibility, character, culture, and mission.*”
8. Societal “*interests, needs, and rewards.*”

It could well be that increasing and retaining greater numbers of minority and other students in institutions of higher education, heretofore not well represented, requires a comprehensive set of changes in society and in the institutions designed to educate the citizens in that society. I expect that in order to increase student success in colleges and universities, we must overcome the influences of poverty, create institutions that are culturally competent (i.e., that can meet the needs of the different cultural groups attending the institution), and provide broad-based support in meeting the mission of the Educational Testing Service: “Advance Quality and Equity in Education for All People Worldwide.”

Again, what does success represent in my terms? Success would be reaching some level of personal competence in a chosen activity (i.e., in this instance attendance at a college or university and earning a degree) and the development of personal, physical, intellectual, social, civic and/or cultural skills or knowledge that meet community and tribal expectations representing success and that may be expanded upon throughout one’s life at some level of competence.