

# Family Education Model: Meeting the Student Retention Challenge

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Iris HeavyRunner and Richard DeCelles

## Introduction

We came to the realization of how central the whole concept is to Native Americans and to our communities and how, in fact, family is a central concept to all societies. (J. E. Shanley, personal interview, February 6, 2002)

**S**tudent retention is one of the most challenging issues facing higher education today. Educational literature indicates that when students fail to complete educational programs serious adverse conditions plague the individuals, their families, and their communities. To mitigate this deteriorative affect, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) must strengthen their understanding of the factors that affect student departure, as well as the factors that contribute to students' educational persistence. A close examination of the retention factors for Indian students reveals that replicating the extended family structure within the college culture enhances the student's sense of belonging and leads to higher retention rates. This article provides first a backdrop to understand the social context of the American Indian student and then explains the Family Education Model (FEM) and how it addresses the need for family-based education in postsecondary education.

Over the last three decades, the American Indian self-determination movement resulted in the establishment of 33 tribal colleges in the United States and Canada. Playing a vital role in helping to counter the legacy of misaligned federal assimilation policies and mismanagement of tribal resources, tribal colleges gained favor and support from tribal councils and communities, without whose help the colleges would not have come into existence (Stein, 1992). Together, the tribal communities and colleges face the challenges of reservation life, such as staggering unemployment rates ranging from 45% to 90% (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 1999; Boyer, 1997b; Karger & Stoez, 1998; Stein, 1992). Other challenges, including high morbidity rates and the breakdown of the nuclear family, weigh heavily on the minds of tribal leaders. For example, the suicide rate for American Indians is more than double that of other racial or ethnic minority groups, the number of alcohol-related deaths is extremely high, and the already large number of single-parent households continues to increase (O'Brien, 1992).

Poverty and family concerns increase the burdens shouldered by Indian students. One may drop out because a car breaks down and there is no money for

repairs. Another may leave because no one is available to care for the children and daycare is unavailable. Others come with more profound needs. Counselors report that alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence are prevalent among students and their family members.

### **The Story of the Family Education Model**

In 1997, American Indian educators, social work professionals, and university advisors from five participating institutions—Fort Peck Community College, Stone Child College, Salish Kootenai College, Blackfeet Community College, and the University of Montana, Department of Social Work—developed what has come to be known as the Family Education Model. This model has contributed significantly to the development of methods to improve educational access for students and to effectively support students' persistence toward degree completion. Three assumptions predicated the development of the FEM: (a) many students and their families need the college to act as their liaison with existing social and health services during times of crisis; (b) tribal colleges must seek to enlist, develop, and structure the ability of family members to support student efforts; and (c) tribal colleges must engage family members in the life of the college community by enlisting them as partners and involving them in cultural and social activities. Together, these assumptions have functioned to create an environment that honors and includes the extended family and nurtures appropriate partnerships.

The partnerships that grew from these assumptions developed several strategies to help the students feel a sense of belonging. For example, activities such as dances, socials, sports, and outdoor activities include the students' families; spouses and children of students are regularly invited to join in. In this way, the entire family develops a sense of belonging at the college and no longer feels resentful of the student spending time on campus. Establishing and maintaining a sense of "family," both at home and at college, fortifies American Indian students' academic persistence. Family support is given to any family that needs and deserves help, support, and access to resources. The family-support approach focuses on helping families identify and develop their strengths, rather than passively receiving services designed and delivered by professionals.

Although family-support programs use different strategies, they adhere to these common principles:

- tribal college staff and students' families must work together in relationships based on equality and respect;
- tribal college staff enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members—adults, youths, children, and extended family;
- tribal college students' families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to tribal communities;

- retention programs must affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society;
- retention programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process;
- retention programs advocate for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families that are served,
- student service practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development;
- student retention programs are flexible and responsive to emerging family and community issues; and
- principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.

Dr. James Shanley, President of Fort Peck Community College, reflecting on the power of the FEM, said,

We're impacting a lot of people in a lot of different ways, not only in terms of their health, but also in terms of their mental stability and their spiritual capabilities simply because they're involved in more healthy activities. (personal interview, February 6, 2002).

These types of activities help the family-support movement focus on empowerment. Empowerment is an intentional, dynamic, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, caring, and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over their resources. Further, "empowerment" describes the transformation from individual and collective powerlessness to personal, political, and cultural power. Bricker-Jenkins (1994) identified several concepts that are central to the notion of empowerment practice: (a) the centrality of the concept "the personal is political"; (b) analysis of the interconnections among consciousness, context, and the context of experience; (c) a "strengths" orientation applied to individuals, groups, and cultures; (d) diversity as a source of strength; (e) creation of choices and opportunities; (f) collectivism/partnership/collaboration supported by interactional and analytical skills; and (g) an experience-based, reflexive learning process.

Family-support models use caseworkers who understand and employ the principles and techniques of empowerment to help families. Pete Williams, student support services instructional coordinator, talked about the importance of the caseworker:

The person who is in that position needs to care about the students and, in turn, their families as well. Because it's a support system for all students, whether Native American, Black, or White, everybody gets a support system in order to achieve. If they don't have it, then it just makes it twice as hard. Also, the person who fills this position [family specialist] needs to have a lot of knowledge about local resources. (personal interview, February 7, 2002)

The caseworker must serve as a resource specialist to help these families make the right decisions. Together, the caseworker and the family share a strengths-based decision-making process. In the tribal college setting, the family education specialist builds on the cultural resilience of individuals, families, and tribes. These strengths, deeply embedded in the culture's value system, include spirituality, bilingualism, biculturalism, kinship, and a sense of belonging to the community. The cultural values shape the cultural identity and self-identity. One student described her experience with this process: "The counseling and mentoring helped me a lot at this college. I had a lot of questions that I needed answered and it seemed like people were right there to help me with them" (C. Small, personal interview, February 5, 2002).

The essential elements of the FEM implementation process include assessment, commitment, collaboration, communication, and evaluation. Assessment of students' attributes at the beginning needs to include not only demographic data, but also documentation of those attributes, expectations, and self-assessment. Commitment requires that tribal college administrators, faculty, and staff understand the goals and purposes of retention and willingly give their full support. This commitment must include respect for cultural values, the significance of family support, and the basic principles of student-centered learning. Collaboration requires participants, whether members of the team or not, to understand the role they play in helping students persist. Communication must be ongoing among all college entities and especially when engaging students and their families. This component provided the model's greatest lessons and continues to inform the institution of ways to empower its students, staff, faculty, and administrators. Family specialists not only increased their knowledge of family-centered approaches, but also developed tools and strategies ready for immediate practice. Finally, evaluation must be planned from the start. In the case of the FEM, a unique evaluation design combined methodologies from both education and social work to measure the effectiveness of the retention strategies.

The FEM also incorporates the concept of cultural resilience. HeavyRunner and Morris (1997) defined this concept from the American Indian point of view:

The elders teach us that our children are gifts from the Creator. It is the family, community, school, and tribe's responsibility to nurture, protect, and guide them. We have long recognized how important it is for children to have people in their lives who nurture their spirit, stand by them, encourage, and support them. This traditional process is what contemporary researchers, educators, and social service providers are now calling "fostering resilience." (p. 1)

Tom Christian, Tribal executive board member, illuminated the cultural perspective by saying, "We don't do these things as Indian people for our own selves. We do them for the sake of our children to make this a better place for them, especially for those who have yet to come" (personal interview, February 7, 2002).

In summary, Dr. Frank Clark, past chair of the Department of Social Work at the University of Montana, shared that many family-centered models have been developed in social work, but that these models have not been adapted for use by postsecondary institutions (HeavyRunner, Murray, & Shanley, 2001). The FEM, based on family support, empowerment, and American Indian values, is the first of its kind that he has seen in a postsecondary setting. When colleges and universities view student attrition as resulting from a lack of individual commitment or ability, these institutions fail to recognize the disconnect between the institutional values and student/family values; hence the real reasons for high attrition rates among disadvantaged students are never addressed. Clark and HeavyRunner (1999) asserted that colleges and universities need to reevaluate their assumptions and shift the paradigm to a student- and family-centered approach.

### **Lessons Learned About Leadership**

In terms of qualities of leadership, I think the people that got involved, the student services people from the various institutions, first of all, they were coming from a setting and they were by their own nature helping people. People were concerned with the welfare of other individuals. They came with good hearts to start with, and when they started talking and discussing the various elements of the Family Education Model, they became true believers that it would be a way to further their main drive of helping people move through this educational process. (J. E. Shanley, personal interview, February 6, 2002)

As demonstrated in traditional family structures, the desire to help others by sharing knowledge emerged from Plains Indian philosophy to become a vital theme for dynamic leadership in the FEM. The Plains Indian tribes placed the family at the center of their social values. From heartfelt beliefs and perennial wisdom flow the values that shape and direct the development of a culture's system of values. Although all cultures within a system share similar values, the prioritization of particular values distinguishes one culture from the next. For many of the Plains Indians, the value of family was preeminent, and this preeminence fostered other values such as respect, generosity, and cooperation. These key values are reflected in the educational leadership model that guides FEM.

Leadership in the FEM assumes complex and powerful interrelationships. Figure 1, Leadership Shield, depicts many of the most important cultural values related to leadership within the FEM. Just as the symbols on protective shields of days past represented prayers to omnipotent forces to protect the shield's bearer, our shield represents prayers to attain the protective power of wisdom as understood by our traditional resident culture as well as wisdom attained through contemporary education.

The shield conveys many subtle messages. Whereas the pipe represents a conduit that carries our prayers to a higher power, it also represents the horizon. The

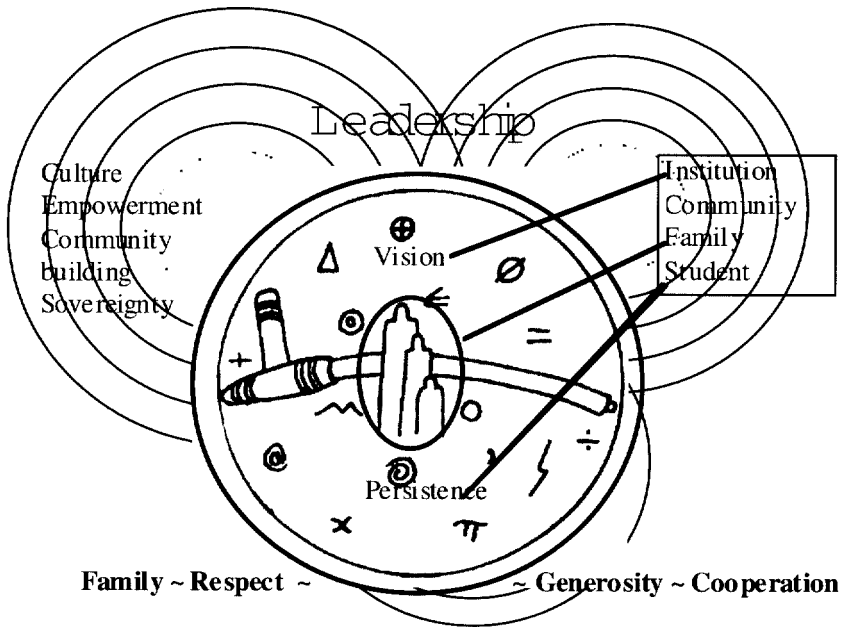


Figure 1. Leadership Shield

horizon separates the spirit world, the upper part of the shield, from concrete reality, the lower part of the shield. Within that context, the various symbols on the face of the shield represent education and knowledge, and serve to protect the family. Symbolizing the acceptance of diversity, the symbols draw from both American Indian cultures and non-Indian cultures to subtly reflect the necessity to be receptive to all cultural perspectives as a means to attain wisdom. Understanding this nonjudgmental way motivates students to persist with their education, to stabilize their families, and to gain wisdom, the state of being most revered by our ancestors.

Other symbolic subtleties explain ancient routes to wisdom and the role of leadership. The small circle within a circle to the left of the tallest figure in the center of the shield represents a family intact. As the world witnesses a family intact, that is, a family strong, viable, and functioning from wise leadership, the behavior of the family demonstrates what works and informs the village of potential paths to wisdom. It signifies the notion that when families are intact the village is intact. The outer circle, the frame of the shield, signifies the sacred hoop or the mirror. Dr. R. McAnally, Vice-President of Student Services at Fort Peck Community College, expressed the power of the hoop when he put it in the context of his personal relationship to the development of the model: "It was energizing; it was something that actually caused you to take a look at yourself, not just at your institution" (personal interview, February 5, 2002).

The hoop, a sign directing one to self-reflect, is an integral feature of this educational leadership model. For example, when parents view life through this symbolic hoop and see their children, they may witness inappropriate behavior. This behavior reflects parental influence and allows parents to assume responsibility for their role in causing the child's bad behavior. When parents and other family members ponder their influence on a misdirected child's behavior, the family can discover ways to help the child to heal. Successful problem-solving techniques can then be shared with others who can learn from the family. K. Shields explained how "we share these moments of affliction and we help one another, kind of like a shoulder to lean on, and this is part of the Indian family structure where we can rely on the extended family" (personal interview, February 5, 2002). This sharing is the sacred law, a path to wisdom shared with everyone.

### **Final Reflections**

Current retention literature provides evidence of the FEM's effectiveness. Reviewing studies on American Indian student retention in mainstream institutions (Benjamin, Chambers, & Rieterman, 1993; Brown & Robinson-Kurpius, 1997; Dodd, Garcia, Meccage, & Nelson, 1995; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Hoover & Jacobs, 1992; Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986; Lin, LaCounte, & Eder, 1988; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Tate & Schwartz, 1993) revealed a surprising oversight: None of these researchers recognized previous enrollment at a tribal college as a factor in retention. Boyer (1997a), on the other hand, found that American Indian students who had attended a tribal college before transferring to a four-year institution were *four times* more likely to complete a four-year degree than those who entered a mainstream institution as freshmen. Evidence presented in the FEM suggests that the tendency for tribal colleges to act more like extended family provides Indian students with the type of support system that effectively prepares them for and indoctrinates them into the college culture.

As a postsecondary institution, Fort Peck Community College glean insight from the community and reflects this wisdom back to the community as it articulates its vision. The college mission develops a path to righteousness and wisdom that is grounded in a deep understanding of the needs of the people it serves. Striving to manifest its capacity as an extended self-reflecting family, the college protects and empowers the community with traditional wisdom while constantly introducing the technology, perspectives, and information necessary for a good life. The FEM at Fort Peck Community College exemplifies how this mission is achieved. The FEM continues to articulate and preserve the subtle constellation of cultural values that continues to stand as the unique foundation of tribal sovereignty.

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