

## Life Skills at a Tribal College: A Culturally Relevant Educational Intervention

### Abstract

American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians (AI/AN/NH) experience the lowest rates of college retention and significant barriers to graduation. In addition, AI/AN/NH individuals face health challenges that include higher rates of obesity, overweight, and type 2 diabetes. We designed a culturally relevant life skills curriculum based on family and consumer science standards to promote educational achievement, self-efficacy, and healthful food choices among tribal college students. The Life Skills at a Tribal College course was delivered by tribal college Extension professionals in a family meal–style environment and involved culturally appropriate, traditional ways of learning to promote positive educational and health outcomes.

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## Program Need

American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian (AI/AN/NH) students enrolled in colleges across the United States bring cultural experiences, values, and strengths to the learning environment; moreover, graduates provide needed diversity in a variety of employment capacities. Unfortunately, AI/AN/NH students have significantly lower college enrollment, retention, and graduation rates than other ethnic groups (Freeman & Fox, 2005; Hunt & Harrington, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Educational challenges for AI/AN/NH students include underpreparation, difficulties adjusting to the academic community, problems with family and self, cultural differences, social isolation, and financial complications (Hoover & Jacobs, 1992; Hunt & Harrington, 2010; Vermillion, 2012; Wells, 1989). Additional barriers to education include poverty, bias/discrimination, health disparities, lack of access to health care, lack of

availability of culturally competent health services, and underfunding of health programs (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2004; Warne, 2006, 2015). Because income and education level are predictors of health status, low per capita income and educational levels of AI/AN/NH individuals are of particular concern (Deaton, 2002; Warne, 2006, 2015).

Additionally, educational barriers and poverty are obstacles to making healthful food choices. Unfortunately, AI/AN/NH individuals experience disproportionate levels of chronic health conditions that are influenced by food choices, such as type 2 diabetes and overweight/obesity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, 2014, 2015; Zephier, Himes, & Story, 1999; Zephier, Himes, Story, & Zhou, 2006). Meal planning and preparation are essential life skills that can positively influence food choices (Fordyce-Voorham, 2011; Krieger, 2013; Larson, Perry, Story, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006). In addition, self-esteem and decision making have been identified as life skills important for developing self-efficacy, and improved self-efficacy can increase the likelihood of choosing healthful foods (Adams et al., 2012; Bandura, 1997; Duerden & Witt, 2011).

## **Introduction and Objectives**

Enrollment of AI/AN/NH students at the 37 1994 tribal land-grant colleges and universities (TCUs) continues to rise (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). TCUs provide Extension services, including services that focus on nutrition and health in tribal communities (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] National Institute of Food and Agriculture [NIFA], 2016). Partnerships between 1994 and 1862 land-grant institutions and between educators and community partners demonstrate the collaborative nature of Extension and can provide effective educational and program strategies to meet the interests of tribal communities (Martenson, Newman, & Zak, 2011; USDA NIFA, 2016).

Programs intended to address college retention, self-efficacy, and healthful food choices among AI/AN/NH students should involve elements that promote academic success, including supportive instructors/staff, commitment/support from the educational institution, assistance with identifying personal goals, guidance about study skills, and encouragement to remain connected with home and cultural practices. Strategies that assist students in gaining self-efficacy relative to making healthful food choices include incorporating traditional methods of learning and cultural practices familiar to AI/AN/NH students, providing hands-on experiential learning opportunities to assist students in acquiring nutrition knowledge, and discussing barriers to making healthful food choices (and strategies for overcoming them).

In an effort to incorporate recommendations and strategies, as well as to address gaps identified in the literature, we formed a partnership between a 1994 land-grant institution (United Tribes Technical College [UTTC]) and an 1862 land-grant institution (North Dakota State University) to develop a life skills course. The three goals of the course were to improve college retention, build self-efficacy, and promote healthful food choices.

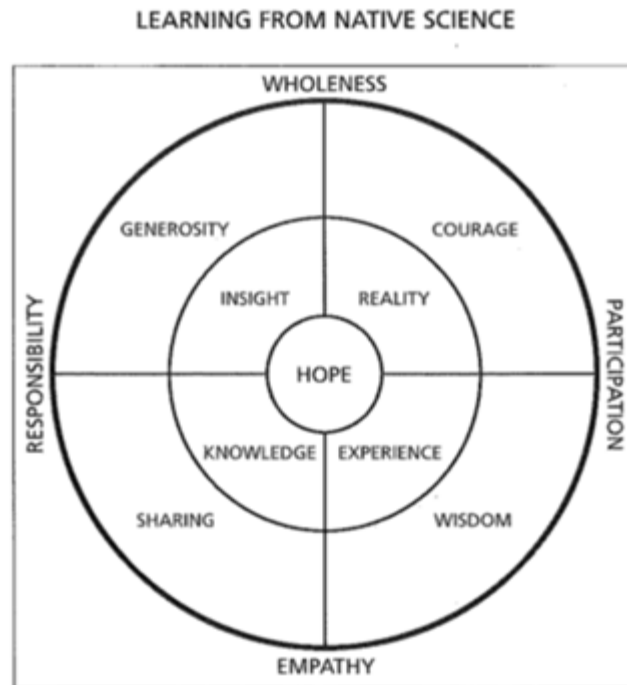
## **Program Description**

The Life Skills at a Tribal College (LSTC) course was a semester-long curriculum. Life skills-specific topics centered on learning objectives included nutrition, budgeting, meal planning and preparation, food gathering (grocery and garden), family health, sovereign (sustainable/local) food systems, employment goals, money management, and communication. The curriculum was based on the North Dakota Family and Consumer Science Content Standards (2008), adapted for cultural relevance.

Adaptations for cultural relevance included the use of Cajete's (1994) learning from native science model (Figure 1) and a humanistic approach to learning. A humanistic approach values interdependence among students and between students and teachers, allows students to inform the direction of education, and promotes participation and relationship building in the learning environment (Cajete, 1999). In addition, a "grandmother-figure" as the primary instructor for the course reflected a matriarchal social order and the common indigenous value of learning from respected elders (Cajete, 1994; Calsoyas, 2006; Varcoe, Bottorff, Carey, Sullivan, & Williams, 2010). A grandmother-figure may not be suitable for paternalistic tribes; program planners should build understanding of tribal values to promote a culturally relevant learning environment.

**Figure 1.**

Native Science Model



From *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*,  
by G. Cajete, 1994, Kivaki Press, Durango, CO.

The adaption of the learning from native science model to the curriculum and an environment with relaxed communication among AI/AN/NH learners (Gilliland, 1995) were strategic to the class. Strategies that incorporate traditional styles of learning, such as experiential learning, storytelling, tutoring, rituals and ceremonies, observation, and open conversation between teacher and learner, were included (Bowman, 1994; Cajete, 1994; Castagna & Brayboy, 2008; Gay, 2000; Hooker, 2011; Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux, & Baeza, 2006; Swisher, 1991). Class time was devoted to incorporating these strategies through regular class rituals, writing assignments, discussion time, hands-on experience, small-group interaction, and storytelling opportunities.

The LSTC course was delivered in a home-like setting on the UTTC campus that included cooking facilities and a large, round dining table (Figure 2). Each term, enrolled students met for a 4-hr class two times a week, for the full semester. Each class meeting included meal preparation and dining as a group. Course layout information (Figure 3) was provided to students at the beginning of the course. Lessons and daily activities

(Figure 4) were planned with student input when possible.

**Figure 2.**

Round Dining Table Used During Life Skills at a Tribal College Course



**Figure 3.**

Life Skills at a Tribal College Course Layout Information Shared with Students

**Daily schedule includes:**

- Participants are required to sign in and sign out every day.
- Tasks will be assigned to each participant on a daily basis.
- Lunch will be prepared each day.
- Classroom and kitchen spaces will be cleaned and maintained each day.
- Grocery lists will be developed by the participants responsible for the noon meal.

**Classroom Expectations:**




- Respectful treatment for all participants, instructors and guests.
- Confidentiality, some of the topics we discuss include personal issues and hardships that should not be shared outside of this classroom space.
- Pick-up, clean-up and help maintain the facility.
- Honesty.
- Appreciation for each other and this opportunity to spend time together.

**Daily Schedule:** This is a flexible schedule but it provides a guide for our daily plans.

9:00	Gather and greet, morning beverage, meal preparation, plan for the day
9:15	Daily discussion topic
10:15	Financial Skills, The Purpose Guided Student, etc.
11:15	Meal preparation, reading and other projects
12:15	Sharing a Meal
12:45	Clean-up and out the door by one

**Figure 4.**

Daily Outline and Weekly Lesson Planning Template for Life Skills at a Tribal College Course

  <b>UTTC LIFE SKILLS at a TRIBAL COLLEGE</b> 			
DAILY OUTLINE	TOPIC GUIDE	TUESDAY Week #	THURSDAY Week #
9:00 15 minutes	Gather and Greet Plant Chores Morning Beverage, Meal Prep		
9:15 60 minutes	READ and Daily Discussion Topics		
10:15 30 minutes	Money Issues, Homework, Gather Food		
10:45 15 minutes	Parenting, Community or Social Topics		
11:00 30 minutes	Prepare Table Topic and Food Readiness		
11:30 25 minutes 5 minutes	Presentation Topic Gather & Thank For Food		
NOON 30 minutes	Prompted/Planned Dinner Conversation (Chat and Chew)		
12:30 30 minutes	Continue Table Chat Clean and Prepare for tomorrow		
1:00	Good Bye		

Note. UTTC = United Tribes Technical College.

## Evaluation and Outreach

Evaluation of the program included pre- and postprogram questionnaires as well as pre- and postprogram telephone interviews with each enrollee. Semester-to-semester retention of LSTC completers was 100%. General self-efficacy did not increase significantly, nutrition knowledge increased but not significantly, and nutrition attitudes and beliefs were not different between preintervention and postintervention. Dietary analysis reflected improved intake and eating behaviors; however, none of the participants met dietary recommendations for any food group.

Curriculum adapted and developed for the LSTC course was intended for widespread use and additional cultural adaptations as necessary. Curriculum materials, including recipes and learning objectives, are available for review, download, and educational use at

<http://www.uttc.edu/landgrant/resources/lifeskills/educators>.

## Summary

American Indians and Alaska Natives experience negative health issues that may be directly influenced by dietary intake and food patterns at disparate rates. In addition, AI/AN/NH students experience the lowest rates of college retention and graduation in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007, 2016). Using a culturally relevant curriculum, such as LSTC, may improve college retention, nutrition knowledge, and eating behaviors among AI/AN/NH tribal college students.

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