A Draft Plan for Improving Support of Native American Students at NMSU

Background and Motivation

The six-year graduate rate for American Indian / Alaska Native (hereafter, "indigenous") students at NMSU-Main Campus is 30-40%, the lowest of any major reported demographic.[1] The low rate probably reflects an intersection of cultural, geographic, and financial challenges that NMSU instructors are incompletely aware of. Indigenous graduates will play an outsized role in helping their communities interface with their non-indigenous context[2], with benefits for all of New Mexico. NMSU is currently re-writing its relationship with New Mexico's 23 Pueblos, Tribes, and Nations with a view toward improving recruitment and retention of New Mexico's indigenous students. With surveys suggesting that institutional support is the strongest predictor of indigenous students' sense of belonging[3], this document proposes a three-level set of options for improving institutional support at NMSU that involve instructors. Depending on the available level of administrative and financial support, these range from educating instructors about the needs and circumstances that are specific to indigenous students to providing dedicated advising and tracking following the NMSU's athletic model. This draft focuses on support that involves the instructor-student relationship because it originates in the NMSU Faculty Senate, but many suggestions necessarily involve administrative units, hence the responsibility for implementation is in most cases shared between instructors and administration.

Level I: Educating Instructors

Educate NMSU's instructors of record (including faculty, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows) generally about the conflicts that can confront indigenous students. Training should raise awareness and suggest responses such as surveys and syllabus boilerplate. For example:

1. Feast Days
    - Educate: Summarize their cultural significance, the likely role students play in them, how long they last, and how much coursework can be expected of students who return home from them. A calendar indicating when different Nations, Tribes, and Pueblos celebrate Feast Days would help instructors plan for them.
    - Plan: Suggest that instructors indicate in syllabi if their courses are incompatible with long absences. Inform instructors about existing forms/procedures for students to request accommodations. Support instructors who wish to develop workarounds for required long absences. Draft a generic beginning-of-term survey for instructors to use that can anticipate Feast Day conflicts, possibly identifying students with tribal affiliations. (Providing faculty with such a survey would increase the chances that they would use it, but filling out the same survey 6-8 times per annum could be annoying or embarrassing for students. Collecting such information once and disseminating it centrally would have advantages; see Level II.)

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[1] https://datausa.io/profile/university/new-mexico-state-university-main-campus

[2] https://nmsu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/pqdtlocal1006289/dissertations-theses/native-american-participation-persistence/docview/2001147639/sem-2?accountid=12810

[3] https://collegefund.org/power-in-culture/

2. Mourning obligations
    - Educate: While all students deserve informal accommodations to cope with loss, bereaved indigenous students may have ceremonial obligations at home. Summarize the significance of mourning ceremonies, the role students may play in them, how long they last, and how much coursework can be expected of students in mourning.
    - Plan: Create/highlight a form/process through which indigenous students can alert instructors (preferably all at once; see Level II) when they have mourning obligations. Train academic advisors to use or recommend these responses.
3. Unexpected religious injunctions
    - Educate: Indigenous traditions may conflict with some coursework requirements. For example, some traditions forbid viewing stars or eclipses [ARE THERE OTHERS?]
    - Plan: Highlight known traditional conflicts for instructors. Indicate how they can be anticipated in syllabi. Support instructors who wish to develop workarounds. Train academic advisors to support indigenous students who identify conflicts.

Level II: Limited Administrative Support and Assessment

The examples in the Level I plan highlight how centralized support for identifying traditional conflicts could streamline the process of identifying, anticipating, and responding to conflicts between traditional and coursework obligations. Level II involves more investment by the NMSU Central Administration.

- Centralized support for instructors: use surveys to identify indigenous students' tribal affiliations upon registration or matriculation, then include this information in Navigate (this could also be done for other religious/traditional identities). Alert instructors to students with tribal affiliations at the beginning of the term using similar procedures as Disability Access Services uses (without creating the impression that a tribal affiliation is a disability).
    - ➡ Risk: some students might not want such information tracked centrally; clarify proactively what is FERPA-protected.
- Iterate with New Mexico's tribes, pueblos, and nations about what information they can share directly regarding student obligations. Identify tribal support liaisons (ideally leaders/elders with a post-secondary degree) who can consult regarding their students' needs. Train academic advisors to contact these liaisons. (These relationships also prevent indigenous students from abusing their tribal affiliations by citing frivolous conflicts.)
- Identify and train an academic advisor within the Student Enrollment and Success office who can specialize in responding to indigenous student needs, and establish procedures as necessary for collaborating with NMSU's American Indian Program.
- Student Enrollment and Success office assess how Level I and Level II changes affect indigenous student enrollment and retention.

Level III: Full Administrative Support and Academic Assessment

Level III support builds on Levels I and II by (i) adding the same level of tracking and support for indigenous students that varsity athletes currently enjoy and (ii) boosting assessment into a funded academic study by NMSU's scholars that draws nationwide attention to results and puts them into context.

- Train the dedicated advisor identified in Level II to track indigenous students' academic progress throughout each term in the same way that is currently done for student-athletes.

They should track students' performance on coursework, proactively alert instructors to predictable conflicts such as a Feast Days or solar eclipse, and be the first point of contact for instructors with concerns.

- Fully fund a Master's or Doctoral student, probably within the College of HEST, to study how different interventions affect recruitment and retention of indigenous students. Obvious data to consider include qualitative custom surveys of students, their communities, and NMSU administrators; a longitudinal study of a representative cohort of indigenous freshmen, and quantitative enrollment and retention rates.

Unanswered Questions

- What is the best way to educate NMSU's instructors about indigenous students' experiences and needs? For example, written form, recorded videos, workshops, or SET training?
- Can the athletic advising model be used to determine whether additional funding is needed to hire/train an academic advisor whose primary responsibility is to indigenous students?
- What external funding is there to support academic study of strategies for supporting indigenous students?
    - Native Forward lists many funding instruments for indigenous students
    - Can academic project proposals be drafted in advance that students could craft into winning grant proposals?
- What parts of these plans are led by the American Indian Program versus Student Enrollment and Success or other administrative units?
- How do the Community Colleges (CCs) and NMSU-Main collaborate to improve indigenous student enrollment and retention systemwide? Are there existing support structures on some campuses that could be duplicated or leveraged on others?
- Should promoting transfers from CCs to NMSU-Main be part of this plan?
- Can academic trajectories be identified that would allow indigenous students who cannot complete at NMSU-Main to re-route into the CCs rather than quitting higher ed altogether?
- Can NMSU teach indigenous languages? (This idea may belong in a different plan.)