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**Cultural conflict among Native American and Australian
Aboriginal students in mainstream universities**

Cantrell, Leon Nicolas, Ph.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1992

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

CULTURAL CONFLICT AMONG NATIVE AMERICAN AND AUSTRALIAN
ABORIGINAL STUDENTS IN MAINSTREAM UNIVERSITIES

by

Leon N. Cantrell

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Administration
Curriculum and Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Alan T. Seagren
Lincoln, Nebraska

July 1992

DISSERTATION TITLE
CULTURAL CONFLICT AMONG NATIVE AMERICAN AND AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL

STUDENTS IN MAINSTREAM UNIVERSITIES

BY

LEON N. CANTRELL

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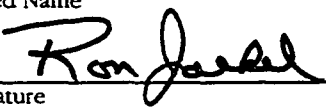
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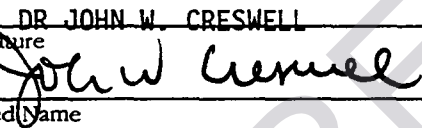
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**CULTURAL CONFLICT AMONG NATIVE AMERICAN AND AUSTRALIAN
ABORIGINAL STUDENTS IN MAINSTREAM UNIVERSITIES**

Leon N. Cantrell

University of Nebraska 1992

Adviser: Alan T. Seagren

The purpose of this study was to examine comparatively the conflict which exists between the traditional beliefs, values and norms of Native American and Australian Aboriginal students, and their experiences of mainstream universities. A special focus was on those processes and activities by which both native students and their universities sought to manage this conflict in order to enhance these students' success.

The study was based on interviews conducted with students, faculty and staff at two mainstream universities: the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) in America and the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in Australia; on observations carried out at those universities; and on the analysis of documents and other relevant data. The qualitative research methods used included case study analysis, constant comparative analysis and grounded theory.

The study revealed that students at both universities experienced cultural conflict. This conflict was categorized as being concerned with the group; family; elders; teaching, learning and knowledge; discovery of identity; traditional culture and the campus; racism; and support structures.

Students were shown to adopt different ways of dealing with cultural conflict so as to reduce its impact on their academic progress. Students who developed an effective bi-culturalism, which made them equally at home in their traditional culture or the culture of the mainstream university, were perhaps the most successful in managing cultural conflict.

The role and work of the two universities' support programs designed to assist native students to deal with cultural conflict were examined. The evidence suggested that a program which facilitated cultural maintenance, and which provided a venue for students to express their traditional values and attitudes, was more successful than one which provided academic support or counseling only. The former program was able to strengthen the development of bi-cultural skills in students and thus enhance their chance of academic success in a mainstream institution.

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children, provided a perfect and active support team. We will all return to Australia enriched by our Nebraska experience.

PREVIEW

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Context of the Problem

Minority students in both the United States and Australia have levels of educational participation and success substantially below their national average (Levine, 1989; Hughes, 1988; Brown, 1991). Schools and universities in both countries have sought to improve access and success among these students. The gains have been generally small and the present situation can be described as faltering and discouraging (Green, 1989; Steele, 1992).

In America, the problem is an increasingly important one, as each principal minority group (African-Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans and Asian-Americans) has a population growth rate significantly higher than the national average. It is estimated that, by early in the next century, minorities will comprise up to 33% of the American population (Ward and Cross, 1989). There are compelling reasons (including that of maximizing the potential of the nation's human resource base) to urge

national parity and equity in levels of educational participation and success for all these minority groups.

In Australia too the Federal government has identified both the national interest and equity concerns as compelling reasons to ensure parity in the education of that country's significant minorities. These groups, which include Australian Aborigines and some migrant communities (especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds), are also increasing at a rate in excess of the rest of the population (Dawkins, 1988). Australia's current economic and strategic situation will not allow it the luxury of under-educated enclaves.

These concerns over minority education are nowhere more urgent than in the plight of Native American and Australian Aboriginal students. Native student participation and success in university education in particular has become a focus for inquiry in both countries. The U.S. Congress, on numerous occasions, has called for action to reduce the rate of educational attrition among Native Americans (Senate, 1969; Indian, 1976; Coffer, 1979). In January 1992 a special White House Conference on Indian Education readdressed the issues (Mixed Reactions, 1992). (The Chair of the White House Conference, Lionel Bordeaux, is the

father of a currently-enrolled UNL Native American student). Recent reductions in the level of Federal support for the education of minorities have not absolved American universities of their responsibilities (Green, 1982; Callen and Finney, 1988; Male, 1989).

As recently as 1989 the Australian government, and the various state governments, promulgated a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP). The AEP was designed to improve the rates of educational participation and success among Aborigines and Islanders (Department, 1989). There are clear imperatives to bring about significant change. Governments, the community at large, schools, universities, native groups, as well as the students themselves, all stand to benefit from any increase in the levels of involvement or success of native students.

There seems little doubt that the confluence of these external pressures, and the internal pressures for higher education in both countries to become more accountable, will force universities to become more adaptive to all minority students. The success and satisfaction of these students will become a measure of institutional effectiveness.

Numerous reasons have been advanced to explain the relatively poor academic record of native students in universities in the two countries (MacLean, 1973; de Lemos, 1979). Some of these reasons are complex and compelling. Inadequate earlier schooling with insufficient preparation for higher education is cited frequently (Kohout and Kleinfeld, 1974; Hughes, 1988). Both America and Australia are countries where long-established and inward-looking native societies were overturned by the relatively recent arrival of European settlers with totally different technical and cultural values (Havighurst, 1984; Ringer and Lawless, 1989). Native students have been torn between their traditional values and attitudes and those of the new rulers of their continent (Boyer, 1978; Harris, 1984).

Other reasons for poor levels of academic performance have been found in the current low levels of socio-economic achievement of many Aborigines and Native Americans and in the social marginalizing of the majority of native people in both countries (Nurcombe, 1976; Astin, 1982; Bickers, 1990). Yet another explanation has stressed the lack of role models or of family and peer support for sustained institutional learning and growth (McDonald, 1978; Harris, 1989). No doubt these concerns raise broader issues relating to the ability of all minority students to socialize and

communicate successfully in the wider context of mainstream education (Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez, 1972; Tinto, 1975).

There is ample evidence to suggest that all these explanations contain at least some truth. They all contribute to an hypothesis of cultural discontinuity (Kleinfeld and McDiarmid, 1983), culture shock (Astone and Nunez-Wormack, 1990) or cultural conflict (Tierney, 1991). Their common thread is that native students experience a unique sense of conflict between their indigenous cultural traditions or experiences and the expectations which the universities have of them. This conflict can be manifested in various ways. Sometimes it exists between a student's traditional beliefs and the content or pedagogy of a university course (Dworkin and Dworkin, 1982; Butterfield, 1983). At other times it can be found in relation to native students' priorities and their organization of time (Monaghan, 1986), both of which can be in conflict with the administrative expectations or rules of the university. Yet another source of conflict lies in the native students' minority status, where their cultural isolation and vulnerability are at odds with the received values of the institution (Greenbaum and Greenbaum, 1983; Loos, 1984).

Only recently has it been suggested that the universities themselves are complicit in this conflict. In America, the suggestion stemmed from the pioneering work of the Waxes and others who carried out interviews and observations in South Dakota elementary schools in the early 1960s (Wax, Wax and Dumont, 1964). These researchers challenged the idea that the only disadvantages of Native American children were those which were brought with them to school. Wax and his team argued that the schools' own curricula, pedagogy and perception of mission, created disadvantage and conflict for native students. Wax saw the schools as enshrining values and attitudes which were contrary to those of the students, inimical to their growth and development as Native Americans and powerful factors for their educational failure.

Szasz showed how this insight applied also to American universities (1977). Higher education was seen by Native Americans as designed to accommodate students from the mainstream society rather than those from the reservations or the urban ghettos. Fuchs and Havighurst (1972) looked at a number of universities where native students showed greater than usual academic progress and suggested that specially designed programs of support were a factor in this success. Astin (1982) urged all American universities to confront cultural conflict by establishing centers to foster

the cultural identity of Native American students. In addition, he called for the establishment of special support programs to provide those students with any academic, developmental or counseling services necessary for their success.

In Australia too the focus shifted from the perceived characteristics or short-comings of students to the nature and structure of the universities themselves. Loos (1984) reported a program designed to reduce conflict and improve the participation and success rates of Aboriginal student teachers by creating separate courses and support facilities within an already existing college of education. Another researcher presented evidence of the need for university administrators to develop new practices when working with Aboriginal students (Cantrell, 1986). There was general agreement that, as in America, the universities had been slow to recognise cultural conflict and slow to respond to the specific needs of their native students (Cantrell, 1990). The Hughes Report (1988) cited not only curriculum and pedagogy, but developmental support and counseling, as well as administrative structures, as sources of potential conflict for Aboriginal students.

Problem

There is little in the literature of either America or Australia to show the precise nature of the conflict between native students' traditional values and beliefs (their culture), and their experiences in mainstream universities. Which particular cultural traditions of which native people are in conflict with which university policies or practices? How do students and universities respond to these particular instances of cultural conflict? Are there useful parallels between the experiences of Native American students and those of Australian Aboriginal students? Can the work of professors, administrators and native students be assisted by identifying cultural conflicts and by examining the processes whereby native students and universities seek to manage conflict and to facilitate the students' success?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine comparatively the conflict which exists between the traditional beliefs, values and norms of Native American and Australian Aboriginal students, and their experiences of mainstream universities. A special focus was on those processes and activities whereby both native students and their

universities sought to manage this conflict in order to enhance these students' success.

Research Questions

The particular research questions were:

- * 1. What were the perceptions and understandings of Native American and Australian Aboriginal students concerning the cultural conflict which arises between their traditional beliefs, values and norms, and their experiences of mainstream universities?
- * 2. How did these students handle this conflict?
- * 3. What practices did a mainstream university in the United States or Australia have to assist native students manage cultural conflict?

These questions were explored through the use of qualitative research methods such as interviews, observation and the collection and analysis of documents. By these methods it was possible to broaden the information base concerning native students' cultural conflict so as to inform and strengthen decision making in the future. A

further outcome was the development of guidelines to assist universities and students in dealing with matters of cultural conflict among native students as they arise.

Assumptions

This research was carried out on the basis of four major sets of assumptions. These assumptions relate to:

- i) The nature of the qualitative research paradigm and its appropriateness for this particular project.
- ii) The notion of what "culture" might mean in the idea of "cultural conflict" between a group (native students) and a larger organization (a mainstream university).
- iii) The idea that there are many aspects of students' life at a university which are likely to manifest this conflict and that evidence of this conflict will therefore be found in various sites. These sites (which will vary from student to student, depending upon his or her particular and broader experiences) were identified during the course of the research interviews and observations.

iv) The various sites of cultural conflict determined by this study were appropriate ones in terms of the research questions, issues and design.

Each of these four sets of assumptions will now be discussed in turn.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research approaches a problem seeking to describe and understand it rather than to control it or to detail its causes or solutions. Such research is not concerned with generalization because it is based on a view of reality as multiple, constructed and holistic (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Qualitative research method is particularly appropriate to the exploration of a diverse range of naturalistic phenomena, all of which appear to be part of a particular problem. The qualitative paradigm has the following practical characteristics (Borg and Gall, 1989):

i) Qualitative research involves holistic inquiry (that is, the collection of a wide range of data which enables the specific focus of the study to be seen in its broad context) carried out in a natural setting. The focus of this study

was on the cultural conflict experienced by Native American and Australian Aboriginal students on the campus of their respective universities. The assumption was that, in order to understand these experiences of cultural conflict, it was necessary to consider them in the settings in which they occurred and in the context of the students' total experience of the university.

ii) Humans are the primary data-gathering instruments in qualitative research. All of the interviews, observations and documents which provided the data for this study were gathered and analyzed by the researcher. They aided in the creation of an holistic account of the experiences of these students. No other data or instruments were used.

iii) Methods appropriate to qualitative research were used to collect and analyse the data and to generate theory from it. These methods are outlined in the next section of this Introduction and discussed in detail in Chapter III, Methodology, of this dissertation.

iv) Purposive or theoretical sampling was used, rather than random sampling, as the basis of all interviews and observations. The intention was to uncover all the dimensions of the problem, including those which only become