How 2 Colleges Help Native Students Succeed

By Kelly Field | JANUARY 08, 2017

The University of Montana and Blackfeet Community College are vastly different institutions in size and mission. Yet both in their own way try to create a welcoming environment for Native American students that helps them to succeed. Here are how the two colleges support Native students, as well as some of the struggles the institutions face in graduating them.

University of Montana

The first thing most visitors to the University of Montana notice is the white concrete "M" that looms over the campus, at the top of Mount Sentinel. A Missoula landmark since 1908, the "M" is a widely recognized symbol of the college, and the city itself.

But the university’s most distinctive building is probably the Payne Family Native American Center, a 12-sided structure that sits on the main quad on the site of a historic Salish encampment. Opened in 2010, it’s unlike the classic brick buildings that surround it — and that’s intentional, says William Brown, administrator of the Native American-studies department.

From the Reservation to College

When college leaders were planning the building, they invited tribal elders to tour the campus and asked which architectural elements they’d like to incorporate into the structure, Mr. Brown says. The elders wanted nothing of the campus’ traditional...
buildings, which "reminded them of boarding school," he says. "They wanted something loudly indigenous."

With that in mind, the university built a center that honors Native design throughout, from the main entrance, which opens to the east to greet the sun, to the long skylight that resembles the slit of a teepee’s smoke hole. The domed roof mimics the inside of a hand drum; the frosted windows evoke sweat lodges.

"There’s always been this separation of home and school, and this brings them back into one space," says Mr. Brown. "It helps with retention."

According to the university, there are 600 Native students on campus, accounting for 5 percent of the student body (the federal tally, which does not include "multiracial" students, is 3 percent). It’s a small share, but it’s high given that Native students make up less than 1 percent of undergraduates nationwide. And when it comes to recruiting and serving Native students, the institution is ahead of most of its peers.

Each fall Emily Ferguson-Steger, interim director of admissions, visits every reservation-based high school and tribal college in the state to talk about enrolling in — or transferring to — the university. She walks applicants through the process, and teaches them the language of federal financial aid, so they won’t be intimidated by the jargon, as she once was.

"When I first heard EFC [expected family contribution], the first thing I thought of was KFC chicken," Ms. Ferguson-Steger recalls, with a laugh.

She says she urges many students to start at a tribal college first, like she did. The university has transfer agreements with every tribal college in the state. Students who plan to transfer to the university from a tribal college can apply as early as their first semester, and be co-advised by their home campus and Montana until they make the move.

When Native students arrive on campus, they are provided with mentors, cultural activities, and a "loudly indigenous" place where they can gather — the Native American Center. To introduce students to the broader campus community, the center hosts "Soup Wednesday" events in the rotunda, offering a free meal to any student who shows up. The president and the deans take turns serving the soup. Ms. Ferguson-Steger says the bi-weekly event "breaks down walls."

"Students can be in a center that makes them comfortable, and also integrate and feel that they’re part of a whole," she says.

This year staff in American Indian student services began giving presentations to other departments on cultural sensitivity and historic trauma in Native communities. They’re urging faculty and administrators to reject the stereotypes — both positive and negative — about Native students, to treat them as individuals, not as statistics.

But even with these efforts, the University of Montana struggles to graduate its Native students. Just 15 percent of Native students in the 2009 cohort of first-time, full-time students finished within six years, compared with half of white students.

One problem, Ms. Ferguson-Steger says, is that Native students are often pulled back to the reservation by family obligations or feelings of guilt about leaving for college. "It feels selfish, because we’re doing something for ourselves," she says. "Unfortunately, when one student leaves [for college], their cousin leaves, or their brother or sister leaves. It’s a bit of a systemic problem."

On recruiting trips, she tells prospective students what she wishes she’d been told when she was young: that there will be family members who will criticize their decision to leave — aunts, and cousins who will complain when they miss birthdays and funerals because of midterms. She reminds them that they’re getting an education not just for themselves, but for their grandparents, who didn’t have the same opportunity. And she promises them it will all be worth it.

"You are going to get people saying, 'You’re turning your back on us, you care more about your white education than us,'" she says. "But know that it’s coming from a place of love. And when it comes to graduation, they will be there."

**Blackfeet Community College**
On a mound of earth at the edge of Blackfeet Community College, a cluster of blue-painted rocks form the letters "BCC." To get to it, you have to cross a trash-filled marsh. It's a far cry from the iconic "M" four hours south.

But the log and wood buildings that make up the campus core are modern, and the tribal college is growing, with a health-sciences building under construction. Financially, it's in better shape than many of its peers.

Ninety-seven percent of the almost 500 students here are Native, as is 91 percent of the faculty, and most are from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Everyone is required to take classes in the history and language of the Piikani — the branch of the Blackfeet living in Northwest Montana — but Native culture and folklore are infused across the curriculum, in math lessons on teepee geometry and in chemistry labs where students make a painkiller from willows.

There aren't many fluent speakers of Blackfoot on campus today, but the college tries to instill the basics, sending students a "word of the day," and posting inspirational sayings in Blackfoot in the hallways: "Stay healthy," "laugh often," "never give up" — mii-noh-mat-skoh-tsit.

Two years ago, the college adopted the Blackfeet "society" model, as part of an effort to strengthen students' sense of belonging and community. The eight societies, which are named for animals important to the Piikani, offer both social and financial support, providing struggling students with gift certificates, gas cards — even holiday gifts.

The climate at Blackfeet Community College is informal and familiar. Professors joke around with students, and people wander in and out of classrooms. Tardiness is tolerated, but when students miss a class, professors will call to find out why — and will often offer a ride or other way to help.

Billy Jo Kipp, president of the college, says its ties to the reservation where it's based are one of its biggest strengths.

"Tribal colleges know the environment and the unique challenges that students come from," she says. "They accept students where they're at."

But those ties also bring some challenges. The Blackfeet reservation, in northwest Montana, is poor and geographically isolated, with low levels of educational attainment. Sixty percent of students are the first in their family to attend college, and two-thirds of them are unemployed.

Recruiting faculty from beyond the reservation can be difficult, because Browning is remote and salaries are low, in the $30,000-40,000 range, Ms. Kipp says. Those who accept the job are often asked to teach outside their area of expertise, and to take on social-service roles, such as soup preparation.

The Board of Trustees is appointed by the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, and leadership decisions are often political; when Ms. Kipp took office in 2011, the college had been through nine presidents in 11 years.

The leadership turnover and the faculty challenges hamper the college as it looks to improve its low graduation rate. Less than half of students return after the first year, and only 13 percent graduate within three years, according to federal statistics.

Ms. Kipp says such statistics ignore the fact that many students drop out and return repeatedly, taking longer than three years to complete their programs. They also overlook the key role that Blackfeet Community College and its peers play in community service and tribal education.

In the 2015 academic year, tribal colleges served more than 160,000 individuals through community education and outreach — 10 times the number they enrolled that fall, according to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. That programming included things like health screenings, financial-literacy courses, and programs for youth.

The failure of government officials and accreditors to acknowledge these contributions and recognize other successes has led some tribal-college advocates to call for the creation of a separate accreditor for tribal colleges — or at least a supplemental one.
"The way we define success is different than most of the rest of higher education," says Cheryl Crazy Bull, president of the American Indian College Fund, the nation's largest charity supporting Native students. For some tribal college students, "achieving their educational or life dream might take 10 years."

"We need to look at metrics in the context of mission," says Ms. Crazy Bull.

Paul Willeto, a professor of arts and humanities at Diné College, in Arizona, the country's oldest tribal college, says creating a tribal-college accreditor is about living up to the ideal of tribal self-determination. Allowing tribal colleges to monitor themselves would finally give Native Americans the sovereignty they sought in higher education when they created the colleges in the 1970s.

"The current higher-education accreditation systems are grounded in Euro-American values and elitism," Mr. Willeto says. Those values "are not always congruent with tribal nation-building efforts."

An independent tribal-college accreditor would "recognize and validate tribal cultural practices and standards," he says.

But Ms. Kipp says she's ambivalent about the idea. She worries that creating a separate accreditor for tribal colleges might send the message that the institutions want to be held to a lower standard than mainstream institutions.

Still, she wishes that the existing accreditors would look beyond graduation rates to more intangible outcomes — things like improved living skills and social consciousness.

"Students who attend tribal colleges are committed to the collective improvement of the tribe and the reservation," she says. "This is not measured by non-Native colleges."

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Fighting Long Odds

What one semester reveals about Native American students’ struggle to succeed in college

By Kelly Field  |  January 08, 2017

MISSOULA, MONT.

Charnelle Bear Medicine isn’t really a football fan. She doesn’t know the fight song, doesn’t understand the rules, and only just learned that they have homecoming in college, too. Where she grew up, on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in northwest Montana, basketball was king.

Still, Ms. Bear Medicine likes seeing the "crazy fans" and a high-school friend who plays clarinet in the University of Montana band. And she’s a little awed by the pageantry of Division I sports — the helicopter flyover, the booming cannon, the lighting of the "M" on the slope of nearby Mount Sentinel.

So on a sunny day in October, she’s put on a Grizzly tank top, stuck a paw tattoo on her cheek, and come to the football stadium with her high-school boyfriend, Sean Lewis, to watch Montana take on Southern Utah in the homecoming game. Mr. Lewis, who moved to the city to live with his brother in September, after his family got evicted from their home, doesn’t have a tattoo, so Ms. Bear Medicine plants a lipstick kiss on his cheek. They hold hands for most of the game. They even clap holding hands.

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The next section over, Treyace Yellow Owl is standing in a group of Native American students from Browning, Mont., that includes two of her cousins and some seniors who graduated from high school with her older sister. They’re dressed like all the other students, in jeans and maroon-and-silver Grizzly attire. But they stick out, a pocket of brown in a sea of white faces.

Like Ms. Bear Medicine, Ms. Yellow Owl is "more of a basketball girl," but she likes to come watch the running back, who is Native. "I’m really proud that there’s an Indian on the team," she says.

Six months ago, the two women were seniors at Browning High School, where nearly all their classmates were Blackfeet. They were eager to escape the watchful eyes of their moms and aunties; ready to trade the tedium of rural life for the excitement of the city.

Now, they’re freshmen at a large public college, learning to navigate a campus that is just four hours from home but feels like a different world. Here, just 3 percent of students are Native, and the culture centers on individual success, rewarding those who distinguish themselves academically or otherwise. It’s a sharp contrast to the tight-knit reservation, where a commitment to the community is the top priority.

Statistically speaking, Ms. Bear Medicine and Ms. Yellow Owl are already success stories. In 2014, only a quarter of American Indian and Alaska Native students between the ages of 18 and 24 were enrolled in a degree-granting postsecondary institution — the lowest rate of any racial subgroup.

If the pair make it through college in four years, it will be an even bigger feat. Less than a quarter of Native students who began a bachelor’s program in 2008 graduated on time; just over 40 percent finished in six years.

This is the story of how Ms. Bear Medicine, Ms. Yellow Owl, and two other students from the Blackfeet Reservation are trying to beat those odds. Three are succeeding; one is not. Yet all of them show in their own way the steep climb Native students face to turn the promise of education into a reality.

In her “Communicative Sciences and Disorders” lecture, where she’s the only Native American, Ms. Yellow Owl is all business. She listens intently, raises her hand often, and takes detailed notes in multicolored ink — alternating pens for main topics, subtopics, and definitions.
Rebecca Drobis for The Chronicle

Treyace Yellow Owl (right) practices words for parts of the face in a Blackfoot language class at the University of Montana. Even with classes like these, Native American students who grew up in tight-knit communities can experience profound culture shock when they start college.

But in her Blackfoot language class, where a quarter of the 20 or so students are from Browning and her cousin, Jesse DesRosier, is the teaching assistant, Ms. Yellow Owl relaxes. She watches videos on the cracked screen of her phone, checks out Snapchat pics of her friends with animal faces, inserts a bellybutton ring. The Browning kids sit together in the back row, teasing each other as the professor pins up pictures of weather.

"Iksstoyi — it’s cold," the professor intones, pointing to a picture of snow. "Iksstoyi," the students repeat. She explains that in Blackfoot, people don’t ask, "How old are you?," they ask how many winters you have survived.

"Then I must be a year younger, since I spent a year in Arizona," jokes Zachary Wagner, a high-school classmate of Ms. Yellow Owl’s.

The class is too basic for Ms. Yellow Owl, who attended a Blackfoot immersion school through eighth grade; she took it because it’s the only one being offered and because it’s a "double dipper," counting toward her general-education requirements as well as her speech-pathology major.

Between classes, Ms. Yellow Owl heads to the Native American Center, a striking building at the heart of the campus that opened in 2010. She says the staff there helped her drop a class and fixed a problem with her financial aid more quickly than the student-aid office could.

"When you need something, it’s easier to go through Natives," Ms. Yellow Owl explains. "It’s just natural to come here — I feel safe."

Royelle Bundy, director of American Indian student services, says the center aims to provide a "home away from home" for Native students, recreating the extended family and support system they grew up with. In addition to serving as a gathering space, it offers a mentoring program, weekly beading sessions, and help navigating an unfamiliar — and often alienating — culture and bureaucracy.

"Mainstream culture is ‘sink or swim’ — it’s ‘fly birdie,’" says Michelle Guzman, academic adviser for Native American studies. "For some of our students, it’s a culture shock."

For Native students, the mainstream emphasis on competition and individual accomplishment is often at odds with the reason they pursued postsecondary education in the first place — to serve their communities, says Bryan Brayboy, a professor of indigenous education and justice at Arizona State University.

"The academic aggression necessary to succeed is anathema to many indigenous ways of being," he writes in his book, Postsecondary Education for American Indian and Alaska Natives.

The transition to a predominantly white institution like the University of Montana can be especially jarring for Native students who grew up on reservations surrounded by American Indians, as Ms. Yellow Owl and Ms. Bear Medicine did.

Mr. DesRosier, Ms. Yellow Owl’s cousin and a senior who served in the Marines before starting college, describes the experience as "going from being just an Indian to being the
Charnelle Bear Medicine (right) left her home on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation to enroll in the U. of Montana this past fall. Her boyfriend from high school, Sean Lewis, moved to Missoula around the same time, to live with his brother after his family got evicted.

Rebecca Drobis for The Chronicle

Indian" in the classroom.

You’re no longer just another student, but a presumed spokesman for all Native people, expected ”to represent your whole community, your whole culture, and all nations," he explains.

"We’re supposed to be the voice of our nations, instead of ourselves," he says.

Last year his brother’s girlfriend, Turquoise Devereaux, interviewed Native students about their experiences at the university for a social-work class. Ms. Devereaux, who is now the program coordinator for American Indian student services, found that students felt stereotyped and tokenized by their professors and peers. They told her that their efforts to challenge those stereotypes were distracting from their academic performance and taking an emotional toll.

"As students, we often have to teach more than we’re learning," says Mr. DesRosier.

But Ms. Yellow Owl, who lives in an off-campus apartment with Mr. DesRosier and his brother, M.J., says the adjustment to college has been easier than she’d expected.

"I really thought I would experience a culture shock, but I didn’t," she says. "There are so many Browning people here that it feels like home."

For Ms. Bear Medicine, who was raised with lots of rules, the hardest part of college has been managing her newfound freedom. In high school, her teachers and her strict Catholic mother made sure she kept up with her assignments. But here, in Missoula, "there’s nobody to tell me what to do," and it scares her a little.

She’s trying to balance school and socializing, but like many college students, she stays up too late, watching Netflix and hanging out with her dormmate and her boyfriend, who is attending high school nearby. On Facebook, friends post pictures of her sleeping in class.

Now it’s midterms week, and Ms. Bear Medicine is worried. She says she was awake from 2 to 4 a.m., unable to sleep.

"I get really bad test anxiety," she says. "I overthink it, and I start telling myself I’m going to fail."

In her study-skills course, provided as part of the federal TRIO program for disadvantaged students, she takes out a brand-new No. 2 pencil and exhales. She finishes the exam in 15 minutes, and declares it easy.

After the test, the students fill out a weekly schedule with slots for class, studying, and socializing. Ms. Bear Medicine gives herself four hours of study time on Monday and Wednesday, and more on Tuesday and Thursday, when she has fewer classes. Across Saturday and Sunday, she writes "party/extracurricular" in big letters. A little later, she adds an hour for church.

Her other midterms are harder. She ends up with a C-minus in psychology and in journalism, and a B-plus in her study-skills class. She misses her goal of all B’s, and resolves to "work harder for the finals."

Still, she decides to drop poetry, her favorite course, because it’s interfering with her writing class, where she’s working on a midterm paper on fetal alcohol syndrome. In comments on that paper, her professor praises her for "comparing the issue across multiple cultures," while urging her to "go deeper on your analysis" and not rely too heavily on quotes.

"Make sure your own voice doesn’t get lost in here," he writes.

http://www.chronicle.com/article/Fighting-Long-Odds/238825
For many Native students, a public university like Montana is out of reach, whether for academic or financial reasons. Half of all Native students are enrolled in community colleges. But the odds of success are even longer there than for those at more selective institutions — less than a quarter of Native students complete an associate degree in three years.

Back in Browning, ShawnTyana Bullshoe, a high-school classmate of the Ms. Bear Medicine and Ms. Yellow Owl, has chosen to go to Blackfeet Community College, which infuses its curriculum with tribal culture and language, in part to retain students.

On a Thursday in October, Ms. Bullshoe is chopping green onions in a round room with air vents in the floor and geometric patterns on the walls. It’s a space designed for drying meat and for smudging — burning dried herbs to purify a person or a place — and it’s where Ms. Bullshoe and the other 11 members of the Piikani culture club gather for their weekly meeting (the Piikani are the branch of the Blackfeet living in Northwest Montana).

Today, for “Soup Thursday,” it’s also a place for preparing soup. Each week, the tribal college serves up free soup and sandwiches to roughly 300 local residents, rotating the responsibility among the eight “societies” that students, faculty, and staff are assigned to based on their discipline or preference. This week it’s the Beaver Society’s turn.

In 2015, two-thirds of the students who graduated from Browning High School enrolled in college. Half of them went to Blackfeet Community College, and 11 percent went to Salish Kootenai College, another tribal college. High-school administrators are still tracking the class of 2016, but the numbers are likely to be similar.

Ms. Bullshoe, who is living at home with her parents, three younger siblings, and 13 dogs (including nine puppies), was supposed to have a Blackfeet-history class this morning, with her aunt, Marilyn Bullshoe. But her mom needed the car to go to her job at the nursing home, so she was stuck until a cousin came to pick her up.

While Ms. Bullshoe chops, another student makes grilled cheese on a panini press and the Piikani culture club’s president, Dannette Spotted Horse, puts her 2-year-old daughter down for a nap on a pair of couch cushions covered with a Denver Broncos blanket. Ms. Spotted Horse lies down to encourage her daughter to sleep, but it doesn’t work. The toddler, Genesis, pops up, and pretending to be a puppy, laps fruit punch from a paper cup.

Marilyn Bullshoe, ShawnTyana’s aunt, comes into the room and says a prayer for Ms. Spotted Horse, who is stressed about the “negativity” that outsiders are directing at club leaders. The aunt passes her hands over Ms. Spotted Horse’s head and torso to calm her, telling her that “you can’t take on other people’s problems.” Later, she says, she will burn sage for her. The younger Ms. Bullshoe says she has some sage, and asks if her aunt wants the male or female plant.

This weekend Ms. Bullshoe plans to head to a powwow in Canada. Since she was crowned Miss Blackfeet, in July, replacing Ms. Yellow Owl, she’s traveled almost every weekend. Sometimes the tribe will give her money to help with gas and food; if it’s not enough to cover her expenses, she’ll raise funds herself. Right now, she’s selling banana bread for $3 a small loaf, $7 a large.

Ms. Bullshoe is also trying to get more involved in the community, she says, through suicide- and drug-prevention groups. She’s been visiting local schools, talking about how she overcame being bullied as a child, and telling them about her brother, who tried to commit suicide last year, while he was still in middle school. She’s urging them to resist the lure of drugs and alcohol, and to draw strength from their cultural identity.

http://www.chronicle.com/article/Fighting-Long-Odds/238825
"Growing up on a small reservation, we see a lot of drug and alcohol abuse," she says. "I'm teaching them that it's OK to say no — and that starting at BCC is not such a bad thing."

Even so, she doesn't plan on sticking around Browning forever. Next fall she's going to compete for the crown of Calgary Stampede Indian Princess. If she wins, she'll get to travel the world as a representative of the First Nations; if she loses, she may transfer to the University of Washington. Her ultimate goal is to become Miss Indian World.

"Grandma says I'm on a winning streak," she says of her Miss Blackfeet title, her fourth pageant win in four years, "but I don't know how long it will last."

As a group, American Indians and Alaska Natives make up less than 1 percent of the college-going population, roughly 150,000 students. That small sample size means that they're often excluded from statistics on student outcomes, and overlooked in conversations about the nation's racial achievement gap. Researchers refer to this as the "asterisk problem."

The data that does exist isn't encouraging. While college enrollment rates have increased for all races over the past 25 years, they've grown the least for Native students. In 2014, American Indians and Alaska Natives trailed Black and Hispanic students in college enrollment by 10 percentage points.

Those Native students who do enroll are concentrated in community colleges, and underrepresented in the top public universities. In 2014, 18 percent of the nation's college students were enrolled in top research universities, but just 8 percent of Native students were, according to the Education Trust.

Those disparities matter because research shows that students who attend more selective institutions are more likely to graduate. The fact that Native Americans and other minorities are overrepresented in two-year colleges and regional publics only deepens the divide in college attainment.

And large numbers of Native students aren't even making it through high school. According to the latest federal statistics, more than 11 percent of Native students between the ages of 16 and 24 are not enrolled in college and do not have a high-school diploma — a "status dropout rate" of 11 percent, nearly double the national average.

William Righthand is one of them. Last spring the 20-year-old was living in a run-down motel with his parents and taking online classes through Project Choices, one of Browning's two alternative-education programs. He dreamed of escaping Browning, of becoming an artist, or starting his own T-shirt design company. He had just two and a half credits left to graduate.

But six months later, Mr. Righthand is missing. He hasn't shown up for classes all fall, and he is rumored to be in living in Great Falls, two hours south of Browning. Charlie Speicher, a counselor at Project Choices, said he last saw Mr. Righthand in June, when he ran into him on the street.

"He looked like he was homeless, like he was struggling to find food, to find shelter, and to stay clean," he said.

Even Mr. Righthand's father, who is still living in the motel, doesn't know where he's living, or with whom. "I don't know where he's at," he says, through a closed door.

Mr. Speicher thinks he might be found on Hill 57, a sandstone-capped plateau in Great Falls where there had historically been a Native encampment. But there isn't much of anything on the hill now, apart from two houses with long gravel driveways and signs warning that trespassers will be shot.

A mail carrier delivering letters at the base of the hill isn't aware of anyone else living up there; neither are the bartender or the patrons at the Halftime Sports Grill, in the hill's shadow. They say the hill is privately owned now.

There's a McDonald's in town where Mr. Righthand's cousin used to work, but he isn't there anymore, and none of the employees recognize his name.

http://www.chronicle.com/article/Fighting-Long-Odds/238825
When Ms. Yellow Owl finds out that Mr. Righthand, her high-school classmate, has vanished, she’s sad but not surprised. "The sad thing about Native kids is things like that happen, and it’s the norm," she says. "He was the statistic where that was going to happen."

In Missoula, Ms. Bear Medicine is struggling a little too, and running the risk of losing financial aid.

By the end of the semester, she has dropped psychology, in addition to poetry. She says she knew she was failing the class and didn’t want to jeopardize her state merit scholarship, which requires a 2.5 GPA. She finishes with a B-plus in writing, an A-minus in TRIO study skills, and a passing grade in journalism. Determined to do better next semester, she drops her journalism double major to focus on psychology.

In a Facebook message, she writes that she "didn’t think college was going to be so hard." She says she has struggled to find "the balance between having a social life and school life."

"Sometimes my social life took over, and sometimes my school life took over. Both just resulted in either me feeling overwhelmed with my schoolwork or feeling left out when your friends go out," she says. "I definitely learned some lessons, and I’m still trying to find that balance."

Ms. Bear Medicine says she misses her 6-year-old niece, Angel, who called her crying the other day, and her mom, who texts often. But neither she nor Mr. Lewis, her boyfriend, miss Browning, a town they describe as dirty, dangerous, and boring — "kind of a shithole," as Mr. Lewis puts it.

In Browning, "almost every day you’re expecting a fight," says Mr. Lewis, who joined a gang when he was 8 and still has a facial twitch from the beating he took when he left it, at age 10.

Missoula, Mr. Lewis says, is cleaner, safer, and "there’s stuff to do."

He adds: "Here, I’m more chill, though I’m still on guard."

But Ms. Bear Medicine says she doesn’t hate Browning, despite its faults. She says she still plans to return to the reservation after graduation. Ms. Yellow Owl, who wants to be a bilingual speech pathologist, still intends to go home after college, too.

In the end, that commitment to their communities may be what helps them get through the challenges that lie ahead, in their next three and a half years of college. Mr. Brayboy’s research shows that Native students who are devoted to serving their home communities are more likely to graduate than are those who are focused on individual achievement.

"You’re less lonely when you’re on a mission," says Mr. Brayboy, the Arizona State researcher.

For Ms. Bear Medicine, that mission is to work as a therapist to Native children who have been abused.

Like her boyfriend, she didn’t have the easiest upbringing. Raped at age 4 by a family friend, later molested by a female cousin, she struggled for years with insecurity and social anxiety.

But here, in college, she seems to have found some degree of peace.

One Sunday, she and Mr. Lewis visit a corn maze on the edge of Missoula to give her a break from her studies. There, they toss tufts of hay at each other in the maze and linger at a petting zoo, feeding and caressing the farm animals. Ms. Bear Medicine says the smell of hay makes her miss riding horses.

"I could stay here all day," she says.

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Each summer, the College Horizons program brings between 200 and 300 Native American high-school students from across the country to college campuses for a crash course in college admissions, financial aid, and campus culture. At the workshops, faculty and staff members from colleges and schools across the country tutor students in choosing the right institution and confronting stereotypes in the classroom, among other topics.

More than 40 selective colleges and universities partner with the program, sending staff members from admissions, financial aid, student services, career services, and Native American studies to the five-day event. Nearly all of the students who have completed the program have gone on to four-year colleges, and 85 percent of them have graduated within five years.

In an interview with The Chronicle, Carmen Lopez, executive director of College Horizons, talks about the misconceptions that many Native American students have about college; what colleges are getting wrong when it comes to recruiting them; and how the program prepares participants for life at predominantly white institutions. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You teach Native American students how to navigate the college-application process. What do you find that students misunderstand, or don’t know, about applying to college?

For sure, financial aid. It’s kind of a mystery. Then it’s the assumptions and myths — that college is way too expensive, or that they should only look at community colleges or a state institution.

We help them understand what financial aid is, what EFC [expected family contribution] means. Five years ago, we started requiring parental tax info as part of the application, so we could advise students on building college lists.

The colleges we partner with are able to pretty much meet full demonstrated need. I want to make sure that for those students where there is the right academic and social mix, that partner colleges are on their list. I need students to understand that a college that’s $60,000 a year might be more affordable than their in-state institution.
Then, it’s test-taking — only one-third have past test exposure. Pre-SAT or ACT. We have the Princeton Review Foundation come in to do test-taking strategies. Help them understand what preparation means, what scoring means, which courses they should be taking.

**How do you help them find the right fit?**

We give them exposure to different types of colleges that are out there. Most students will have their understanding from family and from where students are going from high school. It’s sometimes based on sports. There’s a huge gap for 3,000 colleges out there.

To find what matches me — that is an introspective question. Who am I? We don’t ask them that in high school. It requires them to think about what kind of kid am I, and what other kinds of kids do I want to be around? It’s understanding the diversity of colleges that are out there and expanding those horizons. They might not know about what Bowdoin is, or what an Ivy League institution is.

We have them fill out a battery of questions. We have a map of the U.S. and tell them to cross out areas of the country they would not consider attending. Then we ask what type of support system they’d need. Are you OK being one of a handful of Native students with no Native program or studies? Or do you need a strong Native community around you?

**What are some of the hopes and fears that these students express when it comes to college?**

One of the most beautiful things students will write about is about how attaining a degree is going to contribute back to their community. They might talk about diabetes, sexual assault, domestic violence, suicide. They are addressing the realities of their community, writing about how they can help with this. That’s what distinguishes the students in my program — they’re approaching colleges not from an individualistic place. They’re already thinking about their community, about giving back. They survived it, so now they’re thinking about, How can I help solve the problem?

Their biggest fear is, How can I pay for this? There’s a tension of wanting to go explore, but they’re also nervous about being homesick. There’s the cultural side of, How do I maintain my connections to my language, culture, community?

**You’ve said successful students like the ones you accept into your program aren’t on colleges’ radar. Why is that?**

First, the outreach in recruitment to Native communities has got to be different than the traditional recruitment that colleges embark upon. When you are traveling to certain states, you might expect that students will be on your website, signing up for tours, that they will come to you. But with Native communities, they’re not being told "go sign up."

Then, a lot of colleges go to schools where they’ve identified an academic caliber. They will hit the private institutions, the independent schools, a few publics, but not some of schools with a higher Native population. That’s the job of the institution, to better reach out to students. That’s a legacy of trust.

We do that legwork — we go to schools with Native populations, with Indian education coordinators, to tribal education departments. Most colleges would never go through a tribal education department, but that’s the exact place you’d want to build relationships, the department providing scholarships and resources.

The recruitment has to look different because you’re building relationships and trust with a community. It’s not just an individual-student approach. It has to be a community-based approach to recruitment.

Another reason they’re overlooked and undermatched is because of testing. Colleges are identifying prospects based on the PSAT. So if our Native students aren’t taking tests in 10th grade, and not getting on profile lists that colleges purchase, they’re not seen as traditional prospects.

**About students: You told NPR in a recent interview that you’re "prepping them for the blows they’re going to take when they arrive on their college campuses." What sort of blows are you talking about, and how do you prepare them?**

Another part of what we do is transitioning to college. We have a professor from the host college come lecture to the students. It’s exposure to what does a professor look like, sound like, talk like?
Then we go into being a Native student on a predominantly white campus. The majority of the colleges are predominantly white, or at least non-Native. So we need to talk to our students, especially those coming from reservations. We need to talk with them about what’s it going to be like when you become the 1 percent on your college campus. We talk about that, open up with our individual experiences of going to college, the racism we experienced, the ignorance we experienced, the bigotry we experienced.

It can happen in a social setting, but it’s also the ignorance of professors. It’s putting students on the spot to speak to certain things. Or challenging students’ understanding of the issue versus a Western anthropological or historical view.

It’s talking about when you’re invisible as a Native, and when you are fighting to be seen, and you want to academically be seen. If a college is teaching U.S. history and never mentions Native history, it is not teaching it properly.

Then it’s being homesick, or how you might be treated when you go home. Do you see family differently through an educated lens? And if you talk about it, are you seen as thinking you’re too good, or white?

**College Horizons’ motto is “College Pride, Native Pride!” What does that mean to you?**

It’s an understanding that when we’re thinking about what is knowledge on our Western side, higher education means seeking new knowledge. From a Native side, we also have this cultural knowledge that has informed us since time immemorial, and that is just as important as Western education. At College Horizons, we believe we can have both of these things. We can have the Western education, and we can also have the traditional education. Sometimes they’re going to collide, but I don’t think Native students should have to make a choice between them.

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