

**Views and Perspectives of Native Educational Success:
A National Survey of American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and Others
Associated with Indian Education**

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INTRODUCTION

American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians (referred to collectively as Native in this report) are achieving success in education. While research literature has been dominated by examination of factors associated with a deficit model (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997), the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) has advocated for bringing increased attention to educational practices that promote Native student success (NIEA, 2009). The High School Equity initiative calls for additional research that can be used to bring increased attention to the educational needs of Native students. Research findings can then be used to guide the development of federal and state policies that will increase Native student access to rigorous and culturally-based curriculum designed to foster achievement.

The purpose of this multi-phase research project was to examine the experience of educational success for Native students and to identify indicators associated with Native student success. Phase I of the research was initiated through qualitative analysis of data generated through in-depth interviews with Native university graduates and a comprehensive review of existing literature. This report focuses on Phase II that sought to involve a larger sample of participants, thus, adding breadth to the evidence base that can be used to support policy recommendations. The research questions guiding the study were:

- How do educators perceive the role of K-12 and non-tribal colleges and universities in meeting the needs of Native students?
- How do educators define educational success for Native students?
- What factors influence educational success for Native students?
- What qualities of the Native student experience are important to their success?
- How is educational success for Native students different from or similar to educational success for non-Native students?

METHODOLOGY

The construct of success and the path to its achievement for Native students represents a highly complex and dynamic phenomenon. Therefore, a mixed methods design was selected for this study (Greene, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This is consistent with the recommendations of Native scholars and researchers (Crazy Bull, 1997; LaFrance & Nichols, 2008) who have advocated for developing a research process that combines the strengths of Indigenous methodologies (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008) with the strengths of quantitative research methods. From this work we designed a questionnaire that was disseminated to a national audience to gather further information regarding Native student experiences of success and to determine the extent to which educators associate specific indicators, identified through the previous phase, with Native success in postsecondary education. These indicators can serve as a resource for schools and non-tribal colleges and universities aspiring to increase Native access to and achievement in higher education and can be used to frame the development of policies and advocacy that support Native students.

Population and Sample

In the winter and spring 2010, a mixed mode survey using a web-based questionnaire with a mail-in option was conducted in order to learn more about the views and perspectives on Native educational success from educators, particularly those who are Native, and others interested in Native education issues. The population for this study was the membership of the National Indian Education Association. The NIEA is an organization committed to increasing educational opportunities and resources for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students while protecting the cultural and linguistic traditions. Based on the membership list compiled by the NIEA central office, 1955 individuals were eligible to participate in the survey.¹ An additional 89 respondents were invited to participate in the survey based on their involvement with Native education.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire (see Attachment A) and other survey documents such as email messages and cover letters were developed by the research team with NIEA representatives providing additional review and input. The questionnaire was designed so that it could be implemented either as an Internet-based or paper survey. The content of the questionnaire examined views and perspectives of Native educational success and otherwise addressed the research questions for the project. The paper version of the questionnaire was formatted into a smaller booklet (8 ½” by 14” folded in half) with a color picture on the first page designed to generate interest in the survey. The last page included space for any final comments that respondents might want to make pertaining to the survey and its contents. As much as possible the visual features of the web pages for the internet version and the format of the paper questionnaire were designed to match.

Contact Strategy

The contact strategy used to invite respondents to complete the survey depended on whether email and/or postal addresses were available for each respondent. Group A included those respondents who had a personal email address, 1368 out of the 1955 names on the NIEA list. This group was contacted primarily through a series of email messages inviting them to participate in the survey. The series of emails were sent one to two weeks apart. Each email message was personalized to include the respondent’s name, the link to the survey website and the respondent’s unique survey access code. After the first three email messages, any Group A respondents with a postal address and who had not yet completed the survey were sent through US Postal First Class mail a cover letter, a paper questionnaire and postage paid return envelope. One week later a postal postcard reminder was sent. Two more reminder email messages were sent after the postal mailings. Group B included those 587 respondents for whom a postal address was available, but no personal email address. This group also included an additional 181 Group A respondents whose email message bounced back as invalid. Respondents in Group B (n=768) were mailed a cover letter including the survey web link and unique access code, paper questionnaire, and postage paid return envelope. Three weeks later, a second mailing of a cover

¹ In the original list of 2040 names from the NIEA, 18 were duplicate names and 67 did not have email or postal addresses and could not be contacted. The adjusted total on the NIEA list was 1955.

letter (with weblink and access code) and replacement paper questionnaire and postage paid return envelope was mailed to all non-respondents in this group. One week after the second questionnaire was mailed, a postal postcard reminder was sent. All mailings were sent using US Postal First Class postage. Group C included the additional 89 respondents who were personally recruited for participation because of their involvement with Native education. Respondents in this group were contacted primarily through personal interactions, telephone calls and/or email contacts. Through these personal contacts Group C respondents were provided with the survey web link and a unique access code and/or were given a paper questionnaire and postage paid return envelope. During the data collection period, the NIEA implemented 3 carefully timed broadcast email announcements to their membership indicating the survey was underway and their participation would be greatly appreciated. These broadcast announcements helped to highlight the importance of the survey, to validate its purpose and encourage response.

Response Rate

The following table displays the response rate calculation for all completed questionnaires for this project (Table 1). Overall 688 completed or partially completed surveys were obtained. Of those received, two-thirds were completed on the web-based mode, or 472 out of 688. Another 113 only partially completed the web-based survey. The remaining 103 completes were mailed in using the paper version of the survey. Overall, a 34% response rate was obtained with 688 completed surveys submitted.²

Table 1. Survey Disposition

<i>Contact Disposition</i>	<i>Web only</i>
a. Total completes and partial completes	688
Completed the survey by web	472
Mailed in completed paper survey	103
Partially completed surveys (web)	113
b. Refusals	0
c. Return to Sender	90
d. Ineligible ³	20
e. Non response	1246
f. Number	2044
Response Rate (a/(f-d))	34%

Because the population for this study was the Membership of NIEA and the whole membership list was included in the survey, no sample error was calculated, nor was it relevant.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire was designed to generate both quantitative and qualitative data by obtaining responses to a total of 27 questions. Participants were provided the opportunity to

² The formula used for obtaining the response rate is (Completed + partially competed) / (Completed + Partially completed + Refused + No response+Return to sender)

³ Ineligible respondents were those who did not have involvement with native education.

respond to ten questions using a Likert-type scale that measured degree to which particular needs were being met or degree of importance of specific items. One question involved 35 items to which participants responded; thus, a total of 44 items resulted in quantitative data. Analysis of this quantitative data involved calculation of frequency distributions.

Through six open-ended questions, participants were given the opportunity to provide descriptive, verbal responses. Between 517 to 600 participants responded to five open-ended questions resulting in 157 pages of qualitative data. Through the final open-ended question, participants had the opportunity to add comments. A total of 344 participants provided additional comments generating 27 additional pages of qualitative data. The verbal, descriptive responses were analyzed using a constant comparative approach. This approach involved a continual process of comparing the verbal data to categories (i.e., units of information representing a phenomenon) as the categories emerged during the data review process. These categories were then grouped into broad, overarching themes.

FINDINGS

Roles, Expectations, and Adaptations

The findings are presented according to each of the five research questions guiding the study. The first research question was, *“How do educators perceive the role of K-12 and non-tribal colleges and universities in meeting the needs of Native students?”* The questionnaire addressed this research question by asking respondents how well the education system was meeting the needs of Native students, the importance of education personnel adapting to the needs of Native students, and the importance of Native students adapting to the educational system. Among the respondents,

- 70% felt that the K-12 system does not meet the educational needs of Native students.
- 97% indicated that it is important for K-12 personnel to adapt to the educational needs of Native students.
- 93% said that it is important for Native students to be able to adapt to the current K-12 educational system.
- 50% felt that non-tribal colleges and universities (non-TCUs) do not meet the educational needs of Native students.
- 97% indicated that it is important for higher education personnel to adapt to the educational needs of Native students.
- 96% said that it is important for Native students to be able to adapt to non-TCUs in the US.

Overall, the majority of respondents associated with Indian education feel that K-12 schools and institutions of higher education are not meeting the needs of Native students. Although higher education institutions appear to be meeting the needs of Native students more so than the K-12 arena, clearly there is a predominant call for personnel throughout the educational system to adapt to the educational needs of Native students. Notably, many of the respondents see the value of our Native students being able to adapt as well.

What these findings might reflect is a desire for a reciprocal relationship that is in direct contrast to the paternalistic attitude within the American education system characterized by the thinking that Native people have to assimilate in order to be successful in the American education system. Native people do not have to assimilate into anything because they have the sovereign dignity and freedom to adapt to any circumstances that will allow them to fulfill their dreams, aspirations and life pursuits. If their dreams, aspirations and life pursuits are about ensuring that Native people receive the best possible education, that is their choice. In exercising their sovereignty and freedom, they ask that all educators learn about Native peoples and their needs. For our society to embrace this position sends a message to Native students and their families that their cultural identity has value and educators will honor and respect their culture by addressing their needs.

Defining Success

The second research question was, *How do educators define educational success for Native students?* Success represents a complex, socially-constructed concept that is grounded in cultural identity. Thus, educational success was examined as it was defined specifically in relation to the experience of Native students. This was done by asking an open-ended question that provided each participant with the opportunity to describe what they considered to be educational success for Native students. Of the total 688 respondents to the questionnaire, 590 (86%) answered this question. While individual responses varied widely, several overarching themes emerged from the viewpoints shared. The following discussion begins by identifying the emergent themes and then moves on to describing and illustrating these themes through the voices of participants. Educational success for Native students:

- is a holistic, multi-dimensional process;
- recognizes the unique talents and gifts of students;
- involves knowledge of Native culture, history, and language;
- addresses health and wellbeing on multiple levels – mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical; and
- builds the capacity to contribute to community.

A Holistic, Multi-dimensional Process. The first theme emerging from the data was that educational success for Native students is a holistic, multi-dimensional process. Overall, the definitions of respondents reflected an orientation toward a system-wide process that addressed student needs on multiple levels. Learning was interconnected with the community and place-based in nature. The educational process brought together multiple generations and occurred over the span of a life time.



From a native perspective, educational success would be defined by a system or institution which addresses and is sensitive to the students' cultural needs, as well as promotes the students' well-being, identity, self-awareness, and cultural ties and practices. Successful educational models for native children and students would incorporate intergenerational learning and project-based or hands-on

learning that was also place-based. It would involve a community-type approach, as opposed to a limit to four walls. It would prioritize the needs of native students and recognize the uniqueness of their talents and needs.

Recognizes the Unique Talents and Gifts of Students. Consistent with viewing educational success as a holistic process, multiple themes were often presented in an interconnected way by individual respondents. Following this pattern, the previous response illustrates the second theme – educational success recognizes the unique talents and gifts of students. Another response reflecting this theme highlighted the importance of students having opportunities for “*learning who they are and what gifts they have to share with others.*” This connected with an approach that viewed Native cultural attributes as strengths to be respected and recognized the contributions that Native people have made to the world over time.

Involves Knowledge of Native Culture, History, and Language. Gaining knowledge of Native culture, history, and language was a third theme that emerged from the data.



Educational success can be defined for anyone as learning the skills needed to lead a fulfilling life that contributes something to society. I think it should also include learning the REAL history of our ancestors, learning about cultural practices, and current issues in Native societies.

The importance of learning about Native culture was often contextualized in the need to learn to live in both Native and non-Native worlds.



An individual who can function socially and academically in both the Native and Non-Native society. Educational success is “learning how to learn” in both Native and Non-Native environments as well as maintaining a life-long learning process in both. A well-balanced individual who is physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually fit. A Native person knows his tribal history, culture and language as well as the history and contemporary situation of Native people in a general overview way.

Addresses Health and Wellbeing on Multiple Levels – Mental, Spiritual, Emotional, and Physical. A fourth theme is highlighted in the previous response. Educational success addresses health and wellbeing on multiple levels – mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical. Respondents saw a sense of accomplishment and interconnectedness leading to a state of health and wellbeing reflected in all areas – mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional. It was emphasized that “*today education means [the] whole person.*”



Having successfully completed a process of intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual development which enables the learner to contribute to the cultural/linguistic, social, political, and economic development and sovereignty of their communities and nations.

This response reflects the perspective that as health and wellbeing are addressed on multiple levels, learners gain knowledge and skills that enhance their capacity to contribute to their communities. Thus, this response interlinks with the fifth theme.

Builds the Capacity to Contribute to Community. The fifth theme emerging from the data centered on educational success as a process that builds the capacity of Native students to contribute to community. Education was viewed as a tool for strengthening community infrastructure as graduates assumed a variety of needed roles.



For a Native community, educational success would mean that the sons and daughters of the community would be qualified to fulfill the full range of administrative and professional functions the community needs – administrators, accountants, teachers, doctors, nurses, dentists, lawyers, judges, engineers, entrepreneurs, scientists, researchers ... whatever the people need ... while retaining their cultural awareness and identity.

The importance of contributing both locally by “returning to the reservation to help your people” and more broadly by “being able to help other native[s] with the education that they have received” or “to be able to contribute to society in a meaningful capacity” were highlighted in responses. Educational success was achieved when students were prepared to assume leadership roles in contributing to the vitality of their native communities.



Education is our tool to success at all levels in respect to preserving our social, political, economical, and spiritual lives as American Indian people.

Summary. Education is a process that takes place across all of the contexts of daily life – home, community, and school. Educational success is reflected when the unique talents and gifts that EVERY student brings to the educational process serves as a foundation for learning. As part of the learning process, Native students build their knowledge of Native culture, history, and language. Fostering the development of Indigenous knowledge, talents and gifts then enhances the capacity of students to “give back” to their communities. As students give back, a real purpose frames their learning and connects them to their families and communities. A sense of accomplishment and interconnectedness leads to a state of health and wellbeing reflected in all areas – mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional.

Factors Influencing Success

The third research question was, *What factors influence educational success for Native students?* Participants were asked to identify three to four main factors that influence educational success for Native students through an open-ended question format. Six-hundred out of the total 688 participants (87%) responded to this question. Salient themes that emerged from these responses include:

- Culturally responsive curriculum
- Teachers who are Native and/or culturally respectful and caring
- Institutional support structures and personnel
- Family, community, and tribal support
- Personal factors
- Financial resources

Culturally Responsive Curriculum. The vast majority of participants identified culturally responsive curriculum as a primary influence on the educational success of Native students. This theme was reflected in responses, such as *“curriculum and pedagogy that build on Indigenous students’ linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and affective strengths”* and *“culturally sensitive curriculum (inclusion of Native history and contributions in mainstream curriculum).”* Other participants indicated that *“honoring native place, culture, language and history”* should be evident in the curriculum and that students *“being able to see themselves in a positive light within the curriculum provided”* was important. This related to *“the students being able to see relevance of their studies to their lives and futures”* and led to a *“sense of belonging”* and *“pride, honor, and respect in the whole system.”*

Teachers who are Native and/or Culturally Respectful and Caring. Teachers were seen as playing a primary role in promoting educational success for Native students. Many participants identified *“Native teachers”* and *“teachers who know about the students’ culture”* as key to student success. Others highlighted the importance of building relationships between teachers and students in comments, such as *“a positive connection between educator and student,”* *“[students] making personal connections with their teachers,”* and *“an educational environment where relationship precedes learning.”* Important to the teacher-student relationship was a sense of caring and respect as indicated in comments, such as *“teachers who care and connect with students”* and *“respect our heritage.”* A *“teacher’s understanding of student ability, strength and weaknesses then [would lead to] instruct[ion] from that knowledge.”* Responses also pointed out that *“educators [should] actively counter racism and stereotyping of students.”*

Institutional Support Structures and Personnel. The importance of support structures and personnel in institutions across the various levels of education from early learning to post-secondary emerged as another theme. An example of a comment reflecting this was *“having an American Indian support system in place to encourage American Indian students to do well.”* Forms of culturally-based support were mentioned, such as *“cultural support – peer groups,”* *“a Native Club/activities ... for a sense of identity,”* *“Native contact or native services available on campus,”* and *“cultural sense of belonging, cultural activities to feel comfortable and to feel more like home.”* However, it was pointed out that there might be variation in student desire to be involved in culturally-based activities. For example, one respondent stated *“cultural connection to other Native students but with the individual deciding at what level they wish to participate in Native support services as there is great diversity in assimilation effects.”* The need for other broad-based, support programs was identified, such as *“programs to attend to the health and wellbeing of Native students and families”* and programs supporting academic achievement, such as *“tutoring, etc. for academic needs.”*

Various types of personnel working within the institutional support structures were seen as playing a core role in the positive influence experienced by Native students. The importance of “*cultural understanding and support by school staff, teachers, superintendents, state staff, community*” and “*support from principals and higher up administration*” exemplified the need for a systemic approach involving various types of personnel in promoting Native student success. This was communicated in other comments, such as “*a support system: Parents, teachers, counselors, student support staff who understand Native peoples and communities.*” This systemic approach was seen as involving “*transformational Indigenous leaders and educators*” and “*the training of teachers, administrators and other educational professionals.*” The key role of “*Native personnel*”, “*positive Native role models*,” “*Native mentors*,” and “*roles models – past graduates [who] share their stories*” was highlighted.

Family, Community, and Tribal Support. Family, community, and tribal support systems were identified as another theme underlying influences on Native student educational success. Examples of participant statements included “*a support system in place (family/school/tribe)*” and “*support: family, peers, community.*” Respondents called for family “*inclusion in the educational process*” across various levels in comments, such as “*parents being involved in the education of their children, from Head Start thru 12th grades*” and “*inclusion of student family (primarily parent or guardian) to the college or university.*” The importance of building relationships among schools, communities, and tribes was expressed in statements, such as “*strong school-community partnerships and reciprocity*” and “*having local tribal govt and community support for the school in a positive collaborative relationship.*” The importance of maintaining a connection to community was also mentioned in the context of students returning to serve their communities through a “*value-added commitment to demonstrate leadership and contribute to local community.*”

Personal Factors. Personal factors represented an additional theme emerging from participant responses. The need for each student to have “*excellent health in body, spirit, and mind*” was noteworthy. In addition, “*retention of Native identity*” and students’ “*belief in their gifts and abilities*” and “*believing in yourself that you can do it*” were comments reflecting the importance of influences at the personal level. “*Self-confidence*,” “*self-esteem*,” “*cultural knowledge and confidence in one’s identity*,” as well as the “*ability to cope with difficult obstacles in life*” were also frequently mentioned influences on Native educational success. The importance of self-knowledge was reflected in the comment “*to know oneself beginning with knowing who you are and where you come from.*” In addition, “*the student’s personal view of the role of education for his future success*,” “*personal aspirations*,” and “*vision and goals*” were considered significant influences on educational success. The level of “*academic preparation*” each student brought to the educational process was also seen to influence success.

Financial Resources. The final theme representing influences on educational success for Native students was financial resources. This theme was represented in responses, such as “*adequate funding and/or finances*” and “*having adequate financial aid for those who are college bound.*” Having “*access to information [regarding] ... financial aid opportunities*” was an important factor influencing the decision-making process in whether or not to pursue post-secondary opportunities. Financial resources were also highlighted in relation to the status of schools in comments, such as “*equal access to opportunities to learn (schools with adequate*

resources)” and “*economics – money to fund technology and collaboration efforts between Native Americans and the general population.*” Financial resources emerged in other contexts, such as having transportation to be able to get to school.

Summary. Culturally-responsive curriculum was identified by the vast majority of respondents as influencing educational success. The key word is responsive – responding to what each student brings to the learning situation. Institutional support structures and personnel were also identified as having important influences on educational success for Native students. Supportive relationships were important influences - with Native faculty or non-Native faculty who are culturally respectful and caring - maintaining relationships with family, community, and tribe – a sense of connectedness. Other factors underlying success related to personal factors that a student brings to learning – such as self-esteem. And finally adequate financial resources were of importance to many students. Financial influences also extended to adequate resources being available to schools serving Native communities.

Qualities Important to Success

The fourth research question guiding this study was, “*What qualities of the Native student experience are important to their success?*” The questionnaire offered a list of qualities that might be associated with educational success, and respondents were asked how important each quality was for Native students to experience success (i.e., Not Important, Moderately Important, Very Important, and Not Sure). Clearly, as shown in Table 6a, 90% or more of the respondents feel that overall human qualities (self-worth, goal oriented, work ethic, and family support) and qualities distinctive to Native people (Native pride and Native identity) are very important for Native students to experience education success. Between 81% and 88% of the respondents also seem to feel that educational success for Native students involves qualities germane to student success (a passion for life, achieves goals, academic skills, and manages time) and qualities that are characteristically associated with Native students (i.e., respect for elders, giving back to others, balancing contrasting worldviews). A significant percentage of respondents (72% to 79%) indicate that Native educational success is associated with qualities that are predominately associated with Native people (knows genealogy, connecting Native identity with a tribe and within the education system, community responsibilities, Native identity in the school system, historical/contemporary aspects of Native life, natural resources as gifts, empathy with other life forms) while one quality in this percentage distribution is common to students in general (overcoming test anxiety).

Table 6a. Qualities Identified by 70% or more of the Respondents as Being Very Important within a Native Student’s Educational Experience

Quality within a Native Student’s Educational Experience	Very Important
Knows his/her own self-worth	97%
Has pride in being a Native person	93%
Sets personal goals	92%
Has a strong work ethic	92%
Has strong family support	91%
Maintains a Native identity	90%

Has a high degree of respect for elders	88%
Uses his/her education to give back to others	87%
Balances both individual and collective worldviews	86%
Pursues whatever life path they choose	83%
Achieves professional goals	82%
Masters various academic skills (math, reading, and writing)	81%
Has sense of time and time management	81%
Knows his/her family history and/or genealogy	79%
Identifies with specific tribe(s) or Native group(s)	78%
Understands responsibility to his/her Native community	78%
Connects with Native identity within the education system	77%
Knows the historical aspects of Native life	75%
Knows contemporary issues of Native life	75%
Views natural resources as gifts that need to be honored	73%
Has a sense of empathy and kinship with other forms of life	73%
Is able to overcome test anxiety	72%

As shown in Table 6b, 51% to 68% of the respondents felt that additional qualities indicative of Native core values are very important to the Native student educational success experience (i.e., Native involvement, generous, humor, worldviews, and understands traditional protocols).

Table 6b. Qualities Identified by 51% to 68% of the Respondents as Being Very Important within a Native Student’s Educational Experience

Quality within a Native Student’s Educational Experience	Very Important
Has close ties to Native community	68%
Is generous	67%
Possesses a sense of humor	66%
Maintains a harmonious relationship with the natural environment	64%
Provides service and volunteers in one's own Native community	63%
Understands time as a circular concept & natural cycles that sustain all life	61%
Understands traditional protocols associated with rituals and ceremonies	54%
Is involved in Native community organizations	51%

Presented in Table 6c are yet another sizable percentage of respondents that indicated that various qualities idiosyncratic to Native people—traditional language, gathering practices, dance, song and foods--are very important to the experience of Native student success. Traditional Native people might worry or educational personnel may overlook the importance of these qualities because these qualities were selected by a “smaller” percentage compared to other qualities. However, you put 100 people in the room and pose the question, Are these qualities very important to Native student success? Imagine nearly a quarter to a half of the people in the room standing up in unison; that would say something about significance of deep cultural attributes and it is something that Native ancestors would admire.

Table 6c. Qualities Identified by 24% to 45% of the Respondents as Being Very Important within a Native Student’s Educational Experience

Quality within a Native Student’s Educational Experience	Very Important
Knows their traditional language	45%
Knows how to gather natural materials to continue traditional practices	34%
Knows traditional dance	26%
Is able to sing traditional songs	25%
Knows how to prepare traditional foods	24%

The findings presented in Table 6a-c suggest that those involved in Indian education see the value of recognizing qualities relevant to student success in general and qualities specifically connected with Native student success. Clearly there is a recognition that the top two qualities selected as very important by most of the respondents can be interpreted as being Native in orientation. At the same time, traditional cultural leaders should not be dismayed that critical traditional cultural attributes are not among the most selected qualities; it is significant that such a large percentage of respondents recognize that such qualities are still important to the educational success of Native students. This should give notice to educators that years of colonization and the Native peoples’ desire to adapt to contemporary circumstances have not extinguished the ancestral voice heard in the Native languages and seen in their traditions.

Differences and Similarities of Educational Success

The fifth research question was, *How is educational success for Native students different from or similar to educational success for non-Native students?* Of the total 688 participants, 556 (81%) responded to the questionnaire items focusing on how educational success was **different** for Native students compared to educational success for non-Native students. Overarching themes that emerged from the responses included:

- Need to navigate two worlds
- Focus on “giving back” versus economic gain as an outcome
- Relationships are central (family, community, friends, land, and spirit)
- Perception that educational success will take students away from Native roots and teachings
- Need to overcome obstacles
- Struggle to see themselves in the curriculum

Need to Navigate Two Worlds. The need for Native students to live in and navigate their way through two worlds was a dominant theme expressed through participant responses. An example of a related comment was *“Indian people live in two worlds and must be competent to compete in both.”* This was contrasted with comments suggesting a more direct alignment between school and community life for non-Native students. The process necessary for Native students to navigate between the two value systems represented in schools and in tribal communities was described in responses such as the following.



Native students must learn, at an early age, to navigate between two systems: school and tribal community. Our native students have long had to be much more adaptable than others, and have often been exposed to 2 different value systems that are not always compatible. In my experience, many native students are motivated by helping their community, friends and families – this is important.

Bridging two world views was seen as making extra demands on Native student in the learning process. At the same time, this bridging was viewed as holding potential for contributing to the broad knowledge base needed to solve problems of today's world, as is reflected in the following statement.



Educationally successful Native students should be grounded in their Indigenous languages and ways of knowing as well as being proficient in western academic knowledge. What we know can also contribute to wellbeing of the world and advance western knowledge.

Focus on “Giving Back” versus Economic Gain as an Outcome. The concept of giving back, as an outcome of education, emerged as another dominant theme underlying educational success for Native students. This contrasted with the perception that a desired educational outcome for non-Native students was economic gain. Exemplary responses were “*giving back is core to the educational process*” and “*most of our students go to school to learn things that they can then bring home to help their people, not to make money or get ahead.*” Another participant elaborated on ways that Native students give back. “*Indigenous students in mind and heart, learn to preserve their language, culture, traditions and lands for the wellbeing of their people in the future.*” The following statement further elucidates the importance of being able to contribute toward improvement in the quality of life for Native people.



It [educational success] is less focused on economic success. Native students attending higher education are focused on their community or family as a whole. They are not looking at becoming a corporate employee but looking to find a way to make life better for their people. Also, when a native student fails ... they fail their community and family. Success for one is success for an entire family and nation especially when it comes to higher education.

The concept of giving back was viewed as being integral to a collectivistic orientation – family, community, tribe – versus “*an individualistic focus.*”

Relationships are Central (Family, Community, Friends, Land, and Spirit). Tying in with the previously identified collectivist orientation, relationships were seen as playing a greater role in educational success for Native students than for non-Native students. This theme was reflected in comments, such as “*a connection to family, culture and community needs to remain intact and must continue to be fostered at a greater level than with non-native students.*” The following response identifies dimensions of relationships that are inclusive of people, place, and spirit.



It [educational success] is not competitive. It is more about service to community, land and respect for traditional practices. Educational success involves relationships for native students, and understanding the importance of those relationships (relationships with family, community, friends, land, spirit).

The importance of relationships to “collective well-being” and to the previous theme of giving back was highlighted in comments such as the following.



Family duties and responsibilities come first for Native students. When it is their time to pursue their educational goals, they stress what they can bring back and do to help their communities and Nations. Focus on collective well-being and honoring our ancestors.

Perception that Educational Success Will Take Students Away from Native Roots and Teachings. Another theme emerging from the data was the perception that educational success would take Native students away from their Native roots and teachings. The following comment provides an example of this concern.



Sometimes it is perceived that having educational success will depart the individual from their native roots and teachings. Somehow an educated individual is less “native” because they have adopted an Anglo way of life.

This concern extended to loss of traditional identity, language, culture, and relationships with family and community, as is reflected in the following statement.



There is a pro and a con. The pro is the same as non-Native, better job for providing better care and opportunities for family. The con of educational success is that is often at the expense of losing one’s identity as traditional people, i.e., not learning language and not participating in cultural events and in the process growing distant from family and relatives.

Need to Overcome Obstacles. An additional salient theme involved the obstacles that need to be overcome by Native students on the path to educational success. These obstacles were seen to vary from those typically experienced by non-Native students. An example of a response reflecting this theme follows.



Native students are often times the first family member to graduate high school or college. To families, it is a major step! Natives face many obstacles such as housing, health care, parental support, family support, racism, stereotyping and

income which all contribute to succeeding in school. I also think that Natives have a different value system which contributes to what our priorities are.

As is reflected in the previous comment, obstacles to educational success for Native students come in many forms, including economic, health, family and parent involvement, and racism. The following response further identifies the obstacles of the disconnection that often exists between home and school and mistrust associated with a negative history of education experienced by family members.



Native students have a sense of survival in the ‘white man’s world,’ and have to overcome many obstacles to get there; cultural differences, prejudice, economic hardship (for some). They have a more pronounced sense of leaving the security of their home environment to “go to school,” than those who attend right in their neighborhood. Native students also have to find motivation to be successful in school past the family stories of bad experiences in school.

Obstacles to educational success were contextualized within an environment of discrimination and low expectations for Native students. While concern regarding these obstacles was expressed, there also was a spirit of determination to overcome the obstacles that were faced.



We must acknowledge that racism and discrimination exists in terms of opportunities for “communities of color” to succeed. Our students know they are different, and the expectations from school administrators, parents and others who are “non-Native” are very low. I think the expectations should be that our students CAN achieve, CAN do the tough work and CAN get college degrees despite rural barriers (poverty, lack of jobs, transportation issues). Non Native teachers, school administrators and communities need to be educated so they can raise their awareness around certain cultural factors, but overall, that our kids are smart, can achieve and are working hard.

Struggle to See Themselves in the Curriculum. An obstacle of primary significance in detracting from educational success was the struggle of Native students to see themselves in the curriculum. This theme was expressed in the statement.



It is only different in that Native students struggle to see themselves in the content of the education presented in a classroom setting. Where is Native history, language, contribution? This affects a student’s sense of pride and worth, the underlying foundation that dictates success for any student, regardless of ethnicity.

The extent to which cultural content was included in the curriculum was viewed as relating to non-Native and Native students feeling different degrees of comfort and safety in the school environment.



The non-native students feel comfortable. The native students do not, there is nothing in the school that represents their culture, how can you relax and feel comfortable when you don't feel safe?

The following response highlights the practice of including Native people primarily around topics related to the first Thanksgiving, while the contemporary accomplishments of Native peoples are excluded.



Too often Native students feel like non-entities when the many contributions of Native people are only lightly touched on and studied in relation to the first Thanksgiving. Today, many Indian communities have large commercial enterprises that they run, many tribes are self-governed, but these accomplishments are not part of the public school curriculum.

Summary. Educational success represents a complex process for Native students. As students move between their communities and educational institutions, they must navigate two worlds. The values, experiences, and knowledge they bring from home may not be reflected in the curriculum – whether raised traditionally or not. While many respondents focused on building capacity to give back to their communities as a marker of educational success, the institution often focuses on test scores, degrees, or potential to earn more money as markers of success. At the same time many Native students have experienced multiple obstacles that they must overcome in the path to educational success. A sense of conflict can arise for some Native students who want to pursue higher education, but perceive that it may take them away from their Native roots and teachings. The strong connections to family, community, friends, the land, and spirituality provides a firm foundation for learning for many students – but they may feel pulled away from these relationships as they navigate their way through the structure of higher education. It is a complex process of being pushed and pulled in different directions that may result in a decreased sense of comfort and safety. This is where caring faculty and staff can provide support as students attempt to sort out the direction they will go.

How is educational success for Native students **similar** to educational success for non-Native students? Of the 688 total respondents, 517 (75%) responded to this open-ended question. Salient themes that emerged included:

- All students can learn and be successful in their own ways
- PRIDE in reaching educational goals
- Passing the same classes and getting the same diplomas
- Tool for self-sufficiency and empowerment
- Relevance to the “real world”

All Students Can Learn and Be Successful in Their Own Ways. The participant response, “*all students can learn and be successful in their own ways,*” characterized the first theme pertaining to similarities between educational success for Native and non-Native students. The importance of communicating this message to all students was highlighted in the following statement.



All students are CAPABLE of learning anything they set their mind to learn. The message needs to be made known to all students no matter their race or culture. Success breeds success and we need to find the key to making this happen in our schools of Native populations.

Along with communicating the message that “*all students can learn,*” the importance of providing opportunities and support for each student to achieve their full potential “*and be successful in their own ways*” was expressed in the following comment.



I believe educational success for all students, Native and non-Native, is achieved when a student has been given the opportunities and support necessary to develop to his or her full potential and has the necessary skills to pursue his or her goals.

PRIDE in Reaching Educational Goals. Pride was associated with educational success for both Native and non-Native students throughout the participant responses. For example, “*Both groups take tremendous pride in their success in reaching educational goals.*” The following comment further highlights the pride that results from success in the classroom and in life.



Pride and respect for themselves and others. Native students want the same things in life and know that education is the way to get them. Students, no matter what nationality and who view education as important, want to succeed in the classroom and in life.

Pride associated with educational accomplishment was seen as contributing to the strength of tribes.



Except for cultural emphasis, they are very similar. Native people should make every effort to be certain their people have skills and training that are second to none. They should be able to compete worldwide. Pride and accomplishment will help Tribes grow stronger and young people will be proud to be part of it. Lower expectations, lack of encouragement, or no incentive to become educated will be very detrimental to Native people and we should not settle for it.

Passing the Same Classes and Getting the Same Diplomas. The need to meet the same requirements to attain degrees and associated diplomas was a third theme characterizing the

similarities in the experience of educational success for both Native and non-Native students. Directly reflecting this theme, a participant indicated that the experience was similar, “*When they pass the same classes. When they get the same diplomas.*” Another participant stated, “*Because you have to pass the same tests, write the same papers and deal w/ the same processes.*”



Educational success is similar for Native and non-Native students in that they must fulfill the same requirements in order to graduate.

Tool for Self-Sufficiency and Empowerment. Educational success was viewed by participants as similar for Native and non-Native students in its role as a tool for self-sufficiency and empowerment. For example, one participant indicated that in striving for educational success “*both [Native and non-Native students] are striving for self-sufficiency.*” The following statement provides another example focused on gaining self-sufficiency.



Educational success leads to self-sufficiency. Native and non-Native students who can successfully finish any level (pre-school, HS, college) of education stand a better chance of employment. Economic self-sufficiency allows people to give back to their communities (the world) instead of being on the receiving end.

It was pointed out the “*knowledge is power.*” Therefore, gaining knowledge through education leads to empowerment. Education as a tool for empowerment was communicated through statements, such as the following.



Use of education to empower self and community; educational success makes your family proud; educational success as a tool for advocacy; and educational success leads to a better life.

The connection between empowerment of students and their subsequent capacity to bring empowerment to their communities is reflected in the following response.



They must go to school. They need to graduate High School, College in order to financially succeed in this country/economy – our students need to succeed to empower our own communities/governments/programs, etc.

Relevance to the Real World. The final theme emerging from the data was the connection between educational success and relevance of learning to the real world. A view that educational success for both Native and non-Native students was experienced when learning could be applied in daily life was expressed in statements, such as the following.



Successful students – Native and non-Native – feel successful when they are able to translate educational theory into daily life, or to see a connection between what they are learning in the classroom and their own lives.

Another participant stated “*relevance and pertinence to my life – we all want no matter how old we are.*” The relevance of education was also tied to “*deep learning*” and “*owning*” of knowledge and skills.



The importance of meaningful relationships in the present is shared across cultures. For deep learning, relevancy is crucial to student engagement and, hence, “owning” new knowledge and skills.

The relevance of learning was tied to the need for all students to be prepared for work and life in the 21st century. The following statement provides an example.



All students must be fundamentally prepared for work and life in the 21st century. Schools must endeavor to prepare students with the skills and content needed for the future.

Summary. In many ways educational success was perceived to be similar for Native and non-Native students. The importance of recognizing that ALL students can learn and be successful in their own ways was a point of similarity. All students feel PRIDE when they meet their educational goals. PRIDE – that word was used often. Other themes emerged. Native and non-Native students meet parallel requirements – passing the same classes and getting the same diplomas. Education can serve as a tool for self-sufficiency and empowerment for both Native and non-Native students. All students benefit from a learning process that is relevant to the “real world” and prepares them for work and life in the 21st century.

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The findings were generated through in-depth exploration of the construct of success and means for achieving success in education. We can develop a theoretical framework that is strengths-based with emphasis on identifying factors that build on students strengths, in contrast to expecting students to change in order to achieve educational success as characterized by a deficit model (CHiXapkaid, et al. 2008; CHiXapkaid & Inglebret, 2007; Goodluck, 2002; Inglebret & CHiXapkaid, 2009; Kana’iaupuni, 2004; Villegas, Neugebauer, & Venegas, 2008; Yellowfish, 2009). Positive attributes of the learning environment that enhance existing student strengths provide a foundation for informing educational policy and practice. Indigenous knowledge can guide necessary change in the teaching/learning processes so that student achievement is fostered. The emphasis is placed on changing the system to promote student achievement rather than attempting to change the student to fit the educational system.

Implications for Theory

The findings presented in this report have implications for theory in that theoretical frameworks examining Native student educational experiences need to have, at the core, a belief that educational success for Native students is reciprocal adaptation not paternalistic assimilation. This belief is enveloped by the definition that educational success for Native students is a systemic process filled with unique talents and gifts fostered by Native knowledge kept alive with good health and wellbeing that builds the capacity to contribute to community. The definition of educational success for Native students, in turn, is influenced by curriculum, teachers, institutional support, kinships, personal factors, and financial resources. These influences broaden our awareness and recognition of all the qualities that are important to the educational success of Native students. The range of qualities may then predict and explain the differences and similarities among Native and non-Native educational success.

Implications for Policy

This study aligns with NIEA's High School Equity for Native Students initiative (NIEA, 2009) that focuses on the development of recommendations for federal and state policies and programs to foster Native postsecondary access and achievement. By involving the larger membership of NIEA, the data are better adapted to the work of NIEA and help to ensure a broader base of participant perspectives on educational success that contributes to the development of policy recommendations. Thus, the study can enable NIEA to challenge the current power structure of education by seeking guidance from Native voices in developing policy guidelines (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).

Implications for Practice

This study brings increased attention to educational practices that are perceived to influence Native student success. These educational practices center on culturally responsive curriculum that honors Native place, language, culture, and history and builds connections with local communities and tribes. Positive and personal relationships with teachers, as well as an institutional environment that is undergirded by cultural understanding and mutual respect, further promote success. A holistic approach that goes beyond academic performance to encompass wellbeing of body, mind, and spirit, while fostering students' belief in their gifts and abilities to contribute to their communities and society at large, is important. Adequate and equitable financial resources are necessary for schools to support Native student success from preschool to secondary levels, in addition to ensuring Native student access to higher education. The importance of approaching Native student success in a holistic and multi-dimensional way was emphasized. Overall, the current findings can serve as a resource for schools, institutions of higher education, foundations, and governments aspiring to increase Native educational achievement and transition from high school, to college, and then to the world of work and life-long learning.

Next Steps

This report is presented to the NIEA Board and should be made available through various NIEA communication channels as well as disseminated through various academic venues (conference presentations, publication outlets, etc.). However, one of the purposes advanced when proposing this study was to make the database available to provide opportunities to conduct research that will enable Native graduate students to complete their program of study and early career Native faculty to achieve promotion and tenure. We have left considerable latitude in doing additional research. There remain 11 questions focusing on demographic data regarding participants. These data included highest level of education achieved, enrollment status in two- or four-year higher education institutions, self-identification as Native or non-Native, organization represented, region and setting in which the participant grew up and now resides, gender, and year of birth. Frequency distributions were calculated to analyze these data. We hope this offers prospective applicants an opportunity to further their own scholarly interest and needs of Native students.

An application is available to propose a study, and upon approval, a process is established to provide a technical report, database, and mentoring for either quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method research. Additional support will be offered for those aspiring to develop papers and poster boards for presentation at national conferences or manuscripts submitted for publication. For interested Native graduate student and faculty wanting an application to propose a study to use the *National Native Student Success Database*, please contact:

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Attachment A

Native Educational Success Views and Perspectives



*A survey of
American Indians, Alaska Natives,
Native Hawaiians and others associated with
Indian education*

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In this survey when we refer to “Native” we mean anyone who identifies him or herself as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and/or from other Indigenous peoples.

Q1. Overall, how well does the current kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) educational system in the United States meet the educational needs of Native students?

- ① Very well
- ② Somewhat well
- ③ Not very well
- ④ Not at all
- ⑤ Don't know

Q2. How important is it for the current K-12 educational system in the United States to adapt to the educational needs of Native students?

- ① Very important
- ② Somewhat important
- ③ Not very important
- ④ Not at all important
- ⑤ Don't know

Q3. How well do the K-12 personnel meet the educational needs of Native students?

- ① Very well
- ② Somewhat well
- ③ Not very well
- ④ Not at all
- ⑤ Don't know

Q4. How important is it for K-12 personnel to adapt to the educational needs of Native students?

- ① Very important
- ② Somewhat important
- ③ Not very important
- ④ Not at all important
- ⑤ Don't know

Q5. How important is it for Native students to be able to adapt to the current K-12 educational system in the United States?

- ① Very important
- ② Somewhat important
- ③ Not very important
- ④ Not at all important
- ⑤ Don't know

Q6. Overall, how well do non-tribal colleges and universities in the United States meet the educational needs of Native students?

- ① Very well
- ② Somewhat well
- ③ Not very well
- ④ Not at all
- ⑤ Don't know

Q7. How important is it for non-tribal colleges and universities in the United States to adapt to the educational needs of Native students?

- ① Very important
- ② Somewhat important
- ③ Not very important
- ④ Not at all important
- ⑤ Don't know

Q8. How important is it for higher education personnel to adapt to the educational needs of Native students?

- ① Very important
- ② Somewhat important
- ③ Not very important
- ④ Not at all important
- ⑤ Don't know

Q9. How important is it for Native students to be able to adapt to non-tribal colleges and universities in the United States?

- ① Very important
- ② Somewhat important
- ③ Not very important
- ④ Not at all important
- ⑤ Don't know

Q10. How would you define educational success from a Native perspective?

Q11. What 3-4 main factors influence educational success for Native students?

1.

2.

3.

4.

Q12. How is educational success for Native students different than educational success for non-Native students?

Q13. How is educational success for Native students similar to educational success for non-Native students?

Q14. How important are each of the following qualities of the Native student experience for educational success? Mark your response for each row.

Qualities of Native Student Educational Experience	Not Important	Moderately Important	Very Important	Not sure
Maintains a Native identity	①	②	③	④
Knows his/her family history and/or genealogy	①	②	③	④
Identifies with specific tribe(s) or Native group(s)	①	②	③	④
Connects with Native identity within the education system	①	②	③	④
Balances both individual and collective worldviews	①	②	③	④
Uses his/her education to give back to others	①	②	③	④
Sets personal goals	①	②	③	④
Achieves professional goals	①	②	③	④
Knows his/her own self-worth	①	②	③	④
Has pride in being a Native person	①	②	③	④

List of qualities continued on next page.

(Q14 Continued). How important are each of the following qualities of the Native student experience for educational success? Mark your response for each row.

Qualities of Native Student Educational Experience	Not Important	Moderately Important	Very Important	Not sure
Pursues whatever life path he/she chooses	①	②	③	④
Understands responsibility to his/her Native community	①	②	③	④
Has close ties to Native community	①	②	③	④
Maintains a harmonious relationship with the natural environment	①	②	③	④
Understands time as a circular concept with natural cycles that sustain all life	①	②	③	④
Views natural resources as gifts that need to be honored	①	②	③	④
Has a sense of empathy and kinship with other forms of life	①	②	③	④
Has strong family support	①	②	③	④
Has a high degree of respect for elders	①	②	③	④
Masters various academic skills (e.g., math, reading, and writing)	①	②	③	④
Knows the historical aspects of Native life	①	②	③	④
Knows contemporary issues of Native life	①	②	③	④
Is able to sing traditional songs	①	②	③	④
Knows his/her traditional language	①	②	③	④
Knows traditional dance	①	②	③	④
Understands traditional protocols associated with rituals and ceremonies	①	②	③	④

List of qualities continued on next page.

(Q14 Continued). How important are each of the following qualities of the Native student experience for educational success? *Mark your response for each row.*

Qualities of Native Student Educational Experience	Not Important	Moderately Important	Very Important	Not sure
Knows how to prepare traditional foods	①	②	③	④
Knows how to gather natural materials to continue traditional practices	①	②	③	④
Has a strong work ethic	①	②	③	④
Is generous	①	②	③	④
Possesses a sense of humor	①	②	③	④
Is able to overcome test anxiety	①	②	③	④
Has sense of time and time management	①	②	③	④
Provides service and volunteers in one's own Native community	①	②	③	④
Is involved in Native community organizations	①	②	③	④

Q15. What other qualities are important to the Native student educational experience, that are not already listed in Q14? *Please list or describe.*

Q16. What is the highest level of education that you have achieved?

- ① Less than a high school degree
- ② High school diploma
- ③ GED or high school equivalency
- ④ Some college
- ⑤ Associate or trade school degree
- ⑥ Bachelor's degree
- ⑦ Some graduate work
- ⑧ Graduate or professional degree

Q17. Are you currently enrolled in a 2 or 4 year college or university?

- ① Not currently enrolled, with no plans to enroll
- ② Not currently enrolled, but plan to enroll in the future
- ③ Currently enrolled part-time
- ④ Currently enrolled full-time

Q18. Which of the following categories best describes you?

- ① Native person (American Indian, Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian)
- ② Non-Native person

Q19. What is/are your Tribal Affiliation(s)? *Please list any that apply.*

Please check the box, if not applicable:

Q20. Which, if any, of the following organizations do you represent?

Check all that apply.

- None
- Tribal government
- Tribal education dept
- Tribal/BIA school
- Tribal college/university
- School district
- Public college/university (non-Tribal)
- Private college/university
- State agency
- Federal agency
- Business
- Other *Describe:*

Q21. Which Region best represents where you grew up?

- ① Atlantic (Maine, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida)
- ② North Central (North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio)
- ③ South Central (Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama)
- ④ Mountain (Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico)
- ⑤ Pacific (Alaska, Washington, Oregon, California, Hawaii)
- ⑥ International, *what country?*

Q22. Which of the following categories best describes the type of area in which you grew up?

- ① Grew up mostly on a Reservation
- ② Grew up mostly in a rural area, but not on a Reservation
- ③ Grew up mostly in an urban area
- ④ Other, *describe:*

Q23. In what state do you currently reside?

Q24. Which of the following categories best describes the type of area in which you currently live?

- ① On a Reservation
- ② In a rural area, but not on a Reservation
- ③ In an urban area
- ④ Other, *describe:*

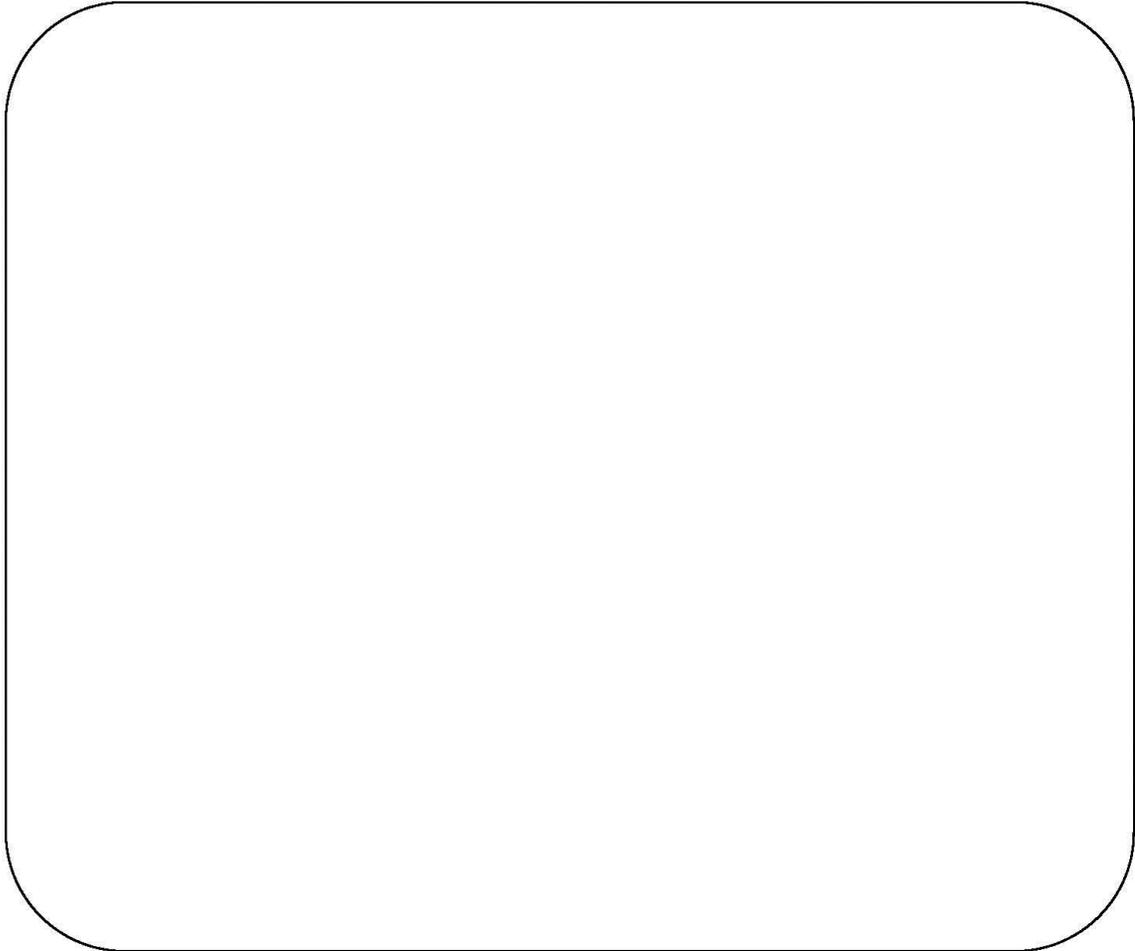
Q25. Are you:

- ① Male
- ② Female

Q26. In what year were you born?

Please turn to the back page.

Q27. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your views on Native educational success? Please feel free to write your comments on the space provided below.



Thank you for your participation in this survey!

Please send your completed survey in the enclosed stamped, pre-addressed envelope.

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