

Student Success in College

“I set a lot of goals. I wanted to come to school. But when I got here I found that it was really hard. I had a lot of problems with wanting to leave My first impression was to get back into my car and just go home” (from an anonymous 22-year-old Lakota freshman from South Dakota).

Leaving home to settle into a new community and begin college presents many challenging adjustments for most new students. In addition to these typical challenges, Native American students may experience additional difficulties influenced by their cultural background such as racism, isolation, or getting used to navigating and finding a sense of belonging in the university academic community (e.g., small fish in a big sea). Increasing resiliency can be one way of helping Native students be successful in navigating this transition. Below are some ideas that may help you thrive during your time in college.

What is Resilience?

- An ability to endure and persevere through challenges and change.
- Students who are seen as resilient and successful are also described by educators as social, optimistic, energetic, cooperative, curious, attentive, helpful, and on-task.
- According to James Clairmont, a Lakota Spiritual Elder, resilience is a “sacred word meaning ‘resistance’ . . . of bad thoughts, bad behaviors. We accept what life gives us—good and bad—as gifts from the Creator. We try to get through hard times with a good heart.”

Discussion Question: What strengths do you identify with personally that may help you negotiate challenges and achieve/maintain student success?

Possible challenges when attending college:

- Financial difficulties and a general lack of resources.
- Cultural differences and experiences of racism and microaggressions.
- Social isolation and feelings of loneliness and marginalization.
- Peer pressure, because although friends may provide comfort and relief from isolation, they may also add pressure to engage in activities that decrease academic success, such as excessive drinking.
- Vague career goals.
- Identity confusion: sorting out student identity and how that fits with Native identity as well as perceptions of others at school and at home.

Factors That Increase Success for American Indian Students and Resources

FACTOR	RESOURCES AND TOOLS
An optimistic outlook and confidence in your ability to be successful	Establishing meaningful connections with Native mentors who are farther along in their degree program or who have recently graduated.
Maintaining cultural traditions	This may include sweats, prayers, beading, pow-wows, or other activities that hold special meaning.
Assertiveness and asking for help when you need it	Establishing strong relationships with trusted faculty and staff
Developing a solid academic identity	This may be connected to your chosen major, club affiliations, leadership positions, peer and mentor connections, and cultural identity.
Maintain connections and support from home	Stay in contact with family and friends from home who support and encourage your college attendance
Develop a sense of community at MSU and in Bozeman	Connect with other Native students on campus by attending Talk Circle or participating in events such as the Orientation Picnic or AIC meetings
Stay connected to various organizations to create a sense of belonging on campus	This may include joining different clubs offered through MSU. See a list of clubs and organizations at this link: http://www.montana.edu/engagement/organizations/explore.html
Always keep your sense of humor!!	Engage in stories, anecdotes, teasing, songs, dance, and so forth

On Campus Support:

Expanding Horizons

Expanding Horizons is a mentoring program for new Native American students designed to help with the many transitions students go through in their first year of college. Students are paired with a faculty or staff mentor who provides support during the transition to college life. <http://www.montana.edu/diversity/Expanding%20Horizons/>
Ariel Donohue at 406-994-5801 or ariel.donohue@montana.edu

American Indian Student Center (AISC)

The AISC serves all American Indian/ Alaskan Native students needing and seeking support in order to become academically and personally successful at MSU. Students have access to tutoring, computer terminals, printing/faxing, and advising.

Richard White, 406.994.4880 or richard.white5@montana.edu

Francine Spang-Willis, 406.994.5529 or francine.spangwillis@montana.edu

Rita Sand 406.994.3334 or rsand@montana.edu

Talk Circle

Talk Circle is a drop-in weekly group for Native American students to discuss and receive peer support. It is co-facilitated by staff from both the AI/AN Student Success Office and CPS.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS)

211 Swingle (next to the SUB, right above Student Health) 406.994.4531

Free and confidential individual, group, and couples counseling.

