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NCWWI Tribal Traineeship Programs: Promoting Diversity in the Child Welfare Workforce

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Twelve universities and one American Indian (AI) tribal college were selected for the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute’s 5-year stipend traineeship program. These tribal traineeships were designed to provide social work child welfare education for tribal and nontribal students. Twenty-two AI students and 58 nontribal students completed a bachelor or master’s of social work degree. The students’ field placements were in tribal agencies or public agencies that served a segment of the AI population. These programs were enhanced through the use of valuable relationships (i.e., partnerships, mentorships, allies), and cultural competence was a key aspect of the students’ education. The students’ education was enriched with a specific child welfare curriculum, cultural teachings, tribal traineeship collaborations, and tribal community events.

This article focuses on the challenges American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) students experience in higher education and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) tribal traineeships’ efforts to increase the number of child welfare social workers who aspire to work in tribal communities. The students selected for the NCWWI tribal traineeship programs included tribal and nontribal members. The nontribal members were selected to participate in specialized training to increase the number of allies in child welfare. These programs responded to the challenges and issues frequently presented by AI/AN students in higher education through the development of innovative approaches to increase recruitment, retention, and support for students through completion of their social work degrees. The crucial role of relationship building and collaboration between universities, tribal nations, and state agencies are also emphasized. The NCWWI tribal traineeship programs’ approaches are applicable to building effective programming that may well serve as a model for social work programs across the country.

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Suzanne L. Cross is associate professor emeritus at Michigan State University. Virginia Drywater-Whitekiller is professor at Northeastern State University. Lea Ann Holder is instructor at Portland State University. Debra Norris is associate professor at the University of South Dakota. James Caringi is associate professor at the University of Montana. Ashley Trautman is an MSW graduate student from the University of Montana.

Address correspondence to Suzanne L. Cross, Michigan State University, 655 Auditorium Road #254, East Lansing, MI 48824. E-mail: suzanne.cross@ssc.msu.edu
THE CHALLENGES

The rationale for effective program development to meet the needs of AI/AN students is in part because of their underrepresentation in enrollment in U.S. institutions of higher education, which has been and continues to be a long-standing problem (Cross, Day, Gogliotti, & Pung, 2013; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007). Although AI/AN college student enrollment nationwide has more than doubled over the past 25 years (American Indian Fund, 2010). AI students continue to remain among the most underrepresented groups in academia. In 2012, 39% of AI/AN students who started in 2005 as first-time, full-time students at 4-year institutions graduated, compared to 60% of White students. (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012). Although the graduates earned their degrees in various programs, social work was included.

Specific to social work, the Council on Social Work Education’s Task Force on Native Americans in Social Work Education indicated that accredited social work programs reported “full-time AI/AN students comprised 1.0% (250 students) of baccalaureate students, and 1.0% (219 students) of master’s students and 1.5% of doctoral students” (Cross et al., 2007, p. 5). This is compared to 1.7% of all people in the United States who identified as AI/AN, either alone or in combination with one or more other races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Therefore, efforts such as those implemented through NCWWI tribal traineeship programs are needed to increase the number of AI/AN students in social work programs.

AI/AN students, especially those who were raised in the traditional culture and come from reservation and rural settings, may struggle with building relationships with faculty members, student peers, and nontribal client groups (Cross et al., 2007; NCWWI, 2013). Weaver (1999) describes social work education as “socializing students into the norms and values of the profession” (p. 415), which holds tightly to mainstream theoretical perspectives. The mainstream values often conflicts with the values of AI communities, their members, and families (Voss, White Hate, Bates, Lunderman, & Lunderman, 2005; Weaver, 1999). AI/AN students may struggle with mainstream culture values. Indigenous cultures traditionally place a high priority on commitment to the relational importance of family and tribal community obligations, which often take precedence over academic requirements. Few social work programs educating AI students have resolved these conflicts (Voss et al., 2005).

A national study reported licensed social workers are not as diverse as the populations they serve, which is illustrated by the fact that only 1% (an estimated 6,500; National Association of Social Workers, 2015) of all licensed social workers in the United States are AI (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006), when the overall AI/AN population is 5.2 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Furthermore, in regard to child welfare and racial minority children, AI/AN children are overrepresented in the public child welfare system (Lawler, Laplante, Giger, & Norris, 2012). Specifically, 2% (10,260) of the children in foster care are AI/AN, but they make up only 1% of the child population, a representation rate of 2:1 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). There is a need to address this disproportionality of AI/ANs in training for the profession of social work, particularly in the child welfare system. All child welfare workers need to be able to employ competencies with federal tribal policies and obtain knowledge and skills needed for effective practice with AI children and their families (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011).
A more specific need to address is the challenge of practice within the jurisdiction of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978. For example, the state of Oklahoma with an AI population of 482,996 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) indicated there are delays in searching for kinship relations for AI children in foster care, lack of coordination by the state with the tribes, and inconsistencies in communication between public and tribal child welfare programs (Oklahoma CFSR Aggregate Report, 2007-2010). Also, new state caseworkers’ lack of an understanding of the tribal roles and ICWA specific requirements was frequently reported (Oklahoma CFSR Aggregate Report, 2007-2010). Undoubtedly, there is a need to address AI child welfare at the national, state, and higher education levels.

TRAINEESHIPS

In 2010 the NCWWI provided traineeship grants to Briar Cliff University (BCU), Portland State University, University of Montana (UM), Northeastern State University, and University of South Dakota (USD). In 2012 the Olga Lakota Tribal College joined the USD’s traineeship program and began its program through additional funding from NCWWI and the USD project. The tribal traineeship programs were selected to provide child welfare education for tribal and nontribal social work students to work with the AI/AN population. The nontribal students were included to increase the number of allies that will support the implementation of ICWA as it was designed in the spirit of the law, to assist AI children, and their families. Also, all AI students were taught the cultural aspects of other tribal nations and their own if they did not know their history or cultural heritage. The lack of their cultural knowledge may be a result of a nontribal adoption, nontribal foster care placement, or their parents’ reluctance to self-identify as AI as a result of past discrimination.

The purpose of the NCWWI tribal traineeship programs was, and continues to be, to build a more diverse workforce for tribal and state child welfare agencies through active efforts to recruit and retain students interested in child welfare and effectively lessen the disproportionality of AI/ANs in the field of child welfare social work practice. The success of the tribal traineeship programs is grounded in culturally competent practice, which is the underpinning of this educational experience. Social work graduate and undergraduate programs have established specializations in the field of child welfare with a significative portion devoted to preparing students to work with AI/AN children, families, and communities. All the tribal traineeship programs had prior relationships with state agencies and tribal nations, however, the funding strengthened those relationships and provided opportunities for the sustainability of these effective partnerships.

The tribal traineeship programs were able to meet their goals as a result of strengthening already existing relationships with tribal nations, tribal agencies, faculties, and social work professionals. As a result of these efforts, the partnerships thrived, which allowed the challenges for AI/AN students to be addressed through collaboration in the environments of the universities, state and tribal agencies, and the tribal communities.

The involvement of the state agencies was imperative, and the partnership with tribal nations was the essence of the success of the tribal traineeship programs. Designated child welfare field placements, cotraining with child welfare professionals, and attendance and copresentations at national conferences provided students with an experiential education. Also, the child welfare
Traineeships included curriculum development, which increased the number of courses or class periods devoted to the discussion of Indian child welfare, for example, Child Welfare, Leadership and Supervision, Child Maltreatment, Youth Offenders, Indian Child Welfare, Indigenous Leadership, Social Work With Adolescents, Culturally Responsive Leaders Seminar, Social Work and Mental Health, Social Work With Native Children and Families, Social Work Practice With Native Children and Families.

This article focuses on the importance of the inclusion of partnerships, the value of mentorship, social work allies, race relations, cultural consultants, and students’ experiences in the development of six different, university-based tribal traineeship programs. Each of the following sections was primarily developed by administrators in the six tribal traineeship programs.

The Importance of Partnerships

The USD tribal traineeship program included partnerships with BCU, Oglala Lakota College (OLC), state agencies, and tribal nations. Specifically, the BCU tribal traineeship program and OLC joined the USD’s tribal traineeship program as a distinct project through a partner contract to better prepare nontribal child welfare professionals in the areas of ICWA, tribal agency governance, and cultural responsiveness. The joint training with the three NCWWI tribal traineeship programs facilitated an intercultural forum for tribal and nontribal members to discuss issues that affect state and tribal child welfare agencies, families, and communities. BCU’s traineeship program was tailored specifically for students from the regional tribal areas. The OLC partnerships with state agencies and the BCU tribal traineeship program were valuable relationships. For example, the USD traineeship program provided access to training in areas such as systems of care with social work students and professionals in the field of child welfare and other regionally close NCWWI projects. The goal of the systems of care initiative is to improve mental health services to children and families. The initial involvement of the NCWWI tribal traineeship program with the systems of care initiative was twofold: the development of a strong collaboration and partnership with the state and an opportunity to increase the students’ preparation for child welfare social work practice. In addition to systems of care, students worked with the local state child protective program using structured activities. This training was followed by inviting AI speakers to campuses, experiential opportunities, and a child welfare course that USD and OLC students shared through distance learning. Additional collaborative child welfare training specific to social work with the AI population were hosted by BCU with USD students in attendance. USD’s partnerships with BCU and OLC provided opportunities for the tribal traineeship programs to bring students together to enhance their cultural exposure and experiences.

Tribal and nontribal students participated in the Red Road Gathering, which is a holistic healing journey based on Lakota/Nakota/Dakota worldviews and enjoys international participation.

The uniqueness of the Red Road Gathering is based upon the “wopila” ceremony, which means giving something back for something that was received. What was given and what was received is dependent upon the participants of the ceremony/experience. The thanks giving ceremonies are integral parts of lifeway teachings of our Indigenous people. (Husby, 2014, para 2)
It is also a time of healing and learning through powerful group interactions between the OLC students who were hosted by the USD trainees. At the end of the Red Road Gathering, the students joined in reflective talking circles to process the teachings on walking in balance with forgiveness and walking in strength from loss. The reflective discussions provided students with an opportunity to explore the differences and commonalities of how the training had an impact on their work, values, understanding of Native belief systems, and their future work together on behalf of AI children and families.

The USD and the OLC shared concerns and struggles in preparing students to work across systems. These particular tribal traineeship programs acknowledged the difficulties students face working outside their cultural systems. It was clear that connecting students from each institution was a beneficial strategy to assist students in developing culturally sensitive and child welfare knowledge to reach across the state agencies, tribal agencies, and communities. OLC students hosted an experiential visit to the Oglala Lakota Pine Ridge reservation for USD students where they learned together and shared meals and their experiences.

The joint tribal traineeship programs facilitated Indian child welfare training and Facebook connections; resulted in invitations to visit other programs for extended visits, distance learning, and copresenting at conferences; and increased the number of OLC students who apply for admission to and were accepted into the USD MSW tribal traineeship program. This partnership serves as a model to provide students with an opportunity to learn the challenges of working across distances, systems, and cultures. The most beneficial aspect of the tribal traineeship projects was the opportunity to teach strategies and experience the relationships of collaboration and alliance.

Value of Mentorship

Portland State University’s inclusion of NCWWI tribal trainee students in the Culturally Responsive Leaders Program (CRLP) involved CRLP alumni currently working in the Oregon Department of Human Services/Child Welfare (DHS/CW), faculty members, field instructors, AI professionals, and community members who all served as leaders and mentors with the student protégés. Each year the director of diversity and equity in the DHS/CW Office of Human Relations is invited to ensure that students who were in the stipend program were introduced and informed of her contact information. The student protégés identified and selected their mentors either from their field instructors, employment, community, or faculty. The mentors in turn spoke about their commitment to provide ongoing mentoring in various ways, such as meeting for tea, coffee, or a meal, and through more formalized settings such as conferences or school or community presentations. The CRLP mentors were influential, “especially those who developed a working knowledge of the protégé’s culture and worldviews” (Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 2002, p. 15).

Also, as protégés the trainees benefited “from increased socialization to the inside culture of the organization, networking opportunities, technical skill development, career advancement information, emotional support, and recognition within the hierarchy” (Kelly & Post, 1995, p. 153).

The focus of the CRLP was to create a pathway for culturally competent emerging leaders among tribal, state, and private contract agency workers serving child welfare-involved families to obtain advanced degrees in social work. The CRLP provided the professional preparation necessary for students to deliver culturally sensitive supervision and culturally responsive program planning, implementation, and evaluation (Kelly, 2001). The project was administered
by the school’s Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services. This NCWWI traineeship program has funded 20 trainee students since its inception in 2009.

The CRLP held monthly seminars or circles that provided a safe and supportive environment for the cohort of AI, African American, and Latino student trainees. Students discussed challenges they were faced with, such as balancing family and community commitments and the rigorous demands of graduate school while learning to adaptively meld cultural aspects and traditional insights into a career in child welfare.

The seminar circle format provided an invaluable social network function for trainees in regard to cross-systems collaboration and formal and informal network development of effective social work leadership. As part of the leaders’ introductions, each student shared what he or she had gained from the relationship with the mentor. Students used the community mentors’ discussion points on the topic of cultural responsiveness to identify a collective process to promote cultural awareness and inclusion, community engagement, adaptive leadership styles, and learning new ways to address challenges, individually and systemically, by working up, down, and around organizations (Ezarik, 2002; Hersch, 2006).

Although the CRLP trainees were from different cultural origins, backgrounds, and tribal nations, there was a strong recognition of shared historical and current aspects of personal, professional, and political struggles regarding feelings of isolation as students or in their places of employment. Additionally, a common topic was the challenge in their ability to complete their academic programs, which was directly proportional to the amount of stress or the lack of life/work/school balance students experienced at a specific juncture. Conversely, group members shared their personal and professional stories of self-discovery, self-awareness, and the recognition of their individual strength through cultural connectedness. Students have been extremely inspired by the leaders who served as their mentors, and they have inspired each other (Brinson & Kottler, 1993).

Students continued the formation of mentoring partnerships they experienced in the CRLP by supporting the honor ceremony held for these graduates. Their families, field instructors, faculty members, mentors, community leaders, and CRLP trainee alumni are invited to attend the celebration and witness their transition from student to their role as a culturally responsive child welfare social work leader. The mentoring relationships students formed with leaders, their peers, alumni, and tribal communities were galvanized each year during this ceremonious rite of passage where they promised to maintain their mentoring relationships in their professional lives. The creation of the CRLP mentoring circles validated the strong relationships of shared knowledge, experiences, and self-awareness. After all, the talking circle is a traditionally indigenous concept.

Workforce Allies

Four of the universities with NCWWI tribal traineeship programs—USD, University of Montana, Portland State University, and Northeastern State University—included nontribal students, namely, White, African American, and Mexican American. The nontribal students became allies who are extremely important to the structure of the traineeship programs and the field of child welfare.

The NCWWI tribal traineeship programs entail a focus on work with the AI population, and it is expected that allies will likely know little in regard to Indian child welfare issues.
Interestingly, the program administrators have become aware that it is not unusual for some AI students to possess limited knowledge, or in some instances, a lack of confidence in their own tribal heritage. Therefore, the tribal traineeship allies and the AI students learn together how to work with AI tribal nations, communities, and families through undergraduate or graduate social work curricula designed to address diversity and difference in practice. An important additional component of the tribal traineeships mandates reinforcing students’ knowledge and field experience by their participation in diverse child welfare training sessions and conferences.

Also addressed by the universities’ NCWWI tribal traineeship programs are the deficiencies in the requirement of AI and nontribal students to conduct practicums in tribal and public child welfare domains. For example, the Northeastern State University traineeship first involved a formal partnership with the Cherokee Nation’s Indian child welfare (ICW) agencies that administer practicum placement availability for all tribal traineeship students. It is important to note, however, that students were able to elect to be matched with any tribal ICW agency to fulfill their practicum obligations. The second domain involved practicum memorandums of understandings with matched county child welfare agencies. The students’ dual practicum educational learning outcomes and behavioral indicators are adjusted to meet the Council of Social Work Education (2015) accreditation standards. The benefit of the two domain requirements prepared the students to obtain knowledge and competencies to practice effectively with federal, state, and tribal policies. The students also developed allied collegial relationships and network building to increase collaboration, engagement, and an alliance with the state of Oklahoma’s ICW and human service department.

Allies in social work practice with AI children and families are critically important to the field of child welfare, especially when they have a foundation in culturally competent practice specific to the AI population. However, a program that targets the training and preparation of a diverse workforce that includes allies does not occur by happenstance. Deliberate program infrastructure components involve specialized course work with an emphasis on diverse practice methods and policies, dual agency practicum training, ongoing introspection in regard to race relations, and relationship building.

**TRIBAL NATIONS’ PREFERENCE IN HIRING POLICIES**

It is essential for nontribal students to be knowledgeable of and understand why AI tribal nations commonly establish a preference for hire of tribal people on reservations, which includes social service departments and agencies. The Northeastern State University administration informs nontribal students of this personnel practice at the beginning of their interest in the program. When nontribal students question why they may be less likely to obtain employment in a tribal ICW that serves as one of their practicum placements, a brief response does not suffice.

The nontribal students are informed that direct administration of tribes regarding health, social, and educational programs, previously administrated by the federal government, became possible via the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1975). This act was followed by giving tribal nations preference in hiring in the amended Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which included an exception to nondiscrimination hiring practices when the following conditions are met:
(1) the employer must be located on or near an Indian reservation, (2) the employer’s preference for Indians must be publicly announced, and (3) the Indian to whom preferential treatment is accorded must be an Indian living on or near a reservation. (U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, 1988, para. 2)

Working in alliance with AI tribal social service departments and programs can further be confusing to those who do not know the history of treaties between the United States and tribal nations, and the resultant federal policies. This is especially pertinent when attempting to explain the numerous failed federal policies designed to assimilate and acculturate resistant AI peoples into Anglo values and norms (e.g., Indian Adult Vocational Training Act, 1956; Indian General Allotment Act, 1887; Indian Removal Act, 1830. To further assist, ongoing instructive support is offered through specifically diverse courses such as Social Work with Native Americans, Indigenous Leadership, the Indian Child Welfare Act, and special-topic independent study courses. These distinct political complexities and the acquisition of knowledge in working with the AI tribal nations by the principal investigators and program staff are imperative to the overall program support and infrastructure.

Finally, not all students seek employment with ICW agencies for various reasons. Public nontribal agencies may provide higher salaries, more comprehensive benefit packages, and may have more resources available to assist with caseloads. AI and nontribal child welfare workers employed in the public realm are able to form alliances with tribal social service workers to work toward competent service delivery systems for AI children, their families, and communities.

Program Race Relations

Even in social service programs that are designed to create a diverse workforce with hopeful outcomes of competent cultural practices for children and families, race relations continue to be the elephant in the room. This is a particular challenge in contemporary American society when political proclamations assume that an equal playing field has been achieved for all racial groups and Affirmative Action programs are perpetually under fire. In part, to address these challenges, all Northeastern State University trainees are required to attend a minimum of one tribal child welfare conference annually to become acquainted with the issues and practical solutions for a diverse population. For the majority of the trainees, this is the first experience in attending a professional conference, and many of the session topics may be unfamiliar or too unique to be presented in journals or social work textbooks. Students may feel overwhelmed with large volumes of unfamiliar information. Some may find this new knowledge to be in stark contrast to their own personal values and opinions in regard to race and culture. Therefore, Northeastern State University program administrative staffs that were in attendance held debriefing sessions with the students over a meal and followed the format of the indigenous talking circle (Struthers, Hodge, Geishirt-Cantrell, & De Cora, 2003). All the NSU trainees had an opportunity to be heard and were treated in a respectful manner.

In spite of program efforts to treat all trainees equitably, as demonstrated in identical program contractual benefits and obligations, when merging nontribal and AI students into a training program that emphasizes tribal nations, it is possible for nontribal students to feel a sense of negative bias toward them. For many of the allies, this can be their first experience to participate in a program where they do not hold majority status. Consequently, situations can arise when the allies believe the AI students are favored by the program administrators; this can be especially
pronounced when the program administrator is a representative of the program’s majority population. For example, such a situation occurred when an AI trainee was invited to take part on a panel at an ICW conference. This resulted in undertones from at least one of her nontribal counterparts that she was only asked to participate because she was a tribal member. When these situations arise, the program principal investigator and staff take advantage of teachable moment opportunities to assist the students with processing their feelings and professional and personal awareness of their conscious use of self. Conversely, it is possible for the tribal students, as well as external tribal people, to feel a sense of discomfort and even resentment for the allocation of resources to nontribal people. Again, it is extremely important to address the parameters and purpose of the program to all students at the beginning.

USD found racial concerns during the initial year of the project; complications in the preparation of students to work with AI families and communities surfaced in the context of traditional social work education. The young ages of the students and the accommodating lack of understanding of their own culture, along with the larger world emphasis of social work being a rescuer role, hindered the development of the cultural sensitivity necessary for cross-cultural work (Kleinschmit & Craig-Oldsen, 2012). Perhaps the greatest obstacle to preparing traditional college-age students to work across cultures is the need for openness to “an appreciation of the fact that people do not and cannot expect to know all there is to be known especially about the world, including the individuals with whom they interact” (Ortega & Coulborn-Faller, 2011, pp. 32–33). Students may struggle with the ambiguity when believe there must be one correct response.

Relationship Building

The NCWWI tribal traineeship programs’ developing relationships among the allies and AI trainees are deliberate, purposeful, and ongoing. However, this is readily accomplished as the students entering the program are coming in at different stages of their undergraduate social work course studies. For example, Northeastern State University students may enter social work in their first semester of their junior year, while others may be a first-semester senior with studies pursued on two different campuses. Because of this, new cohort trainees are often not previously acquainted with one another. Numerous program opportunities to initiate and develop relationships are employed through enrollment in child welfare courses, conference and training attendance, and shared practicum placements. Furthermore, trainee program evaluations have indicated that the students desired more frequent opportunities to come together as cohorts pursuing a career in child welfare. The positive significant feedback indicates that the students understand the importance of developing meaningful allied relations in a field where workforce support and unity is critical. As a result, new program components that have now been instituted include a tribal traineeship student social event each fall and spring semester, which includes a mentoring match program for new students.

Cultural Consultants’ Teachings

The UM School of Social Work is located in Missoula. The traineeship initiative included program evaluation, workforce improvement, new course development, student support teams, and cultural consultants. The tribal traineeship program was successful in training AI and
nontribal students in understanding and intervening in tribal child welfare systems (Cooper & Lesser, 2008). Relationships with the tribal nations were developed based on prior work by faculty from the School of Social Work to provide assistance to tribes relative to child welfare needs and to recruit and retain AI students.

After receiving the NCWWI traineeship, the principal investigator and project staff contacted and met with AI community leaders in Montana from seven reservations and 12 tribal nations to explain the program and invite participation from tribal members. Further, two-plus-two articulation agreements (2 years at community college and 2 years at a four-year institution) were developed with two tribal colleges to help BSW students remain in their tribal communities the second year to complete required course work and their practicum. Students in the program were encouraged to take a newly developed course, Social Work in Indian Country, and met with cultural consultants to assist them in learning about tribal child welfare. The students completed assignments on issues and interventions relative to their home communities and specific to tribes (Ungar, 2008). One of the most essential elements in the evaluation of the tribal traineeship program was the inclusion of cultural consultants.

The cultural consultants participated first as program guides and consultants to students and faculty in regard to cultural issues of tribal child welfare. As most of the faculty is nontribal, they are not able to educate their students about tribal cultural practices. Two AI female elders were employed as contract cultural consultants to fulfill this role. Both are recognized elders from the same Montana tribal nation and reservation community and have earned MSWs, one from UM. In the past, both have assisted the School of Social Work with becoming more successful in the recruitment and retention of AI students. The consultants were key advisers to the principal investigator and project staff (Jeruchim & Shapiro, 1992). They played an essential role in assisting students with the development and maintenance of practicum and traineeship opportunities in their local communities. As members of the communities, they had connections and knowledge that faculty did not, were knowledgeable of cultural practices, and helped students and faculty understand the importance of these practices.

Second, the cultural consultants were guest lecturers in classes. As a small social work program, the school needed to infuse content on tribal child welfare into its classes (Wilson, 2004). For this aspect of the program, the consultants were two AI males who were employed at the National Native Children’s Trauma Center, funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and housed at UM’s Institute for Educational Research and Service. The two American Indian men are citizens of two different reservation communities in Montana and are from different tribal nations than the female cultural consultants. One consultant was a spiritual leader in his tribe, and the other was a leader in working with elders and youth in his community. They were selected because of their skills, positions in the community, and desire to collaborate on the project.

The cultural consultants presented a particularly powerful guest lecture in the MSW Advanced Research and Program Evaluation class. As in most MSW programs, research is not the favorite course of most students. However, the guest lecture was consistently reported as one of the most meaningful learning experiences of the students’ entire MSW program. The following is a description of this experience, including a firsthand account of a trainee in the program whose professional life was significantly affected by her interaction with the cultural consultants.
Advanced Research and Program Evaluation is the second-year MSW research course at the UM School of Social Work. It is unique in that it involves learning about participatory action research methods and the development of theories of change (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Trainees in the NCWWI traineeship program focused their assignments on the development of theories of change in regard to child welfare. In many ways, the course is typical in its focus on program evaluation. Also typical, students were more drawn to practice courses that they saw as more immediately relevant to their learning, especially to their practicums.

The principal investigator of the traineeship project has the distinct pleasure of being a good friends and colleagues with the two cultural consultants through the National Native Children’s Trauma Center and has himself been invited to cultural events in the men’s communities. As instructor of the Advanced Practice class, he invited the two men to come to class to discuss what they felt were the most important issues for children and families in their communities. He also asked them to speak of the solutions they found had the most impact. The two men simply said, “OK, we are going to blow some minds.”

At the time the principal investigator thought they were joking, but in fact they were not. The following describes how they did exactly that, and how they had a great impact on the knowledge and worldviews of the students in the classroom.

The two men told the story of their people’s creation. They then took the class through exercises that were part of their cultural ceremonies. As asked, they spoke of the most important issues for children and families in their communities, describing a lack of cultural identity of youth as a central concern. They then described cultural language immersion classes led by one of the consultants and detention diversion programs led by the other. A dialogue with the students evolved into a passionate discussion and obvious student engagement and learning. One student in particular had a powerful experience that changed the course of her professional career. This following is her story.

**Student Experience (First Person)**

As a student in the UM master of social work program, and a NCWWI trainee, I was required to intimately assess my positionality on core components of the human experience (Finn & Jacobson, 2008). Many of these topics such as class, race, and politics were readily examined because the majority of my fellow classmates had experienced the tensions that can arise from societal difference in these areas. When it came to religion and spirituality, however, I found myself at a loss. Other than the struggle between believing in something or not, it was difficult for my colleagues to speak from experience regarding spirituality in different forms and how this is integrated into social work practice. When I learned that cultural consultants would be guest lecturing in our advanced research methods class, I knew this was a unique opportunity to explore an important topic.

The lecture provided by the cultural consultants was, in one word, powerful. Their presence and the spiritual experiences they shared transformed a research class into a genuine forum for discussing the known and unknowable aspects of spirituality. Another day in class became a truly rare opportunity to be honored with a glimpse into a different culture. In all my years of education, never had I experienced anything like it.
As the time neared for class to end, I took the opportunity to ask one cultural consultant what advice he would give to someone searching to understand his or her own spirituality. He replied that I should pray about it, and to do so I needed to come to a particular cultural ceremony. In my own interpretation of his advice, I felt he was telling me that to understand spirituality, I needed to experience it. His invitation to participate in this cultural ceremony was an incredible honor and an experience that I continue to thank him for.

With the help of my professor and mentor, I was able to travel to the tribal community and attend the cultural ceremony. (One lesson I have learned in my work in Indian country is that you must be given permission to name certain cultural practices. I have not been given permission to name this ceremony; therefore I will refer to it only as a cultural ceremony.) This experience changed my life. It was the first opportunity I have had to gain a granular understanding of how spirituality affects thoughts, perspectives, and ways of being with others. In addition, visiting the tribal community and observing the strength and resiliency of its members was moving. I went into the cultural ceremony with ambiguous assumptions about my professional career and came away with a focused passion that propelled me to where I am today.

After attending the cultural ceremony, I decided to pursue a legal career focused on tribal law. The culmination of experiences unearthed my desire to be a strong advocate for tribal sovereignty while understanding the macro- and microlevel systems that have an impact on individual and community health. I want to use the skills and perspectives I learned in my social work education to effect change in a system that so often neglects the underserved and oppressed. I would not have come to this realization without being honored with a glimpse into the power of an AI tribal culture.

In all my work, I carry with me the experience I had in the cultural ceremony. If there was ever one moment that could affect someone’s journey so significantly, it was that moment in my advanced research class.

The inclusion of cultural consultants as part of UM’s NCWWI traineeship program proved to be one of the most important aspects of student learning. Trainees and nontrainees were educated about the child welfare needs in Montana tribal communities. Moving forward, the school intends to continue to include cultural consultants as a valued component to the program. The powerful experience described by the former trainee and graduate illustrate the importance of the work and the inclusion of cultural consultants. As the school continues to work to improve recruitment and retention of AI students and allies, the cultural consultants will continue as guides and experts to help ensure success in this area.

CONCLUSION

The six NCWWI traineeship programs’ reported that 22 tribal and 58 nontribal students successfully completed BSW or MSW degrees. This was accomplished with the enhancement of partnerships with state and tribal agencies, development of relevant field placements, and the enrichment of curriculum content on topics in the ICWA, child welfare, and tribal cultures. In addition, several child welfare training sessions were cotought concurrently with the state agencies’ child welfare employees and the tribal traineeship students. The student trainees also attended social work and AI conferences as participants and copresenters to increase their knowledge and share their learning experiences. The inclusion of allies,
mentors, leaders, and cultural consultants contributed immeasurably to the education of the BSW and MSW social work trainees. As a result of the universities’ commitment and efforts required by the NCWWI tribal traineeship programs, 80 recent graduates are especially prepared to work with AI families as cultural competent child welfare workers. Their education has also prepared them to be future allies, mentors, leaders, and perhaps some will take on the role of cultural consultants.

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