



East Central University



Northeastern Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College



University of North Carolina at Pembroke



Murray State College



Northeastern State University

Supporting the Attainment of Native American Students in Higher Education: Approaches Taken by Five Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions



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NSI Student Attainment:

Preface

Last spring in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I listened to university and college leaders describe the challenges, resilience, and creativity of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students who were trying to access the internet and stay connected to their college or university courses. Many of these students live in remote locations on tribal reservations. My heart went out to the students who sat in cars parked in business parking lots in nearby towns utilizing Wi-Fi they could connect to, students who completed assignments and wrote papers on cell phones, or those who carved out spaces in multi-generational households, sometimes in homes lacking basic needs, to overcome multiple challenges related to staying in school. I thought about the many barriers Native students already face under normal circumstances and the sheer determination it takes to overcome them. I thought about my own educational journey and its discursive path with many of the same issues Native students still face a generation or two later. I also reflected on the holistic support needed to address Native students' attainment of their educational degrees or professional dreams. I understand the social, political, and economic realities of our people and cannot understate the significance and importance of education for American Indian and Alaska Native students, their families, communities, and tribal nations. In my family it has been the important journey of several generations and will continue to be for many students and their families.

Education of American Indian people emerged out of a complex and painful history of assimilation, removal, and violence that institutions must acknowledge and examine today to eliminate any remaining vestiges of racism, racial injustice, and racial inequity. This requires higher education institutions to comprehensively examine the campus environment for negative images, messages, and naming practices and to assertively develop systematic practices of inclusivity, belonging, and relevancy that embrace and promote



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AI/AN students political and cultural identities. Higher education today is an important pathway for Native people to become the professionals and leaders they aspire to be and to support tribal nation building with the needed capacities graduates can offer.

Through an initiative, *Reducing Postsecondary Attainment Gaps for American Indians and Alaska Natives: Linking Policy and Practice*, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) partnered with 24 two- and four-year Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs) colleges and universities to support a consortium of institutions in networking and developing strategies to support campus efforts to increase AI/AN student attainment rates, and to formulate collective strategies to drive supportive policy implementation at the state and federal levels. AI/AN students have lower enrollment and attainment rates than any other demographic in the U.S. Nationally, 25 percent of AI/AN adults have an associate or higher degree compared to 43 percent of all adults.¹ NASNTIs play a significant role in addressing this disparity. Collectively, the 37 NASNTIs enrolled over 78,168 undergraduates across 10 states in 2018, 19 percent (14,832) of which were AI/AN students.² Nationally this accounts for 13 percent of the nation's AI/AN undergraduates.

To identify effective strategies on campuses that support AI/AN student attainment, this study set out to examine the strategies and practices of five NASNTI campuses that showed low or no attainment gaps between AI/AN students and other students. What emerged as a key strategy and is supported by the research literature is that relationship building with students, their families, communities, and tribal nations leads to AI/AN student success. This is important to consider as the understanding of relationship, reciprocity, and interconnected holism are core to Indigenous world views and paradigms of thought, culture, and behavior. Institutions that are developing and building intentional relationships and partnerships with AI/AN students, their communities and tribal nations are working towards building culturally responsive environments in which students can develop a sense of belonging and purpose. The outreach and actions of senior university leaders demonstrates commitment and builds more authentic, trusting, and lasting relationships. Further developing high-impact practices that respond to cultural values,

perspectives, and supports AI/AN students in making meaning of their educational experiences and supports learning. Systematically developing culturally responsive practices across the college or university in student support services, hiring AI/AN faculty, making senior-level AI/AN leadership appointments, focusing on the inclusion of AI/AN social and cultural practices, providing dedicated physical space, and implementing evidence-based accountability practices are among the effective strategies these institutions and others have undertaken.

As the authors of this study conclude, to increase the attainment rates of AI/AN students, successful colleges and universities need to: 1) improve their responsiveness to AI/AN student participation rather than expecting AI/AN students to adjust, 2) develop strategies and practices that connect retention and persistence of AI/AN students to meaningful and ongoing relationships with students, their families,

cultures, and tribal nations, and 3) recognize that culture and tribal sovereignty matter and are linked to the well-being of the institution. There are many more NASNTIs engaged in these efforts and have much to offer to this discussion. Thus, we encourage greater networking and sharing of information and finding opportunities for AI/AN research and voices to be illuminated.

I would like to acknowledge Lumina Foundation for its generous support of this initiative, WICHE, the NASNTI institutions involved in the study and participating in the initiative. Importantly, an appreciative recognition of the project staff: Jere Mock, Angela Rochat, Colleen Falkenstern, Emma Tilson, and to Ken Pepion who recognized the critical role of NASNTIs and initiated the project. Finally, to all AI/AN students, who are not simply the subjects of these discussions and studies but rather are the active agents and participants in determining their place and their futures. Thank you.



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Introduction

There is increasing recognition that advancing attainment for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students in higher education requires colleges and universities themselves to adapt more concertedly and collaboratively to support, honor, and engage AI/AN students, their cultures, and their tribal communities. Across the country, Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs) educate large numbers of AI/AN students who constitute at least 10 percent and often 30 percent or more of the overall student population of these institutions. However, there has been little documented information about how NASNTIs support successful outcomes for AI/AN students. This report gives visibility to the promising practices being implemented by NASNTIs, which have generally been unrecognized collectively in the higher education community. Building on previous work undertaken over the past three years by staff of an initiative based at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), we hope that the findings described here provide insight into the unique needs of AI/AN students, as well as reveal steps that higher education institutions can take to improve their capacities to promote their attainment.³

Across all levels of education, data suggest that current policies and practices are not fully serving AI/AN students and may perpetuate inequities in attainment. Furthermore, AI/AN students are too often relegated to a footnote or asterisk in reports on the performance of underrepresented groups, contributing to their invisibility in efforts to promote equity in higher education.⁴ The goal of this case study is to shed light on how some NASNTIs have succeeded in eliminating gaps in graduation outcomes between AI/AN students and other student groups. It builds on emerging scholarship and policy analysis – much of which has been pursued by Native American scholars – that seek solutions to the persistent disparities in higher education attainment for AI/AN students. We believe that by describing what a small group of high performing NASNTIs has done to improve outcomes for their AI/AN students, this study can serve as a resource for other institutions and galvanize wider commitments to support AI/AN student postsecondary attainment. We also hope this work helps address the persistent dearth of data about AI/AN students in

higher education that has been recently reiterated by the American Council on Education.⁵

This study is part of WICHE's multiyear project, *Reducing Postsecondary Attainment Gaps for American Indians and Alaska Natives: Linking Policy and Practice*. The project has the broad purpose of building institutional capacity and connectivity among NASNTIs to increase postsecondary attainment for AI/AN students. Over three years, the project has focused on issues influencing Native American student attainment at the intersection of higher education institutions and state and federal policy environments. The project, including research activities such as the current study, also develops and disseminates data and information about NASNTIs to increase awareness about the unique approaches they are pursuing to promote better outcomes for AI/AN students in higher education.

Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs) are federally recognized public and private institutions that enroll an undergraduate population of at least 10 percent American Indian/Alaska Native students. Currently there are 37 NASNTIs, which enrolled about 12 percent of the nation's AI/AN undergraduates in 2018-19 and conferred 14 percent and 10 percent of the nation's associate's and bachelor's degrees, respectively, in 2018. Recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a type of Minority Serving Institution (MSI), NASNTIs are eligible to receive federal grant funding allocated to MSIs; however, these institutions have lacked a collaborative network that is solely focused on the advancement of NASNTIs in educating and supporting AI/AN students. WICHE's NASNTI initiative represents the first convening of these institutions in a formal way to promote resource sharing and collaboration.

Methodology

This study investigates how a subset of five NASNTIs has developed and implemented practices that advance Native American student persistence and academic success on their campuses. These institutions have maintained relatively high overall graduation rates as well as low or no disparities in attainment outcomes between their AI/AN students and other students.

The study seeks to understand what strategies and practices undertaken by these institutions were viewed by staff members and leaders as contributing to positive outcomes for AI/AN students.

The five NASNTIs are all public institutions, including two two-year colleges and three four-year universities that are located in North Carolina and Oklahoma. Each has received at least one NASNTI grant through Title III Part A or Part F funding through the U.S. Department of Education in the past decade. Title III funding is competitive and supports institutional capacity building and enhancement of academic programming for underserved students. It is the only targeted source of federal grant funding for NASNTIs.⁶ The importance of these funds cannot be overstated since eligible institutions by definition serve financially disadvantaged student populations.⁷

We invited these five institutions to participate in the study based on an internal review of postsecondary graduation rates. Over a three-year period, each had maintained relatively high overall graduation rates, as well as very low or no gaps in graduation rates between AI/AN students and other students, suggesting that the institutions were pursuing practices that are effective for AI/AN student success. Participation in the study was voluntary and involved a single hour-long interview over Zoom, as well as an opportunity to provide follow-up feedback on preliminary findings. The interviews were conducted between November 2019, and

February 2020. Institutional participation by campus representatives ranged from one person to nine people representing varied departments and roles. Three interviews included the participation of the president, provost, and/or chancellor. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the project team for key findings and crosscutting themes.

About the Institutions

East Central University

Ada, Okla., Public Four-Year
3,423 Undergraduates

Murray State College

Tishomingo, Okla., Public Two-Year
2,780 Undergraduates

Northeastern State University

Tahlequah, Okla., Public Four-Year
7,809 Undergraduates

Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College

Miami, Okla., Public Two-Year
2,456 Undergraduates

University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Pembroke, NC, Public Four-Year
7,001 Undergraduates

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS), Institutional Characteristics and Fall Enrollment, 2019.



Courtesy: Murray State College

Limitations

The inclusion of only five NASNTIs for this case study does not imply that effective and promising higher education practices for AI/AN students are not being implemented by other NASNTIs. Indeed, further investigation of institutional efforts and progress in overcoming constraints in promoting AI/AN student attainment in a variety of state and tribal nation contexts would be useful. It is important to note that while federally mandated graduation rate data were used because they are a uniform method to measure postsecondary success across institutions, they exclude some AI/AN students. Reported annually by every Title IV-eligible postsecondary institution, graduation rate data represent discreet cohorts of students, specifically those who enroll as first-time, full-time undergraduates, and exclude part-time, transfer, and returning students.

In addition, these graduation rates are reported using federally designated racial and ethnic categories. As a result, only AI/AN students who identify as non-Hispanic and as a single category are included in the AI/AN population. This has the effect of undercounting AI/AN students who are included in the “two or more races” category. Graduation rate data are lagged and those used for identifying institutions for this case study reflected graduate outcomes that occurred between 2015 and 2017. A final limitation concerns the timing of the study. Since the institutions were selected and interviews were conducted between September 2019 and February 2020, our findings represent institutional practices being implemented prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and do not reveal its impacts on sustaining those practices.

Literature Review

Prior to our campus interviews, project staff conducted a literature review to help pinpoint the most significant factors that contribute to, as well as inhibit, the educational success of AI/AN students. Several researchers have noted that while AI/AN students have unique identities and experiences that are grounded in Native American cultures and communities, these factors are seldom reflected in institutional practices or theories of higher education persistence. For example, attainment models stress the importance of student engagement and belonging, but generally do not take into account the unique backgrounds of AI/AN students or consider the potential of cultural clashes to impact students’ experiences and subsequent persistence.⁸ The literature on AI/AN student persistence identifies unique factors that facilitate student success as originating both inside and outside higher education institutions. Moreover, there is growing consensus that institutions need to take these unique factors into consideration to foster conducive environments. For example, adopting frameworks expressly focused on AI/AN student success, such as the family education model, can create a foundation for an array of effective practices.⁹ The following paragraphs briefly review retention strategies that have been found to support AI/AN student attainment, beginning with practices that incorporate the importance of family and community.

Family as a Contributing Factor for the Persistence of Native Students

Families and home communities are integral in AI/AN students’ postsecondary experiences and successes.¹⁰ Broadly speaking, family plays a key role in the postsecondary success of AI/AN students by serving as an ongoing support system for students, source of student goals, and an anchor for remaining connected to home communities and cultures while enrolled in college.

Family as Support System. The connections to family, and more broadly their home communities, are considered by many researchers to be the most important factors supporting AI/AN student success, specifically those researchers that rely heavily on first-hand accounts of student experiences.¹¹ Additionally, AI/AN students place a high value on the role of family in their individual success, even in instances where institutional leaders and policymakers do not.¹²

Community-Based Goals. As an extension of ongoing family support and encouragement to persist, home communities influence how many AI/AN students view their postsecondary aspirations, as their goals tend to be situated within community contexts as opposed to individual benefits.¹³ For example, research suggests that AI/AN students are guided by a sense of “giving back to their community” rather than by personal economic gain.¹⁴ Serving in the position of “role model” within the community for younger generations is also a motivator for AI/AN students.¹⁵



Courtesy: Northeastern State University

Connections to Home. While familial connection can serve as a source of support and guidance for students, the physical proximity to family and community plays a crucial role in student success for AI/AN students as well. The ability to return home and participate in traditional ceremonies provides positive support for AI/AN postsecondary students.¹⁶ In a study of residential AI/AN students, it was found that students return home throughout the school year to remain connected and gain a source of support that may not exist within the traditional campus environment.¹⁷

Institutional Retention Strategies

The literature on the retention of AI/AN students in higher education identifies the importance of creating connections to students' families and home communities as well as to Native American cultures. These practices reflect the establishment of a community within their campuses that fosters an environment of success.

Creating a “home away from home.” As evidenced by the integral role that family and home plays for AI/AN student success, the creation of a “home away from

home” on college campuses has been highlighted as a strategy for supporting student success. Specifically, dedicated places and spaces on campus for AI/AN students helps develop a home community amongst students and fosters a sense of belonging.¹⁸ These spaces for AI/AN students “to be themselves culturally” are not limited to dedicated cultural centers, but rather exist when established relationships with peers, staff, and faculty foster a community that supports academic, social, and emotional support.¹⁹

In addition to physical space that creates a sense of belonging for AI/AN students, it is also essential that student support programs are reflective of students' cultures and identities.²⁰ Incorporating Native American culture into student affairs programming provides an opportunity for students to engage positively with the campus environment while providing an opportunity for them to meet their spiritual needs.²¹

Structured Mentoring. The creation of dedicated spaces on campus for AI/AN students fosters their sense of belonging and promotes networking among students, which has been found to support positive outcomes for AI/AN college students.²² For example,



Courtesy: University of North Carolina at Pembroke

peer mentoring is associated with student success, with mentoring among peers of the same race found to be a strong factor in student persistence and retention among students of color, including among AI/AN students.²³ Additionally, peer mentoring opportunities among AI/AN students plays a significant role in helping students overcome barriers to success, while fostering a connection to community for mentees.²⁴

Faculty Support. Strong faculty-student interactions have been found to yield positive outcomes for students.²⁵ The AI/AN student persistence and retention literature also highlights the integral role that faculty play in students' persistence and success.²⁶ Similar to the important role of networks among AI/AN students within a campus environment, Native American faculty have been found to be crucial in fostering a positive experience for students.²⁷ Additionally, faculty play a crucial role in promoting AI/AN student success by creating teaching environments and curricula that are supportive for students.²⁸ Staff across an institution, including non-Native American faculty, have a responsibility to be equipped with the professional development necessary to enhance their knowledge of AI/AN students' cultures and experiences.²⁹

While the literature discussed previously offers examples and frameworks for NASNTIs to incorporate into their existing institutional practices, it is also important to recognize the important role of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in educating AI/AN students and leading efforts for advancing these students' postsecondary success. The purpose and mission of TCUs is rooted in the tribal communities that they serve and the commitment to advancing American Indian and Alaska Native educational opportunities. This has resulted in successful student support practices and outcomes in areas of nation building, economic development, and creating a diverse faculty body, all of which can serve as models for success across NASNTIs and other higher education institutions.³⁰ In 2018, TCUs, colleges and universities, nonprofits, and foundations formed the Indigenous Higher Education Equity Initiative (IHEEI) and crafted the *Declaration of Native Purpose in Higher Education*, which outlines the duties and responsibilities of nontribal institutions must take in developing student-focused environments that best support AI/AN student success.³¹ The findings of this study underscore the practices outlined in the *Declaration of Native Purpose in Higher Education* and

highlight promising practices for supporting AI/AN students and ways NASNTIs can continue to institutionalize successful practices for advancing AI/AN student outcomes. Lastly, TCUs serve as anchors of their communities and are a potential source of partnership for NASNTIs to collaborate.³²

In summary, the existing research on AI/AN student success in higher education demonstrates the important role of family, community, and tribally-connected institutions in the persistence and success of AI/AN undergraduates. Family and home communities serve as a central support system for students, including guiding goal-setting and motivating their persistence. Within the campus environment, the establishment of a "home away from home" through holistic supports and relationship-building creates a sense of belonging among AI/AN students that, in turn, fosters persistence. As demonstrated by the successes of TCUs, also important are institutional commitments and corresponding practices that enact support for American Indian and Alaska Native postsecondary success. Findings from this study seek to build on this literature from the vantage point of the institutional contexts of NASNTIs.

Findings

Overall, in this case study we found that Native American culture, family, and community figure prominently in the student success practices and initiatives developed and implemented across the five NASNTIs in the study. In addition, the institutions incorporate AI/AN student and tribal community considerations into how they function culturally, as organizations, in terms of relationships, leadership, personnel policies, internal coordination, values, communication and outreach, use of data, and activities and events. A central theme reflected in both the organizational culture and academic practices at these five NASNTIs is integration of approaches that reflect AI/AN students' cultural identities and practices.

AI/AN Student Success at the Organizational Level

Prioritizing Relationships

For each of the five NASNTIs, the academic success of AI/AN students is a priority that is reflected in

organizational processes, structures, and commitments. Consistently, too, these institutions view enrolled AI/AN students as members of their families, tribal nations, and home communities, rather than solely as individuals pursuing educational goals. Building and sustaining relationships with the tribal nations and communities that their AI/AN students belong to is therefore a prominent concern for these NASNTIs. One representative explained her institution's interconnected sense of obligation both to AI/AN students and their tribal communities:

"We're not an institution that does not care about the community in which we live and where we are located, [one] that only cares about our students here. We couldn't operate that way. I think that's one of the things that makes us unique. We have this sense of obligation to our community, given our history, to maintain those relationships with tribal nations. One of the beautiful things about working here is there are so many people invested in making sure we really protect those relationships as best as possible."

Along similar lines, for each of the five colleges and universities in the study, the **priority of relationships** with Native American communities is described as part of the value system and culture of the institution. For them, relationships with tribal nations have been shaped by the fact that the institution was founded expressly to educate Native Americans and included Native American community goals from the outset. Nearly all are located in the geographic area where a majority of their AI/AN students reside. Most are closely tied to a few tribal nations, but have students representing upwards of 30 or more tribes from across the country. For all the institutions, staff and leaders are highly aware of the tribal nation affiliations of their students. As one college president we interviewed explained, if a member of a particular tribe attends the college, then that is grounds for the institution to have a relationship with the tribe.

Relationships with tribal nations give these five institutions unique identity and heritage, which in turn are a source of pride and institutional values. For example, the University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP) celebrates its history of being founded by Native Americans to prepare teachers to



Courtesy: East Central University

work in Native American communities in the state and makes "an intentional effort to maintain that heritage that represents our beginning [and] that makes us unique." Similarly, Murray State College (MSC), "takes a lot of pride in our Native heritage here in Southeast Oklahoma," according to a representative. Institutional values reflecting a "debt of gratitude" or "sense of obligation" toward tribal nations were strong among these colleges and universities, which uniformly view tribes as allies and partners. Among the five institutions, tribal nations had: financed student tribal members' education; donated lands that are part of campus; paid for new construction on campus, such as dormitories; paid the salaries of embedded staff members; provided direct wrap-around support services and advising to tribal members and other AI/AN students; and collaborated with institutions on a variety of political, workforce development, and sociocultural initiatives. For example, Northeastern State University's (NSU) relationship with the Cherokee Nation is wide-ranging and includes stewardship of tribal resources entrusted to the university and cultural advocacy, such as supporting the successful local effort to rededicate Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day.

The institutional representatives whom we interviewed described relationships with tribes as ongoing, and as requiring maintenance and sensitivity to each partners' evolving needs. Two-way, regular communication is key. For example, the Chickasaw Nation has advocated with the state government in Oklahoma for MSC to retain its independent status. UNCP recently provided a letter

of support for the Lumbee Tribe's senate hearing for federal recognition. Also, in North Carolina, the State Advisory Council on Indian Education has expanded to include higher education, along with K-12 education, which UNCP sees as a new resource to strengthen its relationship with each tribal nation in the state. East Central University's (ECU) nursing program partners closely with both the Chickasaw Tribe and the Choctaw Tribe and their medical facilities in the area. ECU leaders and faculty have connections with both tribes, which facilitates ECU's ability to be responsive, such as a recent request to expand its social work program to meet increasing tribal needs for graduates with this expertise.

One manifestation of the relationships that these institutions strive to maintain with tribal nations is that institutional representatives go to meetings held in tribal communities and attend tribal events, rather than solely the reverse. For example, at Northeastern Oklahoma Agricultural & Mechanical College (NEO) a staff member attends Intertribal Council meetings to "keep lines of communication open." At ECU, the president regularly visits each tribe and attends tribal commencement festivities and other events.

Staff at UNCP find that going into tribal communities is important because "that's a comfortable space," especially for AI/AN students who are first-generation college students: "We introduce higher education to them in their community, in their backyard, with family, friends, and anyone who supports our students. That's been very encouraging."

At the same time, tribal nations often have an ongoing presence on campus at these NASNTIs, particularly through tribal higher education offices. Tribal government staff members are embedded at several institutions, where they have designated office space on campus to meet with students. ECU houses the Oklahoma Indian Legal Services organization, which is a pan-tribal nonprofit that assists Native Americans with legal issues and also provides pre-law and paralegal experience for students. In addition, tribal nations partner with these institutions to implement events on campus. For example, NSU has hosted both Choctaw Nation and Muscogee (Creek) Nation higher education offices on campus for "office hours" and Cherokee Nation College Resource Center has offered several scholarship workshops on campus.



Courtesy: University of North Carolina at Pembroke



Courtesy: Northeastern State University

Role of Leadership

The presidents, chancellors, provosts, and other leaders of each of the NASNTIs included in the study play a vital role in establishing, maintaining, and fostering relationships with tribal nations and with AI/AN students, which have been key to student success. As one representative described: “There really is kind of a trickle-down effect from the person at the top.”

Presidential-level leadership for AI/AN student success is important to these institutions to recognize and adhere to the implications of the sovereign status of tribes and tribal governments. One college president described spending “an enormous amount of time” with the leaders of different tribes and sub-tribes, and regularly serves as host to Native American leaders, elders, and families at events on campus. Another president explained that interactions with tribal nations is “always done with respect,” and that the sovereign status of tribes means that talking with a tribal leader is akin to talking to the President of the United States.

Presidential-level leadership has also been key in restoring broken or nonexistent relationships with tribes. A previous administration of one of the NASNTIs included in the study had been uninterested in relationships with local tribal nations. When the current president assumed office at this institution, he prioritized re-establishing these relationships, as a staff member recalled:

“It was our president’s second day in office and he called a luncheon meeting with all [of the local] tribal chiefs and said, ‘This will be a priority of mine’ – building our own resources and improving the experience for Native students – to show our local tribes that we are really serious about this. Our administration wanted to show that not only are we saying that we are going to prioritize these relationships, but we are putting lots of action behind this.”

Since relationships between local tribes and this institution were restored a decade ago, a number of ensuing transformations have occurred that have direct benefits for AI/AN student attainment, including securing several Title III grants, renovating the Native American center on campus, expanding the Native American student club, and collaborating with local tribes to install a tribal flag plaza and intertribal monument on campus. Several transfer student scholarship programs have also been established with four-year institutions that have further elevated the institution’s reputation with AI/AN students. At another institution, relationships with tribal communities were galvanized a few years ago when the institution committed to improving the retention and graduation rates of its AI/AN students. This attainment goal has propelled “a culture of student success on campus” that

includes numerous programs to bolster AI/AN student engagement through building relationships between staff and students.

In addition, the leaders of these NASNTIs are visible and accessible to AI/AN students. One college president explained: "I think being physically present with students is important, [and therefore] I am meeting with our Native students, making sure they have support. A lot of them are first-generation college students, so I am taking them to lunch or dinner in small groups to help with the social interaction and just listening." Another institution takes an approach that views connecting AI/AN students to campus leadership as a means of promoting students' cultural competency and sense of belonging in higher education, as a staff member explained:

"We're very intentional that our leadership is present at our Native student activities and knows about our programming because we believe it's very important that students know who they are. Before students would say, 'Who's the chancellor? What does the chancellor do? Is that like the principal?' [Now] our students have that cultural competency to know, who is the chancellor, and who is the provost. [We do this by] intentionally involving them in all of our activities and our chancellor is there. He's hosted events at his home. So, the students really understand that they are important to our administration because our administration is there."

A final aspect of leadership that these NASNTIs find important for the success of their AI/AN students is the inclusion of tribal leaders and tribal members as part of the institution's leadership. At MSC, three of seven members of the board of regents are tribal members and the governor of the Chickasaw Nation serves on MSC's foundation board. At NEO, local tribal leaders have served on the presidential search committee. At several institutions, top leaders and staff who regularly liaise with tribal governments are themselves tribal members. Native American alumni are a particularly important source of support to these institutions, contributing to AI/AN student recruitment and acting as mentors to student tribal members. In some cases, too, alumni of these NASNTIs have assumed leadership roles in tribal governments, including serving as

governors, which has further strengthened institutional relationships with the tribes.

Personnel and Faculty Development Practices

Commitment to AI/AN student attainment is reflected in the hiring and personnel practices of these institutions. This includes hiring staff who are Native American and who bring "the Native voice" and perspectives to their work. One institution has learned that, "It's the type of person we hire, and not just the credentials, that matters most." Specifically, these NASNTIs find that faculty and staff have to be "approachable, accessible and welcoming" or AI/AN students will less likely seek out the help and support that they might need.

Several institutions include discussion about Native American cultures and related expectations for faculty members and other employees during hiring interviews. One representative characterized this as **hiring to Native American values**:

"During the interview of all faculty, when we're trying to determine who to hire, we talk about Native American cultures. And the expectation of the university for them to support those students in particular ... This includes family first. In the culture of Native Americans, family is first. And it is necessary to always work with the student – you cannot be inflexible. So, if mom needs to go to the doctor (it doesn't even have to be that she is in the hospital) that is a priority for a student because it's the family. And we expect our faculty to work with those students. We don't tolerate inflexibility in that regard. So, in hiring we make sure we're hiring to Native American values."

Expectations to support AI/AN student success are incorporated in faculty and staff induction and professional development programming at these NASNTIs. At UNCP, the university's Native American heritage is not something new employees "just pick up along the way," but they are instead "exposed to it from Day One on campus." Beyond induction, these institutions also provide faculty with professional development and support to "reach all students, in particular our Native students," as one representative described. This includes training provided by centers on campus that are funded through Title III grants as well

as training that is integrated into campus infrastructure, such as centers for teaching and learning. NEO, for example, has recently used its Title III grant to help faculty convert courses into an online or hybrid format that incorporates culturally appropriate pedagogy.

In general, faculty commitment to student success, which is widespread at these NASNTIs, predisposes them to be open to new strategies and knowledge that improves their effectiveness both in and outside of the classroom. Faculty are understood to be “on the frontline of retention,” according to a representative at NSU, where there are “a lot of allies among the faculty” supporting AI/AN student success. NSU has found that AI/AN students are best supported when there is a “seamless integration of student services and the academic programs,” achieved through formal committees, professional development, constant communication, and expectations for faculty and staff engagement in Native American culture and events. It takes a “reciprocal approach” toward supporting faculty with Native American cultural experts whose assistance helps to “build a sense of community” and shared institutional culture.

Several institutions have found that informal interactions during cultural events provide good opportunities for faculty and staff professional development. For example, intertribal dances, convocations, and graduations that weave Native American cultural components into events and ceremonies are safe spaces for faculty to ask questions to clarify their understanding. This, in turn, makes faculty better able to support their AI/AN students both in and outside of the classroom.

These successes do not mean that the institutions have not faced resistance from faculty. For example, efforts continue in one institution to “change the mindset” of inflexibility among some faculty. A representative described how institutional “culture change” has unfolded there in recent years:

“It’s not been easy. There are situations that the student forgot and didn’t look at their email, so they didn’t get a message. And a faculty member might think automatically that the student doesn’t belong here because they can’t do that. We have worked to change that type of mindset. We know that students don’t read

email, so we’ve decided that it doesn’t matter if it’s an objective in a course, we’re going to figure out how to communicate with them a different way...If we have to have a bit of forgiveness. Or if we have to call students one extra time, why not? But not everybody has that attitude on campus. It’s slowly changing, and our president feels that way so that has helped. She’s very student-friendly. Faculty that really didn’t want to change have moved on and retired so there has been a whole cultural shift over the last six or seven years. We’re not perfect, but we’re trying to improve.”

Another NASNTI has found that faculty resistance declines when there are productive working relationships between Native American student services staff and faculty members: “It is just like any Native community, when you’re coming in as an outsider, you’ve got to be brought in by the right people and get introduced.” Finally, in some settings, faculty are experiencing teaching overload and are stretched timewise. The ability to pay stipends has been useful in such circumstances where faculty might otherwise pushback on engagement in professional development and changes to better support AI/AN students.

Organizational Roles and Infrastructure

Although there is sentiment within these NASNTIs that supporting AI/AN student success is “everyone’s responsibility,” each also has dedicated staff members who serve in formal positions and units with day-to-day work responsibilities to carry out this priority. Depending on their size, the NASNTIs in this study have one or more designated staff members who provide direct student support, liaise with local tribal communities, work with faculty, and advocate for practices that support AI/AN students. These staff can be largely supported through Title III funds, especially at institutions where special programs and supports are contingent on external funding. The importance and impact of these staff members on the success of AI/AN students is evident across the campuses, as one representative we interviewed reflected: “I can’t count the number of committees that I am on. It’s important to bring the perspective of how policies will impact Native students.”

At NSU, promotion of AI/AN student success is grounded in the Center for Tribal Studies, which is the central resource on campus for supporting students' academic effectiveness and is charged with a range of responsibilities. Similarly, at ECU, AI/AN student support activities are based in the Hays Native American Study Center. At MSC, academic and basic needs support is available to AI/AN students through the campus Success Center as well as the Chickasaw Retention Office, which focuses on Chickasaw students but serves any student who comes in. At UNCP, support has been recently galvanized through establishment of the Southeast American Indian Studies program and the Campus Advisory Committee, which are both heightening focus on AI/AN student engagement and graduation success across campus. At MSC, the college cooperates with a local tribal nation to implement student support, which is centered in the recruiting and retention office on campus. In addition, MSC recently established a mid-level management group, which represents all of the academic and student affairs unit directors on campus and meets every two weeks. The group focuses on student retention issues, including those affecting individual AI/AN students, and has been effective in quickly identifying and fixing problems that could otherwise adversely affect students' progress.

In addition to formal positions, units, and standing committees, several of the NASNTIs included in this

study embed goals for AI/AN student success in strategic planning. NSU, for example, includes its relationship with Indigenous people in its overall strategic plan, which then informs the priorities and activities in each unit's strategic plan.

Finally, these institutions include multiple spaces and artifacts on campus that symbolize and promote AI/AN students' sense of belonging. This includes tribal and intertribal monuments, signage in Indigenous languages, and home-like comfortable spaces for students to hang out, ranging from staff members' offices to Native American student centers. Prior to creating such spaces, one institution discovered that its AI/AN students, who tend not to live on campus, were sitting in their cars between classes. At NSU, the Center for Tribal Studies is the "front porch and living room for tribal students" and pursues numerous practices that build community and connection for students.

Evidence-Based Decision Making

Another commonality among the five NASNTIs in this study is their use of data, both quantitative and qualitative, about AI/AN student success to inform plans and strategies for improving retention and persistence. In interviews, representatives highlighted the ways



Courtesy: Northeastern State University

that data, including the use of data systems, have supported institution-level efforts to identify gaps in AI/AN students' academic progress in order to implement early interventions that have contributed to student success.

Using Data to Measure Student Success

Several institutions use **data systems**, such as early alert or course management platforms, to measure student success and monitor student progress – and sometimes faculty performance – early and often. These data systems allow institutions to analyze trends across student populations and identify disparities in student success. Through these technologies, institutions are able to use institution-wide data to meet individual student needs. For example, MSC's early alert system provides its retention coordinators with detailed attendance data, allowing them to work collaboratively with students to address issues that affect persistence.

Multiple institutions described using data more broadly to transform and improve practices to support AI/AN students. For example, several years ago the MSC president wanted to raise faculty salaries and did this by shifting them from a nine-month to a 10-month contract. For two of the additional contracted weeks, faculty review and analyze student course-level data, as a representative explained, "To give faculty an opportunity to stop and say, 'Where do we need to improve?'" MSC purchased multiple data analytic platforms, Taskstream and ZogoTech, that are intended to support the institution's efforts to collect and analyze enrollment, progression, and outcomes data in a disaggregated manner that supports evidence-based decision-making. MSC also tracks faculty end-of-course and program success rates as a way to select instructors for coveted opportunities to teach the student success course for entering students.

At UNCP, the shift towards a data-informed mindset was part of larger shifts in organizational culture that began around 2015. Leaders from UNCP stated that there was a deliberate shift from an access-based focus to prioritizing student persistence and retention that led UNCP to rely on the collection and analysis of student success data to make decisions that best support AI/AN students. One UNCP representative described the role that data has played in this success:

"So really having that institutional culture saying that we need to be successful or better, plus using data, that really helped drive us over the years to get to the point that we are at now."

Commitment to use data to guide institutional decision-making and foster a culture of student success was also evident in how these institutions discussed their evaluation efforts and use of program evaluation as a tool to gather alternative perspectives. For example, NEO established internal evaluation teams for several key initiatives including their Title III grant and peer mentoring program that included faculty, staff, students, and tribal representatives. Through the feedback provided in the review of the programs, NEO has been able to adjust services to better meet the needs of its students.



Courtesy: University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Using the AI/AN Student Perspective to Drive Change

Systematically collected student feedback and opportunities to provide input are used by several of these NASNTIs to inform decision-making. Both NEO and UNCP include Native students as members of advisory boards and campus committees. At NEO, the American Indian Center for Excellence included AI/AN students as committee members for the center's renovation and grant evaluation. UNCP includes AI/AN students on formal advisory boards. Representatives there have found that: "Students will tell you how they feel about the job you are doing; the question [however] is whether we are going to take the time to listen."

By taking into account AI/AN student perspectives and concerns these institutions are, in effect, using qualitative data to create more inclusive environments that validate and respond to AI/AN student experiences. For example, in response to a request by the student government association, which includes many AI/AN students, UNCP recently proposed a new co-curricular requirement that is being considered for all students, which includes 80 hours of coursework or volunteer work to help students understand and appreciate the Native American community and culture that makes the institution unique. In a similar effort to respond to AI/AN student perspectives, an academic change occurred at ECU in recent years when students voiced concerns about the Native American Studies program being situated within the institution's History department. After students expressed their perspective, the institution moved forward in establishing Native American Studies as an independent department at ECU.

These examples of using both **quantitative and qualitative** data reveal how evidence can be used to inform decision making and guide efforts to promote AI/AN student support and create more inclusive campus environments for students. In general, these institutions recognize data as playing a critical role in identifying gaps and highlighting areas that need to be addressed to advance AI/AN student success. Additionally, data are collected and used to evaluate the impacts of student programming and ensure that institutional practices are evolving in ways that continue to advance student success.

AI/AN Student Success Practices Inside and Outside of the Classroom

The NASNTIs in this study have tailored high impact and promising practices in order to engage AI/AN students and help them achieve their academic goals. As this section explains, the institutions have built AI/AN student identity into student services and into teaching and learning experiences both inside and outside of the classroom.

AI/AN Student Mentorship

The institutions generally recognize that student services and academic programs need to forge personal relationships with AI/AN students. In particular, relationship building has to be infused into first-year experience and mentoring initiatives, which have proved vital for AI/AN student success.

First-year experiences bring together small groups of students with faculty or staff on a regular basis. First-year experiences at several of the NASNTIs in this study are designed to support AI/AN students with an emphasis on relationship building. For example, at MSC the student success class begins at an all-day orientation event on campus that has the goal of ensuring that each incoming student has a friend and a connection with a faculty member and advisor. Mentorship is built into this semester-long course that concludes with students being provided with two phone numbers and emails to contact the instructor or another staff member. Recognizing the need to set relationship expectations early is also evident in UNCPs "Native Strong" program. Native Strong is an American Indian academic transition program starting in the summer, in which UNCP staff members are able to establish relationships with students even before they start classes. Initial results of the program are promising, with a 95 percent graduation rate from the first cohort of AI/AN student participants.

These five institutions have also found that mentoring is important to AI/AN student success. In particular, they have developed **culturally responsive mentoring** initiatives that are in tune to the needs of AI/AN students and rely on elders, alumni, faculty, staff, and peers to serve as mentors. NEO implements a

tribal elder mentoring initiative, as well as step-ahead peer mentoring. Mentoring by elder tribal members for AI/AN students at NEO focuses on professional development, with mentors connecting to students through a speaker series organized by the Native American Student Association. Informed by a recent consultation with a student retention expert and a desire to be proactive in providing support, NEO's structured peer-to-peer mentoring initiative is used in both online and hybrid courses. Sophomore students who have been successful in a course and who are interested in supporting other students serve as mentors, which benefits both students, is relatively low cost, and distributes sources of help for struggling and unsure students beyond faculty and staff.

ECU's goal in adopting mentoring initiatives is to foster a sense of belonging in higher education among its AI/AN students, especially among those who are first-generation college students. ECU has found that peer mentoring, in particular, helps AI/AN students overcome these concerns. ECU also utilizes faculty mentoring as a key component of their highly successful Digital Humanities Lab, which will be described more fully below. In this inquiry-based mentoring model, students work with faculty on projects, and can be matched with faculty based on their interests.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning

The NASNTIs in the study all attribute their successful support of AI/AN students, at least in part, to culturally responsive teaching and learning practices, including efforts to build Native American storytelling traditions, language, and other aspects of culture into students' academic experiences. Each has developed **culturally responsive pedagogies** that provide opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of the history, language, and culture of the tribes in their region. NEO conceptualizes this work through its Native Ways of Knowing pedagogy.³³ As part of its Title III NASNTI grant, NEO trains faculty to convert courses to an online or hybrid format that is aligned with culturally appropriate pedagogy. The training emphasizes hands-on, placed-based, and holistic themes, and also includes content on maintaining fairness in assessment practices.

NSU ensures that curricula are culturally responsive by requiring that new courses being developed take the

local regional and tribal perspectives into consideration. NSU staff explain that faculty retain flexibility in how this is achieved, with some incorporating Native American concepts into their courses, while others create courses expressly focused on a regional tribal issue, such as a geography course on Native female warriors and water. NSU staff also noted that these pedagogic successes are a testament to having developed allies among the faculty and shared sense of community that the institution has tried to build around AI/AN student success.

In another example, UNCP has recently proposed for incoming students to participate in 80 hours of coursework or volunteer work pertaining to Native American communities. The program was modeled after a program in North Carolina's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that requires students to take culturally relevant coursework, in areas such as Black history, Black culture, or Black music and art. Through the student government association, UNCP's AI/AN students themselves suggested this proposal as a way for the institution to maintain its heritage and honor the school's origins.

Two NASNTIs in this study have had success with AI/AN students through a **digital storytelling** initiative that enables students to explore and share their culture and language using an immersive technology platform. At ECU, digital storytelling is implemented by the Humanities Education Research Center (HERC) that has a designated Native American language specialist who works with students and faculty mentors on projects. Physically, HERC has a home-like atmosphere – with tables, rather than white boards – designed to encourage AI/AN students to gather and feel comfortable interacting in their new environment.

At NEO, local tribes are diverse and vary in the extent they have pursued language revitalization. NEO's digital storytelling initiative accommodates this by helping AI/AN students explore and tell stories about their culture dually through language, as well as still photos, clips from interviews, and short videos. So far, a third of the NEO faculty have been trained to incorporate cultural storytelling projects into their courses. NEO staff are very pleased with the success AI/AN students have experienced through digital storytelling, describing high levels of engagement and numerous students returning to pursue further inquiry-based research on their culture after completing their first projects.



Courtesy: University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Culturally Informed Campus Events and Spaces

The NASNTIs profiled here are implementing culturally relevant practices both inside and outside of classrooms that incorporate Native American culture into campus-wide events, spaces, and co-curricular programming.

Celebratory, cultural, and recreational events provide opportunities to highlight Native American cultures and also create teachable moments to inform non-Native American faculty, students, staff and community members about these cultures. ECU's approach emphasizes the multiplicity of cultures that exist among Native American tribes, for example, by holding recreational events featuring stickball and the Stomp Dance that are associated with non-local tribes, and hosting exchange dinners with foods from different Native American communities. NSU organizes numerous immersive activities that are Indigenous focused. Staff have led student trips from Oklahoma to Cherokee tribal homelands in North Carolina. The campus also hosts powwows and speaker series featuring Native American authors and poets at its Annual Symposium on the American Indian currently in its 48th year. At NSU, the Tribal Studies Center develops programming and services that serve the spectrum of students and meets students where they are, from those who are maintaining their connection, as well as students who desire the opportunity to learn and be proud to be a Native American scholar.

Cultural and celebratory events provide good opportunities to invite AI/AN students' families and other community members to campus. Graduation ceremonies can include tribal government officials and special acknowledgments of tribal members who are graduating. For over 20 years, NSU has kicked off the school year with a Native American convocation that brings students and families together on campus in a celebration that includes a drum group. At several institutions, when Native students graduate, they are presented with honor cords from their member organization, such as Alpha Kai, or the stoles symbolizing their tribal nations.

ECU has developed a campus-wide means of promoting Native American **language preservation** through opportunities for students to see their Native American languages represented in campus artifacts, symbols, and buildings. Through undergraduate research projects at ECU's Humanities Education Research Center, an application was created that uses QR codes to enable students and others to identify places and objects on campus in Native American languages, using both sounds and visuals. The campus also has building names drawn from the Chickasaw and Choctaw languages, such as the Oka' Institute (*oka'* means water), which focuses on Native American water policy issues, and Pesagi Hall (*pesagi* loosely translates as to teach or show) and Chokka-Chaffa' (*chokka-chaffa'* translates as family). Since a Chickasaw citizen donated land in 1909 for the university, ECU leaders believe it is especially important that the school recognize this heritage by honoring Native American languages.

Service and Community-Oriented Co-Curricular Opportunities

Student engagement in internships, undergraduate research, and community-based service-learning opportunities is strongly associated with student attainment. Each of the NASNTIs in this study have tailored these types of co-curricular experiences to their AI/AN students' cultural backgrounds and to the needs and priorities of local Native American nations, especially in terms of workforce development.

Internships are an important means of promoting student engagement in professionally oriented learning. They also provide a means of connecting students and NASNTIs with real needs and future priorities of tribal nations and communities. The Chickasaw Nation, for example, has a Workforce Development Office that works with several NASNTIs to help students learn about and choose career pathways. It also offers internship experiences for students through its campus-based tribal centers. NSU places students who are tribal members in internships in various tribal government offices of their own tribe, where students learn experientially about areas such as human resource management or business operations through job shadowing. At UNCP, because most Native American communities in North Carolina are located in rural areas, AI/AN students are targeted through an internship grant program developed with the State Employee Credit Union. A UNCP staff member noted that the program has been particularly beneficial to AI/AN students because it connects their experiential academic learning to something that is already meaningful to them – community.

Service learning gives students direct experience with topics and issues they are studying as well as opportunity to analyze, address needs, and solve problems in real communities. UNCP has found that service learning opportunities strongly support AI/AN students' overall academic success. Although AI/AN students at UNCP are less likely to engage in learning communities or other high impact practices, they pursue service learning with Native-serving organizations because, like internships, it connects them meaningfully to their communities. UNCP has found that AI/AN students who engage in service learning have higher grades and a heightened sense of academic belonging. Service learning also helps UNCP

advance its goals of building collaborative relationships with its local communities, and it is estimated that students volunteer roughly 34,000 hours with 180 community partners annually. As a staff member explains, "because our institution was founded for our community, we give back to our community, and engage our students in the process."

Holistic Approach to Student Services for AI/AN Students

The NASNTIs in this study view AI/AN student experiences holistically, integrating students' intellectual, social, and emotional development into support services. Student services units in these institutions have close working relationships with academic programs, and several attributed increased AI/AN student sense of belonging and success to this interconnectedness and holistic approach.

NSU has an explicit goal of reinforcing AI/AN students' identity as an Indigenous person, as well as a "Native person in higher education," which is especially important among students who are the first in their families to pursue an undergraduate degree. Their holistic approach includes hosting family-friendly events and cultural events featuring Native American scholars. In an interview, the director of the Center for Tribal Studies described a transformation of engagement. She attributed this to community building, which was the intent of the living learning community and specifically the Native American family dinners. These dinners showcase the important role of food within Native American communities and provide an opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to congregate around food. The dinners also allowed students to engage with one another outside of the classroom, which helped foster engagement in the classroom. Additionally, in 2014 the NSU president established the Light the Way endowment fund that provides support to students facing emergency situations, such as a dead car battery, and who might otherwise have to stop out of their studies.

MSC recognizes that if it wants to support AI/AN student academic attainment then it has to help students navigate life responsibilities that emanate from outside of school. Its retention coordinator implements an early alert system and is tasked with proactively reaching out to students who are missing classes or struggling

academically. The goal is to understand what students are dealing with and identify what help they need, both in and outside of their classes.

Discussion and Conclusions

The five NASNTIs included here pursue numerous strategies and practices that are expressly intended to support AI/AN student attainment. Consistent with the literature, they each connect the retention and persistence of their AI/AN students to forging meaningful and ongoing relationships with the students, as well as their families, cultures, and tribal nations. We found that these NASNTIs pursue a range of high-impact and promising practices that are tailored to the interests of their AI/AN students and to local tribal communities. We also found that, in addition to providing culturally responsive academic programming, successful outcomes for AI/AN students at these NASNTIs are associated with how they operate as organizations. In particular, how their organizational culture creates and sustains an environment of support for AI/AN student attainment. Relationships with tribal nations play a central role in these institutions' success with AI/AN students, informing academic program development, co-curricular opportunities, and institutional identity and goals. Those relationships also allowed the institutions to provide resources, cultivate alliances, offer mentoring, and expand career pathway opportunities for graduates. The institutions each have one or more designated staff members who provide direct support to AI/AN students, serve on committees, create programming, and generally advocate for the inclusion of Native American perspectives across campus.

Consistent with the literature on AI/AN student success, we found that these NASNTIs incorporate Native American families, communities, and cultures into institutional practices and recognize that culture and tribal nation sovereignty matter, both for student success and for institutional well-being. These NASNTIs continuously try to adapt to improve their culturally responsive programming and campus environments for AI/AN students, rather than expecting AI/AN students to adjust to what might otherwise be experienced as an unwelcoming and culturally remote atmosphere. The practices of these NASNTIs indicate that AI/AN student attainment is enhanced when an institution makes

it a priority and embeds practices supporting it into academics, administration, leadership, and operations of the institution more generally.

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- ⁶ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Title III Eligibility: Institutions of higher education must meet both basic and specific eligibility requirements. A basic requirement is that an institution must be legally authorized by the state in which it is located to be a junior college or provide an educational program for which it awards a bachelor's degree. Under specific eligibility requirements, an institution must have at least 50 percent of its degree students receiving need-based assistance under Title IV of the Higher Education Act or have a substantial number of enrolled students receiving Pell Grants, and have low educational and general expenditures. See: ed.gov/programs/duestitle3a/eligibility.html.
- ⁷ In spring 2021, the WICHE project will initiate an analysis of the Title III NASNTI funding using annual reports obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. These reports will provide context to examine the linkages between Native students' educational progress, the institutions where they are concentrated, and the impact of federal funding on both student success and the development of NASNTIs.
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