

# Conceptualizing American Indian/Alaska Native College Students' Classroom Experiences: Negotiating Cultural Identity between Faculty and Students

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The U. S. dominant culture's values and ways of knowing depicted in college curriculum assume that American Indian/Alaska Native college students will assimilate to dominant cultural beliefs and values in order to acquire a degree in higher education. Representative of this hegemonic, pedagogical paradigm is the prescribed basic communication course competencies taught at most colleges and universities in the U.S. Institutionally endowed power enables college instructors to compel students to acquiesce to dominant cultural norms and expected behaviors relevant to interpersonal, small group, and public speaking skills. In this meta-analysis, Jackson's (2002) cultural contracts paradigm demonstrates that cultural identities are socially constructed between students and faculty. Jackson's paradigm provides a theoretical lens through which to view cultural negotiation in the context of a basic communication course. Conclusions of this critical literature review include providing a clearer understanding of juxtaposition of American Indian/Alaska Native college students' traditions and the basic oral communication course competencies; an awareness of a paucity of multicultural teaching perspectives in the basic course curriculum; and recommendations for improving the learning environment.

## Introduction

**T**he majority of American college courses are deeply rooted in the hegemonic, colonialist, pedagogical paradigm that trains instructors, produces textbooks, and designs instructional tools. Since Western European ideology permeated our nation's institutions of higher education, America's racial and ethnic minorities and their values have consistently been neglected or insufficiently represented in college textbooks, curricular examples, and

applications (McQuiston & Brod, 1984; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). Evidence of Eurocentric, privileged cultural values and traditions are embedded in the homogeneous perspectives depicted in college curriculum, which may deny American Indian/Alaska Native students cultural relevance or opportunities for academic success. Longstreet and Shane (1993) confirm that curriculum establishes who should be educated, defines objectives for students, determines the relevance of course content, and how that content is disseminated (also see Jackson, Morrison, & Dangerfield, 2002).

With such controlling and stringent curricular standards in place it seems probable that American Indian's/Alaska Native's cultural identities are excluded from curriculum and instructional design and overtly denied in higher education classroom interactions, while a European-American instructor's cultural identity is privileged. Jackson's (2002) cultural contracts paradigm establishes that individuals' cultural identities are negotiated in an academic context when evidence of power or privilege makes demands on subordinated individuals, typically students of color. Additionally, "each contract type is a result of how identities have been personally and socially constructed and explored" (Jackson, 2004, p. 98) within a specific context. For the purposes of this article, the relevant context under consideration is the basic communication classroom in higher education.

In a 1991 study conducted by the U. S. Department of Labor (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991), 16 qualities were determined essential for high job performance. Ten of these qualities are commonly taught in the basic communication course in higher education, making the basic communication course one of the general education courses often required in college and university degree programs nationwide (Cutspec, McPherson, & Spiro, 1999). Some of the qualities pertain specifically to interpersonal skills, public speaking skills, and small group dynamics, which are generally taught in the basic communication course. American Indian/Alaska Native college students who wish to obtain an undergraduate college degree typically enroll in a basic communication course at some point during their academic career. As in all disciplines, speech communication instructors must meet required university/college curricular standards when designing their courses. Many of the competencies required in the basic communication course may prove culturally incongruent with American Indian/Alaska Native values, beliefs, and traditions. For the purposes of this essay, the communication classroom is representative of the courses in which American Indian/Alaska Native college students find themselves negotiating their cultural identities.

### **Methodology**

Given these considerations, a meta-analysis of the literature will demonstrate how American Indian/Alaska Native students' culture is often marginalized in the basic communication classroom due to prescribed course requirements. The evidence is found in a critical literature review of Jackson's (2002) cultural contracts theory

(the framework that will guide the meta-analysis), American Indian/Alaska Native student traditions, and basic communication course objectives. This synthesis of three bodies of literature results in generating significant insights about culturally specific expectations of American Indian/Alaska Native college students in basic communication courses. The author does not assume that this meta-analysis is an end in itself, but rather a means to connect three bodies of literature not previously linked.

Meta-analysis is clearly analysis of analysis (Glass, 1976). Meta-analysis is a methodology often utilized in quantitative studies (Leandro, 2005; Miles & Gilbert, 2005; Stephen & Vogt, 2004). However, the value of using meta-analysis to examine qualitative studies should not be overlooked. Over a two-year period, the author conducted extensive searches of the three bodies of literature in books, journals, chapters in press, and references of the material gathered. A state-of-the-art literature review resulted from locating and examining relevant research. By juxtaposing the extant literature regarding American Indian/Alaska Native college students' experiences, cultural contracts theory, and the basic communication course competencies, a novel perspective was revealed. A scholarly dialogue emerged from three bodies of literature previously unrelated. The primary purpose of conducting this research was to examine American Indian/Alaska Native college students' negotiation of cultural identity in a basic communication classroom. Implications and recommendations provided reframe the teaching and learning applications that can and should include Indigenous cultural traditions in the communication classroom.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As humans, we co-construct multiple identities that influence how we perceive ourselves and our world (Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003; Jackson, 2004). Through daily interactions with others, we negotiate and communicate our cultural identities through a process that Jackson (2002) labels cultural contracts. Jackson's cultural contract paradigm derives from Ting Toomey's (1999) identity negotiation theory. The "cultural contracts theory seeks to explore issues surrounding value shifts and the effect of those shifts on one's collective and personal self-definition" (Jackson, 2004, p. 91). The basic premise of the cultural contracts theory lies in a metaphorical *signed* agreement upon which a particular relationship develops or exists, "a binding agreement between two or more parties" (Jackson, 2004, p. 90). Implicit in the agreement are expected patterns of behavior and norms perceived as acceptable within the participants' interactions.

The three types of contracts defined by Jackson (2004) are ready-to-sign, quasi-completed, and co-created. Ready-to-sign contracts infer assimilation, "are prenegotiated, and no further negotiation is allowed" (Jackson, 2004, p. 97). This type of contract, initiated by a person in power (i.e., teacher, person of privilege, etc.), assumes the Other will assimilate to the controlling person's perspective or set of values. If the subordinate person (i.e., student, minority, etc.) acquiesces

to *contractual agreement*, the contract is in effect *signed*. The subordinate person, by appearing to accept the contract, has negotiated her or his identity within that relationship. Jackson states, “power differentials among interactants interrupt harmonious and equitable relationships even when assimilation occurs” (2004, p. 91). The result of the ready-to-sign contract in a college classroom, establishes that students have no other options but to accept the socially negotiated relationship if they wish to remain in the class.

Quasi-completed contracts suggest accommodation, and are “partly prenegotiated and partly open for negotiation” (Jackson, 2004, pp. 97-98). This type of contract is *signed* by persons who are not fully committed to co-creating a contract, or negotiating their identity. Each person’s set of values or worldview may be too significant to reframe privilege. A need to retain some sense of control derives from a “perceived sense of vulnerability” (Jackson, 2004, p. 98). This type of contract tends to be less sustainable than other types.

Co-created contracts are the most desirable choice for relational equity since these contracts are “fully negotiable, with the only limits being personal preferences or requirements” (Jackson, 2004, p. 98). This type of cultural contract is *signed* by the interactants who co-create it, and who demonstrate acknowledgement of cultural differences and appreciation of those differences. The objective in this relationship is shared fulfillment. Jackson verifies, “each contract type is a result of how identities have been personally and socially constructed and explored” (2004, p. 98).

Institutionally granted power, that enables instructors to employ power in the classroom, influences the co-construction of identities between instructors and American Indian/Alaska Native students. In addition to the basic course competencies, prescriptive syllabi, and mandatory textbooks, communication instructors tend to facilitate an academic environment that allows *ready-to-sign* contracts to be in place when students arrive in the classroom.

In countless situations, Indigenous students enter classrooms where instructors have been pedagogically trained to control student behavior (Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1984; McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986). There are few opportunities for undergraduate student negotiations of culturally equitable learning environments. Buzzelli and Johnston (2002) investigated the implications of instructors’ imposed moral beliefs on language, power, and culture dynamics in classroom interactions. Their findings confirmed that instructors’ authority heavily influenced students’ identities and imposed assimilated behaviors. Since instructors are institutionally empowered, this dynamic is a reflection of institutional oppression.

Institutionalized oppression persists in academe because the dominant cultural paradigm has resisted curricular modification for students of color (Blau, 2003) and for alternative ways of knowing. Structural inequality that is pervasive in classrooms is indicative of the encompassing social construct of which it is a part (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). According to Cooper, “the classroom culture is to a great extent, an extension of mainstream American culture” (1995, p. 279).

America's social order is reflected in the microcosm of college classrooms (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002) where the dominant culture of privilege perpetuates control of institutionalized hierarchy and traditional Western pedagogy. The dominant culture and its practices are rarely questioned, thus allowing cultural dominance to perpetuate.

Power structures play a critical role in classroom dynamics and curriculum design (hooks, 1994). Curriculum materials from kindergarten to college consistently feature values, beliefs, and practices from the White dominant culture as normative (Blau, 2003), which marginalizes cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors of student populations who are not White, Euro-Americans. The hegemonic cultural values that colonialist curriculum perpetuates reinforces the belief that alternative ways of knowing are inferior to traditional, Euro-centric ways of knowing. The implication is that students of color should assert themselves to be more like students from the dominant culture (Smith, 1999). The negation of other ways of knowing, cultures, or worldviews may prevent access to understanding for some students and create academic environments where students of color are uninvited or unmotivated to succeed in the academy (Jackson, Morrison, & Dangerfield, 2002). The inherent implication for American Indian/Alaska Native students is that unless they forfeit cultural heritage, beliefs, and identities, the American system of higher education may obstruct or suppress their personal and academic development. Systemic tolerance of disempowerment for any individual or student population prevents all college students from achieving the ability to succeed in a pluralistic, multicultural, global environment.

### **American Indian/Alaska Native Students' Traditions**

American Indian/Alaska Native college students have been frequently viewed as an at-risk population (Indian Nations At-Risk Task Force, 1990), if not ignored or negated in academic research and scholarship altogether. At-risk factors attributed to American Indian/Alaska Native college students and their experiences derive from comparisons to a culturally dominant student population. When textbooks and educators categorize the dominant student population's experiences as standard, all practices, ways of knowing, and textbook references appear to refer to a normative paradigm by which all marginalized student groups are evaluated. In this manner, many Native student experiences and ways of knowing are problematized, resulting in the dominant culture's marginalization of American Indian/Alaska Native individuals, inextricably labeling them as *Other*. Historically, American Indians/Alaska Natives "have suffered from systematic genocide within Western society," including imposed educational assimilation, economic dependency, cultural deprivation, and institutionalized oppression (Poupart, 2003, p. 87). Multiple challenges generate stressful situations that affect any college student's experiences. However, students from the dominant, privileged culture rarely experience the same demands that American Indian/Alaska Native students living a bicultural life endure. Structural inequality embedded in academic discourse creates chasms of disservice to students of color.

Many socio-economic-cultural tenets imposed by Western academic discourse create challenges for American Indian/Alaska Native students trying to acquire college degrees with which privileged student populations do not contend. For example, students from the dominant culture might easily understand culturally relevant course content since it relates to their daily lives and worldview. Conversely, the same course content might prove to be culturally irrelevant to Indigenous students if their perception or worldview lacks similar experiences or comprehension. Cultural dissonance often compounds American Indian/Alaska Native students' adjustment to college life (Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Cole & Denzine, 2002; Machamer & Gruber, 1998; Parker, 1998; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, & LaFromboise, 2001). Social constructs such as competition in a predominantly Anglo classroom may conflict with Native cultural values of "harmony, unity, and a basic oneness" (Pewewardy, 2003, p. 36). Machamer and Gruber (1998) found that in many Indian communities, overt competition is considered rude, and that a Native student is likely to feign ignorance rather than compete with a classmate. Swisher's (1990) research confirms that Native traditions embrace collaboration more readily than competition among classmates. In college classrooms where colonialist values and pedagogy emphasize individual achievement, Non-Indian instructors may perceive American Indian/Alaska Native students as culturally deprived, rather than rich in Native cultural traditions, if students do not demonstrate assertive or competitive behaviors. Instructors may misinterpret Native student behaviors as noncompliance with expected classroom norms and attempt to impose assimilation via *signing* a ready-to-sign cultural contract.

Additional cultural values, distinctive from the dominant culture, such as family socialization patterns, conformity to authority and respect for elders, taciturnity, strong tribal social hierarchy, and patrimonial/matrilineal clans, are deeply rooted in Native teachings (Pewewardy, 2003). Indigenous cultural traditions may result in diametric opposition to American Indian/Alaska Natives' college experiences on non-Native campuses.

### Core Beliefs and Values

Cajete (1999) stipulates several culturally shared, core behaviors and values, which he attributes to Indigenous traditions. Some of the behaviors that Cajete (1999) identified as American Indian/Alaska Native specific (but not to any specific tribe) are demonstrations of quietness and silence, especially when individuals are uncomfortable; tendencies toward nonverbal communication preferences rather than talking; appreciation for attentiveness and listening; and inclinations toward tentativeness, especially in unfamiliar contexts. White instructors could perceive demonstrations of these types of behaviors as assimilation and acceptance of a *ready-to-sign* contract (Jackson, 1999) since some behaviors could be viewed as nonassertive or compliancy from a Eurocentric perspective.

Many Native children are encouraged to be active listeners, rather than participants in discussions. While effective listening is a social construct perceived as a beneficial attribute for students in college courses, dialogic participation is expected as a means to demonstrate knowledge. Non-Native teachers may misinterpret classroom behaviors that are deemed appropriate in a tribal community, as uncooperative or uncommunicative. Indigenous students who hesitate to speak openly in class could be viewed as resistant to *signing* a cultural contract. Educators need to be aware that while there is no single American Indian/Alaska Native learning style, there are cultural traditions that profoundly affect how Native students learn, live, and communicate (Cajete, 1999).

Wieder and Pratt's (1990) exemplary research demonstrates the behavioral dichotomy that American Indian/Alaska Native tribal members face when attempting to function in a Eurocentric, colonialist world while remaining authentically *Indian*. Recognizing there are some differences in demonstrated behaviors depending on tribal membership, Wieder and Pratt clearly indicate that "acting like a real Indian crosses all tribal lines and ... is employed in recognizing any real Indian" regardless of tribal affiliation (1990, p. 51). Wieder and Pratt confirm that there are seven socially constructed behaviors within an Indigenous culture deemed essential when identifying an individual as a *real* Indian to other Indians. These cultural behaviors include "reticence with regard to interaction with strangers, the acceptance of obligations, razzing, attaining harmony in face-to-face relations, modesty and 'doing one's part' taking on familial relations, permissible and required silence, and public speaking" [quotation marks, authors'] (1990, p. 51). A student's compliance with the behaviors designated as *Indian* behaviors demonstrates essential knowledge of and respect for Native cultural traditions: a clear marker of one's cultural identity. The patterns of behavior listed above, used to communicate a shared identity, clearly establish a cultural identity that American Indian/Alaska Native students have available to negotiate. It is also significant to mention that the behaviors that collectively link Indigenous students to one another are evaluated in relation to expectations from the hegemonic standards imposed by the dominant culture and classroom interactions. Given the expectations of remaining authentic to American Indian/Alaska Native values, the cultural identity challenges that Native students negotiate in Anglo classroom interactions appear significant. Native students may not wish to sacrifice their cultural identity to assimilate or be prepared to *sign* a ready-to-sign cultural contract when entering a college or university classroom. However, given the inherent power differential that exists between instructors and students in a typical classroom, students have extremely limited options.

A profoundly significant cultural value that appears consistent, regardless of tribal membership, is that many American Indian/Alaska Native students view family as an *extension of themselves* providing a sense of identity, confidence, and security: an interdependence among all Native people (Machamer & Gruber, 1998; Mankiller, 1991; Pewewardy, 2003). This collective identity is likely to manifest in a student's communication with others. Personal information about

a student's family or familial communication patterns, the type of information commonly discussed in a basic communication course, might be culturally viewed as private information not to be shared publicly, perhaps even trivializing that essential bond. Security and support mechanisms, attributed to tribal affiliation, have been shown to be of paramount significance relative to students' cultural identity (Haynes Writer, 2001; Pewewardy, 2003). Community and parental involvement and support emerged in the literature as crucial factors contributing to student persistence (Pavel, 1992). Retention is an essential factor for any student's success.

Individual student achievements are rewarded in U.S. classrooms, implying that individuals sign separate contracts, limiting allocation for group membership. In many tribes, a concerted emphasis on collective achievements of the community rather than those of individuals is evident, which contradicts the worldview supported in academia. Subsequently, living away from home to attend college, as many students do, may deprive Native students of the necessary and dependable support systems on which they rely. In turn, these omissions, on which American Indian/Alaska Native students depend, can induce hardships, discomfort, and feelings of isolation. Family obligations and a desire to be closer to home constitute fundamental obstacles that may inhibit degree completion (Burk, 2002; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Machamer, 1999; Parker, 1998), while consistent family relationships correlate to positive educational commitment (Machamer & Gruber, 1998).

Additionally, many Indigenous students arrive on campus ill prepared for the academic rigor of college-level courses (Boyer, 1990; Brown, 2003; Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Machamer, 1999; Tierney, 1992). Rodriguez (1997) notes that there is negligible correlation between what many Native students learn in high school and what is expected of them in college. Boyer suggests "knowledge of how to take notes or check a book out of a library may be taken for granted" (1990, p. 14). For students who have not had the luxury of an economically solvent school district or public library, these incidentals can mean the difference between succeeding or failing academically. Students from socio-economically deprived communities may arrive on campus poorly equipped to manage cultural dissonance or concentrate on culturally irrelevant curriculum.

On many occasions, American Indian/Alaska Native students' cultural norms, values, and beliefs are at odds with Eurocentric *norms* with which they must acquiesce. There is minimal or no negotiation of identity upon entering a non-Native college classroom due to the academic discourse already in place. This is especially true in a basic communication course where prescribed skills are taught based on socially constructed Eurocentric norms.

### **The Basic Communication Course**

During the time that American Indian/Alaska Native college students spend acquiring an undergraduate degree, most will enroll in a basic communication course. The basic communication course usually results in one of two formats:



either a public speaking course or a hybrid course that is similar to a communication survey course. The hybrid course generally includes intrapersonal, interpersonal, and small group communication in combination with public speaking (Morreale, Hanna, Berko, & Gibson, 1999). Communication department curriculum committees often develop the basic course objectives that instructors will implement. Since the majority of higher education faculty in the U.S. is Anglo, one primary cultural perspective is typically privileged in the curriculum. That cultural perspective derives from a colonialist, Eurocentric approach to pedagogical strategies and standards. Consequently, curricular competencies may reflect culturally incongruous principles with American Indian/Alaska Native values, beliefs, and traditions. Communication basic course curriculum design, objectives, and textbooks originate from predominantly Anglo educators whose values are supported by Eurocentric, privileged paradigms. Jackson, Morrison and Dangerfield (2002) state:

When there is an absence of culturally inclusive teaching materials and research, or professors of color in the classroom, the discipline of Communication is sending a powerfully clear message to culturally marginalized students that they are not welcome, that their experience is not significant enough to consider (2002, p. 124).

Accordingly, instructional methodologies and course content represent a ready-to-sign contract that is likely to prove antithetical to Native students' cultural identities. Culturally entrenched pedagogical paradigms utilized in higher education may limit the success of and oppress students who originate from or identify with cultures other than the dominant culture. The foundational ideology underpinning communication conveys that in order for humans to communicate, they must *share common meaning* (Carbaugh, 1990). The goal to effectively share common meaning becomes problematic when cultural differences constrain negotiated identities (how one person perceives another). Socially constructed academic roles clearly create dichotomies of power and control. "Oppression is enacted not by theoretical concepts but by real people in concrete situations" (Lewis & Simon, 1986, p. 469). Education researchers have documented the ways in which power dynamics and cultural expectations influence classroom interactions (Giroux, 1997; Giroux & McLaren, 1993; hooks, 1994).

Institutionalized discrimination consistently enables persons of power, such as communication instructors in the classroom, to teach what the dominant culture socially constructs as the norm. In Morreale, Rubin, and Jones' (1998) work, the authors list speaking and listening competencies that have been generated by communication scholars, government agencies, and research centers. The authors' findings relate that communication competence, as determined by communication scholars, designates that students should exhibit *appropriate* speaking and listening skills and refer to what a student "should be able to do" (1998, p. 3). The designation of *appropriate* behavior correlates with a social construct determined by persons of privilege from the dominant culture. The majority of curricular requirements perpetuate homogeneous examples and standards from

the dominant culture in the communication discipline, among others, perpetuating classroom environments as a *privileged space* (Jackson et al., 2002). As in a preponderance of college courses, communication instructors are required to maintain compulsory pedagogical objectives and student outcomes embedded in the instructional design of the basic communication course that have remained consistent for decades (Morreale, Hanna, Berko, & Gibson, 1999).

Although the basic speech communication course at U.S. colleges and universities derives from hegemonic, patriarchal cultural standards, the nature of the core curriculum creates the possibility for a unique academic environment by providing opportunities for students to be self-reflective of their cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors. Note that this *opportunity* to be self-reflective originates from an individualistic cultural value and may in fact, create learning environments of exclusion for students from collectivist cultures. Braithwaite claims, for example, that communication curriculum often encourages college students to “get in touch with themselves,” when Navajo instructors may teach students to “learn from their elders” (1997, p. 231). This type of cultural dissonance may isolate Indigenous students and hinder academic achievement in basic communication courses. In such environments, American Indian/Alaska Native students have no options to negotiate their identities for quasi-negotiated or co-created cultural contracts.

### Public Speaking Skills

An illustration of this type of cultural dissonance is the public speaking requirement for a basic communication course. Although the requirement appears to correlate with Wieder and Pratt’s (1990) description of public speaking as *real Indian* behavior, the similarities between the two activities are minimal. For both public speaking occasions, there are clear speaker and audience roles and expectations. However, for American Indian/Alaska Native speakers, it is typical that a speaker begins by stating humbly that he is not qualified to speak (Wieder & Pratt, 1990). In contrast, a critical component of speaking publicly in the dominant culture is to demonstrate speaker credibility and competence (Morreale et al., 1998). Wieder and Pratt (1990) report that women and young men are prohibited from speaking publicly for themselves; only elder males may speak for others. Native speakers rarely speak for themselves, but rather speak for a family member. These rich Native cultural traditions oppose the *essential* communication competencies established for public speaking (Jones, 1994) and could potentially cause dissonance for American Indian/Alaska Native students enrolled in basic speech communication courses.

A specific example of this type of dissonance comes from Carbaugh’s (2005) research of Blackfeet college students’ experiences in a public speaking course. Although Blackfeet individuals’ primary mode of communication is listener-active, in a typical college public speaking course, verbal speaking is primary (Carbaugh, 2005). This communication requirement reflects a dramatic paradigm shift and requires a stark difference in communicative behaviors for

Blackfeet students. In order for Blackfeet students to meet the demands of speaking publicly, they must attempt to reframe what it means to speak publicly from an Indigenous perspective to a Eurocentric perspective. This reframing includes assuming a social role of an elder who is typically male. For Blackfeet women and young men, a public speaking assignment creates significant dissonance. In Carbaugh's (2005) study, one young woman perceived this course requirement to be *deeply inappropriate*. Carbaugh acknowledges

From her cultural frame of reference, this presented considerable problems, for she was being required to talk in public, to do so in a scene which to her was very disconnected from her past, thus removing traditional sources of knowledge she had been taught to recognize, use and value. Further, she was being asked to perform through a public communication mode that was secondary to her (2005, p. 93).

The paradox imposed on the Blackfeet student created severe communication anxiety, confusion, and a violation of her Native traditions and values. If she complied with the assignment, she was required to choose between her own beliefs and values or meeting the demands of a narrow pedagogical paradigm in the public speaking course. The student's reaction was immediate refusal by stating "I can't do that!" (Carbaugh, 2005, p. 94). The literature confirms that American Indian/Alaska Native students are asked (in fact, required) to accomplish the same public speaking assignments as non-Native students. In the same instance, Indigenous students are required to usurp a social position entirely outside of their cultural traditions and social norms, in addition to communicating in a nontraditional communicative mode. Compulsory colonialist curriculum creates complex challenges for many Indigenous students, and mandates that a ready-to-sign cultural contract be *signed*.

The curriculum for the basic communication courses include theoretical and performance aspects. According to Morreale et al. (1999), the basic course is frequently labeled a skills-based course that requires students to complete four to six oral presentations to a consistent audience. There are a number of culturally biased skills that Morreale et al. state college graduates should be able to demonstrate that include, "speaking clearly and expressively, decode verbal and nonverbal cues accurately, effectively assert themselves, convey enthusiasm for topic through delivery, give concise and accurate directions, stand up for one's own rights, perform social rituals, etc." (1998, pp. 13-17). Clearly, demonstrations of such skills are social constructions that privilege the dominant cultural perspective and are diametrically opposed to many American Indian/Alaska Native cultural behaviors and expectations. In fact, the Eurocentric paradigm to orally speak up for one's rights "under the guise of participatory democracy" contradicts the objective it strives to accomplish for many Native students (Carbaugh, 2005, p. 95). One instructor (usually White) evaluates student assignments and oral presentations (Morreale et al., 1999), which undoubtedly puts Native students at a disadvantage unless they acquiesce to the socially constructed norm and colonialist expectations. This common practice privileges

one person in power with a great deal of institutionally endowed control, and problematizes Native culturally approved behaviors and traditions.

Morreale's et al. research confirmed that, "standardization and uniformity across sections of the course is attempted at most institutions" (1999, p. 47). Institutional homogeneity is perpetuated by requiring mandated textbooks, learning objectives, and sometimes departmentally prescriptive course syllabi, which Jackson et al. refers to as "culturally-insensitive pedagogy [that] fails to promote the success of students of color in communication" (2002, p. 123). To their credit, Morreale et al. recognized that a limitation of their research instrument lacked questions relating to diversity variables and that such a complex issue deserves "appropriate attention" (1999, p. 49). While this admission is commendable, American Indian/Alaska Native students and other students of color must, in the meantime assimilate to basic course objectives or fail. In all probability, classrooms are more often a heterogeneous blend of students who deserve serious considerations and opportunities to genuinely negotiate identities based on cultural traditions. Whether or not identity negotiation is acknowledged between instructors and students, negotiations of cultural identities continually occurs in the classroom context and cultural contracts are reinforced.

### **Implications**

Many studies have addressed academic influences on American Indian/Alaska Native students (Agbo, 2001; Aragon, 2002; Cajete, 1999; Haynes Writer, 2001; Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002), but none have related those experiences specifically to cultural identity negotiations in basic communication courses. By connecting three bodies of literature previously unrelated to one another, this literature review contributes novel perspectives to the literature regarding American Indian/Alaska Native students' negotiations of cultural identity in the context of a basic speech communication course.

Kasworm states "we need to speak to the uniqueness of every student, rather than creating ghettos of exclusion" (1993, p. 163). As educators, we must acknowledge that cultural biases inform our approaches to teaching. It will behoove instructors to be open to alternative pedagogical methodologies. As Haynes Writer states, "education is never politically neutral" (2001, p. 44). As this meta-analysis illustrated, there are clear dialectical tensions that exist between basic course curriculum standards and many Native student values that exacerbate negotiation of cultural identities in the communication classroom.

The application of cultural contracts paradigm to this student population demonstrates important implications in this compilation of various bodies of literature. One primary implication is its contribution to understanding the juxtaposition of American Indian/Alaska Native college students' traditions and the basic oral communication course competencies. The potential dichotomy between the two, as illustrated in this article, suggests cultural negotiations rife with complexity. Within a multicultural classroom environment, it is inevitable that cultural identities will be communicated and negotiated. Awareness of

identity negotiations provides opportunities for faculty and students to co-create shared meaning and understanding. In turn, communicating through shared meaning and understanding have the potential to present opportunities for co-created cultural contracts between students and faculty.

Another significant implication highlights a lack of diversity in higher education teaching perspectives, and ways of knowing in the basic communication course curriculum. Efforts to incorporate Indigenous-teaching techniques may help create unbiased, inclusive learning environments. These teaching techniques would serve to facilitate learning for any students who derive from collectivist cultures. Without such endeavors, the higher education system may continue to fail American Indian/Alaska Native undergraduate students. By failing to provide opportunities for Indigenous students to succeed and graduate, educators limit opportunities for American Indians/Alaska Natives to join professional and faculty ranks in higher education. In this way, privilege and homogeneity are allowed to perpetuate within the academy. The American Council on Education has consistently stated the critical need for diverse college faculty members in order to create pluralistic campus environments (Horton, 2000). Few Native faculty members currently serve as role models on non-Native campuses (Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Parker, 1998; Haynes Writer, 2001).

A final implication informs opportunities for American Indian/Alaska Native student motivation. Crump (1996) suggests that a lack of student motivation is a prevalent issue on college and university campuses nationwide. Aragon confirms the necessity to identify “environmental and social factors that influence and maintain classroom motivation” for Native students (2002, p. 12). Pluralistic campuses that include cultural literacy in combination with basic andragogical methods will reflect an academic culture representative of the values, beliefs, and norms of diverse student populations. As with most adult learners, American Indian/Alaska Native students connect with course content that is culturally relevant and that can accelerate their interest in academically challenging environments (Cole & Denzine, 2002). When course content and faculty attitudes demonstrate respect and support for the cultures of marginalized students, self-efficacy is likely to result (Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Van Hamme, 1995). When respect and support for Native students are demonstrated, quasi-completed, or co-created contracts are more likely to be negotiated between faculty and students. Huffman (1993) affirms that preservation of one’s traditional Native cultural identity promotes self-confidence and greater academic achievement. Boyer’s (1990) findings relate the faculty’s responsibility in thwarting academic failure. “Both directly and indirectly, students are told that who they are and what they believe is acceptable and has value” based on course content and faculty attitudes (Boyer, 1990, p. 15).

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations include energizing the community of scholars and educators by infusing curriculum with multicultural examples and ways of knowing, and

by providing opportunities for tribal leaders and elders to be guest speakers. In this way, American Indian/Alaska Native students may become empowered in the communication classroom, and more often academically successful by witnessing community leaders in academic settings. The community of American Indian/Alaska Native student program directors, students, and families might also influence student success. Campus program directors/coordinators could encourage students to enroll in teaching or educational administrative degree programs. By increasing the numbers of Native educators on campuses, retention of Indigenous students could potentially increase. Additionally, increased numbers of Native instructors and administrators would also provide perspectives and insight of worldviews or ways of knowing other than colonialist paradigms for non-Native educators and students. As more American Indian/Alaska Native educators join the scholarly community, understanding of diverse worldviews and perspectives will increase. Agbo's study reminds us, "culture and the context of the learning process are crucial to the educational achievement of students from ethnic groups" (2001, p. 33). American Indians/Alaska Natives with unique perspectives and oral traditions could share instructional techniques and curriculum designs that will benefit college students and educators equally.

### Summary

The data gathered in this literature review will have the potential to influence communication pedagogy by demonstrating the overwhelming impact that Colonialist teaching methods impose on the acculturation of American Indians/Alaska Natives according to European academic standards. As indicated earlier, this analysis of the literature brings to mind more questions than answers. Given the requirements for homogeneity within college districts, instructors are often trapped by professional mandates. Questions arise, then, about ways that educators might incorporate more culturally inclusive methods of disseminating course material and acknowledging diverse perspectives of viewing the world. What other ways of knowing might be implemented in regards to extant curriculum standards? While instructors are mandated to follow standardized curriculum practices, how might additional professional training be implemented to expand the notions of teaching strategies and requirements to include alternative pedagogical methods? What can we learn from Native educators?

Another value of the dialogue initiated by this analysis applies to practical considerations for speech communication instructors when Indigenous students enter a college classroom. In some cases, students' actions may appear to contradict behaviors expected of students and/or may appear contrary to behaviors of students from the instructor's culture. American Indian/Alaska Native student cultural norms or traditions may seem confusing to non-Native educators. By pursuing students' stories about individual experiences, there is the potential to inform non-Native instructors about identity negotiations and clarify behaviors that might otherwise create misunderstanding. In an effort to understand American Indian/Alaska Native students' perception of the basic, oral communication

course requirements, instructors might reflect on the culturally specific nature of the pedagogical methodologies typically employed. How might we effectively evaluate course competencies and alternative learning strategies that will benefit educators by helping implement changes that motivate and empower Native students to achieve their academic goals in more equitable ways?

Future research might investigate ways in which textbook authors' collaboration with Indigenous peoples from North America could incorporate rich Native teaching strategies, traditions, and values relevant to communication concepts. A community of educators and American Indian/Alaska Native students has the potential to work together to co-create cultural contracts that are inclusive and that meet, exceed, and transform academic standards.

Systemic tolerance of Eurocentric cultural bias profoundly influences college and university programs, and privileges dominant student populations with exam questions, linear structured essays, teaching methodologies, curriculum, and instructional designs that emanate from a single cultural paradigm. Homogeneous pedagogical frameworks are firmly rooted in America's higher education ideology. The co-creation of cultural identities originates from relationships with others. It is necessary to acknowledge that, at times, we are all the *Other*. This meta-analysis demonstrates that the cultural contract paradigm is a useful theoretical lens through which American Indian/Alaska Native students' rich cultural identities can be viewed against the landscape of the intrinsic standards that speech communication instructors are expected to incorporate in basic communication courses. When superimposed, the dichotomies of the basic communication course competencies and Indigenous student values create a stark contrast. However, hope prevails in idealistic, culturally sensitive educators committed to creating awareness of academic equity and social change that will benefit Native and non-Native students and faculty alike.

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