

Language preservation helps American Indian students stick with college

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PAUMA VALLEY – Michael Murphy was a self-described "troublemaker" who wasn't sure about leaving the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians' reservation for college. He filled out only one application, to nearby California State University, San Marcos.

Murphy, now a sophomore and chairman of the American Indian Student Alliance on that campus, credits the student group with helping him feel welcome and making him want to stay in college.

"I would've dropped out the first semester" without that connection, said Murphy, a 20-year-old business major who plans to run for his tribe's council some day.

Educators say that confronting cultural differences is one of the challenges facing American Indian students in higher education. CSU San Marcos, which counts about 40 tribes in its service area, has launched a new California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center aimed at strengthening relationships between the tribes and the campus. The center's ultimate goal is to boost the retention and graduation rates of American Indian students statewide.

Among the center's first efforts is a language preservation project with the Pauma Band of Luiseño Indians in northern San Diego County, made possible by a \$40,000 gift from the tribe. Through the project, staff members and students like Murphy have gone to the Pauma reservation to collect photographs and record the native language once predominantly spoken by tribal members.

Then they uploaded the photos and recordings onto cartridges as songs, images, prayers, quizzes and stories, and distributed the cartridges to families on the reservation for use on a Nintendo DSi. A picture of a big brown bear, for instance, appears with the Luiseño word for bear, "hunwut."

The project helps reinforce students' ties to their tribe and ignites academic and technological curiosity, said Joely Proudfit, the center's director and an associate professor at the university.

"With the students, they feel as though they're contributing back to their community," said Proudfit, a descendant of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians and the first in her family to earn a high school diploma. "It's just feeling like you have a place and that you matter and what you do matters."



About 1 percent of the students enrolled at CSU San Marcos are American Indian, mirroring national numbers. American Indians have among the lowest college graduation rates of any group, though the situation is improving.

In California, 14.3 percent of American Indians 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 American Community Survey. Among all Californians of those ages, 30.1 percent hold at least a bachelor's degree.

Getting students to feel more comfortable with an institution and see how their education can allow them to help their tribes will improve college completion rates, said Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, co-director of the Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University in Tempe, Ariz.

"If students haven't spent a lot of time on campus, they're less likely to know how to navigate the institution," Brayboy said.

Other challenges that American Indian college students face include a lack of role models, financing and academic preparation, said Brayboy, also an associate professor. American Indian students are more likely to graduate when they believe what they've gained can be used to benefit their communities, he said.

Brayboy noted a student who found a career in linguistics policy after talking with a professor about how to apply an interest in language to the student's home community. The student eventually launched classes in the tribe's native language in pre-schools on and near the reservation.

Native language education can help student engagement and cultural preservation while building a link between campus and community, particularly when many indigenous languages are endangered, said Mary Hermes, associate professor of education at the University of Minnesota in Duluth.

Many languages were lost after earlier generations were forced to speak English in schools, preventing speakers from passing the language on to children, she said. When a university values a student's language and culture, that helps the student, Hermes said.

"It's like brain food to learn to think in another language," Hermes said. "It's going to help your confidence and your cognitive abilities."

Maintaining a relationship with ancestors' language and knowledge will embolden students in college and beyond, said Chris Devers, former Pauma tribe chairman.

"This is part of who we are," Devers said. "You need to go out to that outside world knowing who you are."

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