Identity Politics of Difference

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This study’s results provide tribal colleges and other institutes of higher education with important issues to consider as they seek to provide a learning environment for an increasing population of mixed-race American Indian students. The students’ stories shed light on frustrations that need to be addressed. Although tribal colleges have not yet done so, they can deal with these frustrations and take a proactive approach in preparing for the experiences of mixed-race students. Furthermore, since the experiences of mixed-race students are influenced by colorism and racial hierarchy, processes that all students are involved in and affected by, critical proactive approaches could have positive effects for the entire student body. Institutions, in particular tribal colleges, will want to evaluate how to address the situation of the mixed-race population immediately as well as in the long term. The self-determination premise pressures tribal colleges to retain students, so thus tribal colleges should encourage inquiry into lived experiences on campus and the teaching of anti-racist curricula, including a critical focus on the racialization of the growing populations of mixed-raced students in American Indian communities.
Theoretically, this work demonstrates that it is important to study not only what people say about mixed-race American Indian identities and racial issues, but also what they do in a particular context. Through a CRT lens, race is seen as a social construction, but it is also understood to have very real effects—cultural, psychological, and material. For this reason, a number of recommendations can be drawn from CRT, but it is also important to include Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) to acknowledge an endemic process of neocolonial forms of colonization that have become ingrained interactional practices within education systems relevant to Indigenous peoples (Brayboy 2005). The theories are complementary. CRT views race and racism as endemic to society, while TribalCrit emphasizes that colonization is endemic to society (Brayboy 2005). I agree with Alfred (2004) that “the university is contentious ground” (192). It is important to understand the racial formation process in a tribal college setting, including daily racialization and renegotiation of racial boundaries by serving an important role as “Indigenous academics.” As Alfred (2004) states, “We need to turn away from defining our purpose and methods by Western academic standards and be accountable to our cultural heritage and to our people” (95). This recommendation address ways to enhance the college experiences, both in and out of class, that contribute to students’ sense of identity, which also translates into enhancing the awareness of identity politics influenced by blood quantum and a racialized social system that upholds whiteness as having a material value.

More important, these strategies should be shared with higher educational professionals, particularly those whose primary responsibility is to prepare students with the skills to succeed in a learning environment while promoting a critical perspective of the daily effects of systemic racism and colonization (Alfred 2004; Brayboy 2005; Justice 2004; Mihesuah 2004). Unfortunately, most often, instructors and staff who assist students academically, socially, and culturally at Cliff View College tend to utilize the traditional paradigm of being raced based on one’s essentialized degree of Indiannness. A solution would be to “Indigenize the academy.” According to Alfred (2004), “it means that we are working to change universities so that they become places where the values, principles, and modes of organization and behavior of our people are respected in, and hopefully even integrated into, the larger system of structures and processes that make up the university itself” (88). Educating key staff who work directly with mixed-race students who identify
as American Indian or acknowledge their American Indian heritage about educational equality is the first step. Then, just as critical and more challenging, step two is educating the larger body of Cliff View College instructors, staff, and administrators about how educational environments are used as audiences to re-fabricate a race-based ideology. One example is how instructors on campus lower their expectations for American Indian students or play into stereotypes of government-funded programs for such students. Even worse, some instructors assume that students attending a tribal college want to learn how to be “Indian.” As Brayboy (2005) asserts, “The colonization has been so complete that even many American Indians fail to recognize that we are taking up colonialist ideas when we fail to express ourselves in ways that may challenge dominant society’s ideas about who and what we are supposed to be, how we are supposed to behave, and what we are supposed to be within the larger population” (431). Certainly staff, instructors, and administrators need knowledge of how to challenge colonization tactics to appropriately strategize how to avoid reproducing oppressive learning environments. Brayboy writes, “Knowledge is defined by TribalCrit as the ability to recognize change, adapt, and move forward with the change” (434). However, I would contend that most higher education professionals do not recognize the need for critical learning about racial, not just cultural, issues and how such discourse can improve the educational experience. Instructors, staff, and administrators need to have a grasp of traditional cultural paradigms to understand the experience of a certain mixedness being denigrated or alienated. What they must have at Cliff View College is the sense of responsibility to combat racial privilege and assist students with academic success, while providing a healthy, supportive learning environment.

Finally, upon reading this study and similar works of research, administrations at institutions of higher education have the opportunity to replace models and practices that work to support the social and political structures of white privilege. They can create policies and practices that acknowledge the current social complexities in which students exist, and choose to support and validate students’ experiences as they progress in their academic endeavors. Yet, they also need to be courageous enough to challenge student views that support colorism and structural racism. Cliff View College must evaluate how it can best assist mixed-race students in critically understanding their racial positionality, its structural origins, and its relative privilege and/
or disprivilege. And since non-mixed-raced students are also involved in this process, they need to be engaged in a critical curriculum that situates them as active, resistant agents who confront past and present practices that perpetuate colorism and an essentialized “Nativeness.”

Reenvisioning Self-Determination

Administrators should provide programs for students to help them prepare for the developmental milestones they will confront during their college years. Administrators also need to make connections to mixed-race American Indian students to ensure that the cultural climate of the college is supportive of student success. Administrators should provide positive opportunities for students to immerse themselves in their own culture as well as interact with and learn cultures outside their own. Administrators should ensure that professional development sensitizes faculty and staff to the culture of the community and the growing body of mixed-race students who identify as American Indian. In addition, administrators should provide support systems for students. Programs should include family support to the greatest degree possible so that students’ families support their self-determination. One of the best ways administrators can help is to seek out faculty who bring a critical race perspective to their pedagogy and scholarship.

For faculty and staff, focusing on the individual through the use of empowering strategies, and being in tune with their own racial ideologies will help students develop positive connections and views of all raced groups. By being aware of, and critically reflecting on, their own racial ideologies, faculty and staff can transform their thinking about the issues or race, colorism, and colonialism as they play out in American Indian communities and schools (Alfred 2004; Brayboy 2005; Justin 2004; Mihesuah 2004). They need to be aware of how students experience racialized politics of American Indian identity and blood quantum politics within a tribal college environment. As Mihesuah (2004) states, “One of the most pressing issues for a Native student is identity. Many Natives, even those who are full blood, often have intense identity issues” (194). Faculty and staff should, both in words and actions, believe in all possibilities for students and have high expectations of students regardless of their phenotypic appearance, and they should be clued in to how phenotype creates a more negative environment for those who are darker skinned.
“Cultural competence,” popular among multiculturalists, and structural racial knowledge need to be integrated into the whole curriculum, but specific classes also need to be offered to address Indianness, racial identity politics, and the influence of blood quantum. Mihesuah (2004) presents this position on a personalized sense of oppression: “Internalized colonization (called the ‘boarding school syndrome’ among many Native Activists), is the phenomenon of believing that whites and their culture are superior, accepting negative stereotypes about Natives, not questioning biased classroom lectures, and acting negatively toward other Natives” (194). In other words, these problems should be made a major part of the overt curriculum, not repressed and swept under the rug in the hope that they will just go away on their own. Faculty should welcome a critical approach to racism and racial knowledge in the classroom for all students as opposed to viewing specific components as relevant to only a specific raced group. They should help students better understand the connections between blood quantum and its effects on self-determination for American Indians, positive and negative. But more important, students should have a better understanding of the pedagogical strategies used as oppressive tools in learning environments so that they can better resist their damaging effects.

There are multiple areas for future study that could include both qualitative and quantitative methods analyzed through both CRT and TribalCrit lenses. Since there are currently thirty-six tribal colleges, many of the issues at Cliff View College are parallel to issues among other mixed-race students in cultural and traditional environments.

While the establishment of a mixed-race student services office may not be deemed necessary by the mixed-race students in this study, they articulated that their experiences are different from those who monoracially identify as American Indian. Moreover, the experiences of mixed-race persons of white versus black heritage are especially dissimilar, which is a profound reason to further explore the meaning of whiteness and blackness within American Indian populations and institutions. Also worth analyzing is discourse used by mixed-race students at tribal colleges that border black communities compared to those that border white communities. Two students in this study, with vastly different appearances, felt the same lack of connection to the campus community because of their experiences with colorism, not being enrolled tribal members, the notion of race being based on (allegedly)
cultural characteristics at Cliff View College (cultural values, norms, social standing), and phenotypic appearance.

As more and more mixed-race students enroll at tribal colleges, it illuminates the need to confront colonized and racialized realities. As Justice (2004) explains, “If Nationhood and liberation are our goals, we must truly acknowledge the diversity of Native experiences by avoiding both the traps of ‘mixed-blood angst’ and of ‘full-blood purity’—if we focus on blood quantum as an indicator of Indian authenticity, we emphasize a colonialist paradigm” (104). However, as I have tried to emphasize throughout this book, if we take seriously the fact that race is a social construction, we must pay attention to how racialized processes work: continuing discrimination and institutional racism, perpetuating and exacerbating old forms of colonialism, and reinforcing neocolonialism. If tribal colleges and other institutions continue to reproduce learning environments where students perform race and act racially, they will need to delve deeply into the impact on those students. Additionally, tribal colleges and other institutions should be interested in learning more about the impact of schooling influences on mixed-race identity choice when classroom, campus, and peer pressures assert and assign certain mixedness to a particular group. If for no other reason, tribal colleges, as a new form of self-determination in comparison to historically black colleges and universities, will want to attract, retain, and graduate this growing population of students. Beyond academics, one of the main reasons students do not complete their education at tribal colleges and other institutions is the lack of social and cultural connections on campus, among their peers, and within the learning environment. Tribal colleges and other institutions will want to develop programs and services to help these students identify and bond with their learning environments.

One of my goals in conducting this study was to provide mixed-race American Indian students attending tribal colleges with the opportunity to read about the experiences of others so they can see that they are not alone. It was interesting and enjoyable to interview the students and hear their stories. They have unique experiences that should be widely shared. My hope is that this study will contribute to the understanding of the factors that shape mixed-race identity within politicized institutions, such as schools, and highlight the importance of educating to empower.