

Suprahuman Indigeneity in Academia: Invisibility, Tokenism, and Responses

Margaret Smith, PsyD

The Chicago School of Professional Psychology at Xavier University, New Orleans

Melissa Wheeler, MA

Northern Arizona University

Emily Loerzel, MSW

University of Washington

Jayne Kenney, BA

The Illinois School of Professional Psychology at Argosy University, Chicago

Inquiries regarding this presentation may be made to 4Matsi7@comcast.net

Despite recent increases in enrollment, Native American (NA) students face numerous challenges to success in academic settings in the United States (U.S.). Among the many factors identified in the literature, leaving the community to go to school, family obligations, first generation college experiences, isolation, and lack of tribal and indigenous social supports are some of these challenges. NA faculty members also face significant impediments to being successful. While many academic institutions in the U.S. have a relatively new focus on inclusion and diversity, NA academics can experience challenges regarding having their voices heard on their campuses and in national academic forums as well.

The combined result can create conditions where, in order to be recognized as legitimate, indigenous students and faculty alike can face a pressure to be “suprahuman,” resulting in working twice as hard while sometimes receiving less credit for their efforts. Often when recognized at all, they may also face tokenism as opposed to being seen as equal and valuable contributors to the educational process. Caught between these two polarities of being invisible or a token can contribute to attrition of both indigenous students and faculty. The presenters will discuss how these dynamics are evident in perceptions of stereotypic assumptions about NAs and the micro-aggressions that communicate them. They will also discuss the impact that stereotypes and assumptions made by non-NA educators and administrators have in creating a destructive and vicious cycle leading to misunderstanding and alienation.

Audience participants will learn the unique factors regarding indigenous identity in the U.S. Current research findings on indigenous students and faculty experiences in higher education will be provided. We will share promising processes and programs that are meant to improve indigenous student and faculty success in academia. We will discuss ways of developing indigenous mentoring and networking communities to increase support and success. The indigenous presenters will also share their own personal and professional experiences to add depth to the discussion.