

Student Success: It Really Takes a Village

By Bogdan Hoanca

In working on student success, we tend to focus on what we do in class, in office hours, or in extracurricular activities involving students. We tend to forget that there is much more we do not know about students, especially those who might be quieter, less regular in attending class, or from a culture with which we are not very familiar.

Early in my teaching career, an Alaska Native student came to me to tell me she would have to miss class for a couple of weeks because her Auntie was coming to town. That struck me as a bit extreme – missing class for that long just because some relative was visiting. I do not recall exactly what I said or how I reacted, but I am afraid my words or facial expression might have conveyed some of my disapproval of the absence given the circumstances. It was only years later in a culture camp where we were learning about the Alaska Native culture that I understood what the Auntie’s visit meant.

Alaska is a large state, with a small population, and almost half the population lives in small villages. Traveling from the village to the “big city” is expensive, culturally jarring, and is often prompted by the need to get medical attention for a serious matter or for a big family event. The Auntie is not necessarily the sister of a parent; she is an important elderly female family member, a revered elder and possibly family matriarch, somebody who deserves and receives respectful treatment from the entire family (and, very likely, the entire village). Moreover, when coming to town this Auntie will need help with local transportation, with making arrangements for medical visits, and will need a trusted companion, a designated family member. My student could not simply say hi and go back to her studies, but she had a big and important duty to take care of and to show the appropriate respect to the Auntie who was coming to town. In a tight-knit culture where family ties historically were literally a matter of life and death, few things are more important than such duties.

What happens to these duties after graduation is another facet of student success. We judge the success by Western standards: getting a good job, making lots of money, and living in a big house in the city. I know the parents and families of our students are proud of them and value such achievements, but I have often wondered about the loss to the village when a bright student earns a degree that takes them away from their roots. Of course, nowadays, many Alaska Native students come from city-dwelling families so their roots might appear to be in the city. “Appear” is the operative word because these students still keep in touch with the ancestral village, or, villages if they have parents from different heritages. They still see themselves as members of the village family, and, they are likely shareholders (or future heirs of shares) of Alaska Native regional corporations or village corporations. Whether they were born in the city or in a village, many of the Alaska Native graduates work in the urban offices of these organizations. But what happens to the village and the people back there?

On a trip to a village, I found an answer that filled me with joy. As part of a program to provide free federal tax preparation for low income residents, I travelled to several rural Alaska villages over the course of several years. As U.S. citizens, Alaska Native villagers are required to file for their federal taxes if they have a certain level of income. With the limited employment options in the village, most of them make too little money to have to pay taxes, but some make sufficient income to qualify for Earned

Income Credit (EIC). In effect, EIC is a negative tax that brings much-needed federal funding to low-income communities as an incentive to earn more income. Since there are no local tax preparation services in the village, the free tax preparation program is a key enabler for village residents to gain access to EIC funds.

A second additional important benefit of the program is to allow college students who study accounting to practice filing tax returns under the supervision of a faculty member. On these tax preparation trips, a team of 2-3 students and a faculty member will spend a day or two in a village, depending on the size of the community. We fly in and make announcements on the VHF radio to invite any community member to take advantage of the free tax preparation opportunity. The taxpayers bring in their tax forms showing incredibly small amount of income as most of them lead traditional subsistence lives; still hunting, fishing, and gathering resources from the land, and relying on family and community ties in this process. Student tax preparers get to know their impromptu clients, learn about the Alaska Native culture, and taste some of the traditional foods the village generously shares with the team.

The joyful occasion was when one of the taxpayers who came in was a former business student of mine. Born in a village, she came to Anchorage to attend college, and I did not know where she went after graduation. I was happy to see her again, and to learn that she was now back living in the village working in a management capacity for the local tribal organization. She was making considerably more money than others in the village, but still a rather modest sum relative to what she could have made in a similar position in the city. I found this young lady to be the ideal story of student success; one who had married her Western education with her traditional upbringing and was building a synergistic new way of life from the two.

Over the years, I hope to see more such examples – students who not only graduate, not only get good jobs that help the state of Alaska, not only make good money to help their families and make for good role models for their younger community members, but who also go physically back to their communities and bring back what they learned. Success measured by Western yardsticks typically means a brain drain from the village. There are direct benefits for the state and for the family of the student, but the local community benefits only indirectly. An even more impactful success is that which directly benefits the local community. When graduates return as business people, teachers, nurses or engineers, they strengthen the local community rather than draining it. This is already happening, slowly, but it is happening. As an observer from outside the Alaska Native culture, I can only marvel and hope, but it is the community members who will have to figure out what and how to do it.

In the meantime, for us educators, we need to remember that there are students who strive to succeed in two different worlds. On one side they live in the Western world and on the other side in that of the family culture, whether Alaska Native or another strong family culture. For these students, some choices are much more difficult than for those of us who only deal with the challenges and tradeoffs of a single culture. Should they follow their heritage and traditional values, or should they lean towards the time and money values of the Western culture? As educators, we are most successful in helping our students when we at least know of these challenges and when we are willing to meet our students half-way. We must remember that, however inconvenient this might make things for us, their half of the way tends to be the larger and more difficult one.