Embracing Culture, Community and Relationships:
Basic Native Youth and Family Service Program Requirements for Community Engagement

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Introduction: The primary goal of this class is to begin reflecting upon your work environment and culture of your organization, staff and programs. To be effective in engaging Native families and communities, there are basic fundamental requirements needed from the members of your team. Three important requirements will be discussed: 1) Embrace Native culture while dismantling misconceptions, prejudice and biases, 2) Immerse into the community, 3) Establish a relationship-oriented approach. The secondary goal is for you to personally examine your mindset and heart towards these three requirements. What can you do to help your programs embrace this type of work environment and culture?

1. Embrace Native Culture, Dismantle Misconceptions, Prejudice and Bias

In order to embrace Native culture, an historical understanding is essential when addressing Native educational issues. Educators and program staff need an understanding of the tragic history of native education and the background/meanings of key concepts such as *assimilation*, *acculturation*, *ethnocentrism*, and *civilization*, etc. (Reyhner, 2006). Furthermore, educators and program staff need a critical examination of how social historical influences have shaped their personal perceptions of race – specifically their beliefs of Native peoples and culture.

Native people have been poorly and inaccurately represented in media, curricula, and through interpersonal relationships over a long period of time. The challenge is – most people know very little about Native Americans and often what they do know is inaccurate (Fleming, 2007). It is normal for every person to have some level of prejudice and/or bias, especially when media and society has misrepresented minority people for years. Youth and families in Native communities also identify themselves in many diverse ways. Some may identify with only the local tribe or one tribe, while others identify with multiple tribes, or as multiethnic. Prejudice and bias is a "normal problem" in work environments, but should be respectfully addressed and discussed in a non-threatening environment so that people can move past their misconceptions.

1a. What are some misconceptions about Native and non-Native people that may cause communication challenges in your work environment?

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1b. What are current strategies you have in place to address misconceptions, prejudice and bias in your work place and/or programs?

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1c. How do you think these misconceptions in your work environment impact your community and family outreach?

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Human beings have a tendency to develop their personal identity by evaluating themselves through other people's perceptions (Suárez-Orozco, 2004, p. 184). Native youth and families are often represented negatively and/or misunderstood in their communication styles. They especially face these types of challenges in academic environments that may lead them feel unwelcomed, undervalued, disrespected, patronized, etc. For instance, Native student's cultural values and behavior can often be misinterpreted in public schools and perceived as noncompliant, disrespectful (Huffman, 2010), not engaged, or uninterested (Powers, Potthoff, Bearinger, & Resnick, 2003). How a student feels about their own identity and culture has shown to have a positive or negative affect on academic engagement and performance (Whitesell, Mitchell & Spicer, 2009). Native parents and families are often perceived as uninvolved in academic settings, which is inaccurate. These assumptions and biases hurt Native children and their families and at times make them sensitive or mistrusting to academic programs. Therefore, Native programs need to be especially cautious to affirm the positive strengths in the community and make sure to address any prejudice or bias in the work place.

1d. What possible misconceptions do you have? How can you support your work environment to embrace positive attitudes and deal with misconceptions?

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Tips:
  ➢ Learn more about the cultural and ethnic breakdown of the youth and families you serve.
  ➢ Develop a staff-training manual that includes critical knowledge of the local tribes' protocols, cultural traditions, practices, social historical experiences, etc. Include other key information about the cultural and ethnic breakdown of youth and families typically served (i.e. multi-ethnic, members of multiple tribes, etc.).
  ➢ When hiring new staff members, include interview questions that address possible attitudes and misconceptions they may have about Native people or the local tribe. Only hire those who are willing to lovingly embrace the Native community and address any assumptions they may have.
  ➢ Develop an advisory committee of community members, elders and families to teach and train your staff on what they feel is important knowledge and practices.

2. Immerse Into the Community; Native Culture and Community is Synonymous

The community plays an important protective function to Native children and families. In two qualitative studies that spanned over 8 to 10 years, Ledesma (2007) interviewed urban Native Americans from several tribes on their perspective of significant cultural values and protective functions. Ledesma concluded: *"Traditional values provide guidelines for an interpretation for life experiences. Values influence relationships protocols, social expectations, operate as resources in stressful conditions, and promote resilient capacities… Values influence individual and group identity and are the foundation on which the American Indian and Alaska Native's experience rests. The characteristics and values associated with traditional life include a group and collective orientation as well as an appreciation for family: kin, extended, and tribal"* (p. 56).

Too often, Native children and families are required to adapt to mainstream society, rather than mainstream society adapting to them or encouraging them to embrace their Native culture and practices. Sometimes, schools and educators see Native cultural practices and traditions as a barrier to success, rather than a pathway.

2a. What positive community practices or examples have you witnessed that have been effective in strengthening children and families?

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2b. How have your programs successfully embraced the community? (List one or two examples and results.)

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In our recent statewide study in Washington on the preferred pathway for early childhood educators serving in Native communities entitled "Dear Children," we found that Native communities desired educators to be immersed in the community (CHiXapkaid, Strong, Dolota, & Baker, 2014). For instance, one community member stated, *"In a tribal community, culture doesn't end at school, school and community work together to provide cultural experiences/teaching. Students and families are always at cultural activities after school, which supports their cultural learning that may not always take place in school."*

Those who are successful in embracing the community go beyond including community events in program activities. Rather, they attend community and cultural events on their own time because they love the culture and community.

Tips:
- ➢ Hire staff members that have previous experience in the community and respect for cultural traditions and practices.
- ➢ Encourage current staff members to attend community events on their own time or provide work hours to attend events.
- ➢ Help staff to see that working in Native communities, their involvement does not end after program hours.
- ➢ Develop and consult a community advisory group on effective community engagement activities to incorporate in your programs.

3. Establish a Relationship-Oriented Approach

Relationships are core to Native communities and families. Community members will go above and beyond to serve someone in crisis or to celebrate a loved one. A relationship-oriented approach supports the previous concept of being immersed in the community and culture. Values often drive relationship priorities and interactions. All Native communities vary in cultural practices and traditions, but there appears to be some important shared values. For instance, "*Native values generally consist of sharing, cooperation, noninterference, sense of being, importance of the tribe and extended family, harmony with nature, a present-time orientation, preference for explanation of natural phenomena according to the spiritual realm, and a deep respect for elders…. and by contrast, mainstream values emphasize saving, domination, competition, aggression, doing, individualism and the nuclear family, mastery over nature, a future-time orientation, a preference for scientific explanations of everything, "clock-watching," winning, and a reverence for youth* (Garrett, Bellon-Harn, Torres-Rivera, and Roberts (2003, p. 226).*
These are only some values that may exist in Native communities and families. Building relationships in the community also requires acknowledging values that may be important to the community and being willing to embrace them whenever possible. Remember that the Native community is often required to adapt to other values and cultures, but rarely experience others adapting to them.

3a. What values are important to the community you serve in building relationships?
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3b. What values are important to you when building relationships?
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3c. Are there any major conflicts in values that could be a barrier to developing strong community relationships? And, what could you do differently to bridge the barrier?

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Tips:
➢ If a staff member is not from the community, encourage them to find a mentor in the community.
➢ Have staff members who are from the community periodically train other staff members on relationship building skills and/or provide opportunities for question and answer periods in staff meetings.
➢ Provide team-building opportunities for staff and make sure conflicts are dealt with quickly in the work place. If the work environment does not promote positive staff relationships, it will be challenging to have effective community and parental outreach.

References

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