

Native American & Indigenous Student Experience at San José State University

Issued
September 21, 2023

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Introduction

This study aimed to gather feedback from current and recently graduated Native American and Indigenous (NAI)¹ Students about their experience at San Jose State University (SJSU). Specifically, this study focused on building a more welcoming environment at SJSU for NAI students. The study's findings are intended to inform strategies for addressing the graduation rates of Native American and Indigenous students, which are the lowest of an underrepresented minority group in higher education. Despite an unwelcoming environment and obstacles to graduation, NAI students have persisted in forming a community and obtaining services and space from the University.

SJSU is an Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander (AANAPSI) and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) with one nation's most ethnically diverse student populations with a majority-minority student population: eighty-three percent (83%) of students reported as non-white in fall 2021. Asian Americans (34%), Hispanic Americans (28%), and African Americans (3%) constitute the largest minority populations, while those declaring mixed or other racial background is 5%. The gender split among students is roughly equal (50% female).

The research team comprised of five NAI faculty and staff members of the SJSU faculty affinity group Gathering of Academic Indigenous and Native Americans (GAIN). GAIN has been working to address the needs of NAI students at SJSU through programming and outreach. On February 24, 2023, the research team held a report-back session for the campus community and presented the initial findings of the focus groups.

Note on Information Presented

It is important to note the information presented here represents the experiences of students who identify as NAI and that each participant comes from a different cultural background and group of people. While they may have different ways of seeing, understanding, and interacting with the world, they have a common experience based on how the University perceives them – as a homogenized group for data collection purposes.

As noted by students, they felt it stripped away individual agency and reinforced erasure by not recognizing the diversity of NAI communities students come from. Further, it alienated them from the campus community, where they should feel welcome.

Methodology

GAIN and the Native American Student Association (NASO) collaborated on this research project. Members from both groups collaborated to produce the questions and review the final question list that would be used for all focus groups. The NASO student group played a key role

¹ The terminology Native American and Indigenous is used throughout this report to encompass the identities of focus group populations. NAI identity is complex as it is both a racial and political categorization. The focus group participants comprised students who identified as being in one or both of those categories. The research team intentionally chose this terminology to maintain consistency with the terminology used on the SJSU campus.

in identifying the type of research that would be the most impactful, the questions that were asked, and the feedback on the themes identified. Throughout several NASO meetings, the research design and direction specifics were covered collaboratively with students.

The researchers conducted three focus groups, two in September and one in October 2022. Each Focus Group Discussion (FGD) had between two and five participants. The FGD lasted 60-90 minutes and recorded online via Zoom. The recordings were transcribed and then de-identified for names.

Themes

The research team thematically analyzed the transcripts of the FGD to identify themes using an iterative process. Six themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts: Lack of Belonging and a Native Community at SJSU; Racism and Microaggressions; Erasure of Indigeneity and Marginalization; Broken Promises; Forms of Survivance; What NAI Students Want from SJSU.

Lack of Belonging and Community at SJSU

The NAI students in the FGD expressed feeling isolated from other NAI students and expressed frustration that there was no visible NAI community at SJSU. As demonstrated by the following quotes from the FGD:

“I would say . . . not knowing about any resources or connections with other indigenous folks, as we're not very large numbers and pretty scattered, so it's hard to kind of just meet students or other faculty . . . It's hard to connect with other Indigenous folks.”

“...as far as I know, I'm fairly certain, I'm the only native student in my department of about three hundred people. So I think it's been very isolating, and I've had a lot of professors dismiss my opinions on things.”

Racism and Microaggressions

The NAI students in the FGD expressed experiencing microaggressions and racism from other students, staff, and faculty at SJSU. As demonstrated by the following quotes from the FGD:

“When they refer to Indigenous people, I've caught all of them slipping, they refer to us in a past tense, and that we still don't exist, like we're gone.”

“Maybe it's not their fault, but there are some students I've encountered who have been unknowingly insensitive, and maybe it's because they don't know, or they just weren't exposed to that type of information growing up, but . . . they have been really insensitive to the Native American community, and . . . I've stepped up and told them, ‘Hey, man like that's not right’ . . . it can be very hard to put yourself out there like that, and then you come off as, I really hate to say it, but kind of like a b-word or like an a-hole, but you're not. You're just defending your own culture.”

Erasure of Indigeneity and Marginalization

A recurring theme throughout the focus groups was the erasure and marginalization of Indigenous identity in the curriculum, in the Latine² community, in Chicana /Chicano Studies (CCS), and in spaces specifically meant to support Latine students at SJSU. As demonstrated by the following quotes from the FGD:

“That’s been the experience for me here at San José State. I think when a lot of people meet me, for face value, they don't think like, ‘Oh, you're Indigenous,” even after I tell them, like, ‘Oh, I'm [tribe], this is where my family comes from.’ They're like, ‘Oh, yeah, well, you're nothing,’ or else ‘You're Mexican,’ and that's all they will ever refer to me as”

But I definitely think that a lot of people specifically, not to call out anyone, but in CCS programs they like to say like, Oh, this was Mexican land, and it's like, no, it wasn't. It was sovereign Indigenous land, let's get one thing straight”

Broken Promises

NAI Students felt the University had explicitly and implicitly promised resources that it did not have or intend to provide. Many students felt a sense of being misled or betrayed by SJSU. As demonstrated by the following quotes from the FGD:

“I had so much support at my junior college as compared to at San Jose State. I wasn't aware that at San José State, we don't have an AIAN specific guidance counselor, so when it came to talking to an [SJSU] advisor, it felt like they didn't take their time with me. I had set an hour appointment . . . and my adviser maybe spent ten minutes with me . . . it felt very dismissive. I felt with my AIAN counselor at my other college, she really took her time. You could tell she cared, and I'm not saying that this other adviser doesn't care, but maybe he's busy, or maybe he's overwhelmed. I don't know his extenuating circumstances, but I just felt dismissed and not seen.”

“I was pretty frustrated when we went to the Martin Luther King Library for the whole announcement of a Native American Center, and everyone was all hyped up, and they got our hopes going, and then nothing kind of came of it . . . I was kind of salty about that, because I was really looking forward to it.”

Forms of Survivance

Despite the constant barriers and challenges that NAI students in the focus groups faced, they also expressed the myriad of ways they continued to resist within the framework of survivance.

² The term Latine refers to people from Latin America or Latin American descent residing in the United States. The “e” at the end of Latine encompasses the various gender identities often excluded in Spanish. Latine also allows for more communities, like Indigenous communities, to use the term who want to use the genderless, whereas “x” in Latinx excludes some Indigenous communities who do not have “x” in their everyday language.

Although resistance is sometimes an apt description of some of the ways NAI students navigate higher education, Vizenor's notion of survivance fits more closely with what we heard students discuss in the focus groups, such as students continuing to seek out NAI community even when the University did not provide the community or support they were seeking, and how students forged connections with other NAI students, seeking out NAI staff and faculty to support them, and continuing to take pride in their culture.

Recommendations

FGD participants were asked what would make SJSU more welcoming for NAI students; they discussed the need for resources that were specific to the NAI community, such as financial aid and academic counselors, outreach to NAI students, NAI curriculum, programming, and even having NAI elders come to campus. The following four sub-themes emerged as recommendations for future action by the University.

Acknowledgement and Recognition

- Establish a university-supported Pow Wow or Native Pride Day,
- Establish a dedicated tribal liaison to interact with tribes and native organizations in the area,
- Erect a monument to the tribe whose lands the University occupies,
- Have dedicated personnel in Student Outreach and the Recruitment Office to work with NAI students,
- Have dedicated Financial Aid Office personnel trained in tribal and Bureau of Indian Affairs financial aid programs,
- Dedicated funding to Native American and Indigenous programming on campus,
- Coordination around basic needs with local native organizations.

Reverse Broken Promises

- Establish a physical space for the Native American and Indigenous Student Success Center (NAISSC),
- Hire a program coordinator at the NAISSC to assist with programming.

Success of Native American and Indigenous Students

- Direct University Advance to investigate the establishment of scholarships for NAI students,
- Provide internships and student assistantships for NAI students,
- Introduce Native American and Indigenous Studies into the SJSU curriculum.

Adapt to the NAI Student Needs

As SJSU adapts to the needs of NAI students, it will, in turn, be taking steps to:

- End the erasure and marginalization of NAI students at SJSU,
- Reduce the harm to the NAI student body,
- Retain and grow the NAI student population,
- Increase the NAI student retention and graduation rate,
- Attract and retain NAI faculty and staff.

Conclusion

Despite an unwelcoming environment and obstacles to graduation, NAI students have persisted in forming a community and obtaining services and space from the University. By engaging in survivance, NAI students have navigated and impacted an institution that was not designed for them to form small pockets where their indigeneity can thrive.

The work was undertaken in this research project to provide feedback from current and recently graduated Native American and Indigenous (NAI) Students about their experience and support them in their work to create a more welcoming environment at SJSU. The study's findings and recommendations inform strategies for addressing the graduation rates of Native American and Indigenous students.