

# Cross-Cultural and Inter-Cultural Mentorship in Academe: American Indian Culturally Grounded Constructs Applied in Social Work Education

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**Abstract:** An American Indian mentor and four student mentees voice their experiences in the mentor-mentee relationship. Two American Indian cultural constructs are utilized within the academic mentor-mentee relationship with four students. The first construct is learning from an individual who is considered an elder and mentor in the context of American Indian culture. Elders are viewed as teachers, guides, counselors, and supporters of mentees. One example of this construct is the American Indian cultural teaching that emphasizes that the selection of a mentee with potential to learn to accomplish a task is more important than the selection of a mentee who has already mastered the task. This construct allows the mentee to experiment and learn by doing, which can be more demanding of the mentor's time. The second construct is the traditional American Indian worldview of everyone having skills and abilities to share. Therefore, all are able to learn from one another. This construct facilitated opportunities for all four students to learn from each other's cross-cultural and inter-cultural differences between tribal life and the mainstream dominant culture.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural; mentoring; mentor; social work; American Indian; Native American; elders

There are several definitions used to characterize the mentoring relationship, such as didactic, face-to-face, long-term associations, one-on-one relationship, supervisor and novice student, a coach or sponsor and client, etc. (Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000; Bird & Didion, 1992; Kasprisin, Boyle Single, Single, & Muller, 2003; Noe, 1988; Kram, 1985; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000). Each mentoring relationship is defined by the function and purpose of the needs of each mentee. A mentor may have more than one mentor-mentee relationship at a time, and each may be markedly different. The authors selected the term mentor-mentee for this discussion, as it is most culturally appropriate for the American Indian mentor and mentees.

Engaging in mentoring constitutes an ethical responsibility of social work educators and other seasoned professionals. The Council on Social Work Education's National Statement on Research Integrity in Social Work (2007) indicates:

Mentoring junior researchers and trainees in social work research serves to instill the mentee with the ethics, techniques, and community of the profession. Social work's commitment to advancing the careers of traditionally

underrepresented and marginalized groups indicates a special commitment to mentoring trainees who often experience isolation and exaggerated expectations in academic and research settings. (para. 14)

The mentoring relationship can also be used to foster the development of cultural competency, another concept critical to the development of professional social workers (CSWE, 2013; NASW, 2001): "Social workers shall advocate for and participate in educational and training programs that help advance cultural competence within the profession" (NASW, 2001, p. 5).

In this instance, the trainees are learning from a mentor who is a member of an underrepresented or marginalized group. The rationale for this point of view is that mentees may learn more in depth differences from mainstream culture and how other cultures view their world (Kunselman, Hensley, & Tewksbury, 2003; Kersting, 2004; Casto, Caldwell, & Salazar, 2005). Oftentimes, in the cross-cultural mentor-mentee relationship, the mentor is from the mainstream or dominant culture and the mentee is from a different cultural/ethnic background (Allen-Mears, 2006). In this situation the mentee frequently learns to work with and adjust to the

mainstream culture which is valuable. However, this may be problematic for the field. Students from underrepresented groups may be fully aware the learned skills and techniques may be less or not effective in communities with a culturally different environment and worldview. Therefore, it is important to examine the mentor-mentee relationship, with the mentor being from a different ethnic/cultural background and the mentees from the mainstream culture. Students can gain knowledge, skills and techniques to be more effective in providing service to members of unrepresented or marginalized groups. Those students who are underrepresented are likely to find validation for their culturally different beliefs and home community environments.

### **Mentoring Relationship in an American Indian Cultural Context**

Characteristics of the mentor-mentee experiences discussed in this paper include: (1) a mentor who is a female, and a member of an underrepresented group, the American Indian population. (2) All of the mentees were female; two were members of American Indian tribal nations different from the mentor and each other. The two remaining mentees were Caucasian. (3) All share their individual experiences of the mentor-mentee relationship from either a cross-cultural or inter-cultural viewpoint. This particular mentorship allowed the students to enhance their cultural competency, learn a different worldview, and obtain knowledge unique to tribal cultures. This included the nuances not readily disclosed to non-tribal members or members from different tribal nations.

One of the two constructs for this discussion includes learning from a mentor who is considered an educator and an elder of a tribal nation (Hendrix, 2005; Cross, 2004). The elder mentorship is based on wisdom from years of learning and life experiences that are disseminated to the youth of their particular tribal nation. The second is the cultural belief that everyone has skills and abilities that are important to share with others. This paper is based on the premise that these two constructs are indeed transferable to academe and bring a unique dimension to the mentoring relationship.

These cross-cultural constructs provided an exceptional social work knowledge base for the

mentees in relation to the tribal nations' cultural teachings, traditional values, and methods of transmission of the culture. In addition, the experience offered an understanding of policies that negatively impact this population, and current health and human services issues of tribal nations, which frequently differ from the dominant culture (Weaver, 2000). The mentees had the opportunity to learn from each other as they processed and integrated the information gained from their experiences of working within a multicultural research team.

### **Being Mentored and Becoming a Mentor**

I think that to enter into a relationship as a mentor is a way to give back to society and to honor those who provided you with time, direction, and networking opportunities to assist your professional development. I was fortunate to have both formal and combination formal/informal mentoring experiences as a graduate student. The mentors that I consider formal include Caucasian and African American males who were faculty members and professional academic advisors. Each provided me with support by sitting on my doctorate committee, providing constructive criticism in my writing for the dissertation, and giving me valuable direction as to how to move through the program effectively. I would meet with each of them by appointment in their university offices. I did make attempts to seek their opinions on my work in regard to manuscript writing and future employment after graduation. Their advice was generalized to "keep doing what you're doing." I found this to be of no benefit. Therefore, all of these relationships concluded shortly after I completed my graduate degrees. As stated by Riebschleger and Cross (2011), the formal relationships have been terminated, because the goals that brought about the relationship were accomplished.

I also had formal/informal mentoring experiences with Caucasian, African American, and American Indian female mentors. They were in prestigious positions within academe or directors of community-based agencies. As mentors they provided me with access to their professional world by sharing information about their organizational systems and including me in professional activities. I was able to learn about the challenges that existed for women in the profession. They shared in confidence some frustrations they had experienced

and what it meant to be successful. The relationships were long term and multi-dimensional, which included sharing the impact of gender and race on their professional careers. Each mentor developed a role for me as a member of their research team, which led to co-presentations, co-authorships, and community engagement. The most invaluable aspect of working with these mentors was their willingness to share not only positive, but also negative experiences. Their guidance and confidential sharing provided me the opportunity to learn from my own missteps and those of others. Overall, this experience prepared me to learn to cope with future challenges.

My Caucasian and African American female mentors moved into the role of colleagues. We have worked on service and university projects with other members of the faculty in the greater community. Once my career was launched, they moved on to mentor other young women who were studying to be members of the social work profession. My American Indian women mentors provided me with validation for my work and a stronger sense of connection with tribal nation communities. They encouraged me to attain my goals and provided support when I met culturally conflicting challenges. These mentoring relationships have changed over time, but remain in place. The relationships have become reciprocal with a focus on research projects and field experiences for tribal and nontribal students. Currently, I work with these women as colleagues on major projects at universities, on reservations, and in urban American Indian communities. These mentors have provided access to tribal nations for my research, in ways which proved important for my career. My American Indian women mentors continue to invite me to familial, social, and tribal ceremonial events in the role of an extended family member.

### **Why Mentor?**

The decision to mentor is a personal choice. The mentoring role is manifested by the mentor's personal view of caring for individuals, the social work profession, and how she or he views the world. As a mentor, I attempted to combine components of all the mentoring styles I experienced in my academic and professional career. The American Indian value of inclusion, sharing, and focus on the survival of the group are

motivators for me. This value is easily adaptable to academe, the social work profession, and mentoring. Personally, I mentor because I am considered an elder in my culture, I enjoy witnessing the students' growth, and I want to share my knowledge and culture. The rewards of mentoring vary from person to person. I believe mentoring is a way of paying forward for the future. I think the mentoring relationship includes being able to see students obtain their goals by assisting the mentees in their professional development. Also, mentoring adds excitement to life in academe. It allows me to observe several first times, such as co-presenting at professional conferences, conducting a first field research interview, notification of a successful grant proposal, and/or a publication. After graduation, my mentees often inform me of their first position as a professional social worker or if they are a successful candidate for graduate school admission. In addition, the mentees learn values necessary to prepare them to contribute to the betterment of communities, including those cultures different from their own. They learn the significance of their professional roles. And finally, they learn the impact they will have, especially in their work with clients who are culturally different from themselves.

### **American Indian Educator in the Role of Mentor**

The role of mentor is often defined by students, colleagues, and administrators within academe as one who will advise and direct students with the goal of completing their degrees. In tribal communities the role of mentor is defined as an elder or someone who is established and is willing to share acquired knowledge. As an American Indian educator, I combine both of these definitions of mentor. My mentoring role includes social work knowledge, tribal culture, and differences in worldview. I often invest significant amounts of time and direction with mentees. I provide the students with valuable learning opportunities to increase knowledge, skill, and techniques. Also, I provided access for students to acquire a unique experience to understand diversity within the American Indian cultures. The students learn nuances or ways of living of each tribal nation that is not readily disclosed to non-tribal members. Oftentimes, the American Indian population is viewed as one homogenous group with little differences. However, there are differences in the ways of living. The American Indian students who

are citizens from different tribal nations need to learn these nuances as well, to be effective professional social workers.

Each mentor-mentee relationship is as individualized as the two people in the relationship. The mentor is required to have adaptability from one mentee to another. For example, I have worked with more experienced mentees who needed less direction and support in their work. They were able to interview in person or face-to-face with little direction. However, they may require assistance during times of transition, such as moving to conducting focus groups. They may also need assistance as to how to access information that may not be readily available. The students may be computer savvy in the work of literature review, but less knowledgeable of how to access data from tribal nations. In addition, a mentor from an underrepresented group must have patience when teaching cross-cultural issues. In my experience, some American Indian mentees were wonderful at sharing cultural knowledge. Others may be frustrated that they were called on to share this knowledge. I discussed with them an option of accepting the role of a cultural translator and that this was a valuable skill. They were willing to share their abilities to communicate nuances and rationales as to why it is important to proceed in a certain manner while working with a particular tribe. They then understood they had an expertise to share to assist the American Indian population.

The American Indian foci for the mentor are on the importance of adaptation to the mentee's needs, such as patience during the learning curve, investment of time, inclusion in tasks for the promotion of the mentee, and willingness to share the knowledge of his or her own culture and the cultures of others (Cross, 2004). The cultural construct to acknowledge here is the American Indian mentor's investment of time, patience for the mentee's learning curve, and the amount of energy required to learn and develop the mentee's skill set. The American Indian worldview encourages the untested mentee to try new experiences for skill development, knowing mistakes can be just as educational as successes. The risk the mentor takes on behalf of the mentee is a possible lack of success. As previously stated, the American Indian cultural teachings emphasize that the selection of a mentee

with potential to learn to accomplish a task is more important than the selection of a mentee who has already mastered the task. Thus allowing the mentee to experiment and learn by doing which can be more demanding of the mentor's time.

### **Selection of Mentees**

It is a conscious decision to assist in the development and growth of an individual. Personally, I think it is an honor to be a part of this experience. Universities may have a mentor-mentee program with a selection process. In my experience I have selected the mentees myself. One may think that my selection process, comparatively, is quite unsystematic. My selection process includes recruiting students enrolled in a class I teach, those who are working as research assistants, or others who are active in social work student organizations. Also, I have met students at cultural gatherings held at the university, or in the local community. They all have expressed a willingness to work and learn under my direction. As an American Indian faculty member, many American Indian students gravitate to me, for I have a similar cultural background. The relationships develop through a shared topic of interest, a discussion in regard to a borrowed publication, or interest in current tribal issues. Consequently, there is no precise selection process. I prefer the mentoring relationships unfold and then I am able to extend an invitation to work together. Also, I select those who have a shared commitment and enthusiasm in regard to relevant interest on a specific topic which involves my research.

As a member of an underrepresented group, I am often in the role of a cultural mediator. As a cultural mediator, I bridge and translate the meaning of nuances of cultural aspects in both directions. My shared expertise with non-American Indian students allows them to become effective and competent to work with the American Indian population. Also, my expertise is shared with American Indian students who are navigating the dominant culture to obtain their educational goals. Our relationship may also pave the way to provide my mentees with a more accessible research environment.

A mentoring relationship, regardless of the gender or culture of each student, requires an element of trust (Riebschleger & Cross, 2011). It is my opinion that the mentor is trusted to help, inform correctly,

and be able to say to the mentee, “I do not have the answer, but here is an excellent referral.” In addition, I think the relationship requires a level of trust within the dyad to allow for sharing of opinions and an opportunity to discuss different views. I believe this level of sharing allows for growth of the mentee. I think trust is also an issue for the mentor, in that the mentee reflects the mentor's work and reputation. It is a risk to be in a situation where my reputation is in potential jeopardy. It has taken a long time to earn my professional reputation, and therefore, I am taking a chance that the mentee will share my work accurately. As a mentor I have to trust that the mentee will act in good faith. I want to be sure they understand not only the concept, but how and why. When a mentee becomes a professional they will share what they have learned from the mentoring relationship. I am fully aware of this, and want to be sure I have done all that I can to ensure they will be sharing accurate information. This highlights the importance of the mentee selection process. I want to be able to have confidence in the mentee's judgment, skills, and abilities. That is why time investment with mentees is so important.

### **Students as Mentees**

The four other female authors of this article were selected as mentees because of their commitment, skills, and interest in my research. All were willing to complete the university's human subject's tutorial, conduct literature reviews on the topics to be studied, and learn new skills such as data coding and analysis. They were responsible in their time commitment and willingness to consult with me when uncertain as to the next step to take in the work. In addition, they sought direction in regard to completion of their degree programs, wanted a sounding board for their frustrations or were in need of encouragement to pursue new avenues. Their knowledge, skills, cultures, and abilities varied. Some needed more direction than others due to personal aptitude and academic levels, at either a bachelor's or master's program. Two of the mentees are Caucasian. Two are American Indian, although neither were from my tribal nation. Also, all five of us have been able to learn from each other. The two nontribal young women are from rural areas in different parts of the state, which has enabled them to share rural cultural differences. We have worked together on research on American Indian

grandparents as parents of their grandchildren.

The four mentees share their perspectives on the mentoring relationship in the following section. It is written in the first person voice intentionally to ensure the originality of their words.

### **Student Voice A**

Student A describes her experience in the mentor-mentee relationship over a ten-year period. She highlights several positive outcomes that have derived from the relationship including academic achievements in research and scholarship, and preparedness for professional employment, and feeling a sense of belonging:

My experience with my mentor has been long-term and multi-faceted. I have learned that mentoring provides both internal and external supports. Internal benefits have included feeling encouraged, acknowledgment of my strengths, positive self-image, and access to emotional support during difficult times. The external benefits included assistance with goal setting, resource development, opportunities to engage in leadership roles, and being treated as a colleague in completion of tasks...As an aspiring social worker, this mentor-mentee relationship has been invaluable to me. My mentor has experience in several areas of the profession, which include: clinical practice, teaching, administration, institutional development, and collaboration with communities, including tribal nations. It is wonderful to work with someone who has the fluidity necessary to blend the complexities of teaching, research, clinical practice and the commitment to communities to accomplish educational, research and service goals...Social work students generally learn to be professionals through professor-facilitated discussions in the classroom centered on readings assigned from textbooks. However, classroom instruction cannot equate to experiences learned through working directly with a mentor. Mentoring includes the rare opportunity to explore the field of social work through a cross-cultural lens. My mentor has shared her tribal nation's culture and the cultures of other tribal nations with me. This opportunity has allowed me to increase my cultural competence, which includes personal and collective strengths as well as challenges, and to

derive potential solutions for critical social issues...As a graduate assistant working for my mentor, I participated in a qualitative research study on the topic of American Indian grandparents' kinship care. I was included in the development of the research project in a hands-on manner (i.e., submission of a research proposal for approval by the university human subjects committee, conducting individual and focus group interviews, etc.).

As our relationship progressed, I was encouraged to collaboratively submit proposals for funding to conduct research and to develop co-presentations for peer reviewed professional conferences and for tribal-based community organizations. One conference in particular that I recall from a personal growth standpoint was held on my mentor's reservation. The first half of the session she and I had co-presented on the topic of American Indian grand families. The second part of the session she was asked to lead a "talking circle," which is described more fully in Ferris-Olsen (2013). The talking circle was an opportunity for participants to share comments in a comfortable, familiar, and culturally appropriate way. The acceptance and warmth I received reinforced my desire to continue to work with American Indian children and families.

An unexpected benefit of being mentored was the interaction with other mentees. The concept of collective learning through small, cooperative group interaction is a teaching method valued in American Indian communities (Swisher & Deyhle, 1992). The mentees were from different racial/ethnic cultural backgrounds, which provided a rich environment for cross-cultural learning. As an example of the benefits from this mentorship learning opportunity, after graduation I was employed by a state agency as a children's services specialist. Another mentee had secured a position working for her tribal nation. We serendipitously found ourselves working together on behalf of a shared client. It was beneficial to the family to have two caseworkers that not only had mutual respect for each other that was developed over a long period of time, but had the benefit of workers who understood the culture, and were able to work together on the family's behalf by maximizing resources and minimizing

trauma.

### **Student Voice B**

Student B is an American Indian female who grew up off her reservation. Her tribal affiliation differs from the mentor's tribe. She describes the mentoring relationship that was developed over nine years as having three aspects important to her, which are trust, risk taking, and mutual respect. Student B's experience with the mentoring relationship spans from the time of her undergraduate studies through her graduate program:

I would like to discuss trust first. My mentor was able to gain my trust because of her professional academic knowledge, honesty, and ability to navigate and communicate both in the Native and non-Native cultures. I shared personal knowledge, which required trust and acceptance between each other. My mentor provided guidance as I developed into an effective professional social worker. Another factor supporting the trust within the relationship was culture. Working with an American Indian professor provided a more relaxed atmosphere. She was able to understand my issues more clearly in relation to participation in cultural, tribal, and even family events. This is a result of the mentor having an understanding of the significance of these events. A non-Native mentor may not have readily understood the importance of my need to partake in these activities, which at times conflicted with my academic obligations. Often I have heard from a non-Native perspective, "Can't that wait?" or "Why is that so important?" My American Indian mentor did not convey this message. She was always willing to talk with me about my concerns, in general, and experiences of how our tribal nations differed in some areas and were similar in others. There was no judge as to whose tribe was right or wrong...The second aspect I would like to discuss is risk, which included a fear that I might possibly have a personality clash with my mentor, or that she might not share a similar belief system because we were members of different tribal nations. Also, there was a fear that we might not share similar interests, or that she would not be able to hear and understand my viewpoint. Fortunately, this was not the case. There was just never an issue between us...The

third aspect that impacted my mentoring relationship was respect. It was so important to be respected by a mentor who made it clear that my voice is important. This was demonstrated to me when my mentor invited me to be involved in several professional opportunities, which included field research, literature reviews, manuscript development, co-presentations held at professional meetings and American Indian conferences. This all culminated in my role of consultant in a national social work organization taskforce.

The opportunity to have had an American Indian mentor was a rarity and so rewarding on both a professional and personal level. This mentorship and guidance provided me with a new perspective and helped me to realize that I do have something to contribute. If I had been working with a non-Native mentor, I don't think that I would have been as receptive to the relationship, or felt understood. There were non-Native instructors and professors that were helpful during my college career, but I felt I had to educate them about who I was, educate them about my tribal nation, and neutralize stereotypes. It was easier with my American Indian mentor, because she and I talked about tribal issues, histories, and current events with the same passion and vigor. I did not have to explain myself. It was rewarding to be included in another American Indian person's life professionally and personally; it was and still continues to be an honor.

Through work with my mentor on three research studies: American Indian kinship care, the United States Indian boarding school project, and a study on the experiences of bullying in high school, I have been able to meet several social workers and allied professionals. One particular opportunity allowed me to secure a paid position. I was also able to develop and implement successful programs for children and families in a number of tribal nation communities. I use many of my mentor's organizational and supervisory skills that she modeled for me in my approach with colleagues and employees who are under my supervision. The skills I model include patience; sharing of knowledge of not only how to do the task, but the overall importance of the task;

awareness of cultural differences; and most of all respect for the other person.

### **Student Voice C**

Student C is an American Indian female who was raised in her tribal community and culture. Her tribal affiliation differed from her mentor's. She describes the mentoring relationship, which was developed over six years, as one that was fostered from the mentor's reputation as being an advocate for American Indian students across the campus community:

As an undergraduate major in political science, I met my mentor through campus-based events in which we mutually participated (i.e., events hosted by the American Indian Studies Program (AISP) and the annual Michigan Indian Day (MID) event hosted by the School of Social Work). Although we are both members of different American Indian tribal nations, our tribal histories of forced assimilation and genocide are comparable. There are some cultural differences between our tribal nations (i.e., size, government structure, physical environment, language, gender roles, religious and spiritual practices), but the differences never were an issue for us.

In 2006, I had struggled with fulfilling the internship requirement for a specialization in the AISP. My mentor advocated on my behalf and assisted with the development of a suitable internship proposal that was accepted. My internship involved a systematic review of textbooks frequently used by social work programs to assess for the degree of inclusion of American Indian content. I thought the task would be easy initially, but upon the review of a number of textbooks, I became frustrated due to my findings of the lack of content available or the inclusion of inaccurate content. I clearly remember in one section of a text, an author described the consumption of alcohol by the Anglo community as a practice to connect with God, and was supported as a religious custom. In the same text, it explained that when alcohol was introduced to American Indian communities, the substance was misused to the extreme. I was upset at this finding of academic leaders promoting negative stereotypes to future

generations of social workers. It was beneficial for me to have my mentor to vent my frustrations and to have the opportunity to discuss my beliefs of what accurate information should be included in such a textbook.

As a result of the internship and the guidance of my mentor, I was able to produce an annotated bibliography of fifty-five textbooks with a description of the quantity or deficiency of American Indian/First Nations content. My mentor shared this information with a national social work organization in a formal report. I felt that I was not only learning from the task, but I was actually making an important contribution to the profession. In addition, my mentor invited me to present these findings at a statewide social work conference and the MID event...Working alongside another American Indian woman is empowering both in academia and within the community. My mentor is a powerful American Indian woman, a professor, and deeply respected across many fields of the profession of social work as well as with those who work in tribal nation communities. This is an aspect of her that I cherish. She is an advocate for American Indian students. She has been able to obtain funding for several American Indian students to afford them an opportunity to gain research experience and employment. I was one of the fortunate students to have been employed by her. It benefited not only me, but also my family.

My mentor continues to be a powerful voice in my life and empowers me both professionally and personally. She has provided me with essential guidance, and challenges me to look at situations differently. She has taught me how to be a professional in the provision of services for specific needs of our tribal communities. The lessons, values, opportunities, and people I have been privileged to meet through my mentor are extraordinary.

#### **Student Voice D**

Student D is a Caucasian female who grew up in a city located near the reservation of her mentor. The mentoring experience is described over a fourteen-year period:

Engaging in the mentoring relationship gave me

courage to participate in and learn about another culture in ways I would never have done on my own. Personally, the most valuable aspect of working with a mentor was to be able to obtain my education while benefiting from a perspective that is not always offered to students. The opportunity to have this particular mentor-mentee relationship allowed me to learn about issues and topics that I may never have thought to seek out on my own. Also, if I had not worked with my mentor it is unlikely that I would have experienced how to conduct research, prepare a professional peer-reviewed presentation, or navigate the rigors of publishing and teaching.

I assisted my mentor in conducting research on the maltreatment and neglect of American Indian elders. I conducted individual interviews with Indian Outreach Workers who are employed to work with tribal communities. The skills I acquired in this process are relevant to the day-to-day role of a clinical social worker, are invaluable, and add to my professional skill set. These experiences point to the possibilities of the direction my career may take in the future.

Prior to working with my mentor, the exposure I had with American Indian culture was limited to my living near a reservation. My experience working with a mentor from a different culture provided opportunities that I may not have sought out on my own. My mentor's interest in conducting research with American Indian elders afforded me the opportunity to travel and interact with multiple tribal nation cultures from an ethnographic point of view. I quickly learned how the negative interactions with non-native social workers resulted in reluctance of American Indians to engage with mainstream service providers. This reluctance largely stems from the historical traumas that occurred over decades, such as removal of their children to foster care or adoptive non-Indian homes, and Indian boarding schools. The fact that my mentor accepted and trusted me as a colleague allowed the interactions between the elders and me to be more comfortable. As a result, the elders were relatively candid with me during our interactions within their communities as we collected data for the research project. While there was significant emphasis placed on diversity and cultural



education in my undergraduate and graduate programs, nothing compares with the first-hand exposure to the cultural nuances and traditions. If my mentor had not been a member of the American Indian population, it is likely that I would not have had these rich experiences.

Although our mentor-mentee relationship has changed over the years, my mentor and I continue to stay engaged in different ways that have continued to help me grow professionally. She invites me to guest lecture in her undergraduate courses, which I thoroughly enjoy. As a social work professional I find it gratifying to share my experiences with future social workers. This experience is also beneficial in my professional career as I am often called upon to share information with various groups in the community in which I practice. I look forward to having the opportunity to pay it forward by becoming a mentor and guiding new social workers in the future.

### Conclusion

This case study highlights the need for and value of recruiting faculty from underrepresented populations to serve as mentors for both students who are members of underrepresented groups and students who are members of the dominant culture. It also provides insights on how mentees understand their ability to learn from one another, for all of them have knowledge to share and a contribution to make to the profession of social work. In addition, the cross-cultural and inter-cultural major lessons learned by the four mentor-mentee relationships include: (1) introduction to field research in tribal communities via data collection by conducting interviews with American Indian elders and social work professionals, (2) experience networking with other mentees, (3) attainment and refinement of professional leadership skills, (4) development of writing skills for grant and manuscript submissions, and (5) development of knowledge of tribal nations to increase cultural competency.

As social workers develop their professional identity it is important that they practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development (CSWE, 2008). This includes the development of understanding how diversity shapes the human experience. From my

perspective as a mentor, the mentoring experience allowed these mentees the opportunity to gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate personal bias in working with diverse American Indian communities. The mentees were able to recognize and communicate an understanding of the importance of difference in shaping life experiences. They were also able to view themselves as learners and engage with each other and their mentor as key contributors in research and community engagement activities.

The benefits of mentoring have been a learning experience for me. I have enjoyed being in the midst of the mentees' enthusiasm, eagerness, and discovery of their own talents as social work professionals. Their willingness to engage in efforts beyond the requirements of their degree programs in order to assist in my research is appreciated. In addition, I was able to watch them bloom before my eyes.

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