

Native American Women's Voices

2010 Utah Women and Education Project Research Study

UWEP 
Utah Women and
Education Project

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Of all the minority groups in Utah, the Native American population has one of the lowest higher education participation rates among those aged 18 to 24. Close to 19% of Native Americans from this age group enroll in higher education compared to approximately 58% of Asians/Pacific Islanders and 28% of Blacks/African Americans (Perlich, 2006). However, 57.8% of all Native American students enrolled in Utah public higher education institutions are female while only 48.7% of White students are female (King & Madsen, 2010). Participation for both groups lag behind national rates by 2.4% and 7.6% respectively.

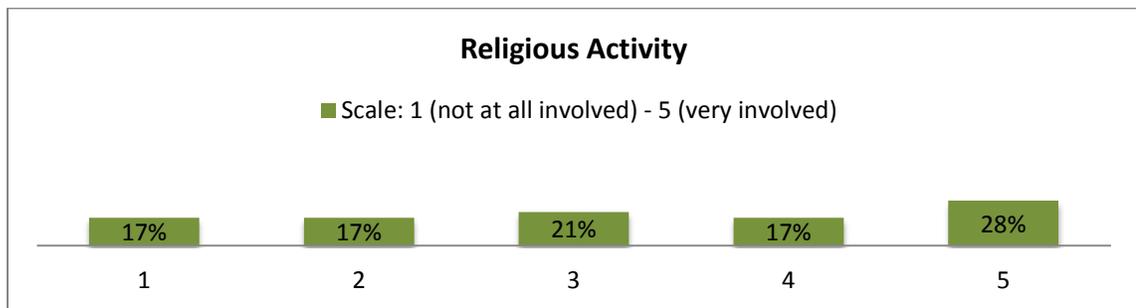
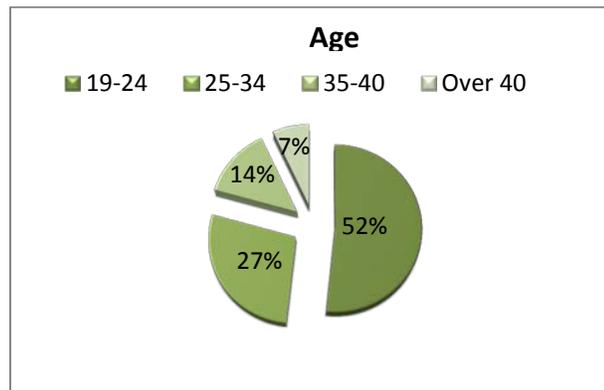
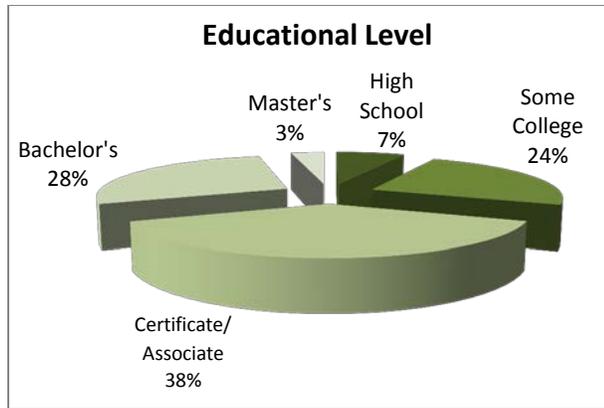
To better understand the factors influencing the higher education choices of Native American women in Utah, this study examined variables such as demographics, family background, values, individual attributes, schooling/non-schooling experiences, and aspirations on enrollment decisions. Three groups of women were invited to participate: those who did not enroll in postsecondary education after high school, those who enrolled but did not complete, and those who completed. The study focused on two research questions:

1. What factors influence the enrollment decisions of Native American women?
2. What are the educational values and future aspirations of Native American women and how do these affect enrollment decisions?

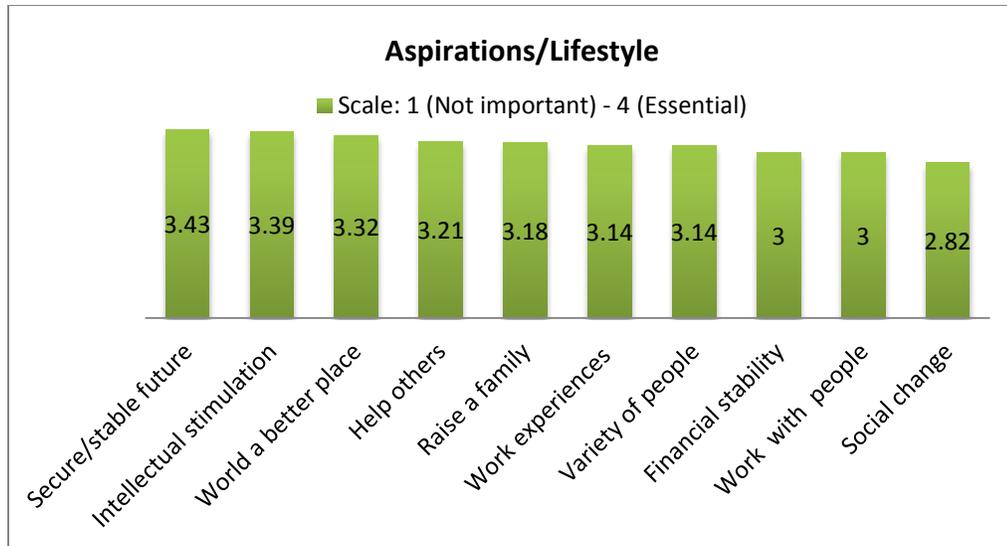
Qualitative and quantitative data was collected by means of an online survey.

Although recruitment of participants was extensive and involved networking within the Native American community throughout the state, respondents were primarily those who had been successful in higher education by completing either an associate's or a bachelor's degree. Thus, the findings predominantly reflect the experiences of Native American women who had realized success rather than being a comparison among three groups of women. Also, as the study involved a limited number of participants, correlations among questions was not possible. What follows is a brief summary of the key findings and implications for supporting Native American women in higher education in the state of Utah.

1. **Demographics** - the majority of the 29 Native American women participants had completed an associate's or a bachelor's degree. Most were between the ages of 19-34. Sixty-six percent of the respondents were of the LDS faith and 45% described themselves as involved or very involved in their religion.



- Aspirations** - most participants (55%) were not the first in their families to complete a degree, and nearly all (93%) expressed aspirations for getting a degree or completing an additional degree.

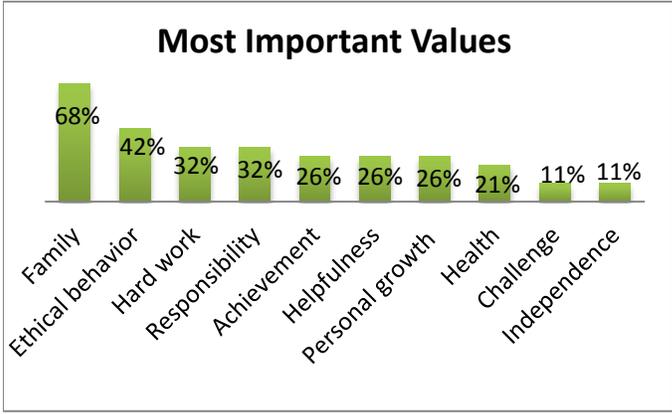
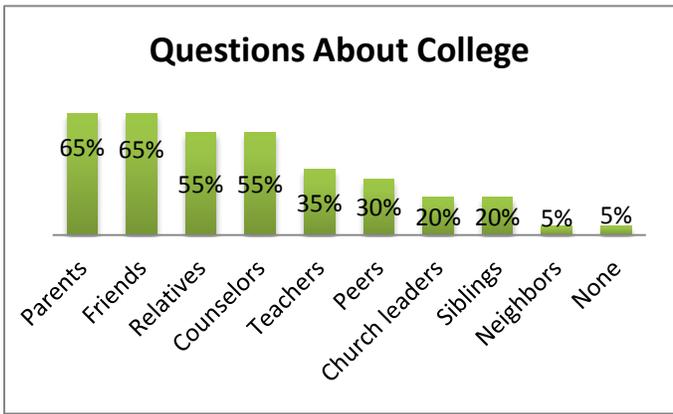


The graph shows participants' motivations for an education. Qualitative data indicated that these women desired or had completed a degree in order to ensure a better life, particularly for parents, siblings, and husband/children. Another motivating factor was to help others. The following quotes illustrate:

- “The most important factors that influenced my decision were my family. I figured they took care of me as a child and young adolescent, now it is my turn to take care of them.”
- “As long as I can have things for myself and help my family out, then I will feel accomplished. That's all I want is to be successful.”
- “I really want to move back to the reservation because I believe that is where I am supposed to be. There are so few people willing to invest their time in the reservation and make a difference. . . . I don't think I will be making a lot of money, but that is OK with me. I have never really needed it before. I really just want to help other people.”

3. **Influence on decision** – parents had a big impact on the participants' desires for an education. This influence was both direct and indirect. For example, fathers gave positive feedback when their daughters received high grades, and set an example by reading and showing enjoyment in learning. Participants indicated that 70% of fathers were encouraging or very encouraging about higher education while 81% of mothers were described the same way. Mothers, in particular, talked to their daughters about their experiences in life and the value of education. The following quotes illustrate.

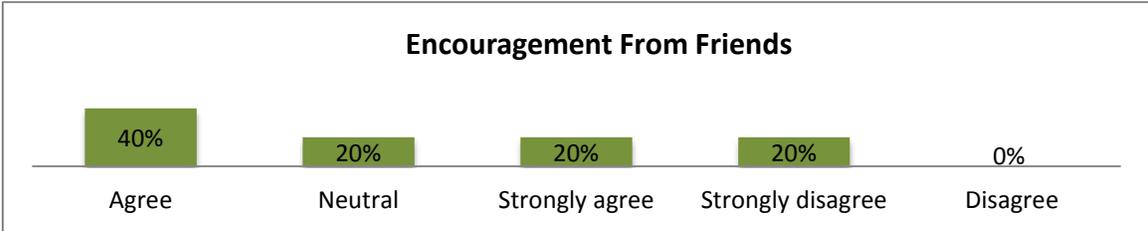
- “My dad lectures me all the time on being a better person intellectually because then I can help others more effectively. . . . He thinks if I go to school then I will have more choice of a career.”
- “My mother has had a profound effect on my life in general and especially with my educational choices. She has supported me through and through without tire. . . . I almost didn't attend for one semester a year ago, but she put her foot down, and I kept attending.”



The graphs above show the importance of family. Open-ended participants responses supported this information as the following quote illustrates.

- “I think that all of us are capable of doing whatever we put our minds to and I set the same standards for myself. I believe that I have the same opportunities as everyone else and therefore I can do everything and anything. My long-term life goals are to continuously educate and develop myself as a human being, to always be considering new horizons for my people, and to help my family in any way that I can.”

High school teachers who expressed belief in the ability of the participants to be successful and friends who had goals to attend college were also key factors although these sources of support were not as strong as the influence of parents. Sixty percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that encouragement from friends had been a factor in their desire to pursue higher education (see graph below). Forty-five percent of participants indicated that teachers had been encouraging or very encouraging and 45% talked to teachers sometimes or often about higher education. Counselors who helped students complete college applications and pursue scholarships had a positive impact as well.



4. **Challenges** – High school life included challenges such as coming to terms with culture and identity, peer pressure, family problems, and learning difficulties, but resiliency and a desire for further education helped the women overcome these difficulties. Finances were the biggest barrier for those who had not completed any degree (i.e., associate’s or bachelor’s), or who had completed only to the associate’s degree level. Most participants had a strong desire for

education, and this led to some level of completion. The following quotes illustrate their determination:

- “I wanted a more abundant life and not to struggle like my parents did.”
- “I want to give back to my fellow Native Americans, set an example, and show them it’s possible.”

In sum, findings indicate that a strong desire for education, based on a firm belief in its benefits, resulted in the decision to enroll and to complete either an associate’s or a bachelor’s degree. Additionally, all of the women indicated they had plans for further education above the level they had already completed. For Native American women, educational aspirations were primarily driven by wanting a more secure and stable life for themselves and their extended and immediate families. These aspirations did not differ among the three groups of women although as mentioned, participants who had not enrolled in higher education or had enrolled and not completed were underrepresented in the study. The participants expressed a desire to not only use their education to the benefit of their own families but to be role models and actively improve the lives of those living on reservations. These women were not driven by a need for financial success but to make life better for themselves and others.

Factors influencing these aspirations varied but parents had a key influence, as did friends. Religious teachings, including specific encouragement from religious leaders, had an impact. Similarly, high school teachers and counselors who took a personal interest in these women, demonstrated confidence in their abilities, and talked to them about educational possibilities positively affected the women’s aspirations. An overriding characteristic in these women was the belief that they could be successful in their chosen endeavors and do whatever they set their minds to. Overall, the key to their success was receiving consistent, ongoing messages of the value of education from a variety of sources along with positive feedback about their abilities. Many of these women came from low socioeconomic backgrounds, which was an additional driving factor. Native American young women in Utah need multiple layers of encouragement regarding their ability to be successful and the transformative possibilities of an education. Additionally, information and guided direction regarding financial aid opens the way to the realization of their dreams.

References

- Perlich, P. (2006, May). *Long term demographic trends impacting higher education in Utah*. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah, Bureau of Economic and Business Research.
- King, A. D., & Madsen, S. R. (2010, April). *IPEDS enrollment and graduation report. 2008 data*. Orem, UT: Utah Valley University, Office of the Utah Women and Education Project.