



Success factors and factors that made completion difficult for 12 American Indian elementary education graduates in the Distance Education Program at Rocky Mountain College  
by Joyce Plaza Folgert

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Education  
Montana State University  
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**Abstract:**

There is a growing need for American Indian graduates to educate our younger generation. The responsibilities of being an educator are substantial and often require a college degree. Although many American Indians pursue a college degree, this goal is shattered because of the many barriers they encounter. The purpose of this study was to identify key factors that had a positive impact on successful completion and factors that made completion difficult for American Indian students in the Elementary Education Distance Education Program at Rocky Mountain College.

The qualitative research methodology was used in obtaining data for this study.

The emergent nature of qualitative design allowed the researcher to discover, explore and learn about the distance education experiences. Interviews and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory provided evidence of distance education experiences of 12 American Indian students who graduated from Rocky Mountain College's Elementary Education Program between 1996 and 2000.

Results showed that the graduates who experienced success had self-determination to become a teacher. They had support from their families and other related support systems. The insightful, perceptive and caring instructors who responded to their learning needs impacted success. An awareness of their learning style preferences was also helpful to the graduates. However, technical problems related to delivery of the courses caused difficulty. Some negative experiences with less than supportive faculty also caused problems as did instances of racial prejudice on the part of non-Indian students.

The impact of this study is on distance educators, who may need to find ways to vary their instructional techniques, methods and media when using interactive distance education to teach American Indian students. From the interviews and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, the researcher made recommendations to enhance advising, teaching, learning and design in the distance education curriculum. To meet its mission statement, the college needs to be more focused on the needs of a culturally diverse student population. The focus of these recommendations is not only to educate, but also to empower American Indian students.

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MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Bozeman, Montana

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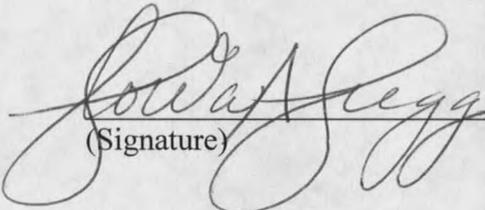
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This dissertation has been read by each member of the dissertation committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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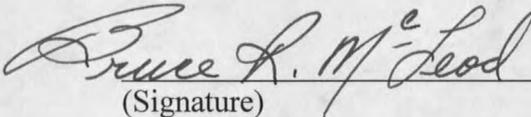
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## Abstract

There is a growing need for American Indian graduates to educate our younger generation. The responsibilities of being an educator are substantial and often require a college degree. Although many American Indians pursue a college degree, this goal is shattered because of the many barriers they encounter. The purpose of this study was to identify key factors that had a positive impact on successful completion and factors that made completion difficult for American Indian students in the Elementary Education Distance Education Program at Rocky Mountain College.

The qualitative research methodology was used in obtaining data for this study. The emergent nature of qualitative design allowed the researcher to discover, explore and learn about the distance education experiences. Interviews and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory provided evidence of distance education experiences of 12 American Indian students who graduated from Rocky Mountain College's Elementary Education Program between 1996 and 2000.

Results showed that the graduates who experienced success had self-determination to become a teacher. They had support from their families and other related support systems. The insightful, perceptive and caring instructors who responded to their learning needs impacted success. An awareness of their learning style preferences was also helpful to the graduates. However, technical problems related to delivery of the courses caused difficulty. Some negative experiences with less than supportive faculty also caused problems as did instances of racial prejudice on the part of non-Indian students.

The impact of this study is on distance educators, who may need to find ways to vary their instructional techniques, methods and media when using interactive distance education to teach American Indian students. From the interviews and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, the researcher made recommendations to enhance advising, teaching, learning and design in the distance education curriculum. To meet its mission statement, the college needs to be more focused on the needs of a culturally diverse student population. The focus of these recommendations is not only to educate, but also to empower American Indian students.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Background

Mary Doyle lived on the reservation. This third generation Assiniboine mother in her mid-20's worked two jobs in order to provide for her children. Grandma and other elders cared for her children while she was at work. Mary was unhappy with her life. The 24-year old single mom had a strong desire to become a teacher in the elementary school on the reservation and continue the traditions of the American Indian culture. Mary wanted to complete her education and finally get the degree she started five years ago. She hoped to take courses that would be flexible enough for her to work and care for her children. Mary would need guidance, advice and support. Distance education was the only option for her at the time.

Florence Pretty Flower was almost 50 years old. She married at an early age and raised seven children. She loved children and spent much of her time volunteering at the Head Start School. Recently, she and her husband divorced after 34 years of marriage. Florence decided to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. She planned to enroll in her first distance learning class the following semester and earn a degree.

Steve Running-Fast lived in a remote rural community in northeastern Montana. He was a senior in high school and was in the upper tenth percentile of his class. His

time was occupied by helping his father on the family ranch. Highly motivated to learn, this young man always wanted to become a science teacher. He made plans to attend Fort Peck Community College after graduating from high school in the spring. His advisor told him to complete two years at the local community college and then earn his teaching degree while taking distance education classes offered by Rocky Mountain College.

Ben Morris was enrolled in the distance education program at Fort Peck Community College. Because of a childhood injury, Ben had limited vision in his right eye and was restricted to a wheel chair. His disability had not stopped him from taking classes to earn a degree. He had a wonderful dog, Cassidy, that accompanied him to class. Ben hoped to earn his degree in elementary education the following year.

Tricia Limberhand met her American Indian husband while serving in the U.S. Army at Fort Gordon, Georgia. Her husband, Shane, earned an associate degree at Fort Peck Community College in Poplar, Montana, before leaving for the army. Shane planned to return to his hometown of Poplar and live on the reservation with Tricia and their expected baby. Although Tricia was not an American Indian, she planned to get a four-year degree in K-12 Music Education by taking two years of course work at the Fort Peck Community College and then completing her degree with distance learning classes from Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana.

These five examples illustrate real circumstances that are part of a growing number of situations in which distance education is being used to help provide opportunities for American Indian students who want to enroll in college courses. Fort Peck Community College in Poplar, Montana is one of seven tribal colleges in Montana

where students who succeed are encouraged to continue their education at a four-year institution of higher learning. Not unique to Montana, these cases reflect the changing educational needs of adult learners on a regional and national scale (Bruder, 1991).

This changing face of education ranks as one of five trends that will have a major impact on the shaping of our society (American Association of Retired Persons, 1997). The American Association of Retired Persons projects that this new view of education will alter our ideas of learning and our learning sites.

It has been over 40 years since telecommunications first began to meet the needs of learners; however, colleges using telecommunications are now approaching the "threshold of significance" (Grossman, 1994). According to Perry (1989), this interest in distance education is changing the way education is viewed. Keegan (1991) states that, "It is now no longer possible to think of education solely in the traditional sense of face-to-face contact."

New and more individual ways of learning are emerging, and innovative locations and settings for learning are being initiated. Traditional classrooms are increasingly incorporating media formats into their curricula and education programs, and mentor relationships are forming across age groupings. In these changed learning environments, the most crucial challenges are in the areas of program development in higher education settings along with the design of the curriculum and selection of effective teachers.

The response of many colleges and universities to these changes is the development of distance learning courses and programs. Distance education has played a major role in extending traditional classrooms to virtual environments. The main

objective of distance education has been to extend resources available to learners beyond local or regional settings. Moore (1991) reported that distance education is not merely traditional learning and teaching using new technology, but a transaction between teachers and learners involving interplay among the environment, the individuals, and their patterns of behavior. He states that "Distance teaching may be defined as the family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviors are executed apart from the learning behaviors, including those which, in a contiguous situation would be performed in the learner's presence so that communication between teacher and the learner must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical or other devices" (p. 18). He goes on to say that learner responsibility is a main feature of distance education.

The Montana Consortium, a Science and Technology Alliance at Rocky Mountain College, defines distance education as "Education that takes place when a teacher and student(s) are separated by physical distance, and technology (computers, radio, television and correspondence) are often in concert with face-to-face communication used to bridge the gap" (Gottschalk, 1996, p. 7). The terms distance education or distance learning have been applied interchangeably to a variety of programs (Jonassen, 1992).

Rocky Mountain College, the oldest four-year college in Montana, has felt the impact of tremendous change—particularly in the field of technology, and the rate of change will no doubt increase in the future. With the rising need to compete in today's high-tech economy, administrators at Rocky Mountain College looked at the role distance education would play in the future of the college. Not long ago, many higher education institutions, including Rocky Mountain College, paid scant attention to distance learning.

Distance learning efforts were usually limited and detached from traditional academic classroom activity, and courses classified as distance learning opportunities revolved around a few correspondence courses and telecourses.

Rocky Mountain College (RMC), a four-year private college, developed a teacher training distance education program for educating future elementary teachers in 1990. Students enrolled in the two-year community college on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana were the first to be connected to RMC's distance education program. As a result, this distance education program has given American Indian students the opportunity to earn a baccalaureate degree in teacher education from RMC.

According to the college's mission statement, RMC needs to reflect sensitivity to the needs of the American Indian student as part of the diverse community of learners. By providing access to courses for adults living in rural or remote areas of Montana, the college's distance education program has the opportunity to value diversity. RMC's mission statement states, "As a college in the Mountain West, Rocky is recognized as a diverse community of learners who seek to understand the history and environment of the region and to also understand the history and environment of the larger world. Rocky Mountain College values diversity and the interrelatedness of knowledge" (RMC Catalog, 1997-99, p. 2).

The first distance education interactive television courses were offered to the American Indian students by using a PictureTel unit that provided compressed video telecommunication. It was designed for small group interactive television activities and operated over a standard integrated service digital network (ISDN) phone line. The

PictureTel unit consisted of a 27-inch television monitor, a movable camera mounted on top of the monitor, and a control pad that also controlled the dial-up procedures. This compressed video technology that was state of the art in the 1990's has since been replaced with VisionNet, which is faster and contains less jerkiness and audio delay. The new VisionNet Classroom, located in the campus library, is a modern facility that involves a high degree of interactivity between teacher and student who are separated by hundreds of miles.

Programs such as this one provide access to higher education for many people who are unable to obtain a college education by traditional means. Yet a large number of students who begin distance education programs do not complete them. In fact, some students do not even complete the first class. A high dropout rate is typical in distance education programs (Moore, 1991). Since one would assume that students must be fairly motivated in order to register and pay for their courses, the question of a high dropout rate is perplexing. Boshier (1988) states in the review of literature on distance learning that the major reasons for withdrawal were lack of time, change of plans, unsatisfactory courses, and illness. Success factors according to Boshier's research included high motivation, planned objectives, self-discipline, perseverance, habitual study, promptness in submitting assignments, and using a variety of approaches.

According to a 1998 American Council Study on Educational Research, the percentage of American Indians nationally completing four years of college has increased from 8% in 1990 to only 9% in 1998. The problem of low enrollment and high attrition rates both contribute to low college graduation rates nationally and at Rocky Mountain

College. Although no reliable studies have yet been done about graduation rates from tribal colleges, some tribal college presidents estimate that between 25% and 33% of students who enroll eventually receive a degree (Boyer, 1997).

Clark (1996) stated that "the comparatively low educational attainment among American Indians is a complex, multi-variant problem which affects Indian participation and performance at all points along the educational pipeline" (p. 19). According to Clark, individual faculty members can make a critical difference in the life of the American Indian student. If a faculty member is sensitive to the student's cultural diversity and makes the Indian culture equal to one's own and offers learning experiences within the student's cultural framework, the student would have a greater opportunity for success.

### Problem Statement

Distance education has often been plagued by high dropout rates (Boyer, 1997), and this is unfortunate, as a degree acquired by distance methods may be the only realistic alternative available to American Indian adult students. To many American Indians, completing a college education seems an impossible dream. Educational theorists and researchers have provided various explanations for this high failure rate, each with its own set of prescriptions.

An assumption has been made by the faculty and administrators of Rocky Mountain College that American Indian students who have completed their two-year program at their tribal school, Fort Peck Community College, and have enrolled in the Rocky Mountain College Teacher Training distance education program would be

successful in completing the course work necessary to earn a four-year degree in elementary education. The administration at RMC has an opportunity to look to the tribal colleges and explore which factors foster success of American Indian students and which ones are barriers to the completion of a program in elementary education.

According to the RMC American Indian Director of Student Services, Carolyn Pease-Lopez, 34 American Indian students from Fort Peck Community College enrolled in the elementary distance education program between the fall 1996 semester and the spring 2000 semester. The dropout rate was 16 students—49%—at the end of the spring 2000 semester. A total of 18 students who completed the distance education program between the fall 1996 and spring 2000 semesters received a degree in elementary education from RMC (Registrar, 2000). Although the number of students who enroll and complete the RMC distance education program is available, little is known about the factors that foster and hinder success in completing this program.

Because of limited contact with the instructors, the distance education students need to manage their own learning in the absence of traditional classroom support and therefore have more responsibility in deciding how and what to learn and the depth of learning efforts. As Morrison (1986) emphasized, removing barriers to successful learning and improving the quality of the outcomes begins with the question of “What and how are people learning and what affects that process” (p. 22)?

The U.S. Department of Education has identified barriers believed to prevent American Indian students from completing a college degree. These barriers are inadequate academic preparation, insufficient financial support, a perceived unsupportive

institutional climate, and problems adjusting emotionally and socially to the college culture. In addition, other issues that can create hardships for these students are unplanned pregnancies, substance abuse within the family system, physical, psychological and sexual abuse, negative involvement with the law, low self-esteem, and a limited number of successful role models. Many of the students are single parents who may have experienced growing up in a single-parent home. Educators have recommended educational programs that would reduce or eliminate these barriers for the American Indian students in higher education with hopes that the student would experience success and complete college (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

The main focus of the studies to date has been on barriers American Indians experience while attending college. Although the studies provide recommendations on how to eliminate or reduce the barriers, problems remain for many American Indian students.

#### Purpose Statement

From 1996 to 2000 only 51% of the American Indian students who enrolled in the distance education program at Rocky Mountain College successfully completed the program and earned a degree (Registrar, 2000). If the completion rate is to be increased, RMC must determine how this can be accomplished. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to identify key factors that had a positive impact on successful completion and factors that made completion difficult for American Indian students in the Elementary Education Distance Education Program at RMC.

### Research Questions

To accomplish the purpose of this study, the following questions were developed. The questions evolved from the review of literature and findings from classroom activities with American Indian students enrolled in the distance education courses in elementary education from 1996-2000.

#### Primary Questions

1. What factors had an impact on successful completion for the American Indian student in the elementary distance education courses at RMC?
2. What were the factors that made completion difficult?

#### Secondary Question

3. What recommendations do American Indian students in the distance elementary education program at RMC have for higher education administrators and teachers?

### Significance of the Research

Distance education is a means of providing educational access and equity. Since higher education administrators and faculty are interested in improving the completion rate of the American Indian population in the distance education program at RMC, a better understanding of the factors that foster completion and those that make completion difficult for the American Indian student needs to be researched. The current lack of

understanding is one of the key issues related to low Indian student retention (Tierney, 1992).

Davis (1992) states that very little research has been done or published about graduation rates from tribal colleges and few research studies even include American Indians in general comparisons with other racial/ethnic groups. Davis also addressed the lack of significant data concerning American Indian enrollment, matriculation, or graduation rates in higher education. With the significant data of this study and a better understanding of the difficulties concerning American Indians in higher education, these students may become more successful in completing a college education.

The findings of this research can be significant if RMC uses the results to enhance the advising, teaching, learning and curriculum design of distance education. This study contributes information that allows faculty to better understand how to work with American Indian students who enroll in distance education.

This study has significance in the broader field of distance education as well, because little research exists that looks at the factors that foster completion and those that make completion difficult for the American Indian student enrolled in distance courses.

In 1996, Childs expressed a need for further research in distance learning when he stated:

...we need to know a great deal more than we now do about the people we enroll. We need to know better than we now do why they enroll and why they discontinue. We need to know that differences exist between those who complete and those who do not. We need to know what motivation is effective and how we can contribute to this motivation. We need to know what attitudes enrollees bring to distance learning and how these attitudes change as the student progresses through the course (p. 41).

### Definition of Terms

The following terms were used throughout the study:

American Indian: A person who claims blood lineage to a recognized Indian tribe which is urban- or reservation-based. The tribe does not need to be recognized by the Federal Government. The American Indian may be full-blood or mixed-blood.

Distance Education: An organized instructional program in which teacher and learners are physically separated. For the purpose of this study, distance education at Rocky Mountain College was defined as an interactive system. An interactive system utilizes monitors at each of the participating locations for exchanging compressed video images and voices of the participants (Turgeon, 1998).

Traditional Education: Instruction usually occurring in a classroom and using face-to-face communication between the instructor and students.

Learning Styles: An approach to learning that emphasizes the fact that individuals perceive and process information in different ways. The learning styles theory implies that how much individuals learn has more to do with whether the educational experience is geared toward their particular style of learning than whether or not they are smart. It is suggested that educators should not ask, "Is this student smart?" but rather "How is this student smart?"

Barrier: Any impediment that hampers the completion of a degree.

Completion: Finishing all requirements for a degree.

Non-Completion: Failure to meet requirements for a degree.

Academically Successful Student: A student enrolled in college who has maintained at least an accumulated 2.0 grade point average on a 4.0 scale or has completed a degree program (for the purpose of this study).

College: An institution of higher learning with educational programs leading to a bachelor's degree.

Higher Education: Learning activities pursued at accredited institutions that offer programs leading to a bachelor's degree.

Private College: An institution of higher education established and supported by independent benefactors without financial assistance from state or local governments.

Tribal College: An institution of higher education established on an Indian Reservation designed by the Indian community to preserve Indian culture and to provide academic programs leading to an associate or bachelor's degree.

Grounded Theory: Theory developed through inductive analysis of data; the theory emerges from many pieces of evidence that have been collected and interconnected (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

### Methodology

This study of key factors that had a positive impact on successful completion and those that made completion difficult for American Indian students in the distance education program at RMC utilized a grounded theory approach. A grounded theory approach was chosen because it is a qualitative research methodology that allowed the researcher to discover, explore, and learn about the participants' world and the interacting influences of personal, social, and cultural characteristics (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In his book, Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, Creswell (1998) states:

The intent of a grounded theory study is to generate or discover a theory, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation. This situation is one in which individuals interact, take actions, or engage in a process in response to phenomenon. To study how people act and react to this phenomenon, the researcher collects primarily interview data, makes multiple visits to the field, develops and interrelates categories of information, and writes theoretical propositions or hypotheses or presents a visual picture of the theory.

This method provided the researcher with the process needed for defining the success factors and the difficulties that affected completion of the distance education program in elementary education by American Indian students. For this study, a grounded theory approach provided a means to learn about the participants' world and inductively discovered and explored the variables that emerged.

Acknowledgment of multiple realities allowed the researcher to identify similarities, themes, and patterns. The researcher developed interrelated categories of

information from the numerous sources of evidence that were gathered, analyzed and presented in a model using the grounded theory approach.

## CHAPTER 2

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The need to develop lifelong learners is becoming increasingly more urgent as we move to a global society that demands continuous adaptation and change for educators as they strive to update skills and acquire new knowledge in the use of technology. In creating an online campus, administrators and faculty members can often become focused only on the technology for distance course delivery. Alexander (1995) argued that while implementing a new technology, educators should evaluate how students learn via the new technology to help with curriculum and instructional designs. He added that it is important to understand how the new technology can affect learning when it is used by different types of learners. This chapter guided by the research questions focuses on three areas of literature that exert a major influence on the key factors that support the completion of distance education courses by the adult American Indian student enrolled at Rocky Mountain College. The three areas of literature are: (1) distance education, (2) American Indians and higher education, and (3) learning styles.

### Distance Education

Distance education can extend education, but it also aids in equalizing educational opportunities and thereby helps a varied and dispersed student population. A basic advantage of distance education is that through technology, education is taken to where the people are, rather than the other way around (Bruder, 1993).

Defining distance education is a complicated process. There has been significant discussion in the literature in an attempt to define distance education. The following three definitions are a sampling of some found on the Distance Education Clearinghouse home page at <http://www.uwex.edu/ddisted/definition.html>. The University of Wisconsin-Extension, Continuing Education Extension, Distance Education subgroup definition states: "Distance Education is defined as a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning." Virginia Steiner of the Distance Learning Resource Network states, "Distance Education is instructional delivery that does not constrain the student to be physically present in the same location as the instructor. Historically, distance education meant correspondence study. Today audio, video, and computer technologies are more common delivery modes."

The Engineering Outreach staff at the University of Idaho defines distance education in the Rocky Mountain College Faculty Distance Learning Handbook as: "At its most basic level, distance education takes place when a teacher and student(s) are separated by physical distance and technology (i.e., voice, video, data, and print), often in

concert with face-to-face communication, is used to bridge the instrumental gap” (Gottschalk, 1996 - University of Idaho <http://www.idaho.edu/evo/dis1.html>). Garrison and Shale (1997) offered three criteria that describe distance education practices rather than attempting to define distance education with precision. These criteria were:

1. Distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between (among) teacher and student(s) occurs noncontiguously.
2. Distance education must involve two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process.
3. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication.

The review of literature provides many similarities and distinctions in the definition of distance education. Moore (1989) described and summarized the definition of distance education and the situation by simply stating, “In distance education by definition, the person or institutions that provide instruction are separate, either in place or time, or both from their learners” (p. 8). It is clear that a separation between teacher and learner in the educational transaction is a hallmark of distance education.”

### Historical Precedents

Wedemeyer (1981) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison was one of the earliest proponents of the potential for interactive theory in distance education. He was able to look beyond the linear methods of education that existed in the industrial era to

recall more natural ways of learning from the earlier times. Wedemeyer's concept of education with media was a contextual one. He considered the learner to be the center of the learning experience and was also aware of the environments both within and outside of the learner. "The learner takes with him or her the essential environment for learning" (p. 31). He saw an urgency in thinking in new ways about distance education, and encouraged opening up ways to help learners become less dependent on the educator and more directed toward self-direction and interdependence. He was a man ahead of his time. Others are only now beginning to follow his footsteps.

The traditional form of distance education, the correspondence course, has been a part of higher education for many years. In the early 1890's, the University of Wisconsin was utilizing correspondence study and by the 1920's the University of Wisconsin "was firmly entrenched as the nation's leader in extension and correspondence study" (Watkins, 1991). The earliest applications of telephone teaching occurred in the 1930's and as television technology became a reality, educators began to look into applying it to correspondence study (Wedemeyer, 1981). "In the mid-1950's, the National University Extension Association used television in their instructional programs in the correspondence study departments" (Wright, 1991). Teleconferencing took root in the 1960s when the Educational Telephone Network (ETN) was established in 1965. The Division of Correspondence Study was established in 1969 with a range of multi-media teaching and learning aids that included filmstrips, slides, videotape and television telephone conferences (Watkins, 1991). In the 1980's, many colleges and universities provided college credit and continuing professional education by audio teleconferencing.

Cable television also came into use in the late 1970's and early 1980's for delivery of course material and by 1991, 18 institutions used the Mind Extension University to deliver video course material via cable television and satellite (Wright, 1991).

In the early 1990's, many institutions observed the phenomenal growth and demand for electronic mail and World Wide Web access from faculty and students. Colleges and universities will become involved with distance education as the technology improves. Many educators predict that distance learning will reform teaching methods and increase access to quality education (Gilbert, 1983).

The American Federation of Teachers (2000) reports that distance education courses for academic credit have been expanding dramatically at colleges and universities. The report states that in just three years, from 1995 to 1998, the use of internet-based distance education courses at universities grew from 22% to 60%.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2000) estimated that more than 1.6 million students were enrolled in distance education courses in 1997 and 1998. They report that increasing numbers of institutions have begun offering distance learning courses. In public four-year institutions, the distance learning grew from 62% in 1995 to 79% in 1997-98. In public two-year institutions, the distance learning grew from 58% to 72%. Private four-year institutions were much less likely to offer distance learning courses in 1997-98. According to NCES, total enrollment in distance education courses across postsecondary degree-granting institutions has approximately doubled from 1995-98, from 754,000 to 1.6 million students.

Ostendorf (1997) reported that “live video instruction is the fastest-growing distance learning delivery mode in the United States” (p. 51). This phenomenal growth in distance education is being fueled by the growing demand for job retention, the need to work while attending school, and re-educating individuals for changing careers (Wagner, 1996).

### Distance Education Design

Political and public interest in distance education is especially high in areas where the student population is widely distributed. Many colleges and universities, both public and private, “are leaping at distance education as a near-term solution for financial and other problems—without taking the necessary time to understand the requirements and to prepare faculty for effective participation” (Gilbert, 1983). What results is:

An investment in technology without a parallel investment of time and money in support of educators, learners, and the technology will quickly yield a disillusioned team of educators, disappointed learners, and a large monument to the waste of institutional dollars (Gibson, 1992, pp. 83-84).

There is a phrase commonly heard by some administrators which says, “Just go in there and teach distance courses the way you have always taught. There is no difference between traditional classroom teaching and teaching at a distance” (Cyrus, 1997, p.15). This myth causes the problem of passive classroom lectures being delivered in teleclassrooms with the talking head syndrome (Cyrus, 1997).

Although technology is an integral part of distance education, any successful program must be designed to focus on the instructional needs of the students rather than the technology itself. It is essential to consider their ages, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, interests and experiences, educational levels, and familiarity with distance education methods and delivery systems (Schuemer, 1993).

A Washington D.C. based consortium of leading colleges and universities maintains a web site called Educom, which publishes news about information technology and education on the Internet. In the January 21, 1997 issue the following summary appeared:

The new Florida Gulf Coast University, which is scheduled to open its doors next August, has as part of its charter a mandate to incorporate distance learning practices into each of its 17 undergraduate and nine graduate degree programs. The new school will use videotaped classes with interactive two-way video as well as the Internet to reach out to working adults, homemakers and shut-ins who otherwise would not avail themselves to the opportunity for higher education.

(<http://webserv.educom.edu/edupage/97/edupage0121.html#anchor77>)

Some distance education programs have been designed from a broader perspective. This broader perspective views the learner as central and the learning experience as both contextual and interactive. It takes into account learner characteristics, learning styles, needs, and experiences. The educator is no longer seen as an expert disseminating information to the learner, but rather an author/editor acting in a facilitative/guiding and interactive capacity (Moore, 1991).

The theoretical basis on which instructional methods are based effects not only the way in which information is communicated to the student, but also the way in which the

student makes sense and constructs new knowledge from the information presented. Schlosser and Anderson (1994) refer to Desmond Keegan's theory of distance education, in which the distance learning system must artificially recreate the teaching-learning interaction and reintegrate it back into the instructional process.

The more familiar teachers are with the instructional design and delivery process, the more effective their presentations will be. Distance Education teachers need training in instructional message design, strategies for delivering instruction on camera, methods of diversifying types of presentation, selecting various mixes of student-teacher activities and interactions, choosing situations and examples relevant to their students and their learning styles, and assessing the level of learning by distance students. There is also a need for guided, hands-on practice developing and delivering coursework using audio, full-motion video, graphics, and text, in front of a live audience, yet still in a non-threatening situation (Willis, 1993). Administrators cannot expect teachers to feel comfortable with the distance education technology, to use it effectively, and to maintain it as well without giving them extra resources and time.

At Rocky Mountain College, the distance education program requires a team approach as the courses are transmitted to the American Indian students at Fort Peck Community College enrolled in the Elementary Education Program. This team approach can involve numerous people (media specialists, site coordinators, classroom facilitators, tutors, technicians, curriculum specialists, designers, producers, editors, and so forth) depending upon resources and expectations. Communicating and teaching through technology at RMC requires collaboration with the need for planning and coordinating as

essential ingredients.

The literature suggests that a requirement for successful distance education is a carefully designed and maintained learner support system. In such a system, teachers who are highly qualified and experienced in the understanding of learners and learning support students by providing skilled diagnostic counseling and orientation programs, by assisting students to organize their time and develop their study skills, by providing active tutorial assistance during the course, face-to-face if needed and feasible, and by giving assistance when illness, financial, family or work difficulties threaten to overpower the motivation to study (Moore, 1991).

#### Distance Education Learners

In the literature review, little information about qualities and characteristics of American Indian distance education students or learners was found. Successful distance education students possessed similar characteristics such as self-discipline, motivation, trustworthiness, positive behavior and assertiveness according to Charp (1994). She notes that with greater autonomy, student characteristics such as active listening and the ability to work independently in the absence of a live instructor became crucial for success. Teachers tend to blame the high dropout rate among distance learners on poor time management and procrastination. However, in a study of effectiveness of university-level audio conference courses in Alaska, Sponder (1990) found that climate, the university support system, the efficiency of the postal problems, and other factors come into play. Miscommunication between students and teachers and lack of relevance to

students may also have negative repercussions. Like Charp and Godfry, Porter (1994) found that teacher mediation increases the completion rate for distance education courses.

For many adults, including American Indian adult students, it is just not possible to leave their families, jobs and other obligations where they live to return to campus to participate in residential learning. "The changing demographics of higher education's clientele—the growing population of non-residential, part-time, older students—will continue to make distance education an attractive option" (Green & Gilbert, 1995, p. 36). Information from the September 2, 1996 edition of "The Almanac" from the Chronicle of Higher Education states that the traditional college-aged 18-24 year olds represent only 9.4% of the United States population, whereas 25-44 year olds and 45-64 year olds represent 31.7% and 19.9%, respectively. Statistics for the American Indian adult student were not available.

A visit to the World Wide Web (May, 2000) of The American Federation of Teachers yielded numerous case studies showing comparable student performance in distance education courses. The site also stated that many educators remain skeptical about positive student performance in distance education courses. They believe that teaching and learning are inherently social processes, and these educators consider interaction central to a successful educational experience.

#### Distance Education Teachers

The literature agreed that the distance education teacher was another vital element affecting the implementation of distance education programs. The Distant Education

Clearinghouse (2002) (uwex.edu/disted), managed by the University of Wisconsin, reported that many of the techniques and skills used in a classroom teaching situation do not translate directly into a distance education approach. Teacher training programs are important to acquaint the teachers with successful approaches for integrating the use of technology into the teaching/learning process.

While training for distance education teachers was found to be absolutely necessary, other personal characteristics of the teacher were also important. Bradshaw, author of The Promise of Distance Learning (1989), stated, "Just as every person in the world is not born to be a teacher, every teacher is not born to be a teleteacher" (p.22). Bradshaw emphasized that being an effective teacher required all the understanding, experience and skills of a successful face-to-face classroom teacher, and even more including a good voice, pleasing appearance, stage presence, plenty of self-confidence, a flair for the dramatic, artistic and creative, and a willingness to exert extra effort to become comfortable with the technology and to be able to use its strengths to enhance teaching and learning.

The U.S. Department of Education (1995) reported the following in Linking for Learning: A New Course for Education:

The key to success in distance learning is the teacher. If the teacher on the system is good, the technology itself can become transparent. Conversely, no technology itself can overcome poor teaching; poor teaching is actually exacerbated in distance education applications. But when skilled teachers are involved, enthusiasm, expertise, and creative use of the media can enrich students beyond the four walls of their home classroom. Outstanding teachers can also serve as 'electronic mentors' to other teachers (p. 87).

It was further stated that four important training elements were imperative in order for distance education teachers to be successful: 1) training in the technical aspects of the system; 2) training in the educational aspects of the system; 3) understanding how to design a course; and 4) understanding appropriate and effective communication skills for teaching at a distance (p. 95).

In his book, Distance Education: A Practical Guide, Barry Willis (1993) discussed the challenges posed by distance teaching. He stated that the challenges to reach a wider audience, to meet the needs of students who are unable to attend on-campus classes, and to link students from different cultural, economic and experiential backgrounds are opportunities for the distance teacher. He stressed the importance of sensitivity, caring, and understanding for effective communication and learning to value diversity.

As early as 1981, Charles Wedemeyer noted, "What is different about learning via technology today is the scope of learning facilitated by technology, the altered role of teachers and learners, the changed environment for learning necessitated by technology, and the sophistication of the process used in developing instruction that will be communicated by technology" (p. 67).

#### American Indians and Higher Education

The history of American Indian higher education over the last several hundred years is one of compulsory Western methods of learning, recurring attempts to eradicate tribal culture, and high dropout rates by American Indian students at mainstream schools and institutions. The Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, a collaborative

effort between the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) and the American Indian College Fund, states that in reaction to the history of American Indian higher education, the Indian leaders build on the success of the self-determination movement of the 1960's to rethink tribal higher education. These leaders recognized the growing importance of postsecondary education, and became convinced that it could strengthen reservations and tribal culture without assimilation (Boyer, 1997).

The American Indian Higher Education Consortium is a uniquely American Indian organization. It was founded in 1972 by the presidents of the nation's first six Tribal Colleges as an informal collaboration among member colleges. Today, AIHEC has grown to represent 32 colleges in the United States and one Canadian institution. Unlike most professional associations, it is governed jointly by each member institution. AIHEC's mission is to support the work of these colleges and the national movement for tribal self-determination.

The Meriam Report in 1928 was the first study to report that the educational, social and economic problems of the American Indians probably resulted from trying to conform them to an alien culture. In 1934, legislation in the U.S. Congress was passed that allowed American Indians to participate in the development of educational planning. The Civil Rights Movement and the Higher Education Act of 1965 provided an environment where American Indians could finally be heard (National Advisory Council on Indian Education, 1992).

In an effort to boost the number of American Indian teachers, the U.S. Department of Education awarded the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and four partners a two-

year \$742,000 federal grant in August 2000 to provide American Indian students the opportunity to earn a college degree and teaching licensure. This is an exciting concept that could serve as an example for future American Indian teacher development programs throughout the United States. There are more than 12,000 American Indian students attending public and tribal schools in Wisconsin, but only 142 American Indian teachers are licensed as classroom teachers (Wolf Green, 2000).

According to Alan Cadwell, Director of the Menominee Culture Institute at the College of Menominee Nation, the partnership has identified more than 80 American Indian students who will be eligible to participate in the program at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. The program design will take into account the fact that many of the prospective students are predominantly place-bound and will take many of their classes at the College of Menominee Nation and Lac du Flambeau School District using distance education and Web-based learning provided by the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire faculty (Wolf Green, 2000).

In Montana, the Montana Committee for American Indian Higher Education (MCAIHE) sponsored the statewide Opening the Montana Pipeline Conference in 1999. The conference was designed "to develop an action plan that would provide the blueprint to increase American Indians' access to, and success in, the higher education system." The research presented at the conference and the resulting recommendations are viable resources for higher education officials, institutions, and students.

The Montana GEAR UP Program helps American Indian students prepare for college. Created from the Higher Education Act of 1998, GEAR UP, or Gaining Early

Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, is predicated upon the belief that all students can achieve at high academic levels and go on to succeed in college if they receive early college awareness information, rigorous academic instruction and sustained support. Montana was one of 21 states to be awarded a five-year, competitive matching state grant through the U.S. Department of Education to implement a statewide GEAR-UP Program. Local school-community coordinators, tutors and mentors all work together to provide Montana students with the skills, support and encouragement they need to enroll and succeed in college ([pazure@state.mt.us](mailto:pazure@state.mt.us); 406- 444-7490).

The 1999 Montana State Legislature approved HB528, which directs Montana's education community to comply with Montana's constitutional commitment to Indian education. However, according to Denise Juneau, OPI Indian Education Specialist (2000), it became apparent at follow-up sessions that while many efforts and positive actions were made toward improving the achievement and success of Indian students in Montana's schools, many of the key issues remained unchanged because those efforts were not institutionalized. In August 2000, the OPI and the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education submitted their action plans for HB528, fulfilling the Board of Public Education's recommendations. Many American Indian educators gathered together to develop a curriculum guide that aligns American Indian content to Montana's academic standards and a professional development plan for implementing HB528 (Juneau, 2000).

### Evolution of American Indian Education: Tribal Colleges

In 1968, the Navajo Nation created the first tribally controlled college, and other tribal colleges quickly followed in Arizona, California, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, New Mexico, Washington, Nebraska, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. Today there are 28 tribally chartered colleges and three federally chartered Indian Colleges in a total of 12 states. These higher education institutions serve nearly 14,000 American Indian students (Boyer, 1997). Fort Peck Community College is one of the seven tribal colleges in Montana. With seven tribal colleges, Montana boasts the greatest number.

Tribal colleges have become an integral part of higher education for American Indians. Succeeding at a tribal college also appears to encourage students to continue their education. American Indian students attend tribal colleges for many of the same reasons that non-Indians attend non-tribal colleges. They want to improve their chances of securing meaningful and rewarding employment, to provide a better standard of living for their families, to better themselves intellectually, and to strengthen their abilities to manage their futures. Many of the American Indian students attending tribal colleges are older with family responsibilities and are individuals who may have failed at non-Indian higher education institutions. Many of them are the first in their families to enroll in higher education (Stein, 1992).

Tribal colleges are somewhat similar to mainstream community colleges. However, the trait that distinguishes them from other community colleges is their dual mission to rebuild, reinforce and explore traditional tribal cultures. They do this by using

uniquely designed curricula and institutional settings and to address Western models of learning by providing traditional disciplinary courses that are transferable to four-year institutions. An important asset of tribal colleges is their ability to provide personalized attention to the American Indian students in order to overcome the economic and social barriers to postsecondary success that they face (Tierney, 1992).

According to Boyer (1997), tribal colleges are in varying stages of development and differ in their structures, sizes, and other characteristics; however, they share many of the following commonalities:

- most are less than 25 years old;
- most have relatively small student bodies that are predominantly American Indian;
- most are located on remote reservations with limited access to other colleges;
- most were chartered by one or more tribes but maintain their distance from tribal governments;
- all have open admission policies; and
- all began as two-year institutions.

Fort Peck Community College. Fort Peck Community College is located on the Fort Peck Reservation which is the home to two separate Indian nations, each composed of numerous bands and divisions. The Sioux, the Yanktonais, and the Teton Hunkpapa are all represented. The Assiniboine bands of Canoe Paddler and Red Bottom are also represented. The reservation is located in the extreme northeast corner of Montana, on the north side of the Missouri River. The reservation is 110 miles long and 40 miles wide, encompassing 2,093,310 acres. Of this, approximately 378,000 acres are tribally owned

and 548,000 acres are individually allotted Indian lands. There are an estimated 10,000 enrolled tribal members. The Fort Peck tribes are constantly building for a better future in the 21st century.

Education is a high priority for the Montana Fort Peck tribes with a tribally operated Headstart Program, a tribal scholarship program, and Fort Peck Community College. Fort Peck Community College offers course work in areas leading to an Associate of Arts and Technical degrees, which could lead to a baccalaureate degree.

### Cultural Discontinuity

The words "Indian education" often call to mind a painful part of the lives of this country's American Indian people. For decades education meant assimilation, government boarding schools and classrooms where teachers forbade the use of Indian languages. It has helped give Indians the nation's highest school dropout rates and lowest income levels (Williams, 2000).

Cultural discontinuity is one of the obstacles American Indian students face in completing a college education. According to students of cultural discontinuity theory, minority children having been raised in a distinctive culture of their own are often thrust into a school system that promotes the values of the majority culture—not those of their own. If the resulting clash of cultures continues, the minority student may feel forced to choose one culture at the expense of the other. A tragic paradox emerges: success (in school) becomes failure (in the community), and failure becomes success. Moreover, it has been argued that failure is not simply the passive act of neglecting to complete

required tasks, but that it may be a status that is actively pursued by ethnic minority students in order to preserve their culture of origin (Tierney, 1992).

The decade of the 90's produced significant events related to the education of American Indians. According to the website that was last updated on April 9, 2000, a report entitled "Nations at Risk" documented continual failure of the current education system to adequately meet the needs of the Indian learner. The report also documented the historic tribal leaders meeting at the White House in Washington, D.C. and the development by Indian Country of a Comprehensive Federal Indian Education Policy Statement which led to the eventful introduction of a Presidential Executive Order on Indian Education in 1998 (<http://www.niea.org/blueprint.html>).

According to the Nations at Risk report, "Isolated by distance and culture, many American Indian students have come to accept that they cannot complete school. College seems to many American Indians an impossible dream. Tribal Colleges offer hope in the climate of despair...without sacrificing academic rigor, courses are often tailored to reflect the unique learning styles of American Indian students" (Boyer, 1989, p. 4).

According to Tierney, statistics of the American Indian are difficult to assess for three reasons (1992, p.11):

1. American Indians are a relatively small group, so a researcher cannot generate a reliable sample from which to generalize.
2. Nearly half of the American Indian population is difficult to survey because they live in some of the most rural and isolated areas of the United States.
3. The diversity of tribal people and variety of educational programs defy simple

categorization.

Austin (1999) reported that American Indians remain among the least educated ethnic groups. He reported that only 6% of the American Indian population had a college degree, compared to 23% of whites, 12% of African Americans, and 7% of Hispanic Americans. Austin suggests that higher education institutions look to the tribal colleges as successful models as they implement the curriculum for distance education programs.

Research funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation examined the experience of American Indians majoring in math, science, engineering, or business (McAfee, 1977). The phenomenon of stepping into, out of, and back into higher education emerged as a typical mode of college attendance. Strength of cultural identity had a significant impact on persistence and outcome of undergraduate education. McAfee's findings about the relationship between cultural identity and persistence to degree attainment reinforce the importance of tribal colleges for American Indians in higher education.

McAfee's study suggests that the problem of stepping out is a norm that needs to be better researched and understood by colleges, universities and other institutions of higher learning. The total number of American Indian participants in McAfee's study was 65, of whom 60 were undergraduates, and five of those were students with disabilities majoring in areas other than science, math and engineering. The students participated in interviews and focus groups. The study was ethnographic in nature as McAfee examined the experiences of 43 American Indians enrolled in nine undergraduate institutions in eight western states. This research indicates that 23 of those left school. Of that number, 22% were perceived to have a strong identity with traditional cultures. By comparison,

50% of the 16 who had completed baccalaureate degrees were thought to have strong ties to their American Indian heritage.

Students in every form of education face problems that may prevent them from completing their courses and their programs. This is certainly the case with distance education students, as they have job and family responsibilities which may hinder completion. In addition, many have been away from formal education for several years, and self-confidence may be a problem, particularly if the student was not successful in the past. The distance education student must also cope with studying at a distance in relative isolation. Dropout factors are difficult to categorize. Boshier (1988) states reasons given for withdrawal were lack of time, change of plans, unsatisfactory courses, and illness. Again, high motivation, planned objectives, self-discipline, perseverance, habitual study, promptness in submitting assignments, and using a variety of approaches were success factors according to Boshier's research.

Rocky Mountain College. Rocky Mountain College is the oldest college in Montana. Adversity has led to strength through joining of liberal arts tradition and practical training for specific careers. The union of three distinct religious traditions (United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and the Synod of the Rocky Mountains of the Presbyterian Church) has resulted in a church-related college that considers all questions in an open and non-sectarian manner. All the strains of Rocky Mountain College's history are valued as students are prepared to be leaders in the 21st century (RMC 1997-99 Catalog).

With the rising need to compete in today's high-tech economy, administrators at RMC looked at the role that distance education would play in the future of the college. It was the lack of access to advanced level courses and the need to incorporate technology into the classroom that prompted RMC to pursue distance education options for the college.

As a college in the Mountain West, RMC is recognized as a diverse community of learners who seek to understand the history and environment of the region and to also understand the history and environment of the larger world. Rocky Mountain College values diversity and the interrelatedness of knowledge. With a mission statement that could be highly supportive of American Indian students, there is an expectation that RMC might become a model institution for building a better future for the educational needs of American Indian students enrolled in the Distance Education Program.

### Learning Styles

Learning styles and their effect on student performance and attitudes have intrigued educators for a long time. Currently, teachers are studying learning styles along with brain research in order to better understand differences in students.

The term "learning styles" is often used to describe the individual's unique approach to learning. It is common knowledge among educators that students differ in how they learn. For example, some students learn best when they have the opportunity to manipulate objects. For other students, hands-on experiences are uninteresting and not necessary because they prefer to learn in a more abstract way. Some students prefer to

learn alone, while others are happier and learn more effectively when they can discuss a subject with fellow classmates. Some students are completely distracted by noise, while others have difficulty learning without some noise in the background. Some learners need a multitude of details in order to understand a subject, but others can learn the subject matter by knowing the broad outlines.

The different approaches to learning have been labeled and categorized in many variations. One term that describes approaches to learning is cognitive styles. The study and identification of cognitive styles grew out of experimental research in psychology. According to Keefe (1979), cognitive styles are information processing habits representing the learner's typical mode of perceiving, thinking, problem solving, and remembering.

Learning styles usually include aspects of cognitive style, elements of the affective domain, and environmental preferences for learning. According to Keefe (1979), learning styles include cognitive, affective and physiological styles. He believes there are stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to their learning environments. Keefe explains that the affective learning styles are motivational processes in which the learner arouses, directs and sustains behavior. The physiological styles are the biologically-based modes of response related to gender differences, health, and reactions to the environment.

Cognitive and learning styles are somewhat similar. However, cognitive styles usually refer to deeper psychological differences in perceiving and organizing information, while learning styles relate to more superficial levels of affective and

environmental preferences. They both account for some of the differences in learning behavior, and both are relatively stable features of an individual's personality.

Many instruments have been developed to assess the various levels of learning styles. The Meyer-Briggs Personality Type Indicator is used to assess the underlying cognitive style. The instrument determines an individual's preference for extroversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, and judging/perceiving. Sixteen types are generated from the four interacting references. Extroversion refers to an interest in the outer world, and introversion indicates an interest in the inner world of ideas and reflection. Sensing relates to a preference for looking at the real facts of an experience, while intuition is a preference for seeing the possibilities and relationships with the experience. Thinking and feeling are rational processes of decision making, but thinking types prefer to make decisions objectively and logically. Feeling types are more apt to make decisions based on their values. Judging relates to a preference for living a planned and controlled life, while perception refers to a preference for living in a flexible and spontaneous way (Rechinger, 1991).

In a study done by Lee (1984), adults were found to have greater satisfaction with instruction when there was at least a partial match between learning styles and teaching styles. Some researchers have also found that achievement is greater and attitudes toward a course are more positive when students and instructors were cognitively similar (Padgett & Wolosin, 1980).

Using a somewhat different approach, Rechinger (1991) supports the need to match learning style with environment. She found that 70-80% of the youth in juvenile

detention facilities were auditory learners. Rechinger suggests that the school environment is based largely on reading, and consequently these auditory learners are turned into failures.

Gregorc (1979) describes a learning style as "distinctive behaviors which serve as indicators of how a person learns from and adapts to his environment. It also gives clues as to how a person's mind operates" (p. 234). Gregorc believes that styles originate from experience, inheritance, culture, and the subjective patterns within ourselves that are used for self-actualization.

There are several controversies associated with learning styles. Researchers have explored the controversy between learning styles and cultural backgrounds. Carl Ulrich and Pat Guild, coordinators of learning styles in Seattle Pacific University, argue understanding the relationship between culture and style is a valuable tool for teachers. It is also valuable for teachers to be able to modify their teaching styles or curriculum when they understand that students with different cultural backgrounds may have unique learning styles. Some teachers, however, are concerned that modification of teaching methods may result in discrimination or even student failures (Ulrich & Guild, 1986).

A sense of optimism suggests that an understanding of learning styles is one of the keys to understanding the school experience for American Indian students (Browne, 1990; Kleinfeld & Nelson, 1991). Ramirez and Castaneda (1997) and Cox and Ramirez (1981) describe the relationship between cultural values and learning styles. They suggest that cultural values influence socialization practices which in turn influence the way children prefer to learn. "Insofar as these teaching styles reflect a certain set of values













































































































































































