Using Photos to Improve the College Experience of Indigenous BSN Students

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, the enrollment of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students in higher education has been lower than for students in other racial groups. While 42% of white students enroll in college, and 62% of white college students complete their four-year degrees, only 19% of AI/AN students enroll in college, and only 39% of AI/AN college students finish their four-year degrees.

The Caring for Our Own Program (CO-OP) in the Mark & Robyn Jones College of Nursing at Montana State University works to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of AI/AN nursing students by providing support using a four-pillar model. The feeling of sense of place is one of the pillars, as this aspect of university life can determine whether an AI/AN student finishes their degree. While the program has provided a community, structured support, and outreach to students' families, it is housed within a building that has pictures of only non-AI/AN nurses displayed. The photos are meant to inspire students, but they may not be effective for AI/AN students. This project aims to increase CO-OP students' sense of belonging by displaying photos of influential AI/AN nurses that can serve as role models for them.

Figure 1. Elizabeth Sadoques Mason at her nursing school graduation; copyright for educational purposes granted by Joyce Heywood.

Figure 2. Marcella LeBeau; photo taken by the Army; no copyright attached to photo

METHODS

A literature review was completed, where several topics were examined. These topics included the enrollment, retention, and graduation rate of AI/AN nursing students, the importance of cultural competency for AI/AN students, and the lives and accomplishments of influential AI/AN nurses.

Copyright was obtained for photos of the influential AI/AN nurses to be reproduced for educational purposes. Canvas prints of the photos were made with the intention to display them alongside the already existing photos of influential non-AI/AN nurses in the College of Nursing building.

Because most (97.5%) of students at Montana State University were born in the United States and because most CO-OP students are from tribes in the U.S. (81.6% from tribes that have resided in Montana), the decision was made to exclude First Nations nurses.

RESULTS

Based on geographic distribution, timeline and ease of copyright release, the following AI/AN nurses were selected for display:

1. Virginia Rosebud Sneed Dixon (Tribe: Eastern Band Cherokee Indians, Location: North Carolina). 1919-2021. She was a part of the US Army Nurse Corps for both World War II (in which she was the first nurse to serve abroad that was Cherokee) and for the Korean War. During WWII, she worked in a rural village in China, and during the Korean War, she worked in a hospital without water or electricity. After the wars, she worked again in Korea to help American soldiers with brain and spinal injuries.
2. Lula Owl Gloyne (Tribe: Eastern Band Cherokee Indians, Location: North Carolina) 1891-1985. Gloyne may be the first AI/AN RN and was definitively the first RN from the Eastern Band Cherokee Indians. She served in WWI as a 2nd Lieutenant in the US Nurse Army Corps and was the only officer in the war from her tribe. She also founded the first inpatient hospital for her tribe.

3. Marcella LeBeau (Tribe: Cheyenne River Sioux, Location: South Dakota). LeBeau served in the 76th General Hospital Unit as part of the US Army Nurse Cops during WWII, caring for soldiers after D-Day and Battle of the Bulge. After the war, she returned to her reservation, where she worked for Indian Health Service and advocated for it to become the first smoking-free community in South Dakota.

4. Elizabeth Sadoques Mason (Tribe: Abenaki, Location: New Hampshire) 1897-1985. Mason was one of the first AI/AN RNs, along with her sister, Maude. While Mason worked at the Elliott Community Hospital in Keene, New Hampshire, for close to forty years. She was also a private nurse for Abbott Handerson Thayer, an artist known for painting Madonnas and angels, and inspiring the military's camouflage design.

5. Susie Walking Bear Yellowtail (Tribe: Apsaálooke, Location: Montana) 1903-1981. Yellowtail was the first Apsaálooke (Crow) RN. She spent most of her career bettering the health care available on the Crow Reservation. She served on the President's Council on Indian Health and Nutrition, as well as other, similar councils. She also advocated for native culture to be included in healthcare settings on reservations and started the Community Healthcare Representatives program. She combined Indigenous knowledge with Western medicine to help Crow women to have safe and. culturally appropriate births. She also helped to found the American Indian Nurse's Association. She was given the President's Award for Outstanding Nursing Health Care in 1962.

Figure 3. Susie Walking Bear Yellowtail at her nursing school graduation (top row middle); copyright for educational purposes granted by the Montana Historical Society.

DISCUSSION

Most of the AI/AN students involved in the CO-OP program come from one of the seven reservations in Montana, and upon graduation, many plan on returning to their communities. Currently, "...86% of the RN graduates of the CO-OP work in and around reservation communities" (Larsson & Johnson, 2022).

Due to tragic historical events, AI/AN communities are likely to distrust institutions such as medical clinics, which can worsen the health disparities already present in this population. However, nurses who identify as AI/AN may be more trusted by the community, as they are able to provide culturally competent care, leading to increased use of healthcare services.

Most AI/AN students are first-generation college students, which can create challenges in successfully completing their degree, including the lack of guidance from someone who has navigated a university system previously. AI/AN nurses that work in their community could serve as a mentor, or as support for children in the community, especially if those children pursue a BSN. By providing support for students' education, the AI/AN nurses would be able to reinforce the CO-OP pillar of Sense of Place.

For AI/AN nursing students to graduate and become mentors, efforts must be made to improve retention rates. As the photos are intended to create an improved sense of place, there is an expectation that they will assist in the retention of AI/AN nursing students in the CO-OP program.

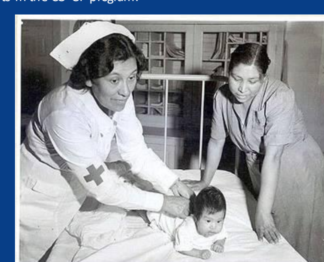

Figure 4. Lula Owl Gloyne; -photo from the National Archives; no copyright attached to photo

Figure 5. Virginia Rosebud Sneed Dixon at a Veteran's Day Event on November 11th, 2017; copy of photo purchased from photographer Scott McKie

CONCLUSIONS

It is expected that these photos will improve AI/AN students' sense of belonging at the Mark & Robyn Jones College of Nursing at Montana State University, which may improve CO-OP retention and graduation rates. AI/AN students from the CO-OP program who graduate and work in reservation communities will be able to reduce the health disparities present in rural and tribal areas while serving as role models for younger generations.

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