It is crucial for American Indian/First Nations people to obtain an education if we are to guide our communities to great successes. After working in the field for some time, it is easy to recognize the many intricacies involved in making this happen. As we all may be aware, there are several cultural barriers for our students going away to college. There is no one sure-fire to everyone's struggles. I do not claim to be an expert by far, the process has and mostly likely will always be a work in progress.

What I do know is that the University where I am employed is far advanced in successfully educating American Indian/First Nation students. The University of North Dakota (UND) is fast becoming recognized as an institution of excellence for American Indian higher education opportunities.

UND has a long history of serving American Indian students representing tribes of the region and all across the U.S. and Canada. Twenty-nine (29) distinct American Indian programs, along with a wealth of innovative initiatives, are administered on the campus, and approximately 500 American Indian students are currently enrolled at UND.

Reasons for the successful recruitment and retention of Native students can be directly attributed to these programs. American Indian Related Programs on the UND campus, American Indian Student Services (AISS) in particular, serves American Indian students and all students who utilize the American Indian Center or seek assistance. Additionally, American Indian Student Services works with all aspects of the University, including the administration with institutional planning, maintaining communication channels with the regional tribes and tribal colleges regarding collaborations and successful student transfers, and continually striving to ensure a campus and community climate that is respectful and responsive to the needs of American Indian/First Nations students.

The American Indian Center complete with a state-of-the-art computer learning lab, lounge area, kitchen facilities, and study areas; the rich array of Indian related programs and opportunities, including seven American Indian student organizations; a wealth of student support and leadership opportunities; a campus environment that celebrates community building and the diversity of our region, nation, and global village, and the passionately committed staff members of American Indian Student Services - all together render UND culturally sensitive and knowledgeable - a superior choice nation-wide for Native students seeking higher education. We at AISs like to think of it as a "home away from home" for our students.

The University of North Dakota has the largest American Indian enrollment in the region. We administer several unique programs and projects that aid with this achievement. Surrounding students with the cyclical support system that UND possesses is a retention tool in itself and sharing information on the many opportunities is on the forefront of recruitment.

It all starts with a passionate group of individuals who are the movers and shakers of creating programming for American Indian students. American Indian/First Nation students are unique in their needs and must not be lumped with other diversity services. Specific programming designed to assist American Indians is a requirement for effectiveness.

Aside from stellar services, support from your institution is also required. UND’s commitment to the American Indian population is apparent in our warm, welcoming environment and is reflected in its mission statement which promotes cultural diversity among its students, staff and faculty and also encourages attendees to share responsibility both for their own communities and for the world. The University of North Dakota is the largest University in North Dakota with over 200 academic programs of study and many student opportunities that are best in class.

A perfect recipe for successfully recruiting and retaining any population is not attainable, although we can come close. In the case of recruitment and retention of American Indian students, the discussed resources, unique opportunities, wealth of supportive services, and genuinely caring, helpful, and culturally knowledgeable staff are some of the key ingredients.

Ultimately, continuing to push forward through trials of adversity when assisting our students can prove to be fruitful. The following motto, perhaps, says it best: "At UND American Indian Student Services, we strive to build stronger American Indian communities across the state and nation - one successful student at a time."

I simply cannot imagine a more rewarding career than helping our people enrich their lives, make their dreams come true, and go on to serve their tribal communities as critically needed American Indian/First Nations professionals - all through the pursuit of higher education.

Kristy Zastra is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa located in North Dakota and was raised on the Turtle Mountain Reservation. She graduated from Turtle Mountain Community High School and attended Turtle Mountain Community College where she earned an Associate of Applied Science in Tribal Advocacy and obtained a Legal Studies certificate as well. She also holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from the University of North Dakota (UND) and is currently taking graduate courses in Educational Leadership.

Zastra works as a Program Coordinator and Recruiter at American Indian Student Services located in the American Indian Center at the UND. In this role, she provides culturally appropriate support services to current and prospective American Indian students. Prior to this position, Zastra worked as the education director for the Boys & Girls Club of the Three Affiliated Tribes.

She is the 2011 recipient of the University of North Dakota Student Services Dears award and more recently was named as a Bush Foundation Native Nations Rebuilder, an opportunity in which emerging leaders participate in seminars to strengthen their leadership skills and nation-building knowledge so they may be instrumental in moving nations, in cooperation with elected leadership, toward realization of their tribes' unique goals. Zastra is passionate about promoting education throughout Indian Country.

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