

January 1, 2013

*Final Report:*

**Native American Perspectives of Rocky Mountain National Park**

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## **Executive Summary**

The primary goal of the NASS (Native American Student Services) project is to aid Rocky Mountain National Park personnel in better understanding Native American student views and attitudes toward public lands. This project focuses specifically upon perceptions of Rocky Mountain National Park by millennial-aged Native American students at the University of Northern Colorado. We draw recommendations for improving Native American-RMNP personnel relations should students eventually be hired by RMNP as interns or full time employees. Specifically, we highlight cultural sensitivity issues as defined by our study's focus group participants.

This report provides the following: (1) the initial results of a focus group held with ten millennial-age NASS participants at the University of Northern Colorado; (2) initial data on minority enrollment at UNC; (3) Photographs from two of the trips that Native American Student Services (NASS) took to RMNP in 2011-2012 and (4) links to podcasts of UNC Native students. In general, emerging focus group and "snapshot" results suggest that UNC First Nations students possess a strong interest in visiting public Rocky Mountain National Park, and maintain several solid ideas as to how best incorporate natives into park programs and services.

### **Part 1: Focus Group Recommendations:**

The focus groups were held at the University of Northern Colorado in February 2012 and included a group of ten native students from the UNC First Nations group. Seven questions, designed from the general to the specific were asked of focus group participants. Responses were recorded with both an iPad and audio recorder and transcribed by a NASS student assistant in the weeks following the session. The ten focus group participants ranged in age from 18-23, and all were undergraduate students majoring in various disciplines at UNC. Tribes represented among participants include the Navajo, Nez Perce, Comanche, Lumbee, Eastern Cherokee, Mohawk, Crow, Lakota, Hopi, and Pueblo Nations.

### **Summary of NASS focus group recommendations for working with N.A. interns at RMNP:**

What follows are a list of concerns and recommendations that arose during the NASS focus group discussions of 2012. An overwhelming number of NASS students were interested in interning with or being employed by Rocky Mountain National Park upon graduation. In this vein, students cited several cultural sensitivity issues for park personnel to keep in mind when working with Native American populations. Central themes emerged upon analysis of the focus group transcript and these are listed below.

#### *(1) Experience of time*

Focus group research revealed, not surprisingly, that *time* is often perceived of differently for Native American students, which may create potential challenges in the traditional workplace where punctuality is more valued and prioritized. Native participants cited the importance of allowing time for contemplation, which is often in contrast to the “hurry up” mentality of the West. Students spoke of how impromptu events are part of Native American culture, yet in Western society, activities are usually planned well in advance. This is not to say that NASS

students do not understand nor respect dates and deadlines, as First Nations students operate within an academic setting where time places demands on their schedules. Yet, time problems were frequently cited as a central challenge among participants, an issue that might prove challenging but not insurmountable for those seeking positions at RMNP and elsewhere.

### *(2) Trust and the workplace*

The longstanding history of genocide, imprisonment, forced assimilation and schooling, has led to inevitable trust issues between native populations and western institutions. NASS participants cited how these trust issues might translate into problems in the workplace, although they were not perceived of as concerns that cannot be mitigated. Students mentioned how **strong communication** between employer and employee (or internship provider and intern) can ultimately override any trust issues.

### *(3) NASS attitudes toward communication*

Focus group participants recommended several strategies for encouraging better communication between Native American student interns and RMNP employees should NASS students be hired. Study participants mentioned the importance of “holistic, egalitarian, consensus, and dialogue rather than monologue” in all workplace and internship settings. In terms of recommendations, students state the significance of “hands on, face-to-face interactions” when dealing with work related issues or concerns. Interestingly, while electronic communication is standard and customary in today’s wired context – particularly among today’s millennial generation- personal encounters are seen as fundamental in order to establish trust.

In addition to means of communication, NASS students emphasized the meaning of food in all social settings, including the work place. Seen as a sign of respect, sharing food is integral to

many Native American cultures, their identity, and provides a vehicle for communication. In most of the meetings and events with NASS students, it is customary to cook and share traditional food, and participants expected that this custom be carried into future careers.

Third, NASS students also suggested that easily understandable, clear, jargon free language is essential in the workplace. Too often academic and work discourse can marginalize certain populations. This is not to say that NASS populations cannot utilize the “tools of the dominant discourse”, but rather, jargon free language is more typically employed and preferred. In summary, communication forms that (1) take an egalitarian approach; (2) focuses on dialogue rather than monologue and (3) are jargon free are recommended for future RMNP- NASS relationships.

*(4) Collaboration and the workplace:*

NASS students cited several challenges related to collaboration and the workplace. On one hand, several focus group participants mentioned the importance of collaboration as a skill set among Native American students. At the same time, however, some participants fear that their emphasis on collaboration might leave them behind in the more competitive, individualistic environments of work or school. The investigators feel, however, that NASS students’ emphasis on collaboration is a particular strength, given the Park Service’s own commitment to community-park collaborations.

Interestingly, participants also mentioned the ways in which informal work or school settings create obstacles for Native Americans who are expected to similarly discuss and debate projects and problems. Collaboration is key for NASS students, yet speaking up to contribute to discussion can be perceived as bragging or self-aggrandizement. This more assertive approach

conflicts with the belief that individual attention works against overall group goals, something to keep in mind if native students are hired for the park service.

Similarly, NASS students noted that natives are accustomed to complex systems of power that include “family, clan, band, village”, as well as local, regional, and federal government entities. They have had longstanding encounters with councils, chiefs, and presidents. This experience with various forms of hierarchy may serve as an asset for students seeking internships or employment with the Park Service.

#### *(5) World views and the work place*

Focus group participants similarly addressed the way in which workplace ideals are often incompatible with Native American beliefs. In most work and academic settings, spiritual identity and social identity must be merged. Several students cited how the workplace does not necessarily tolerate spiritual beliefs of “wholeness, interconnectedness, and balance”. Indeed, Native identities are tied not only to work but also to “family, tribe, and homeland”. Yet as interns or employees, these young people must function not as whole individuals in this new setting, but as “parts of a larger organism” or “compartments”. While complex relationship serves as a potential challenge for those students choosing to work at RMNP, it is not insurmountable.

#### *(6) NASS and the importance of education and employment*

Focus group participants addressed the fact that Native Americans are severely disadvantaged from an economic standpoint, and thus internships are perceived as extremely valuable opportunities for NASS students. Unemployment is as high as 80% among some Tribes, and consequently, some 83% of students apply for financial aid. At UNC, in particular, some

66% of Native American students receive institutional financial aid. Indeed, Native Americans face several financial challenges in northern Colorado. They comprise the smallest ethnic minority of UNC students, and their enrollment levels have dropped over the past few year (see Tables in subsequent sections). Paid internships for this population of students are therefore extraordinarily helpful for those seeking unique career opportunities in Colorado. By directly engaging NASS students with projects that link their academic studies to park related issues, internships would likely aid student retention and encourage interns to seek full time employment in the park upon graduation.

Part 2: UNC Demographic Data for Native American Students (UNC Diversity Fact Book: 2010):

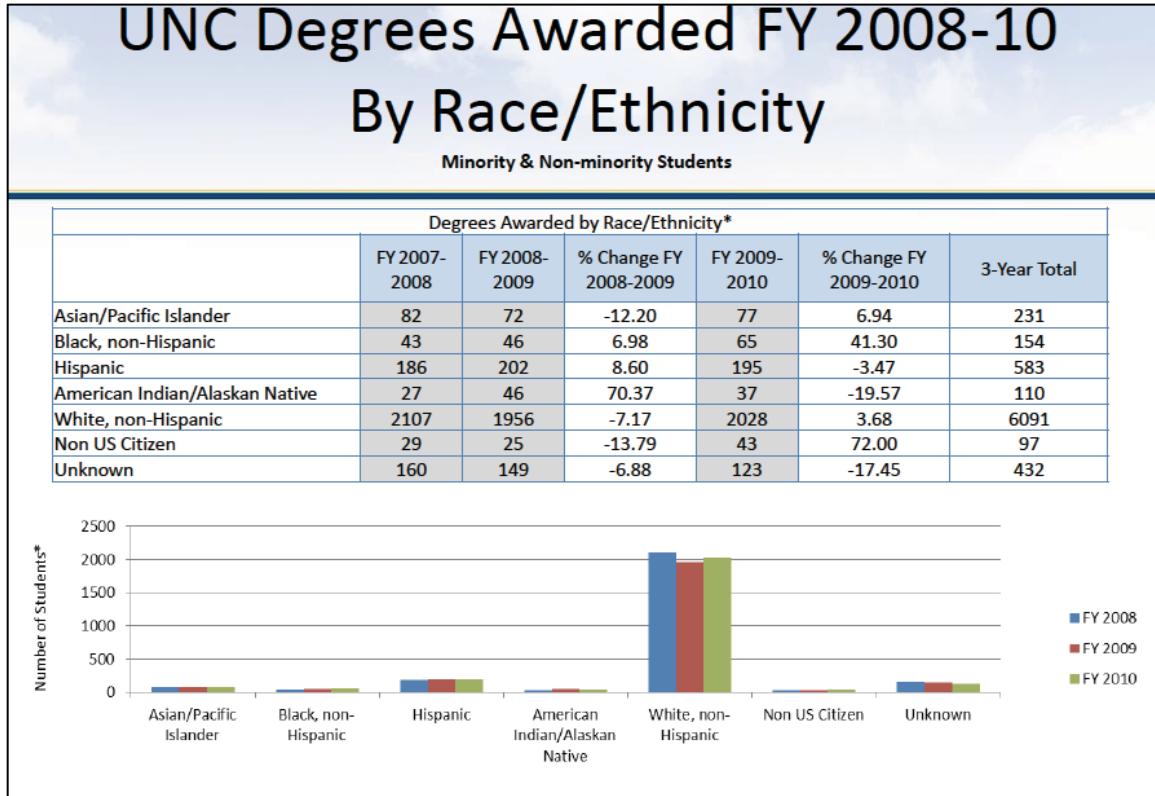


Table 1: UNC Degrees Awarded FY 2008-2010 by Race/Ethnicity. Source (Diversity Fact Book: 2010).



# Undergraduate Fall 2006-2009 Ethnicity

Minority Only

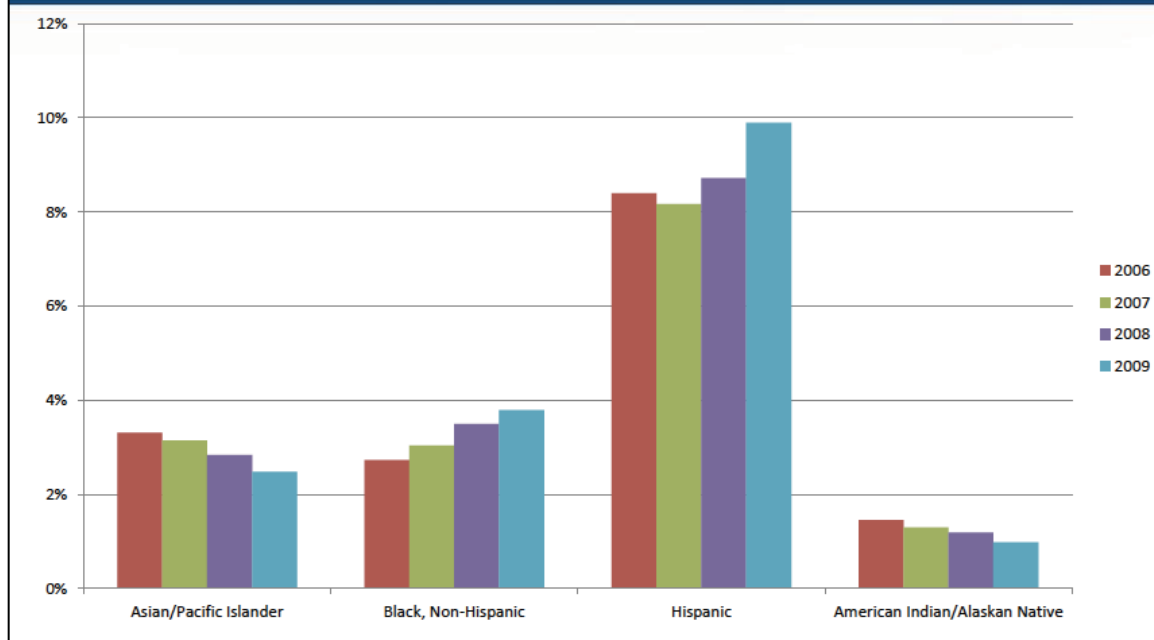
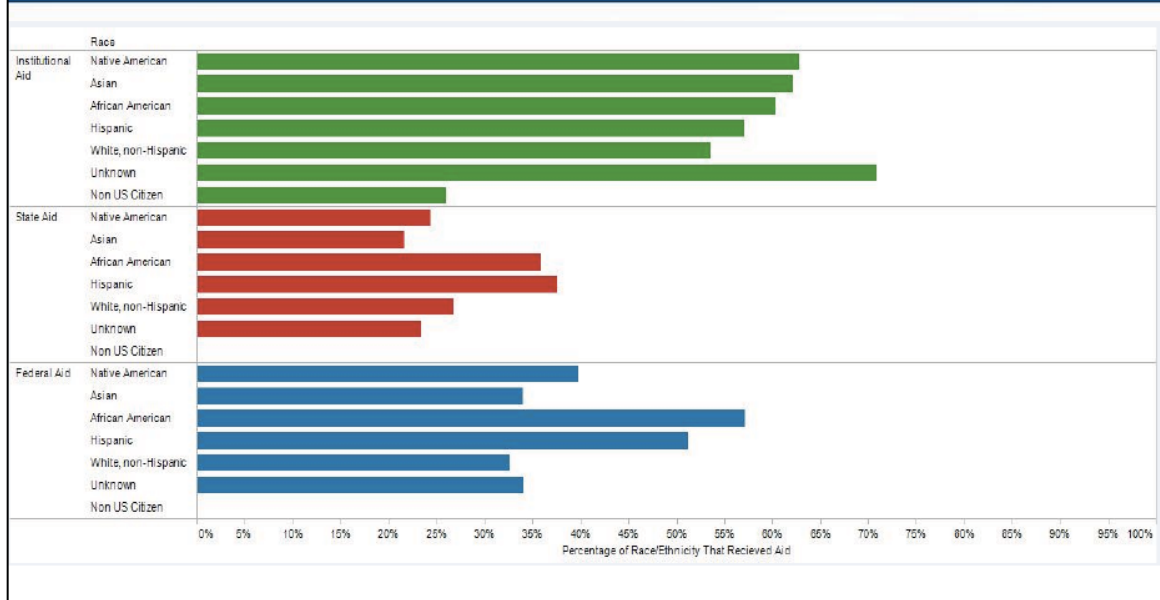


Table 2: Undergraduate Fall 2006-2009 (by ethnicity, minorities only). Source (Diversity Fact Book: 2010).

# Undergraduate Financial Aid Paid Financial Aid Year 2009-10

## Percent of Race/Ethnicity Category

(Does not include Loans)



**Table 3: Undergraduate Financial Aid 2009-2010 by Ethnicity. Source (Diversity Fact Book: 2010).**

# UNC Fall 2010

Minority & Non-minority Students  
(New Reporting Method)

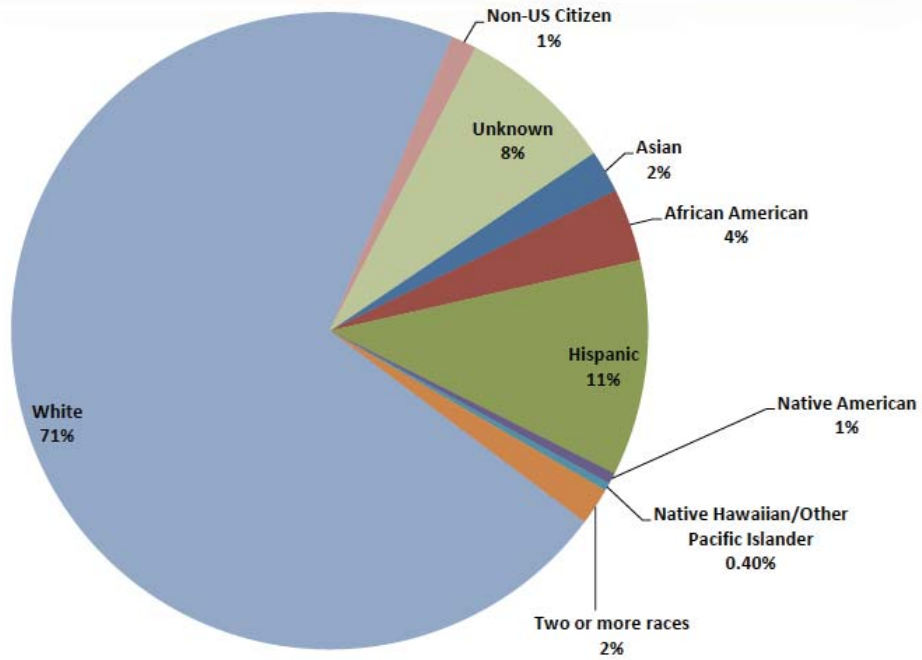


Table 4: UNC Minority and Non-Minority Students Fall 2010. Source (Diversity Fact Book: 2010).

**Part 3: Photographs of NASS (Native American Student Services) at Rocky Mountain National Park (2011-2012)**

The following photos were gleaned from two NASS field trips taken to RMNP in 2011-2012. For many students, these experiences represent their first time in Rocky Mountain National Park.

**Figure 1: NASS Student Group at RMNP - February 2012**



Figure 2: NASS Group at RMNP with Solomon Little Owl - November 2011





Figure 3: On the Trail at Rocky with Solomon - November 2011



Figure 4: Students Listening as Solomon Lectures - November 2011





Figure 5: En route to RMNP - "Indian" Carving - February 2012



Figure 6: NASS Group up at RMNP - February 2012





**Part 4: Podcasts of 4 NASS students and their experiences at RMNP:** Below is a link to the podcasts in which NASS students describe their experience (or lack thereof) at Rocky Mountain National Park: <<http://www.unco.edu/nass/rmnp.html>>.