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A VISION TO SERVE THE COMMUNITY: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH
EXAMINING EDUCATIONAL PERSISTENCE AMONG AMERICAN INDIAN
GRADUATE STUDENTS

By

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Dissertation

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of Montana
Missoula, MT

Spring 2017

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Abstract

Bird, Karla D., Ed.D., Spring 2016

Educational Leadership

A vision to serve the community: A grounded theory approach examining educational persistence among American Indian graduate students

Chairperson: Dr. Patty Kero

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the process of educational persistence among American Indian graduate students attending non-Native colleges and universities in Montana. Specifically, a grounded theory approach was used to generate a theory to describe persistence, using the concepts derived from participant interviews. Participants were American Indian graduate students currently enrolled at the following Montana institutions: University of Montana-Missoula, Montana State University-Bozeman, Montana Tech-Butte, Montana State University-Billings, and Montana State Northern-Havre. This study explored the following central research questions: What is persistence in the context of the American Indian graduate student experience? Why and how do American Indian graduate students persist while attending non-Native colleges and universities in the state of Montana? Data analysis was structured to select one core category as the focus of the theory, with additional detailed categories to form a theoretical model (Strauss & Corbin, 2015; Creswell, 2013). The core category of persistence in this study was a “Vision to serve the community,” with the following supporting categories: identity, skills, and support. It is recommended that Tribal Community Colleges and Universities (TCU’s) expand to include higher leveled degrees, non-Native Colleges and Universities (NNCU’s) reduce institutional barriers for American Indian students, and that the research paradigms become more inclusive of Indigenous research methodologies.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude for all the many blessings that Creator has bestowed upon my journey throughout this lifetime. It is through God, that I was able to persevere during a very difficult moment in my life and complete this research.

The completion of this dissertation was also dependent upon the support and encouragement of many people. I would like to give thanks to my father and mother, Kenneth Leo Bird and Delores Mae Bird (Butterfly). Thank you so much for gifting us such a beautiful life, my love for you is eternal. To all of my accomplished siblings: Douglas Wayne, Kenneth Allan, Kendra Mae (John), and Dana Leigh (Phillip), thank you for being exceptional role models and providing guidance throughout the course of our lives. Additionally, I'd like to acknowledge my nieces and nephews: Tiahna Rose, Jonathan Robert, Phillip Anthony, Jaden Leigh, Sabrina Marie, and Ethan Leo. You are loved by many and have lots of family that will support you as you embark upon your own life endeavors. I pray Creator watches over all of you and gifts you an abundance of blessings

Thank you to Chairperson Dr. Patty Kero for your caring encouragement and unwavering belief in my abilities to complete this process. Thank you for your time, dedication, and contributions to this research study. You've provided mentorship and have exemplified the ideals of being a compassionate educator and transformational leader. I'm truly indebted to you!

My dissertation would not be complete without the commitment and support of all my committee members and Educational Leadership/Counselor Education professors. Thank you Dr. Matt, Dr. Lee, Dr. Belcourt, Dr. Lindsay, Dr. O'Reilly, Dr. McCaw, and guest advisor Sedelta Oosahwee. I'd also like to extend my gratitude to Jon (Lisa) Stannard, a previous supervisor, yet lifelong mentor. You have all been a wonderful source of inspiration throughout this journey.

To all of my friends (Pearl, Turquoise, Deserae, Roger, Maegan, Kristina, Shanley, Shane, Darin, Rose Mary, Michelle, Courtney), thank you all for your love, support, and a lifetime of laughter. Aislinn, it's been such a privilege to embark upon this educational journey with you! We've had such wonderful mothers to provide guardianship in this lifetime; I know they would be proud of our accomplishments.

I'd also like to give reverence to all of my ancestors for their sacrifices and guardianship. I'd like to acknowledge my grandparents: Grandpa Henry Bird, Grandma Rose (Bullshoe) Grandpa Henry Butterfly and Grandma Dorothy Mae Butterfly (Yellow Owl); as well as all my relatives through the Bird family, Bullshoe family, Yellow Owl family, and Butterfly family.

To all the individuals that have shared their story of persistence, resilience, empowerment, resistance, and survival, thank you. I've cherished all of your stories as gifts and I know that these inspiring stories will positively impact the future generations of Indigenous youth and their ability to persist in higher education.

In the Amskapii Pikuni language we have a word "Ee-kah-ki-Maht" which means "try hard!" To all the people invested in American Indian education keep persevering, as the livelihood of our Indigenous communities is dependent upon the ability of our academic warriors to "count coup."

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my father and mother, Kenneth Leo Bird and Delores Mae Bird (Butterfly). As Indigenous people, we often express ourselves through story, so I would like to share a story about my mother Delores.

My mom invested so much time into my education, not necessarily my formal education, but my curiosity to naturally learn. I remember as a child I always had access to endless amounts of books and my mother never turned me away when I wanted a story read. I grew up watching my mother be a parent and a professional, balancing out all of her priorities and obligations in life. Essentially role modeling that anything was possible with hard work and prayer. She dedicated her personal and professional life to children and served 40 plus years as an educator and librarian.

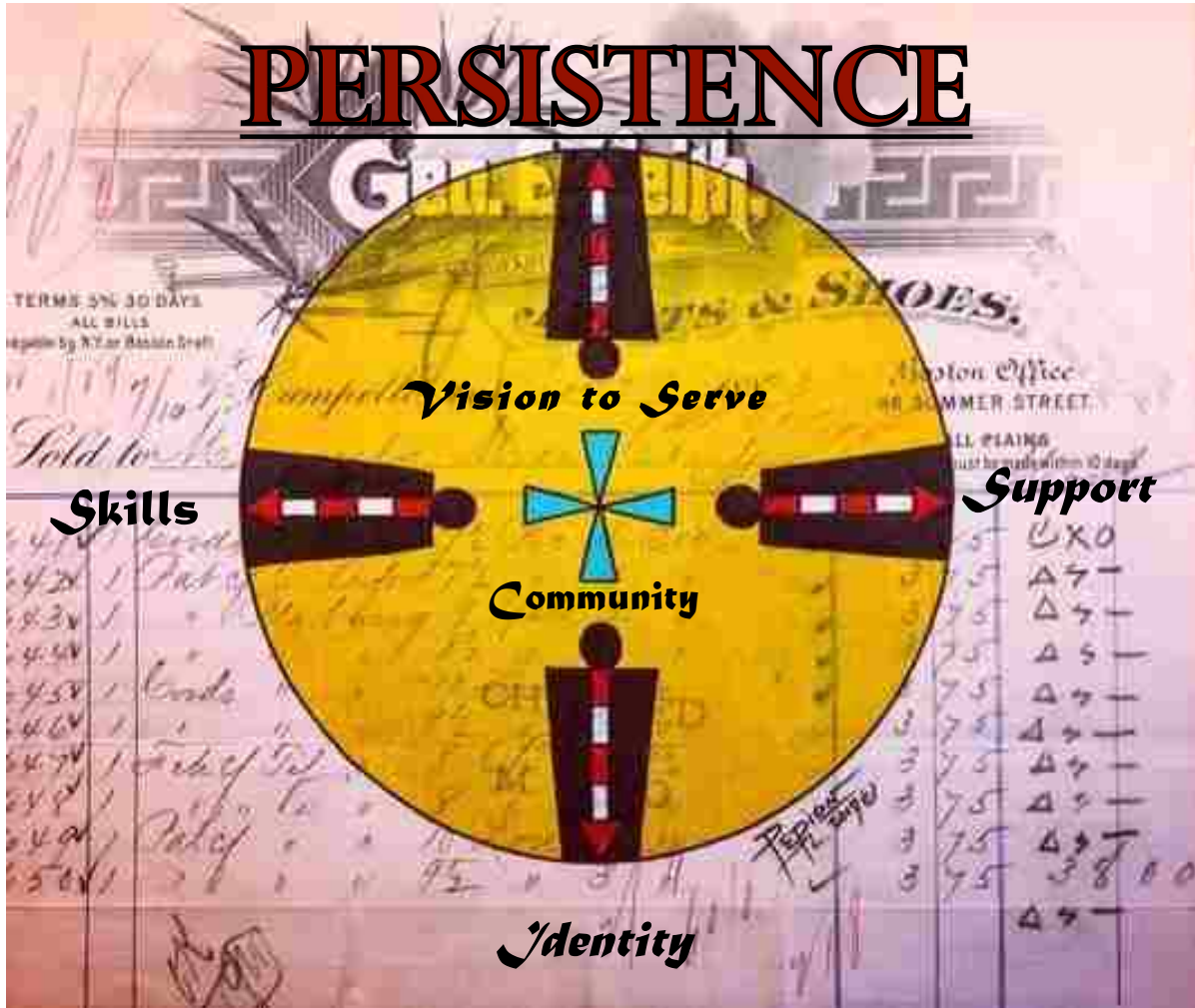
My mother helped me prepare for college in many different ways. When it came time to depart for college, my mother said "Karla, be persistent." I remember leaving my parent's house ready to go to college as a freshman and had left some belongings at their house. I drove back and found my mom sitting on her bed crying. I knew she was crying because she was going to miss me, but I also knew she was crying because she knew the challenging path ahead of me as a Native American in higher education. My mother's words stuck with me for several years, so much that it earned me eleven years of formal post-secondary education, with a path towards a doctoral degree. My mom and her guidance influenced me so much, that I decided to do research on the concept of educational persistence among American Indian students.

Near the completion of my dissertation proposal, my mother passed away. It was the most devastating event in my life. I realize that my father and mother didn't get me this far in life, so I could quit. During trialing moments, I would often think of my mother's sacrifices and it gave me enough motivation to write in the long hours of the night, even though I'd rather sulk in my grief and sorrow due to her absence. My mother was there to get me through these past eleven years of college and now I've had to complete these last few months of my college career without her earthly presence. Well mom, I "persisted" and I dedicate my entire dissertation and educational journey to you. I hope when I walk across that graduation stage, people look at me and see YOU. Kitakitamiatsin Na'aa

Dad, thank you for providing me such a wonderful upbringing and beautiful life. You've always supported all of your children's educational and professional endeavors. We were able to persist and complete our degrees, solely because of you and mom's dedication and commitment to our education. You have both taught us many things, but the main lesson we learned in life is to believe and have faith in greater purposes. We were very lucky to have you, mom, grandma Rose, and all our many relatives to provide guidance and prayer, which will help sustain us for the rest of our lives. Kitsi-ko-ko-mim

Dedicated to Kenneth Leo Bird and Delores Mae Bird (Butterfly), love Karla.

A Vision to Serve the Community: An Indigenous Theory of Persistence



“Okan People 2017”

“Symbology is important to Indigenous people. This picture represents women and men in a circle (community). The people are coming together for ceremony and renewal of yearly teachings. It’s a time of identity, sharing, and community. The Morning Star is sacred and is placed within the center of the circle. The color yellow represents the sun and the other designs identify the Piikani culture. The Okan ceremony is held each year, usually in July or August on the Blackfeet reservation. Each band of The Blackfoot Confederacy is represented at the Okan. Today our culture is alive and this drawing is a representation of Piikani community.”

—John Pepion

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

It is essential to examine the components of persistence among American Indian college students, gain a deeper understanding of student success, and provide insight as to how institutions can create a supportive environment for this population. Educational persistence is an important area of research. According to Hagedorn (2006), the National Center for Education Statistics defines persistence as a “student measure” rather than an institutional measure (p. 6). Thus, the student perspective of persistence can provide valuable information to institutional entities working to increase American Indian retention and graduation. For the purposes of this study, a qualitative research study was conducted to explore the components of persistence among American Indian graduate students attending a non-Native college or university in the state of Montana. Through this process of formal inquiry, a theoretical understanding of persistence will contribute to the research on American Indian education, which is not only lacking in academe, but can also contribute to a wealth of knowledge among educators, administrators, and policy makers in the field of education.

History of American Indian Education

A historical perspective of American Indian education is imperative to understand the contemporary needs of Native students attending Westernized higher educational institutions. These historical experiences have produced negative consequences within American Indian communities, thus contributing to educational adversity in higher education for these particular populations. The Montana Office of Public Instruction has divided American Indian history into eight sections: traditional Indian education and European intrusion, federalism and the Indian treaty period, Indian boarding schools, allotment period, tribal reorganization, termination of Indian tribes, Indian self-determination, and Indian education in Montana (Juneau, 2001). Each

of these periods has created significant contributions and implications for contemporary issues regarding American Indian education.

Due to these periods within American Indian history, Indigenous people have experienced various levels and effects of historical trauma. In particular, Brave Heart, Yellow Horse, Elkins, and Atlschulm (2011) stated that Native Americans have experienced “collective, intergenerational massive group trauma and compounding discrimination, racism, and oppression” (p. 282). In addition, Yellow Bird and Chenault (1999) stated that the major barrier of educational empowerment for Indigenous people is related to their history of intellectual and cultural oppression due to forced immersion into European American schools.

Challenges.

American Indian graduate students who attend non-Native colleges and universities face unique challenges and barriers toward success in academia. Many of these difficulties are shared among segments of the majority population: students from impoverished backgrounds, first generation students, and students pursuing graduate level education and/or professional degrees. However, a unique set of challenges remains specific to the American Indian population that derive from their racial/political backgrounds and historical experiences. These challenges include campus marginality, passive and active racism, experiences of conflicting values systems, and cultural dissonance (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Pewewardy & Frey, 2004; Whitekiller, 2004). Moreover, challenges specific to American Indian graduate students include feelings of isolation and academic and cultural alienation, racism and discrimination, lack of Indigenous role models, lack of academic guidance, and often profound financial stressors (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012). Overall, American Indians have not always been served well by non-Native colleges and universities (Brayboy et al., 2012), which is perhaps

most evident by enrollment and graduation statistics. American Indian representation in graduate school has remained under one percent of the total graduate population nationwide, indicating a severe underrepresentation of this population in post baccalaureate programs (Bell, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2015; Kena et al., 2015).

Educational persistence.

Numerous higher educational challenges exist for Indigenous populations; therefore, researching educational persistence and identifying contributing factors of success is imperative to foster educational equity. To understand the area comprehensively and how it has evolved over time, a historical framework of the concept of educational persistence must be developed. Early research on educational persistence and attrition were greatly influenced by theories derived from both the anthropology field, as well as the sociology field.

One of the first theories on student attrition/persistence was Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory of student departure, which explained the process of interaction between an individual and his or her institution. These interactions may result in various outcomes, such as persistence and/or dropping out of college (Tinto, 1975). Essentially, Tinto (1975) believed that academic and social integration influences a student's commitment to the institution and toward graduation. Tinto (1975) also believed that the more a student was academically and socially integrated, the higher rate of persistence he or she would achieve in college. Specific components of Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure were highly influenced by the fields of anthropology and sociology. In particular, Tinto used Van Gennep's right of passage theory and Durkheim's suicide theory to develop the concepts of integration and membership within the student departure theory. As a result of these theories, Tinto (1975) suggested that student membership was defined by the completion of specific educational passages and

developed the notion that students must become socially integrated into society to persist in higher education.

Early research on educational persistence and attrition was influenced by social systems theories. Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide influenced the notion of educational attrition. In particular, the social component of egoistic suicide was a theoretical centerpiece that influenced the integration concept of Tinto's interactionist student departure theory. Durkheim (1951) indicated that egoism occurs from isolation from social groups, when individuals are left with limited social support and guidance (Durkheim, 1951). This theoretical orientation provided the basis for thoughts on institutional departure from higher education.

Although Durkheim's theory was influential to mainstream persistence theories, the researcher and committee members of this study believe that it may introduce concerns to community members. Specifically, while unlikely it is possible that community members could find it upsetting and inappropriate to make analogous comparisons between institutional departure and suicide. Suicide is a serious public health problem facing Montana communities and tribes, in fact the rate of suicide in the state is the highest in the nation (2009 National Vital Statistics Report, 2012). Therefore this theory was not covered in a large amount of detail within the following literature review, nor will it be significantly referenced throughout the rest of this study. Please view Durkheim's (1951) work for further review.

Tinto's student departure theory was influenced by anthropological studies. More specifically, Van Gennep (1960) developed the "rites of passage" theory as he studied tribal societies, which later influenced Tinto's conception of educational retention. Van Gennep (1960) analyzed ceremonies that accompanied life passages from one position to the next. Following Van Gennep's work on life passages, Tinto developed passages within the timeframe

of a student's college career, which included separation from communities of the past, transition between high school and college, and incorporation into the society of college (Tinto, 1975).

Conversely, Tierney (1992) challenged Tinto's interactionist model, stating that Native American students should not have to integrate into the institution; rather, the institution is responsible for meeting the needs of the students. Shotton, Lowe, Waterman, and Garland (2013) stated that historically, retention models have been largely designed based on mainstream populations, rather than specific to minority populations. HeavyRunner developed one of the first Indigenous theoretical persistence models in 2009. The research findings indicated that students needed a vision of success and circles of relationships to persist in academe. In 2002, HeavyRunner and DeCelles identified Native specific retention models, such as the Family Education Model, a strength based resilience approach grounded in the idea that universities recreate the extended family structure within institutional settings. Additionally, McAfee (1997) offered another theoretical model specific to Indigenous populations called "Stepping Stones." This model used the concept of "stepping out" rather than "dropping out," which referenced the idea that most Native students will have a momentary pause in their education that should be seen as a neutral factor, rather than a negative experience (McAfee, 1997, 2000). McAfee (1997) stated that attrition "carries a sense of finality, ending, stopping, and institutional and particularly individual failure," while the phenomenon of stepping out can imply the possibility of stepping back into higher education (p. 256). Due to the sequencing or stepping out phenomenon, American Indian attrition rates can be difficult to assess (Huffman, 2008).

Indigenous theories.

In this research design, several Indigenous based theories were used as a lens to view the educational institution, the components of persistence, and student assets. These theories

included the following: Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribCrit), Transcultural Theory, and Cultural Wealth Theory. Tribal Critical Race Theory, which was used as a theoretical lens to view non-Native colleges and universities in this research study, posits the idea that colonization is endemic to the society of education (Brayboy, 2005). Transcultural Theory was also used as the theoretical lens of student educational persistence. This theory referenced the idea that American Indian students can simultaneously operate on two cultural levels to overcome difficulties posed by alienation and estrangement (Huffman, 2008). Lastly, Cultural Wealth Theory acted as the theoretical lens to focus on student strength and resiliency as students navigate systems of higher education (Perez-Huber, 2009; Solórzano, Villapando, & Oseguera 2005; Yosso, 2005).

In education, Tribal Critical Race Theory emerged from Critical Race Theory, yet Tribal Critical Race Theory is rooted in the epistemologies and ontologies of Indigenous people (Brayboy, 2005). In general, Critical Race Theory emphasized the idea that racism is endemic to society and includes five defining elements: the centrality of race and racism, the challenge of dominant ideology, a commitment to social justice and praxis, a centrality of experiential knowledge, and a historical context and interdisciplinary perspective (Brayboy, 2005; Solórzano, Villapando, & Oseguera, 2005). However, Tribal Critical Race Theory was more specific to Native American populations, because it explicitly indicated that colonization was an endemic force to the society of education (Brayboy, 2005). This theory suggested that the contemporary goal of formal education was not to assimilate American Indians, yet some forms of assimilation were inevitable through these formal structures of Westernized schooling (Brayboy, 2005). Tribal Critical Race Theory was also an approach to teach students how to combine Indigenous notions of culture with European conceptions to become actively engaged in “survance, self-

determination, and autonomy” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 437). Overall, Brayboy (2005) stated that this theory could be a lens to view educational problems, such as the lack of students graduating from colleges and universities.

The final two Indigenous based theories employed in this study included Transcultural Theory and Cultural Wealth Theory. Transcultural Theory was used as a lens to view educational persistence among American Indian graduate students. Transcultural Theory posits that American Indian students can use their culture and identity as an emotional anchor to achieve academic success (Huffman, 2008). In essence, students are able to operate in two different cultures simultaneously as they pursue higher education, without compromising any aspect of their background. Lastly, Cultural Wealth Theory was used as the lens to view student strengths and assets as a person of color. This theory is defined as “the array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Cultural Wealth Theory is a Critical Race Theory that has shifted the lens from a deficit view and began to focus more on sources of strength and resiliency (Perez Huber, 2009; Solórzano, Villapando, & Oseguera, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Thus, cultural wealth can be an asset to educational persistence among American Indian students attending college.

Problem Statement

Native Americans are grossly underrepresented in higher education, with disproportionately high attrition rates in comparison to other populations, especially at the graduate level. A report titled “The Condition of Education 2015” stated that American Indian/Alaska Native students comprised 15,000 of the 2.9 million post baccalaureate students enrolled in graduate school nationwide as of fall 2013 (Kena et al., 2015). The reflection of low

enrollment and high attrition rates are indicative of a population that has multifaceted needs and challenges, which are typically misunderstood and not met by most institutions and educational leaders. Research that explores persistence among American Indian students is greatly needed, thus leading to the rationale of this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to explore American Indian higher education from a strengths-based perspective, by focusing on student academic success rather than from a deficit perspective. In particular, this research study examined the components of educational persistence among American Indian graduate students attending a non-Native college or university in the state of Montana. The researcher used a grounded theory approach, which is the generation of a theory that is grounded in data (Corbin & Strauss, 1967). However, the methodology was culturally adapted as needed to better explain the experiences of American Indians. Kleinman (2004) stated that contextualizing culture as an embodiment of “interpersonal relationships, religious practices, and the cultivation of collective and individual identity” is essential, as opposed to treating culture as a fixed variable when conducting research (p. 1).

The culturally adapted grounded theory approach allowed the researcher to develop a theory of how American Indian graduate students persist in higher education while attending non-Native colleges and universities. The selected interview questions explored the internal and external components of persistence, such as thought patterns, actions and behaviors, and support systems. Strauss’s (1987) approach to grounded theory analysis was used for this research project. The unique feature of Strauss’s approach to grounded theory is that the concepts that build the theory are derived from the data collected, and not chosen prior to the beginning of research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this particular case, the concepts and overall theory

emerged from the interviews conducted with American Indian graduate students in Montana. Corbin and Strauss (2015) stated that there are no definite number of participants required; rather, participants are selected based on the theoretical concepts that need to be developed. However, Creswell (2013) recommended that a guideline of 20 to 30 interviews would need to be conducted to completely saturate a theory. Additionally, research analysis and data collection are interrelated, meaning that it is an ongoing cycle throughout the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). A culturally adapted grounded theory was developed through the concepts that emerged from the interviews of each participant.

The intent of this research project was to develop a deeper understanding of how American Indian students persist to reach academic success. Persistence in this study was evidenced by participants who have successfully obtained a bachelor's degree and are persisting to graduate education, despite the unique challenges presented for this particular group.

Central Questions

This study explored the following central questions: What is persistence in the context of the American Indian graduate student experience? Why and how do American Indian graduate students persist while attending non-Native colleges and universities in the state of Montana? Through the use of semi-structured interviews, this project sought to examine the components of educational persistence among American Indian graduate students.

Definitions of Terms

For the purpose of this study, key terms were defined to enhance the reader's understanding of this research study.

American Indian. The terms Native American, American Indian, and Indigenous are used interchangeably throughout this paper. These terms refer to the Indigenous populations of

North America, specifically within the United States. They identify individuals as members who maintain their cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition (Pavel, Skinner, Cahalan, Tippeconnic, & Stein, 1998). Native Americans are not only classified as an ethnic minority, but also as a political group considering their identity is connected to the status of sovereign nations (Brayboy, 2005).

American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). A central organization founded in 1973 by six tribally controlled community colleges as an informal collaboration among member colleges (American Indian Higher Education Consortium [AIHEC], 2016). AIHEC has grown immensely as a national movement and currently serves 37 tribal colleges and universities in the United States, with one located in Canada (AIHEC, 2016).

Campus climate. Students' perception of an institutional environment (Shotton, Lowe, Waterman, & Garland, 2013).

Cultural wealth theory. The concept that communities of color have a broad "array of knowledge, skills abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Graduate student. A student enrolled in a post baccalaureate program that includes both "master's and doctoral programs, as well as programs such as law, medicine, and dentistry" (Kena et al., 2015, p. 98).

Non-Native colleges and universities (NNCUs). Institutions that represent the predominantly white population, previously referred to as predominantly white institutions (PWI's) or mainstream institutions within the research paradigm (Shotton, Lowe, Waterman, & Garland, 2013). Shotton et al. (2013) argued that is imperative to use the term NNCU as a conscious effort to center the experiences of Native people.

Persistence. Persistence and retention are often used interchangeably. According to Hagedorn (2006), the National Center for Education Statistics differentiates the terms by using retention as an institutional measure and persistence as a student measure. In this particular study, students are demonstrating persistence by actively continuing and pursuing graduate education and/or a professional degree.

Transcultural theory. The ability to successfully engage in two different cultural settings without compromising Native identity and heritage (Huffman, 2008).

Tribally controlled colleges and universities (TCUs). The term tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) and tribally controlled colleges is used interchangeably throughout this paper. Tribal colleges and universities are chartered by tribal governments and share the mission of tribal self-determination (Shotton et al., 2013).

Tribal critical race theory (TribCrit). Abercrombie-Donahue (2011) defined TribCrit as:

A theoretical framework for academic research and teaching that focuses on racism and colonialism as central to all other forms of oppression, especially with research and teaching involving Indigenous people. TribCrit challenges the lasting legacies of colonialism, ongoing systemic racism, the impact of ideological/cultural hegemony on students in schools, the subordination of Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies, and the continued violation of tribal sovereignty, self-determination, and the rights of tribally controlled education (p. xvi).

Delimitations

In compliance with a culturally adapted grounded theory approach, this study included delimitations. This study required that all participants self-identify as Native American.

Participants were either members of a federally recognized tribe, state recognized tribe, and/or those tribes not recognized by either the state or federal government. Participants may also have several tribal affiliations. However, it is problematic to treat Native Americans as one group, considering that they represent a variety of independent nations. In Montana, there are seven reservations with thirteen federally and/or state recognized tribes. The seven reservations include the Blackfeet reservation, Flathead reservation, Rocky Boy's reservation, Fort Belknap reservation, Fort Peck reservation, Northern Cheyenne reservation, and the Crow reservation. The thirteen tribes of Montana include the Blackfeet, Salish, Kootenai, Pend d'Oreille, Assiniboine (Ft. Belknap and Ft. Peck), Gros Ventre, Sioux, Chippewa, Cree, Northern Cheyenne, Crow, and Little Shell. All participants had to be attending college in Montana, which may unintentionally limit tribal affiliation to those tribes concentrated in the Northwestern region of the United States. However, there were no limitations on tribal affiliations.

All participants were required to be graduate students as determined by their university/college requirements and must be seeking a master's degree, doctoral degree, and/or any other terminal degree. All participants had to be graduate students attending a non-Native college or university in the state of Montana. In this particular case, the non-Native public colleges and universities that offer post baccalaureate degrees within the Montana University System (MUS) include the University of Montana's affiliated institutions (Missoula and Montana Tech) as well as Montana State University's affiliated institutions (Bozeman, Billings, and Northern). According to Montana State University System's unpublished raw data, within the academic school year 2014-2015, eighty-four American Indian students completed with a graduate degree at either Montana State University or the University of Montana. However, in the previous year 2013-2014, only 40 American Indian students graduated from these two

institutions (MUS Data Warehouse). During spring semester 2016 at the University of Montana and Montana State University, 196 American Indian graduate students were enrolled (MUS Data Warehouse). The population of American Indian graduate students in Montana is limited; therefore, the sample size of participants was also considerably small. Open sampling and snowball sampling were initially employed, followed by theoretical sampling, which is concept driven and cumulative in nature (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Limitations

One limiting factor was the inability to generalize findings due to the qualitative nature of this research study. Additionally, the researcher had difficulty determining when categories were saturated or when a theory was detailed, considering that the population and sample were naturally limited in size (Creswell, 2013). However, the purpose of this research was not to generalize to the population, but rather to be a culturally informed exploratory informative piece of research to the field of education.

Significance of the Study

This qualitative research study is significant because it sought to examine the components of persistence among American Indian graduate students attending a non-Native college or university in the state of Montana. Early research conducted on American Indians has often been conducted through the perspective of Westernized thought processes, which often led to misinterpretation or a misunderstanding of Native issues. This study is of great importance because a culturally adapted grounded theory approach was used to generate a theory based on information derived from the interviews of American Indian graduate students. Research in this area is limited and is often conducted using a Westernized perspective, which does not

comprehensively depict the issues faced by this population. Therefore, more researchers should become aware of Indigenous epistemologies and incorporate these methodologies into research.

Summary

In summary, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the components of educational persistence among American Indian graduate students attending a non-Native college or university in the state of Montana. A culturally adapted grounded theory approach was used in order to examine the components of persistence. The researcher generated a theory, specific to Native American graduate students, based on the data collected from the interviews of all participants.

Educational persistence is an essential area to study among the American Indian student population, due to low enrollment and high attrition rates in higher education. Many American Indians finish graduate school and/or professional programs, despite significant challenges such as experiences of racism and discrimination, lack of Indigenous role models, financial stressors, lack of academic guidance, academic and cultural alienation, and overall feelings of general isolation (Brayboy et al., 2012). In particular, graduate students have generally proven a level of success by previously completing a baccalaureate degree and are in the pursuit of a graduate level and/or professional degree.

This study sought to explore the components of educational persistence as identified by these students and to examine the concepts and themes that have contributed to their success. This study was viewed through the lens of three indigenous theories: Cultural Wealth Theory, Transcultural Theory, and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribCrit), to provide a theoretical basis specific to the American Indian experience in graduate school. Although the findings of this qualitative study cannot generalize to other populations, the results will be informative to higher

education officials and policy makers in regard to the challenges presented and how colleges can adequately serve the needs of this population.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

The following literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the topics related to the concept of American Indian educational persistence in higher education. First, American Indian history of education will be examined, along with the impacts that United States' federal policies have had on Indigenous people in North America, specifically in regard to forced acculturation and assimilation. In addition, the history of American Indian higher education will be discussed, examining the mission and objectives of colonial colleges as well as the results of these institutional endeavors to formally educate Native Americans. Both of these historical backgrounds provide evidence of an involuntary transformation of Indigenous people from traditional education to a more formal Westernized education system, resulting in a loss of language, culture, and lifestyle.

Over time, U.S. federal policies eventually evolved to support tribal sovereignty as well as tribal self-determination, thus contributing to the establishment of tribally controlled community colleges. This historical background significantly aids in understanding the current challenges and concerns of American Indian students when they attend non-Native colleges and universities. To demonstrate how theory has transformed over time to be more explanatory of the minority experience in higher education, both Westernized and Indigenous educational persistence theories will be examined. Lastly, this study will be viewed through the lens of three indigenous theories: Cultural Wealth Theory, Transcultural Theory, and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribCrit). These theories provide a theoretical basis specific to the Native American experience in higher education.

The following literature review provides background content related to the central research questions: What is persistence in the context of the American Indian graduate student

experience? Why and how do American Indian graduate students persist while attending non-Native colleges and universities in the state of Montana? Despite this exhaustive review of the literature, Corbin and Strauss (2015) stated that a literature review should not constrain or stifle the creativity of generating a theory. Rather, the researcher must allow concepts to derive from the data to understand either their contribution of new material or overall relevance to the research paradigm (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Thus, the literature review will only serve as a foundational framework, with the focus on allowing the theory to emerge solely from the collected data.

History of American Indian Education

In order to understand the challenges Native Americans face in higher education, studying the history of American Indian education is necessary. This foundation of knowledge is especially important due to the history of impositions to assimilate American Indians into mainstream society, specifically through the use of formalized educational institutions. As a result, the following section will discuss various periods in history that have contributed to this forced transformation of Native people, from Indigenous education to Westernized educational systems.

European invasion and settlement marked the beginning of colonization and assimilation of American Indians. The initial arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean Islands signaled the notion that Europeans possessed inherent truths, which was supported by the Church and Western civilization (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Lewis and Clark were the first Europeans to cross the western half of North America, which expanded European knowledge of the continent, yet imposed long-lasting reverberations on American Indians' traditional ways of life (Barrett, 2003). Thornton (1987) initially used the term the "American Indian holocaust" to describe the

plummeted population of Indigenous people in the United States, from several million before Columbus's arrival to a little over 200,000 at the beginning of the 20th century.

Throughout American Indian history, Indigenous people have suffered the consequences of colonization. Williams (1989) wrote an article regarding the definition and classification of ethnicity and referenced the idea of "involuntary minorities," which Cross (1999) later implied was definitive of the American Indian experience. Cross (1999) stated that involuntarily minorities were coercively incorporated into American society in contrast to voluntary minorities, such as Europeans and other immigrants who willingly adapted to the American value system and lifestyle.

According to the Montana Office of Public Instruction, the history of American Indian education is divided into several periods: traditional Indian education and European intrusion (1492-1787), federalism and the Indian treaty period (1787-1871), Indian boarding schools (1617-present), allotment period (1887-1934), termination of Indian tribes (1953-1975), Indian self-determination (1975-present), and Indian education in Montana (1972-present) (Juneau, 2001). Consequently, a huge loss of population, language, and culture occurred among many Indigenous populations across North America. Yellow Bird and Chenault (1999) stated that throughout history, Indigenous education has been permeated with "oppression, racism, discrimination, cultural genocide, social control, and hegemonic European American education methods" (p. 7).

Traditional Indian education and European intrusion (1492-1787).

The initial period was identified as traditional Indian education and European intrusion, which occurred from 1492 to 1787 (Juneau, 2001). Although Indian communities had diverse educational systems, many commonalities existed among Indian cultures (Lacourt, 1997). Prior

to European invasion, American Indian traditional education was conducted through oral tradition and practical hands-on training and was passed on down from one generation to the next (Tierney, 2015). These traditional forms of education emphasized learning by application and imitation, as well as sharing and cooperation as opposed to Westernized education, which accentuated competition, individualism, and the memorization of basic information (Cross, 1999). Knowledge of tribal traditions was conducted through ceremonies, storytelling, apprenticeship, and games (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). The common defining characteristics of traditional Indian education “included a nature-centered philosophy about education, the participation of community and extended family, and the role elders played in passing on traditional knowledge through oral traditions” (Lacourt, 1999, p. 26). Indian tribes possessed information about the natural world; however, significant knowledge about lands, plants, animals, and the continent has been lost through the transformative process of traditional education to Westernized education (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

Essentially, American Indian education has been used to refer to two different concepts: the education of American Indian children by their parents, extended families, and communities, and the education of American Indians by colonial authorities (Lomawaima, 1999). Traditional education existed prior to European invasion and included information that encompassed the history, culture, and religions of each tribe (Juneau, 2001). Conversely, colonial education referred more to the re-culturing and reeducation of American Indians by secular and religious institutions from the colonizing nations of Spain, Great Britain, France, and the United States of America (Lomawaima, 1999; Tierney, 2015). Early colonists viewed formal education as an opportunity to Christianize Indigenous people, as well as civilize them and reform them in the image of Europeans (Lomawaima, 1999; Wright, 1988).

Federalism and the Indian treaty period (1787-1871).

The Federalism and the Indian treaty period lasted from 1787-1871; during this term the U.S Constitution (1787) recognized the governmental status of Indian tribes (Juneau, 2001). Despite this relationship, the federal government was still able to control Indian commerce, establish treaties with tribes, and regulate tribal lands as protected by the U.S. Constitution (as cited by Cross, 1999). In particular, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 pledged that the United States would provide a suitable education for Native people, although the act included the notions of religion, morality, and knowledge as components of education (Yale Law School). Despite this objective, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 set a tragic precedent of denying Indian rights (Frey, 2003). During this treaty period, the Senate approved 400 treaties, with 120 treaties having direct educational provisions (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). According to the Kennedy Report, tribes ceded almost one billion acres to the United States during this period (Indian Education, 1969), which contributed to a large amount of land loss among Indigenous populations.

Indian boarding school period (1617-present).

The Indian boarding school period started in 1617 and continues to present day (Juneau, 2001). Schools were founded to provide a bridge to fulfill a complete integration of Indians into American culture (Boyer, 1989). In the 1800s, boarding schools required Native children to be forcibly removed from their families and work to obtain a Christian based vocational education (Shotton et al., 2013). Educational policy eventually required that boarding schools be developed farther away from tribal communities in order to separate children from their families and communities (Boyer, 1989). In 1879, Richard Henry Pratt gathered 200 Indian children and forcefully made them attend Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania (Boyer, 1989). The goal of

this boarding school was to assimilate Indian children into mainstream society by teaching them English as well as a marketable trade (Harding, 2001).

The boarding school era peaked before the Great Depression. By 1900, nearly 22,000 American Indian students were in boarding schools, and Congress allocated approximately \$2.94 million to support these schools (Adams, 1995). These types of institutions were managed by the church and federal government (Shotton et al., 2013) and resembled forced acculturation camps where tribal languages, cultural beliefs, and cultural practices were regarded as impediments to European American civilization (Yellow Bird & Chenault, 1999). Yellow Bird and Chenault (1999) stated that religious and government sponsored boarding schools were the most potent and hostile form of oppression that has derived from the U.S. government.

Allotment period (1887-1934).

The allotment period spanned from 1887 to 1934 and was an act to move Indians from their ancestral lands and push them west of the frontier to become sedentary farmers (Juneau, 2001; Haymond, 1982). The U.S. government advocated for policies that would force Indians to live in American society, such as requiring Native Americans to have ownership of properties (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Congress enacted the General Allotment Act of 1887, known as the Dawes Act, and divided tribal lands into individual parcels and sold the surplus to non-Indian farmers (Juneau, 2001). As a result, each American Indian family received 160 acres of land, which was held in trust by the government for up to twenty-five years until families acquired farming skills and were given citizenship upon compliance (Barrett, 2003). The allotment period was a way to abolish tribal nations and assimilate American Indians into dominant society.

This period forced American Indians to adapt from a nomadic lifestyle to an agriculturalist society. American Indians were deprived of their traditional lands, foods, and

lifestyles; yet they did not possess the farming implements nor the capital supplies necessary to survive as farmers (Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Haymond, 1982). The Problem of Indian Administration report (1928), also known as the Meriam Report, criticized the Department of the Interior's implementation of the Dawes Act and indicated that much of the economic and social ills on Native reservations were a result of governmental actions. The Meriam Report (1928) provided the basis to create new legislation, as the report found that the U.S. government was failing to support and protect Native Americans.

Tribal reorganization period (1934-1953).

The Tribal Reorganization period lasted from 1934 to 1953 (Juneau, 2001). During this period, tribal nations were forced to develop self-governments in the attempt by Congress to force Native Americans to live in American society, by acceptable Westernized standards (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Federal recognition granted tribes the authority of self-governance, despite the fact that tribes had governed themselves for thousands of years (Shotton et al., 2013; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Utter, 1993). In 1934, the U.S. government passed the Indian Reorganization Act, in which tribal nations adopted formal governing documents, such as constitutions (Utter, 1993). Self-governance meant that tribal nations were able to provide services for their own citizens as well as prioritize needs, which translated into determining the destiny of their tribe (Shotton et al., 2013; Reyhner & Eder, 2004). Additionally, Congress enacted programs to improve education, health, and social conditions; however, the underlying goal of the Indian Reorganization Act was to foster assimilation by making tribal communities resemble non-Native communities (Walch, 1993).

Termination of Indian tribes period (1953-1975).

The termination of Indian tribes period spanned from 1953 to 1975 (Juneau, 2001). The Indian Reorganization Act, noted from the previous period, was met with opposition from both Natives and non-Natives, which caused Congress to repudiate this act and assimilate Indians into mainstream society at a more rapid pace via termination of tribes (Walch, 1983). This policy was designed to end the federal government's obligations to American Indians by dissolving reservations and relocating Indigenous people to preselected urban destinations (Fixico, 1986). By (Juneau, 2001). The Relocation Act of 1956 required tribal members into forced resettlement to urban areas like Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco; and by 1960 sixty-one tribes were terminated across the nation (Juneau, 2001). The termination and relocation of tribes resulted in the loss of large amounts of culture with the displacement of individuals from their homelands, cultures, and original communities.

Indian self-determination and beyond period (1975-present).

The Indian self-determination and beyond period started in 1975 and continues to present day (Juneau, 2001). Resistance to the termination and relocation policies, as well as the Civil Rights Movement, sparked political movement among American Indians as they demanded the right of self-determination for the future of their communities (Tierney, 2015). Although the struggle for self-determination started in the 1950s, it was realized in a special message to Congress by President Richard Nixon in 1970, requesting an end to the termination era of federal policies and the recognition of American Indians' right to self-government (Tierney, 2015). Five years later, Congress responded to the message by passing the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in 1975, thus allowing tribes to operate their own programs by contracting with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Tierney, 2015; Utter, 1993). During this

movement, a government-to-government relationship was established between tribes and the U.S. government.

Indian education in Montana (1972-present).

The previously mentioned periods have affected all tribal nations across the United States. However, Montana has experienced specific advancements in regard to Indian education. The Montana Constitution (1972) initially recognized the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians, thus committed to preserving the cultural integrity of Montana tribes through education. Nearly twenty-seven years later, the 56th Montana Legislature (1999) passed into law House Bill 528, which implemented “Indian Education for All” (IEFA). As a result, every Indian and non-Indian in Montana public schools is encouraged to learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner (Juneau, 2001). Legal, ethical, and instructional aspects support the rationale of teaching IEFA as a way to provide a quality education in Montana (Elser, 2010).

Future recommendations.

Federal and state entities’ failure to provide an adequate K-12 public education that meets the unique needs of American Indians has been evidenced not only from a historical viewpoint, but also from a contemporary stance. These issues affect the localized region of Montana, as well as Indigenous populations nationwide. For example, the Meriam Report (1928) and the Kennedy Report (1969) both acknowledged that national policies have let down Native American children and that there must be renewed commitments to Indian education. At a localized region, Juneau (2001) stated that the current public school system in Montana is not effectively meeting the needs of Native American children as reflected in the high dropout rates and low standardized test scores. More specifically, curriculum and instruction does not promote

Indian culture and history, and the Board of Trustees system still does not incorporate partnerships with tribal governments (Juneau, 2001). Conversely, Deloria and Wildcat (2001) emphasized that the focus of American Indian education should not be on raising standards or improving test scores; rather, systems should consider building an educational practice on a foundation of American Indian metaphysics. Indigenous metaphysics is a “unified worldview acknowledging a complex totality in the world both physical and spiritual,” which would result in experiential learning within an educational system (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Thus, two rationales exist in regard to advancing Indian education: whether the focus should be on individual student success, or changing the dynamics of the system to incorporate more of a comprehensive Indian education program. Regardless, more progress is needed for educational systems to serve American Indian populations in a more responsive manner.

To be more progressive in Indian education, tribal communities need to become more involved in the educational system, and the history of North America also needs to be taught from an Indigenous perspective. Cross (1999) emphasized the idea of the new “American promise,” which reaffirmed the inherent rights of American Indian peoples to educate their own children. Additionally, Cross (1999) coined the term the “three legged stool” of American Indian education, which represented Indians in public education, the trust and duty of the United States for Indian nations, and tribal self-determination as applied to tribal education (as cited by Juneau, 2001). Yellow Bird and Chenault (1999) suggested that advancement of American Indian education depends on the acknowledgement of historical oppression and the lasting legacy of colonialism.

History of American Indian Higher Education

The historical context of higher education for American Indians helps explain the current challenges this population faces, especially in persisting to graduate education and degree completion. Historically, higher educational institutions developed missions to formally educate Native Americans; however, they were typically written using language and terms that referred to Indigenous people as an academically inferior population. Despite these missions, the majority of these institutions failed to successfully meet their objectives. Although literature exists on the boarding school era, missionary schools, and other aspects of K-12 American Indian education, there is limited information on Native American higher education (Carney, 1999).

Carney (1999) divided Native American higher education into three eras: colonial, federal, and self-determination (McClellan, Fox, & Lowe, 2005). These periods overlap with some of the previously mentioned historical periods of Indian education; however, these periods as defined by Carney (1999) had specific impacts on higher education. The colonial era began with the first contact between Europeans and the Native American people and extended to the Revolutionary War (Carney, 1999; McClellan et al., 2005). The federal era began with the development of treaty relationships between the U.S. government and tribal nations and extended through the Native American self-determination movement (Carney, 1999; McClellan et al., 2005). Lastly, the self-determination era began around the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934, as well as the overall progressive movement in education (Carney, 1999; McClellan et al., 2005).

Colonial era.

The colonial era of Native American higher education began with the first contact between Europeans and Native American people (Carney, 1999; Noriega, 1992). The history of American Indian higher education reflected the clash of two cultures and the confrontation of lifestyles, starting with the colonial era (Tierney & Wright, 1991). Three of the nine original colonial colleges (Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Pennsylvania [Philadelphia], Princeton, Columbia [King's], Brown [Rhode Island], Rutgers [Queen's], and Dartmouth) included the importance of educating Native Americans in their purpose or mission; nevertheless, these colleges did very little to fulfill this objective (Tierney & Wright, 1991). The earliest colonial efforts were to Christianize and civilize Native Americans; therefore, mainstream institutions focused on assimilating American Indians rather than focusing on their educational development and progress (Tierney & Wright, 1991; Haymond, 1982).

Proposals for the first college for Native Americans began in 1617, where King James I partnered with the Anglican clergymen and collected charitable funds to erect churches and schools to educate the children of the “barbarians” (as cited by Tierney & Wright, 1991; Haymond, 1982). The first English colony in North America contained clauses requiring “conversion” of Indians through education (Noriega, 1992). The next year, the English set aside 10,000 acres in Henrico, Virginia, to construct a “college for the Infidels” (as cited by Tierney & Wright, 1991; Haymond, 1982). However, Native nations launched a war “thoroughly offended by colonialist duplicity and pretensions to cultural superiority,” consequently ending plans for an Indian college (Noriega, 1992, p. 372; Tierney & Wright, 1991).

Harvard College was considered the first Indian higher educational institution in North America (Noriega, 1992). It was initially founded in 1636 with a grant from the General Court

of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and was intended to be an institution for the education of Puritan ministers (Harvard University, 2016). In 1650, Harvard College was incorporated and chartered by the General Court, and by 1656, an Indian college was constructed on the premises (Harvard University, 2016; Calloway, 2010). Eventually, the entire institution grew to encompass general education. For four decades, Harvard College held a capacity of up to 20 students, yet the college only housed a maximum of six Native Americans, while the rest of the college population was composed of English students (Tierney & Wright, 1991). The Superintendent of Indians in Massachusetts, Daniel Gookin, stated that the majority of Indian students died, dropped out, or returned to their tribe, leaving only one student that graduated with his Bachelor of Arts degree (Haymond, 1982). Eventually, the college turned into a housing unit for only Caucasian students (Haymond, 1982). Harvard Indian College did not survive the devastation of King Philip's War in 1675 to 1676, and eventually the college was torn down in 1698 due to years of neglect (Calloway, 2010).

In 1693, the English chartered the College of William and Mary, and the mission was "that the Christian faith may be propagated amongst the Western Indians," a movement targeted at converting the aboriginal youth population (as cited by Tierney & Wright, 1991; Haymond, 1982). At the College of William and Mary, American Indian students found themselves in a segregated institution and were taught separately from the white students (Haymond, 1982). The Indian enrollment declined over the course of the 18th century and by 1775, almost no Native students were left at the College of William and Mary (Haymond, 1982). Additionally, many tribal leaders declined to send their youth to colonial institutions of higher education, such as the College of William and Mary, due to the perception that these experiences would lessen their people's ability to engage in a traditional lifestyle (Thelin, 2003).

Dartmouth College was another colonial institution that included a mission to formally educate American Indians. In 1769, Eleazar Wheelock, a Congregational minister, founded Dartmouth College, which had a mission to “the education and instruction of the Youth of the Indian tribes in this Land in reading, wrighting [sic], and all parts of Learning which shall appear necessary and expedient for civilizing and Christianizing children of pagans” (as cited by Tierney & Wright, 1991, p. 13). Wheelock’s vision for Dartmouth was to educate Indian students in English ways and Christianity, so they could serve as missionaries and convert other Native Americans (Calloway, 2010). Again, the number of Natives who were educated was very limited (Haymond, 1982).

Although these three colleges sought to include American Indians in their mission statements, none of them fulfilled their objectives of educating Indigenous people. Overall, Harvard College, the College of William and Mary, and Dartmouth College only enrolled a total of 47 American Indian students (Carney, 1999). Of these 47 students, only four students graduated (Carney, 1999). American colonies tried for more than 150 years to incorporate Native Americans into the European education system, without achieving much progress (Boyer, 1989). The failure of these institutions to advance the education of Native Americans is partly due to colonial colleges focusing more on the fundraising capacity than the education component, as well as American Indian student resistance to assimilation through Euro-American higher education (Carney, 1999).

Federal era.

The federal era began with the development of treaty relationships between the U.S. government and Native American nations (Carney, 1999). Ninety-seven treaties were signed between 1778 and 1871, all of which addressed education for Native Americans (Belgarde,

1996). Despite the advancement of colleges during this period, American Indian higher education was continually overlooked. This changed in 1928 when the Institute of Government Research released a report titled “The Problem of Indian Administration,” or the Meriam Report. This report included a survey of the economic and social conditions of American Indians in the 1920s, as mentioned previously, and encouraged Native American participation in higher education. In addition, it stated that the U.S. government should furnish adequate secondary schooling, scholarship, and loan aids as necessary for Indian students to pursue higher education (Meriam et al., 1928). Despite these efforts, the objectives from the federal era remained the same as the colonial era: Christianization, forced acculturation, and assimilation (Belgarde, 1996).

Self-determination era.

The self-determination era of higher education occurred with the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934 (Carney, 1999). The Indian Reorganization Act affirmed tribal sovereignty and self-determination, indicating that Indians can administer their own programs in lieu of federal bureaucrats (Carney, 1999; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Regarding education, the Indian Reorganization Act designated Native American scholarship funds, authorizing \$250,000 in loans for college expenses (Carney, 1999; Tierney & Wright, 1991). By 1935, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported 515 Indians in college, although the loan program was discontinued in 1952 (Tierney & Wright, 1991). However, the Bureau of Indian Affairs established a higher education scholarship grant program in 1948, allocating \$9,390 to fifty students (Tierney & Wright, 1991). Furthermore, Indian veterans returning from World War II were eligible for the GI Bill (Tierney & Wright, 1991). During this era, federal funding began to support American Indians in higher education.

Native American representation in higher education began to gradually increase, and by the late 1950s an estimated 2,000 Native Americans were enrolled in college. By 1965, an estimated 7,000 American Indian students were pursuing college (Tierney & Wright, 1991). Despite this shift in education, much of the federal focus was on vocational training; consequently, Native American enrollment in higher education from the 1940s to 1960s grew very minimally (Carney, 1999; McClellan et al., 2005). In the 1970s, the U.S. General Accounting Office reports called attention to the academic, social, cultural, and financial challenges on Indian students, and by 1979 an estimated 14,600 undergraduates and 700 graduates were being funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs Higher Education Program (Tierney & Wright, 1991). The most significant result of the self-determination era was the development of tribally controlled community colleges, which marked a shift to Indian control of education (Tierney & Wright, 1991), as well as support for tribes to enact their sovereign powers through higher education (Cross, 1999).

Tribally Controlled Community Colleges

To understand the challenges for Native American students seeking higher education, it is imperative to examine the role of tribally controlled community colleges within Native American communities, as well as the current educational limitations that prompt students to attend mainstream institutions. As mentioned previously, tribally controlled community colleges were supported by the self-determination era. The self-determination era was exercised through two large pieces of legislation: the Indian Education Act of 1972, and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (P.L. 93-638; Shotton et al., 2013). These two movements allowed tribal nations to reclaim educational processes in an effort to address the needs of their communities (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012).

As laws and policies began to change to support tribal self-determination rights, U.S. tribes began to develop their own educational institutions. In particular, the Tribally Controlled Community College Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-471) provided the opportunity for tribes to develop their own tribally controlled colleges (TCUs), which were grounded not only in academics but also in tribal language and culture. TCUs were created to serve geographically isolated areas, where individuals do not have access to other educational entities (AIHEC, 2016). In addition, TCUs must be chartered by a tribe and typically have an all-Native American board independent of the tribal government (McClellan et al., 2005). Belgarde (1996, p. 9) stated that TCUs “promote the culture of the tribe they serve, work to strengthen the economies of their Indian communities, and strengthen the social fabric of the tribal community both internally and in conjunction with outside communities through empowering individual Indian people.”

American Indian higher education consortium (AIHEC).

Tribal colleges initially formed the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). Through this particular consortium, tribal colleges are able to receive federal support (Boyer, 1998). AIHEC serves an important function by unifying tribal colleges, nurturing a common vision, becoming a national movement, and helping shape federal policy (Boyer, 1998). AIHEC (2014) indicated that currently 37 tribally controlled colleges and universities exist; however, most of these colleges are limited in degree offerings. Twenty-four of the thirty-seven tribally controlled colleges only offer an associate’s degree as the highest level degree (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2014). Additionally, 8 out of 37 tribal colleges offer a bachelor’s degree program, and 5 out of 37 tribal colleges offer a master’s degree program (AIHEC, 2014). Currently, no tribally controlled colleges or universities offer doctoral degree

options (AIHEC, 2014), nor do they presently have the capabilities to become comprehensive research institutions (Noley, 1993).

Tribally controlled community college graduate programs.

In addition to the limited number of degree programs offered at tribal community colleges, graduate program options are also limited. Five tribal colleges offer master's degree programs: Sinte Gleska University, Sitting Bull College, Institute of American Indian Arts, Navajo Technical University, and Oglala Lakota College (AIHEC, 2014). Sinte Gleska University is located in Mission, South Dakota, and offers the largest number of master's degree options, with five graduate programs. These programs include a Master of Arts in the Human Services Department, Master's in Education/Educational Administration 7-12 Secondary, Master's in Education/Educational Administration P-8 Elementary, Master's in Education/Early Childhood Special Education, and a Master's in Education in Curriculum and Instruction (Sinte Gleska University, 2016). Additionally, Oglala Lakota College, located in Kyle, South Dakota, offers two Master of Arts programs: Lakota Leadership and Management, and Lakota Leadership and Management Education Administration Emphasis (Oglala Lakota College, 2016). The Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, offers a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, which was recently developed in 2013 (Institute of American Indian Arts, 2016). Additionally, the Navajo Technical University, located in Chinle, Arizona, offers a Master of Arts in Dine Culture, Language, and Leadership, which was also recently developed in 2014 (Navajo Technical University, 2016). Lastly, Sitting Bull College, located in Ft. Yates, North Dakota, offers a Master of Science in Environmental Science (Sitting Bull College, 2016). The programs offered by these institutions include the fields of education, art, science, and tribally specific programs. Carney (1999) indicated that the bulk of tribal

college degrees are in education and social work/human sciences, which is a typical pattern of disciplines for developing educational institutions such as tribal colleges.

Despite the growing efforts of tribal community colleges, most of these entities do not provide advanced degrees partly because of the new emergence of tribal colleges in the educational field (Carney, 1999). Thus, if American Indian students desire graduate school, often their only choice is to attend a non-Native college or university. Although tribal community colleges serve a large population, only 8 percent of all Native college students are enrolled in tribally controlled colleges and universities (Freeman & Fox, 2005), indicating that the majority of Native students are attending non-Native colleges and universities.

Non-Native educational institutions that serve a large proportion of American Indians are typically limited and geographically constrained. Twenty-five mainstream colleges and universities within the nation offer disciplines for Native Americans (Carney, 1999). Approximately three-fourths of mainstream colleges with Native American programs are located in the Western half of the United States (Carney, 1999). At 85 non-Native institutions, Native Americans represent more than 5 percent of the enrollment; however, only seven of those institutions enroll more than 500 Native American students (McClellan et al., 2005). Consequently, the research of educational persistence among Indian populations at these entities is an important area to research, due to the limited representation of American Indian students at mainstream institutions as well as the geographical limitations of mainstream institutions that offer Native American oriented disciplines.

Native American Underrepresentation in Post Baccalaureate Programs

It is important to understand the population size of American Indian graduate students, as well as current enrollment and graduation rates, before examining the concept of persistence

among this population. Nationwide, the majority of Native American students are attending non-Native colleges and universities, yet the representation of this population within these institutions is still considered very low in comparison to other groups. Native Americans are grossly underrepresented in all levels of postsecondary education. This Native invisibility is especially pronounced at the graduate school level (Brayboy et al., 2012). Recently, there appears to be an unfortunate dip in graduate enrollment numbers for American Indians, as well as a low representation of Native American men pursuing post baccalaureate options. Additionally, Native Americans are not pursuing diversified fields, but rather are enrolling in either education or service-oriented fields. Thus, it is important to study persistence, identify factors that contribute to American Indian educational success, and help promote representation of American Indians in all levels of post baccalaureate programs as well as within diversified programs.

Native Americans are underrepresented in graduate programs nationwide. In a report titled "Graduate Enrollment and Degrees: 2000-2010," Bell (2011) examined total graduate enrollment using the CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees. Bell (2011) found that there were 8,809 American Indian/Alaska Natives students out of a total of 1,746,628 students, which made up 0.6 percent of this population in fall 2010. Moreover, the Digest of Education Statistics (2013) found that there were 15,400 American Indians enrolled in post baccalaureate education, which made up 0.6 percent of the entire graduate student population in the year 2012 (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Finally, in a report titled "The Condition of Education 2015," researchers found that American Indian/Alaska Native students made up only 15,000 of the 2.9 million post baccalaureate students enrolled in graduate school nationwide as of fall 2013 (Kena et al., 2015). According to the American Community Survey (2015), the nation's population of American Indian/Alaska Natives is 5.4 million, which also includes those

individuals who make up more than one race (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Therefore, the American Indian/Alaska Native population comprises 2 percent of the total population in the nation (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Each of these reports indicate that in recent years, American Indian representation in graduate school has remained under one percent of the total graduate population nationwide, indicating a severe underrepresentation of this population in post baccalaureate programs.

Recently, the major decrease in American Indian representation in graduate programs has resulted in a huge concern for the academic community. Bell (2011) stated that racial/ethnic minorities have driven much of the growth for first-time graduate enrollment; however, between fall 2009 and fall 2010 a 20.6 percent decline occurred among the American Indian/Alaska Natives population. Within the same report, Bell (2011) found that between 2009 and 2010, a 10 percent decline occurred among the American Indian/Alaska Native population for total number of graduate students (Bell, 2011). Additionally, Kena et al. (2015) found that the number of American Indian/Alaska Native post baccalaureate students was higher in 2010 than in 2013. As evidenced by these reports, there is an alarming decrease in first-time enrollment, as well as total enrollment of graduate programs for the American Indian population.

Graduate programs are multifaceted and include options such as master's, doctoral, and professional/terminal programs. American Indians are underrepresented in all of these options, and invisibility is specifically pronounced within professional programs and at the doctoral level. During the 2011-2012 school year, 3,674 American Indian students obtained a master's degree (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Regarding professional degrees, 618 Native Americans were pursuing a professional degree during 2011-2012 (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Lastly, 913 American Indian students received a doctoral degree within the same time period nationwide (Snyder & Dillow,

2015). The population of American Indian graduate students is small, and the majority of these students are pursuing master's degrees as opposed to professional/terminal or doctoral degrees.

Generally, Native American females enroll in graduate school at a higher rate, as opposed to Native American males (Bell, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2015; Ross et al., 2012). Bell (2011) found that 1,168 Native American women (63%) and 690 Native American men (37%) were first-time graduate school enrollees during fall 2010. In regard to total graduate enrollment, 5,689 (64%) Native American females were enrolled in graduate education, in comparison to 3,201 (36%) Native American males. Snyder and Dillow (2015) found that the general trend for gender enrollment has typically been that Native American females enroll in post-baccalaureate educational opportunities at a higher rate than Native American males. This pattern has been evident for decades; however, the exception to this trend occurred between 1976 and 1980 (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Ross et al. (2012) also found that 24 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native men aged 18-24 enrolled in college or graduate school, compared to 33 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native women. Except from 1976-1977, the general trend has been that more American Indian females than males obtain a master's degree (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). This gender enrollment pattern has been true of American Indians pursuing master's degrees, yet the exception to this pattern has been doctoral programs.

Unlike the master's degree trend, more Native American males received doctoral degrees than Native American females within the period of 1976-1997 (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). From 1997-2007, the number of doctoral degree completion was comparable between males and females, with American Indian females being more progressive in numbers near the end of this term (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Lastly, within the years 2007-2012, more females completed doctoral degrees than males (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). As evidenced by this report, a shift of

gender representation occurred in doctoral programs. Historically, Native American men had higher representation in doctoral programs, until more recently where Native American women currently possess higher representation in these advanced programs of education. Currently, American Indian males have been severely underrepresented at all levels of post baccalaureate education.

American Indian graduate students typically pursue service-oriented fields, leaving a major underrepresentation of this population in other fields. In fall 2010, for example, underrepresented minority first-time graduate students were less likely than their peers to be enrolled in the natural sciences and engineering. Accordingly, Bell (2011) found that 25.7 percent of American Indians/Alaska Natives pursued education related fields, while 11.9 percent of Native Americans pursued biological and agricultural sciences engineering, mathematics and computer sciences, or physical and earth sciences. The top five fields of American Indian master's degree obtainment in 2011-2012 included Education (929 individuals), Business (882 individuals), Health Professions and related programs (464 individuals), Public Administration and Social Service (298 individuals), and Psychology (139 individuals) (Snyder & Dillow, 2015).

In 2011-2012, the top five doctoral fields pursued by Native Americans were Health Professions and related programs (344 individuals), Legal Professions (330 individuals), Education (72 individuals), Biological and Biomedical Sciences (35 individuals), and Psychology (27 individuals) (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Of the 618 individuals who pursued professional degrees nationwide, 328 individuals pursued Law (LL.B and J.D.), 114 individuals pursued Medicine (M.D.), 28 individuals pursued Osteopathic Medicine (D.O.), 64 individuals pursued Pharmacy (Pharm.D.), and 35 individuals pursued Dentistry (D.D.S. or D.M.D). Other

fields included Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.), Theology (M.Div., M.H.L./Rav., B.D., or Ord.), Chiropractic (D.C. or D.C.M.), Medicine Podiatry or Podiatric Medicine (Pod.D. or D.P.), and Optometry (O.D.); however, these professional degrees were not pursued in significant numbers comparable to the previously mentioned fields.

Education seemed to be the most prominent field pursued by Native Americans, except for the doctoral and professional programs, which were dominated by the health professions, as well as legal professions (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Nonetheless, education was still the third field of study pursued in doctoral studies (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Brayboy et al. (2012) stated that many graduate students report that their main objective for pursuing higher education stemmed from a desire to give back to their communities; therefore, many Native American graduate students pursue service oriented-fields.

Across the board, there is a low representation of American Indians pursuing post baccalaureate options such as master degrees, doctoral degrees, and professional degrees. In particular, Native American males are alarmingly underrepresented in all post baccalaureate programs. Moreover, most American Indians pursue service-oriented master's degrees, with little representation in professional/terminal or doctoral programs. Consequently, American Indians are not represented in more advanced programs, nor are they pursuing programs outside of education or service-oriented fields. Therefore, a severe underrepresentation of this population exists in biological and agricultural sciences, engineering, mathematics, computer sciences, and physical and earth sciences. Additionally, high attrition rates continue to characterize the American Indian higher educational experience (Carney, 1999). As a result, it is imperative to view the challenges that Native Americans experience in graduate education, prior to examining persistence factors, models, and theories.

Native American Challenges in Higher Education

For the purposes of understanding the low representation in higher education, it is imperative to examine the challenges that Native Americans face in college and how this relates to persistence in higher education. American Indian populations share many of the same challenges as the majority population in higher education. However, a subset of challenges unique to this population stem from their cultural background, history, and unique status as political entities.

College preparation.

Native Americans face educational barriers even prior to college enrollment. Dillman (2002) found that American Indian students struggle with high dropout rates, poor academic preparation, and lack of financial resources at the secondary level. Additionally, Native Americans lag behind national averages on the SAT and ACT college entrance exams, although improvements in this area have increased since the 1970s (Pavel et al., 1998). Furthermore, Falk and Aitkin (1984) found that both Native American students and their educators believed that Native American students had poor college preparation skills in math, study skills, budgeting, and career information and goals. The National Center for Education Statistics identified risk factors to postsecondary enrollment for American Indian high school graduates that included delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, financial independence, having dependents, single parenting, working full-time, and being a GED recipient (Pavel et al., 1998). It is estimated that 51 out of every 100 American Indians graduate from high school (Tierney, Sallee, & Venegas, 2007). Of these fifty-one students, only 37 percent will enroll in college and earn a bachelor's degree within six years (Tierney et al., 2007). Accordingly, American Indians start higher education with many academic as well as non-academic needs and challenges.

College matriculation and transition challenges.

Upon successful enrollment at the post-secondary level, American Indian students face challenges transitioning to non-Native colleges or universities. Some of these challenges include limited academic support and preparation, poor family support, psychosocial adjustment problems, ambivalent career plans, and financial need (Whitekiller, 2004; Angspatt, 2001; Jeanotte, 1981). However, cultural dissonance or culture shock in traditional higher educational systems was found to be a specific challenge to Native Americans and can often lead to feelings of isolation and a sense of invisibility (Whitekiller, 2004; Angspatt, 2001; Jeanotte, 1981).

Post baccalaureate challenges.

In particular, American Indian graduate/professional students have specific challenges as a product of their academic level, as well as their racial, ethnic, and political background. These challenges include feelings of isolation and academic and cultural alienation, racism and discrimination, lack of Indigenous role models, lack of academic guidance, and financial stressors (Brayboy et al., 2012). Brayboy et al. (2012) found that most challenges specific to doctoral students corresponded to challenges at the undergraduate level, yet some of these challenges are more prominent at the graduate level. In addition, the literature on American Indian graduate students is limited; therefore, the following section on challenges will incorporate research that examines both the American Indian graduate and undergraduate experience. The following topics will be discussed in more detail: cultural alienation and isolation, conflict of value systems, parent and family influences, financial barriers, impoverished communities, lack of culturally relevant curricula, campus climate, racism and discrimination, and institutional practices.

Cultural alienation and isolation.

As American Indian students enter graduate education, less Native American colleagues and faculty are in these programs, contributing to a heightened sense of cultural alienation for this population. In particular, student invisibility and feelings of isolation are more pronounced at this level, due to low enrollment and retention of American Indian students (Brayboy et al., 2012). Another more pronounced factor at the graduate level is the lack of Indigenous role models (Lintner, 1999; Brayboy et al., 2012; Wright, 1991). Conversely, Lintner (1999) emphasized the importance for Native doctoral students to become role models for undergraduate students, as well as for their communities, since this component is lacking in Indian education.

Conflict of value systems.

American Indian students who attend non-Native colleges and universities often experience a conflict of value systems between their tribal communities and Westernized education. For example, many colleges promote the value of independence, whereas most American Indian students stem from cultures with a value system based on the notion of interdependence. Markus and Kitayama (1991) recognized that communities that have an interdependent value system often place importance on connecting with other individuals. Conversely, Westernized value systems emphasize individualism, meaning that individuals are viewed as autonomous and are distinct from other relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Furthermore, American Indian students report that their families and communities are not always supportive of their educational goals due to this conflict of value systems. Jackson et al. (2003) found that students did not feel like their families and communities fully accepted their academic aspirations, despite the fact that their families and communities provided support and

were proud of their accomplishments. Jackson et al. (2003) referred to this phenomenon as “paradoxical cultural pressure.” In a similar notion, Austin (2005) stated that Native American students acquire Westernized technical skills and knowledge, but they must transfer that knowledge within an American Indian context to work with tribal communities and governments. As a result, American Indian students may struggle to be engaged and actively learn in an educational environment that promotes Eurocentric values and belief systems.

Current educational issues for American Indian students are highly influenced by history, specifically the role that European based educational systems have played in American Indian history. Consequently, many Native people suffered various forms of trauma such as the loss of their families, language, and culture. Due to this history of imposed formal education, tension exists between traditional knowledge and Western knowledge, which contributes to stress among American Indian students and their families (HeavyRunner, 2009), as well as distrust of such educational entities (Lundberg, 2014).

Parent and family influences.

American Indian graduate level students are less likely than their academic peers to have parents and/or family who have achieved college degrees. According to the National Science Foundation (2015), doctoral recipients from underrepresented minority populations are less likely to have at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree. However, Asian and white doctoral students are more likely to stem from families that have had formal educational backgrounds. Specifically, three-fourths of Asian and white doctoral recipients stem from families with at least one college educated parent, and half had at least one parent with an advanced college degree (National Science Foundation, 2015). In comparison, approximately half of American Indian

doctoral recipients belonged to families in which neither parent had been awarded a college degree in 2014 (National Science Foundation, 2015).

American Indian doctorate holders are more likely to be first generation college students in comparison to their counterparts. Therefore, American Indian graduate students have unique needs and often lack academic guidance from their family. Between 1994 and 2014, the number of doctoral degree holders who were first generation college students declined gradually, except for American Indian/Alaska Native doctoral recipients (National Science Foundation, 2015). As a result, American Indian graduate students may not have family to provide financial assistance, guidance for coursework, or suggestions for professional experience for post-graduation (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015). Moreover, American Indian students are the oldest doctoral recipients; therefore, they typically have more responsibility to family and community, contributing to a longer doctoral degree completion than their non-Native peers (National Science Foundation, 2010; Brayboy et al., 2012).

Financial barriers.

Finances were one of the most common factors affecting time completion for graduate students (Patterson, Baldwin, & Olsen, 2009). American Indian students frequently mention the problem of inadequate financial resources in relation to the ability to persist in academe (Jeanotte, 1981). Financial barriers can worsen academic performance for American Indian students, limiting time available to either the application process or full engagement into the program (Patterson et al., 2009). In addition, the adequate management of financial aid is equally significant, since it also contributes to educational persistence (Jeanotte, 1981). Overall, financial resources and the management of this funding is vitally important to the academic persistence of Native American students.

Impoverished communities.

Many U.S. reservations are impoverished communities. One of the biggest challenges for Native Americans is poverty, considering that it affects access to higher education (Lee, 2013). Brayboy et al. (2012) stated that community poverty, unemployment, and lack of social services are barriers to higher education for American Indian students. Although employment rates and incomes for American Indian people have increased, Native Americans are on average the poorest group in the United States and continue to earn salaries lower than the national average (Brayboy et al., 2012; Pavel et al., 1998). American Indians and Alaska Natives tend to have lower family incomes and higher poverty rates in comparison to nationwide averages (Pavel et al., 1998). Ross et al. (2012) found that the poverty rate for children living with a female parent with no spouse present was higher for American Indian children (53%) than for children of any other racial/ethnic background. Consequently, American Indian students are the most tracked racial/ethnic group to be affected by poverty (Mosholder & Goslin, 2013) and are the most economically disadvantaged group tracked in the national data (Lomawaima, 1995). The high level of poverty experienced by Native American communities limits their access to educational opportunities.

Lack of culturally relevant curricula.

Most U.S. higher educational institutions fail to create a system that provides a supportive environment for American Indian students to thrive academically, partially because they do not incorporate diverse perspectives into campus activities, classroom curricula, and overall academic discussions. HeavyRunner, Murray, and Shanley (2003) stated that historically, higher education has been a form of compulsory Western methods of learning and attempts to eradicate tribal culture, hence leading to high dropout rates for American Indian

students. According to Huffman (2008), three areas of educational disservice include: “culturally irrelevant curriculum, educational practices that are culturally ineffective, and failure to appreciate unique learning styles prevalent among Native learners” (p. 30). Furthermore, the Native student population is not reflected in the literature, classroom, and/or campus culture. Educational materials that do incorporate American Indian cultures and people are represented in superficial or stereotypical ways (O’Neill, 1987), which can further marginalize students from formal education. As a result, American Indian students are seemingly required to adapt to this learned perspective with limited support.

Campus climate.

Similarly, campus context plays an important role in student persistence (Brayboy et al., 2012). Minority populations have a very different experience than the majority population at primarily white institutions in regard to college campus climate (Rankin & Reason, 2005). For example, students of color experience more instances of marginality than inclusion within higher education, which can negatively affect academic and social experiences (Pewewardy & Frey, 2004; Jackson, 1998). Additionally, students of color are more likely than Caucasian students to report experiences of harassment and view the campus climate as more racist, hostile, and less accepting of minority students (Rankin & Reason, 2005).

Racism and discrimination.

Racism and discrimination have been challenges for American Indian college students, which is inclusive of both intentional and unintentional forms of disregard for these populations. Native American students, in particular, report experiences of passive and active racism on college campuses (Jackson et al., 2003). Passive racism was identified as either being ignored or singled out as a representative of a student’s race or culture, which led to feelings of isolation or

social pressure (Jackson et al., 2003). Conversely, students typically experienced active racism in the classroom when discussions about historical or cultural issues ensued (Jackson et al., 2003). Jackson et al. (2003) noted insufficient dialogue and a lack of research on Native American students' experiences of racism and discrimination while attending college. To date, the majority of research regarding this topic has been conducted on African Americans and Latinos at predominantly white institutions (Jackson et al., 2003; McCabe, 2009; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), with limited research that focuses on the American Indian experience.

Institutional practices.

Mainstream colleges tend to perpetuate policies and practices that are unproductive to American Indian students and are typically institution centered, indicating that they identify the problems in terms of individual failure, rather than institutional failure (Carney, 1999; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Overall, a long-standing deficiency of educational services exists, meaning that mainstream institutions are ill-equipped to serve American Indian students, which ultimately causes problems within the Native American college student population (Carney, 1999; Brayboy et al., 2015).

American Indian graduate students attending non-Native colleges and universities face unique challenges and barriers unknown to any other population, which is indicative of the low enrollment numbers nationwide. As a result of these previously mentioned issues, specific challenges for Native Americans can hinder the learning process and contribute to higher attrition rates for American Indian graduate students attending college. Despite these challenges and barriers, some students are able to persist and achieve academic excellence. Thus, educational persistence is a critical piece of research that can make a positive contribution to higher education.

Theories of Persistence

It is imperative to examine the historical and theoretical component of educational persistence in the literature, to understand how many seminal authors developed theories based off previous work in other fields. Persistence theories evolved over time, from Westernized researcher perspectives to Indigenous research perspectives. As a result, early persistence theories examined the concept of persistence among the majority population in the United States, while newer theories have been developed to understand the minority experience in higher education.

Seminal persistence theories.

Early research on educational persistence and attrition began with Tinto's student departure theory. Tinto's work was highly influenced by Van Gennep's rites of passage theory, as well as Durkheim's suicide theory. In particular, Van Gennep's (1960) study on the rites of passage influenced the notion of retention. Additionally, Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide was the most influential suicide theory for describing persistence and attrition for college populations, due to the social systems component. As a result, Tinto (1993) used Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage theory and Durkheim's theory to develop the concepts of integration and membership within the student departure theory.

Van Gennep.

Van Gennep (1960) developed the "rites of passage" theory as he studied tribal societies, which was an influential component in Tinto's student departure theory. Van Gennep (1960) analyzed ceremonies that accompanied life crises, and for each event a ceremony took place that allowed an individual to pass from one position to the next. For example, Van Gennep (1960) stated that such transitions can include "birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement

to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death” (p. 44). Van Gennep (1960) explained that when activities associated with ceremonies were examined in terms of their order and content, three stages in the rites of passage could be identified, each with their own specialized ceremonies and rituals.

Van Gennep’s (1960) rites of passage included separation, incorporation, and transition. The first stage, separation, involved the separation of a person from past associations, such as funeral ceremonies (Van Gennep, 1960). Rites of incorporation were more evident at marriages, while transition rites were more prominent at instances such as pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation. Additionally, transition rites could also be used for adoption, delivery of a second child, remarriage, or an individual’s passage to a different age group (Van Gennep, 1960). Some ceremonies incorporated all three rites of passages.

Tinto.

Using Van Gennep’s foundational concepts regarding his study on the rites of passage, Tinto developed three stages of passage in student college careers. Tinto (1993) stated that the process of student persistence is marked by the incorporation into human communities, indicating that an individual must navigate certain educational passages (Tinto, 1993).

The first stage required separation from communities of the past, which means that individuals must disassociate themselves from entities such as family, their local high school, and local areas of residence (Tinto, 1993). Since communities differ from colleges in values, norms, and behavioral and intellectual styles, some degree of transformation was required of the individual and perhaps rejection of the norms of past communities (Tinto, 1993). The next stage involved the transition between high school and college, then followed by the incorporation into the society of college. Tinto (1993) stated that this transition period was the time before an

individual adopted new norms and patterns of behavior but after the onset of separation from old ones. As a result, some individuals may voluntarily withdraw at this point in time, not from the inability to become incorporated into college, but more so because of the inability to withstand the stresses of the transitional period (Tinto, 1993). The last stage referenced the incorporation into the society of the college, meaning an individual must establish new norms and behavioral patterns (Tinto, 1993).

Durkheim.

Durkheim's theory was influential in Tinto's integration and membership component of the student departure theory. Durkheim's (1951) theory attempted to derive a sociological explanation of suicide, rather than an individual or psychological explanation. In particular, egoism was identified as a lack of integration into a society where the individual detaches himself from social life and his personal goal supersedes those of the social community (Durkheim, 1951; Pope, 1976). Durkheim's notion of egoism provided the framework for Tinto's theory on institutional departure from higher education.

Tinto.

Tinto interpreted Durkheim's theory as the notion that individuals are unable to become integrated and establish membership within the communities of society (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) stated that insufficient integration and the absence of community membership may arise from holding values that deviate from other members of society. As a result, Tinto (1993) believed that this theory provided a framework for institutional departure because of the social and intellectual communities that comprise a college and influence students' willingness to stay at that college. However, Tinto (1993) noted that college structures are fundamentally different

than societal structures, meaning that colleges have more distinct academic and social components.

Indigenous persistence theories.

Previous theories addressed educational persistence based on the majority population experience in higher education. Tinto combined the work of sociologist Durkheim, as well as anthropologist Van Gennep, to create a seminal theory on student persistence. However, Tierney critiqued Tinto's work and believed that this theory did not adequately describe the experiences of the minority population. Recently, researchers have been examining persistence among minority populations, in particular Indigenous populations and their experience in post-secondary education.

Tierney.

Tierney (1992) critiqued Durkheim's theory on suicide, as well as Tinto's student departure theory. Tierney (1992) believed that Durkheim's use of the term "integration" contained assumptions that individual membership was dependent on the adoption of the values and norms of that particular community, indicating that it reflected conformity. Additionally, Tierney (1992) critiqued Tinto's idea of social integration from a cultural perspective informed by critical theory to express that this construct may be potentially harmful for racial and ethnic minorities. Tierney (1992) suggested that the "rites of passage" component is problematic because it misinterprets the cultural definition of ritual and is over-reliant on an integrative framework. Tierney argued that American Indians undergo a "disruptive cultural experience" (p. 608), not because college is a rite of passage, but because the institution is culturally distinct from the student's culture.

Tierney suggested that institutions develop a critical theory framework that offers a dynamic model based on difference, rather than a static integrative model based on assimilation (Tierney, 1992). Additionally, Tierney (1992) suggested that organizations develop rituals of empowerment, rather than requiring minorities to assimilate into an organization. However, the challenge lies in creating empowerment grounded in the “multiplicity of voices that exist, rather than on a singular voice of integration and assimilation” (p. 54). Tierney was one of the first researchers to incorporate a racial minority perspective in regard to educational persistence theories.

HeavyRunner.

While Tierney provided an overall minority perspective in regard to persistence, other Indigenous researchers have developed persistence theories specific to Indigenous populations of North America. HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003) stated that persistence specific to Native Americans is derived from a self-resilience component: “Resilience is the natural, human capacity to navigate life well. It means coming to know how you think, who you are spiritually, where you come from, and where you are going. It involves understanding our inner spirit and finding a sense of direction” (p. 2). HeavyRunner (2009) developed one of the first Indigenous theoretical persistence models and indicated that students needed a vision of success and circles of relationships to persist in academe. The central category, vision of success, had two properties: awareness and expectations (HeavyRunner, 2009). HeavyRunner (2009) defined vision of success as “spiritual connection among thought, feeling, and behavior and the hopeful expectation of success” (p. 111). Additionally, circles of relationships included family relationships, community relationships, and academic relationships, which all provide support for the student to achieve success (HeavyRunner, 2009).

Secatero.

Secatero (2009) found factors of persistence specific to Native American professional/graduate students, which can be explained using a holistic perspective involving eight pillars of well-being. These pillars include spiritual well-being (purpose), cultural well-being (identity), professional well-being (planning), social well-being (networking), mental well-being (thinking), emotional well-being (feeling), physical well-being (body), and environmental well-being (place) (Secatero, 2009). Following each pillar is a question that addresses an individual's sense of well-being, which prompts the individual to reflect on personal strengths/attributes, identify challenges, develop a plan of action, and become aware of available resources (Shotton et al., 2013).

McAfee.

Educational persistence rates are difficult to determine due to sequencing or the “stepping out” phenomenon among American Indian populations (Huffman, 2008). McAfee (1997, 2000) coined the term “stepping out” and suggested that this phenomenon reflects the notion of college attendance where students leave higher education for various reasons and different lengths of time before completing a degree (McAfee, 1997, 2000). Typically, this phenomenon references the idea of individual failure by using the phrases “dropping out, stepping out, and leaving.” (McAfee, 2000, p. 21). However, McAfee (1997, 2000) suggested that “stepping out” should not necessarily be viewed from a negative standpoint, considering that students are still persisting to graduation, although in a longer timeframe than traditional students. McAfee's research posed the conundrum of whether “stepping out” was a reflection of attrition, or whether it truly reflected persistence in education.

Components of Persistence for Native American Populations

Despite the numerous challenges that exist for American Indians, some students are able to persist and reach academic success at the graduate level. Within the research paradigm, American Indians have consistently been viewed from a deficit perspective. Deyhle and Swisher (1997) found that for over 60 years, a deficit perspective of American Indians was prominent in the literature, which included the topics of “intelligence and achievement testing, urban migrants, teachers, parents, cultural deprivation, the language barrier, and stereotypes, categories that remain prominent in current research” (p. 118). Moreover, Yellow Bird and Chenault (1999) stated that using an empowerment orientation could assist people vulnerable to oppression, as a result of racism, discrimination, and poverty. Thus, it is of great significance to study the positive factors that contribute to American Indians’ success in higher education.

Factors that contribute to Native American educational persistence include family support, social support, academic preparation, supportive faculty and mentors, personal determination and resiliency, strong cultural identity, and a supportive environment (Huffman, 2008; Guillory, 2002; Jackson et al., 2003). Jackson et al. (2003) found many surface themes that were consistent with the literature; however, they also found deep themes that were more complex, contradictory, or multifaceted. These deep themes included Indian students’ ability to deal with racism, the occurrence of a non-linear path, and paradoxical cultural pressure (Jackson et al., 2003). The following section incorporates research from both the American Indian graduate, as well as undergraduate experience, since persistence factors have similarities at both levels.

Family support.

The support of family is critical at all levels of higher education for American

Indians and is one of the most valuable contributions of persistence for Indigenous graduate students (Huffman, 2008; Brayboy et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2003). The support of family is not necessarily limited to parental involvement; it also includes the influence of extended family members (McInerney, Roche, McInerney, & Marsh, 1997). Although many American Indian families do not necessarily understand the pressure and challenges of graduate education, especially in regard to assimilation, they are still considered the most important support for graduate students (Brayboy et al., 2015). Light and Martin (1986) identified three specific areas of strength among American Indian families: “the helping systems that operate within the family, courage and optimism resulting from spiritual life and religion, and the respect for each other and personal relationships, which forms the basis for later learning” (p.2). When American Indians are forced into mainstream culture, they have problems developing their fullest potential; thus, they rely on their families for courage and confidence (Light & Martin, 1986). Lastly, Guillory (2002) found that families inspire and motivate Native American students to persist in academe.

Campus social support.

Structured social support is a key component to persistence. Examples of structured social support include Native American clubs, multicultural offices, and other groups organized to support American Indians in college (Jackson et al., 2003). In addition, Lee (2013) found that students persisted with peer mentoring support. Moreover, Jeanotte (1981) found that satisfaction with campus supportive services contributed to success in college. Often, Native Americans respond to isolation and cultural discontinuity by creating surrogate campus communities (Pavel, 2012; Williamson, 1994). Likewise, Waterman (2007) found that developing a safe space on campus was crucial to the likelihood of graduation and success.

Academic preparation.

Equally significant in educational persistence is academic preparation. Academic preparation and academic performance showed a significant difference between student persisters and non-persisters (Brown, 1995). Jeanotte (1981) found that high school grade point average and ACT scores were stable predictors for American Indian students. Exposure to structured college experiences, such as Upward Bound and similar programs, as well as having family who attended college provided familiarity and readiness for college (Jackson et al., 2003).

Faculty and mentor support.

Supportive faculty and mentors play a significant role in educational persistence among the American Indian population (Jackson et al., 2003; Brown, 1995; Hornett, 1989). In order to facilitate American Indian educational persistence in higher education, Hornett (1989) identified six areas in which faculty need to be cognizant: understanding and dealing with racism, recognizing nontraditional leadership skills, appreciating the need for a strong support person, realizing the difference in value and time orientations, providing honest and helpful feedback in order to foster self-understanding among students, and affirming cultural differences and thereby affirming the American Indian student. Jackson et al. (2003) found that students valued warmth received from faculty and staff, stating that staff's personal engagement with students enhanced their experience in higher education.

Additionally, faculty relationships helped students develop a personal connection to an institution, as well as offer a place to go to ask questions about academics (Jackson et al., 2003). In particular, persistent students were more likely to meet professors outside of class for academic issues, adjustment issues, personal problems, and direction on tutoring needs (Brown, 1995). Native students were equally likely to approach not only Native faculty, but also non-

minority faculty for support; however, Brown (1995) did not know if this was due to the low number of American Indian faculty at higher educational institutions.

Personal attributes.

Personal factors such as self-motivation and resiliency play an integral role in the successful completion of higher education (Brayboy et al., 2012). Shotton (2008) found that in her sample, graduate students developed tenaciousness from surviving college as an undergraduate, and their love of learning and passion for research contributed to their motivation to complete the program. Likewise, the concept of resilience has been linked to persistence in many research studies. HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003) defined resilience as the natural human capacity to navigate life well and that resiliency is interconnected with wisdom, sense of self, and spirituality. Jackson et al. (2003) stated that in their research study, students demonstrated resilience in pursuing their degrees, indicating that they continued in school despite “struggling academically, taking long breaks from their studies, feeling discouraged by racism, moving from one college or university to another, or perceiving that they had little support from their college or university” (p. 561). Shotton (2008) found that participants experienced resilience in three different ways: personal factors, support systems, and turning points. HeavyRunner (2003) and Shotton (2008) both identified resiliency as strength tied to one’s tribal culture and spirituality.

Cultural identity.

Strong cultural identity is another theme related to academic success of Indigenous people, although the literatures supports that this concept is a fairly new proposition. Jeanotte (1981) stated that a positive self-concept of one’s American Indian heritage contributed to academic success. Furthermore, Simi and Matusitz (2016) found that if students had an

attachment to their Native American culture, it made a positive difference in reversing academic struggles. In addition, Jackson et al. (2003) found that reliance on spiritual resources contributed as a source of strength in completing academic work. Moreover, Waterman (2013) discovered that Native American women in higher education find strength in community, family, tradition, and cultural integrity. Lastly, Limb (2001) found that in the Master's of Social Work program in California, the American Indian students demonstrated stronger adherence to helping poor and disadvantaged populations, compared to the rest of the students. Consistent with findings from the undergraduate level, American Indian graduate students have a desire to pursue higher education so they can one day serve their tribal communities (Brayboy et al., 2015; Guillory, 2002). This desire to give back is considered a cultural value.

Institutional support.

One important aspect of campus climate is a supportive environment, which is a strong predictor of learning for American Indian students (Lundberg, 2012). The quality of the interpersonal environment and institutional support for diversity is a strong predictor for learning among the Native American population (Lundberg, 2007); however, educational institutions need to be equipped to responsibly handle diverse populations (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Racial diversification without intentional education may result in negative interactions and consequences (Gurin, 1999). Likewise, Windchief and Joseph (2015) stated that students must claim Indigenous space using curriculum, American Indian student services, and digital media due to assimilative educational practices in higher education.

Barnhardt (1994) listed characteristics of college campuses where minority students have been successful: mission statements celebrate diversity, there is administrative involvement and support in the university system, effective linkages with minority communities are developed

and maintained, strong student support systems are available, academic departments are involved in minority issues, minority faculty members are actively recruited and appropriately supported.

Indigenous Theories

Since theoretical models based on the majority population do not describe the experience of persistence in higher education among Native American populations, viewing the lens of this research design through Indigenous based theories is necessary. Indigenous generated theories and models are “theoretical efforts created by and for Native peoples” (Huffman, 2010, p. 208).

In particular, three Indigenous theoretical models were used in this study: Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribCrit), Transcultural Theory, and Cultural Wealth Theory. Tribal Critical Race Theory is the notion that colonization is endemic to society, and it was used as the theoretical lens to view non-Native colleges and universities in this study. Transcultural Theory is the idea that students can navigate new cultural systems by drawing on their identity as a form of strength (Huffman, 2008). This theory was used as the theoretical lens to view Native American student educational persistence as a process in higher education. Lastly, Cultural Wealth Theory was used as the theoretical lens to view student assets and strength to persist in academe. Cultural Wealth Theory states that people of color have cultural and community assets to overcome racism and oppression (Yosso, 2005). All of these theoretical models are extensions of decolonization ideologies. Decolonization theories challenge prevailing Westernized views and attempt to “establish Indigenous views and ways of understanding into scholarly discourse” (Huffman, 2010, p. 209).

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribCrit).

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribCrit) was used as the lens to view non-Native colleges and universities in this study. Initially, TribCrit emerged from Critical Race Theory (CRT),

which evolved in the 1970s in response to Critical Legal Studies (CLS) and attempted to change societal and legal structures that focused on racism (Brayboy, 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Solórzano (1998) identified five tenets of CRT that inform theory, research, pedagogy, curriculum, and policy. These tenets include the intercentricity of race and racism, the challenge to dominant ideology, the commitment to social justice, the centrality of experiential knowledge, and the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches (Solórzano 1998).

However, Critical Race Theory was limited in the ability to explain Indigenous experiences because it did not describe American Indians as political and racialized beings, nor did it discuss the impact of colonization on this population (Brayboy, 2005). Brayboy (2005) defined colonization as “European American thought, knowledge, and power structures [that] dominate present day society in the United States” (p. 430). In essence, TribCrit research and practices involve a process of moving away from colonization and assimilation, and more toward self-determination and tribal sovereignty (Brayboy, 2013).

TribCrit is rooted in Critical Race Theory and is based on the tenet that colonization is endemic to society and that racism plays a major role within educational entities (Brayboy, 2005). Tribal critical race theory established nine tenets:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous people occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized nature of our identities.
4. Indigenous people have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous people are intimately linked around the goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.

8. Stories are not separate from theories; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429-430)

The sixth tenet is specific to education and referenced the idea that governmental and educational policies are geared toward assimilation of Indigenous people. However, TribCrit emphasized the idea that Native students need to cultivate and maintain cultural integrity (Brayboy, 2005). Brayboy (2005) also stated that contemporary education's goal today isn't necessarily assimilation, although some assimilation seems inevitable due to Western schooling. Additionally, TribCrit teaches that Native American students can combine Indigenous epistemologies with Westernized/European education to engage in "survivance, self-determination, and autonomy" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 437).

Transcultural Theory.

Transcultural theory was used as the lens to view Native American graduate students' educational persistence while they attended non-Native colleges and universities. This theory posits that "culturally traditional American Indians may undergo a socialization process whereby they gain the ability to learn to manage the cultural mainstream of the college setting by using their Native identity, heritage, and traditions as a personal anchor" (Huffman, 2008, p. 187). The premise of this theory is that traditional American Indian students learn to interact on two cultural levels simultaneously to overcome the difficulties posed by alienation and estrangement as they pursue education (Huffman, 2008). In essence, successful performance requires dual operation at an American Indian cultural level and a college mainstream level (Huffman, 2008). Huffman (2008) asserted that transculturation is the process where an individual can interact in one culture without the loss of the person's native cultural identity. In addition, Hallowell

(1972) stated that transculturation is not a transformation in the structure and function of a social system, but rather a cultural process that occurs within an individual.

Huffman (2010) stated that students who complete the transculturation process find that their American Indian identity serves as an emotional anchor that they can draw on to achieve academic success, thus contributing to educational persistence. Transculturation is a different concept than biculturalism, which typically implies acculturation in which two cultures have congealed or have become enmeshed, which emphasized the idea of assimilation and acculturation (Huffman, 2008; Herring, 1995; Little Soldier, 1985).

The transcultural process requires four stages: initial alienation, self-discovery, realignment, and participation (Huffman, 2010). The initial alienation period is identified as students possessing strong feelings of alienation with other students, faculty, and the institution (Huffman, 2008). If students are able to persist during this stage, they may continue to stage two, which is a crucial stage of self-discovery. The second state of self-discovery is the ability of students to survive academically without assimilating to the majority culture; rather, students are able to keep their identity and heritage intact throughout the academic journey (Huffman, 2008). This is referred to as the “transculturation threshold” and is a crucial factor to persistence in college (Huffman, 2008, p. 158). Following self-discovery is the re-alignment whereby a student evaluates their values, attitudes, and goals, and measures them against those of the institution (Huffman, 2008). At this stage, students are able to relate at both cultural levels as demanded by the situation (Huffman, 2008). Stage four is identified as participation, indicating that students used their American Indian heritage as a source of strength, confidence, and identity (Huffman, 2008). At this stage, students experience an increase in comfort level and are positioned to fulfill their goal of college completion (Huffman, 2008).

Cultural Wealth Theory.

Yosso (2005) as well as Villalpando and Solórzano (2005) constructed the concept of cultural wealth, which has multiple layers of assets. Yosso (2005) stated that communities of color have a broad “array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). Cultural Wealth is a Critical Race Theory challenge to traditional forms of cultural capital and shifted the research paradigm away from a deficit view (Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital referred to the accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed or inherited by privileged groups in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu believed that cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital can be acquired through family or formal schooling, thus keeping dominant groups in positions of power (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, cultural wealth emphasized the cultural wealth of marginalized populations, although mainstream society may not necessarily value those cultural tools that derive from communities of color (Yosso, 2005).

Summary

When researching topics connected to the American Indian population, Ruiz (2014) recommended that new theories and the testing of their viability should be connected to Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory. Additionally, Ruiz (2014) suggested that research be conducted on the educational success of Native Americans in education, and Guillory (2002) recommended that future research be conducted in the areas of students’ desire to serve their tribal communities as a core persistence factor. Lastly, the use of Euro-American theories, models, and practices is inappropriate to serve and support Native American students (McClellan et al., 2005).

The purpose of this research was to examine educational persistence from a strength based perspective and develop a grounded theory to explain how and why American Indian students have been able to persist in graduate education, through the lens of Indigenous theories. This literature review provides a theoretical framework, as well as a synthesis of current research to examine the topics related to educational persistence.

Chapter Three: Methodology

A culturally adapted grounded theory approach was conducted to examine the components of persistence among American Indian graduate students attending a non-Native college or university in the state of Montana. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Upon thorough investigation and data analysis, an Indigenous theory was developed to explain the components of educational persistence. This theory emerged from the experiences of American Indian students and how they believed they have persisted in post baccalaureate programs. Lastly, the researcher interpreted the results and provided recommendations of how to support American Indian graduate students in higher education.

Research Methods

A qualitative methodology was used to approach this field of study, given that these methods can be used to discover unique cultural perspectives (Lee, Michell, & Sablynski, 1999). In contrast, quantitative methodologies often use surveys, models, or instruments that either limit findings to a certain paradigm or is an inappropriate measure for American Indian issues (Hoffmann, Jackson, & Smith, 2005; Jackson & Smith, 2001). Therefore, a qualitative approach was specifically chosen to coincide more appropriately with an Indigenous worldview in this study. Consequently, factors of persistence identified by this culturally adapted grounded theory approach may be tested in the future through quantitative measures (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Qualitative research has specific features and characteristics. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) described five features of qualitative research: naturalistic, descriptive data, concern with process, inductive, and meaning. This type of research utilizes naturalistic settings as the direct source of data and uses the researcher as the key instrument (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell,

2014; Rossmann & Rallis, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In addition, the data are descriptive and take on the form of words or pictures, using multiple forms of data. Qualitative researchers are also concerned about the process rather than the outcome and tend to analyze their data inductively (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003). However, Creswell (2014) stated that both inductive and deductive methods can be used in qualitative research. Inductive analysis is the immersion of patterns, themes, or interrelationships that evolve from data (Patton, 2002). As a result, theory is built from the bottom up based on many “disparate pieces of collected evidence that are interconnected” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 6). The deductive method in research refers to the point in time when researchers review their data to determine if more evidence is available to support each theme, or if additional information is needed (Creswell, 2014). Meaning is another important aspect to the qualitative research paradigm, referencing the important relevance of participant perspectives (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003; Creswell, 2014). Therefore, “social reality is understood as a shared product and attribution of meanings” (Flick, Kardorff, Steinke, & Jenner, 2004, p. 7).

Creswell (2014) identified additional features of qualitative research: researcher as key instrument, emergent design, reflexivity, and holistic account. One feature of qualitative research is its emergent and evolving design (Rossman & Rallis, 1998), indicating that researchers cannot plan for a tightly prescribed process but rather allow for flexibility throughout the process (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). Lastly, reflexivity and holistic account are also defining features of qualitative research. Reflexivity is the idea that a researcher’s background may be influential in interpreting the data (Rossman & Rallis, 1998); while holistic account is the notion that researchers develop a complex picture of the issue being studied, which involves multiple perspectives and factors (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002).

Grounded theory is an important research method for exploring underdeveloped areas in research. Creswell (2013) stated that grounded theory is a viable choice when no other theory exists to explain or understand a certain process. Moreover, grounded theory is valuable when the literature only presents models for specific populations (Creswell, 2013). In this particular case, a grounded theory was not developed that examines the components of educational persistence among American Indian graduate students attending non-Native colleges and universities. More specifically this study helped close the research gap between HeavyRunner (2009) and Secatero's (2009) research, by using the same methodology as HeavyRunner (2009), yet it examined the same population as Secatero's (2009) study. Overall, hpersistence studies have typically been conducted on majority populations; however, recently the research trend has changed to incorporate the minority experience in higher education.

Persistence has been identified by Reason (2009) as an "individual phenomenon—students persist to a goal" (p. 660). Reason (2009) used the term persistence broadly and stated that it was progress toward goal attainment, yet persistence should not be confused with being an outcome or the obtainment of student success. Additionally, Berger, Ramírez, and Lyon (2012) defined persistence as "the desire or action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning year through degree completion" (p. 12). Lastly, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) stated that persistence included multiple forces that operate in multiple settings to influence student learning and persistence.

Glaser and Strauss initially developed grounded theory in 1967; however, various researchers have provided different perspectives and methodologies on grounded theory over the course of time. Glaser and Strauss (1967) initially published "The Discovery of Grounded Theory," in which they created the idea that the generation of a theory can be grounded in data.

However, the two authors had different conceptions of the meaning and procedures of grounded theory (Creswell, 2013). As a result, Strauss developed his own methodology and techniques for grounded theory, and Glaser believed these procedures were too prescribed and structured (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1992). Following Glaser and Strauss, many other researchers developed other versions of grounded theory. Charmaz (2006) advocated for a constructivist grounded theory, meaning that the focus is not necessarily on a single process or core category, but rather the perspective includes the emphasis of diverse local worlds and multiple realities. Charmaz (2003, 2006) stated that grounded theory is an interpretive approach to qualitative research with flexible guidelines and reaffirms the studying of people in their natural settings. Similarly, Clarke (2005) stated that “situational analysis allows researchers to draw together studies of discourse and agency, action and structure, image, text and context, history and the present moment—to analyze complex situations of inquiry broadly conceived,” rather than just focusing on the “action-centered basic social process” that underlies traditional grounded theory (p. xxii). Situational analysis incorporates main sociological modes: situational, social world/arena, and positional cartographic maps for collecting and analyzing data (Clarke, 2005). Situational maps analyze relations about major “human, nonhuman, discursive, and other elements in the research situation” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxii). Additionally, social world/arenas maps “lay out the collective actors, key nonhuman elements, and the arena(s) of commitment and discourse”; while positional maps “lay out the major positions taken and not taken in data” (p. xxii). This research study used Strauss and Corbin’s (2015) prescription for grounded theory approach, by identifying a core category with supporting categories that describe the main processes of persistence.

Central Question

This study explored the following central questions: What is persistence in the context of the American Indian graduate student experience? Why and how do American Indian graduate students persist while attending non-Native colleges and universities in the state of Montana? Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the researcher examined the components of educational persistence among American Indian graduate students.

Participants

Participants self-identified as Native American and were either members of a federally recognized tribe, state recognized tribe, and/or those tribes not recognized by either the state or federal government. Participants also identified as members of several different tribal affiliations. Native Americans are often classified as one group; however, this generalization is problematic considering that they represent a variety of independent nations. In Montana, there are thirteen tribal nations: Blackfeet, Salish, Kootenai, Pend d'Oreille, Assiniboine (Ft. Belknap and Ft. Peck), Gros Ventre, Sioux, Chippewa, Cree, Northern Cheyenne, Crow, and Little Shell. All participants attended an institution in the state of Montana, which may have unintentionally limited tribal affiliation to those tribes concentrated in the Northwest region of the United States.

All participants were required to have completed a baccalaureate degree, while they were currently pursuing either graduate school and/or a terminal degree. Graduate student status was determined by their institution's guidelines. As a result, students had to be seeking a master's degree, doctoral degree, professional degree, and/or a terminal degree within their discipline. Additionally, all participants were categorized as graduate students attending a non-Native college or university in Montana. In the literature, non-Native colleges and universities are also referred to as Predominantly White Institutions or mainstream institutions (Shotton, et al., 2013).

The term non-Native colleges or universities represents the same racial dynamics; however, the terminology reflects a conscious effort to center the experiences of Native people (Shotton et al., 2013).

Participants were currently enrolled in graduate school. According to the Montana University System (MUS) Data Warehouse, within the academic school year 2014-2015, eighty-four American Indian students completed with a graduate degree at either Montana State University or the University of Montana. However, in the previous school year 2013-2014, only 40 American Indian students graduated from these two institutions (MUS Data Warehouse). During spring semester 2016 at MSU-Bozeman and the University of Montana combined (MUS Data Warehouse), 196 American Indian graduate students were enrolled. The population of American Indian graduate students in Montana is limited; thus, the sample size of participants was also relatively small.

Participants were recruited initially by open and snowball sampling, followed by theoretical sampling. In addition, recruitment was conducted by working closely with American Indian student services, Native American studies, and/or multicultural offices at all of these institutions to recruit participants. Additionally, flyers were sent out via e-mail listservs from these departments, as well as hung up within their offices and on campus. Flyers and advertisements were also displayed using social media. Participants and researchers communicated initially by e-mail, followed by phone contact for any possible urgent communication responses.

An interview protocol was used to inform the participant of the confidentiality plan. Participants were only identified by a pseudonym. Audio recordings were transcribed. Upon transcription, audio recordings were destroyed to protect the privacy of the participants. In

addition, transcriptions were held safely on a computer using a password as a heightened level of protection only known by the researcher. If transcriptions were printed, these printed copies were kept under lock and key when not being used by the researcher. All participants were volunteers and were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the study, and/or to have their responses excluded from the data analysis. Lastly, participants were aware of informed consent and agreed to include their responses in this particular research study.

Data Collection Procedures

A qualitative approach was used to examine the components of educational persistence among American Indian graduate students attending a non-Native college or university in the state of Montana. A qualitative approach was chosen to explore the inner experiences of participants, take a holistic and comprehensive approach to studying the topic of persistence, and discover relevant variables that could be tested through quantitative forms of research in the future (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

More specifically, a culturally adapted grounded theory approach was employed in this study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized that theory needs to be built from concepts derived from actual data. Grounded theory usually focuses on a “process or an action that has distinct steps or phases that occur over time” (Creswell, 2013, p. 85). Thus, the researcher develops a theory of this process or action by combining theoretical categories that are displayed to show how the theory works (Creswell, 2013).

Participants were recruited initially by open and snowball sampling, followed by theoretical sampling. Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommended that open sampling be used for the first few interviews, and as concepts are derived through analysis, then theoretical sampling can be employed. In the early stages, many different people, situations, and documents are

selected to obtain complete coverage of the research question (Böhm, 2004). The researcher can then use theoretical sampling by choosing participants who can contribute to the development of the theory (Creswell, 2013). Charmaz (2006) stated that theoretical sampling means to seek pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories within an emerging theory. Clarke (2005) referenced that theoretical sampling within basic grounded theory focuses on finding new data sources that can best address specific theoretical concerns as opposed to sampling to find a representative of a social body or population. In particular, these “places, people, and events will maximize opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 134).

Essentially, theoretical sampling is concept driven and cumulative. “Theoretical sampling means seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging theory” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96). It is more concerned with following up on important theoretical leads, rather than searching for consistent findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). However, Corbin and Strauss (2015) also stated that consistency is not a major concern since it naturally occurs among participant stories. Creswell (2013) stated that sampling begins with selecting a homogenous sample of individuals. After developing components of the theory, the researcher selects and studies a heterogeneous sample to either confirm or disconfirm the conditions of the model (Creswell, 2013).

Creswell (2013) recommended a guideline of 20 to 30 interviews be conducted to completely saturate a theory; however, Corbin and Strauss (2015) stated that no definite number of participants exists, since researchers should have the flexibility to sample participants and settings based on concepts in need of development. Categories are saturated when data does not reveal any new properties or core theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006); thus “no new concepts are emerging” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 134).

Participants were selected based on their academic status, school selection, and identification as American Indian. After informed consent, participants took part in a semi-structured interview. This process included a set of structured questions and allowed for follow-up questions to further examine a concept or for clarification purposes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Charmaz (2006) recommended using intensive interviewing within grounded theory, which is the use of “open-ended but directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet flexible approaches” (p. 28). Interviews were recorded based on participant consent, and notes were taken as needed. Interviews were conducted in participant selected locations allowing for an appropriate level of privacy, audio recording quality, and participant accessibility and comfort.

Prior to obtaining data, the researcher sought the approval of the University of Montana’s Institutional Review Board regarding the ethics of the study. Secured approval ensured that both the data and the participants were treated with confidentiality and that the research study met high ethical standards. Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommended that ethics be applied to the research, as well as the participants and researcher. In regard to participants, the researcher must obtain consent, maintain confidentiality, and develop an atmosphere of mutual trust (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Although research methods may allow for flexibility, to ensure integrity of method, the researcher must continue to make sure that participants are not alternating procedures due to personal choice (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Since participants donate their personal time, Corbin and Strauss (2015) also stated that the researcher has a responsibility to the participant to follow through on a study and publish the results. Additionally, the researcher must produce the highest quality work possible in order to fulfill ethical responsibilities to self, participants, and the research field (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Interview Protocol

Interview questions were developed to discover relevant variables to the concept of educational persistence in higher education. Specifically, questions were created to target the inner experience, as well as the actions, processes, or interactions of educational persistence, which is the central component of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Reason's (2009) definition indicated that persistence is student progress toward goal attainment. Therefore, questions were targeted to understand participants' academic goals, as well as the factors that contribute to their progress to meet these goals. Terenzini and Reason (2005) accounted for multiple and interrelated forces that contribute to persistence such as the student, faculty, and institutional forces. Thus, questions were created to explore these components in detail. Lastly, questions addressed components of persistence for American Indians in higher education as referenced in the literature review: personal attributes, academic preparation, campus social support, faculty and mentor support, institutional support, family support, and cultural identity.

The following interview questions were created to explore the various components of persistence during the initial interviews:

1. Tell me about your experience as an American Indian graduate student.
2. What type of personal qualities and characteristics do you possess that contribute to your ability to persist in graduate school?
3. What type of academic skills and preparation has contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?
4. How has campus structured support (if any) contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?
5. How have mentors or faculty members (if any) contributed to your persistence in graduate school?
6. How has institutional support (if any) contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?

7. How has family support (if any) contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?
8. How has your culture and identity contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?
9. Is there anything related to your persistence in graduate school that hasn't been discussed in this interview?

In grounded theory, interview guides are not as relevant since interview questions and concepts will change over time to fully detail a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). However Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommended that initial interview questions be developed for Institutional Review Board approval, with the caveat that questions may evolve or change to gather data on concepts needed to develop the theory. These initial interview questions were developed from researcher experience, literature review, or from preliminary fieldwork (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. A thorough analysis of interview responses was performed to explore common themes as they emerged from the data, for the purposes of having a better understanding of educational persistence. The unique feature about grounded theory is that each data collection session is followed up by analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Lastly, the researcher developed a theory based on the components of persistence, which derived from participant interviews.

In grounded theory, instead of choosing concepts before research is conducted, core concepts are derived from data collected during the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Furthermore, research analysis and data collection are interrelated, creating an ongoing cycle throughout the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The analytical process is triadic, as well as circular, since theoretical concepts are discovered in the data and then must be proven, requiring the researcher to constantly return to the data (Hildenbrand, 2004). Triadic refers to the process in which the research collects data, codes the data, then writes memos on data findings (Hildenbrand, 2004). Creswell (2013) used the term “zigzag” process, signifying that

the researcher will gather information by conducting fieldwork rather than analyze the data in an office, and will continually repeat this process.

Data analysis was conducted using a process termed constant comparison, in which data are broken into manageable pieces, with each piece being compared for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2013). Memoing is an intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers, and is a prompt to analyze and code data early in the research process (Charmaz, 2006). During memoing, the researcher tries to formulate the process or sketch out the flow of this process (Creswell, 2013). Memoing, along with writing in a research diary, assisted the researcher in recalling the multiple shifts in assumptions and design that occurred throughout the process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Different aspects of coding exist within grounded theory. Coding is the deciphering or interpretation of data, as well as the identification of concepts (Böhm, 2004). During coding, the researcher develops concepts “which are hypotheses captured in ideas, and establishe[s] connections between these concepts” (Hildenbrand, 2004, p. 19). Essentially, researchers code to categorize segments of data with a short name that encompasses the meaning of each piece of data (Charmaz, 2006). Three reasons to code include the following: “open coding for concept identification; coding for concept development and elaboration; and coding for context, process, and integration” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 323). Coding is the link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Grounded theory employs several steps in the coding process. Open coding occurs when the data are coded for major information (Creswell, 2013). Charmaz (2006) referred to this as the initial coding process in which the researcher remains open to exploring all possible theoretical explanations. Following the initial coding process, Charmaz (2006) identified

focused coding as a process in which decisions are made about how to categorize the data based on what makes the most analytical sense. Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, and specifies the properties and dimensions of a category (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, Creswell (2013) stated that the core category is the focus of the theory, and additional categories (axial coding) are more detailed to form a theoretical model (Creswell, 2013). Similar concepts are grouped together by the researcher to form categories or themes, and eventually the different categories are integrated around the core category (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These supporting categories consist of “causal conditions (what factors caused the core phenomenon), strategies (actions taken in response to the core phenomenon), contextual and intervening conditions (broad and specific situational factors that influence the strategies), and consequences (outcomes from using the strategies)” (Creswell, 2013, p. 86). The intersection of the categories becomes the theory, which is also known as selective coding. In the final phase of theory development, the researcher is advised to collect and code new data to prove a theory, which is an important dimension of grounded theory (Flick et al., 2004). This theory can be presented as a diagram, so that the researcher can show how the core concept and main categories fit together to visually present the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Corbin and Strauss (2015) argued that when creating grounded theory from data, the researcher can easily confuse description with theory. Description tells about an event, while theory offers an explanation of why the event occurs (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Although description does play a part in theory development, theory is the framework that explains why events happen. In this study, a grounded theory will be developed based on the data to explain why and how American Indian graduate students are able to persist in non-Native colleges and universities in Montana.

Several challenges accompany the grounded theory approach. For example, the researcher must set aside theoretical ideas or notions so that the theory can emerge from the data (Creswell, 2013). In addition, the researcher must be able to recognize the difficulty in determining when categories are saturated or when a theory is fully detailed (Creswell, 2013).

Trustworthiness of the data.

The procedures for data collection were described to participants in thorough detail. For the purposes of this study, the trustworthiness of the data was established through accuracy as described below.

Accuracy.

Data was collected via audio-recorded interviews, with the exception of one interview that was conducted by an e-mail response. Interviews were transcribed verbatim as approved by the participant. Additionally, notes were taken throughout the interview process as needed. All participants' identification was held in confidence, as the researcher used a subject code to label all interview transcriptions and files.

Verification.

The researcher took the following steps to ensure verification: negative case analysis, clarification of researcher bias, and utilization of thick description. Negative case analysis was of particular importance to grounded theory. In negative case analysis, the researcher refines working hypotheses as the inquiry advances (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in light of disconfirming evidence (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, not all evidence will fit the code or theme, so the evidence will be reported within the results section to provide a realistic assessment of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). It is imperative to clarify researcher bias so that the reader understands the researcher's position, which might impact the inquiry (Merriam, 1988). Lastly,

rich, thick descriptions were used as a verification method. The researcher provided a detailed description of the participants or setting under study to allow the reader to determine the potential ability to transfer results to other settings (Creswell, 2013).

Researcher bias.

Every researcher has perspectives, biases, and assumptions, along with a set of characteristics they bring to the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Researcher bias makes the greatest impact on data analysis, specifically regarding the meaning of data and concepts, as well as selecting questions and making comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Grounded theory has built-in checks and balances that can help limit researcher bias, although they cannot eliminate it completely. The qualitative researcher reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and realizes that his or her personal biography shapes the study (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Intrusion can be controlled by self-awareness, as well as the systematic application of research strategies that provide researchers with an assortment of analytic options (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In addition, reflexivity can help control research bias in qualitative research. Finlay (2002) defined reflexivity as thoughtful conscious awareness, and deemed it a valuable tool in the practice of data analysis and research. Specifically, reflexivity examines the “impact of the position, perspective, and presence of the researcher” (Finlay, 2002, p. 532). Due to reflexivity, researchers are able to gather insight about personal responses and interpersonal dynamics, empower others, evaluate the research process, method, and outcome, and allow for public scrutiny of the integrity of the research (Finlay, 2002).

In this study, the researcher recognized her perspectives, biases, and assumptions that derive from her racial, cultural, and political background, as well as her own experience of graduate school. As a member of the Amskapii Pikuni nation, or Blackfeet Tribe of Montana,

the researcher acknowledges that her worldview is different from mainstream society, indicating that this viewpoint may have influenced or impacted the data analysis section. The researcher understands the world through the context of Indigenous metaphysics, with the idea that the world can be understood in a holistic manner rather than cause and effect. Additionally, the researcher acknowledges spiritual realms that influence this holistic understanding of life. Throughout the researcher's academic journey, she has experienced instances of cultural dissonance, alienation, and isolation as a result of being a minority within the majority population. The researcher conducted this study while in graduate school, indicating that many of the challenges and persistence factors may have resonated with the researcher. Lastly, the researcher stems from a collectivist society and is pursuing academic goals to eventually be of service to her family, community, and tribal nation. The researcher hopes to contribute to tribal nations' sovereignty, self-determination, and nation building through the facet of education. Through the use of self-awareness and reflexivity, as well as the prescribed methods of grounded theory, the researcher tried to control research bias, although it cannot be eliminated completely.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the procedures used in this study. The purpose of this study was to use a grounded theory approach to examine the components of persistence among American Indian graduate students attending non-Native colleges or universities in Montana. The components of persistence were explored through the use of a semi-structured interview protocol, consisting of a set of structured questions that allowed for follow-up questions. This study was approved by the University of Montana's Institutional Review Board to ensure all procedures maintained a level of integrity and met ethical guidelines. The interviews were transcribed, and identifying information was removed to preserve reasonable

confidentiality of participants. Themes that emerged regarding educational persistence were identified and used to develop a meaningful theory grounded in the data. Thus, this research was conducted to generate a theory to explain the components of educational persistence among American Indian graduate students attending non-Native colleges and universities.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter provides the findings for the following research questions: What is persistence in the context of the American Indian graduate student experience? Why and how do American Indian graduate students persist while attending non-Native colleges and universities in the state of Montana? This section will explain the stages of analysis, as well as themes that emerged from the data. The intent of this research study was to understand the concept of persistence in the context of serving American Indian graduate student populations, as well as to identify components that contribute to persistence for this population.

Core Category

The core category of this research study is “A Vision to Serve the Community,” which explained “why” American Indian graduate students were able to persist in higher education. Participants desired to “give back” to their tribal communities in the future, by the culmination of their traditional values and professional skills. Participants stated that the rights of tribal self-determination were dependent upon the ability of Indigenous people to take on leadership roles within their communities, thus contributing to Indigenous nation building.

Participants envisioned themselves serving their communities in various capacities. More specifically, students noted that they felt privileged to be in a position to pursue education, as well as serve their people in the future. Additionally, participants wanted to become role models to inspire Indigenous youth to pursue their own educational endeavors. Graduate education was also perceived as a route to provide a quality life for participants’ families, indicating that it was a step toward raising their children in an environment that was removed from the conditions of poverty. Participants also envisioned themselves serving tribal

communities by combining their unique traditional knowledge with their professional and technical skills, thus contributing to nation building.

The concept of Indigenous nation building was present in twenty-four of the twenty-five interviews. This underlying concept was present in the majority of interviews, in which participants were pursuing a variety of fields which included the helping professions, Native American Studies, Business, Law, as well as the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math) fields. Participants were able to translate their educational knowledge into the context of serving Indigenous communities, by creating specific goals that made contributions to tribal nations.

Demographic Information

Participants included 25 self-identified American Indian graduate students currently attending an institution in Montana. These five institutions included the University of Montana-Missoula, Montana Tech-Butte, Montana State University-Bozeman, Montana State University-Billings, and Montana State University-Havre. Participants included eight males and seventeen females who were actively seeking a professional degree, master's degree, or doctoral degree.

Participants were pursuing graduate programs in a variety of fields: Bio-Chemistry & Bio Physics, Forestry Conservation Sciences, Systems Ecology Forestry, Environmental Science, Earth Science, Geo-Science, Clinical Psychology, Counselor Education & Supervision, Clinical Rehabilitation & Mental Health Counseling, School Counseling, Social Work, Educational Leadership, Adult & Higher Education, Native American Studies, Indian Law, and Business. A large majority of these participants were pursuing degrees considered to be helping professions.

In addition, participants were pursuing graduate programs in various formats, which included in person attendance, online programs, and hybridized programs. A total of 20

participants were pursuing graduate education and attending classes in person. Most of these participants lived within the community where they attended school; however, two out of twenty individuals were commuting from their place of residence to attend class in person. Three participants pursued graduate programs online, with two of these participants living within the same community as their institution, and the other participant taking courses remotely. Lastly, two other participants pursued graduate school using hybridized programs that incorporated components of online education as well as in-person classes.

Participants represented a variety of tribal nations: the Blackfeet, Salish, Kootenai, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, Chippewa Cree, Crow, Oglala Lakota, Hidatsa, Sisseton-Wahpeton, Shoshone-Bannock, Absentee Shawnee, Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe, Navajo, Shawnee, Cherokee, Northern Cheyenne, Klamath, and Ojibwa. Twenty participants were attending college in-state, and five participants were residents of another state.

Lastly, twelve participants were pursuing a doctoral degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.), twelve were pursuing a master's degree (M.A. or M.S.), and one was pursuing a Juris Doctorate (J.D.). Twenty-two interviews were conducted in person, two were by phone, and one was by e-mail correspondence. Participant's identities have been maintained as confidential. However, in order to focus on the power of story, as well as story ownership, three participants chose to create their own pseudonyms, which is a prevalent practice and value within many Indigenous communities. The rest of the participants' pseudonyms were chosen by the researcher to maintain confidentiality. All direct quotations and interpretations correspond with each participant's pseudonym.

Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym (Gender)	Number of Years in Program	Graduate Program
Andrea (Female)	First Year	Ph.D.
Ashley (Female)	Sixth Year	Ph.D.
Brandon (Male)	First Year	M.S.W.
Charles (Male)	First Year	M.A.
Danielle (Female)	Second Year	Ph.D.
Fox (Female)	Fifth Year	Ed.D.
Heather (Female)	Sixth Year	Ph.D.
Jennifer (Female)	First Year	M.A.
Joyce (Female)	First Year	M.B.A.
Kathleen (Female)	Fifth Year	Ph.D.
Lori (Female)	First Year	M.A.
Melissa (Female)	Second Year	J.D./M.P.A.
Michelle (Female)	Third Year	M.S.
Natalie (Female)	Sixth Year	Ph.D.
Noah (Male)	Fourth Year	Ph.D.
Olivia (Female)	First Year	M.A.
Otata (Female)	First Year	M.A.
Rachel (Female)	First Year	M.S.W.
Robert (Male)	Seventh Year	Ph.D.
Roy (Male)	Second Year	Ed.D.
Russell (Male)	First Year	M.A.

Pseudonym (Gender)	Number of Years in Program	Graduate Program
Samuel (Male)	First Year	Ph.D.
Sissy (Female)	Second Year	M.A.
Tiffany (Female)	First Year	M.A.
William (Male)	First Year	M.S.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, ensuring accurate reporting of participants' words and context. The aforementioned qualitative data will be reported in narrative form, with several direct quotations to provide rich, thick descriptions, as well as to produce verifiability. The coding process included three coding procedures: open, axial, and selective. Finally, an Indigenous theory of persistence was developed to explain how categories were interrelated, identifying a core category with three supporting categories. The core category of this theory was "vision to serve the community." In addition, the supporting categories of this theory were "identity," "skills," and "support." This theory was created to help explain why and how American Indian graduate students persist at mainstream institutions.

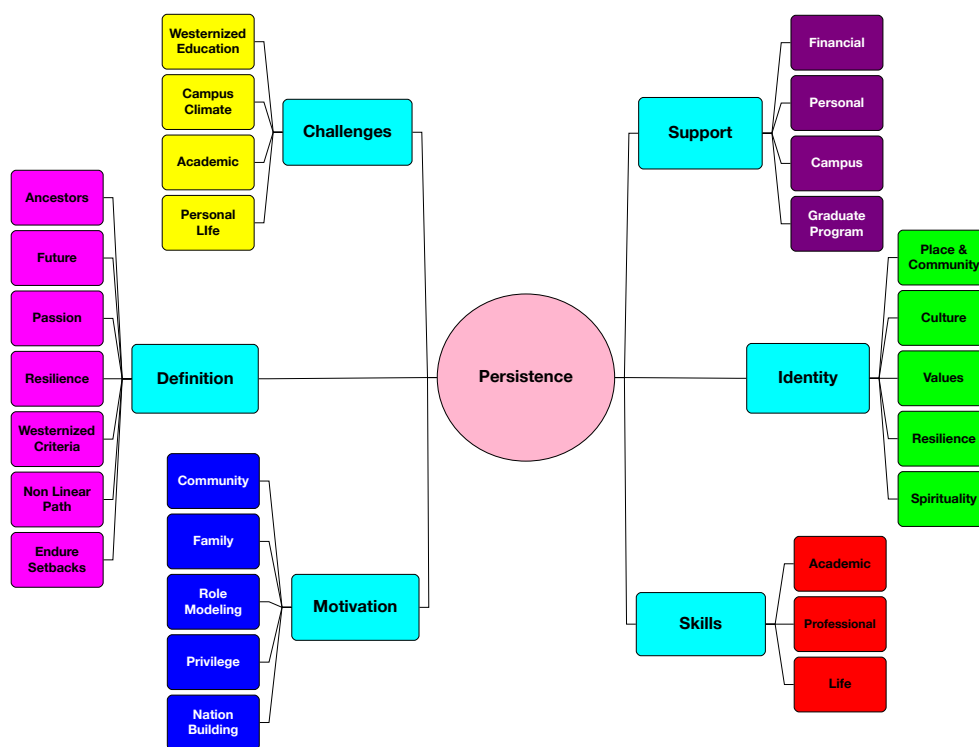
Open coding.

Open coding as defined by Corbin and Strauss (2015) indicated that raw data must be fragmented into delineated concepts. Charmaz (2006) referred to this process as initial coding, in which segments of information are categorized into a short name that summarized the data (2006). Due to the dense nature of data collected, the researcher conducted open coding by hand and categorized data according to fragments or sections of data. The researcher made theoretical

comparisons, which is an analytic tool used to think about properties and dimensions of categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Axial coding.

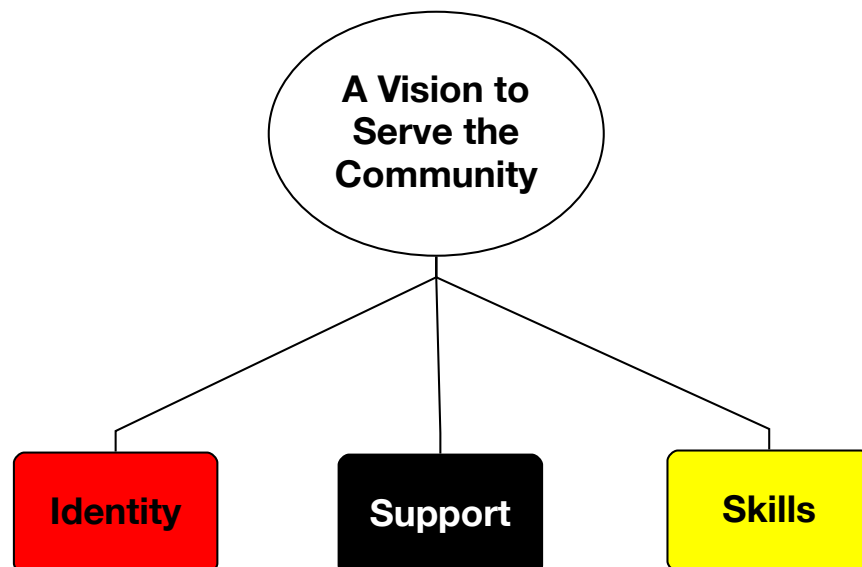
Axial coding is the process of relating categories to subcategories in accordance to their properties and dimensions (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) categorized axial coding under focused coding, which is the process of using the most significant codes identified in the open coding process. NVivo computer analysis software was used during this process to identify twenty eight subcategories and how they were related to these six main categories: definition of persistence, challenges, motivation, identity, skills, and support. Following this coding process, selective coding was employed to connect and relate categories into forming a theory.



Selective coding.

Selective coding according to Charmaz (2006) described the process of selecting codes that tell an analytic story in a theoretical direction. Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggested

developing a core category with supporting categories to create the theory. The core category, which is a concept that summarizes the main idea, was developed to describe the concept of persistence for American Indian graduate students. The core category explained “why” students persist in higher education, which was categorized as a “vision to serve the community” within this theoretical framework. Integration of categories is a vital step to the creation of a theory, and requires that the supporting categories be linked around the core category of the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The supporting categories that support this vision include “identity,” “skills,” and “support.” These supporting categories explain “how” students are able to persist in graduate school and are indicative of the notion that persistence is a process and/or action and is not reflective of an end result. The purpose of this research was to explore American Indian higher education from a strengths-based perspective, by focusing on student academic strengths and identify components that contribute to educational persistence.



Research Question One: What is Persistence in the context of the American Indian graduate student experience?

“What is persistence in the context of the American Indian graduate student experience?” The researcher posed this question to understand the concept of persistence within the context of the American Indian graduate student experience. Participants identified several components of persistence, with a core emphasis focusing on ultimately serving their tribal community in the future.

Students stated that the reason they persisted in graduate school was to gain the necessary credentials and/or degrees to serve their tribal community in the future. However, the focus was not on graduation, but on the ability to elicit change and serve their communities post-graduation. Therefore, participants believed that education was just one particular option or route for students to advance their knowledge base or skill set to serve in more effective positions within their tribal community. Participants also recognized that the cultural value of “giving back” does not always require a degree, but was a personal path that they chose to help better their own communities, thus indicating that everyone within their community has unique talents, skills, and social responsibilities or roles.

The framework of this entire theory was based on one particular quote from a participant. Andrea, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, discussed the concept of persistence and what it meant to Indigenous communities, compared to the majority population. Noting a major difference, Andrea stated that peoples’ worldviews influence their conception of persistence: “How you define persistence would likely be a little bit different depending on your worldview.” She went on to give an example:

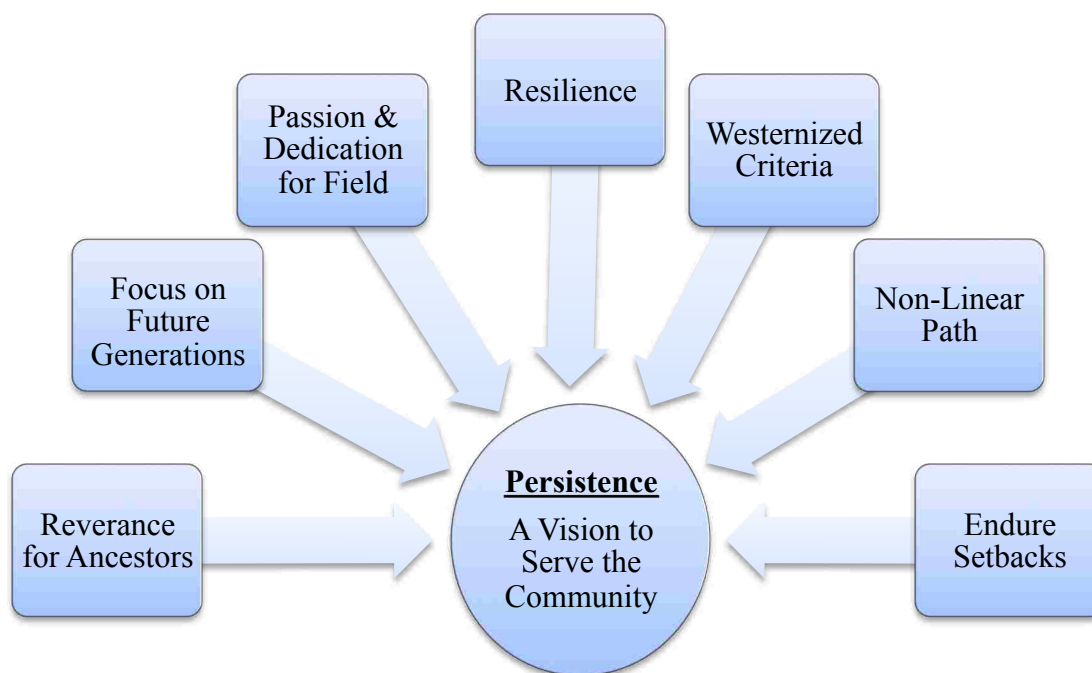
I’m thinking for this American Indian student, how [persistence]...was different was that her goal wasn’t finishing. It was serving her people, and in that way, she was

persistent...but yet in mainstream culture, your goal would be to graduate and your goal would be to finish your dissertation.

Andrea's description of persistence was the guiding framework of this study, noting that American Indian students' concept of persistence is related to their cultural values, and not entirely focused on the Westernized value of graduation. Therefore, the idea of persistence is foundationally different than mainstream ideologies and definitions within education.

The definition of persistence among American Indian graduate students involved the incorporation of several cultural components specific to this population. The reason "why" students persist is related to their cultural value of "giving back" to their tribal community. Participants also described persistence as a way to give reverence to their ancestors for their sacrifices, as well as to make sacrifices for the betterment of future generations. This view was indicative of the importance of Indigenous lineage, as well as social responsibility to kin. Participants were also passionate about their field of study and described specific goals of how they envisioned themselves serving their tribal nations. Additionally, participants described persistence as a non-linear path, meaning that culturally, other responsibilities may take precedence over education at certain times. Persistence was also seen as an ability to endure setbacks, noting that challenges are inevitable throughout the process. Unfortunately, participants defined persistence as the process of adhering to the requirements of Westernized criteria due to their attendance at mainstream institutions. However, participants stated that after they have "jumped through all the hoops," they will eventually be able to "do what they want," by incorporating elements of culture into their professional service. Lastly, participants stated that the American Indian population inherently possesses resiliency; furthermore, the relationship between resilience and persistence are complementary concepts to achieving academic success

Components of Persistence



Reverence to ancestors.

Participants stated that their access to education was based upon the sacrifices of their ancestors. They noted the inherent power and strength that has been passed down to them from their relatives. For example, Melissa, a law school student, stated, “The grandmothers and grandfathers that have walked before me have fought and died so that I could be right here today, doing this [attending graduate school], and their strength, and their energy, and their power is in my blood.” Otata, a student pursuing a master’s degree in Native American Studies and Environmental Sciences, said her tribe is recognized for certain traits and that her education is purposeful: “We’re called the fighting Cheyenne because we stand for what we believe in, and I believe that the ancestors put me here for a purpose.” Moreover, Joyce, a business student, stated that she gathers her strength from her ancestors and has plenty of Indigenous role models who have paved the way for her ability to persist in education:

I summon the strength of all the ancestors and I pull for future generations. I can identify with the trials and tribulations of Kamiakin, Lalasee, Joseph, Crazyhorse, Sitting Bull, Koostatah, Cobell, my grandparents, and all the Indians who persevered. This identity and my culture have been my stronghold. I believe I can persevere because they paved the way for me.

Participants gave reverence to their ancestors as a source of strength that contributed to their ability to persist in graduate school. Some participants described their relationship with their ancestors as relatives that provided guardianship and guidance in life. Essentially, participants explained that their educational persistence was related to their ancestral lineage as an Indigenous person.

Future generations.

Participants noted the significance of possessing a collective identity and the cultural value of giving back to future generations. Kathleen, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, talked about her sense of responsibility to her family and community:

I think maybe part of it is just having a sense of responsibility, so thinking about the sacrifices all my ancestors made for me to be here. The sacrifices they made for me to have access to education, and then thinking about my own family. Being able to better prepare myself so that I can give back in a more significant way to my tribal communities and my future generations of Native people.

Similarly, Natalie, another doctoral student at the University of Montana, explained the power of being part of a collective identity:

Part of the collective identity of being a minority among minorities, in wanting to...build a road for another Native student to come. I want to pass that down as well, [so that] maybe it might be easier for the next generation.

Danielle, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, noted the importance and value that children hold among Indigenous communities and emphasized the idea of making all decisions based on looking seven generations into the future: "Our children are the most important thing and we have a saying that seven generations, to always [be] looking seven generations ahead

instead of just here. So I really want to help the next generation.” Participants stated that their ability to persist in graduate school was related to their vision of creating a stronger Native community for the benefit of future generations.

Passion and dedication.

Participants also described persistence in graduate school as passion and dedication to their chosen field of study. Noah, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, described his curious nature for science: “I really enjoy doing research. I really enjoy finding out new things, or how things work, how nature works, and so that kind of keeps me plugging along.” William, an Earth Science student, also spoke about his love for science and research: “I knew I wanted to go to graduate school, because I loved research and I’ve had eleven research internships since undergrad, and I just loved research.” He also stated, “I really liked the natural sciences because it was something I’ve been paying attention to my whole life...I just realized there is science behind it, all the observations. And then, it gave me tools where I can expand my curiosity into the science realm [and that] was pretty awesome.” Tiffany, a graduate student at Montana State University-Northern, explained her passion for her future career as a school counselor: “Like I always say, I don’t have a magic wand, but I do have the dedication to help. So I feel like when I get this degree, I’ll be able to go back and do what I love.” Participants described persistence as having passion and dedication to their current field of academics, as well as their future profession.

Westernized criteria.

Participants noted that part of persistence among American Indian students is the idea of meeting Westernized education’s requirements in graduate school, with the goal of graduating and creating a professional career that meets Indigenous community needs. Roy, a doctoral

student at Montana State University, stated that Indigenous students must navigate the complexities of two different worlds:

It takes a lot more effort than a non-Native person would have to do, because you're navigating two worlds that are remarkably different, that have different expectations of you, really. So I hate that cliché, but it is true in the sense that a graduate student cannot operate outside of one. They have to be more integrative and they got to accept cultural pieces from non-Native culture in order to subscribe to what they want to do. And once we get to that level, we can start to do what we really want.

Olivia, a graduate student at Montana State University-Billings, stated that she experienced a conflict between her traditional values and the Westernized educational value system. She sought advice from a renowned American Indian professional in how to resolve this issue:

His response was basically just work through their system, give them what they expect from you, and then after you get through your, your graduate studies, then you can do whatever you want to after. It's just like working the system to graduate and you get that piece of paper. You know you're free to do things how you want—how you want to do them.

Participants indicated that upon graduation, they would have the freedom to adapt their profession to become more culturally appropriate, as well as provide services that meet the needs of the community.

Endure setbacks.

Participants indicated that setbacks would naturally occur throughout their educational process, and the ability to endure or overcome these challenges is key to persistence. Noah, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, emphasized the importance of attitude as the key to overcoming challenges in graduate school:

It goes back to the mental attitude and being able to overcome an obstacle because there's going to be problems that arise or people that you work with, or with the lab, what you're working on can fail. I think the important thing is to not give up hope and to remain positive.

Rachel, a Social Work student, stated that she had to apply twice to graduate school because she was denied the first time, but persevered and was accepted on her second try:

I tried [applying] once right after I graduated from my undergrad at MSU and I got denied only because they only accept, like, twenty people [in a] cohort....I kind of questioned, 'Why I got denied, on what grounds?' They said they wanted people with 'more experience,' just because it's such a competitive program. So then I went back and that's when I started working, kind of gained a little more experience and then I applied for the MSW.

Participants stated the ability to endure setbacks is essential to persistence in higher leveled programs. In particular, students mentioned the importance of possessing optimism, as well as the notion of "not giving up" as important aspects to enduring setbacks within their academic life. Nearly all participants described setbacks as an aspect of natural progression in their graduate program.

Non-linear path.

Participants described their education as a non-linear path, meaning that sometimes other goals preceded education. Therefore, persistence in graduate school may be defined as attending school part-time or being in a program for an extended period of time before graduation. It may also mean being a non-traditional student and having a long-term break between undergraduate and graduate school to fulfill other family, cultural, or social responsibilities.

Participants believed that part-time education was a viable option as a way to support their family goals. Heather, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, described her family goals as more important than her academic goals, which she stated is a common phenomenon among the American Indian students in her program:

We have a bunch of people still in the program, but part of that is our own individual choice to take a little longer to finish based on our family goals and things like that. I think that's also a little bit unique to the Native students' lab. We take a little bit longer in the program.

Participants also described graduate school as a lifelong endeavor that they weren't able to pursue earlier in life due to other obligations. Joyce, a non-traditional student, decided to pursue graduate school later on in life: "I decided to pursue an MBA at the ripe age of 55 years old. It took two attempts to pass the GMAT, as I had not calculated algebraic and geometric functions since high school." Joyce sought out online resources and tutors to help her transition to graduate school.

Natalie, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, said that persistence should be measured in regard to the context of students' challenges and struggles. She conceptualized the notion of persistence during her interview:

When we're not moving forward, or we move backwards, to me it's also persistence as well. Sometimes just staying where we are, because it's like when we had those deaths in my family, I wasn't always moving forward but I was being where I was, and that was my persistence, because I could have dropped really low and I didn't. So given the context of my life, I have persistence and I have resilience, and even if I move backward...but maybe to somebody else that would put it on a graph, it would look like not progress.

Participants described persistence as a non-linear path in higher education, even though mainstream institutions negatively describe these pathways as "non-traditional," "part-time" "dropout," or "failures." Despite these formalized academic descriptors, students believed they were still persisting in academe.

Relationship between persistence and resilience.

Participants were challenged to identify concrete differences between the concepts of persistence and resilience, as well as explore any potential relationships between the two concepts. Overall, participants stated that these concepts were fundamentally different, indicating that resilience is the ability to overcome adversarial circumstances, while persistence was perceived as an ability to progress forward and achieve goals. However, participants

indicated that there was a relationship between the two concepts and that American Indian students needed to possess both to be successful in graduate education. Rachel, a graduate student at the University of Montana, stated:

Resilience and persistence are both working towards the same goal. It's not that they're working against each other. You know, being resilient, being able to kind of get back up, when you're going against the current at times. Being persistent and just keep trying and trying. I think they both really work together and kind of mimic each other in a lot of ways.

Lori, a Native American Studies student, also said, "You ask if we need to have persistence and resilience? We're not going to make it if we don't have those two hand in hand." Therefore, persistence and resilience were important components for a student to possess as they progressed on a path toward academic success.

Summary of persistence.

Components that defined the concept of persistence in the context of the American Indian graduate student experience were discussed within the interviews. Participants noted that persistence encompassed several different components: reverence for ancestors, focus on future generations, passion and dedication for the field of study, resilience, westernized criteria, non-linear path, and the ability to endure setbacks. Student acknowledged that they were able to access education due to the sacrifices of their ancestors and persisted in graduate school to create a better society for future generations; indicating that persistence was related to ancestral lineage. In addition, students stated that they were very passionate about their field of study. Unfortunately students stated that persistence was the ability to adhere to Westernized criteria. However students explained that upon successful completion of their program, they will no longer have to adhere to these standards and will have the freedom to adapt their future research and professions to be more culturally oriented. Participants noted that persistence and resilience

were fundamentally different concepts, however they were complimentary to student success. Lastly, students stated that persistence encompassed the ability to endure setbacks and was viewed as a non-linear path in education.

Challenges

Participants identified several different challenges in graduate school. A few of these challenges were shared with the majority population; however, most of these challenges were due to their identity as an American Indian student attending a mainstream institution. Challenges that participants shared with the larger population included academic challenges, as well as personal life demands outside of school. However, challenges specific to their race included issues with campus climate, as well as issues related to their attendance in a Westernized educational system. Moreover, participants felt that as representative of a minority group, they had to complete additional tasks not required of majority populations, such as recruiting students, educating the class about Native American issues, and decolonizing educational frameworks, therefore resulting in an idea of “double duty.” As a result of attending a mainstream institution, students felt that formal education was a threat to their identity and value system as an Indigenous student. Consequently, participants worked harder to solidify their identity and made extra efforts to ensure that American Indians were appropriately represented within academe.

Challenges

<u>Westernized Education</u>	<u>Campus Climate</u>	<u>Academic Challenges</u>	<u>Personal Life Demands</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Conflict of Values •Tokenism •Double Duty •Maintain Identity •Decolonize Education •Historical Trauma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Cultural Dissonance •Isolation & Alienation •Stereotypes & Micro-aggressions •Racism & Sexism •Political Events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Academically Unprepared •Workload & Pressure •Emotional Toll •Sacrifices •Lack of Academic Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Family •Death & Loss •Finances & Employment •Disability & Addictions

Westernized education.

Indigenous students who attend mainstream institutions often encounter challenges due to the conflicting nature between Westernized education and their traditional cultural background. As a result, students are sometimes tokenized to either represent an entire race, or provide education to the entire program regarding their backgrounds. In addition, students have noted the idea of having to do “double duty,” because they are required to take on additional duties in comparison to their non-Native counterparts. Interestingly, participants stated that they have become more proactive in maintaining their identity as well as transforming educational frameworks by decolonizing education within a mainstream educational setting. This action was described as an empowering endeavor for students; however, participants still said these tasks were challenging, since they were often isolated in these attempts with limited support or guidance.

American Indian graduate students must attend mainstream institutions to pursue higher leveled degrees because the majority of their tribal colleges and universities do not offer these

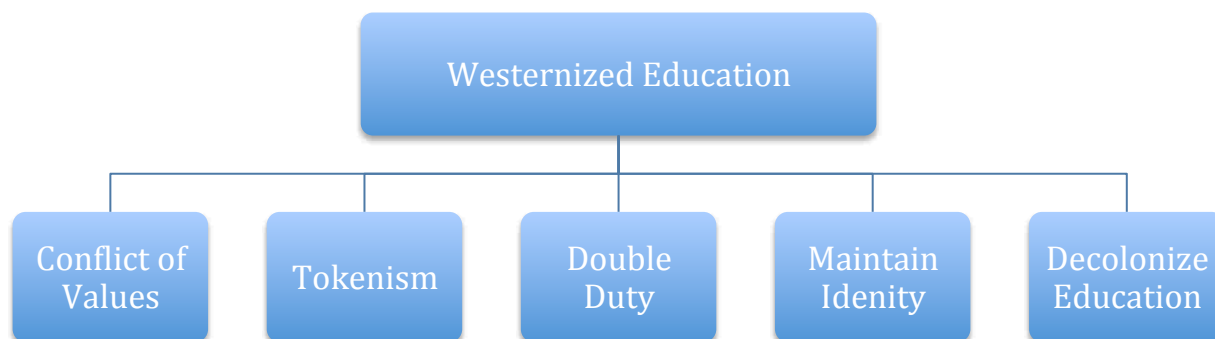
more advanced programs. As a result, graduate students attend institutions that provide a Westernized education; thus, students encounter several challenges regarding their unique cultural background. Heather, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, perceived Westernized education as a step away from Indigenous culture and traditions:

I came into the program wanting to help the people who I grew up with, help the people in my community, but getting trained in a Westernized view, it's taking a step away from the way things are done traditionally and culturally, and so it's taking a modernized approach, and so I've had some conflict over that. You know, it is—it is taking a step away, it is going in a different direction.

Furthermore, Robert, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, stated that mainstream institutions often send implicit messages that Westernized knowledge is superior to Indigenous knowledge systems:

The message kind of is the Western way of—you come to the university and I don't think they intend to do this—but the Western way of thinking is the right way of thinking. And the implicit message is the Native way, or your way, is wrong.

Essentially, participants described Westernized education as an invalidation of their Indigenous heritage, traditional ways of knowing, and tribal community needs.



Conflict of values.

Participants explained that they felt an overall conflict of values as an Indigenous student attending a Westernized educational institution. Robert, a Ph.D. candidate, has experienced cultural conflicts since his acceptance into the program, regarding his future profession as a clinical psychologist. In particular, Robert discussed the conceptualization of mental health from a Westernized perspective, as well as an Indigenous perspective, noting fundamental differences in the perception of health:

From day one, I'm going to say from day one. This is mental health—even that term! Mental health. It's like, there's mental health, and then there's physical health, right? And as a Native person, it's all—it's all connected. Even within yourself and outside of it, outside of yourself, the—the universe. And there's just not this definition or schism between self and others, or self and the world, and self and nature, or mind and body. Or to also say, what about your spiritual health? That's something that's just—to a large degree—is not even talked about in psychology. And the word, psychology, psyche, it means something like the study of the soul. Right? And now it's become the study of the mind. And we think about the mind, on that fundamental level. There's been this conflict, or these value systems that were—they don't really mesh well.

Participants stated that mainstream values systems are represented in the classroom, particularly when programs present information that is from an area of dominant knowledge.

Participants also gave specific examples that highlighted the conflict between individualism and collectivism. Roy, a doctoral student at Montana State University, felt that the dissertation process had undertones of Westernized values. He noted that the dissertation process used terminology, as well as practices, that were more individualistic as opposed to ones that stem from collectivism:

I also think that some of the language that is used in the dissertation process is very domineering, like defending your dissertation. Or it's like we're [Native students] more amped to be sharing than as opposed to always having to be on the defense.

Similarly, Fox, a doctoral student at Montana State University, described the difference between individualism and collectivism, and indicated that American Indian students do not thrive in

individualistic settings, which are promoted in education. She stated that Native American students stem from a collectivist society, and gave an example of a buffalo hunt as evidence of traditional community based practices:

[We're] living in two worlds almost, in the academy, because we're expected to perform and sort of behave academically within these confined circles and as individuals. Where in our own communities, we do things in groups. And it's not so much competitive, but if we succeed, we all need to succeed. And if we fail, we all fail. If you don't get that buffalo shot down, we're not eating tonight. When you do, we're all going to come together and quarter it and take the hide and take the liver and take the stomach and dry the meat. It's more community based. And so then we're expected to sort of work very individual and from a point of view that don't really relate to us.

The difference between individualism and collectivism is a conflict of value systems that American Indian students experience while attending college at a mainstream institution. Essentially, individualism was seen as a foreign value and made students highly uncomfortable in the academic setting. Participants stated that they were more likely to thrive in a program that promotes supportive and collective efforts, as opposed to individualism and competition.

Tokenism.

Participants described tokenism as a challenge in graduate education. According to Kanter (1977) token refers to individuals that are identified by ascribed characteristics (sex, race, religion, ethnic group, age, etc.) and are representatives of their category within a dominant group setting. For example, doctoral student Andrea described her participation in additional program tasks, due to her race as Native American. She discussed her involvement with program promotion:

Another challenge is at times feeling tokenized for being Native, or being a minority. Because I know that graduate programs like to have diversity in their programs, and like to demonstrate that—like to show that—like to say that to other people. And that if there were campaigns or they wanted to highlight the department in some way through a pamphlet or video, then you would be expected to be asked to participate. I think to demonstrate that they have a minority in their program.

Tokenism was also viewed as being the spokesperson for all Native American or minority issues in the classroom. Brandon said, “What I’m learning now is that a lot of non-Natives, they sort of automatically look to you to be the voice of every Native issue. I know that whenever something’s brought up in class, I’m almost expected to be the person to talk about it.” In addition, Danielle also felt as though she had to be the primary source on all Native American topics in the classroom: “One of the challenges I think for being a minority is the fact that they kind of rely on you to give information. [They say] ‘What is it about your culture that’s different than ours?’ There are times that I get frustrated about it because I’m like, ‘Yes I’m Native, and I’m different, but at the same time, it’s frustrating because you always rely on me to tell you stuff, and I can’t speak for everybody, I can only speak for myself and where I come from.’”

Natalie also felt that it was her sole responsibility for providing Indigenous education in the classroom:

So in classes, there was always this obligation or a responsibility maybe to educate the department about Native issues...that responsibility felt like it was on us...I felt that other students didn’t have that responsibility to educate. Or when people are trying out the diversity and they directly look at you like, ‘What do you want to teach us about diversity?’...You know my life was only one snapshot of what it’s like to be a Native person.

In addition, Andrea stated that students that represent a minority race are often viewed as the multicultural person in the classroom:

Being Native American often can make you the spokesperson for all topics that are multicultural. And also the other challenge is because there’s not professors who are knowledgeable, they look to you to provide the information to the class. Kind of put you on the spot, particularly when you talk about serving American Indians....If you’re a minority, you’re also seen as being a multicultural person for all cultures and minorities, not just American Indians.

Participants expressed a desire for their professor and classmates to be more knowledgeable about American Indian issues and actively to engage in discussion about these

topics. Additionally, participants felt that they had to be the “spokesperson” for an entire race, even though American Indians are a multi-faceted group and they only represented one segment of that cultural group. Moreover, students expressed that they were viewed as the person to discuss all topics on multiculturalism or minority populations, because of their status as an American Indian student.

Double duty.

Participants noted the challenge of existing in “two worlds,” both the Western academy as well as within Indigenous culture, thus creating a sense of “double duty.” In addition, participants felt that they had to do twice the amount of work than their non-Native peers and colleagues because they had to navigate and speak to two culturally different groups. Furthermore, students had to proactively work to retain their culture within dominant society, as well as produce research that was important to tribal communities, which required additional amounts of work. Fox, a doctoral student at Montana State University, described the challenge of trying to do meaningful work for tribal communities, while also meeting Westernized academic criteria:

If I tried to do a research project the way some of my [non-Native] peers are doing it, I don't feel I would be doing any justice to my community and to myself as an Indigenous person....I still have a responsibility to my relatives in the past and future.

Further, Roy, a doctoral student studying Educational Leadership, discussed how Indigenous research methodologies become double duty, since students often have to produce the foundational work. He also stated that institutions view Indigenous methodologies as unconventional and scrutinize the validity of these research protocols. He described his personal experience of having to publish, prior to finishing his dissertation:

Our research agenda, as Native students, is consistently questioned and therefore when we want to do something different and concise, we're having to do things like publish

before you graduate. And so one of the things that I'm doing is being published this winter in order to provide credibility to my methodology, and in a project that I'm already engaged in...It's not a matter of just finding the research, it's actually, sometimes we have to engage in it ourselves to build that foundation so that we can do exactly what we want to do, and like again, it's double duty.

Roy also stated that American Indian students have to produce research that is relevant to both their tribal communities, as well as meeting the criteria of Westernized educational systems:

We're trying to inform our communities, whereas the institution's view of it is we're here to inform academia, and those are two different worlds. And so...we have to do double duty, to be relevant to both processes.

Graduate student Olivia mentioned that maintaining her culture within a Westernized society was difficult and she felt that she had to work twice as hard compared to her peers to preserve her traditions:

Trying to incorporate the Western education into my belief system is...difficult and it's hard because...it's almost like we have to work harder because our culture means a lot to us. It's almost like were working double, like we're working harder than our peers and our coworkers.

Participants felt that as an American Indian student they had to "work twice as hard" compared to their counterparts to serve their Indigenous communities, while also meeting Westernized academic demands.

Maintain identity.

Many of the participants felt that Westernized education was a threat to their identity as an Indigenous person. As a result, participants became more proactive in maintaining their identity and staying connected to their culture and community, while making sure that American Indians were represented accurately in academe. Natalie stated that education challenged her identity as an Indigenous person and discussed her struggles in academe:

I felt...almost as though being educated meant that I was being less Native, and so it was a pull internally in me, that felt like I was disconnecting from something in order to pursue this Western institution's values and stuff, so that was hard. Then while I was in

the institution, I always felt like I was advocating for a non-Western approach, always, like an Indigenous approach, or to even consider that as being valid. So it was...an identity struggle.

Similarly, Robert stated that graduate school challenged his own traditional beliefs, as well as his identity. He began to proactively stay more connected with his culture by incorporating specific traditional practices. Eventually, Robert believed that graduate school provided him an opportunity to develop a stronger identity and grow as a person, since he had to actively resist assimilating to the majority population:

I'm being indoctrinated into a Western system to the highest degree that a person can be indoctrinated. Here I am as a Native student, and the other layer that Native students have to cope with is how does this sit with my own beliefs, my own identity?... You can't let yourself get lost, your own identity. And that's been really hard. That's why I try to reach out to people. I try to go sweat. I wear things that kind of connect me. I carry my medicine ball, you know, some other things. But it's also been providing me an opportunity to kind of resist that force, allowed me to ground myself more. In one way or another, for better or worse, I come away with a stronger sense of who I am. It's been a real opportunity for me to grow.

Essentially, participants stated that Western academe invalidates the experiences of American Indian students, thus threatening their sense of identity. However, students stated that it also provided an opportunity to develop a stronger sense of identity, despite these circumstances.

Decolonize education.

Decolonizing education is the progressive movement of Indigenous people to reclaim traditional ways of knowing and understanding the world, as opposed to using dominant methodologies that incorporate the ideas of imperialism and colonization (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Interestingly, participants were very active in decolonizing educational frameworks within their fields of study. Participants described this endeavor as empowering, yet still very challenging, since they had limited support and guidance in the process. Participants worked on decolonizing

educational frameworks by voicing their perspectives in the classroom, incorporating appropriate research methodologies, and by creating culturally relevant theories.

Brandon, a first-year graduate student, worked to decolonize Social Work theoretical orientations and practices within his program, specifically by critiquing philosophical foundations viewed as inappropriate, invalid, or overtly racist toward Indigenous populations.

Brandon said some of his peers would question his criticism of theories in the classroom, and he credited this to their continued exposure to mainstream knowledge:

A few people in the program sort of didn't understand why we were critiquing a lot of frameworks. They're like, 'Oh, you know this framework works. Why would you try to poke holes in it?' And a lot of the discussion in the first few weeks at least were sort of—not heated, but they were a bit more intense, like as far as you know, having people, dominant knowledge, people sort of stretch their own thinking beyond that. And so that's—I'd say that's probably been maybe one of the more bigger challenges I've sort of encountered.

Heather discussed appropriate methodologies to use with American Indian populations, indicating that qualitative methodologies may be more appropriate than quantitative methodologies. Fortunately, Heather has an Indigenous research lab within her program, where she can discuss such topics with fellow classmates and advisers:

Research is very Westernized, and being able to work within an Indigenous research lab and being able to talk about how a lot of research approaches aren't in line with Native research, and so looking more at the community based, more participatory research or grounded theory. How that works better with Indigenous cultures than, you know, doing some stats on people.

Fox discussed the importance of developing trusting relationships with research participants prior to collecting data, as reflective of Indigenous research methodology. She stated that quantitative methodologies devalue individuals, while Indigenous methodologies focus on individual backgrounds, as well as the power of story ownership:

Collect the data, put it into the statistical analysis, here are your results. And we don't look at people's backgrounds or where they come from or why their identity is larger

than just who they are. I think that really narrows our scope of what we're able to do as graduate students. And sometimes I think it makes it really difficult for us. Specifically in my study, I wanted to be able to share story, and I wanted students to be able to be comfortable with me....And explaining to the academy—I have to spend time with these students and build a relationship before I can expect them to give me their stories was sometimes a little bit foreign. They were like, 'Can't you just give them a gift certificate and have them fill out the survey and call them participant one?' And I was like, 'No, I don't think I'm going to get the answers that I'm looking for if I don't ask the questions in a way that I need to.'

Fox called her way of collecting data “Indigenous research methodology,” which incorporated the values of identity and storytelling into her research project. It is imperative for Indigenous studies to decolonize methodologies to empower tribal nations and create a more diverse worldview within education, which is often a process that is only initiated by Native American students.

Historical trauma.

Participants stated that historical trauma has greatly impacted their personal lives and academic lives. In particular, Robert and Jennifer said that mission schools and boarding schools tried to eradicate their Indigenous culture and language. Robert talked about this mother's boarding school experience and how it contributed to language loss:

When my mother went to school—my mother went to boarding school, and she was punished for speaking Navajo. And that's why I don't speak Navajo, because my mom thought it would be easier.

Jennifer also said that missionary schools played a huge role in removing her traditional language and traditions:

Back at my home we have two different, a mission school, two different boarding schools that really destroyed a lot of our culture, so I didn't grow up knowing our language and traditions.

Kathleen compared her persistence in graduate school to her ancestor's overall resiliency. More specifically, she explained that her grandmother was a survivor of the Wounded Knee massacre.

She said her struggles as a graduate student were not comparable to her ancestors' experiences, because her ancestors endured and survived traumatic experiences:

One of my ancestors is a survivor of Wounded Knee, and she survived that. This [graduate school] should be a walk in the park.... So one of my grandmothers that is my mentor, her grandmother survived an intentional starvation of our people. I don't remember how many people died, but her grandmother was a young girl. So they just did what they needed to [do] to survive. So I think about that and I got a warm place to live, I got food in my fridge. So this to me is hard, but there's so much more that I could be trying to do to survive.

Lastly, Fox said that historical trauma impacts American Indians' everyday experiences. She said that historical trauma not only affects their professional and academic lives, but it also impacts their ability to exist and survive:

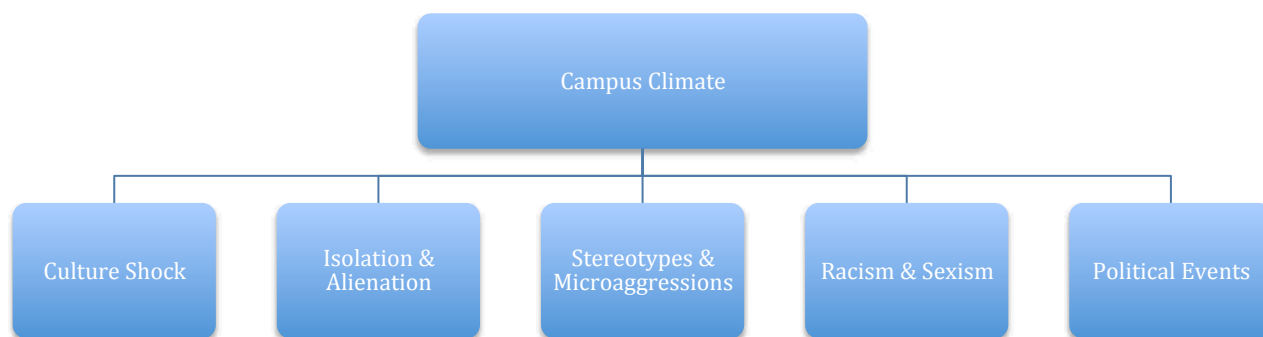
We've been through so much. We've all experienced poverty at some level. We've all experienced racism. None of us are untouched, unscathed deeply by colonialism. And the more we become aware of it, the more we become aware of our scars. So there's so much that we've been affected by, we've had to push through just to live. Not just to get an education or to get a job or to go to school for something, or to help put somebody through school, but just literally to live and to breathe and to exist.

Participants discussed their exposure to historical trauma, indicating that it has impacted their life in various ways.

Climate.

Participants discussed that the campus or program climate created a challenging atmosphere at times for Indigenous students attending mainstream institutions. Students described their experience of cultural shock as they moved to larger, more urban areas that were culturally different than their tribal communities. In addition, participants felt culturally alienated since they were often the only Native student in their program and they felt that their graduate program was isolated from the rest of campus. Students also noted that they have felt "othered" throughout their program, and were highly cognizant of stereotypes and microaggressions prevalent among the campus community. Students experienced instances of

overt racism and sexism within their programs and/or internships. Data collection was conducted during the 2016 presidential election season. In light of this specific political event, students were highly distressed and often questioned their own sense of well-being and safety as a member of a minority population.



Culture shock.

Participants described their feelings of cultural dissonance, or culture shock, when they initially moved to urban areas to attend mainstream institutions. Brandon explained that many American Indian students struggle with culture shock when they attend college, especially when they are separated from their families. He said, “There’s a lot of community and familial support with a lot of Native American students. And I think that it’s hard when a lot of them move away from home. There’s that aspect of culture shock.” Lori, a non-traditional student, explained her personal experience with culture shock when she was accepted into graduate school and moved to Bozeman. Lori continued to persevere, despite her initial culture shock of traveling to a large community that was predominantly non-Native. She talked more in-depth about her emotional experience with cultural shock as she was on campus, seeking out any type of support system:

The most challenging part was the cultural shock of pulling into Bozeman and I came on campus and I was in near tears that entire day and thinking that I need to talk to somebody. I need to see some kind of support group, and I came over here to the NAS department and basically didn’t know anybody, didn’t know who to reach out to, and just kept persevering.

Although participants were in graduate school, many students expressed experiences of culture shock. This was most evident in students who were first year graduate students, transfer students, or non-traditional students. Participants desired support services during this transition period, stating that it was an overwhelming and stressful experience.

Political events.

The researcher conducted the majority of interviews during the 2016 presidential election. Overall, many different political events influenced students' persistence, whether it was perceived as a negative or positive influential event. Such events had many participants questioning their sense of well-being and safety as a minority student on campus and within their community. Danielle, a doctoral student, stated that she was fearful that the recently elected president would support legislation that would threaten American Indian sovereignty and tribal lands:

I was...crying almost the whole day because I was like, 'What are we going to do?' There's so many Native Americans out there that are going to be discriminated against easily and we don't know what's going to happen to our reservation, our government system, like everything that we have.

The 2016 presidential election was a segment of history that included influences of misogyny, racism, sexism, and xenophobic attitudes. These national politics had negative impacts on the campus climates and communities in Montana. Robert discussed an alleged attack on a fellow Native student on campus and talked about his own sense of well-being after the election season. He also stressed the importance of diverse nations to be united during this time: "We got to come together and support each other. Natives, Muslims, transgender individuals, people with disabilities." After the alleged attack on a fellow Native American student, Robert began to question his own safety on campus:

Do I feel safe? Maybe that's over-concern, maybe that's paranoia, but there's also a part of me that says you just have to trust and see where this goes. Don't drop your guard, be prepared, but also don't get all crazy stressed out.

Due to the most recent presidential election, students stressed and began to question their safety as minority students. Many students developed self-coping skills to deal with feelings of uncertainty as they persisted in graduate school. Other students found refuge within their graduate program, stating that their professors and classmates were very supportive during this time. Evidently, national political events do have some influence on the college campus climate and atmosphere.

Isolation and alienation.

Participants felt both isolated and alienated either on campus or within their graduate programs. Partly because their graduate program was separated from the main campus, participants felt isolated. Students also sensed moments of isolation because some academic tasks were very independent, such as writing a dissertation or doing independent research. Many students described their graduate programs as more insular; therefore, they felt more disconnected from the main campus. A sense of cultural alienation arose from the fact that participants were often the only minority representative in their program. Therefore, students felt culturally alienated as an American Indian student attending a primarily white institution (PWI).

Several participants said that they were the only Native American within their entire graduate program. For example, Andrea said, "There was a lot of classes that I took and I was the only Native. I felt like—I was the only Native and I was the only minority in those classes. So just being the only one, I guess, is the other challenge." Moreover, Charles stated that there were only two Native American students in his graduate program: "I mean, we have a good

[Native American] population on campus, but in terms of the program that I'm in, there's not a lot of Natives in it right now. There's me and one other person." Ashley described the difficulty of being misunderstood in her graduate program due to cultural differences: "It can be really hard to go through something you don't understand and where people don't understand you." Essentially, participants felt American Indians were underrepresented in their graduate programs, which contributed to their feelings of cultural alienation.

Isolation was another common phenomenon among American Indian graduate students. Participants said that they felt disconnected from other students and the rest of campus, due to the insular nature of graduate programs. Danielle discussed her lack of communication with other graduate students: "I don't know any other grad students, just because we're so, I think each grad program is so closed off, that you don't realize that there's other people around (laughs), and that other people are doing the same thing and struggling the same way." Participants also expressed a concern with not feeling a part of their graduate program, due to their race. Natalie said she felt "othered" during class, but that students and professors did this unintentionally and without ill intentions:

The whole message that you are 'other than,' I think that's really strong. So for example, we'll be talking about psychology, and then they'll be talking, 'So how do they do that in, like, Native communities?' And it's like it's great that they're considering that, but it's also like this is psychology and then you're 'other.' 'So what do we do here?' I always had that feeling of [being] an outsider within the program. So I felt like I [was] always hypervigilant about, about the otherness.

Natalie also expressed that she felt "othered" in class when a professor couldn't remember the minority students' names, yet remembered all the other students' names in her class:

Just other things that make you feel 'othered.'...One of the professors that we had for the entire semester didn't even learn my name.... Well, there was two native students in class. There was this woman who was in our program who is Mexican, and I felt that we were more of the brown skinned people. So he just saw us as one person, and he merged our names together into one. So he would call us both [name]. And it was just like, 'Really?

There's only six people in this class. Like, is it that hard?' It just reinforced that idea that...people see brownness. Like, kind of the invisible, or if you are visible...it just felt like it was less valued.

Participants discussed experiences of isolation and alienation while attending graduate programs or professional degree programs. More specifically, participants felt isolated due to the insular nature of their graduate program, thus feeling disconnected to other students and the rest of campus. Additionally, students felt culturally alienated because they were often the only minority within their program.

Stereotypes and microaggressions.

Participants were highly cognizant of preconceived notions, stereotypes, and microaggressions that existed about American Indian people, impacting their ability to feel comfortable or to feel as though they belonged in the graduate program. Tiffany felt that students within her program had developed preconceived notions about American Indians. She said, "I just felt different. I only had only one other Native student [in class] and it was really different because I felt [that] they always had their assumptions about what Natives were, and what our culture was."

Racial microaggressions are defined as "a form of system, every day racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place" (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2014, p. 298). Robert explained the complex nature of microaggressions. He said, "It's more difficult to work with the microaggressions because people are like, 'That's not really racism, that's something else.' It's more difficult to root out. But it's so much more pervasive." Melissa gave a specific example of a microaggression she encountered in her class: "Last year in one of my classes, the professor stopped one of my classes and looked at me and said, 'What do you like to be called?' And I was like that's probably not okay to do, because I'm not every Indian person ever." Melissa said

that she felt that her professor's comment in class was inappropriate and could be viewed as a microaggression.

Participants also explained that stereotypes and microaggressions impacted their cognitive performance, as well as their behavior within the program. Stereotypes are defined as “a set of constraints between knowledge about a group, the explicit use of labels about group members, and perceived equivalence of group members” (McGarty, 2002, p. 36). Natalie spoke in depth about how stereotypes impacted her performance as a student and future professional:

I was always vigilant about stereotypes. I was very aware that people had stereotypes about Montana, and about Native people in Montana. And so I felt like I almost had to preemptively educate people where they are overly glamorizing being Native, or like ideas about, like, alcoholism, and about parenting and things like that. I always felt like I had to educate on those issues, before we ever had any conversation because I didn't want to have to go off on somebody. And so even with alcoholism, you know when everybody would go out to have drinks, like the cohort, I was very aware that there was stereotypes about Natives drinking, so I [was] always aware of that. So I always made sure that I was in control of myself, never...I didn't feel like I had the luxury that other students did, to just kind of explore themselves, and make mistakes and learn from them. I felt like I had to be on top of it, because I definitely felt like people saw me as Native, I represented that, so I felt that responsibility.

Participants stated that stereotypes and microaggressions were a prevalent part of their graduate program, which made them feel uncomfortable and unwelcomed in the educational setting.

Racism and sexism.

Participants encountered experiences of racism and sexism. These were experienced within and outside the academic setting; however, both instances contributed to a challenging atmosphere while students attended graduate school. In particular, Heather stated that during her practicum/internship she encountered racism from her clients. “When we started doing therapy with people from the community, there was a lot of microaggressions and sometimes overt racism against Native people.” She explained in more detail, stating that her source of support during this time included other Native students, as opposed to faculty:

We would see them [clients] for individual therapy, and so people would come in and say things to us directly, or people in the research lab had experienced it directly. So just being able to talk about that with other Native students was really helpful. Because the department tries to be supportive, but they're not Native, so they don't know exactly. Like, they may be a sexual minority, or a minority in another way, so they can kind of try to relate what it was like if someone made a microaggression toward us or something like that. But just being able to talk about it with other Native students, they could say, 'Yeah, this is what happened to me. This is how I dealt with it.'

Robert talked about the impact of historical trauma on Indigenous communities and the pervasive racism that still exists against this population:

People think it's all in the past. Everybody does. That's a blanket statement, and I want to retract that, but it's with us and it's an ongoing process, this historical trauma stuff. So your feelings really becoming invalidated, you know, 'Why are you so angry? What do you have—why? Everything's great for you guys. You have your casinos, you don't pay taxes, you get monthly checks.'

Racism was a prevalent experience for participants, which contributed to their feelings of being hurt, angry, confused, or unwelcomed in various settings.

Furthermore, participants discussed their instances of sexism. The majority (17 out of 25) of the participants identified as female, and 14 out of the 17 female participants had children. This is reflective of the literature, indicating that a large majority of American Indian graduate students are women with children. As a result, many of the female participants discussed their experiences of sexism. Heather felt that a double standard existed in her program when it came to expecting parents:

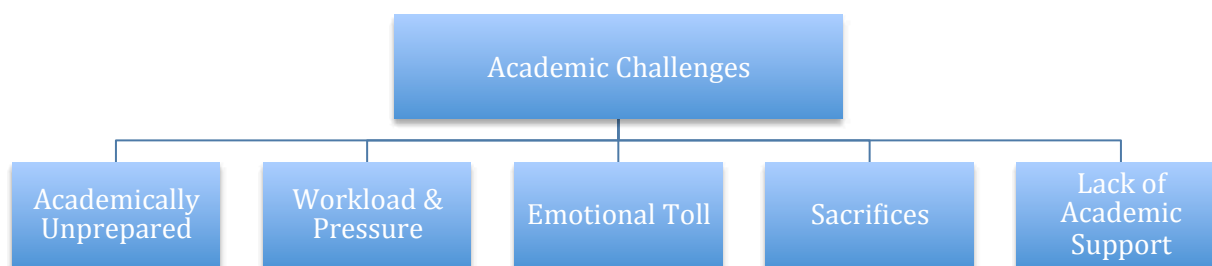
The only person who had had a child in the program was male, and so I feel like there was a lot more congratulations for that individual, and then when people found out that I was pregnant, it was more like, 'Oh, what are you going to do?'

Natalie described her experience of sexism. She explained that she was pregnant during graduate school and that her colleagues indicated that this was synonymous with the end of a career. "As soon as I got pregnant, and I was in the department I could just feel the idea of like, 'Oh there goes your career.'" Additionally, Natalie said, 'I think people even mentioned to me, that I

wouldn't be able to apply to internship this year, because I just had a baby....So that pushed me even harder to finish my dissertation and get my internship.” Natalie said that these sentiments gave her more desire to persist and finish graduate school.

Academic challenges.

Participants described academic challenges encountered in graduate school. Regarding educational challenges, many participants felt unprepared for graduate school, referencing their first generation status, lack of family guidance, and secondary education as a reason for not being adequately prepared. In addition, students felt that they possessed unique learning styles, which was contradictory to Western academe's teaching style. Participants also encountered intense workloads and pressure, which may be a challenge shared with the majority of graduate students' experiences. Students said that graduate school took an emotional toll because they encountered moments of intimidation, anger, and guilt throughout various stages of the program. Additionally, students reported a lack institutional support, as well as mentorship for Native American graduate students. Lastly, students had to make several sacrifices, specifically time with loved ones, to stay focused on their academic goals, thus limiting another personal support system.



Academically unprepared.

Many participants felt unprepared for the academic demands of graduate school. Additionally, several participants identified as first generation students and indicated that

sometimes their family couldn't provide any academic or professional advice. Therefore, participants were uncertain about the application process, as well as options for graduate degrees and fields. As students were successfully admitted into programs, many felt academically unprepared for the academic rigor, as well as the demands for professional development.

Fox, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, stated that some individuals have been more prepared for college than others, indicating that these individuals have had more academic resources and family to guide their plans:

There are those who didn't grow up on or near a reservation, and were part of school systems that had a lot more resources, that were able to put you on a trajectory into college, and maybe parents or uncles or just people around could give you more help financially, academically, to kind of help you through a program. Maybe even proofread your papers, or suggest courses or books or something.

Fox stated that she did not have these resources, nor was she on a trajectory to college.

Therefore, she said the entire collegiate experience was a learning process, but that she gathered strength in character along her educational journey.

Similarly, Kathleen, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, talked about her experience regarding the application and admittance process for her doctoral program, explaining that she was unprepared for the professional expectations of graduate school:

I didn't have any other people who told me much about getting into graduate school. I didn't even know anything about looking up who would be a good adviser. I didn't look up anything really about developing a good research statement. So really I don't think I was really a competitive applicant, or graduate student when I look back.

Kathleen discussed her interview with her adviser prior to her acceptance into graduate school, indicating that she did not realize the formality of the application process:

I came bopping into his office one day for a meeting. I had a conference here in Missoula, so he scheduled a meeting and I came in with jeans and my cap on. I just thought, 'Oh, this is a chance to meet the person that's going to be my adviser.' And it wasn't. It wasn't really a chance to meet my adviser, it was more of an interview to see if

I was a good fit, and I didn't know about that. And he's very, very highly regarded in the field internationally and I didn't realize that...that was a steep learning curve.

Participants felt unprepared for the academic and professional demands of graduate school. Students noted that their secondary education did not equip them with the skills they needed for graduate school. Although participants stated that the application process was feasible, they were uncertain about graduate degree options and fields. In addition, participants seemed unaware of formal professional procedures and expectations required throughout graduate school.

Workload and pressure.

Participants noted that workload and pressure had greatly increased in their graduate experience, compared to their undergraduate experience. Noah said that graduate school required more responsibilities. Thus, the workload, pressure, and stress increased with the demand:

In graduate school there seems more responsibility, there's more...people rely on you more, people in your lab, your PI [principal investigator] relies on you more to get work done and make progress and things like that. So I think with the more demands or expectations there can become more stress and pressure.

Brandon and Andrea also discussed the increased expectations and pressure of graduate school. In particular, Brandon explained that as a representative of a minority population, he felt more pressure to succeed in school: "It's a bit more intense. There's a lot more work—a lot more. I think there's more expected of me, as far as being a grad student. I know it was a big deal when I got in and so it's a bit more—I feel like it's a bit more pressure." Moreover, Andrea stated that graduate school requires self-discipline, especially when the department has high expectations of student academic achievement: "It's expected to—that you get all A's (laughs). And anything less than an A would be failing, or looked down upon by the professor and especially by the

department.” Overall, students described graduate school as having a tough and demanding work schedule, with more responsibilities and expectations of achieving academic excellence.

Emotional toll.

Many graduate students experienced an emotional toll while pursuing higher leveled degrees. Some of these emotions included anger, guilt, and a sense of intimidation. Students expressed anger when they started to realize certain social injustices that occurred in society, specifically those among American Indian populations. In addition, participants felt guilty for leaving their family and/or tribal communities to seek out education at mainstream institutions. Participants also disclosed that at times they felt intimidated by their classmates and/or the graduate program. However, they started to gain confidence when they received positive feedback from classmates and professors, or received good grades.

Participants became more cognizant and aware of social injustices, which caused them to become angered about certain topics. Participants noted that they dealt with this emotion in an appropriate way, often turning to their traditional thoughts and viewpoints. Robert explained that his anger was related to understanding the manifestations of historical trauma among Indigenous communities, especially through the lens of practicing clinical psychology:

The other aspect that’s been really challenging is you start learning about mental health, how it affects people, then the other things like race, socio-economic status, gender, all those different aspects of diversity. For me, it always hits home in the way of Native Americans. And getting pretty angry—getting pretty very angry when you understand why things are the way that they are and how it affects people. I see people every day. I see clients who are Native, and they might not recognize it, and I might not necessarily put it out there on the table, but sometimes I do with this is part of the experience Native people have. I see poverty, I see trauma, I see substance use, I see racism. And then how these things work together, I see historical trauma. As a person trying to help people, you know, and I think this was one of the reasons why I wanted to be in school, is I can’t help but be upset that these things are out there. That also feeds into me wanting to do something about it. So dealing with those feelings and trying not to be that cynical person, trying to maintain a balanced worldview.

Participants experienced various bouts of anger throughout their graduate school experience, but it was mostly a result of students' understanding of social injustices, particularly within American Indian communities.

Several participants discussed a sense of intimidation while applying for and pursuing graduate school. However, as time progressed participants realized that they were highly capable of being successful in college. Samuel, for example, felt intimidated in graduate school because he transferred from a small tribal community college: "At first, I was a little intimidated coming from a tribal college...and then as things moved along, then I did get a little more comfortable and see that, 'Hey, I am bright enough to be here and I can do this.'" Charles, Rachel, Tiffany, and Olivia discussed their experiences of feeling intimidated throughout their graduate experiences. Charles said, "Sometimes I feel like I'm not as articulate as some people. I mean, I probably am, I just sell myself short a lot, being a minority in that sense." Rachel was also intimidated by her classmates' age and experiences:

Sometimes I'm really, really intimidated by this because a lot of the people are a lot older and they tried for a lot of years to get in, they finally got in, so I was really intimidated. People were coming from 'We did work in Africa,' 'We did work over here, across the sea.' And now this is where they landed so I was really intimidated by these people. I just came from a little town in Montana.

Tiffany said she didn't feel equivalent to her peers considering that she was from a rural area: "Coming from a little tiny reservation...then you go into these programs and it feels like, sometimes it feels like...you're not as good as the rest." Olivia also discussed her apprehension about graduate school, but as time progressed she realized that she was able to contribute a lot of content to her online class:

At first I was a little apprehensive, because that's just how I was, this whole time about my feeling about going to get my master's. I would psych myself out, and think that I couldn't do it and that it was going to be hard, but it actually was not hard at all. I mean, I would psych myself out a couple times, but once I found a routine of doing weekly

discussion with my peers and finding some good things to talk about, it kept me going and my main focus was always the Native American population.

Intimidation was a common phenomenon among participants' experience in graduate school.

However, students noted that encouragement and positive feedback from professors, as well as academic success contributed to their confidence and decreased these negative feelings.

Sacrifices.

Graduate students said that they had to make a lot of sacrifices to pursue college. In addition, their family also made sacrifices. Many participants were parents, so they often had to uproot their family and move to a more urban area to attend college. Participants also stated that they had to sacrifice their social life, as well as time with friends and family to stay focused on their academic goals.

Participants and their entire family had to sacrifice time away from their tribal communities. Kathleen stated that her children have made sacrifices for her to attend college: "You know my sense of responsibility or my sense of something towards my kids, they have sacrificed so much of their childhood being here, so I better make it worth their while."

Additionally, Fox mentioned that American Indian students often have to give time away from their communities to pursue higher-levelled degrees:

Now we've committed to this [college] again for x amount of years and keep us away from our community, and you want to be visible within your community, so you don't feel like you get lost or you're not a part of it anymore. So that's another sort of sacrifice that we have as graduate students, it's extending that state where we feel like we're not home.

Participants and their families made a lot of sacrifices to attend graduate school, such as spending time together and attending social events. Additionally, participants stated that they had to sacrifice time away from their tribal community to pursue graduate school at a mainstream institution.

Lack of academic support.

Participants felt an absence of institutional support for American Indians on campus. A few participants stated that they were so isolated within their graduate program that they did not feel any support exterior to graduate school. Other participants attended either online programs or hybridized programs, where they were less involved with campus, thus depended more on personal supports such as family. Lastly, some participants noted that institutional support was absent because American Indian students were not a priority within their academic institution or state.

Participants felt that they were unprepared for graduate school and desired mentorship to help navigate the complexities of professional programs. More specifically, they desired mentorship from other American Indians and from those already in the professional field. Often, participants had to seek out their own sources of mentorship. Joyce said she did not have any mentors for her specific field of study:

In the MBA program, I make every effort to reach out to fellow students and mentors because it's very important to feel connected. In the Indian world, I don't have any mentors or peers who can relate to this particular field of study.

Olivia discussed her personal experience regarding a lack of institutional support. She talked about her experience as a minority recruiter, indicating that American Indian students do not bring in a large amount of income to college; thus, they are not considered a priority by institutions:

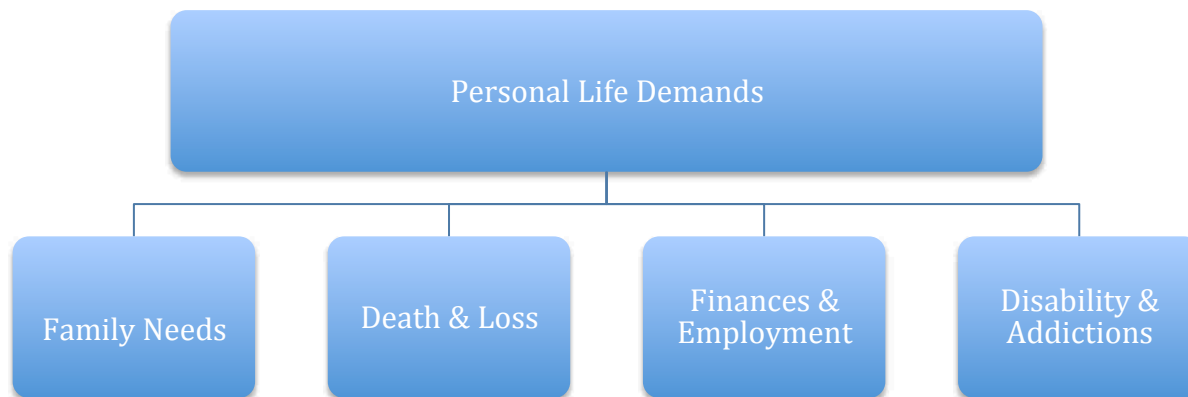
I was actually employed as a college recruiter, as a minority recruiter for [name of institution] in 2012 to 2013. So I got to see...the other side of the educational system in the college. And it has a lot to do with money, because we are minorities, Native Americans, and we get help with our tuition. The priority for Native Americans at [name of institution] is kind of put on the back burner because we don't bring in an awful lot of money for the college. The importance of recruiting Native Americans, it just was not there and I already knew that as a Native American student, but seeing it from their

perspective, it was like, 'Oh, that's why you guys don't support Native Americans because we don't make you guys money.'

Students identified a lack of academic support as a challenge, specifically focusing on a lack of mentorship and institutional support as the most pronounced deficits at mainstream institutions.

Personal life demands.

Participants discussed their personal life demands or challenges as very impactful in their ability to persist in graduate school. Students stated that sometimes other responsibilities preceded their academic goals. The majority of this sample included American Indian women, who were either expecting or had children. Additionally, participants were also caring for nieces, nephews, siblings, and/or parents. They discussed their family demands, as well as cultural perceptions of the concept of family. In addition, several participants experienced a significant loss during their graduate experience, with a couple who had experienced a series of family deaths. Some participants gained employment outside of school, or had to send scholarship money home to help pay for family needs. Students also acknowledged divorce or separation as very stressful situations, indicating that such events significantly impacted their finances as well as living arrangements. In particular, two students struggled with homelessness but were able to successfully complete the semester. Students also disclosed disabilities, stating that they either received institutional accommodations or learned how to care for their own needs to maintain their academics. Lastly, a few participants disclosed their substance abuse addictions, all of which were currently in sobriety as they persisted in graduate school. Overall, participants discussed the notion that the more challenges they have endured in life, the stronger they have developed their character, which has contributed to their ability to persist in graduate school.



Family needs.

Participants talked about their additional responsibilities outside of class, which involved taking care of children and family. Many participants viewed their family role as more important than their academic life at times. As a result, participants often put their academic plans on hold, or reduced their workload to support their family goals. Additionally, many participants were caring for their nieces, nephews, or siblings in a parental manner as well. Participants acknowledged that their children had to make sacrifices for their ability to attend college. As a result, participants tried to keep their children connected to their culture, family, and community by making several trips home to their tribal communities.

Olivia discussed the cultural value of family, indicating that her familial responsibilities come before her academic responsibilities. Additionally, Olivia found out that she was expecting a baby after she got accepted into graduate school, but was positive that she would be able to balance her priorities. As a result, Olivia opted to take online classes so she could care for her children at home and fulfill her familial responsibilities:

I am a mother and a wife and so my responsibilities for my children and my husband come first. And so that was probably why I didn't go back [to graduate school] right away too, because, well, my son is ten, my oldest son, and we just had our daughter in 2014, so that was kind of a hold up as well. To kind of just focus on my family, and then, I'm pregnant now, and so I'm do in March. But when I enrolled in school, this was

before I got pregnant and so I made the decision before we got pregnant and so my responsibilities kind of collided.

Noah, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, stated that as a graduate student he wasn't able to spend long hours studying or doing schoolwork because of his parental responsibilities:

I kind of realized when I came here for graduate school that I wasn't probably able to study as much because of being a parent and doing a lot of driving to pick up my daughter and so I kind of just made the low standard, that I need to pass all my classes with a B or higher. I don't care about getting an A or B, which was very different from being an undergraduate, where I had always like I had to get an A in the class... In graduate school, I was just like, I got more responsibility now...as long as I pass the class and it's acceptable by my committee or the program, then that's all that really matters and as long as I learn something.

Participants indicated that their academic performance was sometimes compromised because they had family responsibilities and priorities.

Family was expressed as a cultural value. As a result, participants had several responsibilities to their family, indicating that they were caring for their children and/or extended family. They stated that several of their colleagues were able to devote more time to school, since they didn't have similar family responsibilities. Ashley, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, said that she had to balance several family responsibilities, which didn't allow her to spend long hours on campus. Many of her colleagues didn't have similar responsibilities. As a result, she felt as though the program questioned her commitment, even though she believed she was working harder than most of her peers by balancing two different obligations:

Everybody in my lab has a kid, which is something that the rest of our non-Native colleagues don't have. And I don't think that was really taken into consideration, just how big family is a part of Native students. And that you might have to go home for long periods of time, and you might have an extended family living with you for a while, and you're taking care of maybe your nieces or nephews. You have other things going on that you can't neglect. Maybe your colleagues can, where they devote, and they stay in the lab from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Well, that just can't happen with a lot of Native students, and because of that, you're overlooked or—I don't want to say punished—but they

don't—the perception is you don't work as hard, when you're really—I think, working harder. You're balancing two huge obligations. And I don't think they understand that at all.

Kathleen stated that her children made sacrifices for her to attend college at the University of Montana. Kathleen worked very hard to keep her children connected to their culture and homeland. This resulted in several trips home, which became a huge expense:

One thing that was hard was being away from my own reservation, when I first moved here. We would go back once a month, because I wanted my boys to be connected to family and I was homesick...I wanted to make sure they still had an identity connected to their tribal lands. That was important to me and that gets expensive, because it's like a 12-hour drive and then same thing with my daughter. Trying to make sure she gets back to her reservation.

Participants identified family as a huge priority and sometimes, family needs took precedence to their academics, despite participants' commitment to school.

Death and loss.

Participants discussed the prevalent issues of death and loss among American Indian communities. Additionally, participants noted that students are expected to be in attendance for funeral services, indicating that they must return to their home communities and leave their graduate program for a period of time. Participants stated that it is important for graduate programs to understand the cultural values that surround death, as well as to be able to support students during this time. Michelle talked about the loss of her nephew, which happened on a day that she was supposed to give a final presentation:

Montana in general has a high suicide rate so I had experienced the suicide of my nephew while I'm driving to give a presentation and I get the phone call at seven in the morning. It was really, really challenging and I'm sure suicide isn't just a minority subject. It's more like isolation and stuff like that, but it was really hard. That was the most horrible day to go in and I'm balling my eyes out and have to tell my professor I can't present because of this. Luckily I had my thumb drive, [and] he took my presentation.

As evident in Michelle's statement, it is imperative for professors to provide support and appropriate accommodations for students during times of loss and grief.

Kathleen and Natalie also experienced several losses throughout their graduate program. Kathleen experienced the loss of several grandparents within a short period of time. She said that she lived 12 hours away from home and couldn't attend all the services, which weighed heavily on her heart:

One of the hardest things is...losing loved ones. I've lost both of my paternal grandparents. I lost one of my grandmas, who was like 98, and there was this fall and spring, just a series of deaths. I think in one month, there was 11, and so you can only choose how many you can go back for, and it's, kind of is frustrating. I mean, my selfishness, it's like, 'Geez, I wish I would have hurried up and finished [graduated] so that they could see me.'

Natalie also talked about a series of deaths she experienced over the course of several years in graduate school. She said she experienced at least one death every year while enrolled. Natalie chose not to communicate her losses to her program, because she felt as though they wouldn't be able to understand or relate to her experiences:

It was so hard to really connect with people because, you know, like somebody in my program might have one of those [deaths] in ten years. And I had one at least every year. And so I know that they knew. I didn't feel specifically or particularly supported by them, because I didn't feel like somebody could understand that experience, except for people who've had experienced [it].

She explained her grief as an ongoing process:

I don't know if I could have articulated the grief that I felt, and that it's complicated. It's not that you just grieve this person and then it's over. It's like there's so many more triggered by that, and you're grieving more than just that [one] death.

Many participants experienced a death within their graduate experience, or were grieving over a previous death experienced prior to graduate school. Two participants experienced a series of deaths during their graduate school experience. Participants stated that grief interfered with their cognitive abilities and they often had to postpone academic assignments. Participants said that increased academic flexibility and support from their program were vital during this time.

Finances and employment.

Participants discussed financial strain as they attended graduate school, especially in terms of having to provide for a family without full-time employment and living on financial aid. In particular, William received several scholarships and funding opportunities; however, he chose to send money home to his family throughout the semester:

For the first half of the semester, it was really hard because [it was] just my mom and little sister and I wasn't there to take care of them anymore, and so, my mom's car is breaking down, she's about to get evicted, and all these things, and I have my scholarships now, so I was always sending money to them, that part was just me not being able to be there.

Due to family responsibilities, many participants had to gain employment outside of school.

Natalie explained her work and school schedule, noting that she rarely had time to sleep, nor go home:

I continued to work full-time my first two years of graduate school, and it was just so hard. Like I was working nights, like 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. I can sleep a couple hours during the night, there at the, it was a group home, like a crisis group home. And then I was going to school from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and not going home because I lived out in the Bitterroot Valley. So I had to just stay in Missoula, so that was really tough, and it was, but I needed to make enough money to pay for the bills and stuff. It was hard for me to relate to any of the other students, because I felt like they were all here on this sort of exploration of, like, their identity, and I was doing what I needed to do, to...build a life for my family.

Work outside of school contributed to students' level of exhaustion, sometimes compromising their time to study and participate in extra academic activities.

Homelessness.

Two participants were homeless for a period of time during their graduate school experience. However, they eventually gained a place to live partway through the semester. These participants received housing either through self-advocacy or peer and program support.

Lori, a non-traditional student at Montana State University, talked about her first three weeks of being homeless while she entered graduate school. Lori sought out dormitory residence but was denied:

The first night I spent in my truck. I slept the night in my truck. I had no place to go. I had two, three days of classes and I knew I can hotel up the next night. I had enough money for that. So I went ahead and hoteled up the next night. Absolutely no scholarship money to attend, no funding whatsoever, and I went to the financial aid and put in my FAFSA and found out that I could apply for a loan. And so I had continued to persevere homeless for about three weeks, came here went to housing, they said they had nothing. One lady, maybe she misunderstood me when I asked about the dormitory, 'We're full.' So I thought, well, maybe graduates can't stay in the dorms, so I left.

Lori then turned to social services but was turned down for receiving any type of residential services. She remained homeless until she was able to reconnect with the dormitory, which had some available rooms. Eventually, Lori moved into a dorm and persevered, earning excellent grades for that semester.

Samuel, a doctoral student, had separated with his wife during the semester. As a result, he became homeless and was living out of his vehicle. Fortunately, a colleague talked to the dean of his school, and he was given temporary student housing:

So I lived in my car for the past week and thankfully [colleague's name] talked to the dean of [name of school] on my behalf. I didn't even ask her, and then I got a place at [apartment complex name] for a week and I don't have to pay.

Samuel said he felt a wealth of support from his friends and program during this difficult time, which was why he was able to obtain temporary housing. Both participants were able to finish the semester successfully.

Disability and addictions.

Participants disclosed disabilities, as well as addictions. One participant felt that her program and institution had been very supportive and had provided adequate accommodations for her disability. Another participant learned self-coping skills of how to manage her disability while pursuing graduate school. Participants also described substance abuse issues, and how they have maintained their sobriety through self-care. Samuel stated that he was struggling with his addiction during the onset of his program, but currently is in recovery:

At the time, I thought that I was hiding it pretty well, but I struggled with alcohol. I was doing so good academically, but as far as being involved with things as a graduate student, as it should be, and being a professional, and of course I went to present and things like that. [I] went to AISES in Florida a couple years ago, got third place in an oral presentation, things like that, but I was still hiding my alcoholism. I thought I was doing a good job, but actually people could see it.

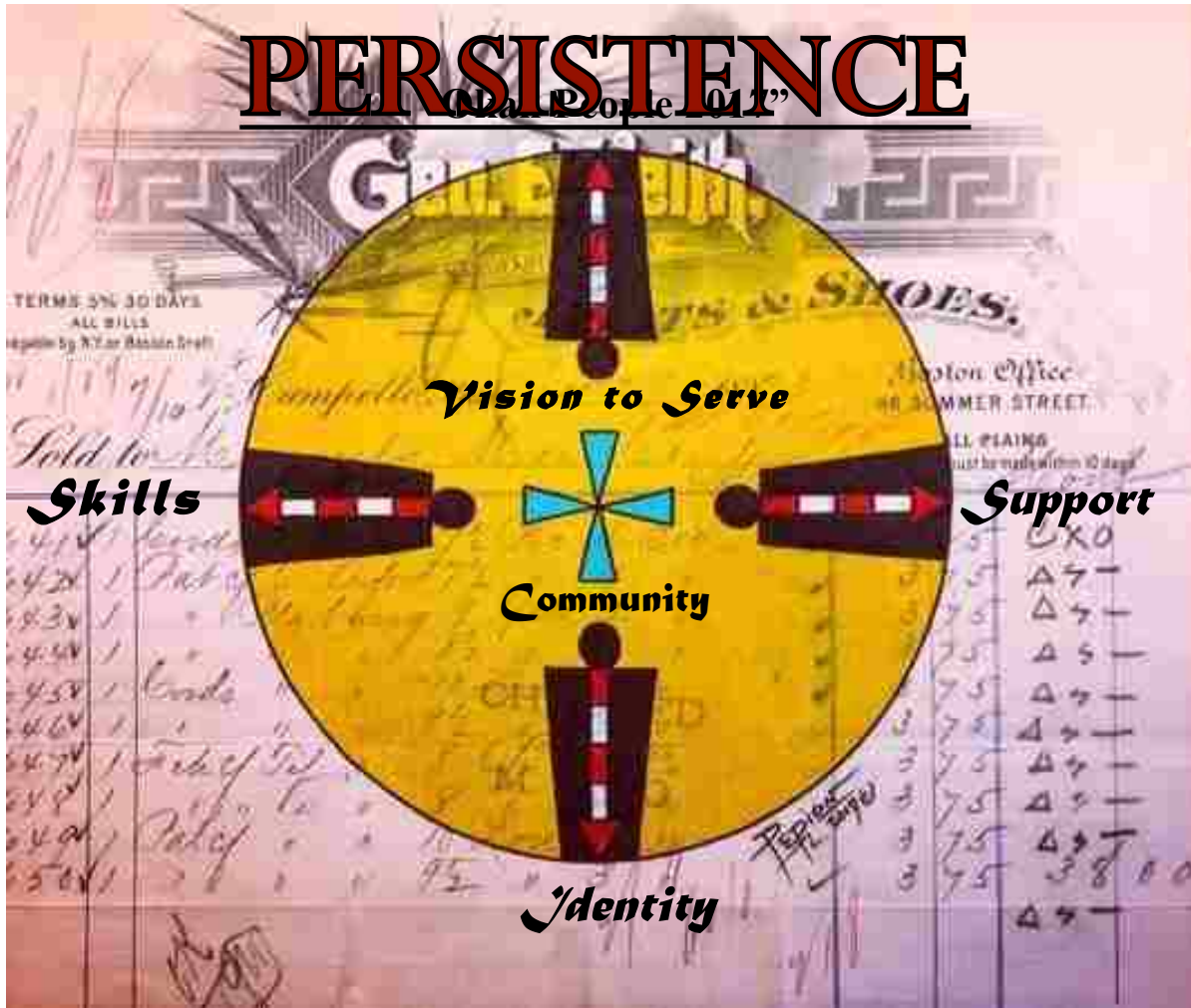
Samuel stated that he was able to excel in academics, even though he was struggling with alcoholism. He mentioned that he thought he was hiding his substance use, although his peers could see his addiction. Fortunately, his colleagues reached out to him about his problem and Samuel was able to treat his addiction and remain in sobriety while in graduate school.

Summary of challenges.

Participants experienced several challenges, both academic and non-academic. The majority of these challenges were related to race and cultural background, indicating that students encountered challenges related to the campus climate as well as Westernized education. Additionally, students encountered student academic challenges, some of which can be shared with the larger population, but most of which were still specific to American Indian students. Lastly, participants acknowledged personal life demands, which also greatly impacted their academic performance. Participants noted that the amount of life challenges they have encountered has strengthened their character, giving them power to persist in graduate school.

Research Question Two: Why and how do American Indian graduate students persist while attending non-Native colleges and universities in the state of Montana?

A Vision to Serve the Community: An Indigenous Theory of Persistence

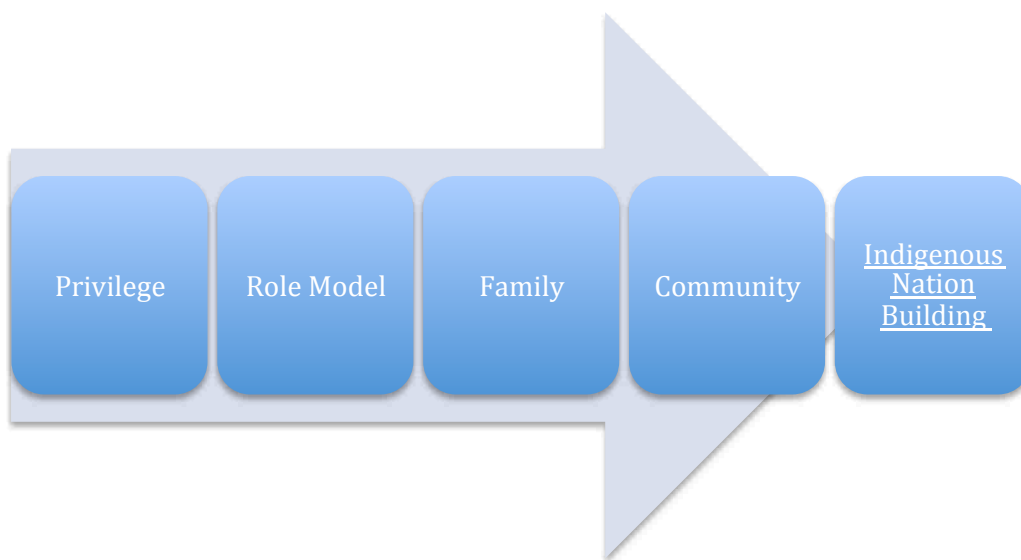


“Symbology is important to Indigenous people. This picture represents women and men in a circle (community). The people are coming together for ceremony and renewal of yearly teachings. It’s a time of identity, sharing, and community. The Morning Star is sacred and is placed within the center of the circle. The color yellow represents the sun and the other designs identify the Piikani culture. The Okan ceremony is held each year, usually in July or August on the Blackfeet reservation. Each band of The Blackfoot Confederacy is represented at the Okan. Today our culture is alive and this drawing is a representation of Piikani community.”

—John Pepion

Core category: A vision to serve the community.

The core category of this theory was a “Vision to Serve the Community” and explained “why” students persisted in graduate school. Participants expressed a desire to “give back” to their tribal community and/or Indigenous populations through their future careers and professions. Participants believed that obtaining a higher leveled degree would allow them to give back in a more significant way. In addition, participants were motivated to continue their education to provide for their families, noting that education was a way to provide a quality life. Furthermore, students wanted to set an example for Indigenous youth, and become a source of inspiration for others to pursue their educational goals. The supporting themes that surround the core category include identity, skills, and relationships; all of which are indicative of the idea that persistence is a process of growth in these various categories. These supporting categories are fluid in nature and explain “how” American Indian students persist in graduate school. Together, the core category and supporting categories comprehensively make up the Indigenous theory of educational persistence.



Privilege.

Participants believed that attending graduate school was a privilege, especially in comparison to the lack of opportunities provided in their rural communities, as well as the lack of representation of American Indians in higher education. Melissa said that she felt privileged to attend law school: “Every single day that I do come in here and do walk into the building, I feel honored and privileged.” In addition, Danielle said she felt honored to have gotten accepted into a highly competitive doctoral program: “I am a minority, and I’m a Native American student, and that I do consider myself privileged to be able to be here.” Rachel, a graduate student at the University of Montana, discussed her viewpoint of education, and indicated that she took advantage of all learning opportunities presented to her:

I know not many Native Americans get this opportunity to come to grad school, to move off the reservation, and so, just kind of sitting with that and having that mindset. It’s made me really thankful, and I’m, like, not taking any of it for granted. I’m, like, taking all I can get, when I’m in class.

Andrea said that she also felt very privileged to be able to access education. In an emotional response, Andrea compared her opportunities to some of her fellow high school classmates back in her home community. She questioned why she was able to pursue education, while her peers struggled with addictions and poverty:

Another motivating factor for me that gets me emotional too, and that I’ve thought a lot about, is that I don’t know why (crying) it has to be me. I think about so many (crying) of my friends who are addicted to [substances], or still live in poverty. And it’s like, ‘Why me? Why me? Why not them?’

Andrea stated that there should be more American Indians in higher education and she felt obligated to graduate, since she was given an opportunity that most people do not receive from her community.

Role model.

Participants wanted to use their positions as graduate students as a way to inspire and become a role model for their family and community, and encourage them to pursue education. Andrea said that American Indian students in graduate school provide evidence that students stem from resilient communities. She said, “Being a role model. Showing that it’s possible, and you are an outcome, you are evidence of your community’s resilience by attending graduate school.” William, a graduate student at Montana State University, said that he didn’t have many resources growing up, but wanted to set an example for the community that despite these difficult challenges, education is still possible. He said, “Life has been very difficult. [I] moved around a lot. [I] never had any money most of my life. And I just want to be able to show other future Native students that even [though] those situations do occur, you still can persist, and you can go to graduate school.” Ashley stated that she wanted to positively influence the youth of her community. In particular, she wanted to show Native children that they don’t have to become stereotypes, which are messages that children often internalize in her home community:

I have a strong connection to my home community, so I want to persist because—I’m going to get emotional, sorry (laughs). Culture I’m connected to back home, so I want people—I want to be a role model. I want Blackfeet little kids to know that can go to college and they can succeed and they can make a better life, and they don’t have to be those stereotypes.

Participants concluded that they wanted to become role models for Native American youth, by supporting them to defy stereotypes and achieve their own goals.

Family.

Participants described family as a motivation to persist in graduate school. In particular, participants said that they wanted to provide a “better life” for their children by escaping the conditions of poverty. Jennifer, a graduate student at Montana State University, described her

own life growing up as a child and said that she wanted to provide a better life for her children, so they wouldn't have to endure similar struggles:

I want to set a good example for my own kids, because I ended up growing up, I come from a single parent home. My mom worked two jobs to support her kids, and I didn't ever want my kids to struggle like that...And I don't want to see other kids have to struggle like that...Just trying to encourage them to tap into their full potential is...what drives me.

Similarly, Ashley stated that her educational background will help provide a quality life for her children and family, so they won't have to endure the struggles associated with an impoverished life:

I want to help Native people, and that's why I started college, period. So I want to help Native people, I want to help my children; I want them to have a better life. I don't want them to struggle in poverty.

Kathleen said that education was an opportunity to finish her families' unfinished educational goals. More specifically, her grandfather passed away prior to graduating with his bachelor's degree, so Kathleen viewed her education as an opportunity to honor her grandfather and complete his academic goals:

My maternal grandfather, he earned his bachelor's degree in Natural Resources, but when he started to work towards his graduate degree, he didn't finish. He got sick because he, it was World War II, so he ended up passing away because of exposure to chemicals in World War II. So knowing the kind of work that he did, and how far he was able to get there. This kind of responsibility to finish up for him.

Persistence was also reflected in the idea that participants wanted to provide a quality life for their children and family, which was still embedded in the notion of contributing to community.

Community.

Nearly all participants identified the motivation of wanting to "give back" to their tribal community and/or Native populations as the core reason of persisting in graduate school.

Brandon, a graduate student at the University of Montana, said that his motivation to pursue

graduate school was fueled by his passion to serve his community. He stated that many American Indian students pursue higher education to better their communities, as opposed to individual gain and status. He said, “You’re never just going to grad school, or getting an education to better yourself. So much of it—you’re trying to better your community.”

Kathleen, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, said that college provided her an opportunity to become more adequately prepared to give back to her tribal community.

Kathleen’s insight helped form the notion that students establish a vision of service, by combining their field of study with their desire to give back to the community:

Being able to better prepare myself so that I can give back in a more significant way to my tribal communities and my future generations of Native people. I think about my nieces and nephews, so having that vision of this is why I need to get done....When I was doing my master’s it was definitely thinking about my kids and thinking about my tribal colleges, and future native scholars.

Ashley, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, said she worked hard in school to one day help strengthen Native communities through her future profession as a clinical psychologist.

She said, “They’ll [children] benefit directly, but also other Native people by just being a role model and working with them clinically and strengthening families. So that’s really my motivation, to see a stronger Native community.” In addition, Lori, a graduate student at Montana State University, wanted to return home after the completion of school and apply her graduate degree to bettering her community: “It has been one of my lifelong dreams to get this degree, gain that knowledge, and then go back home and use it to help my people.”

Natalie, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, said she felt committed to serving high need communities upon graduation. In addition, she said that pursuing graduate school and not contributing to society would be a selfish endeavor. She explained the interdependent nature of community:

I knew that people were depending on me, not [just] my family now, but it's also other people, just communities in general. They need programs, they need the knowledge that I spent six years getting, and it would be selfish of me to not finish, and give it to the people who need it, or to the communities that need it.

Andrea, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, stated that graduate school was an opportunity to show her people, as well as the world, that American Indians can be successful. Interestingly, Andrea was the only participant who stated education was a way to heal from historical trauma. She said that finishing college was a way of conquering the Westernized educational system for her tribal nation:

It's like healing from historical trauma—going through a Westernized educational system and succeeding. And it's like conquering. It's like conquering the educational system for your people.

Nearly all participants identified a vision to serve their tribal community by combining their professional expertise with their cultural value of giving back to the people.

Indigenous nation building.

Participants naturally possessed a vision to serve their tribal communities with very specific goals related to their field of study. Thus, participants expressed their ideas of how they would directly contribute to Indigenous nation building upon graduation from their program. Participants discussed their objectives and goals for serving their community.

Fox, an Adult and Higher Education student, talked about her goal of making education more accessible for Native American populations. Fox envisioned herself as an advocate for Indian education, stating that diversity benefits the majority population at mainstream institutions:

I want institutions to be able to—if they genuinely want American Indians to come to their campuses and succeed, we know that diversity in an institution or any environment benefits those who are not part of that diverse group, more than that diverse group. So it's a benefit to everyone. And if they truly want that, I would like for them to offer salient resources to be genuine in their intentions.

Michelle, a graduate student at Montana Tech, wanted to use her science background to have more influence within the field for Indigenous populations. She stated that it's important for American Indians to serve in these positions to implement change, rather than taking a reactive approach to decisions and policies that negatively impact Indigenous communities.

Michelle indicated that if there were more American Indian scientists, then they would be able to influence change and help create a more environmentally sustainable environment:

So now it's very important that we have more Natives having influential positions in engineering and sciences, STEM fields. If we really want to make a difference, we can protest until we're blue in the face, protest and protest and protest. But if we really want to make a difference, we need to educate ourselves in these fields and we need to work for the bad guys and we need to have some influence in their decision-making. So before it gets to Standing Rock, if we have more Native engineers, Native scientists, then we can have a seat at the table, so that...we don't have to wait until things are at the eleventh hour. And so now, my whole outlook on why it's important to get into these fields is for our people. So that we have a voice, not just like fighting all the time, but actually more constructive, being more environmentally friendly.

Otata is attending graduate school to gain the technical working knowledge to use referencing systems to help preserve sacred sites and Indigenous burial sites. Otata will combine her traditional values and knowledge with modern technical information to recover cemeteries and protect these sites:

My master's thesis was based upon preservation of sacred sites and sacred places, with geo-referencing systems, specifically geo-physical systems, geo-spatial information systems, GIS, ground penetrating radar, and GPR. And I used those tools and my informal instruction, my traditional instruction, to find children in federal, historic federal Indian boarding school cemeteries.

Russell wanted to work on culture and language revitalization for early education to help children connect to their culture. His previous educational background was in Elementary Education and he is currently studying folklore within the Native American Studies department.

He hopes to combine his teaching background with his cultural studies to provide culturally relevant curriculum for early education:

I have a passion for just kind of like preserving and revitalizing culture...kind of taking the importance of folklore, as well as the language and teaching them in tandem, so then children can have more of a sense of pride and possession of culture.

Melissa, a law school student, talked about her future objective of being an advocate for Indian country. She described a paradigm shift within Indian country, stating that American Indians are currently in an era of self-determination, which has been demonstrated by progressive political movement:

I honestly think we're in a time period of a shift in the era of self-determination because tribes are rewriting our constitutions, our codes. There are more Indians becoming educated, and I think there's some slow moving momentum. It's almost like similar to the Civil Rights Movement except an Indian version because we're being acknowledged, like Obama acknowledges us, people are getting on with the Standing Rock issue. People want to talk about the Washington football team, so there's like, there's like different social movements, that you see, and I think it's an effect of like this shift, because I honestly think we're in, and our tribal governments are becoming so much more developed now too....On a larger scale, I feel like I'm going to be an effective advocate as an Indian attorney.

Overall, participants envisioned themselves serving their tribal communities through very specific professional goals, thus contributing to the creation of a stronger nation for the youth.

Supporting category: Identity.

To understand the codes and themes throughout this chapter, one must first understand the context of the participants' orientation to these elements in regard to their identity and worldview as Native American. Essentially, this context influences their overall perspective of persistence within graduate school as well as perceived challenges, levels of support, skills and experience, and motivation to continue on the path of education. Although these concepts were divided into sections, each of these concepts are interrelated, making it nearly impossible to separate into different categories. The concepts of identity, community, culture, values, sense of

place and home, and spirituality are all interrelated concepts and compose the worldview of American Indian students in this study.

Participants typically identified as Indigenous or by their tribal affiliation. The supporting category of identity was also process oriented, indicating that students begin to strengthen their identity at the threat posed by Westernized education. Most of the participants composed an identity built on a solid foundation by the time they were in graduate school; however, a few participants were still exploring their identity and reconnecting as an American Indian student. Andrea said her identity as an Indigenous person was formed and resolved by the time she started graduate school:

I can't imagine what it would be like to be in graduate school and still be struggling with your identity as a Native person. I know I struggled with it prior to graduate school, but by the time I got into graduate school, I was pretty solid on who I was, where I was, and how I came to be.

However, Andrea stated that prior to graduate school she had an identity struggle. She said she blamed herself for not knowing her Native language. She eventually resolved this issue by understanding the complexities of historical trauma and became more grounded in her identity:

I used to blame myself for not knowing a lot of things, but then I realized that because of historical—if it weren't for historical trauma, I would know my language, I would know these things....I was, like, comforted by that. So I felt like in coming to graduate school, I was already comfortable. I felt stronger in my identity.

Conversely, some students were exploring and reconnecting to their identity as an American Indian student while in graduate school. Russell stated that he didn't realize he was Native American as a child and started to explore this identity more in depth as an adult:

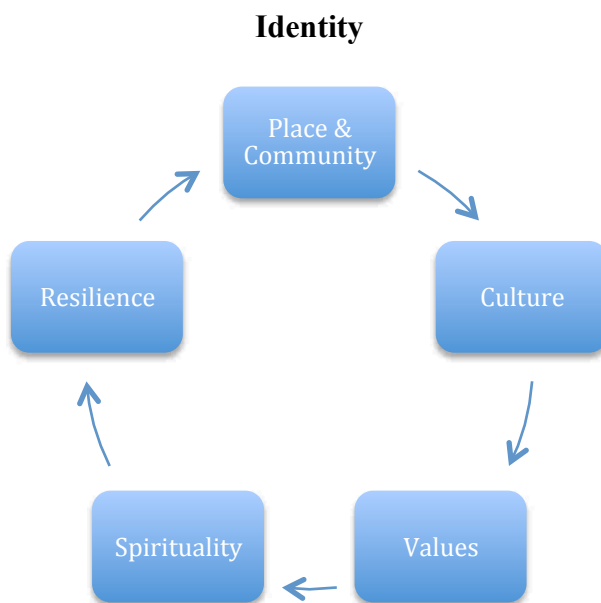
I [have] never really been in touch with my native roots. My grandfather, my great grandfather, was successfully assimilated from the Ojibwa, so we didn't even know, I didn't even know that I was Ojibwa until I was probably about eight or nine.

Eventually, Russell moved to Montana to pursue a degree in Native American Studies.

However, he was very nervous about how others would perceive him, yet was openly welcomed by his classmates and program:

I came up here, kind of nervous, and because I wasn't sure how I would be received, because [I'm] like literally the epitome of the urban Indian. I didn't really know anything about my culture growing up, only like I said from what I read, and it was interesting because I had no idea how I was going to be perceived, and as you know, pretty much everyone just welcome about it, so it's kind of through that, through this discovery of my identity, which I knew I had, but hadn't dove into it as much out of, you know, a little bit of nervousness.

Participants described Westernized education as a threat to their identity and traditional knowledge and value systems. Therefore, participants proactively worked to strengthen their identity by staying connected to their culture and community.



Sense of place and community.

Participants explained the significance of community and how it has shaped their worldview. Andrea talked about the importance of community. In particular, she stated that American Indian students practice the value of altruism, because they typically focus on how they are able to contribute to their community, rather than focus on what they are able to gain

from their community. However, when she did reflect on this idea, she said her community has provided her with several gifts: a sense of belonging, safety, family, culture, a home, and an entire worldview:

I feel really connected to my community. I feel like that it gave me a home. It gave me a place of belonging. Everybody that I know, most people that I know are from my home community. That it's given me safety, because I feel like I've experienced some discrimination, and I felt like at home, I felt like I belonged, and that I knew I wasn't going to be discriminated against. I felt that I would be welcomed. That it gave me culture, because without your community, you wouldn't know your ceremony. I feel like it gave me my whole perspective on life. Why the things are the way they are. It gave me my education. It gave me everything. I don't know how to include all that—how to include everything (laughs).

Participants stated their sense of community contributed to the creation of their worldview and helped them navigate the educational system.

Culture.

Participants had to live away from their tribal communities for a designated period of time to pursue graduate school. Additionally, certain ceremonial practices are considered place based, which means they cannot be recreated outside of the community. As a result, students stated the importance of staying connected and occasionally traveling home to their communities. In addition, it is important for some cultural events to be practiced on campus such as powwows and stick games, to help contribute to a sense of community for Indigenous students that attend mainstream institutions.

Lori described her upbringing, stating that she was immersed in her Native culture as a child. She said culture has helped shape her character, as well as her sense of overall well-being in life:

I started doing beadwork when I was about seven years old, and that kind of transitioned into powwows, and I started traveling and became a champion women's fancy shawl dancer, and then I was attending a lot of ceremonies. So going into the culture and the history basically modeled me to where I am today, and it's really helped to humble me.

Thus cultural practices contributed to students' character and their ability to navigate life well.

Participants mentioned that culture was a form of self-care and was a way to stay connected to their identity and community. Andrea said she used various forms of culture to overcome difficult days. Additionally, she used a cultural lens to analyze new information in graduate school:

[When I'm] having a hard day, or having [sic] difficult things come up, utilizing culture in a way. I feel like it's helped me persisted. I guess it's just provided that foundation, and assurance, and it's helped me continue to frame how I think about things. Even when we're learning about new material, being able to think about it through culture, or through that lens, and figuring that out has been a good process... So it helped me persist through engaging culturally, but also having a sense of community. Like going to round dances has been really helpful. Going to round dances, going to powwows has been really helpful in just being connected.

Furthermore, Robert explained that Indigenous cultural stories teach values about life. He shared a Navajo story about Coyote, comparing his educational journey to staying on the Navajo's conception of the corn pollen path:

Coyote...he was a trickster. Right? (laughs) You learn something from the crazy stuff that he does. And he makes you think. He makes you think about who you are. He makes you learn new skills. And he tries to throw you off that corn pollen path. So when you get on that path, you're more balanced, and you're more stable.

Therefore, cultural stories provide analogous concepts to educational persistence.

Values.

Many participants explained how the cultural values of humility, generosity, and collectivism may sometimes be contradictory in nature to Westernized educational values.

However, students expressed a concern to maintain their traditional values. Samuel, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, talked about his community values:

My community...yeah that's my roots. Until I was eleven I mostly grew up there, on and off kind of, but yeah, generosity, even when you're poor...generosity. Even being generous and being hospitable. My Native relatives, and my parent's friends and

everything, down there, none of them are rich. None of them are rich. Some of them are a little better than others, but the point is, everybody, it's a cultural thing, was kind and generous, and hospitable, with the little they had. No matter what, they'll help you... And that's really important and that helped shaped me as a person. If I didn't have them to look up to as a person and that kind of love, I wouldn't be who I am today, and that's my roots.

Fox talked in detail regarding cultural expectations of American Indian students, noting the value of humility, generosity, and communal efforts. As a Native American student, Fox stated that it is important for students to take others along with them in their educational journey:

I think there's a lot more weighted on us. What are we doing with this degree? We're not supposed to be arrogant. We're supposed to have humility. We're not supposed to do things for ourselves. We're not supposed to just shine bright and not take anyone with us. So I think sometimes pursuing an advanced degree, sometimes that is the question. Why are you doing this? And what are you going to do with this degree? And I know that question can be asked to everyone. But not everyone comes from places where you have to pull your community with you. You want to be part of it, you don't have to, but that's just who you are.

Participants explained certain cultural values that are not practiced or valued by dominant society have contributed to their personal character, as well as influenced their world perspective.

Spirituality.

Spirituality played a huge role in participants' lives. Some related their spirituality as part of their ability to persist in higher education, while others viewed it as a component outside of their academic life, more related to ceremony and place. Participants also viewed culture as a way to stay connected and practice self-care.

Michelle stated that her spirituality is what kept her afloat in life. She explained that her most important job is her role in ceremony and how that has shaped her personal character, indicating that she has learned values that cannot be taught anywhere else in the world.

Although Michelle helps make vaccines in her current profession, she said her most important job is washing dishes at ceremony:

The one thing that has always kept me afloat is the spirituality that my grandmother, my great grandmother, my aunts, have never let go of. When it comes to our ceremonies, we're very exclusive. It's just family only....In one world I'm like, 'Oh yeah, I'm kind of contributing to the world by making safe adjuvants, like medicine...vaccines.' But my really most important job is washing dishes at ceremony. It gives you that humbleness that you can't learn in a textbook, and without that I probably would have failed a million more times than I have in life.

Michelle stated that spirituality and ceremony are very important aspects in her life, which have contributed to character development and helped her progress in life.

Participants also described their spirituality as connected to place. Therefore, when participants are attending college they cannot engage in ceremony, unless they travel home.

Danielle related her spirituality to self-care: "I can't go to ceremonies or anything because I'm not home, but I do like to go to them when I'm home, which is more like self-care." Andrea and Danielle both related their spiritual life as separate from their academic life, yet part of holistic wellness. Andrea talked about the concept of well-being among Indigenous people and how it is important to persisting in education:

I feel like that relates to our holistic model of healing, of well-being, of living, is taking care of yourself in all these different areas, and that's one of them, is being able to balance physical and mental, spiritual, emotional life and trying to maintain that throughout academics.

Participants described spirituality as a connection to people, specifically elders who hold ceremonial and cultural knowledge. Natalie stated that her spirituality was closely tied to her grandmother. Unfortunately, Natalie lost her grandmother during graduate school and said she also lost a sense of her spirituality as well:

My sense of spirituality was largely based in the land, and where I grew up, and then again my grandmother, the people who held that knowledge. I lost my grandmother...in my first year of graduate school and that was really hard. I think because for that reason, it was extra hard, because it's not just losing a grandmother, I was losing a piece of my spirituality.

Participants stated that spirituality was a huge aspect of their life. Some indicated that it contributed to their educational persistence, while others said it was more related to self-care and was a separate component from their academic life.

Resilience.

Participants emphasized resilience on an individual, community, and historical level. Andrea talked about resiliency first from an individual level. She said that it is necessary for students to possess some resiliency during difficult moments, such as losing a loved one during graduate school:

If I lost a loved one, that would challenge my resiliency during—during my graduate studies. So I think of them as not—they're not just given. They're not just given, but yet everybody—everybody already has some resiliency to some amount.

Regarding individual resiliency, Andrea stated that factors exist that help protect people before and after a difficult experience:

I think of protective factors and risk factors are present before an event happens. Those are the things that protect you prior to an event happening, and resiliency factors are things that protect you after an event has happened.

Andrea then talked about community resilience and how it is related to historical events. More specifically, Andrea stated that American Indian graduate students are outcomes of their communities' resilience. In addition, community members that leave to obtain an education and return to fill leadership positions contribute to the self-determination of a community:

When I see communities with a lot of self-determination, I also see a lot of Natives with higher education and graduate level education leading—leading in their communities, whatever capacity that is, either on their own, or head of programs. But that—that's evidence of a community's resilience.

Kathleen and Melissa, both students at the University of Montana, talked more in depth about historical resiliency among American Indian populations. Both participants indicated that resiliency is an inherent feature of Native American students. Kathleen said:

People talk a lot about historical trauma, but I think they don't talk about historical resilience. So yes we may have some of those traumatic experiences in our genetic, in our DNA, but we also have the resilience, you know they [ancestors] survived that, and we're the living examples of their survival.

Melissa also agreed that resiliency is partly woven into American Indians' genetic composition.

She said, "You know they say now it's scientifically proven, even though we knew it, that historical trauma is in your blood, but so is resiliency."

Supporting category: Skills.

Skills were identified as a supporting category within the Indigenous educational theory of persistence. Skill development contributed to educational persistence, as well as to the overall goal of serving the community. Participants described certain skill areas they had to either refine or develop to be persistent in graduate school. These skills were categorized into three different areas: academic, professional, and life skills.

Academic Skills	Professional Skills	Life Skills
Writing	Application of Knowledge	Attitude
Vocabulary	Communication	Care Taking
Statistics	Previous Work Experience	Self Advocacy
Listening & Memorizing Content	Professional Development Opportunities	Time Management

Academic skills.

Participants said writing skills, statistical skills, and vocabulary were three areas they struggled the most with in academics. However, these were skills that graduate school demanded; thus, participants had to develop and expand these specific academic skills to move forward in their academic journey. In addition, participants described that their ability to

memorize content and listen to classroom teachings was often more pronounced than many of their colleagues' ability.

Writing.

Many participants said they had to develop their communication skills, specifically writing skills, to be successful in graduate school. Several participants said that their writing skills were not comparable to their colleagues' skills. Natalie said she had to develop her writing skills in her graduate program:

Coming to graduate school let me know that I was way underprepared in terms of...writing. I felt like everybody else must have had a different English class because I felt so behind in terms of my written communication. So I really had to develop that skill.

Danielle, a young doctoral student at the University of Montana, stated that English was her second language because she had learned her traditional language first as a child. As a result, she struggled greatly with her English writing skills in graduate school. She said she would need to develop better writing skills, especially in terms of writing a thesis or doctoral dissertation, to be successful in graduate school:

My writing isn't very great, because I learned my Native language first. I learned Mohawk first in school, up until second grade or so. After that had happened, I was trying to learn how to read and write in English. It made it difficult for me to write properly later on. So right now I still have struggles writing down papers, and trying to articulate it properly, write, do the correct grammar and everything. I'm very articulate when I speak, but when I had to write something down I struggle because...I'm thinking [about] how I would do it in Mohawk, with very descriptive and very long, and not grammatically correct [sentences]. So it's frustrating for me to be in a program where it's all writing.

Participants stated that they had to enhance all aspects of their communication skills in graduate school, particularly writing.

Vocabulary.

Participants said they struggled with vocabulary, indicating that it was not the language or vocabulary they grew up with, nor was it used within their home or communities.

Additionally, students indicated that their previous educational experiences did not give them exposure to an extensive vocabulary. Interestingly, Sissy, a Native American Studies student, said that although she is pursuing Indigenous education, it is taught through the lens of Western academy. Thus, the vocabulary in Native American Studies is also Westernized:

What's interesting is it's all NAS [Native American Studies], so it's all like Native and cultural, but they put it into a Western academic perspective. So it's just kind of learning the same words that I'm trying to portray, but through an academic Western view.

Vocabulary was an acquired skill for most participants, indicating that they didn't receive exposure to large English vocabulary from their previous education or their home communities.

Statistics.

Participants indicated that understanding and comprehending statistical research methods was essential to persisting in graduate school. A few students indicated that statistical analysis came as a natural skill; however, the majority of participants indicated that this was an area of struggle, with a need for necessary growth. Joyce, a non-traditional student, stated that complex statistical functions were challenging and she questioned whether or not she could pursue a business degree. However, she reached out to a renowned author who encouraged her to continue to apply for a Master's in Business Administration:

A few years prior, I took a course online [called] 'Learning How to Learn.' I was fascinated by testimonials that people can learn anything if they apply certain techniques. The course instructor, Barbara Oakley, Ph.D., UC Berkeley, followed the formula in her book entitled 'A Mind for Numbers: How to Excel at Math and Science (Even If You Flunked Algebra).' I reached out to her and she encouraged me to pursue the degree. She has asked me to keep in touch with her because she is interested in my progress. Admittedly, I regret that I often commiserate because I still struggle with finance and complex statistical functions. None of this is intuitive to me so I have to study!

Heather, a doctoral student at the University of Montana, stated that she struggled with the comprehension and conceptualization of research statistics in her program. She said she failed statistics her first year and it discouraged her to continue her doctoral program. She eventually passed the class the following year and stated that it wasn't a huge deal after reflection:

Thinking back to some of the times where I wanted to quit...there was one stats class that—in graduate school you actually can't get a C, at least in our program. So if you get a C, you actually have to retake. So there was one class, it was a statistics class, and it was just really difficult for me conceptually, and so I ended up getting a C in the class, and met with the professor afterwards to figure out what to do, and he actually quizzed me on the spot on what my stats knowledge was and basically decided that I could go to the next level. There's actually stats one and two, which I ended up passing with an A, but I still had to go back and take one. So I was like, 'I can't do this, I don't belong here, I don't want to.' And now looking back on it, that was just not a big deal at all (laughs).

Persistence within participants' viewpoints meant struggling to acquire a skill such as statistics and gaining the necessary resources to succeed and overcome.

Listening and memorizing content.

Listening and memorizing content were skills that participants naturally possessed, and they noted that these skills were often more developed than their colleagues'. Danielle talked about her enhanced memorization skills. She said, "I'm really good at memorizing things, like amazingly so, like I can memorize notes a day before the test, and go into the test and get a 90 or above." Roy, in contrast, talked about his listening skills and ability to apply knowledge to his profession. He said, "I learn by doing, I learn by hearing. I pride myself on being a good listener. ...Taking what you learn, and applying it, has been probably one of the most productive parts of being a part of this [graduate school]." Students said their memorizing and listening skills were often more pronounced than their colleagues' abilities and it helped them be successful in graduate school.

Professional skills.

Professional skills were another theme that was evident within the data. More specifically, students noted that professional skills were closely related to their graduate school experience, as well as future professions. Professional skills were developed within the classroom as students applied learned knowledge to their future profession. This application was most evident within practicum or internship experiences. Moreover, students stated that communication was the key to persisting in graduate school, as well as a skill that can be applied to their future career. Additionally, students felt that conferences and research experiences contributed to their overall professional development. Lastly, participants stated that previous work experience contributed to their professional skillset, as well as knowledge and desire to pursue a certain field of study.

Application of knowledge.

In the interviews, participants noted that their ability to apply academic knowledge to their future profession was a key to excelling in graduate school and professional development. Danielle entered her doctoral program right after her undergraduate education. She explained her experience and skill acquisition in her Clinical Psychology program:

It's a lot more hands-on, at least in my program....So I think that's a big component of what's challenging is we're not just learning to learn at this point, were learning to apply it for our careers in the future.

Brandon compared his undergraduate experience to his graduate experience too: "I think when I was undergrad, I was learning a lot of knowledge, and I've noticed in grad school it's applying what I already know. My background was also in social work, so I've been learning a bit more of those foundational techniques." Olivia explained the direct relationship between her classroom experience and future profession: "It's clinical rehabilitation and mental health

counseling and so it's not just focusing on mental health counseling, it's also focusing on the rehabilitation counseling, which is helping those with vocational rehab, you know, helping them get out into the communities, because they like, for example, they got injured and they're now disabled and they need help getting jobs, and they need mental health counseling." Participants stated that their graduate school education was focused on the application of knowledge, specifically for their future professions.

Communication.

Communication was a key skill that students had to possess or develop, especially in terms of conversing with chairs, advisers, or professors. Natalie explained that she felt as though her communication skills were inadequate for graduate school:

I thought that I could communicate well for graduate school, but coming to graduate school let me know that I was way underprepared in terms of just how I expressed myself.

Fox explained that communication with her chair was critical in regard to progression in her program. She explained the difference between undergraduate and graduate school in terms of communicating and developing a relationship with one's adviser. In particular, Fox noted that communication is key and that sometimes it can be problematic if students and their professors come from different value systems. Therefore, graduate advisers need to possess the skills of validating and acknowledging their student's unique heritage, without making the individual feel "othered" within the program:

As a graduate student, you do have to have a pretty close relationship with your committee member, or your chair or your adviser....So I think that's an additional barrier too, is the increased level of communication that is required. There can be some misunderstanding or just not a similar value system there.

Participants stated that communication was imperative to persistence, particularly the ability to converse with chairs, advisers, and supervisors.

Previous work experience.

Participants explained that the value of previous work experience was important in regard to skill development, as well as selecting a program that was a good match for their interests and goals. For example, Olivia, a graduate student at Montana State University-Billings, explained that her previous work experience in the mental health field influenced her desire to become a therapist in the future:

I was able to gain some work experience and actually really decide what I wanted to do. It took me six years to decide that, and so thanks to my position as a youth case manager...it was really my deciding factor. Okay, this is what I wanted to do. So I think that's really important for people to kind of understand that. Work experience really does help.

Similarly, Kathleen talked about her previous work experience at the local tribal community college and public school system and said that her formal graduate education will become beneficial to her tribal community college in the future. Kathleen said that she can become a principal investigator for research opportunities at the tribal college if she possessed an advanced degree. Overall, this would contribute to the ability to expand funding and partnership development with other institutions:

While I was at the tribal college, I saw how a lot of times these non-tribal institutions would want to partner for grants and they would put themselves as the PI and not really engage at an equitable or fair level with the tribal institutions and I knew that part of being a PI was having an advanced degree....Part of it being able to have a different level of research, but then also to bring in more dollars directly to my institution rather than having to...get the drippings from other institutions.

Roy explained that his previous work experience in the community has allowed him the opportunity to build relationships, as well as gain credibility. Additionally, it has been an

advantageous experience in the ability to connect education to practice. It has also provided Roy the opportunity to stay relevant on community issues:

Identity is important, because it gives you legitimacy in your own community to an extent. I'd say that's what [is] beneficial to me to persist is that I've actually been working in my community while I'm going to school. I'd developed relationships in my community and I think when people just go and get their doctorate, they don't, they lose touch, they're not a part of their community at that point. I think that's one of the main things [why] people don't finish is because they're not being able to connect what they learn to where they want to apply it, and so, for me that's been really helpful, because I don't...want to be out of touch. I don't want to be the person that's going to come in blind and not have an idea of what's going on.

Russell said that his previous teaching background helped influence his academic goals of pursuing a master's degree in Native American Studies. He stated that students should know what they want to study, since graduate school is such a huge endeavor:

I took some time off and did some time teaching elementary school. I taught literacy for first and second as an interventionist, and just kind of made sure that graduate school was a path that I wanted to pursue, because I knew it was going to be a tough run, because it's not easy stuff, and you really have to be passionate about it if you want to commit and do that much work. After two years of that, I decided that I did want to continue education, and go to graduate school.

Tiffany explained that her previous work experience was in the field of mental health for youth, which motivated her to pursue a degree in School Counseling:

Right now I do a lot of things already. I train the youth mental health first aid training, which is mental health for our youth that just teaches our community members warning signs and symptoms of what to look for, in our youth that might be concerning and what they should do, like a referral to behavior health. I do suicide prevention training. So I do a lot already.

She continued on to say, "I just know that when I get my degree, I'll be able to continue to work with the Native American population." Participants stated that previous work experience was vital to selecting an appropriate graduate program. Previous work was one of the most saturated categories within the data.

Professional development.

Professional development was a significant opportunity that participants discussed in their interview. This included internships, conferences, presentations, and opportunities to develop a network system. In particular, Samuel said he got to attend an AISES national conference and present his data, which was related to the construction of a bison ecological caring capacity model. Moreover, Noah stated that he has had plenty of opportunities to attend conferences and present research at conferences throughout his graduate school experience.

Otata said that professional development contributed to her overall learning process:

I got help from Hope of my Home, and I got a \$5,000 research monies and to work with the Native nonprofit. I've heard of this nonprofit the cultural conservancy. And so I got to know the director, and then I seen that she, she was a big sister, and good fit. What the cultural conservancy did for me, is they introduced me to the IWWF, the International Indigenous Women's Forum, and I went to the United Nations, and when I went to the United Nations, I was able to create more of an awareness with the International, or Indian Treaty Council. So that was just enhancing the foundation for my learning process.

Michelle stated that the opportunity to network through an internship guided her decision to pursue graduate school: "I did an internship with the department of energy in Chicago and I met this girl and she was Crow and she told me about the SLOAN scholarship at Montana Tech and it was a very lucrative scholarship and so after I finished my second degree here, I had my sights set on going into that program." Essentially, participants explained that professional development was equally important to academics, especially in regard to developing a career pathway.

Life skills.

Participants explained that along with academic and professional skills, it was imperative that they were geared with general life skills to help them fulfill both academic and non-academic demands. Students noted these specific skills: attitude, caretaking, self-advocacy, and time management. For example, students noted that having a positive attitude, paired with

optimism, helped students overcome challenges. Participants described themselves as natural caretakers, which influenced their desire to pursue helping professions. In addition, students stated that self-advocacy didn't come naturally, but it was a skill that they had to develop to be successful in graduate school. Lastly, students noted time management was a required tool that helped them fulfill academic and family obligations.

Attitude.

One life skill that participants possessed was the ability to have a positive attitude, especially in terms of overcoming challenges throughout their graduate school experience. Robert routinely thought about the positive outcomes of his profession to gain momentum along his journey. More specifically, Robert talked about his interactions with clients within his clinical psychology internship:

To be able to go to school, and do practicum, and work my way up and get my master's degree, and to work at Tribal Health. You know, there's been a number of times where I've felt, I'm doing what I've been put here to do. In a way. I'm not—I don't have a Ph.D., I'm not licensed yet, and all those other things, but I'm still working with Native clients. I'm helping them feel better. They come back and say, 'You know what, you've given me some good things to think about. I've made some good changes in my life.'...That makes me feel good about my direction and how far that I've come. And I can make it through this, because I know that I'm already making a difference.

Participants stated that challenges will naturally occur and that possessing optimism and a positive attitude helped them persevere and overcome obstacles.

Caretaking.

Many participants described themselves as natural caretakers, explaining their role within their family and community. It was also a defining feature of participants that chose a field in the helping professions. Heather described herself as a natural caretaker and explained that she cared for her family the majority of her life. In addition, Heather said her personality has led her to pursue a career in clinical psychology:

I guess characteristics-wise, I think I've always been a helping person and I've always wanted to help other people. I've always definitely been a caretaker type of person. You know, I have older siblings, but in my house that I grew up in, I was the oldest and had three younger brothers—a brother, and two younger stepbrothers. And so, [I] was left taking care of them a lot of the times. We had a great-grandma who lived with us for a couple of years after she had dementia and she really needed a lot of help just with day-to-day kind of tasks. And so just being able to, you know, be the person there for other people. I think it feels good to be able to help others.

Natalie, a doctoral student pursuing a degree in Clinical Psychology, also viewed herself as a natural caretaker, which has been connected to her desire to pursue a helping profession:

I see myself as a caretaker and I think I've been that way since I was a baby. That's just sort of my nature. And so the persistence in the educational realm has kind of mirrored my persistence in all other areas of my life... It fits into my personal character of being a caretaker and having people to take care of, like I can't, I don't think I've ever not had somebody to take care of. And I don't know what I would do, if I didn't have anybody to take care of. I'd probably feel like a total, lack of purpose.

Participants described themselves as natural caretakers, which may also be viewed as a cultural value. They stated that it influenced their desire to pursue helping professions.

Self-advocacy.

Participants described self-advocacy as a very important tool to develop in higher education. Charles said that American Indian students don't naturally advocate for themselves in school and that it must be a learned skill:

Self-advocacy is one of the biggest ones that I've had to learn. You know, being from the res [reservation], we don't really express who we are or what we want. We just kind of maybe do it. So self-advocacy is a huge one. I learned from the first semester how important it was to ask questions, go get help, because I didn't do that because we're so quiet.

Roy also mentioned that students just have to open themselves up to their program, which is difficult at times, but is important to flourishing in a program:

Just knowing everybody, getting to know people in the department that can help you, from the finance lady, to the admin assistant, to the program director, to the professors and instructors. You just got to put yourself out there... I think a lot of people [Native

students] get scared when they're asked to do things that they ordinarily wouldn't do, or outside their comfort zone, but you got to be willing to relinquish those boundaries.

Samuel started graduate school online and then moved to attend school in person. When Samuel arrived on campus, he was very proactive in meeting people within his department:

When I came here on campus in 2013...I went around campus at everybody's office and I shook their hands and I said, 'Thank you.' And that's how I met people here on campus and I made sure to do that.

Self-advocacy was an unnatural skill that didn't come easy for many participants; however, they said it was an essential tool that helped them persist in graduate school.

Time management.

Participants expressed that they had several demands in life, which included personal and academic obligations. Many participants were either expecting or were parents, so they had familial responsibilities in addition to work and school. Participants discussed the need to have exceptional time management skills to balance all aspects of their lives.

Fox talked about the demands of graduate school as a challenge for all students, regardless of group identification: "Time is always an issue. Finishing deadlines. I think those are—those are going to be synonymous regardless the group." Rachel discussed her family responsibilities, as well as her academic responsibilities, indicating that time management and organization were the key to meeting all these demands:

I think one thing that I had to possess was being organized. Especially having kids, I felt like I needed to put time slots on everything I do. I had to, I guess it would just go along with time management.

Moreover, Danielle compared her undergraduate experience to her graduate experience, indicating that her higher level program demanded more time management skills to be successful. In addition, she referenced the notion of getting work assignments turned in early to ensure quality work:

I realized in graduate school, when I had a harder professor who wasn't going to let me slide by, that I do need to push myself especially with my time management because otherwise I'm not going to get stuff done and it's not going to be the quality that I want it to be. So lately, I've been pushing myself a bit more to actually do things before they're due, like substantially. So I'm not in that crunch time like I was in that last semester, and I think that taught me a really important lesson.

The majority of students had several family responsibilities; thus, time management was essential for them to accomplish all academic tasks while meeting the needs of their families.

Supporting category: Support.

Support and encouragement were vital components to participants' ability to persist in graduate school. The researcher divided these support structures into three categories: personal support, program support, and financial support. Many participants felt that they did not receive any institutional support other than assistantships. Participants were more likely to use the support structure within their graduate program than campus support since they were more isolated within their programs. Support was one supporting category within the Indigenous educational persistence theory, indicating that many students actively worked to develop a support network on campus.

Financial Support	Personal Support	Campus Support	Program Support
Assistantships	Family	Student Clubs	Cohort
Scholarships & Fellowships	Friends	Campus Services	Professors
	Personal Network	Native American Student Support Programs	Chairs, Advisors, & Supervisors
		Native American Campus Community	Committee Members
			Native American Classmates/Colleagues

Financial support.

Participants identified various sources of financial support that they have received throughout their graduate school experience. Charles, a graduate student at the University of Montana, talked about the overall complexities of Native Americans' financial aid, indicating that many professionals have a difficult time processing the unique sources of funding:

In terms of financial aid, I think Natives have a whole complex financial aid process or system than most other people who go to college, because of the funding resources that they come from. That they get higher ed, or tribal scholarships, or other things. They just—it's much more complex, and so much more difficult.

Additionally, Charles mentioned the issues that exist within financial aid:

A lot of the faculty I know help students deal with financial aid issues. That shouldn't be their problem (laughs). That shouldn't be a problem for students in general. I've seen it happen all over in regard to financial aid. And it's a system that I feel students should never have an issue at, and they should never have to feel belittled when they go into an office. Those types of things should never happen at all at an institution.

A few participants noted that family provided financial support; however, the majority of participants stated that their family was not in a position to be able to contribute to their academic funding. Therefore, students stated that it was imperative that they received other sources of funding, especially for those students who had families to support. Funding availability was one of the main reason students opted to pursue graduate school.

Assistantship.

Participants described assistantships as a form of institutional support. Lori mentioned that she had a teaching assistant position lined up for the upcoming semester. She said that her professor asked her to apply, which made her feel confident in her academic abilities. Noah said his teaching assistantship absorbed a lot of his time, in addition to being a parent; thus, he wasn't able to do as well in his classes as he had hoped: "I had my daughter quite a bit that semester, so

I had a lot of responsibility going on more than the normal. So I wasn't able to do extremely well in the class.”

Heather talked about the unique program funding that she received for graduate school and that it almost disqualified her for any teaching and research assistantships in her program:

So they [classmates] would see us [Native students] having this [name] scholarship, as like, we shouldn't even be in the pool to compete for assistantships that everyone else is competing for, even though those are tied to those experiences that we get...So there was always this pushback from other students. So I feel like that became a sticking point with people who were friends, people that we know really well, that we worked alongside, who got along really well, but then we find out that they're going to the president of the [name] department complaining about these positions...It felt like we were being told by other students that we couldn't have these other opportunities because we had this other funding, specifically for Natives.

Heather then explained that her program had to address the issue. She said that the program director told the rest of the class that the American Indian scholarship had a payback clause and it wasn't funded by that particular graduate program. Therefore, the Native American students were allowed the opportunity to seek out teaching and research assistantships, since those were related to professional development opportunities.

Scholarship and fellowships.

Participants also received various sources of funding to support their academic goals. Most participants received a combination of funding. Tiffany explained that without funding, her family would not have the means to support her financially in school:

Funding is probably hard for everybody, but coming from a reservation my family wasn't rich, so I had nobody to help me. And just learning how to apply for scholarships and finding sources for money for school was a big challenge for me.

Danielle talked about her scholarship and how it required “forced persistence,” since it had a threefold payback clause if students did not finish their program. She said it caused her a lot of undue stress:

I have an IHS scholarship so it requires me to do my payback or I have to pay threefold of what I've been loaned, so it's kind of frustrating to have this over looming thing on top of my head at all times. So it forces me to finish the program.

Lastly, Fox mentioned that funding opportunities draw students to college, yet it's the relationships that they build that will sustain their academic career:

It's really the people. People have been the most valuable resource, both academically and non-academically, that have helped me continue to stay in this. Because there's been at least three times, if not four times, that I've really wanted to quit. And just because I want to get started with other things, and I always say, I can always work on this part-time, but I know if I stop, it's going to be so hard to get the wheels turning again. And so people have been—I mean, the finances is wonderful. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that, but I feel like there are a lot of places hopefully that if you look hard enough, or work hard enough, you can find finances. But it's the people that are connected to those, people who have the faith in me, to give me those, the people who see me on campus, the different committee chairs that I have, and my committee, are the committee members and my chair, have been—they've been my number one resource for both academics and non-academics.

Participants noted that scholarship and fellowships were vital to their ability to academically persist, considering that they had families to financially support while in school.

Personal support.

Personal support systems were important to student educational persistence. Students identified family, friends, and the development of a professional network as important areas of support. Family was identified as students' top support system. Often, students resided with immediate and extended family, which was viewed as beneficial, since these living arrangements benefitted their children. Additionally, students said that long-distance communication with their family provided them encouragement to continue on the path of graduate school.

Participants also identified friendship as an important aspect to their ability to persist. Lastly, participants stated that developing a professional network was another important level of support.

Family.

One of the main support structures for students included family, which was a paradoxical concept. Participants stated that their main support was their family; however, their families often did not understand the demands of graduate school, nor were they able to offer academic or professional advice. Participants acknowledged extended family as very close relationships. Charles explained that his entire family is his support, which includes his mother, grandfather, aunts, uncles, and nieces. He stated that families are important in Native American culture:

Having my mom talk to me every day about ‘You can do it! No matter how tired you are.’ Just being that pusher is really important....As Natives, you really value our family. And my grandfather as well. My grandfather is a huge, huge supporter in this journey of mine, when it comes to financial need, or just to talk on the phone, or have me come home is one of the best things I think. He has never given up on me. Even when I give up on myself, he’s always there to push, and I think that’s very important.... And then, it sounds kind of odd, but my nieces are my support. They may be four and five, but just being there and FaceTiming me when they’re over a hundred miles away is extremely important.

Rachel said her family was very supportive, especially in terms of helping her move, providing financial support, as well as watching her children when school got too demanding:

With financial support, they’ve even...helped me move up here. They help me with my kids as much as they can. My dad’s come up a couple times, when you know, stuff got really crazy, hectic, ‘I’ll come stay with you for a week and help you with your kids.’...And if I called my mom and said, ‘I need your help right now, what can you do?’ she would be more than willing to ‘I’ll drive up there, I’ll do whatever I need.’ You know, because they really want to see me succeed too.

Heather and Natalie both explained the paradoxical nature of family. Natalie said that her family was very supportive; however, they often do not understand the pressure and demands that she has experienced in graduate school:

The rest of my family, they were understanding and supportive, but they also had this idea that it was going to be this quick degree. Like, ‘Okay, she’ll go to school for a couple of years and then she’ll get her degree.’ And so the longer that it drew out, I think the more pressure, or more burden, it put on my family. And they sort of looked at it as though it was a luxury that I was going to school. And they didn’t understand how

difficult it was for me to be in school, and then doing this program, because it wasn't a part of their value system. It was just like, 'Okay, you should have done that.' And then, 'Get back to work,' or like, 'Help your people,' or 'Do what you said you were going to do.' And so that started to pull on me a lot too.

Heather said that attending graduate school close to home was beneficial, but often required her to be in attendance to many family events since she was also part of that support system:

Being so close to home, since I'm just from [name of hometown], I also had that family support, which is kind of a double edge. It's really nice to have support so close, but you're also seen as part of that support, so if something's going on with someone else, you're close, you're expected to be there. Even the celebrations like birthdays, graduations, things like that. So it was great to have that source, but it was also another piece of your time. Since you're right there, you're kind of expected to be there whether your schedule can accommodate that or not.

Family was viewed as the single most important support system for students. Family provided encouragement, financial support, and childcare. However, family was limited in the ability to provide professional or academic advice and guidance. Regardless, students heavily relied on their family for support and encouragement, especially in terms of navigating a complex educational system.

Friends.

Participants developed personal support systems on campus, indicating that friendships were valuable in persisting in academe. Fox, for example, said she witnessed friends pursue advanced degrees, which inspired her to seek out graduate school:

I started to see some friends and other people I really admired work on an advanced degree. So I thought, maybe I should try out this master's thing, I don't really know what it is, because no one in my family has any degree.

Jennifer mentioned that she had a close friend in her previous graduate program and it was very helpful in completing the program successfully. However, in her current graduate program she did not have any close friendships, due to her program's loose structure, and stated that she is struggling without that support:

I had a friend doing the class with me, so we were together a lot, but we bounced ideas off of each other, we talked to each other, we supported each other, and I don't have that right now. So it's kind of, I guess I'm a little bit lost without having that person to talk to and lean on.

Participants said that they stayed in contact with their friends via social media, especially since most participants attended college away from their communities.

Professional network.

Many participants developed their own professional network, especially with individuals who were familiar with American Indian academic and professional issues. Kathleen said that Native faculty on campus served as mentors and that she admired their academic accomplishments:

The fact of having Native faculty on my campus, and I don't necessarily engage with all of them, but knowing that they've gone through what I'm going through. Some of them are from either my community or similar communities. Knowing that some of them came in to academia at a time when they really probably had to fight their way through to be where they are, you know, to me that's inspiring and also, they've been mentors.

Participants stated that they had to be proactive in developing their own professional network, especially in terms of finding individuals who were knowledgeable about Indigenous issues in education.

Campus support.

American Indian graduate students noted the importance and influence of American Indian student structured programs, as well as student clubs on campus. However, participants did state that they felt more insulated within their graduate programs and had several obligations that demanded their time. Despite these circumstances, participants felt that student clubs provided access to professional development opportunities, as well as the ability to develop a professional network system. They said that the most influential support on campus was having a strong, present, and cohesive Native American community.

American Indian student support programs.

Participants felt more insulated within their graduate programs, but they did indicate that American Indian student support programs were helpful in providing resources, as well as a connection to other students. Russell stated that the American Indian Council provided a study room where Native American students have a space to do school work, as well as connect and provide support for one another during graduate school. It also provided a connection to community resources:

There's the AIC, American Indian Council, and they, they run, there's like a study room downstairs. There's free printing and there's fellow comrade you know, like if you have an issue with something you can talk about, there's people that you can have just a rap session with if your going through some tough times, that kind of stuff.

American Indian student support structures are imperative to student educational persistence. However, these support structures should learn how to branch out to and reach students within graduate programs, considering that these students are more isolated within their program.

Student clubs.

Participants noted the importance and relevance of being active in student clubs, specifically those targeted for American Indian students. These clubs often provided access to professional development opportunities and created a venue to establish a professional network system. Noah, for example, was a member of AISES (American Indian Science and Engineering) club and stated that it was a great way to network, as well as provide an opportunity to attend professional conferences. Noah said the AISES club also provided peer support: "We're starting back up the UM chapter of AISES. So we've actually got quite a few people, so it's kind of exciting, so I think that helps promote Native Americans as they get together and talk about science or life things."

Lori said she joined a Native American graduate student club, which also provided a lot of support:

I joined the group SAGE and this is basically compiled of the graduate students and, you know, anything bothering me I can basically present it to anyone of them and we've pretty much opened up to one another. We all have the same classes pretty much and so those guys have been a lot of support.

Additionally, Kathleen explained that the COSMOS (Circle of Success: Mentoring Opportunities in STEM) program allowed for faculty and students to build relationships during cultural field camps. It also provided an opportunity for faculty to learn about their students, as well as their community:

They are working to develop an Indigenous mentoring model, and then also they provide different mentoring modules for faculty members working with native graduate students in the STEM fields. So for example, I have three colleagues, Native colleagues, graduate students that have, are participating in the programs, and so are their faculty. So their faculty members participate in these modules, and then in the summer they have, a cultural field camp, they call it. So then the faculty member and the student go out on this rafting trip on the Nez Perce reservation, and they talk about Indigenous research methodologies, Native philosophy. So it's preparing the faculty member for working with their student, and giving the student opportunities to engage with their faculty at a different level. And then also part of that program is they pay for the faculty member to go back to the tribal community of the student's, so that the student can host them at their home and meet their family, and get a sense of where that person comes from, and I think that's really enriching because a lot of times you see at the university, where these faculty travel all over the world and do research all over the world, and yet they have these tribal communities that are much too different than those communities right in their own backyard that they are clueless about.

Student clubs were deemed as essential for professional development; however, students had less time to commit to these extracurricular activities due to their program demands and family needs. Therefore, identifying other routes of involvement with student clubs, or increasing the acceptance of family involvement within these clubs, is important.

Campus services.

Participants used many student services on campus. In particular, students mentioned TRIO, disability services, and the writing center. Rachel noted that she used the writing center as a way to transition back into college academic demands after taking a break between undergraduate and graduate school. She said, “When I first came, I knew that my writing wasn’t as good as, I mean I slacked for a few years while I wasn’t at school or anything, and so I utilized the writing center to kind of get back into it.”

Ashley no longer qualified for TRIO services, due to her graduate student status. However, she still maintained relationships with the director of TRIO and considered her a mentor. She said, “I think that’s why I struggled so hard, was I didn’t find that mentor in graduate school at all. In undergrad, I worked with TRIO, and I still call them—the TRIO director all the time. She is super supportive, and she mentors me and pushes me through.” Students said campus services were helpful, especially in terms of providing support with their academic skills. Participants actively used these services throughout their graduate school experience.

Native American campus community.

The Native American campus community was a prevalent theme within participants’ interviews. Participants noted the importance of connecting with other Native American students on campus, especially in terms of living far away from family and having the ability to connect on similar levels. Samuel said that having this community on campus helped, since so many students are away from their families: “I don’t have family here, so...having this Native American community here on campus is very important.” Furthermore, Andrea explained that Native American students naturally bond: “If you’re a Native student and you’re in graduate school, you tend to bond really strongly with other Native students who are in graduate school or

just higher education in general because you are—you're all being resilient together...everyone's there for a higher purpose." Olivia said she will maintain relationships with Native American community members in the future, after graduation:

I think it's just the connection that we find with our Native American colleagues, friends, support, previous support staff. I think we always maintain those relationships and I still see supportive people on Facebook, whether it's old college peers or old colleagues, or [name of director]. We can always still depend on each other when we need help.

The Native American community within a college town is a huge support system for students, since they bond by having a shared academic experience at a mainstream institution.

Program support.

Participants described their graduate programs as more insulated; therefore, they were more likely to depend on support within the program than on campus support that was exterior to their graduate school. Andrea felt that her program was very supportive especially regarding life outside of school. However, she credits this helpfulness to the profession of the program, considering it was a helping profession:

In my graduate program, I felt like overall I was supported in that way. Maybe it was the type of degree that I went into. If I had gone into a different program, I don't know if I would have gotten that support. (laughs) You know, as counselors, I think most people are supportive of life outside of graduate school.

Participants also thrived if they felt that their program was more supportive than competitive.

Heather described how her doctoral program provided a supportive and collegiate atmosphere:

It's not super competitive like a lot of other schools in the same program are. I feel like there's a lot more competition for research—resources in research areas and things like that. That doesn't really exist here. It's more collegiate [sic], which I really like. And there's a lot of openness with faculty.

In addition, Russell felt that his program was very supportive and had developed a sense of community. He explained one particular scenario in which a classmate was contemplating quitting the program. However, her classmates provided support and encouraged her to stay:

The department is the most supportive department that I've ever had out of any school I've been to, any field that I've studied in. It's like there's a sense of community and family in this department and they just kind of, everyone supports each other. Like a great example, it wasn't even involving me, there was another graduate student who was Blackfeet and she was saying, 'This is really hard, I'm really struggling with this, I don't know if I can keep going.' And myself and another graduate student turned to her and was like, 'I don't accept that answer, you can stay here with us.' There's this sense of like, we're all in it together as a unit. We'll always just try to help each other out.

In contrast, other participants noted that it is imperative for graduate programs to develop in-house support structures, given that students are more culturally alienated and are isolated from main campus.

Cohort.

Participants described that the cohort experience has enriched their academic life and that the idea of shared experience is valuable. Participants who did not have a cohort felt more isolated and alienated within their program. Jennifer, for example, compared her two graduate experiences. Jennifer said she thrived in her previous graduate school experience because she had a cohort in that program. However, in her current graduate program she felt more disconnected and alienated from the rest of her program. Jennifer explained her current experience:

So that's kind of a big reason of why I kind of feel like a little bit lost and on my own, because I'm not really part of any cohort. I don't have any other people to interact with, I guess. I'm pretty much basically on my own.

Jennifer said that when she met her classmates in person, they were literally strangers and that college felt more like a business, rather than an educational institution.

Participants also described the cohort as instrumental in their educational persistence.

Danielle talked about the closeness she has established with her cohort:

If we ever had any problems come up, then we can have that comfort that we can go to anybody within our cohort and be able to talk to them...So within my own cohort, within my own lab, I have a really close support.

Heather explained the value of shared experience:

Having my cohort support, so even the non-Native students was really helpful just because they're at the same level that you are, and so just being able to talk to them about specific classes. It was a really supportive environment.

Cohort experiences were vital to the livelihood of the student educational experiences.

Native American classmates and colleagues.

Participants said that having Native American classmates and colleagues was very advantageous in feeling validated within the Westernized educational system. Ashley explained that her Native American classmates were her biggest support considering that her faculty didn't understand cultural family obligations:

I think when my personal life started to bleed into graduate school, and my professors didn't understand it at all, that was really challenging. And that was really hard for me to separate the two, because my family is such a big part of me and it has to bleed into what I'm doing. Last year...I had a really hard time finding support, but I think I just kept looking and found support among my Native colleagues, the students, not the faculty. So that was nice.

Ashley did not think she would be in the program without her fellow Native American colleagues: "My Native colleagues, I don't know if I could have done it without them, having such a big support system there." Heather explained that her graduate program was designed to incorporate American Indian students by admitting at least two each year. Heather said it was easy for her to relate to her Native American peers:

If we weren't doing a research project, we could just talk about what everyone was working on at the time. And so we kind of had that built-in support of Native students who already had something in common.

Robert also said his Native American peers were vital to his academic experience:

Peers. You know, my cohort has been essential. I don't know if I would have made it through school without them... You have those people who have kind of been there with you, and made it through with you. That's your peer support.

Native American peers, especially those within the same graduate program, helped students persist because they provided a shared learning experience. More importantly, they acted as people who validated students' experience within a Westernized educational system.

Professors.

Participants explained that professors played a vital role in American Indian students' ability to persist in graduate school. More specifically, the ability of the professor to recognize the unique heritage of Native students was instrumental to making students feel comfortable. Participants also recommended that professors learn about Native American culture so they can connect with students.

Participants explained the cultural differences between themselves and their professors, which can potentially pose as a barrier for mutual understanding. Many felt that their professors didn't understand their experiences and cultural values. Other participants stated that their non-Native professors were very aware of cultural dynamics, as well as issues among Indigenous communities, and were significant advocates for American Indian students.

Otata provided advice for all professors, stating that they should learn about the backgrounds of their students. She said that professors should do a "trade-off," since American Indian students learn Westernized values and backgrounds:

One of my recommendations is that they learn, all professors learn on the ground from which they're working and learning from. Learn a couple words of the language that I was taught here. If you have, have three different students here, Apsalooke, Fort Peck, Pikuni, learn at least some words, some familiarity, learn what some of their traditions are...know that they have learned all yours. So do a little bit of balancing, trade-off there, and learn what their needs really are.

Moreover, participants expressed the need for American Indian professors in higher education.

Sissy explained that the number of Native American professors is growing at her institution and that it is important, especially in terms of teaching culturally relevant issues on campus:

I think the effect of a good teacher in Native studies, on people who have never had any kind of experience with Native people or Native culture, I think it's important that they learn those things from a Native perspective.

Additionally, Russell explained that one of his role models is an American Indian professor on campus:

My Indian law professor kind of immediately became a role model as soon as I sat through my first lecture with her. The way she speaks, the way she presents herself, and the ideas—it's definitely a hard class, and definitely I wish her tests were a little bit easier, but she always gets me so motivated, you know? She just always gets your blood pumping and you're feeling, because she's not afraid to hit on the tough topics. Like she's not afraid to say what everyone's thinking, when you're talking about something like termination policy in the '50s with the Menominee. It's like everyone is kind of thinking like, 'Yeah its terrible,' but she'll just straight up tell you exactly why did this happen, what was the legal precedent and...it makes some people uncomfortable but it needs to be said to a certain point.

The ability of professors to understand the unique heritage of American Indian students, without making them feel “othered,” is essential to academic persistence among this population.

Moreover, American Indian professors in academe pose as a resource, and are important role models in an area where Indigenous people are underrepresented.

Chairs, advisers, and supervisors.

Chairs, advisers, and supervisors play a pivotal role in American Indian graduate students' academic life. Participants described having a very close relationship with these individuals, and that the ability for these people to recognize students and their unique heritage is of great significance. In addition, individuals in these roles must validate participants' research ideologies and be cognizant of their backgrounds.

William explained that COSMOS, an American Indian support program, provided an opportunity for him to spend time with his adviser: “I went to an Indigenous Knowledge field camp this summer, so it's kind of, that was another kind of service, because it was with my graduate adviser, before I even started [graduate school], so it helped foster relationships.” Fox

explained that students' relationships with their adviser are close and that it's important for the adviser to be aware of the student's background and cultural values:

As a graduate student, you do have to have a pretty close relationship with your committee member, or your chair or your adviser, that I think sometimes that relationship, based on who that person is and how they are able to acknowledge or value who you are as an Indigenous person can sometimes be difficult. I'm super fortunate that I have never had that. But I know students who that's been challenging for them, where more of their identity is going to be visible in that relationship now.

Roy mentioned that it is imperative for advisers to be aware of important topics in Indian education, as well as Indigenous research methodologies:

As you go onto the dissertation phase, its more insular. It's only yourself with your chair... I think advising has to be done by someone that has more than just background knowledge, and that's why I think Native faculty in education, in other very important fields is really critical, and either that or people who are well versed in what were trying to do.

Natalie explained the importance of having a Native American adviser and the implicit and explicit messages it sends to the rest of the department:

The idea of having a Native adviser I think was pretty big. The message it sent was it was okay to be Native, and in this program, like you don't have to trade that out and then also with my research, I think had I not had a Native adviser, I wouldn't have felt like I could have done research with Native people, and even all the intricacies that go with the research with Native people, bringing that into a Western institution, I felt like it would be less valued or less taken as seriously without the adviser standing there making sure that this was taken seriously.

The closeness of the working relationship with chairs, advisers, and supervisors is heightened at the graduate school level. It is at this level that students stated their cultural values and heritage are the most evident within these professional relationships. Therefore, it is imperative that these key individuals understand and support American Indian student identities, as well as support their research endeavors.

Committee members.

Committee members played an essential role in the participants' ability to incorporate Indigenous ideologies and methodologies into their research. In addition, they served as professional guides throughout the research process, sometimes using their own professional networks to advance the students' research project. Lastly, committee members served as a support network for graduate students.

Roy stated that his committee was fairly knowledgeable about his traditional research ideologies. Roy wished there were more American Indian potential committee members available: "I have one Native American on my committee. I should have all Natives on my committee." However, he said that his current committee was knowledgeable of Indigenous research methodologies.

Fox also talked about her committee members. She explained that these people have an invested interest in her as a student, as well as her research ideas:

I've had several individuals on campus, a couple peers, a couple students, and also the people from Embry like my chair, and some people from NAS, and a couple people that are on my committee, who do know what my research is about, who have sat down and taken the time to have conversations with me, and understand where I come from, what my passions are, what I'm interested in. So when we have a conversation, it is genuine, it is real. That really means something to me. And then I know that they're invested in my education—this—this degree is not the end product, but they're invested in it, and that relationship means a lot to me. There's a lot of those relationships. They become part of a web, is what I see, support, holding me up, and so I become more invested in my own education because I see that they have hope in me and they really, really want to see me succeed.

Committee members serve as a huge resource for students. In particular, students noted that committee members' ability to understand and support their research efforts is vital to student educational persistence, particularly at the thesis and dissertation level.

Conclusion

American Indian graduate students expressed that their idea of persistence is different from the mainstream community. In particular, participants said they persist in graduate school, so one day they can be in a position to serve their tribal communities. However, persistence was deemed to be a non-linear path with the notion that sometimes other responsibilities take precedence. Additionally, participants were very passionate about their field of choice and had very specific goals of how they would contribute to Indigenous populations, thus contributing to nation building. Participants believed that they could elicit change within their communities and they wanted to inspire future generations to pursue their goals. They also gave reverence to their ancestors for their sacrifices and were making sacrifices through education for the betterment of future generations.

Fox, a doctoral student at Montana State University, provided a quote that summarized the connection of culture and the educational journey. In particular, educational persistence was related to the cultural value of communal work. She explained that a traditional communal buffalo hunt was equivalent to graduate school, indicating that every individual has a role in the survival of the community:

I'm going to the past of what my ancestors would think. What my future will think. How have I been the best community member in this buffalo hunt? How have I contributed to setting up this lodge? We went on a buffalo hunt a couple years ago with Little Big Horn College...Thinking about that experience, and about the knowledge that comes through being Indigenous from our ancestors, is very powerful. And I have to honor that. And to do that, for me, it's this program.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The following chapter addresses further exploration and analysis of the central research questions in this study. Additionally, an overview will be provided that examines the concept of persistence among the American Indian graduate student population and how it is different from mainstream education's definition of educational persistence. Findings from this study will also be compared to findings from the literature review, noting saturated themes as well as anomalies. Lastly, recommendations will be provided for the discipline of education, as well as practitioners who serve American Indian students in higher leveled programs. The overall purpose of this research was to explore American Indian higher education from a strengths-based perspective, by focusing on student academic strength and identify components of educational persistence.

Central Questions

The central research questions for this study included: What is persistence in the context of the American Indian graduate student experience? Why and how do American Indian graduate students persist while attending non-Native colleges and universities in the state of Montana? In this study, the researcher identified components of persistence specific to American Indian graduate students and answered the initial research question of "what" is persistence, in the context of serving this population. Additionally, an Indigenous theory of educational persistence was developed from the data, explaining "why" and "how" American Indian graduate students were able to persist at mainstream institutions.

Holistic Analysis

Participants identified persistence as comprehensively different than mainstream education's notion of persistence. In particular, students stated that mainstream education's definition of persistence meant progress toward graduation. However, American Indian students

described persistence as progress toward serving their community in the future. Therefore, graduation was viewed as movement toward this goal, but was not the end result, nor the overall objective. Essentially, persistence among the American Indian population was explained as an intersection of traditional cultural beliefs/values with professional/technical skills derived from their formal education.

The participants' description of persistence was related to their fundamental cultural values of responsibility and collectivism. Participants emphasized their ancestral values of reciprocity and mutual responsibilities, indicating that everyone has a responsibility of contributing to the community. In addition, participants compared these values to ancestral practices, such as a communal buffalo hunts and day-to-day ancestral thought processes and practices. Therefore, the survival and livelihood of a community depends on collectivism, which translates into modern-day educational contributions to self-determination and Indigenous nation building.

Resilience was identified as a complementary concept to persistence. Participants were challenged to recognize the fundamental differences between resilience and persistence. As a result, participants defined resilience as an ability to endure adversarial situations, while persistence was identified as an ability to progress toward the achievement of goals. However, participants stated that progress was not always movement, but may incorporate instances of idleness, depending on life events. Therefore, resilience and persistence were identified as fundamentally different concepts, though complementary in nature as they worked together to achieve the same goal in education.

Participants identified different types of resilience: individual, community, and historical resilience. Individual resiliency was identified as factors that protect people before and after a

difficult experience. Additionally, community resilience addressed the issue of Indigenous leadership and its relation to the self-determination of a community. Lastly, historical resilience was representative of inherent abilities of survival. In particular, students stated that they were inherently resilient because of the strength they have been given from their ancestors in the ability to survive instances of hardship, especially due to historical trauma.

According to these previous mentioned definitions, it appears that resilience would be required to endure both academic and non-academic adversarial conditions such as racism, cultural dissonance, and the loss of a loved one. However, persistence would be more evident in challenges experienced by all graduate students such as workload, stress or pressure, and academic performance. Thus, American Indian students stated that they needed to possess both resilience and persistence to be progressive and successful in higher education.

American Indian students inherently possess components of resiliency; therefore, it is essential for support systems and institutions to enhance components of persistence within this population. Participants identified numerable challenges or barriers. It is imperative that institutions comprehensively understand these unique challenges and work to reduce the amount of barriers that prevent students from persisting to academic completion. Nearly half of these challenges were identified as institutional barriers in regard to Westernized education and campus climate issues. Regarding persistence, American Indian students have developed their own sense of identity, and have defined their own cultural value and objective for success. Consequently, graduation programs and institutions can promote persistence in this population by providing adequate and culturally appropriate support, as well as resources for professional or academic skill development. Additionally, programs and institutions may also provide cultural

events on campus, which contributes to diversity and enhances students' ability to stay connected to their culture while away from their tribal communities.

Many powerful paradoxes were present within the data. Participants identified a few of the challenges as empowering endeavors in education. For example, the concept of "double duty" was viewed as a challenge, considering that participants felt that they had to complete twice the amount of work compared to their non-Native peers. However, participants also felt that it allowed them an opportunity to interact with two culturally different groups. In addition, Westernized education was perceived as a threat to Indigenous students' identity and students felt that maintaining their identity was a challenging process. However, participants were able to develop an even stronger sense of identity in the face of threatening circumstances. The process of decolonizing education was viewed as an empowering task, yet categorized as a challenge since participants felt alone in this endeavor with a limited amount of resources.

Family and community were viewed as paradoxical, which was also evident in the literature review. Participants identified their family as their top support system; however, their family often could not provide guidance nor advice regarding academic and/or professional tasks. The last paradox identified within these data related to the concept of community. Participants felt that their communities questioned their absence with concern, even though participants were seeking higher education with the notion that they would return to their communities in the future. Community members felt that students were abandoning the community and/or that formal education would change the character and identity of the student. However, students stated that despite education's deeply engrained assimilation tactics, they were able to maintain their cultural identity and were working to contribute to their community upon completion of their education.

Exploration of Research Questions

The central research questions for this study included the following: What is persistence in the context the American Indian graduate student experience? Why and how do American Indian graduate students persist while attending non-Native colleges and universities in the state of Montana? Twenty-five participants were interviewed and identified as Native American. They were attending one of the five mainstream institutions in Montana: University of Montana-Missoula, Montana State University-Bozeman, Montana Tech-Butte, Montana State University-Billings, and Montana State University-Havre. As a result, a grounded theory approach was employed to create a theory of educational persistence specific to this population.

Central research questions.

The first central research question was developed to explore “what” persistence is in the context of serving the American Indian graduate student population. Participants identified several components of persistence: reverence for ancestors, focus on future generations, passion and dedication for the field, resilience, Westernized criteria, a non-linear path, and the ability to endure setbacks. Persistence was tied to lineage, as participants indicated that they were able to access education due to the sacrifices of their ancestors. Additionally, participants made sacrifices to pursue education to create a better life for future generations. Participants also expressed passion and dedication to their field of study, establishing very specific goals of how they would serve the community, essentially contributing to nation building. Unfortunately, participants described persistence as “jumping through hoops” to meet “Westernized criteria,” stating that when they graduate they will be able to have the freedom to culturally adapt components of their profession. Participants described persistence as the ability to endure setbacks and that it was a non-linear path, indicating that “step outs” or extended time

progression in a program were a common phenomenon. Lastly, participants said that defining characteristics or features existed between the concepts of resilience and persistence, yet both were complementary in the ability to be successful in graduate school.

The second central research question was developed to explore “why” and “how” American Indian students persist at non-Native colleges and universities. Consequently, the core category emerged that participants possessed a vision to serve their community, answering “why” they continue to persist in these institutions. Moreover, three supporting categories were developed that explain “how” participants persisted in graduate school. These categories included the following: identity, skills, and support. Together, the core category and supporting categories comprehensively make up the theory, answering the latter portion of the central research question.

Core category.

The core category of the theory was a “vision to serve the community.” Participants stated that the primary reason they persisted in graduate school was so that they can contribute to their tribal community in a more significant way. Students wanted to be in a position to provide a quality life for their children and family, as well as strengthen Native American communities in general. Specifically, participants said that they wanted to inspire and elicit change, as well as become a role model for Native youth and encourage them to pursue their own life goals. Participants developed specific goals that combined their passion for their field of study with their desire to give back to the community, thus contributing to Indigenous self-determination and nation building.

The core category of “A Vision to Serve the Community,” was also evident among participants that were pursuing a degree in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and

Math) fields. Participants pursuing the STEM fields were just as likely to make the connection to serve Indigenous communities, as those participants that were pursuing the helping professions. In this sample, six participants were pursuing a STEM degree, which included Bio-Chemistry & Bio-Physics, Forestry Conservation Studies, System Ecology Forestry, Applied Geographic Information Science, Earth Science, and Geo Chemistry. Three participants were pursuing a doctoral degree and three participants were pursuing a master's degree. The majority of these participants were pursuing an earth based science degree. Five of the six participants that were pursuing a STEM degree, also possessed a desire to serve the community.

The majority of STEM participants indicated that they wanted to make a contribution to Indigenous communities by combining their unique cultural knowledge with their professional and technical skills. As an example, Samuel used his geospatial analysis background to divide his reservation into nine different physical geographical regions and did a soils survey for a local organization. In addition, Samuel also created a bison ecological caring capacity model for bison herds in the Northwest region of the United States, using remote sensing data sets. Moreover, Otata wanted to combine her traditional cultural knowledge with her educational background in Geographic Information Science to find Native American children in federal boarding school cemeteries. In addition, Michelle stated that was important for Indigenous people to pursue STEM fields, so that they constructively work to protect Indigenous rights and the environment. William and Kathleen both wanted to use their science backgrounds and work at tribal community colleges in the future. In particular, William wanted to become a professor and teach Earth Sciences. Additionally, Kathleen stated that her degree would benefit TCU's, because she would possess the credentials to be a Principal Investigator for grant funded projects. Kathleen noted that currently, larger Non-Native institutions gain the funding to support TCU's but do not

engage in a fair or equitable level with tribal colleges. Therefore, graduate students in the STEM field still possessed a vision to serve the community.

Supporting categories.

Supporting categories were developed around the core category of a vision to give back to the community. These three supporting categories explained “how” students persisted in graduate school: identity, skills, and support. These supporting categories demonstrated growth as participants continued to persist in graduate school and/or their professional fields.

Identity was a supporting category within the theory. Students entered graduate school with various levels of identity development. A large majority of participants had solidified their identity as Indigenous prior to school; however, a few participants were still reconciling or developing their identity. Regardless of participants’ level of identity development, nearly all participants experienced some type of identity growth when faced with the adversarial experiences of Westernized education. The more developed their identity was, the more they participated in cultural events, practiced cultural values, engaged in ceremony, and were connected to their community. Consequently, the more developed participants’ identity was, the more they were exposed to historical trauma, as well as resiliency. Thus, resiliency and persistence were complementary concepts that helped participants progress and succeed in education.

Skills were another supporting category within this theory. Skills were categorized into three sections: academic, professional, and personal life skills. Participants were able to develop their professional and life skills to accommodate their graduate school schedule, as well as future professions. Students were able to connect their education to practice, and develop professional skills without significant problems. Additionally, students were able to develop life skills that

helped them maintain their personal life demands outside of school. However, students struggled in the area of academic skills. In particular, writing/vocabulary and statistical analysis were two specific areas of challenge. Students were able to persist despite these challenges by reaching out to resources such as their university's writing center, or communicating with professors about their academic struggles and performance. The skills category was the least saturated category, which may be indicative of students' cultural value of expressing humility, as they talked about their own personal skill and talents.

Support was the third supporting category in the theory. Many participants discussed their feelings of intimidation or inadequacy while pursuing graduate school. These students stated that the most important form of support was encouragement from people within their academic and non-academic lives, which helped them navigate a complex Westernized system. Participants noted that their family was typically their most salient form of support. Although family was considered support, students expressed that sometimes family could not provide academic and/or professional advice. In addition, students were seen as "part of the support," meaning that they also had to be present during family events or challenging times.

Relationships were very important to contributing to American Indian student persistence. In particular, graduate school provided an opportunity for students to develop intimate working relationships with their adviser/chair and committee members. The ability for these individuals to encourage students, as well as understand and be invested in their unique research interests was of vital importance. Graduate programs are often isolated in nature, meaning that students feel separated from the main campus. Additionally, graduate students are typically "non-traditional," indicating that they have family and parental obligations. Due to

students' family responsibilities and the insular nature of graduate programs, it is important for these programs to build a support system for this population within their programs.

Analysis Related to the Literature

This research study filled a large theoretical gap in the literature. More specifically, this study used the same grounded theory methodology as HeavyRunner's (2009) study, but examined the same population as Secatero's (2009) study. Therefore, this study reflects a theoretical foundational piece that examines educational persistence among American Indian graduate students that attend mainstream institutions. Thus, specific concepts of challenges and persistence have been identified within this study, which can be further explored in future research studies. Additionally, this study has produced and identified specific practical implications for graduate programs and institutions to promote persistence within the American Indian population.

Many challenges identified within this data corresponded with findings from the literature review. Students said they experienced a conflict of value systems as they attended mainstream institutions. Participants also felt inadequately prepared for graduate education, indicating that their primary and secondary schools did not provide them with the academic rigor that they needed for post secondary education. In addition, participants felt that they did not have the family resources for financial support and/or academic guidance. Many students disclosed that they stemmed from impoverished communities, which motivated them to persist in college because they wanted to eventually provide a "better life" for their children. A lack of culturally relevant curricula was also a challenge identified by participants within this study. However, lack of appropriate curricula was translated into using "dominant research methodologies," considering that this sample was composed of graduate students and/or students

seeking professional degrees. Campus climate posed several problems for this sample of participants. These problems included cultural dissonance, isolation and alienation, stereotypes and microaggressions, racism and sexism, and the presence of recent political events. The majority of participants felt that there was “no institutional support,” perhaps indicative of institutional practices that fail to support diverse nations.

This research contrasted mainstream theories of persistence, yet it corresponded with persistence theories specific to minority populations and/or American Indian populations. Tierney (1992) was one of the first researchers to critique dominant (mainstream) persistence theories. In his argument, Tierney (1992) stated that American Indian students undergo a disruptive cultural experience. This appeared evident in this sample of participants, as students expressed instances of culture shock, or cultural dissonance. This was particularly pronounced among non-traditional students, first year graduate students, and students who transferred from tribal community colleges. In addition, Tierney critiqued Tinto’s (1975) student departure theory and stated that social integration is potentially harmful for minority populations. In this research study, participants stated that Westernized education was a threat to their identity, but students still did not assimilate to mainstream cultural practices. Rather, students sought out traditional practices on campus to stay connected to their cultural roots, as well as strengthen their identity as an Indigenous person while persisting in graduate school. As a result, students were not socially integrating to persist in mainstream education, as suggested by Tinto. Instead, students were doing quite the opposite: maintaining and strengthening their diverse perspectives and practices while pursuing graduate school.

HeavyRunner (2009) developed the first persistence theory specific to Indigenous populations. However, HeavyRunner’s theory was specific to college students attending tribal

community colleges and universities. This particular research was focused on a different population: American Indian graduate students who attended mainstream institutions. Despite the differences in populations, several similarities were found between the two sources of data. This data supports HeavyRunner and Marshall's (2003) definition that persistence derives from a self-resilience component. Participants in this sample did state that persistence and resilience were different fundamental components, with some participants suggesting that persistence derives from resilience. Regardless, participants stated that these were complementary concepts to student success. The core category of HeavyRunner's grounded theory was a "vision of success." This research data supports a core category of a "vision to serve the community." Both data sets involve a visionary component as a core category of persistence.

Additionally, HeavyRunner (2009) developed "circle of relationships" as supporting categories. Within this research study, one supporting category included "support," indicating that relationships were still a prominent feature of persistence as students progressed from undergraduate education into higher leveled degrees. Two categories not evident in HeavyRunner's data included the notions of "skill" and "identity." Skill development may have been more evident in this research study, as students were exposed to gaining technical and professional skills related to their future profession, as opposed to undergraduate degrees that may be less linked to specific career types. Additionally, identity was not a component of HeavyRunner's theory of persistence. This contrast may be attributable to the idea that students' identities may not be threatened within the tribal community college setting.

HeavyRunner's (2009) grounded theory of persistence is the most applicable comparative data for similar themes and categories among American Indian college students. Family challenges that included "caretaking" and "time management" were evident in both data sets,

indicating that American Indian students have several familial responsibilities. Two particular academic challenges evident at both the undergraduate level and the graduate level were “math and writing skills,” which may translate into problems with statistical analysis at the pursuit of higher leveled degrees. American Indian graduate students are more disconnected from their traditional communal practices due to their attendance at a mainstream institution; however, involvement with cultural practices is still important to persistence in academe. HeavyRunner (2009) also found that students’ involvement in academic events and clubs is imperative to their academic persistence. Although American Indian graduate students had less time to be involved with events/clubs, their participation in these activities were essential and vital to their professional development and network systems.

It is imperative that culturally sensitive leadership perspectives are developed and maintained at mainstream institutions to support diverse populations in education. In particular, Indigenous philosophies, values, and characteristics of leadership should be incorporated at the administrative level to support American Indian students. Williams (2012) used a phenomenological approach to identify leadership characteristics by American Indian college students and elders. Williams (2012) found that it is imperative for leaders to develop these specific characteristics that were intrinsic values of American Indian people: commitment (determination and fighting for the community, dedication, patience, bravery and strength), community (understanding the concept of community, family and culture, responsibility to the community, developing a voice with pride, vision and awareness), and collaboration (open-mindedness, fairness, cooperation, understanding). In addition, Wise-Erickson (2004) found that traditional American Indian leadership appeared to have similar characteristics of team-based leadership, as well as community-based leadership. These leadership approaches focus on

shared meaning, common direction, community learning, and commitment to resolving common problems and challenges (Wise-Erickson, 2004). Thus, American Indian traditional leadership is embedded in the culture and the community. Moreover, Burns (2010) developed a leadership theory from the Mashantucket Pequot tribal perspective and found five final concepts: service leadership, community involvement, respect and collaboration, cultural participation, and communication and transparency. Lastly, Bill (2012) described best practices for traditional Native American leadership: getting to know students, getting to know the community, and respecting elders and children as the first teachers.

Educational leadership that incorporates these traditional values are important for use at tribal community colleges, as well as non-Native or mainstream institutions. Cohesively, these research articles suggested that traditional Native American leadership values should be incorporated into practice. As suggested by these articles, it is important to work collaboratively as a team, with a focus on respect and culture when serving Indigenous populations. Additionally, traditional leadership emphasizes the idea of serving the community, which was also the core category of educational persistence in this study.

Implications for the Discipline/Practitioners

American Indian graduate students stem from unique, rich cultural backgrounds. Despite the notion that students have already received an undergraduate education, they still voiced personal concerns about culturally disruptive experiences and/or culture shock at mainstream institutions. A large majority of participants expressed feelings of intimidation or inadequacy despite the fact that they were able to succeed in education. Therefore, it is essential that American Indian students are provided with structured support that is specifically tailored to graduate students as well as Indigenous populations.

Native American Indian students have expressed that persistence is a non-linear path. This reflects the idea that students may have an extended period of time between their undergraduate and graduate path. However, students stated that this time period posed a great opportunity for them to gain professional experience and helped them choose a graduate program that was a good fit for their professional goals. The non-linear path was also indicative of students' responsibilities outside of their program. These responsibilities include family, cultural, and ceremonial responsibilities that may take precedence over their education at certain moments.

Student experience of grief and loss was quite significant in this study. Participants indicated that they were either grieving from a previous loss or experienced a significant loss within their graduate school experience. In particular, two participants stated that they experienced a series of losses during their graduate school experience. One participant experienced nine deaths throughout her doctoral program and stated that more than one death occurred every year in her program. The other participant experienced eleven deaths within the timeframe of one month. Moreover, students' exposure to tragic deaths was also quite significant. One participant experienced a drug/alcohol related death, two participants experienced a death caused by suicide, and three participants experienced deaths related to vehicular accidents. Participants stated that they struggled with traumatic grief and were suffering from more than one loss throughout their graduate school experience. If participants lost a grandparent, they often equated this death to a loss of their connection to their spirituality and culture. These incidents impacted students' cognitive and academic abilities, indicating that they often had to "compartmentalize" information during this time to persist in education.

As a result, students may need to travel home and be present during these moments of loss to fulfill the timeframe of culturally appropriate burials. In addition, participants stated that professors didn't understand the importance and value of extended family, especially in terms of death and loss. Thus, communication with professors and programs is imperative, as well as flexibility within the program to complete academic requirements, during a time of loss.

The overall message of this research study is that Indigenous people and mainstream society have two different concepts of persistence and success. Participants indicated that their goal and vision of success is to be in a position to serve their community. Additionally, graduate education was just one specific route to achieve this endeavor. However, institutions may view the non-linear path, or "step outs" from higher education, as a failure or dropout, while the student may be contributing to society in another form and views that as success. The underlying issue is that cultural differences between the ideas of persistence and success exist.

Recommendations for Discipline/Practitioners

The following list of recommendations is provided for the discipline of education, as well as practitioners, and is explained in more detail within this section.

Recommendations
1) Tribal Community Colleges and Universities (TCUs) expand programs
2) Non-Native Colleges and Universities (NCUs) reduce institutional barriers and promote diversity
3) NNCU's incorporate Indigenous research methodologies
4) Graduate/Professional programs meet needs of American Indian (AI) populations
5) Relationship development between advisor/chair/supervisor and AI graduate student
6) Increased AI representation in faculty positions and study body
7) Focus on student academic preparation; primarily within the topic of statistics and writing
8) Administrator and policy support of AI populations
9) Institutional fiscal support of AI cultural events and student support services
10) Programs and recruitment services link educational path to the career path, so Indigenous students can understand how that specific degree meets the needs of their community

The researcher recommends that tribal community colleges and universities (TCUs) expand their institutions to include higher leveled degrees, such as graduate school and/or professional programs. However, this expansion would require financial support on behalf of federal agencies, as the government maintains its trust responsibility with tribal nations by providing access to higher leveled education. As tribal community colleges and universities begin to develop more advanced programs, this would greatly reduce the amount of challenges and barriers that American Indian students endure while attending non-Native institutions, also known as Primarily White Institutions (PWI) or mainstream institutions in the literature. In this study, 19 challenges have been identified, with nearly half of these challenges being attributed to either campus climate or Westernized education. Theoretically, if tribal colleges produced higher leveled programs, nine specific challenges would be reduced, if not eliminated. These nine challenges include the following: conflict of values, tokenism, double duty, maintenance of identity, the decolonization of education, cultural dissonance, isolation and alienation, stereotypes and microaggressions, and racism within the campus community.

Despite the movement of tribal colleges and universities toward incorporating these higher leveled programs, several barriers still exist. One particular challenge is that tribal colleges need to receive federal funding to support these advanced programs. If tribal colleges do receive federal funding, they will need to be in a position to recruit professionals to help maintain these advanced programs. Regardless of these challenges, TCUs have the opportunity to provide advanced education to community members, where the curriculum and courses can be tailored to include Indigenous perspectives as well as provide training to become culturally appropriate professionals. Additionally, students will not have to experience cultural dissonance and alienation, but rather attend school while staying connected to their culture and home

community. As TCUs develop graduate programs, they will be able to develop into research institutions, which would provide resources to decolonize research by focusing on Indigenous research methodologies that help transform the research paradigm.

American Indian students will have to attend non-Native institutions until tribal colleges and universities are able to offer these more advanced programs. Currently, mainstream institutions can work on promoting persistence in American Indian students by understanding the unique needs of this population, while removing institutional barriers. Additionally, American Indian students undergo similar culturally disruptive experiences as foreign exchange students. Therefore, student service support should be at least equivalent to all minority parties on campuses. In addition, state headquarters, such as the Montana University System (MUS), could provide monetary incentives to institutions for recruiting and supporting American Indian students to make this population a priority on campus. Mainstream institutions should also make diversity a value on campus, thus progressing to the creation of a more culturally inclusive campus, which benefits all populations.

Graduate and professional programs can adapt their programs and services to be more conscientious of culturally diverse needs. Graduate programs can promote persistence in American Indian students by incorporating Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogy within their teaching paradigms. Additionally, these programs can become more family oriented, by understanding that they are not just serving a student, but rather a family unit within American Indian populations. Graduate/professional programs can also provide a level of flexibility within their program, considering that the graduate path for American Indian students may not always be linear. Students may have family, cultural, or communal responsibilities that take precedence over their education, which should not be misconstrued as a student's lack of commitment to

education. Cohort experiences are essential to the livelihood of the academic experience of American Indian students. Moreover, Westernized education can be an invalidating experience for American Indian students, indicating that their American Indian peers are of vital importance to their persistence in graduate programs. Hybridized and online programs will need to become more interactive to enhance relationship building among participants within the program.

The most powerful influence for American Indian graduate students was reflective of the intimate professional working relationship they had with chairs, advisers, supervisors, and professors. These individuals served a pivotal role in influencing persistence among American Indian students. Additionally, these professional positions have the duty of recognizing each of their student's unique heritage, without making students feel "othered," or separate from the program. Cultural knowledge of students' backgrounds is necessary, especially in terms of the students' experiences with death and loss and their obligations to travel home for a specific period of time. Moreover, chairs or advisers have the unique responsibility of understanding Indigenous research methodology and making sure that students' research is culturally appropriate for that specific population. Chairs or advisers also have the power to advise students' research to ensure that it serves the needs of American Indian communities, as opposed to only meeting Westernized criteria. All professionals on campus must understand that they serve a powerful role in encouraging American Indian students on campus, for they navigate a unique and complex system that is culturally different from their own tribal community.

Furthermore, American Indian representation in higher education needs to be increased. American Indian students are more likely to persist if they have Native peers who can help validate their experience, since Westernized education is a culturally disruptive experience and can be dismissive of Indigenous epistemologies. Moreover, more American Indian

representation needs to exist among faculty in higher education. Native American faculties send a strong message to students, as well as to the department, that Indigenous education is an important topic. In addition, Native American faculties provide necessary role modeling for students navigating an intimidating system and are a necessary resource for students. These individuals are a vital resource in regard to using appropriate research methodologies, as well as teaching course content through accurate perspectives. American Indian representation in higher education should be reflective of the overall population in that particular region.

Moreover, administrative knowledge of American Indian student needs is imperative to creating a culturally diverse campus, as well as developing inclusive communities. Participants noted that education should be provided based on “the land from which they learn on,” recognizing the importance of Indigenous nations in the region, as well as their connection to the land. It is imperative that administrators and campuses recognize the American Indian original homeland territory from which their college campus is built upon for that specific region. Administration also has the power to create policy change that requires professionals to have training in serving culturally diverse nations as well as including Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies within the classroom. Additionally, administrators have the power to fiscally support American Indian populations, by providing adequate services that are at least equivalent to serving foreign student populations. Officials can also provide financial incentives to departments for recruiting and retaining American Indian students. It is imperative that Montana educational institutions sustain their state constitutional commitments to Indigenous nations.

Student academic preparation is a major contributing factor for persistence in American Indian students. In particular, students desired more academic preparation prior to graduate school. Participants said the application process was manageable; however, they were not aware

of graduate degree options and programs. Additionally, participants stated that they struggled with statistics, as well as writing in these advanced programs. Prior preparation for students needs to focus on these specific skill sets, with exploration of teaching these skills through various pedagogies.

Financial support is of great significance for the ability of American Indian students to persist. A large majority of participants were parents and stated that the only way they would be able to pursue graduate school is if they maintained a job while attending school or if they received enough financial support. Additionally, students disclosed that they came from impoverished circumstances, indicating that they had no other forms of support, nor was their family in a position to contribute to the financing of their education. They stated that financial support was necessary for them to embark on the graduate educational path, yet the focus on sustainability was based on the relationships they built on campus.

The core category of this theory was that participants had a vision of serving the community. Therefore, it is advised that graduate programs recruit American Indian students on the premise that they are linking information between the educational path and future career options, so that students can understand how these programs fit within their community need. Graduate programs and funding opportunities should also follow up with career placement. In particular, these opportunities should inform students of career placement prior to their acceptance so that students can comprehensively understand how their education will contribute to their community.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research recommendations are to explore American Indian education from a strength-based perspective and to view identity, culture, and values as an asset to educational

persistence. In particular, qualitative research paradigms align with Indigenous worldviews, therefore future research should consider using these research methodologies, or perhaps using mixed methods studies to enhance quantitative research studies. The most important recommendation for future studies is to incorporate decolonizing and Indigenous research paradigms while conducting research on this specific population.

More specific recommendations for future researchers are to study the relationship between altruism and educational persistence for American Indian students. Academic skill attainment should also be explored in these areas: vocabulary, writing, and statistics. Moreover, the use of unique teaching pedagogies to teach these specific topics among this population should be researched more in depth.

Research on the student experience of campus climate issues is another important area of research. Previous research has been compiled on the minority experience on mainstream campus, however there is extremely limited research that is specific to the American Indian college experience. In addition research focused on mentoring services, as well as institutional support for American Indian students needs to be examined in larger scope, since these areas were viewed as deficits from the student perspective.

Moreover, decolonizing and tribal centered research methodologies need to be the crux of American Indian research. At this point in time, the use of tribal epistemologies within the research paradigm is controversial, due to previous historical exploitive research practices. Additionally, the use of tribally centered research paradigms may also lose context, if information is translated within the westernized educational context to be used in academe. Therefore ethical considerations must be further explored regarding Indigenous research methodologies, as research starts to transform to include these perspectives in the literature.

It is advised that any research conducted on this population must be done in an ethical way, given the historical context of research and its use of exploitive practices, as well the focus of American Indian education from a deficit perspective. It is imperative to gather approval from tribes in the use of Indigenous cultural and intellectual properties (Berman, 1997). Additionally, researchers must understand the idea of reciprocity in relation to their research, meaning that outcomes must be used to benefit Indigenous communities to avoid exploitation of this population. Researchers must also have a knowledge base of tribal peoples' history, culture, and customs prior to conducting research. Researchers should also use methodologies that incorporate components of storytelling, relationality, ceremony, and metaphysics as valid ways of understanding the world (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008; & Deloria, 2001). Lastly, research should focus on Indigenous people as political and sovereign entities with self-determination rights. Thus, the primary focus of research should include notions of community resilience, healing, empowerment and survivance.

Conclusion

In summary, these data suggests that American Indian students' perception of educational persistence and success is different from mainstream education's definitions. Persistence for American Indian students requires a visionary component linking their formal education to their future profession of serving their tribal community. Additionally, persistence requires skill development, as well as an enhanced level of support on campus, with a focus on sustainable relationships. Contrary to most mainstream persistence theories, which insist that students must socially integrate on campus, this grounded theory provides evidence that American Indian students must maintain their identity to succeed rather than assimilating to the social protocols of mainstream society.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol Example

Date: _____ Time: _____ (am / pm) Setting: _____

Male: ___ Female: ___ Age: _____

Tribal Affiliation _____

Institution: _____

Graduate Program: _____ Field of Study _____

Graduate Level Status _____

Subject Code: _____

Opening Statement: Thank you for agreeing to take time from your busy schedule to participate in this research study. There are a few things that I would like to make sure you understand before we get started in this interview.

- I will be asking you some general questions and writing notes as we proceed. These questions are created to gather your thoughts, feelings, and experiences as an American Indian attending graduate school.
- All information from this interview will be confidential. You will not be identified by name, graduate program, or location/institution in this study.
- Your name and graduate program will only be known by the researcher and Dr. Kero, Associate Professor of the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Montana. Dr. Kero is my Doctoral Dissertation Committee Chairman and oversees all aspects of this research study.
- The confidentiality of your name and university enrollment is also under the purview of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Montana.
- You will be given a confidential subject code to be used for any follow-up questions.
- You may stop this interview at anytime without any negative consequences.
- The intent of this interview is to understand contributing factors of student educational persistence in higher education. The data gathered from these interviews will contribute to the development of a grounded theory of persistence among American Indian graduate students attending non-Native colleges and universities.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Study Title: A Grounded Theory Approach Examining Educational Persistence among American Indian Graduate Students

Special Instructions to the Participant:

You are volunteering as a research participant, as the researcher is studying the concept of educational persistence among American Indian graduate students. Therefore, you will be asked questions regarding your thoughts and feelings, as well as contributing factors to your ability to persist in graduate school.

If you decide to participate in this project, please sign this consent form. If you wish, you will be given a copy to keep for your own records.

This form may contain words that are new and/or may need additional clarification. If for any reason you need further explanation, please ask the researchers for more detail about this research project.

During the study you may contact one of the following research team members if you have additional questions:

Karla Bird (Principal Investigator) [email address]
Dr. Patty Kero (Faculty Supervisor) [email address]

Purpose:

The purpose of this research study is to develop a theory regarding educational persistence among American Indian graduate students.

Research Process:

- Participants will be interviewed through a semi-structured interview process. Each participant will be asked to answer 8-10 questions during the interview. Typically, interviews will last 20-40 minutes.
- You will be asked a variety of questions about your ability to persist in graduate school, as well as contributing factors of support.
- Each interview will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher during the interview. All recordings will be kept confidential and the data will be stored in a locked cabinet.
- The researchers will then transcribe the interviews. Once the interviews are transcribed, the recordings will be erased in order to maintain participant's confidentiality. However,

the written interviews will remain in order to complete the research project. Each participant will be given subject codes in order to protect their personal identification. Additionally, consent forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet that is separate from the rest of the data.

- The researchers will conduct a thorough analysis of the data in order to identify themes that appear to fully detail a theory on educational persistence.

Benefits:

There are no known benefits to participating in this study. However, your participation will allow the research and academe community to better understand educational persistence among American Indian graduate students.

Confidentiality:

As mentioned above, all participants' identity will be kept confidential. Only the researchers, their faculty supervisor, and the IRB will have access to the files. All data will be kept private and will not be released without your consent, unless required by law. The results of this study may be used in presentations or printed in scientific journals, however your name will not be used or associated with any of the data. Data will be stored in a locked file. The consent form will be stored in a separated locked file from the rest of the data. If an audiotape is used to record the interview, it will be erased once the interview is completely transcribed.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:

Participants can refuse to be a part of this study at any point in time. For example, participants can withdraw themselves from the interview process or elect to eliminate their responses without any negative consequence.

 I have been given information about this research study and its risks and benefits and have had the opportunity to ask questions and to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I freely give my consent to participate in this research project.

 Signature

 Date

THE DATE APPROVAL STAMP ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA'S INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD.

Appendix C

If this interview brings up any negative thoughts, memories, or previous experiences that make you feel uncomfortable and you would like to seek professional help; please see counseling resources listed below:

University of Montana – Missoula, MT

Call to make an appointment at (406) 243-4711, located in room 076 of the Curry Health Center.

Montana State University- Bozeman, MT

Call to make an appointment at (406) 994-4531, located in room 211 Swingle.

Montana State University –Billings, MT

Call to make an appointment at (406) 657-2153 or stop by the front desk at the Student Health Services.

Montana State University Northern – Havre, MT

Call to make an appointment at (406) 265-3599, located in room 228 in the Student Union Building (SUB)

Montana Tech University- Butte, MT

Please contact Joyce O’Neill at (406) 496-4429 for the North Campus or Cricket Pietsch at (406) 496-3730 for the South Campus to make a counseling appointment.

Appendix D

Student Participation Form

Dear Student,

My name is Karla Bird and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at The University of Montana in Missoula, MT. I am conducting research examining educational persistence among American Indian graduate students attending non-Native colleges and universities.

I am writing this letter to ask for your participation in an interview regarding your graduate school experience. Information from this study identifying participants and their programs/institutions will be held confidential at all times.

If you're interested in participating in this research study, please email me at [email address] or call me at [phone number].

Sincerely,

Karla Bird
Doctorate Candidate, Educational Leadership
The University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59801

Appendix E

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experience as an American Indian graduate student.
2. What type of personal qualities and characteristics do you possess that contribute to your ability to persist in graduate school?
3. What type of academic skills and preparation has contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?
4. How has campus structured support (if any) contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?
5. How have mentors or faculty members (if any) contributed to your persistence in graduate school?
6. How has institutional support (if any) contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?
7. How has family support (if any) contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?
8. How has your culture and identity contributed to your ability to persist in graduate school?
9. What type knowledge, skills, abilities, and/or contacts do tribal communities possess that contribute to their strength and resiliency in education?
10. Is there anything related to your persistence in graduate school that hasn't been discussed in this interview?

Appendix FFebruary 23rd, 2017

Dear Mr. Pepion

I am completing a doctoral dissertation at the University of Montana entitled "A Grounded Theory Approach Examining Educational Persistence among American Indian Graduate Students." I would like your permission to reprint in my dissertation artwork from the following:

Okan People 2017

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my dissertation, including non-exclusive world rights in all languages, and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by ProQuest through its Pro Quest Dissertation Publishing business. ProQuest may produce and sell copies of my dissertation on demand and may make my dissertation available for free internet download at my request. These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Your signing the letter will also confirm that you are the owner of the art piece "Okan People 2017."

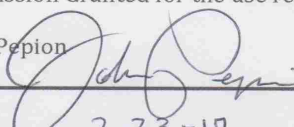
Sincerely,

Karla Bird

Permission Granted for the use requested above:

John Pepion

Date:



2-23-17John Pepion's work can be viewed at www.johnisaiahpepion.com

