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Narrative Inquiry in Practice: A Study Identifying Themes of Persistence and Barriers in the Educational Journeys of American Indian Students in Higher Education

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Narrative Inquiry in Practice: A Study Identifying Themes of Persistence and Barriers in the Educational Journeys of American Indian Students in Higher Education

Abstract

Increasing in popularity, the use of narrative inquiry in qualitative research study offers a unique perspective and context in sharing lived experiences. This article utilizes a narrative inquiry study to improve the knowledge of why American Indian students have the lowest college graduation rates in the United States. These narratives helped define the barriers that have discouraged American Indian students from persisting in higher education. Predominantly, participants identified the lack of financial support, lack of cultural competency, emotional distress, time poverty, afraid to ask for help, afraid to succeed, and navigating through the college processes as barriers to their educational success. Additionally, the participants' narratives identify themes of persistence that include the importance of having a role model, fear of failure, making the family proud, advancement opportunities, and support from family, friends, and cohorts. These barriers and themes of persistence provide a better insight into why American Indian students have the lowest advanced degree completion rates of any ethnic group. By delving into the personal educational journeys of seven American Indians at varying stages of their educational experience, rich narratives were created for the qualitative study and highlighted in this article.

Keywords

American Indian, graduate school, persistence themes, barriers, narrative inquiry, storytelling

Author Bio

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Introduction

The participation of American Indian students in colleges across the United States brings a wealth of cultural experiences and strengths to the learning environment. However, American Indian students have experienced failure in the educational systems and record the lowest degree completion rates in higher education (NCES, 2019). To understand this phenomenon, this article features research from the author's dissertation, *The Road Less Traveled: An Insight to the Educational Journeys of American Indian Students in Higher Education* (Cirks, 2021). Through an intimate examination of the student experience utilizing narrative inquiry, this study highlighted the challenges American Indian students face while pursuing higher education. Barriers and themes of persistence are presented in a narrative format to offer more context, which was not commonly found in past research. Oftentimes, American Indian students do not take a linear path to graduation, therefore, this article provides a better insight to American Indian students' journeys to advance degree completion.

Literature Review

Since "higher education attainment results in economic growth, global competitiveness, decreased crime and poverty, and increased civic engagement," it is imperative to determine why some minority groups, specifically American Indians, are not earning degrees at a higher rate (Andrade, 2014, p. 21). There is limited qualitative research on factors impacting American Indian students' enrollment and persistence in graduate school and attainment of advanced degrees (master's and doctoral level). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high school American Indian/Alaska Native students was 74% compared to Whites at 89% in 2018-19 (2021). Further,

the United States' average high school graduation rate was 86%. By default, a lower number of high school graduates yields a lower number of conferred bachelor's degrees. American Indians own 0.5% of the bachelor's degrees earned with the gap not shrinking (NCES, 2019). Brayboy et al. (2012) put this number into perspective by stating that American Indian/Native Alaskan's earn one bachelor's degree to every seven earned by Whites. The percentage of American Indians who complete undergraduate degrees is low and has a direct impact on the number of American Indians who seek graduate degrees.

Nationwide, there are fewer American Indian students in masters and doctoral programs than any other race. Of the 184,074 United States citizens and permanent residents who earned doctorate degrees in 2018, 707 were awarded to American Indians compared to 107,415 degrees earned by White students (NCES, 2019). In comparison by percentage, 0.4% of American Indians earned a doctoral degree to 66.8% of Whites (NCES, 2019). Likewise, American Indian students were awarded 0.4% of master's degrees in 2017-18 (NCES, 2019). Despite increasing trends, American Indian students represent less than 1% of enrolled students in postsecondary institutions (Heavy Runner-Rioux et al., 2018). With fewer students graduating high school, fewer students are entering the educational pipeline. Thus, American Indian students will continue to earn fewer bachelor's and advanced degrees. The need for a college education has increased, and therefore it is essential understand this phenomenon.

Barriers

Historically, the education of American Indians has been conducted without Indian input, thus nurturing a sense of detachment and distrust of the educational system for many families and communities (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010). This stems back to the rise of boarding

schools in 1879, which has had a lasting influence (Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1879). Boarding schools ripped Indian children from their homes, used a forced abrasive approach, and deprived children of their cultural roots (Szasz, 1977). It was not until the Meriam Report noted malnourishment, sub-standard living conditions, inadequate and untrained staff that attention was brought to these incivilities (Meriam et al., 1928). The report not only noted the effect of separating the children from their families but the loss of tribal learning and familial connection.

Cultural identity has proved to be a barrier for American Indians in higher education as they face cultural insecurity when trying to maintain their identity and deal with pressure to conform to the university culture (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius 2001; Tate and Schwartz, 1993). Montgomery et al. (2000) suggested while American Indians students are developing an academic identity, they become bicultural in trying to keep their own cultural identity and on-going relations with their tribal community. Likewise, American Indian students experience this struggle with their academic responsibilities in which honoring family and community have proved to be a barrier for many students (Burke, 2017). The external challenges associated with completing an advanced degree are trumped by this internal struggle between family and school (Garcia, 2000).

Despite the goals of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 and Barack Obama's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, there is still a widening gap between the aspirations and degree attainment of American Indian college students (Youngbull, 2017). Herzog (2005) found that more influential than financial aid, academic performance and readiness, in particular with first-year mathematics courses, explained freshmen stop-out or transfer. Therefore, the likelihood

of American Indian survival is low due to the lack of academic preparedness. Andrade et al. (2009) concurred that though American Indian students have high aspirations, they need more structured pathways. Andrade (2014) also explored the experiences of educationally successful American Indian women in higher education and found their barriers included family problems, peer pressure, bad choices, lack of racial identity, and lack of counselor and parent support. These themes were consistent in the literature by Heavy Runner-Rioux et al. (2018) and Youngbull (2017).

Many American Indian students face greater financial barriers because of their low socioeconomic status (Flynn et al. 2012; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). According to the United States Census Bureau, American Indian poverty rates were the highest at 23.0% compared to 10.3% for White individuals in 2019 (2019). Financial access and resources are a concern for low socioeconomic American Indian students. Students often use their financial aid to assist their families back home, which could threaten their academic persistence. Mendoza et al. (2011) found that the lack of financial support as well as inadequate academic preparation, lack of career objectives, biases, and social separation were barriers for American Indian students. Patel (2014) added that extreme poverty, lack of faculty role models, and financially challenged tribal colleges are three reasons that contribute to American Indian students' lack of success in pursuing advanced degrees.

As American Indian students enroll in undergraduate programs, the experience itself may be a predictor of degree completion. A study by Strayhorn et al. (2016) surveyed 144 American Indian undergraduates on the influence of faculty and diverse peer interactions on a "sense of belonging". The results showed that when American Indian undergraduates interacted with

faculty and diverse peers, their sense of belonging increased. Further, studies on American Indian student retention and persistence that have identified non-persistence factors that are linked to feelings of invisibility, campus racial climate, and a lack of sense of belonging on campus (Brayboy, 2004; Gloria et al., 2001). Collectively, these barriers impact the success of American Indian students.

Persistence Factors

Perceptions about barriers and persistence factors of American Indian student success vary. Garcia (2000) fielded a study of 12 American Indian doctoral recipients from Montana with intentions to find characteristics that helped these students navigate through their journey. The three major themes identified were (a) able to function bi-culturally, (b) spirituality, and (c) an understanding of reciprocity. Mendoza et al. (2011) added that American Indian students' persistence is dependent on immediate and extended family, faculty, institutional commitment, and links to home and ethnicity. In a study by Broughton-Pretti (2016), 18 American Indian participants felt the following all contributed to their academic success:

Positive lived experiences, family and tribal community, NAC (Native American Centers), retention programs, support systems, preparatory classes, continuing or dropping out, mentors and mentor programs, counselors and counselor programs, strategies, financial support, culture, cultural identity, and spirituality. (p.162)

Persistence may also be predicted by the relationship between the student's commitment to their community and the degree to which institutions support that commitment (Lopez, 2018).

Family support and encouragement are necessary for academic persistence and achievement (Kidwell, 1994). At the core of American Indian values are family, extended

family, and social support (Flynn et al., 2012). Lopez (2018) conducted a literature review on *Factors Influencing American Indian and Alaska Native Postsecondary Persistence* and observed that of the studies reviewed, two-thirds confirmed persistence was influenced by family and social support. Youngbull (2017) agreed that family support is one of the major persistence factors for American Indian college students. In addition, Guillory (2009) affirmed that American Indian students' have aspirations to complete college and to make a positive impact on their communities and their families. In agreement, a study by Montgomery et al. (2000) found that participants agreed that parents and grandparents provide support through traditional values and wisdom by encouraging education.

American Indian students have obligations to their communities which helps ensure the survival of their peoples (Tippeconnic & Fox, 2012). Brayboy et al. (2012) recognized that American Indian students are more likely to complete their degree programs when they pay it forward to their tribal communities. A study by Marroqui'n and McCoach (2014) found that student perception of family support was a positive predictor of GPA and persistence for 501 American Indian students. Additionally, Rindone's (1988) study on Navajo students suggested socioeconomic status has less influence on the achievement of Navajo students than a stable family life with traditional values.

An overarching theme in the literature on American Indian students relates to cultural beliefs and traditions. In Broughton-Pretti's (2016) study, all 18 participants felt that their culture was a major factor in their persistence to graduation and were grateful for their tribal affiliation. By being bicultural, students can maintain their cultural identity while living in mainstream society. Also, these students valued their spirituality and giving back to their community. These

values powered these American Indian students to doctoral attainment. Heavy Runner-Rioux et al.'s (2018) quantitative study on persistence factors of American Indian students agreed that they did not sacrifice their own culture to earn their degrees. Thus, culture is a persistence factor for American Indian students.

Flynn et al. (2012) reviewed research on American Indian students, more specifically, their low retention rates and the impact of their culture. The data collected from the interviews revealed 10 overall themes: “antecedents for college completion and retention, social connection, family influence, finances, antecedents for college dropout/academic probation, racism and discrimination, institutional barriers, academic unpreparedness, reservation life as a barrier to predominantly White culture, and mixed messages” (p. 442). These themes aligned with previous studies; however, they identified racism and White culture as themes in their study.

Together, the literature found common themes of academic preparedness, sociodemographic characteristics, cultural values and strengths, self-efficacy, personal disposition, and the college experience that affect an American Indian students' persistence (Barnhardt, 1994; Demmert, 2001; Keith et al., 2016). However, there are undeniable gaps in the research and the following study used the personal narratives to offer a better insight to the why some American Indian students have failed in their educational endeavors while some have succeeded.

Research Design

In an attempt to understand the winding pathways of success for American Indian students in higher education, the fundamental question of the study was: **What factors impact American Indian students' enrollment and persistence in graduate school?** With this

question as the focus, common themes were created to understand and appreciate American Indian students' educational journeys. This qualitative study delved into the personal educational journeys of seven American Indian students using a phenomenological approach and a narrative inquiry method. A phenomenological approach allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words and expose the human experience (Shotton et al., 2007). Moen (2009) stated that "narrative research is, consequently, focused on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell" (p. 60). This allowed the researcher to write narratives of the participants' experiences in a unique storytelling format. Storytelling is a powerful pedagogy in the Indigenous culture that shares knowledge from both the past and present (Iseke & BMJK, 2011). Therefore, narrative inquiry, in the form of storytelling, was a culturally relevant method of sharing the voice of American Indian students and to answer the research question of the study.

To identify factors impacting American Indian students' persistence in graduate school, the study followed a constructivist paradigm. Merriam et al. stated, "a constructivist stance maintains that learning is the process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experience" (p. 291). Therefore, in learning about these experiences, the researcher acquired knowledge and meaning about the participants' lives. The researcher applied an epistemological lens that allowed the researcher to acquire and give meaning to the knowledge gained. In designing this research study with a conceptual framework there was a logical direction that formed the underlying thinking and implementation of the project. The researcher's strong desire to help American Indian students and 16 years of higher education

experience provided perspective and knowledge to guide the research questions and design of the study.

Purposive sampling was used to select American Indians that met the criteria of individuals who have attempted, in the process of, or have completed an advanced degree. Seven American Indians were selected at varying stages of their educational experience. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for each of the participants. Demographic data was collected through Qualtrics prior to the interview. All participants were American Indian, two identified as American Indian and White, and one participant disclosed that they were two or more races. Three participants were between the ages of 26-35, three between the ages of 36-50, and one participant was over 51 years of age. All participants attended a public high school and all but one participant has earned a master's degree.

Semi-structured interviews occurred using the virtual environment, Zoom. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were also recorded with zoom and a voice recorder to capture the exact responses. The average time of the interviews was 65 minutes, with the lengthiest interview running 108 minutes and the shortest being 26 minutes. Transcription was completed through Zoom which were compared with the recordings for quality assurance.

With over 450 pages of transcription from the one-on-one interviews, an open and axial coding process was used to construct consistent themes. The researcher started with open coding to create major categories as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). Axial coding was then used to find interconnectivity between the categories and themes found in the open coding process. By using open and axial coding, the seven interview scripts were broken down into themes that linked back to the research questions of the study. The researcher used colored post-it notes to

mark barriers and persistence factors and highlighted supporting text. The responses were categorized into themes while preserving the participants' stories. Throughout the study, ethical standards were maintained.

Results

The results were constructed in two parts to share the unique educational journeys of the participants and to present emerging themes. Part I offered the participant's personal narrative, however, for this article only brief vignette was shared. Part II was centered around the barriers and themes of persistence that emerged from the researcher's analysis of the narratives.

Part I: Introduction of Participants

Lewis

Lewis is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and in his sixth year and final year of the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program at the University of North Dakota. Lewis was 14 years old when education started playing a bigger role in his life and completed his high school diploma at an alternative school. With no intention of completing a degree, Lewis started taking general education courses at the local tribal college called Oglala Lakota College (OLC). Academically, Lewis did not feel prepared for college and after two years, Lewis dropped out. His DJ work became more important and was hired to work in outreach programs at the YMCA. Lewis worked at the YMCA for a few years before he enrolled at Black Hills State University (BHSU).

Lewis had a feeling that he did not "have a place" and that was difficult for him throughout his undergraduate experience. Lewis graduated with a double major in psychology and sociology from BHSU and was accepted into the Ph.D. Clinical Psychology program at

UND. With the pressure of graduate school and needing to maintain a 3.5, Lewis dealt with more anxiety and depression than ever before. However, factors that allowed Lewis to be closing in on his Ph.D. at the time of the interview include financial support from his parents, not having family obligations, and a supportive advisor. Lewis was able to overcome the lack of academic preparedness, the pressure of living up to his and other's expectation of him and being Native in a non-Native institution.

Grace

Grace is an enrolled member of the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe of South Dakota, is White, and has lineage to White Earth, Dakota, and Ojibwe. It was through music that Grace was introduced to Bemidji State University, however, college was hard for Grace. She did not feel like high school taught her how to study and how to manage her time. She considered her first two years of college like one big freshman year and did not connect with campus resources until later in her experience. Grace left BSU with an unpaid bill and worked as a barista, a marketing assistant, and a DJ to pay off her school debt that following year. Grace realized she did not want to make coffee for the rest of her life. Grace returned to BSU and graduated after seven years. She wanted to learn more about the music industry and was accepted to Northwestern for graduate school.

In terms of her culture and beliefs, Grace felt slighted at Northwestern. Grace was disappointed in the lack of cultural awareness on campus. Grace graduated from Northwestern with her master's degree, though she faced financial struggles, lack of belonging, and disappointment of the campus's cultural awareness. She sought out and used resources throughout her entire academic career and found out the importance of community and people.

Miles

Miles lived across Montana, North Dakota, then settled in Bemidji, MN. Miles holds a Master of Accountancy from Washington State University and is currently teaching at Bemidji State University (BSU). Miles' tribal affiliation is with Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux. Miles dropped out of high school in the ninth grade, and that was when he realized that school was important. Miles earned his GED when he was 16 and seven years later enrolled at Northwest Technical College (NTC). Miles completed one semester before he dropped out.

Miles tangled with the legal system and was sentenced to 15 years of probation. Consequently, he needed to either attend college or find a job. Miles chose to attend BSU. He never felt prepared academically for college, but he was determined. Miles did not get involved in campus life and activities as he was just focused on graduating. Asking for help was not easy for Miles but graduated from BSU with majors in Accounting and Business Administration with a concentration in Finance and minors in Psychology and Fraud Examination. Miles applied to graduate school and was accepted at Washington State University. Being deficient academically brought on challenges in graduate school, but Miles graduated and is looking to continue in a Ph.D. program to become a better professor.

Sloan

Sloan considers herself a member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, part of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and also part of the White Earth Reservation and Red Lake Nation. Sloan's educational journey did not go as planned. Her first attempt was at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, MN. Sloan did not connect with any other students and ended up partying. She pulled away and was dealing with depression and most days could not get out of bed. Sloan

took a break from school for a while and worked odd jobs to pay off her outstanding bill.

Eventually, she went to Bemidji State University (BSU) and was admitted on academic probation due to her records at St. Scholastica. Sloan quit school again and later found out she was having a child. Sloan attempted college again by taking an 8-week course at Northwest Technical College (NTC) in Bemidji. Eventually, Sloan completed a certificate and an Associate of Science degree in Medical Coding. Sloan wanted to continue and started again at BSU.

Sloan earned her bachelor's degree and was accepted the Ph.D. program at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee (MCW). The first semester, Sloan was able to connect with her cohort, however Sloan struggled with personal issues and the lack of diversity in the program. Together, the faculty, the campus climate, and the cultural shock were enough for Sloan to leave. Sloan stopped short of completing her master's degree but intends to find a program that employs American Indian faculty and specializes in Indigenous Health.

Maisy

Maisy is an enrolled member of the White Earth Lake Band of Ojibwe through her mother's side. Maisy got married right out of high school and started at Bemidji State University (BSU). Maisy did two years of undergraduate courses at BSU, knowing that she was going to transfer to the University of North Dakota (UND). She knew the curriculum requirements and was set up for an easy transfer to UND's Engineering Program. Maisy commuted two hours from Cass Lake. While she was at UND, she had her daughter. Rent, school, childcare, commuting, and books were very expensive. Maisy felt like dropping out a year before graduating. Although Maisy needed a break from all her commitments, she went back. Maisy felt like she had a

support system with her family, classmates, and professors, although she did not immerse herself into the student experience.

Maisy graduated and was a transportation planner with U.S. Forest Service for 20 years. Maisy was ready for a career change and enrolled in the Masters of Tribal Administration and Governance at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. Maisy contributed her success and completion of her degree to her support system. Maisy is in her 30th year with the U.S. Forest Service and is now the Forest Tribal Relations Liaison.

Rowan

Rowan is Sicangu Lakota and is a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. He holds a master's degree in education with an emphasis in physical education. He teaches art education courses at Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) and is a K-12 licensed teacher at Lakeview Public Schools. Rowan is a working artist, specializing in sculptures based on the themes that are representative of him trying to find his heritage.

Rowan grew up surrounded by educators. Since his mom and dad both worked at SMSU, he was able to utilize the tuition waiver. Rowan took a “smattering of classes” and played three sports: track, wrestling, and football. At that time, SMSU had 16 students of color on the whole campus. He ran into racial issues where he was not included or accepted. Between his fifth and sixth year, Rowan got married. Rowan was six years out of earning his bachelor's degree when his mom told him that SMSU was going to offer a Master of Education program. It was a crazy time in Rowan's life but he enrolled. Having the master's meant a level of elitism for him. It was a goal he had, and he intended to reach it. Rowan graduated and is working on a Master of Fine

Arts degree. Rowan attributes his success to his family, coaches, and educators who shaped him into the person he is. He worked hard and that was a mentality that got him through college.

Ivy

Ivy is a mother of four, a member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, and an instructor in the Business Administration Department at Bemidji State University. She did not have the traditional educational experience. She was pregnant when she graduated from high school and married right away. She attended BSU when her first child was one year old, and she was not successful. She struggled to balance school, having a small child, and being pregnant with her second. Ivy dropped out and took a job at the casino in security and surveillance. After four years, Ivy worked during the day and took night classes at the Leech Lake Tribal College (LLTC).

Ivy earned a 4.0 at LLTC and that made her believe that she was a good student. She had a support system in place, and she was prepared to return to BSU for the Business Administration program. Ivy graduated when she was 28 years old with her bachelor's degree. Years later, Ivy found a partially funded and partially online MBA program in American Indian Entrepreneurship. Ivy pursued her master's degree in hopes of providing economic opportunity for her community of Leech Lake. Ivy completed her MBA and enrolled in the Ph.D. Leadership Studies program at Gonzaga. At the time of the interview Ivy was in the final stages of her dissertation for her Ph.D. Perspective, self-reflection, and wanting to provide for her family pushed Ivy through her educational journey.

Part II: Analysis of the Findings

Common barriers and themes of persistence emerged though each participant had unique life experiences. Part II is divided into two categories: barrier themes and themes of persistence with supporting subcategories.

Barrier Themes

Throughout the interviews, common barriers appeared among the participants. When identifying barriers from the participants' narratives, several themes emerged with contributing subcategories.

Lack of support. Popular barriers among the participants were the lack of support they received during their academic careers. Whether it was in the form of not enough financial resources or campus support services for American Indian students, students felt the lack of support impacted their experience. Also, participants mentioned the lack of people, more specifically, role models, advisors, and friends to guide them through the process.

Financial. Financial stress was a factor that impacted the trajectory and halted participants' pursuit of earning a degree. Grace admitted that she, "almost didn't go to school because of it." She added,

I got kicked out of school for a year. I wasn't being smart enough. Because that was still at a time where I was partying a lot and not paying enough attention to what was happening, so I didn't take out the proper loans.

For Rowan, the lack of funding determined which school he was able to attend. "There were no scholarships for me to go to college on or Indian Funds". Rowan utilized his parent's tuition

waiver but received a very limited art education. Rowan is working on another master's degree but cannot finish as "money is the issue there."

Maisy had similar financial troubles. She wanted to stop out a year shy of graduation to work at her minimum wage job and support her husband and daughter. Likewise, Sloan had to get a job at a bar because she said, "I didn't have enough money to live off of which my parents assumed I would." Lewis took out his first student loan and said, "that was a big stress." Before attending his university, he went to school for free at the tribal college. Moreover, Ivy, the breadwinner in the family, quit her job to go to school. She said, "we struggled, but we made it."

Campus. The campus community and climate can influence the overall experiences for students. Unfortunately, for a few participants, campus was not a place where they felt supported or connected. Sloan stated, "I felt really uncomfortable. I didn't connect really with anybody." Even though Grace's undergraduate school had an American Indian Resource Center, Grace said "I really didn't connect with them." Conversely, Miles' college did not have similar resources. He said, "there really wasn't like that outreach stuff there." Whether the campus provided support services or not, participants did not utilize and make connections.

People. The lack of role models, advisors, and friends also played a part in the educational experience of the participants. While many participants discussed the positive impact of role models, Miles had no one who encouraged him to pursue his education. He stated, "I don't really have anybody in my life that guided me to where I'm at." Ivy included that she did not "have those lifelong college friends that most people tend to talk about." Likewise, the lack of an advisor was a factor for Lewis, Rowan, and Ivy. Ivy said, "I didn't have that one person to go to on campus that I thought would like help me." Lewis agreed, "I'm on my own to motivate

myself. There's no one checking in on me." Rowan also did not have anyone to advise him. He would have hoped someone would have told him to go directly into his master's degree.

Lack of cultural competency. The lack of cultural competency struck a chord with the participants in the study. Students experienced this negligence within the campus community from students, faculty, and staff. Lewis said, "cultural competency from the professors and staff was frustrating and those were barriers for me." Lewis had an experience where he was, "feeling misunderstood, like I was not wanted there." He added, "I felt really isolated through a lot of my classes and stuff. I don't want to go to school with a lot of these people." Similarly, Sloan struggled with non-Native faculty teaching courses on how to research Indigenous peoples. She said, "I had to explain boarding schools." Sloan was highly disappointed that her school had a "White guy" teaching an Indigenous research course. Grace had an issue with the college accepting her tribal ID as identification. Grace said, "I had red flags before getting there. I think we had a little culture clash." Staff, faculty, and students all demonstrated a lack of cultural awareness and that was a definite barrier for the participants.

Diversity/racism. Rowan dealt with issues of racism as an athlete in college. Opponents called him names on the field. He said, "I ran into racial things that I was not included and not accepted." In Sloan's undergraduate experience she expressed, "I had never really been in a situation where I felt like the minority." In graduate school, Sloan and had a similar experience. She stated, "there's people from all over the world here, but I'm the only Native American student. Lewis also felt a culture shock when transitioning from the tribal college to the university. He had little trouble transitioning from high school to the tribal college because he was going to school with students and teachers from his community. Miles agreed, "just being

Native American for myself was a little bit of a barrier.” Participants noted the lack of diversity they encountered through their educational journey and how that experience affected them.

Lack of identity. Lack of identity emerged as a barrier for the participants. Participants fought to feel accepted and a sense of belonging. Also, several participants questioned if they were smart enough and struggled with imposter syndrome.

Lack of belonging. Participants dealt with cultural issues on top of suffering from a lack of belonging. Growing up, Lewis did not fit in at high school and gravitated towards his cousins who were in a gang. He said it was, “that lack of self, I guess really stood out.” While completing his degree he felt that same disconnect. He said, “being in a Native in a non-Native institution has been difficult.” Coupled with the lack of diversity at the institutions and the participants’ lack of identity, the researcher recognized the lack of belonging and identity as a roadblock.

Imposter syndrome. When suffering from a lack of identity, participants questioned if they were supposed to be in their graduate program. Ivy admitted that she cried more in the first weeks of school than she had in the last 10 years total. She said, “I have no clue what's going on here.” Grace said she felt “total imposter syndrome” when she started her master’s program. This lack of confidence and identity nearly led to stopping out for these participants. Miles also suffered from imposter syndrome when he was in school and during his first faculty role. He would ask himself if he was smart enough to be there.

Personal issues. Participants were asked if they encountered any personal issues while pursuing their degrees. At some point in every participants’ life and educational journey, they

met personal issues that interrupted their quest for higher education. Personal issues came in the form of depression and anxiety, to death, and relationships ending badly.

Depression/anxiety. Depression and anxiety played a huge role in Sloan's unsuccessful attempts at her undergraduate experience. Though Sloan felt academically prepared, she dealt with mental illness. "I happen to be extremely depressed. I literally couldn't get out of bed most days." Sloan also had domestic abuse and relationship issues. She said,

I dealt with a relationship that ended badly, basically stalking me and threatening me and I had to go through that process and tried to stay focused on my classes. Yeah, that was pretty rough. I really wanted to just give up.

Sloan was able to overcome these issues and earn her bachelor's degree. Lewis also suffered from depression and anxiety in high school and throughout this Ph.D. program. He said, "throwing the pressures of graduate school and trying to live up to the standards caused a lot of emotional distress." In trying to keep high academic standing to continue in the program, Lewis said, "I dealt with probably more mental health issues than I have ever prior in my life." Grace also encountered anxiety issues but was able to work with a counselor and utilize accessibility services for her test anxiety.

Death. Unfortunately, Sloan and Miles suffered loss which contributed to them leaving school. During Sloan's first semester of graduate school, she had two deaths in the family. "Our family was really hurting from that and I had to leave and go home for the funeral and to be with my family." She added, "My stepmom died suddenly from a heart attack." Sloan struggled to keep up with coursework, caring for her daughter, and completing her graduate assistantship requirements. In Miles' first year of school, he shared that, "one of my friends died in a car

wreck.” After that, Miles struggled to stay focused and dropped out the spring semester. He said, “I don't even care, you know, wasn't even like attempting to even try after that.” Life happened to these students and it played a role in their path to degree completion.

Navigating college. Navigating college such as trying to apply for financial aid, changing majors, or the process of returning to school confused participants in the study. Sloan started crying in an advisor's office because she was overwhelmed with the process of trying to return to school. Sloan said, “I don't know if people realize how intimidating that process is.” Miles included that he did not struggle with academics, it was everything else. He said, “I'm not the type to ask for help, even though I know I need to ask for help.” Ivy started her undergraduate career as a biology major but knew that was not the right fit. She said, “I was struggling with like the choice of major. I have no clue what's going on here.” There was no GPS on how to navigate college and this was an issue for participants.

Time poverty. The term time poverty exemplifies the extreme lack of time these students felt when going to school. Areas noted from the interviews included loss of family time and not being able to participate in the whole college experience. Maisy went to school two hours away and commuted. Therefore, she said, “I didn't, you know, totally immerse myself into the experience.” When Maisy started her master's program, she had similar feelings. She said, “I was kind of concerned about loss of family time.” Likewise, Rowan started his master's degree later in his career and said, “it was a nuts time in my life.” Ivy, who like Rowan and Maisy, already had a family said, “The downside of that was like I didn't get the whole campus experience. I didn't have free time.” Lewis agreed that he was unable to get involved with campus resources. Lewis offered that there were “resources that I didn't utilize just because I

was busy.” Time poverty was real for several of the participants who struggled to balance everything on their full plate.

Success. Success emerged as a barrier because, as one participant was afraid of it, another participant chose a successful career over school. While pursuing his degree, Miles was his own roadblock. He was afraid of success. Miles said, “I’m scared to reach forward, I guess.” Miles did not have any role models growing up or any family or friends with advanced degrees. Therefore, Miles was afraid to succeed. On the other hand, success deterred Lewis from completing his degree. Lewis enjoyed his job at the YMCA and dropped out “because work became more important to me.” He mentioned it wasn’t until his job at the YMCA that he felt important.” Lewis decided to quit school and focus on this job instead. Success in different forms had an impact on both Miles’ and Lewis’ journeys.

Commitments. A very common theme among the participants was the numerous commitments each participant had outside of school. This theme tag teamed off of time poverty. Several participants, at some point in their educational journey, had children. During Sloan’s undergraduate experience, she stopped out of school for a period of time. She said, “My daughter was born and at this point, I thought a college education was just not going to happen for me.” When her daughter was older, she did return to school to finish her bachelor’s degree. Likewise, Maisy had her first child during her undergraduate career. When she was driving back for forth two hours each way with a child, she thought, “Why am I doing this?” Maisy was so close to stopping out. Ivy too almost stopped out of school for her family. She said, “I ended up getting pregnant and we got married right away and education, like higher ed, was put on the back burner.” As Ivy said, she did not take the traditional educational route, but four kids later she is

months away from a Ph.D. While commitments altered the participants' journey, it did not stop them.

Preparedness. Participants in the study were divided on whether or not they felt prepared for college. Miles said, "Pretty much ninth grade was like the last time I really went to class. I didn't feel prepared, but I was determined." He added, "I'm a high school dropout, and for like 10 years I probably didn't write more than my name." Lewis, who attended an alternative learning program to earn his high school diploma said, "My entire high school thing was just trying to get by, like the bare minimum to pass." Lewis said that in college "the coursework was difficult." He included, "Getting grades has always been difficult. So just kind of lack of preparedness." Maisy agreed that she was taking "super rigorous classes" and never wanted to do college again. Both Sloan and Grace did not feel prepared to start their graduate program needed to defer a year. Grace said, "I didn't want to go right away. I like really wasn't ready." Sloan agreed that in hindsight it was beneficial to have deferred a year.

Themes of Persistence

This study interviewed participants at varying stages of their educational journey. It is important to note that though participants identified barriers to their academic journeys, themes of persistence were also discussed. With several subcategories named, the overarching themes of persistence were support, role models, achievement, and internal motivation. Since the road to degree completion is winding for many American Indian students, it is beneficial to recognize persistence factors.

Support. For the participants, evidence of support in various forms allowed for these students to continue and complete their degrees.

Family. Ivy's mom supported Ivy and her family throughout her undergraduate career. Ivy said, "I don't know that I would have been successful if I had not have had my mom in my life at the time." Rowan, being from a family of educators, has always felt support from his family. Maisy, who went back to school after 20 years, said, "Familywise it was great, they gave me the space to remodel the bedroom to make it like a study center." Maisy and her son supported each other since they were both in college at the same time. Grace agreed that she had a supportive family. She said, "They were there when I was crumbling." Lewis added, "My parents are still helping me out financially." Additionally, Sloan's mom also helped her family out financially. She said, "I was very privileged to have my family help me with paying rent in a safe neighborhood with two bedrooms for me and my daughter." When Sloan missed school because of deaths in the family said added, "My mom had to come and live with me for a couple weeks so that she could take care of my daughter so I could just study." Family provided the necessary support for the participants in different ways.

Financial. Finances were a major barrier for most participants. However, financial wealth offered an opportunity for participants to complete degrees. In graduate school, Maisy said, "I didn't have to worry about finances because I was fully funded through tribal grants and scholarships." This was unlike her undergraduate experience. Rowan took advantage of a tuition waiver from his parents teaching at the same university. He said, "I had a tuition waiver and got so many credits for free." Other participants were motivated because graduate school had an expensive price tag. Grace wanted to make sure she powered through her degree. She said, "It bothered me to know that I had debt and nothing to show for it." Miles, who no longer had grant funds to pay for school, had to pay out of state tuition for graduate school. He said, "I am not

gonna pay \$20,000 a semester and to not have a degree.” Money played the motivator and helped both Miles and Grace earn their master’s degrees.

Community. Community support and giving back to the community was a motivator for degree completion among the participants. Grace said, “Community and people, that’s always been something that’s been really important to me.” Ivy agreed that community can help students reach their goals. She said, “Indigenous people tend to be, you know, relationship builders, so if we can get those relationships formed in a small community, perhaps they can help each other be successful.” Sloan’s main purpose in earning a degree was to gain knowledge and share it with her community.

Campus support services. Participants spoke about the lack of services and not being involved on campus as a barrier. Meanwhile, participants who utilized those campus services acknowledge the importance of making a connection. Sloan stated, “I ended up volunteering for a frybread fundraiser, and then before I knew it, I was vice president, then president of the Council for Indian Students. That was really a turning point.” Sloan had tried school two times prior and struggled to create relationships with other underrepresented students and support services. Miles spoke about the TRIO Department and receiving advising from Student Support Services and the McNair Scholars Program. Grace also referenced the same programs and included Accessibility Services and the Music Department as her supporters on campus. In graduate school, Grace was also involved with the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research and felt she learned even more about her culture.

Advisors. All of the participants stressed the importance of their advisors at some point in their academic career. Maisy said, “I had a good support system there.” Miles had faculty that

not only encouraged him to go to graduate school but to apply for a faculty position after he earned his degree. Ivy's previous advisor offered to help her return to school after leaving with an unpaid bill. Her advisor said, "I can help you get back in if you want to." Lewis said, "I would not have made it to through grad school without a supportive advisor. I'm somewhere where I never would have thought I would be five years ago, and lot of it's just from peoples like willingness to keep me moving along." Rowan concurred, "I was really fortunate in that regard and fallen into some really great educators." Likewise, Grace was grateful for her band teacher who connected her to campus and the music program.

Friend/coworkers. Support also came from friends and coworkers. Grace said, "I felt like I had a pretty good friend group." Though Sloan had a hard time connecting with other American Indian students and campus, she said, "I was able to connect with my cohort." Likewise, Maisy connected with her engineering cohort. She said, "we became pretty good friends". Ivy had that same support from her cohort in her master's program and again from a small group of students in her doctoral program. She that they were "that cheerleader for each other." Rowan dealt with issues of racism at college, but since he was an athlete, he belonged to a group. He said, he was "not a little brown boy, but I belong to groups." Also important was the support participants received from coworkers. Ivy talked about the influence her supervisor at her gaming job had on her future. She said, "Without him in my life, I don't know where I'd be." Maisy added that her "coworkers were supportive of what I was doing." Support was the most prominent theme of persistence found in the study.

Role models. A theme of persistence that became clear throughout the interviews was the importance of having a role model. Miles expressed he never had someone to look up to or guide

him to where he is today. Fortunately, most participants had that person or persons who set an example and served as role models.

Sloan and Ivy both expressed how meaningful it was to see their mothers go to school and raise their families. Sloan said her mother “did such a great job instilling how valuable education was.” She added,

I remember waking up in the middle of the night, two or three in the morning, and my mom sitting at her desk working. It stuck with me. She spent time with us during the day and then went to school and you know studied all night if she had to.

Ivy shared a similar story of her mother being in an abusive relationship, but still cared for the family and kept the household running. Ivy said, “She studied every night until like three in the morning.” Moreover, Maisy was inspired by her grandma who wanted to earn her GED years later after experiencing boarding schools. She added, “So for my grandma to want to go back to school and get her GED really meant a lot to me.” Rowan shared that his mom, dad, grandparents, and the Lakota Warrior were his role models. Rowan added, “I had wonderful coaches in high school.” Lewis found role models with “Native people out were who, you know, respected in the science community and were doing a lot of good research.” Grace looked up to her cousin because she was the first one in their family to get a degree. Role models set important examples of perseverance for the participants and inspired them to push forward towards earning their degrees.

Achievement. Opportunities to advance professionally and the fear of not achieving influenced the participants in the study to surpass the previously mentioned barriers.

Fear of failure. As mentioned earlier, Miles struggled with the idea of success. Conversely, the thought of failing was a motivator for Lewis, He said, “I’ve always had this fear of missing out or of like falling behind. The fear of failure has really driven me quite a bit. I started this journey people see me on it and like I can’t fail.” He would visualize himself being shamed out and that was scary. Those thoughts pushed Lewis to succeed and to continue through his Ph.D.

Advancement opportunities. Not getting a promotion or the possibility of career advancement were other factor that drove participants to graduation. Ivy said, “I didn’t have any other options besides maybe working at the casino.” She added, “I knew I needed to go to school because without a college education my options were limited.” Maisy had been working in her position for twenty years and did not get a promotion. She said, “I was just looking for a career change and I applied for another job and didn’t get it.” Maisy then decided to earn her master’s degree. Lewis had quit college to focus on his job at the YMCA. When he did not get a promotion, he decided to return to school. He said, “I felt like I hit my educational ceiling.” For Rowan, he was in a master’s degree program and procrastinating on the final paper. He was offered an opportunity to coach at the collegiate level when finished his degree. He said, “It was a heck of a motivator.” Rowan finished his paper and graduated with his master’s degree.

Internal motivation. Most participants leaned on internal motivation to accomplish their educational journeys. Motivation also came from within. Ivy said,

I knew I didn’t want to give up, I knew that I wasn’t going to be happy if I continued working for gaming.” She added, “that this is not where I want to be and if anybody is going to change it, it’s going to be me.

Ivy also wanted to provide for her family. Miles pursued graduate school after he figured out what motivated him. Miles said, “I like learning, I don’t like working.” Finishing a degree was important to Rowan as well. He said,

There is a level of elitism. It was a goal that I intended to reach, and I would reach it. I like to complete things. It was just another thing on the road that I was meant to do. I was talented, but I would say I was a better worker.

Lewis had panic attacks because he was, “not doing anything.” He added, “I was not doing anything to progress to this place where I envisioned myself.” Making his family proud was also important to Lewis. He said he wanted “to do well for my family.” He added, “I think it’s really driven me quite a bit.” Grace, whose master’s program was only a year long, knew she had to push herself through. She said, “I just had to do it. I felt like a machine. It’s like you do or you don’t.” She added, “I want to finish; I can do this.” Grace did just that and earned her master’s degree.

With each participant’s unique educational journey came exclusive, but similar barriers and persistence factors as presented in the narratives. In review, the most prevalent barriers amongst the participants were the lack of support in the form of advisors, campus support services, and financial resources. Meanwhile, participants also noted that those same support categories were contributing factors to their success if they utilized the support.

Discussion

As outlined in the literature review, American Indian students have the lowest college retention and graduation rates in the United States, facing a variety of barriers to completing their education. Barriers and persistence factors that emerged from the narratives of this study agreed

with past literature. Interestingly, these narratives revealed additional themes of persistence and barriers worth mentioning.

Popular barriers in past research have agreed that historical trauma, cultural beliefs, racism, achievement gap, poverty, family commitment, the lack of preparedness, lack of financial and family support, lack of role models, emotional distress, and the high school and college experience all impact American Indian student success (Andrade, 2014; Broughton-Pretti; 2016, Burke 2017, Heavy Runner-Rioux et al.,2018, Mendoza et al., 2011). Consistent with the literature, the seven participants in this agreed with these barriers. Predominantly, participants struggled with the lack of financial support.

While the literature noted cultural beliefs and racism as a barrier, participants exclusively noted the lack of cultural competency in the classroom with students and faculty. Moreover, participants struggled with campus support services. In fact, having to work with culturally incompetent faculty was the breaking point for Sloan. As noted earlier, this is a common barrier for American Indian students.

Emotional distress was mentioned as barrier in Burke's (2017) study. Burke discovered that racism, emotional distress, and financial difficulties halted student attrition. Similarly, Lewis felt emotional distress throughout his academic career, most predominantly in this Ph.D. program. However, it is important to understand the emotional distress these participants endured. These issues were not limited to, death, depression and anxiety, and unhealthy relationships. Perhaps everyday personal issues were not specifically discussed in past research, but it is fair to assume from the narratives that each participant struggled with some level of personal issues that compromised their ability to persist in their educational journey.

Time poverty was briefly discussed in past literature but was mentioned by several participants. Juggling an unmanageable number of commitments caused interruptions in the college experience for the participants. Ivy, Lewis, and Maisy felt like they could not fully immerse themselves into the whole college campus experience because of other commitments. In terms of commitments, three participants, Sloan, Maisy, and Ivy all had children during their academic journey. Having children played a role in the timeframe and overall trajectory of their academic journey.

Another notable barrier that was unique to this study was that a participant was afraid to ask for help. Throughout Miles' academic career, he had times where he felt connected to campus and advisors and times he did not. Whether he had support or not, Miles still had difficulty asking for help. This fear was a factor that led to Miles dropping out of his first attempt at college. Aligning with the fear to ask for help, was the fear of succeeding. Miles also discussed that he was, "afraid to reach forward." Being scared to succeed or being afraid to ask for help were not clearly defined as barriers in previous research.

The literature identified that the high school and college experience posed a barrier for students. Participants in the study expressed that it was not the experience necessarily that was an issue but navigating through the college processes. Sloan, Ivy, and Miles all mentioned whether it was changing majors or filling out grade appeal forms, these processes were overwhelming. If these students did not have the support of advisors, their educational journey could have ended.

Collaboratively, past studies have shown that the significance of academic preparedness, sociodemographic characteristics, cultural values and strengths, self-efficacy, personal disposition, the college experience, academic engagement, resiliency to challenges, and

knowledge of higher education have contributed to American Indian student success (Andrade 2014; Burke, 2017; Keith et al., 2016). Further, lived experiences, family and tribal community, Native American Centers, retention programs, support systems, preparatory classes, mentors, financial support, cultural identity, and spirituality have contributed to degree attainment for American Indian students (Broughton-Pretti, 2016). These persistence factors from previous studies overwhelmingly agreed with these factors mentioned by the participants in the study. The participants' narratives supported the importance of having a role model, specifically their mother. Ivy, Sloan, and Maisy all watched their mothers earn their degrees later in life. It was important to see their mother's sacrifice and determination. Mothers were a centerpiece in the conversation of success factors. Not only were their mothers role models, but they gave the participants the courage to survive a similar journey.

Notably, resilience was defined as a persistence factor in prior research (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Rindone, 1988; Broughton-Pretti, 2016; Youngbull, 2017; Lee, Donlan and Bowman, 2010; Garcia, 2000, Tinto 1999, Patel, 2014, Guillory, 2009). In this study, resilience came in the form of making the family proud, fear of failure, and striving for advancement opportunities. A barrier mentioned earlier was the fear of success, however, Lewis had a fear of failure and that was a motivating factor for him to complete his degree. Lewis wanted to make his family proud, and both of these factors have inspired him to complete his Ph.D. Lastly, participants pursued and continued their degrees for advancement opportunities. Ivy, Lewis, and Maisy all knew that if they did not further their education that their employment opportunities were slim. Whether it was the fear of failure, or wanting future employment opportunities, these participants showcased their grit and resilience to succeed.

Lastly, it is important to note limitations of the study and article. Due to a global pandemic, the narratives were collected using an online environment. Had the interviews been in person, the researcher may have been able to build a better rapport with the participants, perhaps, creating more in-depth and personal narratives. However, the value of narrative inquiry is in the capacity to gain in-depth individual experience of the participants and how they perceived their experiences. Unfortunately, with page limitations, the personal narratives were not shared in this article. Though each participant's personal narratives were not shared, the researcher was able to categorize barriers and themes of persistence with in-depth context to answer the main research question of the study. These barriers and themes of persistence provided insight and perspective to understand the challenging academic journeys of American Indian students.

Recommendations

To increase the retention rate among American Indian students, it is necessary that the learning campus environment meets the needs of the American Indians, both socially and academically (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). The narratives from this study and the literature demonstrate the need for:

1. An assigned advisor to assure American Indian students are connected to campus and connected to American Indian support services. Strengthened services and outreach with an assigned advisor may reduce the number of students that fall through the cracks.
2. American Indian Centers that offer support for students and their families. Also, offering a specific orientation for American Indian students that focus on connection to campus and seminars on how to navigate college. This should include information

- on financial resources, scholarships, health and counseling services, time management, and degree completion.
3. **Childcare.** Offering free childcare would lessen that burden for American Indian students and would allow time to attend class and study.
 4. **Cultural competency training for faculty and staff at colleges and even students.** Campuses should offer equity training for all students, staff, and faculty.
 5. **Pre-college level courses.** As noted in the study, American Indian students do not feel academically ready for college-level courses. Not all colleges offer these courses. Therefore, offering preparatory English and math courses would provide students an opportunity to overcome the achievement gap.
 6. **Mentoring programs for incoming American Indian students.** New students should be matched with upper-class students to help with navigating the college processes. Thus, creating an opportunity for a better connection to campus and other underrepresented students.
 7. **Graduate school preparation programs such as the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program.** Programs that offer guidance on how to apply and succeed in graduate school. Many participants suffered from imposter syndrome and graduate preparation programs can build that confidence.

Understandably, many institutions provide the suggested recommendations, but there are opportunities to improve support services to American Indian students on all campuses. For example, according to the U.S. Department of Education there are only 187 Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Programs that provide graduate school preparation in the U.S. (2021).

Improved preparedness at the graduate school level may strengthen the retention and representation of American Indians in higher education. Overall, the findings and recommendations of the study provided a better perspective on how to support American Indian students' persistence.

Future Research

American Indians are underrepresented in the higher education pipeline. This study not only attempted to evoke the voices of American Indian students and to understand their perspectives on which barriers discouraged their success, but also what factors contributed to their degree attainment. Opportunities to expand this research include comparing barriers and persistence themes during the undergraduate experience compared to the graduate experience. Do barriers and persistence factors continue appear through the educational funnel or do those factors change?

Other ideas for future research include a mixed method approach where significant demographic information is collected to find any correlation between participants and their rate of success. Utilizing both quantitative data and qualitative data could perhaps provide a bigger overall picture while preserving the participant's story. Finding similarities in demographics and experience may offer additional insights. Due to the timeframe of the study, only seven participants were interviewed. Ideally, expanding this study to glean more personal stories from more participants could reveal additional barriers and persistence factors. Thus, allowing an opportunity to hear more unique narratives of American Indian students.

Conclusions

With dropout rates that continue to rise, American Indians have a significantly lower college enrollment rate than any other ethnic group in the United States (Keith et al., 2016). This article offered an example of how narrative inquiry can be utilized in a qualitative study to identify barriers and persistence factors. Participants identified a lack of financial support, lack of cultural competency, personal issues, time poverty, being afraid to ask for help and to succeed, and navigating through the college processes as barriers to their educational success. Participants also felt that cultural incompetence from faculty, staff, and students were major barriers and affected their educational experience. The study also found persistence factors that attributed to the participant's success. Those factors include role models, fear of failure, making the family proud, striving for advancement opportunities, and support from students and cohorts. Further, family and community played a huge role in the persistence that was evident in that six of the seven participants attributed part of their successes to family support. By identifying barriers and themes of persistence, a better understanding of how to support these students at every point in their educational journey can be gained. In turn, making the road to degree completion for many American Indian students not so less traveled.

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