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The Road Less Traveled: An Insight to the Educational Journeys of American Indian Students in Higher Education

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**THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED: AN INSIGHT TO THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS
OF AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

Kristina Cirks

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Minnesota State University Moorhead

Moorhead, MN

May 2021

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DEDICATION

I devote this dissertation to the American Indian students that I have worked with who inspired this study. I also want to dedicate this paper to future degree-seeking American Indian students. May these stories encourage you to keep moving forward. I also want to dedicate this paper to my children. I hope you now understand why “mommy always has to do her homework.” I truly hope I will one day inspire you to pursue higher education.

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ABSTRACT

American Indian students have the lowest college retention and graduation rates in the United States, facing a variety of barriers to completing their education. Studies have identified factors impacting the lower persistence of American Indian students; however, the achievement gap is not decreasing. To improve the knowledge of why American Indian students have the lowest percentage of advanced degree completion, an intimate examination of seven American Indian students' educational experiences was completed. This phenomenological qualitative study examined the events that impacted American Indian students' non-persistence and persistence in pursuing advanced degrees. By delving into the personal educational journeys of seven American Indians at varying stages of their educational experience, rich narratives were created. This study helped define the barriers that have discouraged American Indian students from persisting in higher education. In providing personal stories of American Indian student's enrollment in graduate school and the barriers they face, this research detailed American Indian students' journeys through higher education. Factors that impact American Indian students' enrollment and persistence in graduate school were identified.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The participation of American Indian students in colleges across the United States brings a wealth of cultural experiences, values, and strengths to the learning environment. However, American Indian students have experienced failure in the educational systems, and the underrepresentation of American Indian students exists throughout. American Indians, with rising dropout rates, have a significantly lower college enrollment rate than any ethnic group in the United States (Keith, Stastny, & Brunt, 2016). Nonetheless, 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), which are often required for leadership positions in higher education.

To broaden the knowledge of why American Indian students have the lowest percentage of advanced degree completion, an intimate examination of the American Indian student experience was completed through narrative inquiry. Since most American Indian students do not take a linear path to graduation, this study was a platform to share the rich narratives of American Indian students' journeys to advance degree completion. This phenomenon of why American Indian students are not earning degrees at the same rate as their peers, factors affecting the enrollment and persistence of American Indian students were analyzed. In particular, it offered an opportunity to hear the stories from the participants in a storytelling format. Storytelling is a powerful pedagogy in the Indigenous culture that shares knowledge from both the past and present (Iseke & BMJK, 2011). Finally, American Indian students' personal oral

histories were portrayed to gain a better understanding of why degree completion is the road less traveled for so many American Indian students.

Statement of the Problem

There is an underrepresentation of American Indians in leadership roles, specifically in academia, however, American Indian graduates provide much-needed diversity in the employment sectors (Keith et al., 2016). Since “higher education attainment results in economic growth, global competitiveness, decreased crime and poverty, and increased civic engagement,” it is important to determine why some minority groups, specifically American Indians, are not earning degrees at a higher rate (Andrade, 2014, p. 21). When looking at the pipeline to degree attainment, it is important to review high school graduation rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2019), the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high school American Indian/Alaska Native students was 72% compared to Whites at 89% in 2016-17 (2019). Further, the United States’ average high school graduation rate is 85%. By default, a lower number of high school graduates yields a lower number of conferred bachelor’s degrees as well. American Indians own .5% of the bachelor’s degrees earned with the gap not shrinking (NCES, 2019). Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl, and Solyom (2012) put this number into perspective by explaining 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 those who seek graduate degrees.

Oftentimes, American Indians do not make reports due to their size. Rather, they are grouped in a category represented with an asterisk. Of the 184,074 United States citizens or

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, .4% of American Indians earned a doctoral degree to 66.8% of Whites (NCES, 2019). Therefore, nationwide there are fewer students in masters and doctoral programs who identify as American Indian than any other race. From 2010-18, there has been a total of 6,772 American Indian students who have completed their doctoral degrees (NCES, 2019). In 2018, Hispanics, the race with the next lowest degree completion, earned 13,253 degrees (NCES, 2019). Profoundly, in that one year, Hispanics nearly doubled the number of doctoral degrees earned by American Indians in the last eight years. American Indians are less likely to obtain doctoral degrees compared to their peers. There has been a continual wave of increasing and decreasing doctoral degrees earned by American Indians with a peak in 2009-10 with 947 degrees conferred (NCES, 2019).

Significance of the Study

Since college degree completion contributes to more stable careers and higher income, understanding the statistics and achievement gap is critical (Keith et al., 2016). The lack of research on American Indian students' success was mentioned in numerous studies; however, few studies are qualitative and focus on the student's story (Guillory, 2009; Harrington & Harrington, 2012). Despite increasing trends, American Indian students represent less than 1% of enrolled students in postsecondary institutions (Heavy Runner-Rioux & O'Reilly, & Matt, 2018). There is an overwhelming number of barriers that contribute to this low number. Research thus far has identified several factors that affect American Indian student's success in graduate school, which revolve around institutional, social, and personal factors (Flynn, Duncan, &

Jorgensen, 2012). However, there are untold stories of the American Indian students' educational journey; thus, proving the significance of this phenomenological study.

Purpose of the Study

In an effort to determine the lack of degree attainment at every level of education for American Indian students, a closer look at factors of persistence and the barriers that contribute to the lack of achievement were explored. Moreover, this study attempted to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon of low enrollment and completion of advanced degrees by American Indian students. The information gathered from this study intended to minimize the gaps in literature on American Indian students' higher education achievement as noted by Flynn et al. (2012) and Harrington and Harrington (2012). In trying to provide more insight and perspective, this study created a platform in which lived experiences of American Indian students, at varying stages in their educational journey, were shared.

Finding financial resources, lack of knowledge of the graduate school application process, or lack of family knowledge or support were popular barriers identified in past research for American Indian students' persistence. Discovering themes of persistence factors and barriers may aid institutions of higher education that are trying to recruit and retain minority students. The findings of this study intended to provide perspective and offer knowledge on how to better serve these American Indian students at every point in their educational journey. In order to understand this common phenomenon, real-world experiences were studied through the lens of the people as recommended by Broughton-Pretti (2016).

Research Question(s)

Since less than 1% of students in master's and doctoral programs identify as American Indian, there is a high need to understand why these students are lagging in degree attainment (Heavy Runner-Rioux et al., 2018). To make sense of this, the central question that was explored in this study was: **Which factors impact American Indian students' enrollment and persistence in graduate school?** The core of this research was to understand and appreciate American Indian student's educational journey at the point when the interview took place. To answer the overall research question, secondary questions were explored through interviews and the literature review:

RQ2. Which barriers need to be addressed for American Indian students to succeed?

RQ3. Which persistence factors relate to American Indian graduate student success?

RQ4. What impact does family and community support play in the academic persistence of American Indian students?

RQ5. Does the American Indian culture play a role in a student's decision to enroll and persist?

By addressing these questions, a better insight was gained on why some American Indian students succeed while some do not. Hence, by answering these questions, a better understanding as to why American Indian students have the lowest degree completion rates will be provided.

Organization of Dissertation

Permission and IRB Approval

To conduct this study and to guarantee the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects, the researcher received MSUM's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Likewise,

authorization to conduct this study at Bemidji State University was also granted (see Appendix A). However, interviews took place virtually due to a worldwide pandemic.

Informed Consent

In this study, the protection of the human subjects participating was assured. Participants were informed that the researcher was conducting this study to meet the requirements of Minnesota State University Moorhead's Doctor of Educational Leadership Program. Pseudonyms were used and no identifying information was used to ensure confidentiality. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time (see Appendix B).

Limitations

The ultimate limitation of this study was the time available to complete the study. The collection of narratives through interviews required a considerable amount of time on the part of participants. The researcher would have increased the number of participants significantly if time allowed. It is also important to note that this study relied on participants' memories, which may have been different than the actual experience. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that with emotional trauma, distortion of memories, or participants' fear of backlash, the participant may not be able to recall the events. The researcher established rapport with the participant in that the participant felt safe sharing any emotional trauma (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was challenging because, due to a worldwide pandemic, the interviews could not be conducted in person. All one-on-one interviews were completed using a virtual tool called Zoom. In the event that the internet connectivity was compromised, the research also used a voice recorder to assure accurate dictation.

Definition of Terms

American Indian: “A person who is identified by the community in which he or she resides as an Indian, identifies himself or herself as an Indian, and who has some relationship with an Indian Tribe” (Chiago, 1981, p. 20).

Culture: “A people’s shared beliefs and behaviors that distinguish them from others and, at the same time, offer them a sense of shared meaning” (Borofsky, Barth, Sweder, Rodseth, & Stoltzenberg, 2001, p. 433).

Conclusions

This research was intended to be meaningful, thoughtful, and necessary. Although there are slight limitations in conducting this study, all steps were taken to ensure that this study was ethical and reliable. This study aimed to add to the limited research on the experience of American Indian students in graduate school and discovered persistence factors and barriers not already discussed in the research thus far. The need for such a study has already been discussed and the proposed research questions have been established. Personal experiences of American Indian students were shared through narratives and common barrier and persistence themes were created. This study gave a voice to American Indian students who shared their academic experiences.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

American Indian students desire to go to graduate school, but there is a lack of understanding on the disconnection between increased enrollment and continually low persistence and graduation rates for this student population (Youngbull, 2017). The rate at which American Indian students graduate from postsecondary institutions is astonishing lower than their peers and places personal pressure on the student financially (Brayboy, et al., 2012). In an effort to understand the factors that impact the pathways of American Indian students, it is imperative to recognize the full scope of the academic success of these students.

Background Data

When studying the factors impacting the pathways of American Indian students, it is essential to understand the background of students earning degrees through the analysis of historical facts. The data showed that American Indian students were awarded .4% of doctoral degrees with .5% of American Indians earning master's degrees in 2017-18 (NCES, 2019). Furthermore, the American Indian College Fund (2010) revealed that:

The number of American Indian/Alaska Native students enrolled in colleges and universities more than doubled in the past 30 years, along with the number of associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees conferred to Natives over the past 25 years. Yet, American Indian/Alaska Natives were less likely to earn a bachelor's or higher than their non-Native peers. American Indians account for less than one percent of those who have earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 71.8% of whites, 9.8% of African Americans, 7.9% of Hispanics, and 7.0% of Asians and Pacific Islanders. (p.1)

American Indian students are lagging behind at every level in the educational funnel. With fewer students graduating high school, fewer students are entering the funnel. Thus, American Indian students will continue to earn fewer bachelor's and advanced degrees.

American Indian students have three strikes against them when pursuing graduate school; the number of American Indian students that attend graduate school is lower, the retention rate is lower, and American Indian students take longer to graduate. Multiple studies have shown, "the retention rate of American Indian students in higher education is much lower than other minorities" (Broughton-Pretti, 2016, p. 3). On average, American Indian doctoral students take 9.9 years to complete their degrees from taking fewer credits a semester, stopping out for a period of time, and therefore impacting individuals, nations, and communities (Burke, 2017). This also delays graduates entering the workforce causing personal and financial pressure on the student. American Indian student representation is stagnant when compared on a national scale although total enrollment numbers have increased (Youngbull, 2017). The need for a college education has increased, and therefore it is essential to assist American Indian students in their persistence to graduation.

Historical Trauma

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, which has had a lasting influence. Under the control of Lieutenant Richard Henry Pratt, the first off-reservation boarding school opened at the Carlisle Military Barracks in 1879 (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. This led to the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 that wanted to reverse cultural assimilation. Before the Indian Reorganization Act, Congress enacted the Indian Citizen Act of 1924 that gave citizenship to all American Indians born in the United States (Mendoza & Reese, 2019).

In the past, American Indians had limited citizenship. Any educational gains that were made were lost throughout the next 30 plus years until Congress passed the Indian Education Act in 1972 (Indian Education Act, 1972; United States Department of Education, 1991). This also led to the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in 1975, which allowed the Indian voice (Indian Self-Determination, 1975). The era of self-determination ignited reform with the Indian Education Act of 1987 and the development of the Gifted and Talented Program that secured funding for Indian educational opportunities (Office of Indian Education 1980; United States Congress of the United States, 1987). A century of movements offered increased opportunities for American Indians, but academic equality in American Indian education still exists. Moreover, the trauma experienced during this time is “transferred to subsequent generations through biological, psychological, environmental, and social means, resulting in a cross-generational cycle of trauma” (Sotero, 2006). Current generations are experiencing the same historical trauma and loss from generations ago.

Cultural Beliefs and Identity

Racism, prejudice, and discrimination exist among American Indians and non-Indians within the school setting, perhaps contributing to American Indian students' lack of success. Unfortunately, there has been limited research conducted in this arena (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Despite generalizations, American Indians are extremely diverse with different tribes, cultures, and languages. About half of American Indian students live on the reservations and the other half in urban areas (Garcia. 2000). Some live mainstream lifestyles and other practice traditional Indian ways. According to the United States Census Bureau, one-third of American Indians reside on reservations or in remote areas with limited access to higher education (American Indian College Fund, 2010).

Cultural identity is a major force that leads to the retention of American Indian students (Broughton-Pretti, 2016). Burke (2017) suggested, “Most people learn their values, including tribal values, from the time they are born, throughout their childhood, and into adulthood and are learned from family and community” (p. 37). When going to college, American Indians face cultural insecurity because there is a pressure to conform to the university culture but want to maintain their identity (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius 2001; Tate and Schwartz, 1993). Kerbo’s (1981) study suggested that the best independent predictors of academic success for American Indian college students are the degree of social interaction and identification with Whites. Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jeffries, and Baysden’s report (2000) also 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.

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. 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. 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. The study found:

(a) A confirmation of early studies on student persistence that did not account for cultural continuity and unique experiences of minority students; (b) providing further evidence of the importance of culture, relationships, and a responsibility to the community as influential factors of American Indian student persistence; and (c) generating the need for further investigation into persistence for American Indian graduate students. (p. 37)

Thus, culture is a persistence factor for American Indian students. Along with culture, family and community support played an integral role in student persistence.

Family and Community Support

Persistence can be predicted by the relationship between the student's commitment to their community and the degree to which institutions support the American Indian commitment to the community (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). American Indian students persist because their families view their students' graduation as an accomplishment, thus a motivation and persistence factor for these students (Lopez, 2018).

American Indian student persistence is tied to faculty, staff, and administrative support as well as from family, extended family, tribal affiliation, and the connection to home (Broughton-Pretti, 2016). Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg (1986) explored the relationship between social, cultural, and aspirational factors of success for American Indian and White students. Their study found that the 48 White college students attributed their achievement to high GPAs and parental encouragement, while 38 American Indian (Sioux) students valued cultural identity and preservation of cultural traditions. Moreover, 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.

Meanwhile, another study by Flynn et al. (2012), interviewed 21 American Indian students to understand the higher education experiences. The researcher found that despite challenges, some participants finished with family support. Youngbull (2017) agreed with previous findings 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). Flynn et al. (2012) agreed that American Indian students value tribal encouragement. Additionally, Brayboy et al. (2012) confirmed 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) on what factors improved grade point average 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. American Indian cultures look at community, family, social networks as a priority (Patel, 2014). Indeed, family and community play a significant role in American Indian culture.

Conversely, the family can also interfere with persistence due to the family needing financial support or care. American Indian students experience this struggle with their academic responsibilities and honoring family and community (Burke, 2017). While most studies found that family has a positive impact, other students expressed that family obligations caused academic interference (Lopez, 2018). It is hard for American Indian students to see the long-term benefit of obtaining an education because their families need them. Multiple studies showed that family has a negative influence on academic performances, such as the study by Lee, Donlan,

and Brown (2010) which explored the persistence factors of 330 American Indian students. This study found that instead of using financial aid for school, students needed to use those funds to support their families. The external challenges associated with completing an advanced degree are trumped by this internal struggle between family and school (Garcia, 2000). For many American Indian students, academic achievement is compromised because they come from a culture where family is highly regarded (Keith et al., 2016). The importance of family in American Indian culture can take priority over school and graduation (Burke, 2017). American Indian students may place loyalty to tribal obligations and family and above school attendance and degree completion.

Achievement Gap

Despite the goals of the *No Child Left Behind Act* educational policy of 2001 that aimed to close the achievement gap amongst ethnic groups, American Indian students have the lowest graduation rates and highest dropout rates in the country (Withington & Shtivelband, 2014). More recently, Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 with the intent to “create a better law that focused on the clear goal of fully preparing all students for success in college and careers” (United States Department of Education, 2021). There is a widening gap between the aspirations and attainment of American Indian college students impacting overall degree completion (Youngbull, 2017). Academic success, resilience, and persistence improve the confidence of American Indian students’ ability to succeed in the academic environment (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Rindone, 1988). However, American Indians face challenges such as the lack of academic preparedness, undefined career goals, lack of funding, the bias of minority groups, and societal separation (Broughton-Pretti, 2016). Lee et

al. (2010) found considerable correlations between high school GPA, ACT and SAT scores and financial stability with persistence. Herzog (2005) also 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, even if students enroll in higher education, the likelihood of survival is low due to the lack of academic preparedness. To say that American Indian students are underprepared for college is an understatement as there are deep, historically unresolved problems of getting American Indian students through the mainstream higher education pipeline (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

Financial Support and Poverty

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 is a concern with low socioeconomic American Indian students (Mendez, Mendoza, & Malcolm, 2011).

Considering the academic demands of advanced degree programs, American Indian students may find work demands to be difficult (Burke, 2017). Mendoza et al. (2011) also found the lack of financial support as well as inadequate academic preparation, lack of career objectives, biases, and social separation as barriers for American Indian students. Moreover, Lee et al. (2010) revealed that American Indian students lack an understanding of financial aid and manage finances and therefore departed the university. Thus, if American Indian students could manage their finances and understand financial aid, more students would persist in college

(Lopez, 2018). Additionally, students often use their financial aid to assist their families back home, which could threaten their academic persistence.

Persistence

Perceptions about persistence factors and barriers of why American Indian students do not succeed vary. Patel (2014) suggested 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 doctoral degrees. A study by Garcia (2000) to gain insight on what factors helped American Indian students succeed found that, "the participants shared three characteristics that helped them navigate the academic pipeline: 1) an ability to function bi-culturally, 2) spirituality, and 3) a traditional understanding of reciprocity" (p. 2). Thus, culture is recognized as a factor in the persistence of American Indian students. Furthermore, 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)

This study established that several factors that contributed to the success of American Indian students. Moreover, Mosholder, Waite, Larsen, and Goslin (2016) created a survey to understand American Indian student perceptions and experiences as they relate to recruitment and retention.

It found that “informal mentoring was more important than formal mentoring programs and that there was a reciprocal relationship, i.e., informal mentoring increased a sense of community and acceptance” (Mosholder, Waite, Larsen, and Goslin, 2016, p. 33). Informal mentoring improved persistence. When American Indian students’ culture is supported by the university with cultural events, persistence for American Indian students improves (Lopez, 2018).

Institutions need to provide academic, social, and personal support. Tinto (1999) suggested that students leave institutions because they feel isolated or marginalized. If students felt valued and connected to the institution, success rates may improve. Therefore, to assist colleges and universities in supporting American Indian student persistence, Guillory (2009) developed the American Indian College Student Retention Strategies Model. The model suggests that American Indian postsecondary persistence can be predicted by: “(1) maintaining family and tribal community connections (2) addressing single-parent challenges; and (3) providing academic remediation through developmental education methods focusing on culturally sensitive career counseling, peer mentoring, and academic counseling” (Guillory, 2009, p. 17). There are several challenges for American Indian students pursuing higher education such as lack of preparedness, difficulties in adjusting to the academic community, family, personal and financial issues, cultural differences, and social isolation (Hunt & Harrington, 2010).

Research thus far has already identified several factors that affect American Indian student’s perseverance in graduate school, which revolve around institutional, social, and personal factors (Flynn et al., 2012). Cueva (2013) interviewed Ph.D.-bound, low-income, American Indian, and Chicano women. This study used critical race theory to examine how racism and white privilege impacted these women’s educational experiences. From those

testimonies, Cueva created four central themes that include: (a) Internal University Responses; (b) External University Responses; (c) Health-Related Responses, and (d) Spiritual Responses/Strategies. These themes would then be used to create the foundation for a survival guide for students of color pursuing higher education. Undoubtedly, there is a need to further the knowledge of American Indian persistence in higher education.

Flynn et al. (2012) reviewed research on American Indian students, more specifically, their low retention rates and the impact of their culture. The authors then conducted qualitative research to uncover the barriers these students faced when pursuing postsecondary education and constructed themes. In their research, they used a semi-structured interview that included 24 questions balanced around the university community, academic setting, and social and relational experiences outside of class. 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.

Lopez (2018) completed a literature review and found that “family support, institutional support, tribal community, and academic performance were the predominant factors influencing college persistence” for American Indian students (p. 804). The before mentioned studies show possible reasons why American Indians might not complete advanced degrees such as lack of funding, unwillingness to leave home, family, and culture. American Indian students “stop out” of the educational pipeline, leaving school and then returning later. Similarly, Burke’s study

(2017) looked at what factors affected student attrition and reported racism, emotional distress, and financial difficulties. Any of these barriers could prevent American Indian students from succeeding in higher education. However, it is not so commonly known why some American Indian students are also “left out” of the educational system (Garcia, 2000).

Keith (2015) also identified similar factors of persistence to include “family relationships and support, supportive instructors and staff and peers, commitment and support from the educational institution, assistance with identifying personal goals, guidance with study skills, and encouragement to remain connected with their home and cultural practices” (p. 41). Barnhardt (1994) concurred from her study on the academic achievement of 50 Alaska Native teacher education graduates at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks:

A teaching and learning environment responsive to the interests and needs of culturally diverse students; student support services respectful of the interests and needs of culturally diverse students; strong family and community support; supportive prior school and life experiences; and exceptional individual efforts. (p. ii)

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, 2016). There are undeniable gaps in the research and this study will voice the personal stories of American Indian students that have succeeded and failed in their educational endeavors.

High School and Undergraduate Experience

Research shows that poor academic preparation, not taking required entrance exams and poor financial preparation, result in a large number of students not enrolling in graduate school (Andrade, 2014). Andrade, Doyle, Kleinfeld, and Reyes (2009) concurred that though American Indian students have high aspirations, they need more structured pathways. Their parents may be unable to help, and students are ill-prepared by their school counselors. Unfortunately, these young American Indians students are on their own. Andrade (2014) explored the experiences of educationally successful American Indian women in higher education, specifically looking at which factors during their middle and high school years affected their pursuit of higher education. The first theme of academic engagement showed that American Indian students had strong academic preparation and achieved good grades. Next, in the category of community and culture, participants felt connected to peers and embraced their own culture. Resiliency, family problems, peer pressure, and bad choices, as well as racial identity, were key challenges. The final theme of knowledge of higher education discussed the influence of career counselors both good and bad. Some participants had access to formal programming about Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA), scholarships, and applications while others did not (Andrade, 2014). Overall, students who took courses with strong academic preparedness and were involved in co-curricular activities in high school improved the student's higher education aspirations. Also, those students who had high school counselors and/or parents or teachers informing them about educational opportunities were the ones that successfully completed some level of higher education. These themes were consistent in the literature by Heavy Runner-Rioux et al. (2018) and Youngbull (2017).

In the undergraduate experience, it is important to recognize the experience itself and a predictor of degree completion. There are limited studies that examined factors affecting higher education aspirations and middle and high school experiences. A study by Strayhorn, Bie, Dorime-Williams, and Williams (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. Perhaps a better sense of belonging at college could improve the student experience and degree completion.

Academic Climate

Student perspective, and specifically the underrepresented minority student perspective, defines the overall institution’s campus racial climate and environment (Youngbull, 2017). A positive school climate is significant as academic culture reflects the values and standards of the institution where the students are developing themselves (Xi & Xianghong, 2012). Regarding academic performance and persistence, the racial climate in the classroom can be more impactful than the campus racial climate for American Indian college students (Youngbull, 2017). Burke (2017) stated that racism stems from one group of people who believe they are superior to others, which could create a hostile learning environment and decrease the ability to succeed. Students need to be able to celebrate and honor their culture as well. Heavy Runner-Rioux et al. (2018) agreed, “the collaboration between the institution and American Indian students will promote a culturally responsive effort to support American Indian student persistence” (p. 37). Therefore, if the university administration wants to improve the student success of American Indian students, racism must be addressed.

Tate and Schwartz (1993) explored the barriers of 84 American Indian students in baccalaureate and master's Social Work programs from multiple institutions and found that students do not understand their educational needs. Faculty can influence the increase or decrease in American Indian student persistence. Bass and Harrington (2014) found that positive interactions with faculty were influential in the success of American Indian students earning bachelor's degrees. Support services, supportive faculty, and the ability to live bi-culturally are all connected to success in college for American Indian students (Demmert, 2001). Historically, American Indian students have contrasting family, cultural, and tribal experiences and enter the campus culture with different views than other students (Hale, 2002). Therefore, "The support and promotion of American Indian culture needs to include opportunities for American Indian students to experience the acceptance of diversity, and every opportunity other non-indigenous students have" (Heavy Runner-Rioux et al., 2018, p. 38).

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). It is important to observe and understand the campus racial climate of institutions because it directly impacts the persistence, access, and graduation rates of minority students (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Further, there are several 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 & Robinson Kurpius, 2001). Keith et al. (2016) applied a conceptual model of influence on American Indian/Alaska Native college student retention and graduation rates which showed the significance of academic

preparedness, sociodemographic characteristics, cultural values and strengths, self-efficacy, personal disposition, and the college experience. Collectively, these factors at some time may impact the success of American Indian students. It was suggested that American Indian students need assistance with identifying personal strengths and institutions should focus on the academic experience of these students in program planning. Thus, institutional support of American Indian students could aid in their degree completion.

Retention and Support Programs

Social support, self-beliefs, and comfort in the university environment predicted the academic achievement of American Indian students with social support being the strongest predictor (Gloria, & Robinson Kurpius, 2001). Shotton (2018) summarized the literature on American Indian women persistence in higher education and identified four themes centered on “(1) spirituality, (2) a journey perceived through traditional cultural stories, (3) strength in traditional cultural roles, and (4) family loyalty” (p. 490). Although this study was focused on American Indian women, it identified both positive and negative factors impacting successful American Indian women in higher education.

A study conducted by Guillory and Wolverton (2008) interviewed American Indian students, faculty, and administration at the same institution. The findings showed that financial support and the need for academic programs geared toward American Indian students were the two themes that emerged. From the institution interviews, administration and faculty believed that the lack of financial resources and lack of preparedness were the main barriers for American Indian students. However, the students voiced that family, single parenthood, financial support, and lack of preparedness as significant barriers. This was a study showing the disconnect

between the faculty and administration at a given institution and the student perspective, but still showing a need for support programs (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

Lundberg (2007) supported this notion of disconnectedness by noting that universities have been unsuccessful in serving first-generation students, underrepresented students, and students with cultural differences. Unfortunately, American Indian students fall into these categories. However, counselors, faculty, administration, who empower American Indians to maintain their cultural identity can promote degree achievement (Flynn et al., 2012). Offering support service and retention programs lend an environment where American Indian students can come together and overcome their barriers to academic success.

Conceptual Framework

Camp (2001) discussed that conceptual framework is a structure that the researcher believes could best explain the natural progression of the phenomenon being studied. This is important as individuals understand their experiences differently and assess knowledge either internally or externally. In this study, the researcher applied an epistemological lens that allowed the researcher to acquire and give meaning to the knowledge gained. This epistemological assumption permitted the researcher to get close to the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By earning the trust of the participants, the researcher gained in-depth knowledge of the participants' educational experiences. In designing this research study with a conceptual framework there was a logical direction that formed the underlying thinking and implementation of the project. Kivunja (2018) stated, "A conceptual framework is the total, logical orientation and associations of anything and everything that forms the underlying thinking, structures, plans and practices and implementation of your entire research project" (p. 47). It could be considered the blueprint of

the study. The researcher utilized their experience and perspective to guide the framework of the study. The overall purpose of the study was to understand the participants' stories in a "broader educational, social and historic context" (Creswell, 2012, p. 24).

Conclusions

There is still an imbalance of degrees conferred by race. As mentioned before, American Indian students are not merging that gap of degree attainment with their peers. Popular themes of past research have agreed that historical trauma, culture beliefs, achievement gap, poverty, family commitment, the lack of preparedness, lack of financial support, and the high school and college experience all impact American Indian student success (Brayboy, 2004; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, Keith et al., 2016; Shotton, 2018). Larimore and McClellan (2005) added that "several studies have identified support from family, supportive staff and faculty, institutional commitment, personal commitment, and connections to homeland and culture as key factors in the persistence" of American Indian students (p. 19). Barriers and key factors of persistence were further identified with this study and lived experiences of American Indians students were explored.

In facing a variety of barriers to completing their education, American Indian students have the lowest rates of college retention and graduation in the United States. However, American Indian students bring a wealth of skills and resilience to persevere and face those challenges. Whether a student succeeds academically, socially, and spiritually depends on family support, motivation, knowledge of the basics, sense of identity and self, language development, and early goal settings (Demmert, 2001). What is clear from the literature review is that there is a

definite achievement gap between American Indians and their peers with several popular topics among the literature reviewed.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In an attempt to understand the winding pathways of success for American Indian students in higher education, this phenomenological study delved into the personal educational journeys of seven American Indian students. Phenomenology is a deep exploration of the lived experiences of a group to understand a collective phenomenon shared across these individuals to form a rich and detailed description of human experience (Sadala & Adorno, 2001). This chapter will discuss the methodological stance, including the research questions, Zoom interviews, research design, data collection and analysis, limitations, procedure, and ethical considerations.

In providing personal stories of American Indian student's journey through higher education and the barriers they face, this research detailed both barriers and persistence factors attributing to their experience. The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the experiences that impact American Indian students' persistence and non-persistence in pursuing advanced degrees. With the literature review and this qualitative study, it will be more apparent why graduate school is the road less traveled by many American Indian students.

Research Question(s)

The fundamental question of this study is: **Which factors impact American Indian students' enrollment and persistence in graduate school?** With this question as the focus,

common themes will be created to understand and appreciate American Indian students' entire educational journeys. This is the heart of the research. Through the interviews and literature review, these secondary questions will be addressed:

RQ2. Which barriers need to be addressed for American Indian students to succeed?

RQ3. Which persistence factors relate to American Indian graduate student success?

RQ4. What impact does family and community support play in the academic persistence of American Indian students?

RQ5. Does the American Indian culture play a role in a student's decision to enroll and persist?

Research Design

To broaden the knowledge of why American Indian students have the lowest percentage of students completing advanced degrees, an intimate examination was completed through this qualitative study. A qualitative phenomenological approach allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words and expose the human experience (Shotton, Oosahwe & Cintrón, 2007). To identify factors that are impacting American Indian students' persistence in completing graduate school and to understand this phenomenon, this study followed a constructivist paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1998) defined constructivist paradigm as, "the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontological and epistemological ways" (p. 195). Besides, "a constructivist stance maintains that learning is the process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experience" (Merriam, Cafferella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 291). Therefore, in learning about these experiences, the researcher acquired knowledge and meaning about the participants' lives.

By collecting significant demographic information, as well as conducting extensive interviews with seven American Indians, narrative inquiry offered in-depth stories that provided insights into each interviewee's personal journey. The participants were at varying stages of their educational experience. These rich narratives from the interviews reflected short life histories focused on a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research methods are designed to understand more than what has already been understood by engaging in the process of people interpreting their experiences, how they construct their words, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). This approach allowed for each participant to share their story openly and to evolve organically. Additionally, it aimed to identify underlying barriers and themes of persistence among these participants through the shared stories. To enhance the study, the researcher gathered and summarized the results to explain trends from the interviews that added to the existing literature.

Setting of the Study

The geographical location of this study is irrelevant as the interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom. However, several participants were associated with Northern, MN. Nonetheless, hosting the interviews using an online format allowed the researcher to interview participants no matter their physical location.

Participants

The purposive sampling approach 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. A purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select participants who would best answer the research questions of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The general population was

American Indians with the target population being those that have attempted or completed an advanced degree. The purposive sampling intended to not only interview American Indians who overcame barriers on their path to advanced degree attainment but to understand their lived experiences through this process. Through conversations with colleagues and fellow learners about completing this study, several participants' names were provided to the researcher. The sample size was kept small to offer an opportunity to create intimate personal stories. Seven American Indians were selected at varying stages of their educational experience. Demographic details of the participants can be found in Appendix E.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Prior to data collection, Institutional Review Board (IRB) and site approval were established. The researcher contacted the participants via email to explain the study and to distribute the informed consent in October of 2020. The informed consent is shown in Appendix A. The primary data were collected through virtual, recorded, one-on-one interviews. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews followed the interview protocol. According to Merriam (2009), following an interview protocol not only allows the research to gather intended data but also informs the participant of important information. In following the protocol, the researcher engaged the participant in three phases of the interview process, including the pre and post-interview (Creswell, 2009). This also offered an opportunity for follow-up questions to gain clarification if necessary. In the pre-interview stage, the researcher gathered demographic information, while in the post-interview phase the researcher provided the written narrative to the participant for quality assurance. The interview protocol is outlined in Appendix C.

While the interview questions were semi-structured, most questions were open-ended and allowed for follow-up questions. As narrative inquiry permits the researcher to ask research questions on perceived, subjective experiences of individuals or groups, these questions focused on the educational journey of the participants (Briggs et al., 2012). The researcher did not ask the interview questions in the same order as each participant's story varied and did not follow the same chronological order. For example, one participant had three attempts at their undergraduate career. Therefore, the interview structure had to be adapted. These interview questions were generated by the researcher and adopted from Youngbull (2017) and McCallum (2012). The semi-structured interview questions are shown in Appendix C. These interview questions were piloted on three students at Bemidji State University in the McNair Scholars Program. Through this process, the researcher altered the questions to be more focused yet open-ended.

The average time of the interviews was 65 minutes, with the longest interview running 108 minutes and the shortest being 26 minutes. The interviews were completely voluntary and confidential. The researcher used an audio recording device to capture the exact responses as well as using the recording option on Zoom. During the interview process, the research also recorded hand-written field notes. These field notes help construct follow-up questions and solicit more information. Transcription was completed through Zoom which allowed for accurate interview scripts and was compared with recorded interviews for quality assurance. The interviews provided thick and rich descriptions and an understanding of American Indian graduate students' decision-making processes and experience (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2013).

Data Analysis

An open and axial coding process was used to analyze the transcription for 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 phenomenon of the study. The researcher categorized the responses into themes while preserving the participants' stories. The table of barriers and themes of persistence is located in Appendix D. These stories are shared and the identified themes are reported in Chapter 4. Demographic information was also collected as part of the pre-interview process and can be found in Appendix E. Each participant had pseudonyms assigned to keep confidentiality and to identify each interview.

Procedures

The researcher's proposal defense was conducted in June 2020, and interviews were conducted from September through November 2020. Selected participants received an email with information on the study and the informed consent in early September of 2020. Participants were also asked to complete a demographic survey via Qualtrics. The results of the survey can be found in Appendix E. Those participants received a follow-up invitation and an interview was scheduled. All interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom and completed by late mid-November. Data were then transcribed and analyzed.

Researcher's Role

At the time of the study, the researcher had worked in higher education for over 16 years and served underrepresented students in a variety of roles. The researcher is the Associate Director of the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program which assists first-

generation, low-income, and underrepresented students in preparing and applying to graduate school. Creswell (2009) suggested that it is important for the researcher to identify themselves in relation to the research topic when conducting a qualitative inquiry study. Unfortunately, too many American Indian students with high potential ended their educational journeys early. Therefore, the researcher wanted to look at the barriers that have impacted these students from persisting in higher education. Additionally, the researcher was interested in discovering themes of persistence to better serve the students in the researcher's graduate preparation program. Not only will the researcher be able to alter programming and services accordingly, but the researcher will be able to share this information with their university and other programs that serve American Indian students. A 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.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout this study, ethical standards were maintained. Before conducting interviews, approval was obtained from the IRB, and every consideration was made to ensure the anonymity of the participants. All participants were provided an overview of the anticipated study and provided an informed consent form (see Appendix B). Participants were informed that the interview was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. All data and recordings were kept confidential to ensure participant anonymity. Each participant reviewed their narratives to ensure an accurate representation of their stories.

Limitations

Due to the nature of a qualitative study, the design of the study was somewhat limited. This study particularly focused on American Indians who earned an advanced degree or were in the process of earning one. This study was not only designed to find a list of barriers and themes of persistence but to hear how these barriers affected the academic experience of the student. Intentionally, the researcher also wanted to learn about themes of persistence and understand the road to success for the participants. While the goal of a qualitative study was not to only discover generalized findings or themes, this may be considered a limitation of the study. However, the value of this methodology is in the capacity to gain in-depth individual experience of the participants.

Due to a worldwide pandemic, the narratives were collected using an online environment called Zoom. While this allowed the researcher to interview participants no matter where they resided, had the interviews been in person, the researcher may have been able to build better rapport with the participant. It is not known if affected the participant's level of comfort in sharing their story. Also, the study relied on trusting memory and perception of experiences that occurred quite possibly years ago. Participants noted that it was hard to remember back to their high school and early college days.

Conclusion

By sticking to a strict timeline, receiving IRB approval, and conducting interviews in the most ethical manner, this study was impactful and trustworthy. In identifying barriers and themes of persistence, an opportunity to make recommendations to universities on specialized services to support American Indian students pursuing higher education was gained. This research dove

deep into the personal educational journeys of seven American Indian students and provided intimate stories of their academic journey.

CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Since American Indians are underrepresented in higher education, this study attempted to understand the barriers and persistence factors that contributed to degree attainment for these students. Qualitative research techniques were used to provide rich descriptions of the educational journeys of seven American Indians. These stories sought to answer the research question: **Which factors impact American Indian students' enrollment and persistence in graduate school?** Further, these interviews looked to answer the following questions:

RQ2. Which barriers need to be addressed for American Indian students to succeed?

RQ3. Which persistence factors relate to American Indian graduate student success?

RQ4. What impact does family and community support play in the academic persistence of American Indian students?

RQ5. Does the American Indian culture play a role in a student's decision to enroll and persist?

Overview of Analysis

Chapter 4 is constructed in two parts to offer an opportunity to share the personal narratives of the seven participants and to present emerging themes. Barriers and themes of persistence emerged from the researcher's analysis of the narratives and presented. Part I of Chapter 4 honored the essence of this narrative inquiry study and presented the seven participants' personal academic stories. Part II of Chapter 4 is centered around the recurring themes that contributed to participants' college successes and (un)successes.

Collecting the Data

Primary data collection occurred in two phases. During the pre-interview stage, the participants were contacted through email to complete a demographic survey via Qualtrics and informed consent. Participants were assigned a participant number to complete the survey. The participant number aligned with the order in which the interviews were scheduled and later matched with the interview dictation. For the interview stage, the one-on-one interviews occurred using the virtual environment, Zoom. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were also recorded with a voice recorder. While the interview questions were semi-structured, each interview was organic in nature to allow the participants to tell their personal story how they desired.

Organization of Data

With over 450 pages of transcription from the one-on-one interviews, the researcher narrowed down the transcription to include only the participants' responses to the interview questions. Those responses were used to create the narrative for each participant. The interview dictation was printed and organized with the participant's corresponding demographic survey results. The narratives are shared in Part I of Chapter 4. Once each narrative was written, the researcher scanned the interview dictation for persistence factors and barriers. Colored Post-it notes marked barriers and persistence factors and the researcher highlighted supporting text. A table with text evidence was created and themes were established. The table of the themes is in Appendix E and described in Part II of Chapter 4.

Participants

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for each of the participants. The pseudonyms used for the seven participants were Lewis, Sloan, Grace, Miles, Maisy, Rowan,

and Ivy. The names of mentors, children, and family members were not used. Using the demographic survey that was administered by Qualtrics, a profile of the participants was created. Four females and three males were interviewed. 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. Five participants work over 30 hours a week, while two work less than 20 hours a week. Of the participants, three are married, one is divorced, one is in a relationship, and two are single. When looking at annual income, four participants earn over \$75,000 while three participants reported an annual income of \$20,000-\$40,000. All participants attended a public high school and all but one participant has earned a master's degree.

The survey also asked each participants' primary father's and mother's education level. Results showed that 57.14% of fathers earned a high school diploma, with 14.29% earning a bachelor's degree, associate's degree, and a Ph.D. respectively. The mother's educational level was recorded at 42.86% with a master's degree, 28.57% earned a bachelor's degree, 14.29% earned an associate's degree, and 14.29% with a high school diploma. All participants attended a public school with three participants growing up on the reservation while two lived in a small town and two in an urban community. All participants attend their undergraduate school less than two hours from their home; however, in graduate school, 42.86% of participants had to fly home. Moreover, 28.57% of students attended graduate school 5-10 hours from home, 14.29% of participants had a 3-5-hour drive, and 14.29% had less than a two-hour drive. When asked about the frequency of visiting home during their undergraduate experience, four participants

acknowledged that they visited home often, two stated sometimes, and one participant never visited home. During graduate school, 28.57% of participants noted that they visited home sometimes, 28.57% visited home often, while 42.86% rarely went home during their graduate program. Participants also were asked what their long-term goals were when they entered college. Responses include:

- To finish my degree and to get a better understanding of what I wanted to do for a career.
- To wrestle and play football, to get a degree.
- To play music.
- To work in the medical field.
- Being able to provide for my family while working normal business hours.
- To have a career that allows financial independence.
- Just graduate.

Lastly, the participants determined the level of importance of the selected categories by choosing one of the following options: not important, somewhat important, very important, or essential.

The results are illustrated in Table 1 below. Knowing one's cultural history and background earned the highest percentage with 71.43% of the participants agreeing it is essential.

Table 1

Measure of Importance

#	Question	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Essential
1	Staying close to home	14.29%	14.29%	42.86%	28.57%
2	Being with family	0.00%	0.00%	57.14%	42.86%

3	Community	0.00%	14.29%	28.57%	57.14%
4	Serving family	0.00%	14.29%	28.57%	57.14%
5	Serving community	0.00%	14.29%	42.86%	42.86%
6	Being involved in tribal events/gatherings	0.00%	42.86%	42.86%	14.29%
7	Being involved in religious/ceremonial events	0.00%	57.14%	14.29%	28.57%
8	Knowing one's cultural history/background	0.00%	14.29%	14.29%	71.43%
9	Being an example/role model for others	0.00%	28.57%	28.57%	42.86%
10	Receiving a post-secondary education	0.00%	14.29%	42.86%	42.86%

Part I: Participant Narratives of their Educational Journeys

Lewis

Lewis is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe; they call it Lakota. His family, a smaller family in the tribe, is from Allen, SD on the Pine Ridge Reservation; however, their entire family moved to Rapid City, SD. Currently, he is 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. He thought he may even want to graduate high school. His friends were slowly dropping out of school and getting locked up. He started to find himself alone. It was at that time that Lewis started seeing a psychologist and was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. His parents were very involved in his life and his sibling's lives. They saw him getting into trouble, not caring about school, actually, not caring about much at all. His parents intervened. As a sophomore in high school, Lewis had no earned credits as he would skip class. He was not good at school, but instead of trying to make him go, his parents bargained with him. Since music, turntables, and

DJ'ing were the only things Lewis found interesting, his parents bought equipment in exchange for him attending school. He started trying once he made a deal with his psychologist and parents to attend a Homebound Program. This was an alternative learning environment typically utilized by students experiencing medical conditions and pregnant teens who could not or did not want to attend school. At the time, he did not have the motivation to finish anything. He was just trying to get the DJ equipment. However, through the program, Lewis was able to earn a high school diploma.

Lewis, being from the poor part of town, saw dysfunctional activity going on in his community. Looking back, Lewis remembers a lack of self and not belonging, especially in high school. "I don't belong here. I don't fit in here." He thought that if he did not fit in at high school he could go back to his neighborhood. He can fit in with those guys. Those guys were older relatives who were involved in gangs and gang activity. The gang members wore all red in his neighborhood and would party on the weekends. Lewis thought it looked fun and his friends were into it. He looked up to his cousins, and he was drawn in because of his lack of acceptance at school. He had a feeling of purposelessness. He wished he could have told himself that he does have purpose and people value what he has to say.

While completing his high school diploma, Lewis was able to do volunteer work at the local YMCA. There, Lewis participated in a program called Midnight Alternatives. This program provided recreational activities for kids from his side of town. He started teaching DJ classes and felt special for the first time. That motivated him to want better for himself. After graduation, Lewis had no idea what he wanted to do and did not have any goals in mind. However, he had a

fear of falling behind or missing out on something. He decided to go to college, but when he told his past teachers, they laughed at him.

With no intention of completing a degree, Lewis started taking general education courses at the local tribal college called Oglala Lakota College (OLC). Lewis found the transition to OLC pretty easy as he was going to school with people he knew and instructors from his neighborhood. It did not feel like college, but more of a community. Academically, Lewis did not feel prepared for college because during high school he was, “just trying to get by, like, the bare minimum and pass.” After two years, Lewis dropped out of college. His DJ work became more important and was hired to work in outreach programs at the YMCA. Although he did not complete a degree at the tribal college, Lewis believed it was a good steppingstone to bridge the gap if he wanted to attend a state university.

Lewis worked at the YMCA for a few years before he decided to go back to school. He thought it was time to go back to school after not getting promoted at the YMCA. A non-Native person, not from the area but with a degree, was hired instead of him. He felt like he hit his educational ceiling and could not go any further without going back to school. He felt that “these people are educated and I'm not.” He was not at a place where he envisioned himself. He was near panic attacks thinking he was in his mid-20s and not doing anything. Nearly four years after dropping out of the tribal college, he enrolled at Black Hills State University (BHSU).

Financially, it was difficult when Lewis went back as college was no longer free. Since he went back on a whim, he did not have time, nor did he know how to apply for scholarships. He remembers taking out his first federal student loan and how stressful that was. BHSU was different than the tribal college as there was no one keeping him in line or checking in on him.

He had pure independence. Lewis had to motivate himself. At first, he was interested in being a social worker, but then he started to have an interest in his psychology research methods and statistics courses. One of his professors mentored him and invited him to work in his lab. This professor planted the seed for Lewis to go to school to be a psychologist. Lewis went directly through his three years and graduated with a double major in psychology and sociology from BHSU.

Lewis felt there were relatively a lot of American Indian students at BHSU, but even the larger classes only had one or two other Native people. This was somewhat of a culture shock because before BHSU, he only went to school with a majority of Native people. Class conversations were difficult, and Lewis sensed that there was a lack of cultural congruence in the classroom. Lewis felt, “really isolated through a lot of his classes and stuff.” In a sociology class, Lewis remembers a conversation about the colonization of Native people. Although Lewis avoids confrontation, he called out a student for her racist ideas. This started a big argument in class and the professor did nothing to support Lewis. Instead, the instructor cut the conversation off. Lewis felt alone and did not want to be there.

Lewis had a feeling that he did not “have a place” and that was difficult for him throughout his undergraduate experience. Feeling misunderstood, not wanted, and cultural incompetency from the professors was frustrating and barriers for Lewis. He found more support outside of the university, but that is not to discount the Native student services they offered. The campus had a relatively large Native population at the school, but it was hard to utilize those services. He felt that it was sometimes “hard to feel connected to campus when you're so busy.” Lewis graduated with his bachelor’s degree and started applying to graduate schools. Lewis

identified graduate programs that were relatively nearby home and preferably where there were Native people. He applied to federally funded programs in the Upper Midwest that particularly fund psychology departments to train Native graduate students. Lewis found inspiration in Native literature and connected with a professor in the application process who was Oglala Lakota at the University of North Dakota. Lewis interviewed and was offered a spot in his lab. Lewis was accepted into the Ph.D. Clinical Psychology program at UND.

Throughout his program, Lewis had to maintain a 3.5 GPA to continue. With the pressure of graduate school and needing to maintain a 3.5, Lewis dealt with more anxiety and depression than ever before. Trying to live up to those standards caused much emotional distress in graduate school. In particular, there was a class Lewis was struggling in and he thought he would be kicked out of the program. Concerned, Lewis went to his advisor about continuing in the program. His advisor hugged him and assured him that he would get him through the degree. That kind of support made all the difference in Lewis's graduate school experience and one of the main reasons he is in the final phases of his program.

During his program, Lewis navigated through personal and academic challenges as those seemed to be intertwined for him. First, the coursework was challenging and the stress of dealing with a GPA requirement has difficult. Lewis also carried the weight of feeling like the "people I care about have expectations of me." His parents wanted to see him do well in life. Respectfully, he wanted to do well for his family. In addition, Lewis had this "fear of failure." Lewis also had a fear of being shamed out. He felt like people had seen him start this journey and he could not fail and let them down. Lewis was able to succeed, not only with the support of his advisor but with support from other Native people. Having people around who saw potential in him, motivated

Lewis to succeed. He trusted the idea of fatalism and the idea that “I’m gonna end up where I end up.” He says it is common among collectivist cultures including Native cultures. Lewis had a general idea of what path is going down but thought that a lot of what happens is not up to him. He trusted his spirituality in that thought process. Concrete factors that allowed Lewis to be eight months from graduation are having 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. He is somewhere he never thought he would be. He contributes that to people's kindness and willingness to keep him pushing towards his goal.

Grace

Grace grew up in Cass Lake, which is on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation near Bemidji, Minnesota. However, she is an enrolled member of the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe of South Dakota. Grace is also White and has lineage to White Earth, Dakota, and Ojibwe. Earning a college degree has always been a goal for Grace. Her parents did not finish college but were supportive of Grace’s journey. They said, “if you go to college, great!” Grace felt like her dad wanted her to go to college even though he did not finish his freshman year. Her aunt and grandparents also showed her the importance of education. Grace’s cousin was the first one in their family to earn a bachelor's degree and Grace thought to herself, “damn it, I want my degree. If they can do it. I can do it.”

All through childhood and adolescence, Grace never wanted to miss a day of school because there was a lot of social interaction there, especially when there is little to do on the reservation. Grace was involved in extracurricular activities because they were free.

Competitiveness in high school carried her in sports, music, and academics. Grace enjoyed music and her band teacher became one of her role models. He introduced her to music camp and the honors band. He also connected her with a saxophone instructor at Bemidji State University (BSU). Grace worked with the BSU instructor during her junior and senior years of high school. Her teacher streamlined her into the program by helping her earn scholarships. Grace graduated high school and being already familiar with BSU, and she enrolled in their music program.

BSU was very hard for Grace. She did not feel like high school taught her how to study and how to manage her time. For the first two years at BSU, Grace lived on campus. She could not focus because everyone wanted to socialize. Grace was stressed and started drinking. She considered her first two years of college like one big freshman year. Besides the Music Department, Grace did not connect with campus resources until later in her experience. Grace hit a roadblock when her father got sick with cancer and was in the hospital. Grace was set to study abroad but had to forgo the trip. She still owed money because she did not complete financial aid for the trip. With an unpaid bill, she was unable to register for classes the next semester. Grace was a bit relieved she could not register for classes since she was not doing well academically.

Grace worked as a barista, a marketing assistant, and a DJ to pay off her school debt that following year. Grace was still able to go to band rehearsal, although she also needed to save up to purchase a baritone saxophone. She would work her barista job in the mornings and go to band rehearsal in the afternoon. She believed that keeping that connection with college quite consistently and being around her peer group, was enough to make her want to go back to college. She also realized she did not want to make coffee for the rest of her life. Grace bought herself a baritone sax and paid off her school debt. However, it bothered her that she had nothing

to show for the debt. Grace returned to BSU and started getting better grades. She took school more seriously and was accepted to the President's Student Commission and the McNair Scholar's Program.

It took Grace seven years to complete her undergraduate degree, but by that time she felt she finally figured school out. She was now interested in pursuing an advanced degree and staying in college for the rest of her life. Grace applied to graduate programs to continue her music career. She was accepted to Northwestern. Grace asked to defer her enrollment a year as she was not ready to take on more debt. She had received a scholarship, but the private school price tag would force her to take out healthy student loans. Also, Grace needed a break and she "just wanted to chill." Grace worked as a substitute teacher and that confirmed she did not want to continue working in an entry-level position.

Grace went to Northwestern that next year to learn the business aspects of the music industry. She quickly realized that having a master's degree in the music industry was not going to get her where she wanted. However, she enjoyed her professors because they worked in industry and they had "cool insights." She was inspired to work in the industry for a while and then return to college to become a professor. Grace's program was condensed into a year and therefore, she was very focused. "You just had to do it. It was like, do or die." With the debt that Grace took on, she wanted to make sure she earned the degree. She felt like a machine trying to power through her program in just a year.

In terms of her culture and beliefs, Grace felt slighted at Northwestern. When she first arrived in Chicago, she was "freaked out" by the campus. She added, "I don't think I belong here." Grace was disappointed in the lack of cultural awareness on campus. Grace has American

Indian Health and therefore thought she did need to buy their student health insurance. When she informed the Business Office they said, “we have no idea what you're saying right now.” They offered mental health services with their health insurance. Grace obliged and started seeing a counselor, though she was not impressed with their lack of knowledge of Indian Health Services. Another incident Grace encountered with the Business Office occurred when she went to provide identification for her research assistantship. Since they needed two forms of documentation, Grace gave them her driver’s license and tribal I.D. They told her they could not accept her tribal I.D.s. Upset, she cried because she could not believe her tribal I.D was not sufficient identification. They reluctantly accepted her forms of identification.

After two negative experiences on campus, Grace found the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research and felt more connected. They set her up with a graduate research assistantship to do archiving at the Native American Educational Services in Chicago. She was able to work with Native people, went through archives, and interviewed people in the community. She felt even more educated about her culture. 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. She finished, “It’s all about 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. All he thought he could do was get a job at Hardee's. He mentioned as soon he dropped out his parents said, "well go sign the paperwork and make it official." They encouraged school but did not force it. Miles did not have anyone who guided him in his family as he did not see them much. Miles is the first one in his immediate family to earn a master's degree. Miles said he has one friend with a bachelor's degree and the rest of his friends are dropouts that work at Walmart.

Miles earned his GED when he was 16 and seven years later enrolled at Northwest Technical College (NTC). At NTC, Miles had to take out loans as he was still considered a dependent. Miles earned a 3.0 GPA first semester. The following semester his friend died in a car crash and Miles did not care about school anymore. He said, "I'm done, I don't even care." There was no outreach to American Indian students on campus and Miles did not want to ask for help. This led to him dropping out that spring.

Miles tangled with the legal system and was sentenced to 15 years of probation. Consequently, he needed to either "get a job or go to school." Being a high school dropout and having little to no work experience, Miles was unsure he would be able to get a job. At age 26, Miles chose to attend BSU. Miles never felt prepared academically for college, but he was determined. He knew he had to focus on school because that was what he was doing for the next four or five years. All he knew was he was getting a degree. Miles did not get involved in campus life and activities. He was there to "go to school and get a degree." He grew up off the reservation, so he never felt like his values and beliefs were compromised on campus. However, his friends who grew up on the reservation did not feel welcomed in public school. It would have

been a whole different experience had he not already lived in the community for 20 years. For Miles, being Native American was a barrier itself, but he looked at it as something, “you just deal with.”

Knowing he was a ninth-grade high school dropout, Miles often wondered if he should even be in college. He asked himself if he was “smart enough” to be there. He started taking classes toward a psychology major. He figured out early on that his interests were in the business and accounting disciplines. Miles, now being an independent student, maxed out his financial aid and took the maximum number of credits. He felt he was getting paid to go to school and did not have financial burdens during his undergraduate experience at BSU. Miles was asked to tutor accounting courses and that was the only job he held. As graduation neared, Miles started getting emails and phone calls from recruiters. Miles questioned if he wanted to enter the workforce or continue in school. “I like learning, I don’t like working.” After blowing off interviews with potential employers, the department chair asked him how he felt about graduate school. Since Miles was not interested in working, graduate school seemed like a viable option.

Asking for help was not easy for Miles. He would try to figure things out on his own. The best advice Miles would give to other American Indians pursuing education is that “there is going to be a lot of confusion.” He added, “You just have to work through.” That confusion was one of the reasons Miles dropped out of NTC. Although Miles felt the imposter syndrome during his undergraduate career, he 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.

Miles went directly to WSU after graduation. Being deficient academically brought on challenges in graduate school. He was able to transition but struggled with writing. Since Miles was paying out-of-state tuition out-of-pocket, he just needed to “get it done.” He did not want to get stuck with a massive bill and no degree. Miles graduated with his master's degree with no future plans or goals. He says he “still don't have goals.” Miles’ former faculty advisor at BSU reached out to him about a faculty position in their department. Miles questioned if he was deserving of the position but is now in his second year of teaching.

Miles did not feel like getting the degree was hard, it was everything that goes along with navigating through school. Miles had a hard time looking to the future, thus himself being his barrier. Thankfully, Miles had instructors who gave him a push to move forward. He was “scared to reach forward.” Having a degree for Miles is “uncharted territory.” He said, “Yeah, hopefully, by the time I get my Ph.D. I have figured out.” He is looking to continue in a Ph.D. program to become a better professor. He pinches himself every day, wondering if he is actually teaching at a university. He was a high school dropout, and for 10 years he did not write more than his name. Now, he holds a master’s degree in Accountancy and teaching at the collegiate level.

Sloan

Sloan grew up in and around Cass Lake, MN, mostly with her mother and sister. She has a blended family and spends time with her dad, brothers, stepsister, and half-brothers. She 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. While she can only be enrolled in one, she belongs to all.

Sloan's mother did a great job of instilling how important education is and that idea has always been part of her. When Sloan was in elementary school her mother, who was a single mother, went to college. She remembers waking up in the middle of the night to find her mother sitting at her desk studying. And that just stuck with her. Her mom went to school, spent time with the family during the day, and studied all night. Sloan had a lot of good role models, her mother being one of them. Sloan felt incredibly privileged to come from a family where two parents have graduate-level education.

Sloan's educational journey did not go at all as planned. Her first attempt was at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, MN. She chose St. Scholastica because it was a small private school. The class sizes and campus life were similar to what she was used to in high school with a graduating class was 52. She thought she would feel comfortable there. St. Scholastica had a reputation in the health and education fields and at that time Sloan wanted to pursue education.

Sloan said her first year was horrible. "It was bad, it was really bad." Some of her teachers did not even know who she was. She felt very uncomfortable. Sloan lived on campus, but she was placed in overflow housing, which was like a community area type living. They put up dividers and put a bunch of girls shared the community space as their dorm room. Not an ideal living situation for Sloan. She remembers one of her first social events on campus where she was the one person of color among all the students, faculty, and staff. One faculty member came up to her and said, "I know it's a lot of white people." Coming from a high school with a majority of American Indian students, it was a huge culture shock. Sloan had never been in a situation where she felt like a minority and did not fully understand the effect it would have on

her. Sloan did not connect with any other students and ended up partying. She got a job at a bar because her financial aid was not covering the cost of school. Feeling overwhelmed with school, Sloan did not mind focusing on work instead of school. She felt, “way more comfortable to just go in, do a job and leave.” She connected with people outside of campus but spiraled from there. Sloan went down that route and did not make it through the first year. She stopped going to classes and was in shock. She pulled away and was dealing with depression. She withdrew from her family so much she did not even want to see them. She knew she was not living up to what they expected. Most days she could not get out of bed because of her depression.

Academically, Sloan was prepared, but she was extremely depressed, so no amount of preparation would have helped her continue with schooling. Sloan wished someone would have encouraged her to go to a community college or technical school right out of high school as opposed to a four-year private institution, especially for financial reasons. Although Sloan was dealing with depression, she thought if she would have connected with more underrepresented students and made those relationships, it may have improved her experience. Even though the college is a large community body, Sloan was looking for a smaller community with which to connect. Sloan left St. Scholastica with debt and poor academic standing.

It was assumed in Sloan’s family that you earn an education and return to help your community. You use your knowledge and skills to serve your people. Sloan was not going to school to please her family or because it was socially expected of her, but she wanted to help the people in her community. However, 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 made it through

fall semester, but “then things kind of fell apart spring semester.” Sloan quit school again and later found out she was having a child. At that point, Sloan thought, “a college education was just not going to happen for me.”

Sloan worked as a personal care associate in a group home setting and enjoyed it. Her stepmom encouraged her to get her certified nursing certificate and offered to pay for it. Sloan took the 8-week course at Northwest Technical College (NTC) in Bemidji and earned an A in the course. She could not believe it. It reminded her that she loved learning new things and was a good student. Sloan looked into the nursing program there, but since her GPA was too low from her past experience, they told her she would not be admitted. Instead, Sloan completed a certificate and an Associate of Science degree in Medical Coding.

After gaining a bit of confidence from earning an AS degree, Sloan applied to a school in Wisconsin. Again, her GPA was too low. To get her GPA up, Sloan had to retake courses at BSU and petition to request a grade removal. This process was a huge barrier for Sloan to complete. This could have derailed Sloan from retaking courses if an advisor had not helped her through the process. After approval, Sloan was able to complete courses online. This worked out great for Sloan because she could be with her daughter and close to her family. Eventually, Sloan started taking classes on campus.

While finishing her degree at BSU, Sloan not only had to navigate threats from her ex-boyfriend, but he was also stalking her, too. This resulted in needing a security escort on campus. She said, “I really wanted to just give up.” At that time, it was hard for her to have any kind of academic priorities. Sloan did not give up and admitted she could not have completed the degree without her family. They helped her financially and would take her daughter so she could study.

Sloan also received substantial scholarships, so much that she had to turn down \$8000 because it was over the estimated cost of attendance. She said, “It was horrible as a single mother.” She did not work but occasionally took a side gig cleaning her friends’ houses. Sloan was on WIC, food stamps, medical assistance, and living in Section 8 housing. She had to utilize every resource and supplemental program available so she could go to school and focus on raising her family.

Sloan connected with the American Indian Resource Center (AIRC) while at BSU. They lured her in the door with frybread and she never left. Sloan was able to connect with American Indian faculty and staff. The AIRC provided childcare, food, and more importantly, a hug. The AIRC offered a sense of belonging. This was the first time Sloan felt connected to campus. She volunteered for the next frybread fundraiser and then before she knew it, she was vice president and then president of the Council of Indian Students. This was a turning point. At first, Sloan was just trying to get a CNA certificate and by the time she was done, she had a four-year degree and was applying to graduate school.

Sloan was accepted into a master's program at Notre Dame but accepted an offer to the Ph.D. program at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee (MCW). Having joint custody with her daughter's father, Sloan needed permission to move her daughter out of state. He did not agree with the move and she ended up having to go to mediation and court. Unfortunately, because of the legal process, Sloan had to defer her enrollment a year. Finally, an agreement was made, and the following year Sloan could move to Milwaukee for her Ph.D. program with her daughter. In hindsight, she appreciated the year as she gained some work experience in the field.

After waiting a year, Sloan was extremely excited to start her program. She was anxious to learn and to throw herself into the coursework. Sloan’s program was divided into four-person

cohorts. Sloan was thrilled as she knew she would have a very personal and in-depth experience. One of the reasons Sloan chose the MCW was the opportunity to work on the Arch Grant that promoted American Indian students. Sloan assumed there would be more Native Americans in the program, but she was wrong. She was the first. Actually, she was one of three American Indian students in the entire graduate school. Sloan wanted to find more connections and was disappointed that the college was nowhere near where she thought it would be in terms of understanding American Indian students and culture.

The first semester, Sloan was able to connect with her cohort. She was surprised at the lack of awareness her cohort had of some of the issues that American Indian people face. Sloan's first semester was successful, academically. She passed her courses, which was huge as Sloan was not only transitioning to graduate school but dealing with family issues back home. Her nephew, who was in his early 20's, passed away tragically and unexpectedly. She had to go back home to attend the funeral and to heal with her family. Also, that semester Sloan's stepmom died suddenly from a heart attack and Sloan returned home again. Thankfully, her mom came to live with her for a couple of weeks to take care of her daughter while Sloan caught up on her studies.

Sloan had to return home again the second semester, which was about a nine-hour drive because her sister was on the wrong medications and became suicidal. She attempted suicide and Sloan went to see her when she got out of the hospital. Sloan struggled that second semester. She was taking nine graduate credits and fulfilling her 20 hours a week assistantship, being a mom, and dealing with loss. Every weekend she also had to drive her daughter to meet her dad, which took 12 hours. Sloan had difficulty trying to balance all of her commitments.

Sloan was paired with faculty to work with the Arch Grant. However, she said the faculty member was clueless on how to conduct business with tribes. They did not understand that tribes are unique systems and their own culture. They believed that since they grew up around those communities that they had a free pass. Sloan was very frustrated with this lack of knowledge. She found out that this faculty member was going to teach a course next year on conducting research with American Indian communities and could not bear the thought of taking that course. For her, as a Native student, it was devastating and oppressive for that particular faculty member to teach that course next year. Surprisingly, at an institution with faculty and students from all over the world, she was the only American Indian student in her program and the only one who understood the culture.

Some days, Sloan would drive to school crying because she did not want to walk into the building and her classes. She was uncomfortable, as she said these “elite and arrogant faculty” made her feel like they were doing her a favor. Sloan did not want to feel like that and did not want to be at that institution any longer. She knew she was not going to be able to complete her degree there while fighting this uphill battle every day. Together the faculty, the campus climate, and the cultural shock were enough for Sloan to leave. She felt that she would probably quit academia altogether if she would have continued at the MCW. Before leaving, Sloan met with the director of the Diversity and Inclusion Office in hopes to better the experience for incoming students. 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. Then, Sloan will be able to give back to her community.

Maisy

Maisy is an enrolled member of the White Earth Lake Band of Ojibwe through her mother's side. She grew up on the reservation but went to public school. Education has always been important to her though neither one of her parents graduated high school. When Maisy was in high school her parents completed their GEDs. Her maternal grandmother also did not finish high school but earned her GED at the same time as her parents. The public educational system Maisy experienced was completely different for her grandma. Native elders attended boarding schools, so it meant a lot to Maisy that her grandma wanted to go back to school.

Maisy's oldest sister was a role model for her because she was the first one in her family to go to college. She was going to school to be a registered nurse while Maisy was graduating high school. Maisy's mom made sure that all of her kids graduated high school, as they needed to go to school to become independent. This was a big thing for the community. Maisy graduated high school and at her friend's graduation party, her boyfriend proposed. Maisy got married right out of high school and started at Bemidji State University (BSU). She already had incoming credits as she had taken advantage of the Post-secondary Enrollment Option program while still in high school. 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. She never did the dorm life at BSU or UND. While she was at UND, she had her daughter, who sometimes went with her to school and sometimes stayed with her husband. Juggling being away from her spouse and having a child was hard for her. Also, the classes were rigorous, and the professors did not handhold like high school teachers. It was up to her to understand the coursework and prepare for the tests. That first

semester she was enrolled in chemistry, physics, math and was “freaking out.” Thankfully, she went to Student Services and an advisor rearranged her schedule. That advisor probably saved Maisy’s college career. After getting a new schedule Maisy loved school and her engineering group of 13 students.

Rent, school, childcare, commuting, and books were very expensive. Maisy had to take out student loans to cover those expenses and had to maintain a vehicle to get to and from school. She did not rely on her parents to help her at all with college. It was all on her if she wanted to go. Maisy felt like dropping out a year before graduating. She was working a minimum wage job and had a paycheck coming in. She did not want to go back and did not want the hassle of a two-hour commute. She felt like, “no one else is doing this.” She added, “Why am I doing this?” Though Maisy felt like, “screw it,” her husband told her she needed to continue. Maisy also found the same encouragement from a professor. She told him she was going to take the fall semester off, even though she was doing well in her classes. Her professor was really worried about her and said that oftentimes when people take a break, they do not return. Although Maisy needed a break from all her commitments, she went back. Her professor was really surprised to see her come 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 applied for a tribal relations specialist position at the U.S. Forest Service. She was not hired. However, the person who was hired told Maisy about the Masters of Tribal Administration and Governance at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. It was online and pretty conducive to working professionals with families. Although she never wanted

to go to school again after earning her engineering degree, she went back to college. Her middle son was going to St. Cloud State University at the time so they were both in the school mode and could relate to each other.

Maisy thought that going back to school was going to be very stressful and “all-consuming.” She remembers taking intense classes during her undergrad. However, this program was about Indian jurisdiction, history, and current events that related to her job. Going back to school later in life, Maisy found she could dedicate more time to it. Though she was concerned with the loss of family time, she loved the program and the faculty. Maisy was very grateful for the financial assistance that she received while pursuing her master’s degree. She was able to secure national scholarships and funding through her local reservation and the White Earth Indian Reservation. Unlike her undergraduate experience, Maisy had no worries about how she was going to pay for her master’s degree. Maisy contributed her success and completion of her degree to her support system. Her family allowed her to remodel a bedroom to make a study center. Also, her coworker, who introduced her to the program, would answer questions and check in on her. Other coworkers were also supportive, but still wondered why she was going to school. Maisy is in her 30th year with the U.S. Forest Service and is now the Forest Tribal Relations Liaison. She also celebrated 30 years with the boyfriend that proposed at graduation.

Rowan

Rowan is Sicangu Lakota and his given Lakota name is Melayouha, meaning “has a knife.” His mother is Sicangu Lakota, and his father is an “all-American mutt.” Rowan is a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and lives in Marshall, MN. He holds a master’s degree in education, with an emphasis in physical education. Rowan is in the midst of his Master of Fine

Arts degree but cannot complete it because “money is the issue there.” 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. His earliest memories were at SMSU where his dad and mom taught. His mom was one of the only minority faculty on campus. His grandparents sent his mother away with the hopes that she was going to be the success story. School has always been something Rowan has loved and the reason why he teaches. He says, “it's home.” Rowan’s mom is his number one role model, but not to exclude the influences of this dad, grandparents, and the Lakota Warrior. A Lakota warrior is an educator and someone who provided first for everybody. Rowan follows these ideals to teach others how to survive and how to take care of themselves. Rowan strives to be generous, a good provider, and help others in need. There were moments when his family had some hard times and did not have food. Rowan’s dad grew up in the environment of orphanages where everything was gifted to them. Thus, Rowan was taught at a very early age that food was a gift, and if someone offered you food, you accepted it because that might be the only thing that person has of value. He learned the important value of food and was raised with that thought process.

After Rowan graduated high school, he was supposed to go into the Air Force Academy. He was all set to go until he learned there was no Art Department. The Air Force also wanted him three weeks earlier than planned, however, Rowan was supposed to play in an All-Star football game. With things adding up, Rowan decided not to go. Rowan had to quickly figure out where he was going to college. Although he was recruited by the University of Minnesota for

athletics, it was too late and the scholarship money was gone. Consequently, at that time his parents were considered “rich Indians” so he could not get Indian funds for college either. Since his mom and dad both worked at SMSU, he was able to go there with a tuition waiver. Rowan took a “smattering of classes” and played three sports: track, wrestling, and football.

Rowan did well in wrestling was approached by the Head Coach of the USA Wrestling Greco Roman team. He was asked to be in Minneapolis by the end of the next week to be the training partner for the silver Olympic medalist in the weight class below him. He talked it over with this girlfriend (now wife) and she reminded him that he said he would be done with his degree. Rowan declined. That opportunity would have offered him a chance to be a part of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Years later, he spoke with that coach who saluted him for making that decision to finish school, as so many of the wrestlers who did not earn degrees are driving pizza trucks. He still regrets missing that opportunity, thinking his wife would have still married him even if he had gone.

Being an athlete, it was assumed Rowan would go to college. His coaches were mentors to him. In college, Rowan had issues because people that did not know who he was, just recognized him as a person of color. 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. A lot of the Eastern South Dakota kids had issues with American Indians. Because Rowan was an athlete, he was better accepted on campus, but he was only accepted in the sports group and not in other groups. He was careful where he went. He did not go out with other groups or to other parties. He said there was no sense of belonging for a person of color. In athletic competitions, there were times were Rowan had to deal with racist comments from his opponents.

Taking 12 credits a semester and courses across several disciplines, Rowan graduated after six years plus one quarter. Between his fifth and sixth year, Rowan got married. Once he graduated, there were no art teaching jobs. His wife was able to get a job at the local company, Schwan's, as a computer programmer and he worked part-time as a wrestling coach. 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. He had concerns about graduate school, but he saw his dad get his doctorate, and knew he could do it. At the time he was teaching and coaching full time, had a screen-printing business, running marathons, and he still wrestled. "It was a nuts time in my life." His wife was putting 45 to 50 hours a week at work, but Rowan enrolled. His uncle, his dad's twin, told him that he was an idiot because he should have started his masters right after he graduated. Rowan had some challenging classes and struggled to write the final paper. However, Rowan found motivation when the athletic director and the dean of students wanted him to take a coaching position at SMSU. This was a huge motivator for Rowan to complete his paper and Master of Education degree. The degree meant a coaching job and more money.

Having the master's meant a level of elitism for him. It was a goal he had, and he intended to reach it. While he was talented, he was a "better worker." He had a strong work ethic and "learned to survive." 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 and her family moved around quite a bit when she was little and landed in Bemidji, MN in the early '80s. She grew up very poor and knew they did not have much. That was a

motivating factor for her to go to college. She also watched her mother struggle through school as a single mother. Ivy's mother was in an abusive relationship through most of her young childhood. Her mother would stay up and study every night until three in the morning and then get up and make breakfast for her boyfriend at the time. Oftentimes her mother had to walk to school and back, make food for the family, complete household duties, and do her homework. She was caring for her children, finishing school, and working without any help from a partner. Her mother was her role model because she survived a physically abusive relationship while caring for her family and completing her degree. Her mother graduated from Bemidji State University (BSU) when Ivy was eight with an Indian Studies degree and again when she was 10 with a Professional Education degree.

Ivy 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. She did not know how to study, was not connected to campus or faculty, nor did she know how to get connected. Ivy dropped out and took a job at the casino in security and surveillance. She was going to put education on the back burner for a while. Ivy thought that it was going to be a summer job but stayed there for over five years. Security and surveillance at the casino came naturally and she ended up moving up to management. At 20-years-old she was managing million-dollar budgets. At one point, she realized she was working long enough at the casino that she could have finished her bachelor's degree in that same time. Therefore, she started taking night classes at the Leech Lake Tribal College (LLTC). She worked during the day and went to class at night.

While taking classes at LLTC, her instructor, who was also a TRIO advisor at BSU, reached out about helping her return to BSU. Since Ivy left BSU with an unpaid bill, she was not able to return there. 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. Ivy sorted out her bill and was able to enroll at BSU. She took a couple of night classes and then quit her job to attend full time. While she had thought she was going to school to be a veterinarian, her first biology class changed her mind. Being a logical person, she looked at the job openings in the community and decided on Business Administration with an emphasis in Management and Entrepreneurship. While completing her undergraduate degree, Ivy and her family lived with her mom. It was her mom, brothers, and her family in the same household. She would not have been able to afford school without the financial assistance that her mom provided. Her mom bought her a reliable vehicle and paid all the bills while her family lived with her. Ivy maxed out her financial aid. She said they struggled but made it.

Ivy had to learn how to study but loved school and the opportunities it provided. Ivy felt she had more responsibilities than most college students she knew. She was taking 18 credits every semester and summer classes to graduate. She did not have any free time. She planned out every single hour of every day. She tried to do all her classes and homework on campus so she could spend time with her family when she was home. The downside of that was she did not get the whole campus experience with not living on campus and not joining clubs and events. Most activities were in the evening and that time was family time. She did not make those lifelong college friends or have the typical college experience, but that was by choice. This time around, Ivy felt she was more responsible and knew how to manage her time and finances. She did not

want to give up. She was not going to be happy if she continued working for gaming. Ivy wanted to work in economic development but still provide and be there for her family. Ivy graduated when she was 28 years old with her bachelor's degree from BSU.

Ivy got her first job after graduation as a registrar at LLTC. While at LLTC she took students to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium Student Conference. There, she met a recruiter from Gonzaga who introduced her to their partially funded and partially online MBA program in American Indian Entrepreneurship. With her supervisor's permission and encouragement, she applied and was accepted. While completing her MBA, she was in a cohort of six students who started and finished together. She expected that her MBA was going to be much more difficult than it really was. She had this implicit bias that prestigious universities and private schools would be more difficult, but that was not her experience. Ivy pursued her master's degree in hopes of providing economic opportunity for her community of Leech Lake where there is a lot of poverty. Ivy was intentional about learning and passionate about creating opportunities in tribal communities.

After two years, Ivy completed her MBA. She worked a variety of jobs in human resources and business. While at a work conference, Ivy ran into the same instructor that helped her get into BSU. She encouraged her to get her Ph.D. and to teach at BSU. With the lack of opportunities, Ivy decided she could make an impact by teaching future business leaders. Ivy, the breadwinner of the family, quit her job because her employer was not supportive of her leave of absence. With a little faith and no job, Ivy enrolled in the Ph.D. Leadership Studies program at Gonzaga. She had no job lined up but put faith in that it would work out. Eventually, she was hired as faculty at BSU.

Ivy cried more in the first two weeks of her Ph.D. program than she did in the last 10 years of her life. She enrolled in the “summer only” option where she was on campus for a majority of the classes. Every other weekend for three semesters she flew back and forth. Ivy was determined to graduate on time, but she struggled to find time to balance everything on her plate. Thankfully, she had a great dissertation chairman and supportive cohort. Of her family and relatives, Ivy will be the to earn a Ph.D. Her mom, cousin, and late aunt have bachelor’s degrees.

Perspective, self-reflection, and wanting to provide for her family pushed Ivy through her educational journey. She realized she wanted a college education and figured out the steps to get there. She understood what her options were without a college degree. She had supportive mentors and a supportive gaming director who made her think about what she wanted for her future. She says, “without him in my life, I don't know where I’d be.” Ivy is in the final stages of her dissertation for her Ph.D.

Part II: Analysis of the Findings

Part I of Chapter 4 presented the rich narratives of the seven participants. Part II of Chapter 4 will reveal barriers and themes of persistence that the seven participants encountered on their educational journeys. Common themes among the participants emerged though each had unique life experiences. A table of the themes and factors is represented in Appendix D.

Barrier Themes

Throughout the interviews, common barriers appeared among the participants. When identifying barriers from the participants’ narratives, several themes emerged with contributing subcategories. Most participants offered several barriers to explore.

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 guiding 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, "my account was blocked, and I couldn't register for school." Since Grace had an outstanding bill with the school she could not register. She said,

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." She had to work several jobs for a year to pay off her bill.

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. He cannot complete his Master of Fine Arts degree because "money is the issue there."

Maisy had similar financial troubles. She said, "I didn't rely on my parents to help me at all with my college." She wanted to stop out a year shy of graduation to work at her minimum wage job to help support her husband and daughter, but decided to finish school with encouragement from her husband and advisor. Likewise, Sloan had to get a job at the bar because she said, "I didn't have enough money to live off of which my parents assumed I

would.” Sloan preferred working a job instead of going to school which played a role in her dropping out. 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 of 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 those 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 in class where a student was being racist, and he called the student out when the instructor did not. He said 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 conduct research on Indigenous peoples. She said, “I had to explain boarding schools.” Sloan was highly disappointed that her school had faculty from all over the world, but they 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. “I ran into racial things that I was not included and not accepted.” Sloan, who attended high school with a majority of Native students, had an entirely different experience when she started her undergraduate experience. She said, “I had never really been in a situation where I felt like the minority.” Then, in graduate school, Sloan 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 no 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. They had experiences where they fought to feel accepted and to feel like they belonged. Several participants questioned if they were smart enough to be there 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 and getting into trouble. 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 program and questioned if they were ready to complete the required curriculum. Ivy admitted 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. While Miles was in school and during his first faculty role he was always wondering if he was smart enough to be there.

Personal issues. Participants were asked if they encountered any personal issues while pursuing their degree. 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 in 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 to return to school was confusing for the 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 is 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 having enough time to get involved in the campus 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.” He already busy but still wanted to continue his education. Ivy, like Rowan and Maisy, already had a family and said, “The downside of that was like I didn't get the whole campus experience.” Trying to juggle family and school Ivy said, “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 theme 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.” As before mentioned, Miles did not have any role models growing up or any family or friends with advanced degrees. Therefore, Miles was afraid of success. On the other hand, success deterred Lewis from completing his degree. Lewis was enjoying his job at the YMCA and he said that he 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 as the participants had more time poverty as their commitments increased. 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. Sloan was accepted to a funded Ph.D. program, but “because of the legal process,” she had to defer a year. Her child’s father refused Sloan from taking his daughter out of the state, even though the distance was only an hour further away. The court sided with Sloan and she was able to attend the

following year. However, meeting on weekends was a huge burden for her. 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.” Miles took pre-college level courses when he started college to bridge that gap. 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 had to maintain a 3.5 GPA throughout his graduate school career.” 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. After 20 years, she did return to complete her master’s degree. Two participants, not by choice, had to defer their enrollment by a year due to the barriers previously discussed. Both Sloan and Grace felt that they needed that extra 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 waited a year to start her program.

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. His mom was the one who suggested he enroll in both master's programs. 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. I had no worries how I was going to pay for this or pay for that.” 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 pocket 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. When asked about what factors helped you through your academic journey, 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 getting involved on campus as a barrier. Meanwhile, participants who utilized those campus services acknowledge the importance of making a connection and getting involved. 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 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 the 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.” Ivy was able to return to school and finish her degree. 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 came from friends and coworkers for the participants as well. 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 said, “we became pretty good friends” about her engineering

cohort. 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." Maisy's oldest sister was a role model to her because she was the first one in her family to go to college." 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 also said, “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 was another factor that drove participants to graduation. Ivy said, “I didn’t have any other options besides maybe working at the casino.” There was a lack of opportunity in the area due to poverty and drug addiction. 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 a successful educational journey. 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." With that thought process, Lewis is now in the final stages of his doctoral program. 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.

Conclusion

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 barrier amongst the participants was 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. Thus, there were times in the participants’ journey where they needed support and did not receive it. Other times, when they received support, it impacted their experience and allowed them to reach their educational goals. These results answer the research questions in this story and will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Discussion

American Indian students throughout the United States have experienced failure in educational systems. 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 study attempted to provide a better understanding of the disproportionately low degree completion rates of American Indian students compared to other ethnicities. In fact, with representing less than 1% of enrolled students in postsecondary institutions, American Indian students are the highest underrepresented minority group (NCES, 2019). To put this in perspective, Brayboy et al. (2012) explained that American Indian/Native Alaskan's earn one bachelor's degree to every seven earned by Whites. In past research and literature, oftentimes American Indian students are represented as an asterisk, not even making a notable category. American Indian students are often overlooked in studies due to their lack of size in the sample population. Instead of grouping American Indian students in the asterisk category, this study presented an opportunity to express the personal experiences of American Indian students as they pursued higher education.

In an effort to understand this phenomenon, barriers and persistence factors were identified through this qualitative study. Further, a platform to share the lived experiences of American Indian students at varying stages in their educational journey was created. By using a narrative inquiry methodology, this study bore intimate life stories. The narratives shared by the participants provided insight and perspective to understand the challenging academic journeys of American Indian students.

In creating the narratives from the one-on-one interviews, the researcher was able to categorize barriers and themes of persistence to answer the main research question, **Which factors impact American Indian students' enrollment and persistence in graduate school?**

Further, the research answered these questions:

RQ2. Which barriers need to be addressed for American Indian students to succeed?

RQ3. Which persistence factors relate to American Indian graduate student success?

RQ4. What impact does family and community support play in the academic persistence of American Indian students?

RQ5. Does the American Indian culture play a role in a student's decision to enroll and persist?

Specifically addressing research question two, participants identified a lack of financial support, lack of cultural competency, personal issues, time poverty, afraid to ask for help and to succeed, and navigating through the college processes as barriers to their educational success. The study also found persistence factors that attributed to the participant's success that addressed research questions three. 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 play a huge role in the persistence that was evident in that six of the seven participants attributed part of their successes to family support. As mentioned earlier, Lopez's (2018) literature review found 2/3 of studies proved that family and community were persistence factors. Thus, answering research question number four. Finally, culture does play a role when American Indian students are looking to enroll and to complete a degree. Most significantly, participants felt that cultural incompetence from faculty, staff, and students was a major barrier

and affected their educational experience. These participants had unique and incredible stories that offered a better insight to the research questions of this study.

In order to broaden the knowledge of American Indian students' academic success, this phenomenological study disclosed the personal educational journeys of seven American Indian students. The participants were all American Indians who were in the process of earning or have earned an advanced degree. The interviews served as a snapshot from one point in their educational journey and attempted to answer the research questions presented.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the barriers and themes of persistence that emerged from the narratives. Additionally, a comparison of past findings, discussion of the unique stories, and limitations of the study are addressed. Suggestions for future research are offered and recommendations on how to support American Indian students through their academic careers will also be discussed.

Interpretation of Findings

As outlined in the literature review and problem statement, 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 themes 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. For example, Grace almost did not finish her undergraduate degree and deferred a year before attending Northwestern due to the lack of funding. Rowan is still trying to complete his MFA but cannot afford to as he is helping his son through school. Lack of financial support was the number one barrier for the participants.

While the literature noted cultural beliefs and racism as a barrier, participants exclusively spoke about 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. Combined with other factors, Sloan left a fully funded Ph.D. program. In the classroom, Lewis struggled with class discussions and the racist words of his classmates. Having faculty that did not understand American Indian culture left Lewis feeling like he did not belong. As noted earlier, this is a common barrier for American Indian students.

Emotional distress was mentioned 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. As previously noted, Lewis said, "throwing the pressures of graduate school and trying to live up to the standards caused a lot of emotional distress." He added, "I dealt with probably more mental health issues than I have ever prior in my life." Participants in the study had similar, yet unique, personal issues to deal with through their college experience. These issues were not limited to,

death, depression and anxiety, and unhealthy relationships. During college, Sloan struggled to even go to class, she said, “I happen to be extremely depressed. I literally couldn’t get out of bed most days.” Further, Sloan lost her cousin and stepmother unexpectedly during her first semester of graduate school. Likewise, Miles’ friend died in a car crash in the first year of his undergraduate experience and that is when he said, “I’m done, I don’t even care.” This led to him dropping out. 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 or simply did not have enough time to get involved. 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. Sloan said, “I thought a college education was not going to happen for me.” Likewise, Ivy had to put college on the “back burner.” These participants were also those who saw their mothers go through their academic journey later in life. All three participants had children while completing the degree. Thus, a major theme of persistence that will be later discussed.

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 said 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. Sloan said, “I don’t know if people realize how intimidating that process is.” When Ivy was trying to change majors, she felt like she had “no clue what’s going on here.” 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 and mentor programs, financial support, cultural identity, and spirituality have contributed to degree attainment for American Indian students (Broughton-Pretti, 2016). There are several studies on American Indian student retention and persistence factors and the participants in the study overwhelmingly agreed with these factors.

Persistence factors recognized in this study paralleled past research of Heavy Runner-Rioux et al.'s (2018), however, it is important to note the unique success factors that emerged. While literature suggested mentors and family as success factors, 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. Ivy watched her single mother, who was in an abusive relationship, maintain a household while going to school and studying into the morning hours. She said her mom "studied every night until like three in the morning." Sloan agreed:

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.

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.

Considering the various categories of support in the literature and in this study, the support of other students and cohorts was valued by the participants. Specifically, Sloan and Ivy mentioned how they were able to connect with their cohorts in their advanced degrees. Ivy said that they were "that cheerleader for each other." Participants also mentioned the support of their coworkers and supervisors through their journeys.

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 fear of failure, making the family proud, 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. He said, “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.” 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. Ivy said, “I knew I needed to go to school because without a college education my options were limited.” Whether it was the fear of failure, or wanting future employment opportunities, these participants showcased their grit and resilience to succeed.

Barriers and persistence factors identified through this study supported those already recognized in previous literature. However, in the spirit of narrative inquiry, the stories of the participants offered more detail and context. In-depth personal stories allowed true insight and a better understanding of how the persistence factors helped the participants to overcome the overwhelming number of barriers they faced when completing their degrees. Thus, the benefits of collecting the lived experiences of American Indian students.

Limitations

Using the narrative inquiry methodology, this study yielded rich and descriptive stories. However, due to a global pandemic, the narratives were collected using an online environment called Zoom. Had the interviews been in person, the researcher may have been able to build better rapport with the participant. Perhaps, creating more in-depth and personal narratives. Also, as far as participant selection, the research relied on referrals from friends and colleagues. For

most participants, the researcher had little knowledge of their academic experience. Further, the researcher did not know how much the participant would disclose about their personal academic experience. If the researcher had an unlimited number of possible participants, there may have been a more defined participant selection for the study. Since the researcher was employed at Bemidji State University, several participants had connections to the university and the community. With a greater number of participants, it would be beneficial to diversify the participant pool as well.

Recommendations

Exploring the academic journeys of seven American Indian students with a qualitative lens allowed for organic and personal narratives to be formed. These narratives were from American Indian students at varying points in their educational journeys. The narratives offered an opportunity to learn what factors impacted these students' educational journey and what led to persistence in advanced degree programs. 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 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 past and current research, American Indian students do not feel academically ready for college-level courses (Broughton-Pretti, 2016; Barnhardt, 1994; Demmert, 2001; Keith, 2016). 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, so students have a resource to help with navigating through 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.

A plethora of literature on persistence exists on different populations. However, with this study's findings and recommendations, a better perspective on how to support American Indian students' persistence in higher education is gained. Thus, hopefully yielding better experiences, increased persistence, and better completion and success rates.

Future Research

American Indians are underrepresented in the higher education pipeline. This study attempted to evoke the voices of American Indian students and to understand their perspectives on what barriers discouraged their success, but also what factors contributed to their degree attainment. However, only seven participants were interviewed due to the timeframe of the study. Ideally, expanding this study to glean more personal stories from more participants could reveal additional barriers and persistence factors. Thus, allowing an opportunity to learn more unique narratives of American Indian students.

Also, the selection of the participants could be more intentional. Such as, future research could categorize participants by the completion of degree type. Also, the researcher followed a list of guiding questions to the research questions of the study were addressed. However, the researcher wanted the interviews to be organic and unique to each participant. Future research could limit the interview questions to, "Tell me about your academic journey." Thus, yielding a more personal flow to the narrative. This may allow for the participant to share their story in their own customized way. Overall, and most importantly, future research needs to record more stories from more American Indian students on their academic experience. By expanding this research to more participants, a better understanding and awareness will be gained.

Researcher's Reflection

While the stories of the participants are unique, the barriers American Indian students face are similar to other American Indian students. The seven participants shared their successes and their (un)success. These stories showed just how hard it is for American Indian students to make up less than 1% of the enrollment in colleges. These personal stories gave the researcher a

better insight into how to serve American Indian students that are pursuing graduate school. Since these narratives offered a better perspective into the challenges American Indian students face, this information will be shared with the researcher's university and with other graduate school preparation programs. This study, in turn, will be used to better inform those supporting American Indian students.

While the barriers identified may parallel students from other ethnicities, this study offered insight on how to better support American Indian students through their academic careers. Originally, the researcher wanted to group participants by those who have completed an advanced degree and those who have dropped out. In addition, the demographic information that was collected would have been reviewed to find any correlation with the participants' profile and to whether or not they completed a degree. However, the researcher learned early in the interview process that this study is just a snapshot of the overall journey of degree attainment. Therefore, even if a participant is not currently enrolled in a degree program, it does not mean that the student is done pursuing education. Hence, it would have been preemptive to have created two categories of participants. There is no distinct cut-off or identifier to determine when a participants' educational journey is over.

Overall and most importantly, the researcher learned that the stories from these participants must be shared and celebrated. Most of the participants' academic journeys are still in progress and they need encouragement and support to be successful. These stories are examples of resiliency and show how American Indian students need support to improve degree completion rates. The researcher is grateful for the participants' willingness to open themselves up and share their lived experiences for the purpose of this study.

Conclusions

Chapter 5 provided an overall summary of the study, offered unique barriers and persistence factors, and limitations. Additionally, recommendations on how to support American Indian students, suggestions for future research, and final thoughts of the researcher concluded this chapter. Foremost, this study was a platform to share the lived academic experiences of seven American Indian students. Essentially, this study showed that American Indian students are not just an asterisk and a group that is dismissed in statistics. These students have unique and incredible stories of pursuing their dreams of higher education. With more life stories being shared by American Indian students, 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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APPENDIX A. PERMISSION TO SURVEY BEMIDJI STATE UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS

Title of Proposal: An Insight to the Educational Journeys of American Indian Students in Higher Education

Name of Investigators: Dr. Boyd Bradbury and Kristina Cirks

Abstract: American Indian students have the lowest college retention and graduation rates in the United States, facing a variety of barriers to completing their education. Studies have identified factors impacting the lower persistence of American Indian students; however, the achievement gap is not decreasing. To improve the knowledge of why American Indian students have the lowest percentage of advanced degree completion, an intimate examination of seven American Indian students' educational experiences was completed. This phenomenological qualitative study examined the events that impacted American Indian students' non-persistence and persistence in pursuing advanced degrees. By delving into the personal educational journeys of seven American Indians at varying stages of their educational experience, rich narratives were created. This study helped define the barriers that have discouraged American Indian students from persisting in higher education. In providing personal stories of American Indian student's enrollment in graduate school and the barriers they face, this research detailed American Indian students' journeys through higher education. Factors that impact American Indian students' enrollment and persistence in graduate school were identified.

Dr. Tony Pepper,

I am asking for permission to interview American Indian students that are pursuing higher education on the Bemidji State University campus. My interview will take approximately one hour and will address the following questions. Which factors are impacting American Indian students' enrollment and persistence in graduate school? To answer the overall research question, secondary questions were explored through interviews and the literature review:

- RQ2. Which barriers need to be addressed for American Indian students to succeed?
- RQ3. Which persistence factors relate to American Indian graduate student success?
- RQ4. What impact does family and community support play in the academic persistence of American Indian students?
- RQ5. Does the American Indian culture play a role in a student's decision to enroll and persist?

The signature below indicates that approval has been given to the above-named investigators.

Signature of Institutional Representative

Date

Printed Name of Institutional Representative

Name of School District/Company/Institution

APPENDIX B. CONSENT LETTER

Consent Letter

You are invited to participate in a study of what factors impact American Indian students' decision to enroll and persist in graduate school. I hope to learn what barriers these students face and how some AI students are able to overcome these barriers and earn a terminal degree. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are American Indian and pursued a masters or doctoral degree.

If you decide to participate, I will first email you a demographic survey using Qualtrics. Then, I will ask to meet you at Bemidji State University for an in-person interview that should take close to an hour. Should you prefer to meet in another location, that can also be arranged. Most likely there is no benefit to you completing the study, other than being able to read my dissertation when the study is complete. The hope is that this study will help educators, administrators, staff, and future students about American Indian persistence. There should be no risk to the you in completing this survey and interview.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. Your answers are completely confidential and will be released only as summaries in which no individual's name can be identified. When you return your completed questionnaire, your name will be deleted from the mailing list and never connected to your answers in any way.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relationships with the Minnesota State University Moorhead. Should you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice. Any questions about your rights may be directed to Dr. Lisa I. Karch, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board, at 218-477-2699 or by email at: irb@mnstate.edu.

If you have any questions, please ask me. If you have any additional questions later, contact Kristina.cirks@go.mnstate.edu. I will be happy to answer them.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. **Gender:** _ Female _ Male _ Transgender
2. **Undergraduate Institution:** _____
3. **Mother's Education Level:**
 _ Less than High School Diploma _ High School Diploma _ Associate's Degree
 _ Bachelor's Degree _ Master's Degree _ Ph.D., M.D., or J.D. _ I Don't Know
4. **Father's Education Level:**
 _ Less than High School Diploma _ High School Diploma _ Associate's Degree
 _ Bachelor's Degree _ Master's Degree _ Ph.D., M.D., or J.D. _ I Don't Know
5. **Type of high school that you graduated from:**
 _ Public _ Private _ Charter School
 _ Native Boarding School _ Other _____
6. **Academic rank in high school graduating class:**
 _ Top 5% _ Top 10% _ Top 25%
 _ Upper Half of Class _ Lower Half of Class _ I Don't Know
7. **Type of community where you lived most of your life before college:**
 _ Urban Area _ Suburban Area _ Small Town
 _ Rural Area _ Reservation _ Other _____
8. **CHECK ALL who lived in your house during high school:**
 _ Mother _ Father _ Step-Parent _ Older Sibling(s)
 _ Younger Sibling(s) _ Grandparents _ Aunt/Uncle _ Cousin(s)
 _ Other _____
9. **Number of times you visited home during college:**
 _ Never _ Once _ Twice _ Three Times _ Four or More Times
10. **Distance between home and college during college:**
 _ 2 hours' drive or less _ 3-5 hours' drive _ 1 day's drive
 _ More than a day's drive _ I had to fly between home and college
11. **Knowledge of native language:**
 _ Fluent _ Not Fluent _ Can Understand, But Not Fluent
12. **How important are each of the following to you?**
 Essential=4
 Very Important=3
 Somewhat Important=2
 Not At All Important=1

a. Staying close to home	1	2	3	4
b. Being with family.....	1	2	3	4
c. Community.....	1	2	3	4
d. Serving family.....	1	2	3	4
e. Serving community	1	2	3	4
f. Being involved in tribal events/gatherings	1	2	3	4
g. Being involved in religious/ceremonial events	1	2	3	4
h. Knowing one's cultural history/background	1	2	3	4
i. Being an example/role model for others.....	1	2	3	4
j. Receiving a post-secondary education	1	2	3	4
13. **How would you characterize your socioeconomic background and/or the way you grew up?**
 _____ Poor/low income _____ Working Class
 _____ Middle Class _____ Wealthy/Affluent

14. What was your entering college major? _____
15. What were your long-term educational goals when you entered college?

Establishing connection /familiarity

1. **Tell me about yourself. Feel free to introduce yourself in the way you feel comfortable.**
- Where do you come from? Community?
 - What's your tribal affiliation?
 - Who is your family?

Importance of Identity as an American Indian / Oral histories as legitimate sources of data/theory

2. **Can you tell me how you identify yourself when thinking of what you consider important in your life?**
- What is it that influences what is important to you?
3. **Describe a time in your adolescence when you realized that education was important to you.**
- What role did your family play in your educational experiences?
 - Who do you remember serving as a role model to you in the school setting?
 - How were they influential to your educational pursuits?

*Colonization is endemic to society/Assimilation as part of the educational process/
Sovereignty/Self-Determination*

4. **Tell me about your first-year experience on campus.**
- Why did you choose that particular university/college to attend?
 - How would you describe your transition to campus?
 - Who do you recall interacting with more on campus?
 - How comfortable do you remember feeling on campus?
 - Who did you connect with on campus?
 - How did those experiences affect your expectations of college/campus?
5. **How do you feel the knowledge that you brought from home was valued on campus, either in or outside of the classroom?**
- Did you feel like you were encouraged and able to incorporate your knowledge from home with the knowledge you gained in the classroom?
6. **Can you tell me about a time when you felt like your values/teachings/beliefs weren't represented on campus?**
- How did that make you feel?
 - How did you respond to this experience?
7. **Tell me about your experience with finances/money at college. To what extent did your financial situation impact your experience on campus?**
- How do you feel it affected your ability to focus on your studies?
 - How do you feel it affected your relationship with your family?

8. Tell me about your experience of going home for the first time during your first year in college.

- a. What feelings do you remember having during that visit?
- b. How did you interact with your family?
- c. What kind of messages did you get from your family at that time?
- d. How did you make sense of who you were at home and who you were in college?

Knowledge, Power and Culture through a Native lens/ Importance of acknowledging and understanding the vast, unique, and evolving backgrounds of American Indians

9. Describe the relationship you had with your family (parents, siblings, extended family) while on campus.

- a. How did they feel about the college/campus?

10. What was the source of power/inspiration/motivation that led you to go to college?

- a. How has it changed over time?

Closing Questions

11. Describe the kind of advice you would've liked to have received about college from students similar to you that would have helped you be more successful in college.**12. Did you leave college at any time?**

- a. Would you share your experience surrounding your decision to not return to college?
- b. After all the experiences you had, what was the major factor that played into the decision?
- c. What were additional factors that played into the decision?
- d. What do you think the college/university could've done to help you stay in school?
- f. Have you gone back to school or thought about going back?

13. Is there anything else you would like to add in regard to what you've shared in this interview?

For student who earned a doctoral degree:

1. What were your expectations of your doctoral program?

- a. Probe: Did you have any specific goals? Did you have any concerns about pursuing the doctorate?

2. When did you first become interested in doctoral studies?

- a. Probe: Whom did you talk to about your goal of pursuing/enrolling in a doctoral program? Who gave you feedback?

3. Were their other family members that you feel either encouraged or discouraged your decision to enroll in a doctoral program?

- a. Probe: How were these individuals encouraging or discouraging?
- b. Probe: How did your relationship with those individual impact your decision?
- c. Probe: What qualities of those relationships seem meaningful?

4. Were there individuals who were not family members who were influential in your decision to enroll in your doctoral program? Close family friends, community members, etc.?**5. Were there people in your community (when you were growing up) who pursued graduate education? The doctorate?**

- a. Probe: Describe your relationship with these individuals. Were these individuals influential to your decision to pursue doctoral education?
- b. Probe: What qualities of those relationships seem meaningful?
- c. Probe: If not, why do you think that is? What made you different?

Thank you for your time and participation.

Questions adopted from Natalie Rose Youngbull and Carmen Michele McCallum

APPENDIX D. THEMES

Barrier Themes		
Theme	Category	Text Evidence
Lack of Support	Role Models	Miles: - "I don't really have anybody... in my life that guided me to where I'm at," Had no role models that encourage education.
	Advisors/Mentors	Ivy: "I didn't have that one person to go to on campus that I thought would like help me."
		Rowan: Had no one advised him to go directly into his master's degree.
		Lewis: "I'm on my own to motivate myself. There's no one er checking in on me."
	Financial	Sloan: "I didn't have enough money to live off of which my parents assumed I would."
		Maisy: "Didn't rely on my parents to help me at all with my college."
		Grace: "Almost didn't go to school because of it."
		Ivy: "We struggled, but we make it."
		Lewis: Had to take our first student loan. "That was a big stress."
		Rowan: "There were no scholarships for me to go to college on or Indian Funds." "Money was an issue." Determined where he attended and received a very limited art education. Also, cannot finish MFA because, "money is the issue there."
	Grace: "My account was blocked and I couldn't register for school. So then, 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."	
	Campus	Sloan: "I felt really uncomfortable." "I didn't connect really with anybody."
		Miles: "There really wasn't like that outreach stuff there."
		Grace: "I really didn't connect with them (American Indian Resource Center)."
	Friends	Ivy: "Don't have those lifelong college friends that most people tend to talk about."
Lack of Cultural Competency	Campus	Lewis: "I felt really isolated through a lot of my classes and stuff."
		Grace: "I had red flags before getting there." Had issue with the college accepting her tribal ID as identification.

	Faculty/Students/Staff	Sloan: "I had to explain boarding schools."
		Lewis: "I don't want to go to school with a lot of these people." "Cultural competency from the professors and stuff was frustrating and those were barriers for me." "Feeling misunderstood, like I was not wanted there."
		Grace: "I think we had a little culture clash."
	Racism	Rowan: "I ran into racial things that I was not included and not accepted."
		Miles: "Just being Native American for myself as a little bit of a barrier."
	Diversity	Sloan: "I had never really been in a situation where I felt like the minority." "There's people from all over the world here, but I'm the only Native American student."
		Lewis: Culture shock transitioning from the Tribal College to the University.
Lack of Identity	Imposter Syndrome	Miles: "Wondering if you should even be here if you're smart enough to be there."
		Grace: Felt "total imposter syndrome."
		Ivy "I'm like, I have no clue what's going on here."
	Lack of Belonging	Lewis: "That lack of self, I guess really stood out."
		Lewis: "Being in a Native in a non-Native institution has been difficult."
Personal Issues	Death	Sloan: "Our family was really hurting from that and I had to leave and go home for the funeral and to be with my family." "My stepmom died suddenly from a heart attack."
		Miles: "One of my friends died in a car wreck." "I don't even care you know wasn't even like attempting to even try after that."
	Depression/Anxiety	Sloan: "I happen to be extremely depressed." "I literally couldn't get out of bed most days."
		Lewis: "Throwing the pressures of graduate school and trying to live up to the standards caused a lot of emotional distress." "Dealt with probably more mental health issues than I have ever prior in my life."
		Grace: Test anxiety
	Relationships	Sloan: "I dealt with a relationship that ended badly...basically stalking me and threatening me and I had to go through that process and try and stay focused on my classes." "Yeah, that was pretty rough. I really wanted to just give up."
Navigating College		Sloan: "I don't know if people realize how intimidating that process is."
		Miles: "I'm not the type to ask for help, even though I know I need to ask for help."
		Ivy: "Struggling with like the choice of major." "I have no clue what's going on here."

Time Poverty	Family	Ivy: "I wouldn't go because they were in the evening...and during that time is for me to be with my family." "Finding time to balance you know everything on my plate."
		Rowan: "It was a nuts time in my life."
	Involvement on Campus	Maisy: "I didn't, you know, totally immerse myself into the experience."
		Ivy: "The downside of that was like I didn't get the whole campus experience." "I didn't have free time."
		Lewis: "Resources that I didn't utilize just because I was busy."
Success	Career Opportunities	Lewis: "Dropped out after that just because work became more important to me."
	Afraid to Succeed	Miles: "I'm scared to reach forward, I guess."
Commitments	Children	Sloan: "My daughter was born...and at this point I thought a college education was just not going to happen for me." "Because of the legal process." "Driving to meet her dad on the weekends."
		Maisy: Had first child during undergraduate. "Why am I doing this?"
		Ivy: I ended up getting pregnant and we got married right away and education like higher ed was put on the back burner."
Academic Preparedness	Drop out of High School	Miles: "Pretty much ninth grade was like the last time I really went to class." "I didn't feel prepared, but I was determined." "Being a high school dropout and being deficient in a bunch of areas." "I'm a high school dropout, and for like 10 years I probably didn't write more than my name."
		Lewis: "My entire high school thing was just trying to get by, like the bare minimum to pass."
	Coursework	Maisy: "Super rigorous classes."
		Lewis: "The coursework was difficult." "Had to maintain a 3.5 GPA throughout the course of our graduate school career." "Getting grades has always been difficult." "So just kind of lack of preparedness."
	Not Ready for College	Sloan: In hindsight appreciated the extra year she had.
		Grace: "I didn't want to go right away." "I like really wasn't ready."

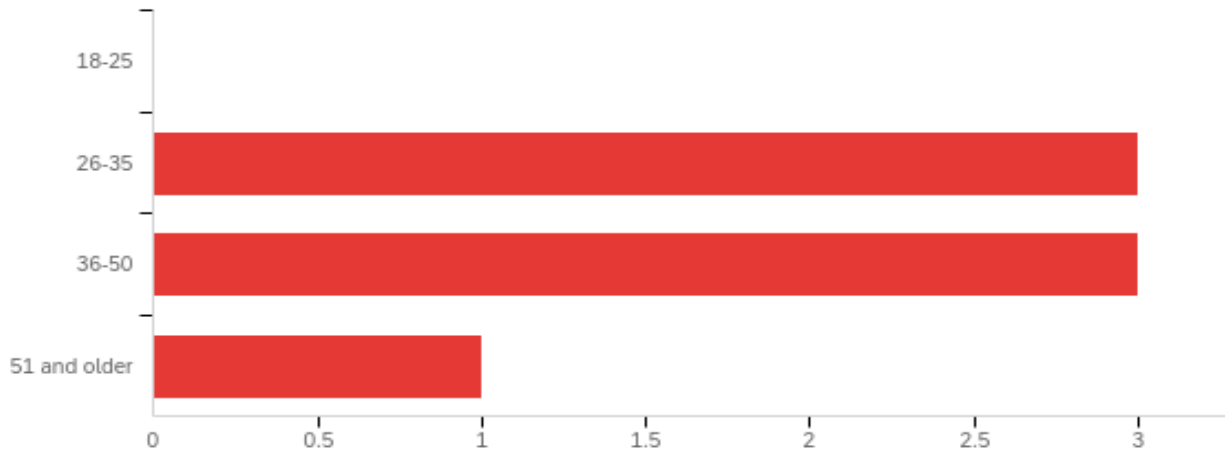
Themes of Persistence		
Theme	Category	Text Evidence
Support	Family	Maisy: "Family wise it was great; they gave me the space to remodel the bedroom to make it like a study center."
		Grace: "They were there when I was crumbling."
		Ivy: "I don't know that I would have been successful if I had not have had my mom in my life at the time."
		Lewis: "My parents are still helping me out financially."
		Rowan: Mom suggested a master's program. They have always encouraged education.
		Sloan: "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." "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."
	Financial	Maisy: "I didn't have to worry about finances, because I was fully funded through tribal grants and scholarships." "I had no worries how I was going to pay for this or pay for that."
		Miles: Maxed out financial aid and credits because he was paid to go to school. Miles: "I am not gonna pay \$20,000 a semester and to not have a degree."
		Rowan: "I had tuition waiver and got so many credits for free."
		Grace: "It bothered me to know that I had debt and nothing to show for it."
Community	Ivy: "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."	
	Grace: "Community and people...that's always been something that's been really important to me."	
Campus Support Services	Sloan: "I ended up volunteering for a fry bread 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." "The support at the American Indian Resource Center."	
	Miles: TRIO Department- Student Support Services/McNair	
	Grace: Accessibility Services, TRIO department- Student Support Services/McNair. "I was involved with the Music Department." Got involved with the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research.	

	Faculty Advisors	Maisy: "I had a good support system there."
		Miles: Faculty encouraged graduate school and returning to teach at university.
		Ivy: "I can help you get back in if you want to."
		Lewis: "My professor kind of planting the seed in my head." Lewis: "I had a lot of different mentors in Native psychology." "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 its just from peoples like willingness to keep me moving along."
		Rowan: "I was really fortunate in that regards and fallen into some really great educators."
		Grace: Band teachers connected her to campus and the music program
	Friends	Sloan: "I was able to connect with my cohort."
		Maisy: "We became pretty good friends."
		Ivy: "Being that cheerleader for each other."
		Rowan: "Not a little brown boy, but I belong to groups."
		Grace: "I felt like I had a pretty good friend group."
	Coworkers	Maisy: "Coworkers were supportive of what I was doing."
		Ivy: "Without him (supervisor) in my life I don't know here I'd be."
Role Models	Family	Sloan: "Did such a great job instilling how important education was." "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."
		Maisy: "So for my grandma to want to go back to school and get her GED really meant a lot to me."
		Ivy: "She studied every night until like three in the morning."
		Rowan: Mom, Dad, Grandparents, and the Lakota Warrior.
		Grace: Cousin who earn bachelor's degree
		Maisy: "Probably my sister because she was the first one of our family to go to college."
	Coach	Rowan: "I had wonderful coaches in high school."
	Faculty/Instructors	Lewis: "I found out Native people out were who, you know, respected in the science community and were doing a lot of good research."
Achievement	Fear of Failure	Lewis: "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." "Visualizing myself being shamed out is like a scary thing." "I started this journey people see me on it and like I can't fail."

	Advancement Opportunities	Maisy: "I was just looking for a career change and I applied for another job...and didn't get it."
		Ivy: "Didn't have any other options besides maybe working at the casino." The lack of opportunity in the area due to poverty and drug addiction.
		Ivy: "I knew I needed to go to school...because without a college education my options were limited."
		Lewis: Did not get a promotion. "I felt like I hit my educational ceiling."
		Rowan: "It was a heck of a motivator." Chance to coach at the college level when finished his degree.
	Degree Completion	Rowan: "There is a level of elitism." "It was a goal that I intended to reach, and I would reach it."
Internal Motivation		Miles: "I like learning, I don't like working."
		Ivy: "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." "Know that his is not where I want to be. And if anybody is going to change it, it's going to be me."
		Lewis: "I was not doing anything to progress to this place where I envisioned myself." Had panic attacks because he was, "not doing anything."
		Rowan: "I like to complete things." "It was just another thing on the road that I was meant to do." "I was talented, I would say I was a better worker."
		Grace: "I just had to do it. I felt like a machine. It's like you do or you don't." "I want to finish; I can do this."
	Making Family Proud	Lewis: "Wanting to do well for my family." "I think is really driven me quite a bit."

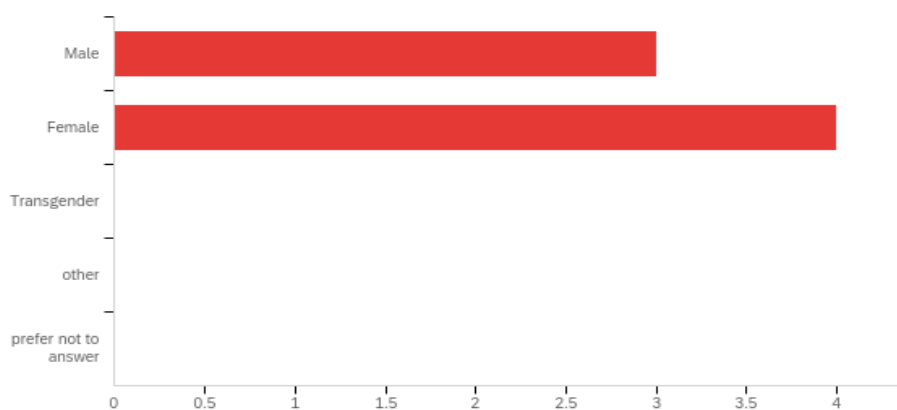
APPENDIX E. DISSERTATION DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Q1: What is your age?



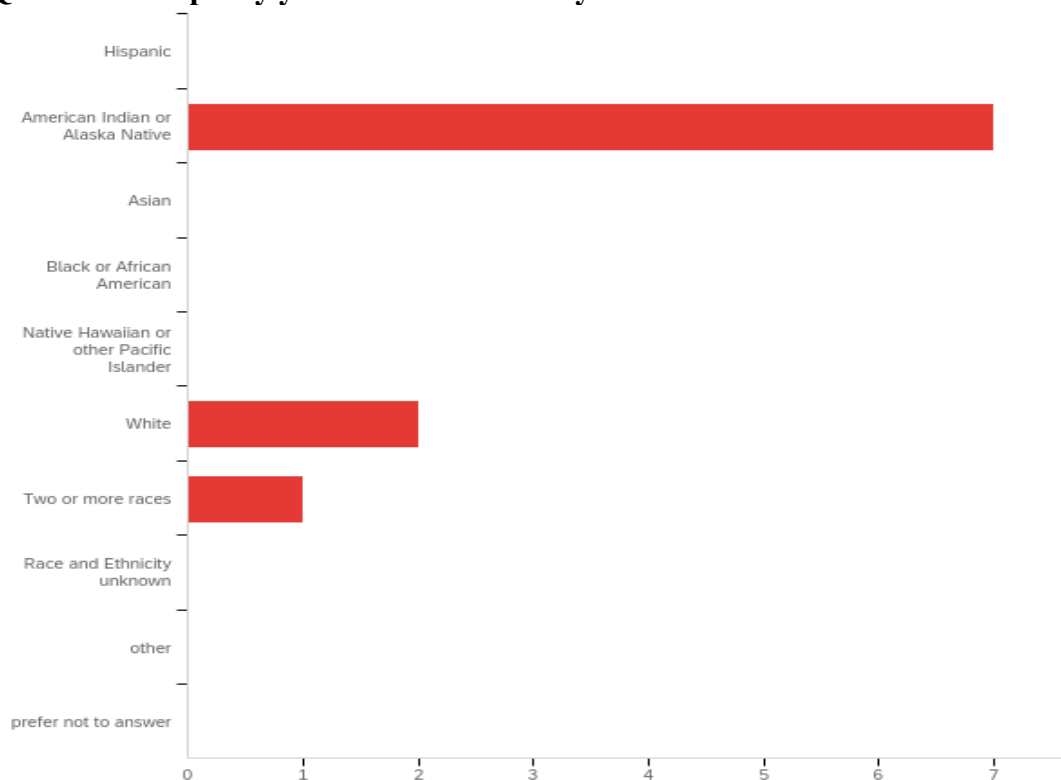
#	Answer	%	Count
1	18-25	0.00%	0
2	26-35	42.86%	3
3	36-50	42.86%	3
4	51 and older	14.29%	1
	Total	100%	7

Q2: What is your gender?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Male	42.86%	3
2	Female	57.14%	4
3	Transgender	0.00%	0
4	Other	0.00%	0
5	Prefer not to answer	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

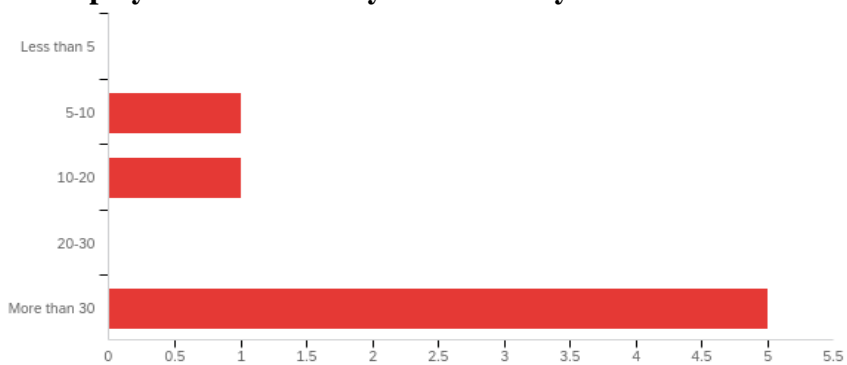
Q3: Please specify your Race or Ethnicity.



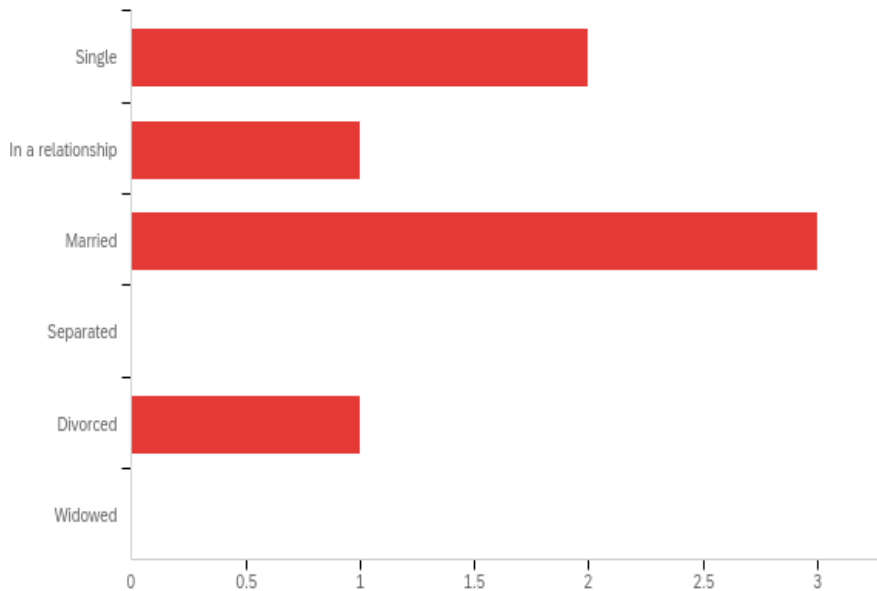
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Hispanic	0.00%	0
2	American Indian or Alaska Native	70.00%	7
3	Asian	0.00%	0

4	Black or African American	0.00%	0
5	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.00%	0
6	White	20.00%	2
7	Two or more races	10.00%	1
8	Race and Ethnicity unknown	0.00%	0
9	other	0.00%	0
10	prefer not to answer	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	10

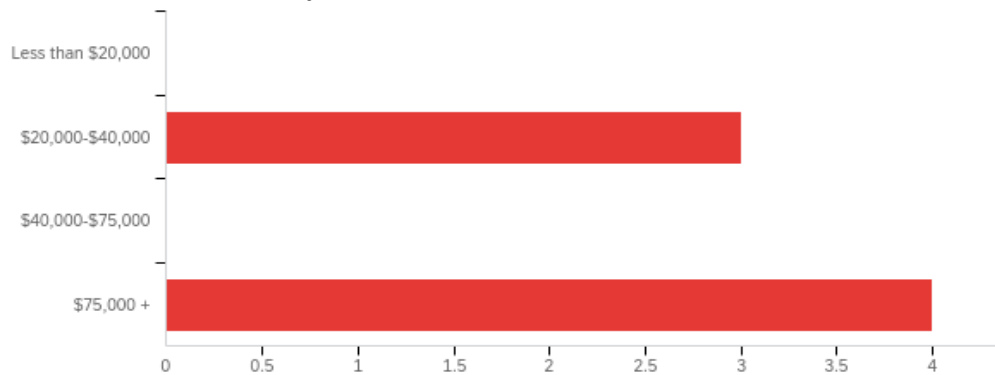
Q4: Employment: How many of hours do you work a week?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Less than 5	0.00%	0
2	5-10	14.29%	1
3	10-20	14.29%	1
4	20-30	0.00%	0
5	More than 30	71.43%	5
	Total	100%	7

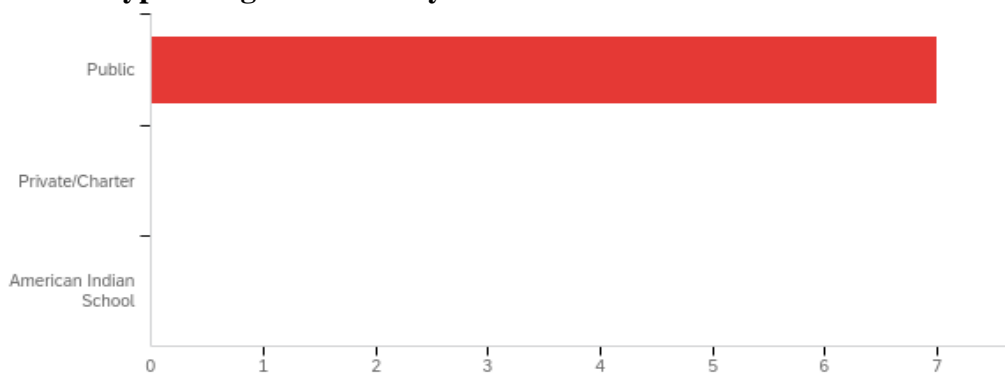
Q5: What is your marital status?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Single	28.57%	2
2	In a relationship	14.29%	1
3	Married	42.86%	3
4	Separated	0.00%	0
5	Divorced	14.29%	1
6	Widowed	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

Q6: Income: What is your annual taxable income?

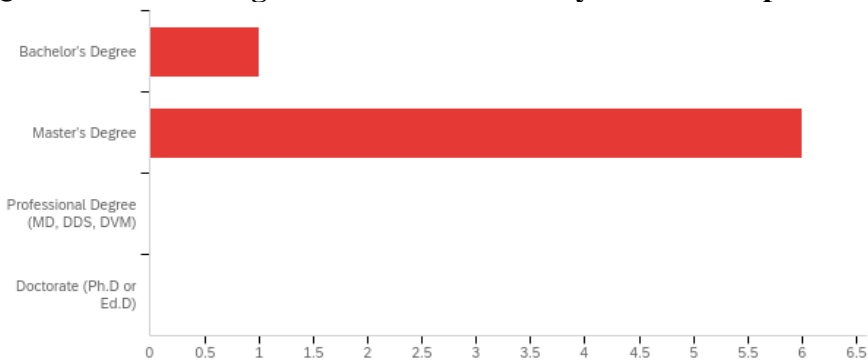
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Less than \$20,000	0.00%	0
2	\$20,000-\$40,000	42.86%	3
3	\$40,000-\$75,000	0.00%	0
4	\$75,000 +	57.14%	4
	Total	100%	7

Q7: What type of high school did you attend?



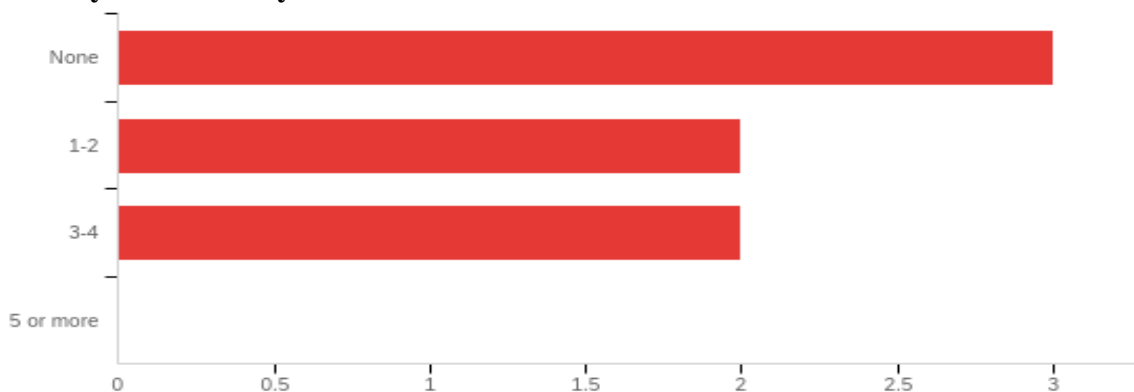
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Public	100.00%	7
2	Private/Charter	0.00%	0
3	American Indian School	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

Q8: What is the highest level of education you have completed?



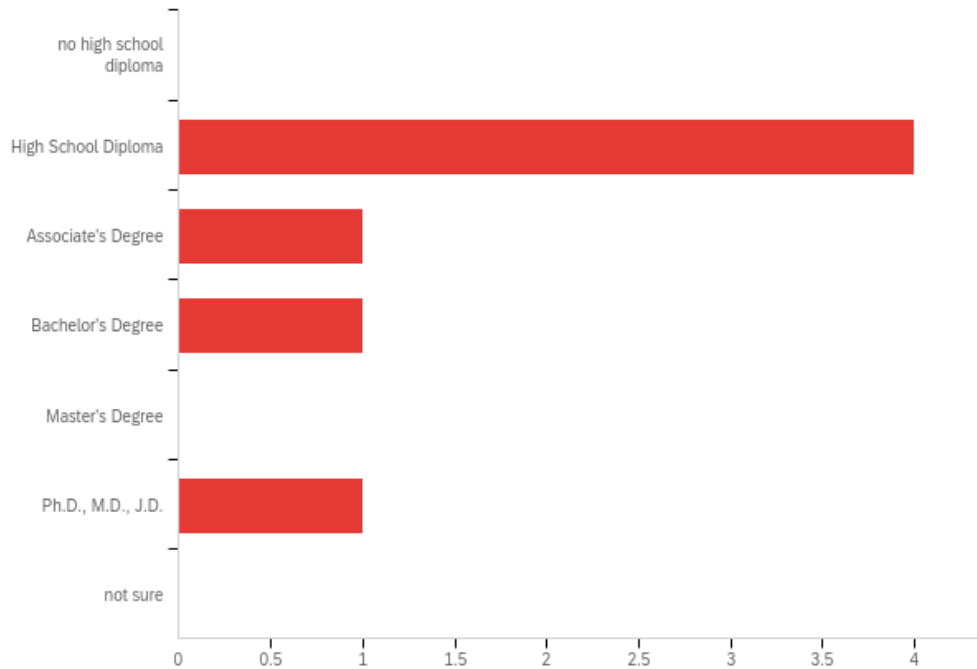
#	Answer	%	Count
4	Bachelor's Degree	14.29%	1
5	Master's Degree	85.71%	6
6	Professional Degree (MD, DDS, DVM)	0.00%	0
7	Doctorate (Ph.D. or Ed.D.)	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

Q9: How many children do you have?



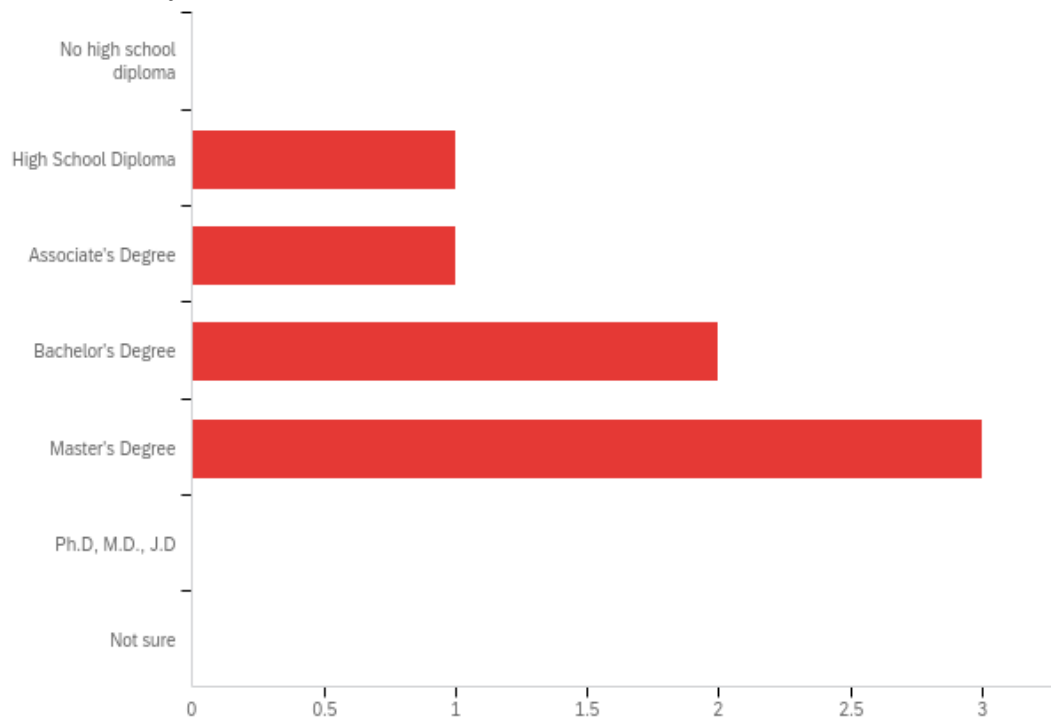
#	Answer	%	Count
1	None	42.86%	3
2	1-2	28.57%	2
3	3-4	28.57%	2
4	5 or more	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

Q10: Primary Father's/Guardian's Education Level

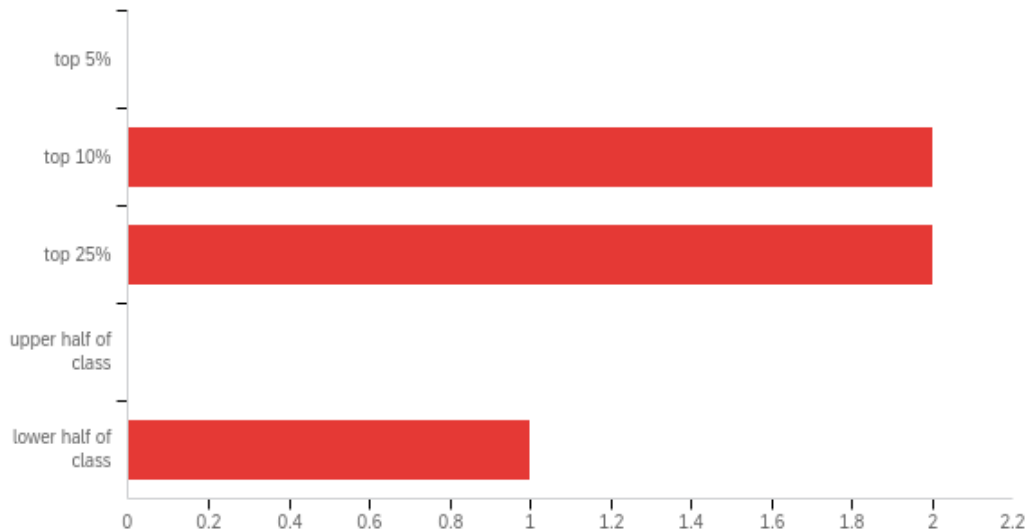


#	Answer	%	Count
1	No high school diploma	0.00%	0
2	High school diploma	57.14%	4
3	Associates degree	14.29%	1
4	Bachelor's degree	14.29%	1
5	Master's degree	0.00%	0
6	Ph.D., M.D., J.D.	14.29%	1
7	Not sure	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

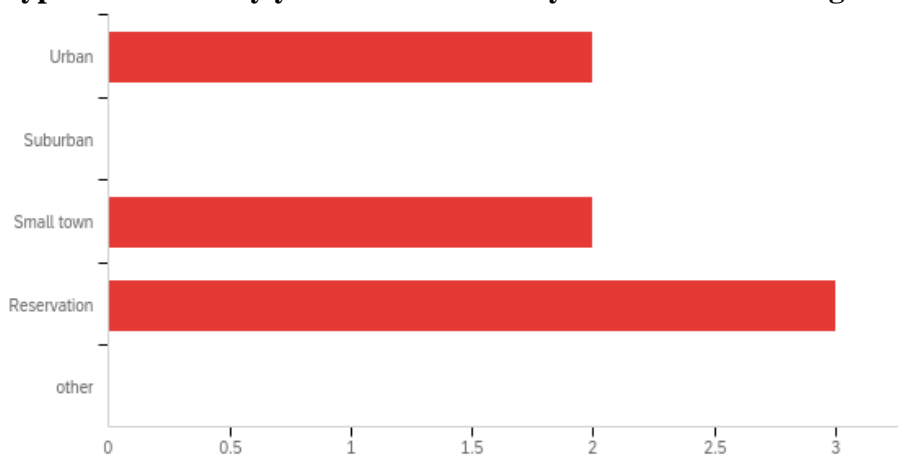
Q11: Primary Mother's/Guardian's Education Level



#	Answer	%	Count
1	No high school diploma	0.00%	0
2	High school diploma	14.29%	1
3	Associate degree	14.29%	1
4	Bachelor's degree	28.57%	2
5	Master's degree	42.86%	3
6	Ph.D., M.D., J.D	0.00%	0
7	Not sure	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

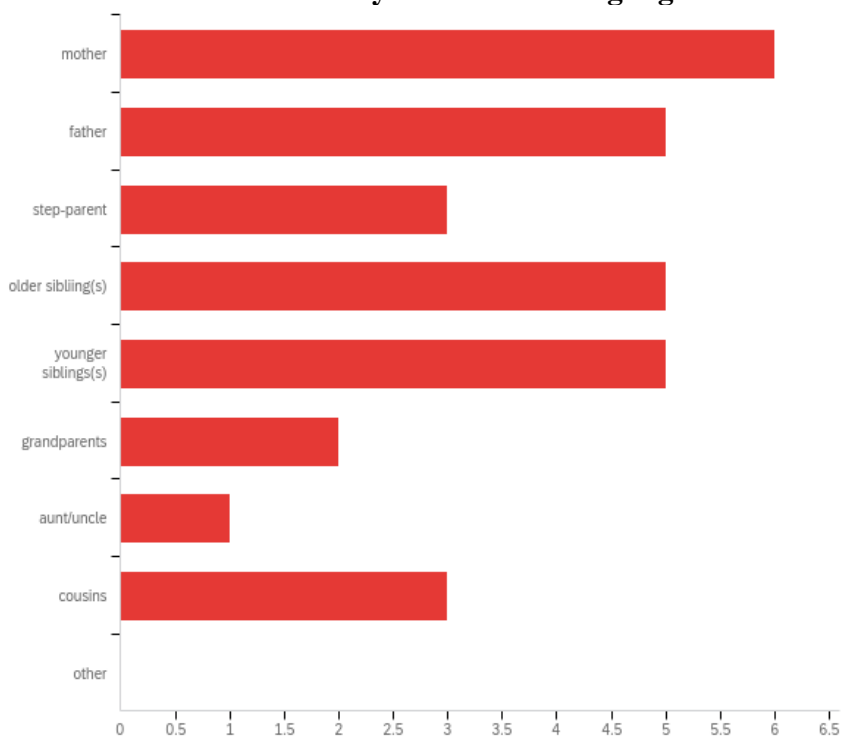
Q12: Academic Rank in High School

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Top 5%	0.00%	0
2	Top 10%	40.00%	2
3	Top 25%	40.00%	2
4	Upper half of class	0.00%	0
5	Lower half of class	20.00%	1
	Total	100%	5

Q13: Type of community you lived in most of your life before college.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Urban	28.57%	2
2	Suburban	0.00%	0
3	Small town	28.57%	2
4	Reservation	42.86%	3
5	Other	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

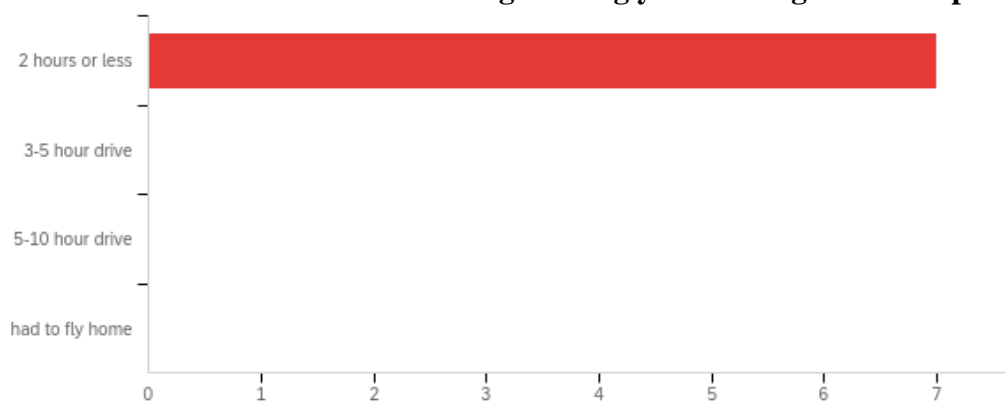
Q14: Check all who lived in your house during high school.



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Mother	20.00%	6
2	Father	16.67%	5
3	Stepparent	10.00%	3

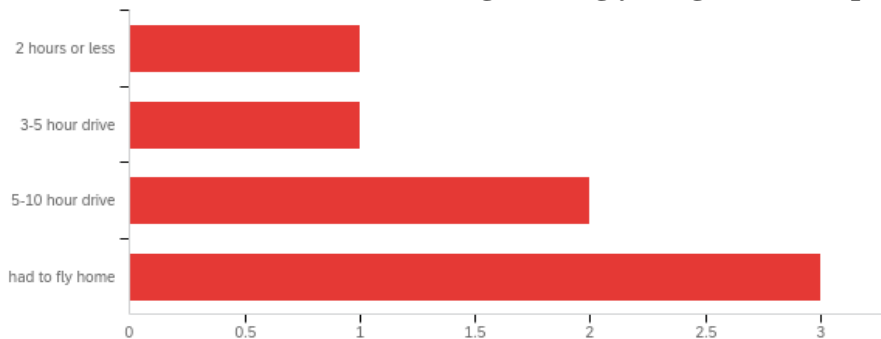
4	Older sibling(s)	16.67%	5
5	Younger siblings(s)	16.67%	5
6	Grandparents	6.67%	2
7	Aunt/uncle	3.33%	1
8	Cousins	10.00%	3
9	Other	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	30

Q15: Distance between home and college during your undergraduate experience?



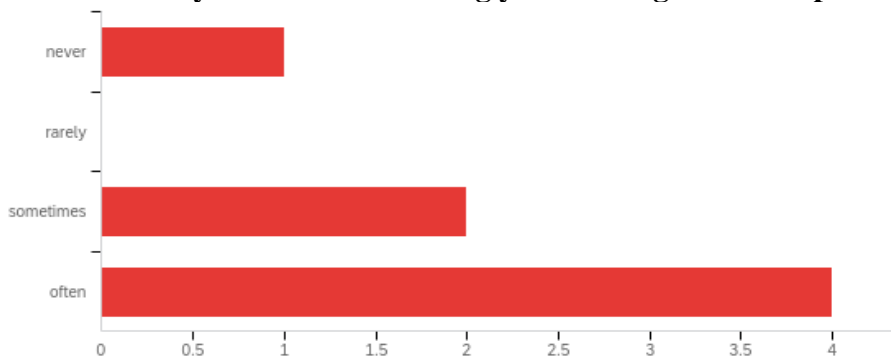
#	Answer	%	Count
1	2 hours or less	100.00%	7
2	3-5-hour drive	0.00%	0
3	5-10-hour drive	0.00%	0
4	Had to fly home	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

Q16: Distance between home and college during your graduate experience.



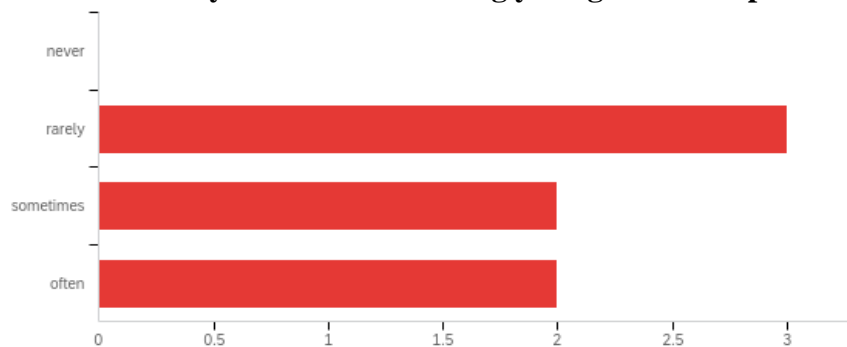
#	Answer	%	Count
1	2 hours or less	14.29%	1
2	3-5-hour drive	14.29%	1
3	5-10-hour drive	28.57%	2
4	Had to fly home	42.86%	3
	Total	100%	7

Q17: How often did you visit home during your undergraduate experience?



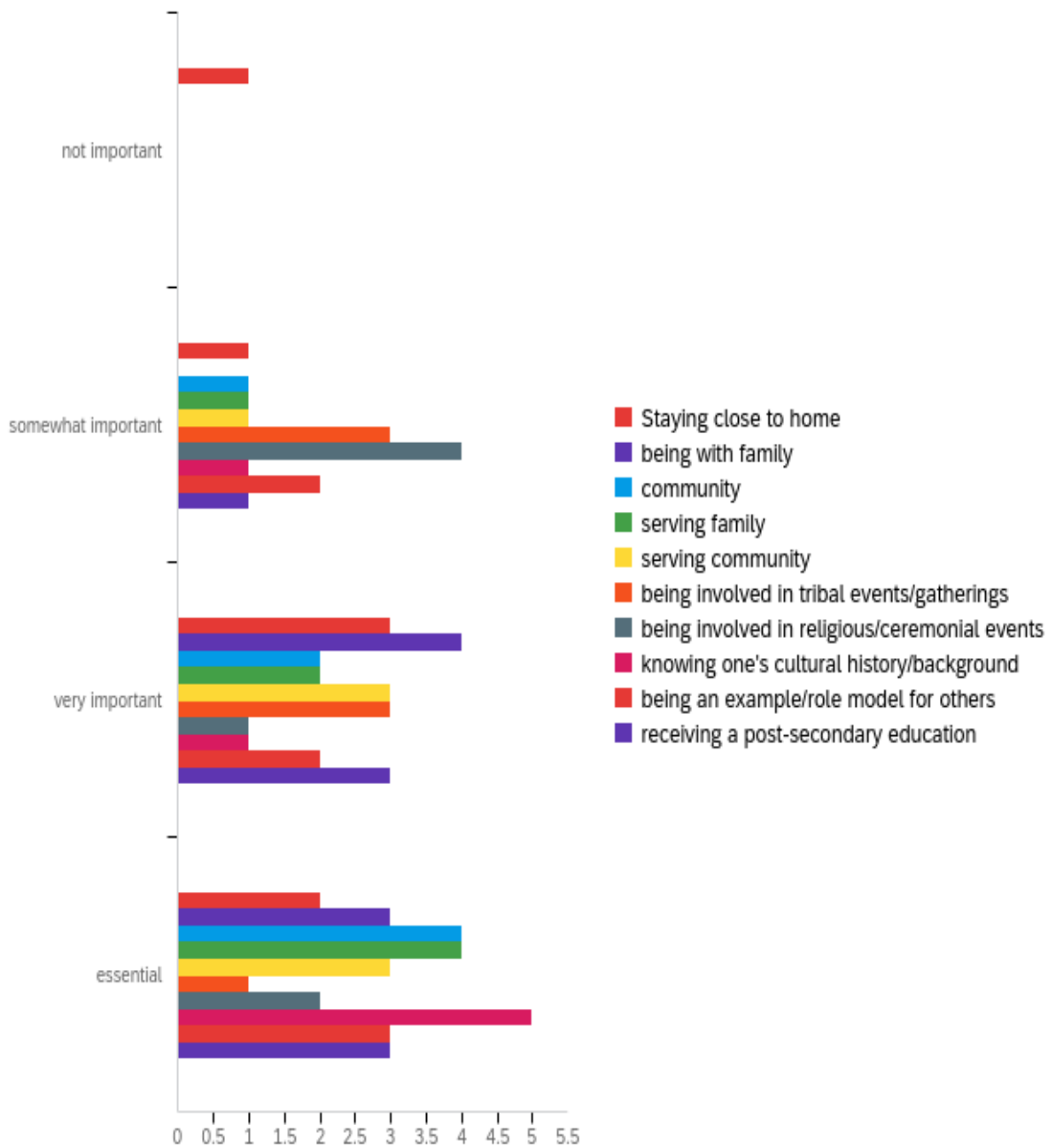
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Never	14.29%	1
2	Rarely	0.00%	0
3	Sometimes	28.57%	2
4	Often	57.14%	4
	Total	100%	7

Q18: How often did you visit home during your graduate experience?



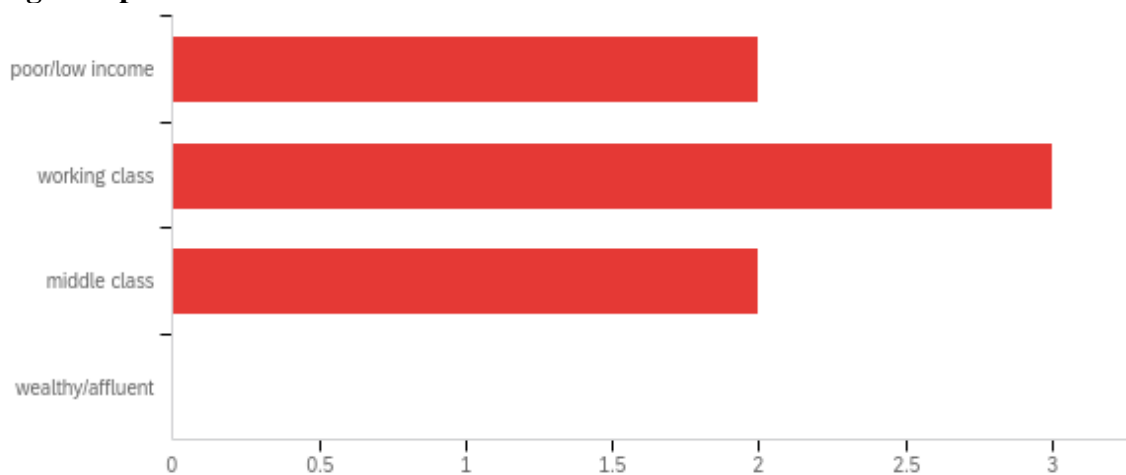
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Never	0.00%	0
2	Rarely	42.86%	3
6	Sometimes	28.57%	2
7	Often	28.57%	2
	Total	100%	7

Q19: How important are each of the following to you? - 4- essential, 3- very important, 2-somewhat important, 1 not at all important



#	Question	Not Important		Somewhat Important		Very Important		Essential		Total
1	Staying close to home	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	42.86%	3	28.57%	2	7
2	Being with family	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	57.14%	4	42.86%	3	7
3	Community	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	28.57%	2	57.14%	4	7
4	Serving family	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	28.57%	2	57.14%	4	7
5	Serving community	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	42.86%	3	42.86%	3	7
6	Being involved in tribal events/gatherings	0.00%	0	42.86%	3	42.86%	3	14.29%	1	7
7	Being involved in religious/ceremonial events	0.00%	0	57.14%	4	14.29%	1	28.57%	2	7
8	Knowing one's cultural history/background	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	71.43%	5	7
9	Being an example/role model for others	0.00%	0	28.57%	2	28.57%	2	42.86%	3	7
10	Receiving a post-secondary education	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	42.86%	3	42.86%	3	7

Q20: How would you characterize your socioeconomic background and/or the way you grew up?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	poor/low income	28.57%	2
2	working class	42.86%	3
3	middle class	28.57%	2
4	wealthy/affluent	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

Q21: What were your long-term goals when you entered college?

What were your long-term goals when you entered college?

To finish my degree and to get a better understanding of what I wanted to do for a career.

To wrestle and play football, to get a degree.

To play music.

To work in the medical field.

Being able to provide for my family while working normal business hours.

To have a career that allows financial independence.

Just Graduate.