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Educational Attainment: American Indians/Alaska Natives Phenomenological Study of a Northeast Nebraska Indian Reservation

Stacy Brasch

EDUCATOINAL ATTAINMENT: AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF A NORTHEAST NEBRASKA INDIAN RESERVATION
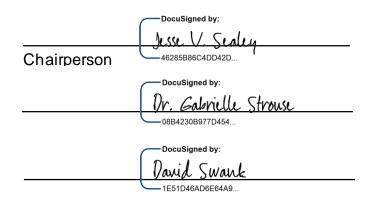
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Chairperson

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the perspectives of American Indian/Alaska Native students who had all graduated from the same Northeast-Nebraska public school located on a federally recognized Indian reservation and completed at least a four-year degree. To that end, the central research question addressed by this dissertation is, "Why were these individuals successful in their educational attainment pursuits when so many of their contemporaries were not?" The two sub-research questions were (1) What supports do American Indian/Alaska Native graduates perceive as having helped to ensure their resilience and successful educational attainment? And (2) What challenges do American Indian/Alaska Native students identify as impeding others from reaching educational attainment?

Data from three focus groups (n = 9 participants) were analyzed using a semi-structured interview model to answer these questions. Thematic analysis was used to identify 5 themes.

Participants found their primary pre-college support non-academic, but their primary challenges seemed to stem from academic preparedness; Participants found the role of human support invaluable to educational attainment; Participants cited their ability to self-advocate, internal motivation, and ability to hold themselves personally accountable as primary support to overcome challenges and persevere through their educational attainment journey; When discussing family members, classmates, and peers who did not complete their college degree, participants attributed challenges to things beyond their control; Participants who attended tribal colleges or universities cited the cultural connection present at TCUs as a strong support in combating culture shock as well as other challenges. Recommendations and best practices for educators in both secondary and post-secondary institutions on this reservation include: implementing career, college, and study skills guidance early in high school. Recommendations for future research were introduced. These findings may facilitate the connection between known challenges and available support.

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Introduction

American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) college completion rates have historically been significantly lower than those of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Keith et al., 2016). American Indian/Alaska Natives represent 1% of undergraduate student enrollment at degree-granting institutions. Of that 1%, 57.2% of all first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students who started school in 2002 obtained their degrees in six years or less (Winters, 2012, p. 27). Low retention, high dropout rates, and low achievement levels continued to be a challenge for American Indian/Alaska Native students (Oaks & Maday, 2009; Tierney et al., 2007). The available data for American Indian/Alaska Native secondary and post-secondary enrollment support Keith et al.'s. (2016) assertion. However, from 1976 to 2006, the number of American Indian/Alaska Native students enrolling in colleges and universities doubled (Keith et al., 2016). This indicates a shift from the previous decades' historically low enrollment and completion cycles. What is fueling this phenomenon? The purpose of this research is to isolate the supports that are being offered to address each challenge and determine what is going right. Secondary and post-secondary institutions could use that information to help create best practices when educating American Indian/Alaska Native students. Through examining external supports, internal motivation, and the role of the tribal college movement, I will explore both challenges and supports based on my participants' first-hand experience.

Problem of Practice

In a small town located on an Indian reservation in Northeast Nebraska, the start of a new school year is a time of excitement and apprehension. Hundreds of pre-K to high school students are excited to meet their new teachers and see their friends for the first time in three months. Simultaneously, a smaller yet equally important student group begins or returns to college. In the past twenty-five years, this small town, located on a federally recognized Indian reservation in Northeast Nebraska, has seen a marked increase in students attending, persevering, and completing college programs. In other words, they have reached *educational attainment* (Cueso, 2007, p. 3). Observational data seems to support that Native American students from this community are enrolling and completing two- and four-year college degree programs in local tribal colleges and colleges and universities both in and out of the state at rates higher than the national average noted above. Students are better prepared for college completion and show a capacity for perseverance, which was not evident ten to twenty years ago. While graduation percentages of American Indian students are lower than the national average, the trend seems to be that they are improving. According to the Post-Secondary National Policy Institute (2019), 41% of Native American bachelor's degree-seeking students graduated within six years, compared to nearly 63% of white students (p. 1). Ultimately, this study intends to help educational practitioners and institutions (at all levels) understand not only what went wrong (challenges) but, more importantly, what went right (supports). Understanding the upward trend in college enrollment and completion for American Indians is essential so that secondary and post-secondary institutions can recreate those environments to keep the trend upward.

Purpose of the Study

This study focused on the factors that American Indian/Alaska Native students believe led to their college perseverance, completion, and ultimate educational attainment. It explored their perceptions of practices that ensured their resilience and successful educational attainment. For tribal nations to continue to grow and prosper, the younger generations must be educated and prepared to lead into the future. This qualitative study aimed to identify the factors that graduates perceive that led to an increased rate of college degree completion among American Indian/Native Americans located on a single northeast Nebraska/mid-western reservation. Ultimately, the purpose was to isolate what graduates think went right (supports) versus only pointing out what went wrong (challenges). These factors are pivotal in preparing American Indians/Alaska Natives for college and retaining and seeing them through to full educational attainment. As tribal entities become a more significant part of the country's business and economic landscape, the need for better-educated employees is paramount. A highly educated tribal population leads to more economic advancement, empowerment, cultural preservation, social and political engagements, and better overall health and well-being. This trend advances not only tribal communities but also surrounding non-tribal communities.

Research Questions

1. What supports do American Indian/Alaska Native graduates perceive as having helped to ensure their resilience and successful educational attainment?

2. What challenges do American Indian/Alaska Native students identify as impeding others from reaching educational attainment?

Definition of Terms

1. American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN): American Indian or Alaska Native "refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment" (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, 2012, p. 2).

2. Educational Attainment: "Students persist in the completion and attainment of their degree, program, or educational goal" (Cueso, 2007, p. 3). For example, 2-year college students persist in completing the associate degree, and 4-year college students persist in completing the baccalaureate degree.

3. Self-efficacy: "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1982, p. 122).

4. Self-determination: "an intrinsic, self-sustaining form of motivation that is influenced by internal stimuli" (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

5. Resiliency: "the ability to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances" (Steele, 2020, p. 308).

6. Transfer Shock: "decrease in grade point average (GPA) that students commonly experience when transitioning to a new institution" (Hills, 1965).

7. First Generation Status: "Students who do not have a parent or guardian with a bachelor's degree" (Brookover, 2021, p. 42).

8. Support: "factors in the environment that helped a student to successfully meet challenges" (Sanford, 1967).

9. Challenges: "situations in which a student did not have the knowledge, skills, or attitude to cope" (Sanford, 1967).

Review of Literature

In 2006, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students accounted for 1% of students in colleges and universities. Forty-four percent of American Indians/Alaska Natives aged 25 or older had attended some college or completed an undergraduate or graduate degree (Rice, 2008). According to the fall 2010 enrollment data, 8.7% (30,000) of American Indians/Alaska Natives were enrolled in one of 36 tribal colleges or universities (Keith et al., 2016, p. 698). More recently du Bray et al. (2019) reported that the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in the fall of 2010 through spring of 2016 was highest for Asian students (74 percent), followed by White students (64 percent), students of two or more races (60 percent), Hispanic students (54 percent), Pacific Islander students (51 percent), Black students (40 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (39 percent). This data makes clear that American Indian students are not entering or completing college at the same rate as other racial ethnicities.

Contextual Framework

To understand the factors driving the increase in American Indians'/Alaska Natives' educational attainment, it was important to understand the recent trends and the forces that drive American Indians/Alaska Natives to either complete a college degree program or drop out. I did a thorough search of databases such as ProQuest, EBSCOhost, ERIC, and Google Scholar, as well as first-hand observations and attendance at national symposiums, provided a variety of sources. Search terms such as "trends in American Indian college completion, "barriers to college completion for American Indians," and "resilience or retention for American Indian college completion" allowed for a broader scope of sequence to approaching the issue. Every attempt to locate recent information was made to limit the search dates to 2017 and sooner. However, much

of the trend data was extrapolated from sources before 2017. Searching these terms culminated

in a reasonably robust foundation of peer-reviewed journal articles that allowed me to analyze

the components that create challenges and support for American Indian/Alaska Native students

as they journey toward educational attainment.

American Indian/Alaskan Native students have a significantly lower college graduation

rate than that of other ethnic groups in the United States (Keith et al., 2016, p. 698). American

Indian/Alaska Natives represent 1% of undergraduate student enrollment at degree-granting

institutions. Of that 1%, 57.2% of all first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students who started

school in 2002 obtained their degrees in six years or less (Winters, 2012, p. 27). Low retention,

high dropout rates, and low achievement levels continued to be a challenge for American

Indian/Alaska Native students (Oaks & Maday, 2009; Tierney et al., 2007). According to Cai

(2020), between 2010 and 2018, the college enrollment rate for American Indians/Alaska Native

students decreased by 33 percent (from 179,000 to 120,000 students), and one-tenth of American

Indians/Alaska Native students did not complete K-12 education. The school dropout rate is the

highest in the nation. This data is consistent with the national trend that Scholl (2006) identified.

American Indian students completed their undergraduate degree at lower rates than their peers

(Scholl, 2006), and they were more likely than Caucasian students to begin their college

education at a community college (Tierney et al., 2007). Students of diverse ethnic and racial

backgrounds (except Asian students) were over-represented among low-income populations, and

as research suggested, they performed at lower levels than students from families with higher

incomes (Bass & Harrington, 2014). Chelberg and Bosman (2020) note, "Inequities in college

attendance between AIs [American Indian] and their White counterparts continues to persist

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despite significant attempts to enroll, retain, and assist American Indians/Alaska Native students in degree completion" (p. 1).

Furthermore, among students of color attempting to complete college, American Indian/Alaska Native students have been reported to be among the least successful. The academic struggles of American Indian/ Alaska Native students are well documented, as is their struggle to transition into college life and persist and thrive on campus (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). The Native American/Alaska Native populations comprise approximately 2% of the entire United States population (Winters, 2012, p. 27). While the number of tribal nations may appear significant at first, American Indians/Alaska Natives continue to be a marginalized, minority population. Statistics also show a gap in higher education enrollment and educational attainment for American Indian/Alaska Native students (Winters, 2012). Even though gains are being made, American Indians/Alaska Natives continue to lag behind other students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in educational attainment. As previously reported by Cai (2020), between 2010 and 2018, the college enrollment rate for American Indian/Alaska Native students decreased by 33 percent (from 179,000 to 120,000 students), and one-tenth of American Indian/Alaska Native students did not complete K-12 education. College dropout rates for American Indians/Alaska Natives are higher, and their graduation rates are lower than their non-native peers. The underrepresentation of American Indian/Alaska Native students is further intensified by attrition rates that are higher than any other racial/ethnic group (Bass & Harrington, 2014; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Chellberg & Bosman, 2020).

Theoretical Framework: Sanford's Theory of Challenge and Support

Sanford's Theory of Challenge and Support (1967) emphasizes the importance of balancing the level of challenge and support in educational settings to promote student growth and development. Sanford (1967) noted that for optimal growth, a student must have sufficient *support* (factors in the environment that help a student to successfully meet challenges) to navigate the *challenges* (situations in which a student does not have the knowledge, skills, or attitude to cope) they encounter and, more importantly, they must be able to tolerate the stress of the challenge itself. In addition to challenge and support, Sanford also discusses the role of *readiness*, which is the internal process associated with maturity or beneficial environmental factors (Sanford, 1967). This theory has been widely applied in various educational contexts, including higher education and K-12 education.

In higher education, students who perceived a high level of challenge and support in their academic environment had greater academic achievement and engagement (Yeager et al., 2014). Similarly, this theory has been applied to online learning environments; students who experienced a balance of challenge and support were likelier to persist, succeed in their courses, and subsequently achieve educational attainment (Smith et al., 2015).

Sanford's Theory of Challenge and Support has also been applied to K-12 education. Brown et al. (2016) found that teachers who provided a balance of challenge and support in their instruction were more effective in promoting student learning and engagement.

Overall, Sanford's Theory of Challenge and Support provides a valuable framework for educators to promote student growth and development by balancing the level of challenge and support in educational settings. By providing appropriate levels of challenge and support, educators can help students achieve their full potential and educational attainment.

Sanford's theory will guide this study by providing balance. Sanford (1967) suggests that those who can balance every challenge with support will be more academically successful. Questions asked of participants in this study will focus on what they perceive as their challenges and supports. Since previous research, cited above, paints a somewhat bleak picture of American Indian/Alaska Native students' educational attainment, this framework would provide a roadmap for success.

Factors Supporting Educational Attainment

Family and Community Support

Family support, institutional support and commitment, academic preparation, an active presence in home communities, and cultural ceremonies are "crucial elements that impact these students' ability and desire to persist in college" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 59). Striplin's (1999) early research regarding first-generation students and family support validates the suggestion that lack of family support could negatively influence student success. Roska and Kinsley (2018) certainly support Striplin's earlier research, stating, "Family emotional support is beneficial for academic outcomes as it promotes psychological well-being and facilitates greater student engagement" (p. 415). Some families discourage higher education as it takes students away from their families and community (Bass & Harrington, 2014, p. 3). Lack of family support creates a critical barrier for students who do not have it. American Indian students report family and community support as critical to their academic success (Bass & Harrington, 2014, p. 2). American Indian/Alaska Native students share that "wisdom impressed upon them by the experiences they have shared with their elders and mentors has provided a source of internal encouragement" (Bass & Harrington, 2014, p. 2). Izzo (2016) states, "sense of connectedness and

trustworthiness felt from recommendations of family members about where to go to college"

(p.68). The influence and support of family is critical when deciding to attend college.

Family is the most frequently mentioned factor affecting persistence. However, it is

important to note that in American Indian/Alaska Native communities, the family has a much

broader definition. Parents and siblings back home, single parents raising several children, and

extended family all constituted "family." In American Indian/Alaska Native families, especially

those from Indian reservations, it is common for both the nuclear and extended families to live

under the same roof. In many cases, American Indian/Alaska Native college students end up as

caretakers of their parents and grandparents (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). The second most

frequently cited persistence factor is giving back to their tribal communities. (Guillory &

Wolverton, 2008). Tinto's *Theory of Student Departure* (1975, 1987) suggests that students enter

college with personal, family, and academic skills and specific intentions regarding personal

goals and college attendance. They adjust these intentions continuously through interactions with

individuals, structures, and college or university community members. More positive interactions

lead to more assimilation within the university system and result in student retention. In contrast,

negative interactions or experiences reduce integration, increase alienation, promote marginality,

and eventually lead to student withdrawal. Thus, student departure before degree completion

occurs when there is "incongruence between the student's pre-entry attributes, intentions, goals,

and commitments and the campus environment" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 60).

When considering successful college completion for American Indian/Alaska Native

students, some themes emerge including (a) family support, (b) structured social support, (c)

faculty/staff warmth, (d) exposure to college and vocations, (e) developing independence and

assertiveness, (f) reliance on spiritual resources, (g) dealing with racism, (h) nonlinear path, and

(i) paradoxical cultural pressure (Jackson et al., 2003, p. 548). Because the participants remained strongly connected to their communities and families, they resembled nontraditional students even when they were college-aged and living in a residence hall. In other words, they tended to resemble nontraditional students because most participants in the study could not name friends from college who did not share a common background. These students received the most emotional and social support from their families and native communities (Winters, 2012, p. 29). A theory has been constructed regarding the development of American Indian/Alaska Native students from reservations in terms of moving from a majority population to a minority population. American Indian/Alaska Native students see value in education and are motivated to enroll in college as a means of "escaping employment disparities and, ultimately, to improve life for their families and communities."

Furthermore, a connection to their community and culture positively impacts students' success in post-secondary (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020, p. 1). Izzo (2018) studied AI students attending a tribal college. He noted that thirty-five percent of the participants who shared that they almost always attend Native ceremonies also plan to return to their tribal community. Sixty-five percent of the participants who attend Native ceremonies are not planning to return to their tribal community (Izzo, 2018). He also noted that twenty-eight percent of the participants who seldom and sometimes speak their Native language are first-generation college students, whereas the percentage of non-first-generation college students who speak their Native language sometimes was 33%, seldom (23%), and almost never (21%)" (Izzo,2018, p. 71).

Students who derive from traditional American Indian/Alaska Native families or grew up with strong cultural teachings more than likely adhere to a philosophy of collectivism. Collectivistic societies emphasize family values and focus on what is good for the group above

the individual's interest. Students who see pursuing higher education as a way to help or bring pride to their family or community would be much more motivated to succeed than those who do not hold those collectivist beliefs (Golightly, 2006).

The Family Education Model

The Family Education Model (FEM) helps the family-support movement and focuses on empowerment. Empowerment is an "intentional, dynamic, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, caring, and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over their resources" (Heavy Runner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 31). Empowerment describes transforming from individual and collective powerlessness to personal, political, and cultural power. Empowerment practices include: "(a) the centrality of the concept "the personal is political"; (b) analysis of the interconnections among consciousness, context, and the context of experience; (c) a "strengths" orientation applied to individuals, groups, and cultures; (d) diversity as a source of strength; (e) creation of choices and opportunities; (f) collectivism/ partnership/collaboration supported by interactional and analytical skills; and (g) an experience-based, reflexive learning process" (Heavy Runner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 31). They found "(a) many students and their families need the college to act as their liaison with existing social and health services during times of crisis; (b) tribal colleges must seek to enlist, develop, and structure the ability of family members to support student efforts; and (c) tribal colleges must engage family members in the life of the college community by enlisting them as partners and involving them in cultural and social activities. These assumptions have "created an environment that honors and includes the extended family and nurtures appropriate partnerships" (Heavy Runner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 3).

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Tribal College Movement

One reason American Indian/Alaska Native students are seeing more successful college completion is the emergence of the tribal college movement. HeavyRunner & DeCelles(2002) note, "American Indian students who had attended a tribal college before transferring to a four-year institution were four times more likely to complete a four-year degree than those who entered a mainstream institution as freshmen." Evidence presented in the FEM suggests that the tendency for "tribal colleges to act more like extended family provides Indian students with the type of support system that effectively prepares them for and indoctrinates them into the college culture" (p. 35). Tribal colleges contribute in various means to support tribal communities, academia, and student success, such as contributing to building indigenous knowledge systems, keeping college affordable for low-income students, fostering economic development and workforce training, hiring more diverse faculty than predominantly white institutions, and producing research on American Indian issues from an AI/AN perspective (Izzo, 2018, p. 26). The designers of tribal colleges purposefully, if not consciously, attended to these facets as they integrated the culture of the American Indian/Alaska Native students into the educational design and purpose of the college. This is accomplished by working with elders on new initiatives, developing new relationships between Indians and non-Indians, expanding strategic partnerships between Indian and non-Indian organizations, and creating a curriculum that meets academic standards and includes rich Indigenous content that reflects curricular content and approaches to learning and student support considered essential to sustaining a successful learning environment for American Indian/Alaska Native students (DeLong et al., 2016).

TCUs offer facilities that show their dedication to the Native community. For example, they offer "personal and career counseling, mentoring, tutoring, wellness programs, childcare,

lending of laptop[s], and transportation and housing assistance" (Bryan, 2019, p. 52). TCUs provide Native American students with faculty and staff mentorship, which is vital in transitioning to a mainstream four-year institution. These individuals are often called "follow-through" mentors because if their mentee is interested in transferring to a mainstream four-year institution, they aid in this process and maintain contact after the transfer (Bryan, 2019, p. 53). TCUs also recognize the need for culturally relevant material. They integrate tribal philosophy and practices into their courses, including American Indian/Alaska Native values, tribal languages, and tribal history (Bryan, 2019, p. 53). One way TCUs empower students is by requiring faculty to use the Family Education Model in their courses (Bryan, 2019, p. 53). Furthermore, TCUs help American Indian/Alaska Native students adjust to the academic environment of post-secondary education before adjusting to the social environment of a mainstream four-year institution (Bryan, 2019, p. 53).

Self-efficacy, Self-determination, and Resiliency

Bandura (1982) defines self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 122). A student's sense of self-efficacy is critical in determining educational achievement—a higher level of self-efficacy generally correlates with the student setting higher goals, demonstrating a willingness to attempt complex tasks more often, and achieving greater academic success than a lower sense of self-efficacy (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). It has been noted that mentoring impacts self-efficacy, "helping students better understand the role of value, self-efficacy, and environmental factors underlying their potential and likelihood for student success. This understanding can provide students with the information necessary to increase persistence for degree completion" (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020, p. 3).

It is also important to note that not all cultures view high academic achievement as highly as the white Euro-centered values of the current dominant American culture. Golightly (2006) studied Navajo culture and noted that among the Navajo population, academic performance has a significant relationship with self-efficacy (p. 82); he also found a clear relationship between academic hardiness and modeling, as well as a relationship between academic self-efficacy and verbal persuasion (Golightly, 2006). Academic self-efficacy has been shown to correlate with academic achievement and post-secondary persistence in American Indian/Alaska Natives. While researchers understand that reported levels of academic self-efficacy are related to low achievement and academic persistence, integrating the four sources of efficacy information needs to be improved in the current literature. Two components of academic self-efficacy (past success-GPA and verbal persuasion) have previously established measures to assess the type and amount of efficacy information individuals receive in these areas. There are no established measures for the other two sources of efficacy information (Golightly, 2006, p. 85).

Research has found that future value (sense of purpose) and self-efficacy (sense of competence) are more salient than other motivational factors. Interestingly, affiliation is the least relevant motivational construct. Competition was also less prominent than a motivating factor (Izzo, 2018). Recent studies on individual student resilience are somewhat more complicated to find. Some generalizations can be made from studies done regarding resiliency theory. Resilience theorists have suggested a "multitude of factors that enhance resilience, but the breadth and variety of studies on the subject have led to a somewhat dispersed and fragmented understanding of what is critical for building resilience and how an understanding of these factors can be applied" (Steele, 2020, p. 310). At the core of resilience theory is the idea that an "individual absorbs disruption while preserving core identity and purpose without being

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fundamentally altered by it" (Steele, 2020, p. 309). Historically, American tribal nations have responded to existential threats and retained their unique purposes and identities as peoples, communities, and governments (Steele, 2020, p. 309). The same resilience that historically sustained tribal nations allows American Indian/Alaska Natives to persevere through adversity in various environments.

Motivation

Motivation plays a significant role in the successful completion of any endeavor. Early research in psychology focused on two types of behavioral explanations: the basic biological needs connected to survival and extrinsic rewards or punishments. Both types of behavior imply the need to achieve a specific outcome, which motivates behavior (Izzo, 2018, p. 7). Ford (1992) described motivation as having three psychological functions: activating behavior – what gets students involved; directing behavior – why one chooses a certain action; and regulating the persistence of behavior – why students persist toward goals (Izzo, 2018, p. 7). This begs the question: What best motivates American Indians to complete their college program? Many factors serve as motivational forces: personal beliefs, cognitive abilities and beliefs, environment, support from family and friends, and behaviors such as social interactions, as well as verbal and motor responses (Izzo, 2018, pp. 7-8). Social cognitive theories emphasize beliefs, cognition, behavior, and environmental factors that impact achievement. Ten key motivational constructs are represented in the Inventory of School Motivation: self-determination, performance/competition, social goals, interest, praise, self-efficacy, mastery, future value, affiliation, and leadership (Izzo, 2018, pp. 12-16). Of particular interest are self-determination and self-efficacy.

Additionally, causal attributions such as self-efficacy, learned helplessness, goals, and self-worth can make or break a student's success. When all motivational forces align, the result is self-determination. Self-determination assumes the psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competencies are basic human needs and create the foundation of intrinsic motivation (Izzo, 2018, p. 8). Another prominent motivation theory in education psychology is the achievement goal theory. Achievement goal theory proposes that mastery and performance are two underlying purposes or reasons related to engagement in achievement-related activities by an individual (Izzo, 2018, p. 10).

Positive Role Models and Mentors

There is some encouraging data regarding using positive role models and mentors at the post-secondary level. Early support provides encouragement and a sense of belief in themselves, which is critical to student success. Chelberg and Bosman (2020) recommended that post-secondary institutions "proactively establish positive relationships with mentors or peer mentors early in the student's college experience to increase the likelihood of persistence and retention" (p. 10). Students indicated that having a mentor they could turn to for support increased their confidence in communicating with peers and instructors (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). As a result, participants noted the benefits of mentoring as (a) an enriched learning experience, (b) providing another person to turn to for support and push them to finish, (c) giving them access to someone who helped them deal with stress; and (d) bringing them into contact with someone who made them feel cared for" (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020, p. 10). AI/AN students have greater persistence in post-secondary institutions if they have more positive connections with faculty members in their program (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). As a result, mentoring increases minority student enrollment, academic achievement, and retention (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020).

Mentoring is highly beneficial for all students but can particularly help "nontraditional and underrepresented students overcome the barriers discussed in the previous section by helping them better understand the role of value, self-efficacy, and environmental factors underlying their potential and likelihood for student success" (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020, p. 2). Research on undergraduate mentoring suggests that marginal progress has been made concerning definitions, theories, and methods. The field would undoubtedly benefit from more research identifying specific program components, assessing social validity, and employing more rigorous research designs. Many of these programs tend to focus on informal meetings with a peer mentor, near-peer mentor (e.g., an older student mentoring a younger student), or academic staff person, or they tend to be coupled with research opportunities with a focus more on research mentoring and less on navigational mentoring (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). Bass and Harrington (2014) postulate that school culture that "promotes connections among students, between students and teachers, and between students and their materials developed resiliency" (p. 3). In essence, positive mentoring and role modeling counterbalance all the other negative factors that would lead students to not complete their degree programs.

Institutional Support

Institutions' perceptions toward students, their abilities, and motivation play a significant role in the success or lack thereof of American Indian/Alaska Native students. When institutions attribute student attrition to a lack of individual commitment or ability, these institutions historically "fail to recognize the disconnect between the institutional values and student/family values; hence, the real reasons for high attrition rates among disadvantaged students are never addressed" (Heavy Runner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 33). The motivation and priority it takes to achieve high academic rigor may be a more individualistic, European-

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American concept. Understanding this issue might illuminate potential explanations for the differences in academic self-efficacy and academic hardiness in their relationships with verbal persuasion and modeling between American Indians/Alaska Natives and students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Golightly, 2006). Bondi (2012) noted, "Students in predominantly white institutions are informed, directed, and supported by the institutions in which they are enrolled; unfortunately, these institutions have been cited as part of the problem of perpetuating oppression" (p. 398). Institutional support is also essential. Although students must make their own choices and navigate their own experiences on campus, campus advisors could be helpful in the transition by offering advice and direction to students (Bass & Harrington, 2014). Institutional faculty and staff should be provided with professional development as a means for enhancing their cultural knowledge of the student body (Bass & Harrington, 2014). Considering the educational environments of American Indian students may boost persistence for transfer students (Bass & Harrington, 2014, p. 39). Encouraging students to participate in campus activities and events may positively affect their college persistence (Bass & Harrington). Tinto (2012) posited that the classroom was vital because it was a place where skills were taught, support was offered, and learning was assessed. The classroom was also a place where social change could occur and where students could make friends and important social connections. Through the process of negotiating, students actively changed their behavior to become more successful, as well as to make necessary connections. For example, some students preferred sitting in the same place in class because it made the class feel smaller and familiarity helped them build relationships in the classroom" (Bass & Harrington, 2014, p. 7).

Factors Challenging Educational Attainment

Racial Relations

Attempts to explore why American Indian/Alaska Native students exhibit unequal academic outcomes and report negative experiences in college have identified that American Indian/Alaska Native students' knowledge, history, culture, and backgrounds are not acknowledged or valued in many educational settings. The values of the dominant White, middle-class culture often run counter to the values of American Indian/Alaska Native students and create a severe barrier to college success and completion (Thai-Huy et al., 2019). Nguyen and Nguyen (2019) and Conrad and Gasman (2015) found that individuality is developed through encouraging students to perceive higher education as a personal and independent journey to identify and cultivate their passions in life.

Considering student perspective, particularly that of American Indian/Alaska Natives, is one way that institutions can address racial concerns on campus. Johnston (2014) noted, "Student affairs programs and courses on racial issues should not only focus on teaching race as a social construction" (p. 240) but should also consider the possibility that students may hold various perceptions of race and have a more "fluid level of racial thinking" (p. 240) Thus, educators and institutions should provide multiple opportunities to diversify all students' tool kits of racial conceptions.

Research shows how "institutions have demonstrated whiteness as property" (Bondi, 2012, p. 409). It is likened to any other asset that might create an advantage. Furthermore, studies point out that to work towards equity, individuals and institutions need to discuss the significant impact of perceived white privilege in student policies and practices (Bondi, 2012, p. 409). Bondi (2012) points to three factors that may be affecting race relations and policy in post-

secondary institutions: (a) examples demonstrating whiteness as property in a contemporary student affairs preparation program, (b) ways to conceptualize how whiteness has been protected in education, and (c) examples of institutions demonstrating whiteness as property. Faculty and students in student affairs preparation programs must become aware of whiteness as property and work to interrupt its impact on the educational experience. Post-secondary institutions must exhibit "awareness of whiteness and rework curriculum, pedagogy, policies, and practices to fracture educational hegemony of whiteness" (Bondi, 2012, p. 397). Cabrera (2014) also pointed out that related to the theme of racial joking in ostensibly "white spaces," in which participants argued that "racial minorities tend to see racism where none exists" (p. 8). Those participating in racial joking "attempted to provide rationalization: "they heard and told racist jokes frequently; the jokes were framed as not racist; and the jokes were told only among white people because the participants viewed minorities as overly sensitive" (Cabrera, 2014, p. 2). There is a need to "disrupt the normality of whiteness" for higher education to truly address the component of multicultural higher education (Cabrera, 2014, p. 3).

Many may believe that America has reached a "post-racial" era because of the election of the nation's first African-American president. The researchers who studied joking on college campuses found these students were far from post-racial (Cabrera, 2014). The Analysis of the data in Cabrera's study highlighted the emergent themes: "the prevalence of racial joking, but framed as nonracist; telling racial jokes in the absence of racial minorities; and the rationalization of these practices by claiming that minorities are racially too sensitive" (Cabrera, 2014, p. 7). Analysis from this same study also noted that, "oppressive practices are fused into the very framework of the background and are made invisible by their commonplace" (Cabrera, 2014, p. 6). Therefore, when a person makes a racist/sexist/homophobic comment, "the background of

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white supremacy/patriarchy/heterosexism makes the speech intelligible" (Cabrera, 2014, p. 3). Cabrera (2014) recommends that student affairs practitioners need to develop strategies to help students understand three fundamental issues: (a) racism is still prevalent in contemporary society; (b) intent does not matter in racism (i.e., one does not have to intend to be racist); and (c) white men who allow racist practices to occur in their presence are also culpable. Personal barriers for AI students include interpersonal challenges (e.g., feelings of inferiority and isolation), challenges obtaining necessary resources at the institutional level (e.g., financial aid information), and overt displays of racism and discrimination on campus (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020).

First Generation Status (FGS)

Many American Indian/Alaska Native students are categorized as first-generation students (FGS). In other words, they are the first generation in their immediate family to attend or complete a college degree. Most college admissions boards define a first generation as students who do not have a parent or guardian with a bachelor's degree (Brookover, 2021, p. 42). Historically, the trend dictates that non-FGS entered college at a higher rate than FGS. A 2001 NCES study found that 82 percent of non-first-generation students enrolled in college immediately after finishing high school compared to 54 percent of FGS, and only 36 percent of students whose parents had less than a high school diploma enrolled in college (Choy, 2001, p. 4). First-generation students are disproportionately overrepresented among most disadvantaged groups and more likely to delay college entry, need remedial coursework, or drop out of college. They also report lower educational expectations than their peers as early as 8th grade and often begin college less academically prepared than other non-FGS. Studies seem to indicate that there were more females as FGS than males. This could be a reflection of the economic benefits of a

college education within the family (Izzo, 2018, p. 70). Recent studies seem to uphold earlier findings. Brookover et al. (2021) found that "only 27% of FGS graduate with a bachelor's degree in four years, and they are less likely than their counterparts to complete their degree, even when controlling for family income, academic preparation, and ethnicity" (p. 42).

Financial Barriers

American Indian students also report financial concerns as a major barrier to being able to attend and stay in college. Research shows that American Indian/Alaska Native students are more likely to work while in college and live off campus than their non-native counterparts, negatively affecting college academic and social integration outcomes (Balemian & Feng, 2013). This is a direct result of financial concerns. The difficulties American Indian/Alaska Native students face in school may contribute to the high poverty levels in this group (Golightly, 2006). Institutions that design programs with the college transfer progression in mind may offer a solution to financial difficulties. For example, in South Dakota, a 2+2+2 system has been implemented between high schools, tribal colleges, and South Dakota State University to ensure smooth transitions of American Indian students between educational institutions (Bass & Harrington, 2014). This system typically involves completing a two-year degree at a community or technical college, then transferring to a four-year institution to complete the next two years for a bachelor's degree, and finally pursuing an additional two years for a master's degree at a graduate school.

Transfer Shock

Institutional transition models that place value on support systems are likely to encourage American Indian/Alaska Native students to transfer from two-year community or tribal colleges

to four-year institutions. Because large numbers of American Indian/Alaska Native students are first-generation students, they often get little support from families. Since their parents had little or no post-secondary experience, these students "lack encouragement and informed advice, the challenges they faced in the pursuit of the bachelor's degree are more than those faced by the average student" (Bass & Harrington, 2014, p. 38). The college transfer process has become an important means of achieving a bachelor's degree for many students, particularly for low-middle-income students (Bass & Harrington, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2020). In the United States, nearly half of all first-year college students begin at community colleges with the intent to transfer (Bass & Harrington, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2020). Twenty years ago, Ishitani (2008) studied reasons American Indian/Alaska Native students cited for leaving college. He called these reasons types of departures. He recognized a trend that is continuing today. He used a study sample of three cohorts, from 1999 to 2001, who transferred to a four-year comprehensive public university in the fall semester. The 7,631 sample included American Indian/Alaska Native and other transfer students. The enrollment status of these students was followed for six semesters, and the different types of student departure, such as dropout, transfer, academic dismissal, and stop-out (when students leave and then return and resume their enrollment after a certain period of non-enrollment), were categorized. Summaries of these different types of departure by student type (native and other) were calculated. The persistence behaviors of American Indian/Alaska Native and other transfer students were then tested to see if significant differences in departure behavior existed across different student types. Ishitani (2008) found that sophomore and junior transfer students were retained at higher rates than American Indian/Alaska Native and other freshman transfer students. The lack of retention for American Indian/Alaska Native students could be attributed *to transfer shock*. Bass and Harrington (2014) define transfer shock as the

stress exhibited from departing or moving from the majority culture of the reservation to being a minority at a predominately white institution (PWI).

Pre-College Preparation

Pre-college preparation is among the most significant indicators of a successful college experience. However, it is also noted that American Indian/Alaska Native students demonstrate lower levels of academic achievement and persistence due to a variety of personal, environmental, and cultural factors (Golightly, 2006; Lopez, 2018). It is well noted that one of the most important indicators of post-secondary success is pre-post-secondary preparation (Lopez, 2018). This is true for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Unfortunately, it has also been noted that "'reservation K-12 schools are not as good a quality as we enjoy at other places,' one state representative stated" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 72; Lopez, 2018). Many students enter college without the proper academic preparation, suggested Roksa and Calcagno (2008), and only 20 % made successful institutional transitions (p. 15). Even though some colleges make better efforts than others to help students who enter under-prepared, students often do not perform as well as their peers who were adequately prepared for college-level work (Bass & Harrington, 2014; Lopez, 2018). American Indian/Alaska Native students are less likely to take algebra, considered the *gateway to* advanced math courses in high school and associated with 4-year college enrollment (Balemian, & Feng, 2013). Bass and Harrington (2014) argue that the most significant predictor of persistence to achieve a college degree is the degree of the academic rigor of their high school curriculum. Brookover et al. (2021) support earlier findings saying that barriers to FGS college enrollment and persistence include a lack of social capital, cultural capital, and economic capital; this includes limited parental knowledge about the college

application process, confusion about which courses to take to prepare for post-secondary education, and financial strains regarding paying for higher education (p. 43).

Summary

Educational attainment poses a formidable challenge for students of American Indian/Alaska Native heritage. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that with each challenge that emerges, a corresponding network of support mechanisms is poised to mitigate the impact of these challenges. Robust pillars of support, such as familial guidance, the presence of positive role models, institutional backing, and intrinsic determinants like motivation, self-efficacy, and self-determination, collectively wield a palpable influence on the trajectories of college completion within the Native American community. The evidence gleaned from the comprehensive literature review accentuates that adept support structures serve to alleviate the adversities inherent to the educational journey, consequently amplifying the likelihood of realizing academic milestones. The forthcoming research begins a qualitative exploration centered on graduates hailing from a publicly-funded institution situated within a Northeast Nebraska reservation. This inquiry is underpinned by the intention to discern the dynamic interplay of challenges and support systems that converge to shape their triumphant trajectory toward academic accomplishment. Through a rigorous and nuanced analysis of their experiential narratives, this research attempts to offer invaluable insights into the intricate tapestry of influences that steered their educational journey. By its qualitative tenor, this study attempts to furnish a contextualized understanding of the multifaceted dynamics underpinning educational attainment within this specific cultural milieu.

ARTIFACT 2

Methods

Study Design

I conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with college graduates from a public high school in a small Northeast Nebraska reservation community. These interviews were done in three small focus groups. Gill et al. (2008) suggest that the focus group be used when "To clarify, extend, qualify or challenge data collected through other methods" (292). I hoped to extend and qualify Sanford's (1967) work by examining how challenges were met with support, and the result was educational attainment (a college degree). Another, more practical, reason for choosing three smaller focus groups rather than one larger group was each participant's time, availability, and personal schedule.

Respondents were drawn from my relationship as a colleague or former teacher. The University of South Dakota Office of Research (IRB) approved the study protocol, and all respondents provided informed written consent. In total, nine participated in the study. The study followed a phenomenological approach. Connely (2010) describes phenomenological study as a philosophical movement that focuses on a phenomenon from the point of view of the person experiencing it (also known as lived experience). A phenomenologist "examines the qualities or essence of an experience through interviews, stories, or observations with people who are having the experience of the researcher's interest" (p. 127). Phenomenological researchers are more interested in what it was like to *live* the experience and not just their reaction to it. The study does have some potential limitations. One is the influence of group dynamics, and another is social desirability bias. Social desirability bias occurs when the study participants respond in

ways they believe are desirable. In other words, they say what they think the researcher wants to hear to appear socially acceptable (Grimm, 2010).

Participants and Other Data Sources

Participants in the study graduated from a public school on a Northeast Nebraska Indian reservation within the past twenty years and attended and received degrees from four-year institutions. Inclusion criteria include graduating from the only high school on this reservation, having received an associate's or bachelor's degree, and being a member of a federally recognized tribe. The decision was made to conduct interviews in three separate focus groups with approximately five participants in each group, but of the fifteen invited initially, only nine participated.

Researcher-Participant Relationship

I have taught high school on the reservation in this study for thirty years. I have served as senior class sponsor, play director, and speech coach to many of the participants in the study. I have kept track of previous high school graduates through family members, social media, and contact at school and community events. In a small community, it is often common knowledge when a student returns from college mid-semester or does not complete their degree. Through years of working with this particular community, I have developed a rapport with anyone who has graduated from this high school and, in many cases, their children and grandchildren.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves self-awareness and a critical examination of how the researcher's perspectives and experiences may influence the interpretation of the phenomena under study. I consciously acknowledged and set aside my preconceived ideas, beliefs, and values about the

subject matter or phenomenon I am studying to avoid inherent biases. Knowing that I had a close personal relationship with some of my subjects and preparing to remain neutral throughout the interview and data and analysis stages allowed me to keep myself in check. My goal was to temporarily suspend my personal biases and assumptions to approach the research with a more open and neutral perspective. I engaged in continual self-checks and self-reflection through journals to help document the process (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). After each focus group, I journaled about the session, tracking my perceptions, biases, and overall thoughts on how the session went (Appendix 7). I noted themes and updated questions as needed before the next focus group. This allowed me to understand the phenomenon better as it was experienced by the participants in the study. The potential for bias did exist. The use of Microsoft Teams to conduct the focus groups allowed for an appropriate amount of separation and provided a sense of cover so that participants could openly express themselves. Furthermore, I was clear in the moments leading up to the interview question that I had no expectations other than complete honesty. I was clear that nothing said would offend or interfere with the study.

Researcher Prior Experience with the Phenomena

I have worked in the community for nearly thirty years. I taught the parents of my current students in my first years in the district. I have attended weddings, baby showers, graduation parties, and funerals. I have seen my students at their highest and lowest points, and they have seen me at mine. Not only have I been allowed to build relationships within the classroom, but I have also been blessed with the opportunity to build them through coaching extracurricular activities.

Additionally, I have taught at the local community college as an adjunct faculty member for nearly 23 years. I have unique insight into both secondary and post-secondary education in

the community. I have experienced firsthand both the challenges and supports that are present. I have witnessed failure and success. Within the first two years of my tenure, I had a student who was a fairly troubled young man. He was bright, but his grades did not always reflect that. He was assigned to me one-on-one to make up his 10th-grade English credits. He journaled daily, and I would respond to him to keep him writing. He decided that I was "OK for a white woman." Fast forward two years, and the young man graduates. He stopped into my classroom on his last day and gifted me a medicine pouch. He told me that he would only have graduated with my help. He applied and was accepted into a state college in the town where I lived. He came over for dinner a couple of times. When I asked him how it was going, he replied, "I have never been around so many white people." He dropped out at the end of the first semester.

Participant Recruitment

Participation recruitment began in-house using purposive/snowball sampling. Many professionals on staff are alumni who have earned bachelor's degrees. They are faculty members, on staff in the business/human resources department, or working with our school through tribal entities such as truancy or law enforcement. I began recruiting in the spring of 2023 at our year-end celebration. I spoke to two members of our staff (one in human relations and the other is our school attendance liaison). I was able to secure five potential recruits in this manner. That group helped me generate a list of potential recruits. I continued to ask potential candidates for suggestions on whom I might include in the study until I began receiving the same responses. I narrowed it down to fifteen participants. Gill et al. (2008) suggest that the optimal group size is six to eight, but this could be done with as few as three or as many as fourteen. Other potential names did arise, but they had graduated more than fifteen years ago. Anyone graduating before 2008 did not qualify for the study. The result was a relatively homogenous sample, but that was

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to be expected due to the nature and purpose of the phenomenological study. Each potential

recruit was contacted via email (Appendix 1), in which the purpose of the study was shared.

They were informed that I had noticed a shift in the past decade that was inconsistent with

previous decades concerning educational attainment among our alumni. I shared with them that

the study's overall purpose was to determine *what went right* for the participants. All were asked

if they would willingly participate in a 60-90 minute focus group interview. Data was gathered

from January 28-30, 2024. After each focus group, participants were sent a thank-you email

reminding (Appendix 2).

Data Collection

Three separate focus groups were held to accommodate various participant schedules. Of

the original fifteen participants invited, nine attended. This is a small community, so all

participants were known to each other. I began our meeting with a disclaimer, which, in

summary, asked them to be honest and share only what they were comfortable sharing. I also

asked them to keep all things mentioned in our meetings confidential. All interviews were

conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams to allow for recording. Respondents met in small

focus groups. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes on average. The focus sessions were recorded for

accuracy and transcribed, and the themes that emerged were member-checked by participants for

accuracy (Appendix 8). The interview guide was written for a phenomenological study on

college graduates' perceptions regarding factors affecting their educational attainment (Appendix

3). Analyses of specific topics unrelated to educational attainment will be presented elsewhere.

No names were used on the transcribed version of the meeting. The following specific

questions/topics were asked. It is important to note that the numbered questions were asked first.

In many cases, the sub-questions indicated with lowercase letters were covered in participants' initial responses. They were only posed if they were not mentioned in the original response.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were read for familiarity (Goffman, 1989). I took an old school approach. I printed the transcripts and began reading through them for commonalities. For example, I looked for words and phrases such as rigor, too easy, too hard, not academically prepared, etc. Like words and phrases were highlighted in the same color. This type of inductive coding, allowed me to easily see when topics had reached a saturation point (Bradley et al., 2007). This approach was also used to ensure a more holistic understanding of the data and to capture unexpected insights or patterns that might not have been anticipated beforehand. The constant comparison method was used to develop a conceptual thematic code structure (Williams & Moser, 2019). Next, a direct approach was used to code subject traits, settings, and directional subject outlooks on each theme (Bradley et al., 2007). The constant comparison method was used to consolidate these conceptual codes, triangulate similar codes among different respondents (Goffman, 1989), and develop broader themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). All coding was conducted in conjunction with my adviser and methodologist.

Methodological Integrity

Research integrity was crucial to the credibility and validity of this study. This section discusses the ethical considerations, procedures, and measures used in this study to ensure the highest standards of ethics and integrity were maintained throughout the process. The study was approved by both institutional review boards of both the university and the tribe (Appendices 5 and 6). Throughout the research process, I was faced with times that I had to keep myself in

check to maintain neutrality. For example, one participant mentioned the lack of extracurricular choices when they were in high school (ten to fifteen years ago). Since that time, the school has added several new activities. I felt the urge to defend my school but had to take a step back and remind myself to remain neutral. In another situation, participants shared that they were not as prepared with academic writing. The next day, one participant reached out to me. They were concerned that I was upset about the academic writing comment because I was one of their English teachers and they did not want me to feel offended. I assured them that I was not in the least upset. I welcomed feedback that points out gaps in our curriculum.

Credibility.

Credibility refers to whether the study accurately measures the intended phenomenon. When considering the credibility of this project, I asked myself, "How congruent are my findings with reality?" (Shenton, 2004, p. 64). The following provisions were made to ensure credibility.

Honesty of Informants. It was important to me that participants feel free to share their experiences honestly and openly. When approached with the opportunity to participate, they had an option to refuse (Appendix 1). Thus, data collection sessions included only those who genuinely wanted to participate. I made it clear that I was not looking for the right or wrong responses early in our sessions. I encouraged participants to be frank and open in their sharing (Shenton, 2004, p. 66). I pulled from my thirty-year history with this community as well as my rapport with participants in the study. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed, and the identities of the participants were kept confidential. In the transcripts, they were referred to as "Participant One, Two, etc."

Debriefing. Debriefing sessions were held with my adviser and methodologist after the focus group sessions concluded. We also collaborated via email. Included in my reflections were

responses from my adviser (Appendix 7). I used these debriefing sessions to seek alternative perspectives and keep inherent biases in check. Shenton (2004) suggested using such sessions to "discuss alternative approaches, and others who are responsible for the work in a more supervisory capacity may draw attention to flaws in the proposed course of action" (p. 67). Furthermore, they can "provide a sounding board for the investigator to test his or her developing ideas and interpretations, and probing from others may help the researcher to recognize his or her own biases and preferences" (Shenton, 2004, p. 67).

Member Checks. Member checks were also used to establish credibility. After data was collected and analyzed, the results were shared with the participants (Appendix 8). They were offered the opportunity to verify our thematic findings for accuracy, as well as provide feedback that was incorporated into my final analysis. This approach allowed me to corroborate information across different focus groups, minimizing the risk of bias and increasing the robustness of my findings. Participants were given one calendar week (7 days) to respond to an email if they saw any inconsistencies.

Transferability.

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied or transferred to other contexts or settings beyond the one in which the research was conducted. This study emphasizes depth over breadth, but the findings may have the potential to transfer to other situations in very meaningful ways. The best way to support transferability was to clearly and purposely describe the context of the study and the phenomenon in question so that future readers would know what can logically be transferred to other situations. Shenton (2004) refers to this as "thick description" (p. 72).

Participants had similar backgrounds in that they all came from the same small reservation community, attended the same high school, were all enrolled members of a federally recognized tribe, and all received college degrees. Most continue to work on the reservation for the public school or other tribal programs: law enforcement, environmental services, community development, cultural preservation, etc. The age range of all participants was 24-34. At the time of data collection, all but one worked for a tribal organization, school, or tribal college located in the small Northeast Nebraska reservation town of roughly one thousand people. The tribe has been very progressive in its economic development. Nearly thirty years ago, the tribe invested in a tribal corporation that ventured into a number of industries: real estate, technology, defense, distribution, education, and community development. Today, it employs hundreds, has offices all over the country, and boasts multi-million dollar profits that it invests back into the tribe. It has been a game changer in improving the lives of tribal members and the community in general.

Dependability.

In qualitative research, dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the study's findings and the research process itself. Dependability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the study methodology that would allow for the study to be repeated (Appendices 1 and 3). This includes details of the design and data collection as well as a reflection on the effectiveness of the methodology.

Confirmability.

In qualitative research, confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are shaped by the participants and the context rather than by the researcher's bias or preconceptions. To enhance confirmability in a qualitative study, Shenton (2004) suggests strategies such as reflective commentary and audit trails. Reflective commentary was provided in the reflexivity

section. This was facilitated by written reflections I recorded after each focus group (Appendix 7). This allowed me to keep my own inherent biases in check and to identify themes to adjust for other focus group meetings. Collected data was securely saved and labeled with unique identifiers to facilitate traceability and retrieval.

Findings

Nine individuals participated in one of three focus groups. Some began at a traditional university, transferred to a two-year tribal college, and then finished at a four-year tribal college or traditional four-year university. All but two of the participants had an associate's or bachelor's degree from a tribal college or university (TCU). The experiences shared brought forth a range of themes that delved into the personal and societal aspects of their educational journeys, as well as details shared with them by peers who were not successful in educational attainment. The participants revealed challenges faced by individuals who did not complete college, emphasizing the significance of factors such as intimate relationships and substance abuse, as well as the challenges and supports they experienced. Participants acknowledged the influence of family expectations on educational priorities and provided insights into the diverse paths individuals take based on their unique circumstances. Participants' responses revealed five dominant themes, which are documented on the following pages.

Theme 1: Participants found their primary pre-college support non-academic, but their primary challenges seemed to stem from academic preparedness.

The discussion on pre-college preparedness centered on the experiences of participants in high school and examined how it shaped their readiness for college. Their high school experience shaped their overall readiness for college in several marked ways: areas in which they

felt adequately prepared and ways in which they felt underprepared. Non-academic experiences

supported their teamwork, time management, and critical thinking skills. They also felt

adequately prepared for vocabulary building. However, participants mentioned feeling

underprepared for some specific areas: study skills, ACT/test taking, writing in academic formats

such as APA, and connecting the high school curriculum to the real world. They only sometimes

felt that the rigor of the curriculum communicated high expectations. Overall, participants

recognized and vocalized the benefits and shortcomings of their high school education in

preparing them for post-secondary education.

Much of the non-academic support in high school stemmed from positive relationships

and skills built through participation in extracurricular activities. Participants acknowledged that

high school, despite lacking in certain academic preparation, facilitated the development of

crucial skills through extracurricular activities such as sports, chess club, speech, one-act, band,

and student government. These experiences were seen as beneficial in terms of teamwork, time

management, and critical thinking.

I joined a chess club, so that shows the amount of opportunities out there. I like chess,

but my whole goal is just to get involved. I was often in student government and sports.

There's a technology club, and so I try to get involved. I think it was just because I

wanted things to do. I think there was maybe a social aspect that I that I was searching

for, but through it all, you know, this kind of reflecting on it, I was able to really develop

a lot of different skills that are still useful today, especially in work settings and group

settings and things like that. I think those experiences helped prepare me for a college

experience.

Four of the nine participants were collegiate athletes. They each received scholarships to play

basketball. Their high school involvement in sports allowed them to not only develops positive

relationships with teammates and coaches but also became a vehicle for college admittance and

finance.

Certain aspects of their high school experience prepared them for stress relief through

self-care. One participant mentioned that they felt better prepared to handle stress in college,

indicating that high school, in this case, served as a grounding experience. Participants

acknowledged the positive impact of high school support groups, specifically mentioning the

Melvin Jones Scholars at UNL. While not exclusively Native-focused, such groups provided

valuable support, camaraderie, and understanding for students of color. High school experiences,

including friendships and interactions with older students, played a crucial role in inspiring and

shaping the participant's attitudes toward higher education.

One academic area that participants felt adequately prepared for was vocabulary

building and certain study habits developed during high school, particularly the practice of

defining and reviewing bolded words. These habits were maintained and applied to aid in

successful academic pursuits in college and in my career. Participants credited their high school

for instilling effective time management skills through the use of planners and calendars. While

time management is not solely an academic skill, these skills, developed during high school,

have proven useful in college and continue to be valuable in the participant's career,

demonstrating a positive impact on high school preparation. One noted:

I remember the school gave out a bunch of planners and their planners with calendars, and then obviously in those spaces where you can right where your assignments are due dates. I was always a checkbox person, so I would use an assignment that was due maybe next Wednesday. I'd go to next Wednesday and put a check box in it and then write with. The assignment was, and then when I would do it, I would check that box, and so that sort of carried over into college and that helped me manages my time. And then it also carries over to, well, I use it even today through Microsoft Outlook and setting dates and deadlines and stuff on a calendar. So those things have helped me.

Students also mentioned feeling underprepared in several key areas. Study skills and test-taking were the dominant sub-themes. Overall, they believed they were never taught effective study skills, and most could not recall any efforts to prepare them for high-stakes tests such as the ACT. One participant noted, "I didn't really have good study habits either, and I don't know if that, you know, maybe that's something you get prepared for in high school, like studying and reading your books. I feel like in high school, I didn't read a lot, so when I got to college, they expected me to do this reading on my own like it was new to me and it was really difficult." One participant recalled challenges in preparing for the ACT, emphasizing the limited opportunities available during high school. The mention of taking the ACT multiple times to achieve an acceptable score highlight the perceived inadequacy of preparation resources compared to contemporary standards, "I don't think I was as prepared for ACT. I think it took about three times, and I got a 21, and that barely got me to UNL. I just feel like back when I was in high school, we didn't have a whole lot of opportunities to prepare for that."

Participants also expressed concerns about their need for exposure and skill with writing in an academic format such as MLA or APA. They suggested that basic writing skills in APA or

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MLA should be an essential standard for any high school student graduating from their former high school. One noted, "I lacked all the different types of writing styles, like APA and MLA. Those were all new for me, and we probably touched on them in school, but not to the level where I felt prepared in college." Their frustration was evident, but they sought strategies and support to correct the course. One participant noted, "I didn't know how to write a paper, like a basic paper. I didn't even know the formatting. I had to watch YouTube videos and all kinds of stuff." Another shared, "The writing was a struggle. How to make a proper paragraph and then the transition into the next one?" and explained their "sink or swim" approach, "I just utilized the resources available on campus like the library, and I signed up for a writing tutor. I asked my professors. You know what they would recommend?"

Another sub-theme that emerged regarding college readiness was a perceived lack of real-world connection and rigor in high school coursework, as well as the lack of test preparation and study skills to prepare them for college adequately. They also recalled some academic struggles in their first year of college, "I did go on academic probation once, but that was my first semester when I didn't know anything about classes, or I didn't have a stable support system and didn't know how to live by myself." The curriculum was described as detached from real-life scenarios, making it challenging for students to relate to the content. Participants openly acknowledged the belief that their high school failed to prepare them for the rigors or realities of college. One stated, "So I've been very vocal about this in the past, but I do feel like my high school education did fail me whenever it came to secondary post-secondary education." Another went into a bit more detail:

I felt high school did not prepare me for any portion of college, especially academically.

I was blindsided when I got to college; I didn't know what a midterm and a final were. We had a lot of homework once I got to college. I actually failed out. I got put on academic suspension. But I had to petition my suspension. And so I was able to come back in. But I just didn't have study skills.

Another participant reinforced the idea that their high school did not adequately prepare them for the rigors of college because studying skills were not emphasized and were not a normal part of the curricular process:

I think that what we call the rigor of the coursework in high school was not the same level of rigor for college because, in college, it's way more rigorous, and the workload is so much heavier. You have to have really pristine study skills to really accomplish those, and if you're coming from a high school where that's not the norm and you're going into this new school where it is the norm, I mean, it's kind of hard to experience success because we don't have all those that experience with that. So I think it's the level of rigorous difference that we weren't quite prepared for.

More than one participant noted that the lack of rigor may have led to the necessity of taking developmental courses during their first year in college. While many of them admitted at the time that the extra time, chances, and lack of rigor made it easier, they realized it did nothing to prepare them for college or life. Participant 9 recalled their first semester at Little Priest Tribal College and emphasized their need for a transitional class to help students adjust to the shift from high school to college. Developmental classes, such as English pre-composition, pre-algebra, and speech, did not provide them credit toward graduation, but participants believed they played a crucial role in familiarizing them with college resources and developing essential skills. While

this may indicate a lack of academic preparation in high school, some saw the opportunity to take transitional courses as important support in preparing them for future coursework.

Ultimately, participants saw the experience in high school as a double-edged sword in terms of how it prepared them for college. Although participants noted key areas where they believed their pre-college preparation could have been stronger, they did want to give their high school credit in a couple of key areas: vocabulary development, time management, extracurricular activities, stress management, and support groups. There were definite challenges and shortfalls caused by both the institution and the students themselves. While some may have entered college academically disadvantaged, other supports offset these challenges while they became adjusted to the overall rigors, stress, and realities of college.

Theme 2: Participants found the role of human support invaluable to educational attainment (mentors, family members, teachers, coaches).

Varying types of positive human support emerged as a dominant theme in our focus group discussions. Participants acknowledged teachers, coaches, and family members who inspired, advised, and mentored them in both high school and college. Participants recognized the influence of mentors like a high school teacher or coach who played a pivotal role in inspiring and guiding them through the journey to and through higher education. Additionally, advisors provided essential support, demonstrating the impact mentors can have on a student's educational path. Each mentioned at least one pivotal family member who emerged as a significant support system. Participants also highlighted the positive influence of connections made in high school, suggesting that social networks can contribute positively to one's overall preparedness for higher education.

The positive presence of these teachers during his high school years influenced their readiness for higher education—participant 5's acknowledgment of teachers who believed in their potential despite her high school challenges further illustrated the positive human support built during the formative high school years, "So just the way I made it myself, I wasn't prepared at all for college, but I am still thankful that I did have teachers that were still trying to push me even though I was naughty as heck." Another forged a lasting mentorship with a high school teacher who became a tremendous support. One participant shared a strong mentorship bond created with their former high school English teacher. "Every time I need a letter of recommendation, she's the one I would go to…It helps that she read a lot of my work outside of what I had assigned during school. So she would pre-read my stuff for me sometimes, and that was really helpful for me." The bond created years ago has become an instrumental support system.

The importance of supportive figures became evident in shaping a student's educational journey trajectory. One developed a positive mentorship relationship with their high school English teacher. They shared, "I feel like one of the one things that really sort of stuck was our English teacher, and honestly, that was my favorite subject, and as you know, I sort of mentioned my experience now being a writer and everything, and I just feel like that was English was definitely my favorite." They mentioned that they are still in contact with this teacher, and they were a huge support during college. It is evident that the strong bonds built between the participants in this study and former teachers and coaches helped to shape and stabilize their college journey.

Additionally, most participants discussed the importance of family and shared that they were often their strongest supporters. "Go to college, you know, was more my parents that were just really encouraging me to, you know, to strive for better," one participant mentioned.

The participants' narratives interwove themes of family, education, and community. From the influence of siblings on educational choices to the desire to contribute to community development, the participants' stories underscore the interconnected nature of these aspects of life. One participant shared their experience attending college with her sister (who also happened to be part of the study). "If you can share college experience with a sibling, do it because that was the best thing for me; sharing that experience with my sister, having that support, sharing those struggles, and just being there physically made my experience. It would not have been very enjoyable without my sister." In this case, this was not just secondary support for a family member but also the direct support of a sibling who was going through the same experience at the same time.

This theme emphasized the impact of family and community dynamics on educational journeys and the potential for education to be a transformative force within broader social contexts. The participants acknowledged the influence of family values and social connections in shaping their attitudes toward education. Positive family attitudes toward hard work and a supportive social environment, including friendships with older students, motivated them to pursue higher education. One participant mentioned the influence of family, particularly siblings who obtained associate degrees. The shared college experience with siblings was highlighted as a significant support, contributing to a more enjoyable and successful journey. Others shared the support of spouses and parents. One participant who attended college on a basketball scholarship shared the support of her husband, but also how her team became like family and thus an

additional support system was gained. "When you're away at college, and you're in athletics, a big part of that is your team, your teammates, and then coaches. We were considered like family. So being away from your actual family and then meeting all these new people, there's another way to create that family bond with each other."

Another emphasized the support and love received from grandparents as influential factors in his educational journey. The discussion touched upon the supportive role of mentors like an uncle during high school and college. This participant fondly remembered childhood play acting as a teacher with an uncle who was only a couple of years older to ongoing support throughout high school and beyond.

> So, always thought, you know, always throughout high school, and even in I remember back when we were kids, we would play school, and my uncle was always a teacher, and it was always fun with me and my sisters and whatnot and going on to high school he was always someone I looked up to, and you know you know definitely in you know in college whether I was struggling or needed any type of advice he was very helpful and supportive and even today he's really.

The presence of mentors, including grandparents, has played a crucial role in Participant 8's personal and academic development.

While many details were shared about family, many also noted supportive relationships forged in college that were instrumental in providing post-secondary support. Participants acknowledged the importance of having a support network within the academic environment. They mentioned peers, faculty, and the community at the undergraduate institution as valuable supports.

Cindy, referred to as a "crazy Lakota grandmother," emerged as a significant mentor for not one but two of this study's participants. Mentors provided emotional and practical support, and in this case, acted as a source of accountability. The positive family influence played a role in maintaining focus and achieving personal and career growth. This familial context may have contributed to the participant's motivation to serve as an example and pursue multiple degrees. The discussion also touched on challenges faced by a sister who, as a single parent, encountered difficulties in completing her degree due to childcare responsibilities. This illustrated the impact of family dynamics and social circumstances on educational choices and outcomes. Participants consistently highlighted their families as their biggest support. Family members, including siblings and partners, played pivotal roles in providing emotional and, in some cases, financial support. In some cases, the absence of familial support or a blueprint for navigating higher education impacted the trajectory of their academic journeys. One noted:

> I didn't always have support from my family and I wish I could say that, but for those who don't know my family on and off has substance abuse problems. And so when Mom would, you know, get on her high again or get on her binge again, then that would just create tensions within the family. And so we wouldn't talk for weeks on end. So eventually just started saying in Omaha (on campus) a lot more than I did in high school because hey, at least these people wanted to be around me, right?

The importance of support systems, both within the college community and family, was evident. All participants mentioned the role of friends, coaches, and family members in their success; however, participants who were not first-generation students (FGS) believed they were more likely to navigate the challenges of successfully obtaining a post-secondary education. Being a first-generation college student posed significant challenges. Participants emphasized the

need for more guidance and understanding of the college experience, especially in a predominantly non-native academic environment. One participant shared that she knew she was at a disadvantage as a first-generation college student. She did not blame her parents but realized that having that particular type of support and guidance would have been beneficial.

They pointed out the significance of having individuals who understand the unique struggles faced by first-generation college students. This support becomes even more crucial in diverse academic settings, where shared experiences create a sense of belonging. One participant did not explicitly identify as a first-generation college student but still mentioned family members obtaining associate degrees, which gave them some exposure to higher education. While not a first-generation college student in the strictest sense, the participant's journey may have involved breaking new ground within their family context, contributing to the broader narrative of navigating higher education within a family.

Participants who were not FGS shared their accounts, "My mom graduated with her associate in medical records from United Tribes Technical College. I was around 6th or 7th grade when she graduated. Seeing her accomplish that was motivating. She recently started working at the hospital in Winnebago, utilizing her degree in medical records." While this participant perceived her mother's college completion as a motivating factor, another received a different type of support from his mother, stating, "She knew how to traverse a college campus. Classrooms and lectures and deadlines and all the things of college living. So though I was experiencing it first hand and calling my mom every night, she kind of provided that additional step of guidance." Unlike the majority of study participants, this subject had the benefit of a support system which helped him, as he stated, "do college."

Whether the human support came from a teacher, coach, partner, or family member, the physical, mental, moral, and emotional support garnered by participants of this study allowed them to persevere through any challenge faced along their educational journey. Each participant made a point of showing gratitude to their former teachers, coaches, peers, and family members who supported and mentored them throughout their journey.

Theme 3: Participants cited their ability to self-advocate, internal motivation, and ability to hold themselves personally accountable as primary support to overcome challenges and persevere through their educational attainment journey.

The highly managed and controlled environment of a secondary school is quite different than the flexible and free environment of a post-secondary institution. Students often described struggling with the freedom not previously granted during high school. There were no parents or other humans at college pushing them out of bed in the morning, reminding them to go to class or do homework. To overcome this type of challenge, participants in the study cited self-advocacy skills, accountability, and strong internal motivation as their best support.

Participants emphasized the importance of self-advocacy, especially in navigating the shift from a supportive high school environment to the more independent nature of college. The shift from having advocates in high school, such as teachers, family members, and counselors, to being one's advocate in college posed challenges. Participant 5 alluded to personal responsibility and accountability for her actions during high school. The challenges she faced underscore the importance of developing self-advocacy skills to navigate the academic environment effectively. The participant seems to be lamenting the lack of self-advocacy skills they had upon entering college, while at the same time, experiencing the self-realization that they had to be their number one advocate.

While participants believed there were definite areas in which their high school could have prepared them more, some did take responsibility for their own actions and behaviors in high school. After sharing that they did not take high school seriously, they added, "It's so embarrassing. Even to getting the nursing school I had to write a letter to the board to apologize for how many F&D's and things I had to repeat." This self-awareness and willingness to own their actions indicated that this participant acknowledges that education is a two-way street and it takes both efforts by the school and by the student.

Participants revealed a vast array of motivational forces during our sessions. From wanting to prove naysayers wrong to family, extracurricular endeavors, and even the more altruistic desire to impact future generations, it was evident that the participants were highly motivated both internally and externally. The desire to be living proof of success serves as a powerful motivator, emphasizing the importance of believing in oneself and challenging external biases. They encouraged self-advocacy, urging individuals to take chances on themselves and apply for opportunities, emphasizing the value of perseverance. The desire to stay focused, grow in a career, and help other students underscored the importance of advocating for one's goals and contributing positively to the community.

The desire to be successful, challenge stereotypes, and prove the naysayers wrong was mentioned by all of the participants, but Participant 7 shared a pointed and powerful narrative with the group.

I had an instructor at (college) tell me I was never going to be a nurse because I couldn't do basic division or something like that. And so that, you know, as negative as it is, turned out to be kind of positive for me. I was able to not internalize it so much, but really just kind of have it drive me and not necessarily negative way, but in a positive

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way for me because I'm like, so stubborn and I'm a really stubborn person, naturally. So I

think it kind of helped me flip it to my advantage. It kind of became my superpower, like

no one's going to see me fail.

Of the nine participants, four played intercollegiate basketball. Each shared that basketball was

highly motivating for them while in high school, and each of them received a scholarship to play

in college. Intercollegiate play provided another level of motivation beyond the love of the game.

It was tied to financial motivation as well. One shared how she used not only athletics but also

becoming a mother while still in college to keep her grounded, focused, and motivated. She

noted, "I have to graduate. I have to go to class. I have to go to practice because I have this little

girl, even though she's just a baby. Like one day she's going to know that her mom did all these

things for her."

Another college athlete shared how their experience in inter-collegiate athletics not only

served as a strong motivating factor but also helped to foster self-advocacy and accountability. "I

was held accountable in so many different things, especially academically, and also on the court

cause basketball was such a big part of my life. It taught me just like a lot of growing up

responsibility and that self-advocacy too."

Participants cited other internal motivational factors that fueled their desire for

educational attainment. Among them was the belief that educational attainment could break

negative generational cycles. Participants expressed a strong motivation to succeed not only for

personal growth but also to set an example for future generations within their families. One

participant mentioned that having an understanding of what a college education could do for

their future, even in the face of adversity, provided strong motivation to persevere:

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There were so many times I could have just like I'm not. I'm not going back. You know,

I'm just going to stay here where I'm comfortable, where it's easy right now. It's easy. It

might be, but maybe five years it might not be. You know, there might be more demands,

and I might have to find a means to support those demands. But I know having the

degrees will make it that much more smooth.

Their narrative showed a high level of self-awareness and understanding. Whether they realized

it or not, they were a prime example of Sanford's Theory of Challenge and Support. They used

the terms demands and means, but the end result was the same. They found the inner strength

and motivation to persevere.

One source of motivation was consistent across the board for 100% of participants- the

inner desire to fulfill their educational potential for the betterment of their families, communities,

and tribal brethren both now and into the future. The long-term impact of education on their

families and communities was recognized. Participants saw education as an investment that will

benefit their families for generations to come. The support received during their college years

was likely to have a lasting impact on their future endeavors. The motivation to prove

stereotypes wrong and serve as a positive example emerged as a powerful driving force.

Participant 7's determination not only impacted her success but also positioned her as a role

model with the potential to inspire others within her community. Participants 7 and 6 expressed

motivation derived from personal connections, such as family and the desire to be a positive

influence on younger generations. Participant 8 expresses a strong motivation to continue

growing in his career and to help other students find support and outlets. This motivation

underscores the potential for positive future impacts, both on an individual level and within the

broader community. One expressed the belief that being in a positive academic environment in

college was beneficial to their overall mental and physical health and provided motivation. "I remember there were periods of times where I'd be able to leave the school for early outs because, you know, the more I was out of the environment, the better it was for my health." The participant's motivation to contribute to the study is driven by a desire to impact Native people's educational experiences positively. Their effort to provide intentional and useful feedback to the study highlighted a commitment to leveraging their experiences for the benefit of future generations. For example, one participant highlighted the importance of intention for college, emphasizing that having a clear answer to the question of why one is in college can address a significant portion of the challenges. This spoke to the motivational aspect of the college journey and its potential future impact. Participant 7 reflected on her sensitivity and people-pleasing nature as a motivation for academic success. The fear of disappointing others, particularly her mentor Cindy, who threatened to intervene if she dropped out, played a crucial role—the desire to avoid conflict and gain approval served as a driving force in her academic journey. The contrasting attitudes within Participant 7's family, with racially discriminative views on her non-native side, contributed to her determination to defy stereotypes and in itself acted as motivation and support.

One participant recognized the need for a different academic environment and took proactive steps to seek a more supportive setting, demonstrating the importance of advocating for one's educational needs and well-being. Similarly, another participant demonstrated self-advocacy through their proactive approach to applying for scholarships and seeking financial support. The act of writing and submitting a screenplay for the George R. R. Martin Foundation Literacy Foundation scholarship reflected the participant's initiative and determination to secure funding for their education.

Each participant found different motivations, sources of accountability, and self-advocacy. The common thread was that they all found the source that provided them the grit and *sticktoitiveness* to persevere through the long and grueling educational process. Each of these anecdotes highlighted the importance of self-advocacy in navigating financial challenges and accessing opportunities for academic support. Each provided a distinct support that served as a balance to the many challenges they faced. Others mentioned the simple act of being able to approach college instructors as an important self-advocacy skill.

Theme 4: When discussing family members, classmates, and peers who did not complete their college degree, participants attributed challenges to things beyond their control.

Participants were asked if they had family members or peers who started college but did not finish. They all had. In some cases, some could think of multiple specific cases. An interesting dynamic appeared when they were asked to share why they believed these individuals failed to complete educational attainment. While they had no trouble sharing the shortcomings of their high school in preparing them for college or even their flaws, they were somewhat reluctant to personally attribute any flaw or shortcoming to their family members or peers for not finishing their degrees. When it came to others, they attributed the failure to fulfill educational attainment to challenges beyond that person's control, such as lack of a support system, having sick children, no childcare, transportation, or funding. One shared, "I look at some of my friends that do want to try to go to college; a lot of them don't have that kind of support system. You do need that support system to kind of lean on. Not everybody does." When discussing classmates in school who would often miss or drop classes due to sick children, she noted, "I've taken care of sick babies. You leave them, and you go to school." The mention of classmates who did not complete a four-year degree despite receiving scholarships alludes to the challenges faced by

some students. While not delving into specific reasons, they emphasized that success in higher education is influenced by various factors beyond financial support. While discussing the Susan T. Buffett scholarship, Participant 7 noted that several classmates who received the same full-ride scholarship did not complete a four-year degree. They noted that some people simply choose different life paths. This observation emphasized the significance of individual paths and support systems in shaping academic outcomes. It suggested that the scholarship alone may not guarantee success; other factors, such as support and beliefs, play vital roles. Other factors, such as cultural shock, unpreparedness for academic rigor, and lack of financial literacy, are also highlighted as challenges that could hinder success in higher education. One participant even got the sense in high school that their peers were not as motivated, "So my high school experience, I feel like I got through school and I was, you know, I wanted to go on to college, but a lot of my peers weren't as motivated." Participants mentioned challenges related to single parenthood, childcare, and financial constraints, particularly for a sister attempting to re-enter college, hints at common difficulties faced by individuals who may struggle to complete their education:

> Not everybody has the same support as I do, even if it's just me or the same beliefs. I
> guess there were some people that I went to school with who didn't graduate. Some of the
> challenges that they faced were just, you know, financial issues. You know, not being
> able to make ends meet or if they had children, you know they were single mothers, and
> you know it's either work or go to school, you know, to finish your degree, and some of
> them just didn't have that support system that that we mentioned umm. So I think that's a
> big factor in educational success.

These challenges include the juggling of familial responsibilities and financial pressures. The story of a friend who dropped out due to relationship issues provides insight into challenges

faced by individuals who don't complete college, emphasizing the significance of personal circumstances and relationships in shaping academic outcomes.

Theme 5: Participants who attended tribal colleges or universities cited the cultural connection present at TCUs as a strong support in combating culture shock as well as other challenges.

Participants' educational paths began in various ways. Some went straight to a traditional college or university. Others began at a two-year community or tribal college. Some began at a traditional college and ended up at tribal college or university. Our discussion delved into the positive and negative aspects of each educational setting. They compared the support received at tribal colleges, where instructors knew them by name and offered personalized assistance, to the larger traditional university setting, where it was challenging to connect with instructors. Three dominant sub-themes emerged: culture shock, empowerment, and adaptability.

The theme of culture shock was identified in two ways: those who experienced it when they attended predominantly non-Native colleges or universities or by the absence of it at tribal colleges and universities (TCUs). Culture shock (sometimes known as transfer shock) was a phenomenon mentioned by all participants in the study. Participant 6 briefly touched on culture shock when transitioning to college. Every participant had a great deal to share on this issue and made a point of telling me that they wanted their narratives shared in full. Participants 1 and 3 shared experiences of culture shock when transitioning to college environments where they were among the few or the only Native individuals. One way in which culture shock affected participants was the pressure they felt to represent all Native perspectives, adding a layer of complexity to their educational experiences. The pressure to represent their entire cultural or ethnic group in discussions about indigenous perspectives was noted, caused discomfort and intimidation:

When I went down to UNL, I would be in a class of about 30 to 50 people, and they were

all white, and I would be the only brown person there. When a topic would come up

about like indigenous perspectives or native peoples or something, I swear you suddenly

represent every native person in the country. You know of all tribes, and you got to speak

on all Native Americans and being 18 or 19, fresh out of high school, like put into kind of

a worldly global conversation with all these non-natives. I mean, it is intimidating. I

remember I was like, wow, I am not prepared to speak on even my own tribe, let alone

native tribes across the country, so that was a huge culture shock for me.

One of the most common comments that participants made regarding attendance at a

traditional predominantly white university was the lack of representation of people of, color-

particularly American Indians/Alaska Natives. It was one of the most common reasons given for

experiencing culture/transfer shock. One participant described the adjustment to a new setting

with a lack of Native American representation and the anxiety caused by being around a majority

of non-Natives for the first time in their academic careers. "They live a completely different

lifestyle than you, and also, I think, the social anxiety." While some participants saw being one

of the only American Indians on campus as a fairly large challenge, others were able to turn the

challenge into a motivating factor that actually supported them throughout their journey. They

reflected, "I think developing that foundation and voicing that respect is really something that's

going to benefit you. I was just learning how to be a better people person, really come out of my

shell more, really learn a lot from the different diverse students that were there." The stress and

anxiety of attending a predominantly white university was mitigated through the self-awareness

that learning to work with people from diverse backgrounds is a benefit.

The positive impact of attending a tribal college was emphasized, including the sense of community, accountability, and exposure to diverse native backgrounds. One participant reflected on being a member of a support group for non-whites while attending a traditional university. It was a group for students of color. They found this group particularly supportive. "Having people in an educational setting where they can relate to you and offer support and even just like just being there and being around and you know having lunch together." Having the camaraderie and support of individuals that derive from similar experiences was beneficial.

One participant who had previously attended a private, predominantly white university shared their experience transferring to a TCU. They recall being impressed by seeing so many highly educated American Indian instructors. "Those were the first natives that I met that had their doctorate degrees, and so just a lot of exposure, and I think that the unique experience that I had definitely had a major impact on my successes." The presence of Native voices at the head of the classroom was not only inspiring but motivational as well.

The dynamics of navigating discriminatory beliefs highlight the cultural and social challenges faced by Native American students when attending predominantly white colleges (PWC). The need to confront stereotypes and prove oneself contributed to feelings of cultural shock and social anxiety. Participant 7 discussed the cultural shock experienced in a diverse academic setting and the challenges of living with roommates from different cultural backgrounds. Participant 9 vividly described the cultural shock experienced when transitioning from a rural, Native American community to an urban, non-native setting. The differences in communication styles and environmental elements highlight the potential for social anxiety in diverse academic settings, particularly for individuals from unique cultural backgrounds. One participant commented that something as seemingly minor as volume can cause a feeling of

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displacement. Something as seemingly minor as volume or tone of voice could cause culture shock. One participant noted how loud everyone seemed when they attended PWC. They shared that back on the reservation if someone was being excessively loud, something was amiss. They had to learn to code-switch when returning home. "I could talk one way in the city of Omaha and then come back home and kind of reprogram myself to who I originally am. I remember my first break coming back home. My brother stopped me, and he would say, you're talking very loud, and then I need you to calm me down a bit." This participant's narrative illustrates the shock and social anxiety that individuals from diverse backgrounds may experience when navigating academic environments that lack cultural understanding. The same participant also shared a story about a student from Walt Hill (another predominantly American Indian reservation community) who experienced culture shock that led to an anxiety attack, causing him to get into a fight on the first day of college and be kicked out of school for it.

Participant 8 discussed the challenge of being away from family and friends when attending school, especially hours away from home. Despite this challenge, they expressed gratitude for the decision to attend a school that was far from their familiar environment. They highlighted the importance of considering the impact of distance on one's ability to focus on studies and personal growth during the college years. As a first-generation college student, Participant 9 navigated the transition from a rural environment to the city, describing it as a significant culture shock.

These experiences emphasized the unique challenges faced by first-generation college students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. Most who attended a TCU valued the experience. "I would say that it did help me going to a Little Priest Tribal College. Had I moved on to go to well, I probably wouldn't have been accepted into Saint Luke's College in Sioux City

for nursing, but I'm really glad that I got an associate's degree at Little Priest Tribal College just because I was able to learn those basic things." Another participant discussed their experience with tribal college and appreciated the academic foundation, small class size, and personal attention given at a tribal college.

Similarly, another participant noted the empowering effects of attending a TCU, which were not only motivating but also empowering. They expressed their experience attending not one but two TCUs, which allowed them to learn about other tribes. They described a sense of empowerment when they witnessed others speaking their native language and sharing their unique cultural heritages. "I definitely feel like it really helped. Just being around your own people but not specifically your own tribe…… It was just really empowering to be around other natives, and it was a lot easier. It wasn't too much of a culture shock."

Adaptability became crucial in navigating different academic environments. One participant demonstrated adaptability by appreciating the benefits of attending a tribal university far from home. This adaptive approach highlights a crucial skill in navigating the complex landscape of higher education. Others saw the benefit of attending a traditional, predominantly white university, which allowed them to better adapt to life off the reservation. One participant explained:

> I would say that the (traditional) four-year institution was a lot more diverse, and it helped me learn how to adapt to different people, cultures, and expectations, so it helped me a lot with what I do today. I meet with a lot of individuals from all walks of life, and I think if you are just able to connect individually in some way, it helps talk about the next steps in your conversation, whatever it may be.

Another participant agreed that attending a traditional non-tribal college or university helped prepare them to work with a diverse group of people and overcome anxiety with working with non-natives, "I think developing that foundation and voicing that respect is really something that's going benefit you and that's something I learned at a (traditional) four-year institutions. I was learning how to be a better people person and really come out of my shell, and I really benefited from the diverse students that were there." The other participants (seven of nine) who attended traditional, predominantly white colleges, even for a brief time, agreed that learning to navigate the diversity of these environments was invaluable.

TCUs had a powerful impact on the participant's successful college experience. Through examining TCUs impact on culture shock, empowerment, and adaptability, it was clear that they reaped the benefits of a type of cultural support not always available in other types of institutions.

Discussion

Our time together brought forth a range of themes that delved into the personal and societal aspects of each participant's educational journey. The participants shed light on challenges faced by individuals who did not complete college, emphasizing the significance of factors such as intimate relationships and substance abuse. The influence of family expectations on educational priorities is acknowledged, with insights into the diverse paths individuals take based on their unique circumstances. These themes collectively formed a narrative that reflected the diverse and complex experiences of the participants in navigating higher education, addressing challenges, and finding pathways to success. The over 200 pages of transcript revealed a common thread of participants feeling unprepared for the academic rigor and unique challenges of college life. As noted in the literature review, AI/AN students often leave high

school underprepared for the rigor and reality of higher education. The struggle with writing skills, unfamiliarity with citation styles, and the need for independent study skills were recurring themes. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness in adapting to the demands of college. The discussion also highlighted recognition of the gap between high school and college preparedness, with participants openly acknowledging the shortcomings of their high school education. This exploration shed light on the complexities students faced in transitioning from high school to college and the importance of refining educational strategies to better bridge this gap. Consistent with the literature review, the discussion provided insight into the complex interplay between challenges, support systems, and resilience in the academic journeys of these participants. It highlighted the multifaceted nature of the obstacles faced by first-generation college students, emphasizing the critical role of support networks in their success. Participants' narratives provided insight into the complex interplay of challenges and supports during their college experiences, emphasizing the significance of family, sibling connections, financial aid, and institutional accountability in shaping their paths to success. In most cases, the study aligned with what the literature was saying. One area posed a bit of a surprise-theme three. When discussing others who were not successful in achieving educational attainment, participants of this study was reticent is assigning personal blame to their peers, friends, classmates, or family. The apparent urge to give others the benefit of the doubt is not something that was revealed in the available literature. The following paragraphs examine the ways in which my study aligns with the review of literature.

Review of Literature Alignment: Support

The participants collectively underscored the importance of mentorship in high school for a successful transition to college. Creating that solid connection mentioned by Bass and

Harrington (2014) was reinforced through this study. The challenges faced by these individuals reveal the need for personalized support systems, especially for those who may not conform to traditional academic norms. The themes of resilience and the impact of personal connections emerged as crucial factors in navigating the complexities of higher education.

Shared narratives intertwined various themes, showcasing the complex interplay of personal, familial, and societal factors in shaping the educational journey of a first-generation college student. As noted in the literature review, the importance of mentorship, adaptability, and self-advocacy became evident, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of success in higher education. As previously noted, all but one participant were first-generation college students, and as Izzo (2018) noted in the review of literature, they are the most underrepresented group in higher education, and they face unique challenges, and their experiences shape their approach to higher education. Exposure to family member's college journeys instilled motivation. They could see the tangible results of perseverance, enhancing their determination. The narratives also underlined the importance of familial support and showcased that, being first-generation or not, the influence of family members with college experience significantly impacts an individual's educational journey. The findings of this study are consistent with Sanford's theory (Sanford, 1967). Sanford postulated successful college completion is best achieved when each challenge is met with equal support. The individuals who participated in this study were not successful because they faced no challenges. They were successful because, for every challenge they faced, there was support to help them persevere through the difficulties. After reviewing points made in the review of literature, many of the points regarding challenges and support were upheld. Among the strongest were family support, mentorship, the benefits of TCUs, motivation, becoming role models, giving back to their community, and developing self-efficacy. Family

emotional support is integral to academic success, fostering psychological well-being and enhancing student engagement (Roska & Kinsley, 2018; Striplin, 2018). This support is particularly crucial for American Indian students, who emphasize the significance of family and community backing in their educational journey (Bass & Harrington, 2014). Additionally, a notable persistence factor among graduates involves their commitment to giving back to their tribal communities (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Empowerment plays a pivotal role in academic achievement (Heavy Runner & DeCelles, 2002). Particularly, attendance at tribal colleges significantly increases the likelihood of completing a four-year degree due to the supportive environment akin to an extended family (Heavy Runner & DeCelles, 2002). Moreover, students' sense of self-efficacy significantly influences their educational outcomes, with higher levels correlating with greater academic success (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). Mentoring emerges as a potent tool for overcoming barriers to success, particularly for nontraditional and underrepresented students, by bolstering their understanding of value, self-efficacy, and environmental factors (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). Finally, Tinto (2012) underscores the classroom's pivotal role as a space for skill acquisition, social interaction, and fostering important connections, highlighting its significance in facilitating academic and social growth.

Review of Literature Alignment: Challenges

Similarly, many of the challenges presented in the review of literature were expressed by the study's participants. Among the noted challenges are racial relations, first-generation status, financial hardship, transfer/culture shock, and lack of pre-college preparation. The values entrenched in the dominant White, middle-class culture often clash with those held by American Indian/Alaska Native students, posing a significant obstacle to their college success and

completion (Thai-Huy et al., 2019). During the focus group discussions, participants recounted instances where they felt alienated or misunderstood due to cultural disparities in academic settings, underscoring the challenges they faced in navigating higher education as Indigenous individuals. Additionally, the emphasis on individuality in higher education, as highlighted by Nguyen and Nguyen (2019) and Conrad and Gasman (2015), resonated with participants who expressed the importance of carving out their unique paths amidst societal expectations. The disproportionate representation of first-generation students among disadvantaged groups was a recurring theme, with participants sharing personal experiences of feeling academically unprepared and financially strained upon entering college. Brookover et al. (2021) underscored the struggles faced by first-generation students, including delayed entry, the need for remedial coursework, and lower completion rates, aligning with participants' narratives of overcoming systemic barriers to achieve their educational goals. Moreover, the financial burdens borne by American Indian/Alaska Native students, as highlighted by Balemian & Feng (2013) and Golightly (2006), were echoed in the focus group discussions, with participants discussing the challenges of balancing work and academics while grappling with socioeconomic disparities. The phenomenon of transfer shock, elucidated by Ishitani (2008) and Bass and Harrington (2014), resonated with participants who recounted the difficulties of transitioning from reservation life to predominantly White institutions, highlighting the need for culturally responsive support systems. Finally, the pivotal role of pre-college preparation in shaping post-secondary success, as emphasized by Golightly (2006) and Lopez (2018), was reflected in participants' narratives of overcoming academic and cultural barriers through resilience and determination, underscoring the importance of holistic support mechanisms for Indigenous students navigating higher education.

**Recommendations for Secondary and Post-Secondary Schools Located
on the Northeast Nebraska Reservation**

Admittedly, the participant pool was not wide, but their stories ran quite deep. While future studies would enhance this body of literature, the nine college graduates who participated in this study provided vast narratives that allow us to extrapolate some best practices for both secondary and post-secondary institutions on this particular reservation; however, upon consulting the contextual framework discussed earlier, other rural reservations might find the data easily transferable. For example, there are two public schools located on an adjacent reservation that might find this data quite useful. I have decided to make recommendations in the following areas: recommendations for secondary school, recommendations for post-secondary schools and recommendations for both. Toward the end of our first focus group, a participant made the comment some of the main things they wished they had known going from high school into college which lead to the other participants chiming in with comments of their own. This inspired what I would later refer to as the *lightning round.* At the end of the other groups I would ask them to state the top challenge and top support in their educational attainment journey. From their comments, I was able to devise a best practices/recommendation list.

Recommendations for Secondary Institutions

Secondary institutions should offer robust college and career counseling and classes to help students articulate their goals before entering college. At some level, many already do, but they are typically limited to seniors. It is recommended that high school students be offered a college/career preparation course beginning as freshmen and continuing through senior year. Such a course could encompass career counseling, researching colleges, applying for scholarships, ACT/SAT preparation, and apprenticeships (Byrnes, 2019). This would also be a

great opportunity to network and gain valuable experience and mentors. Elementary and secondary institutions should adhere to the highest standards and provide opportunities for students to experience a rigorous workload (Winters, 2012). Requiring students to self-advocate from an early age would allow them to develop healthy habits as they progress through the educational system (Golightly, 2006). Something as simple as a student coming to a teacher to ask questions versus a teacher coming to them shows the student that it is their responsibility to seek out the help that they need. The teacher's constant hovering and catering to every need may be helpful and make the class run more smoothly, but it does little to teach personal responsibility and self-advocacy to students. Secondary students should be required to do independent reading and homework to prepare for the expectations of college (Brookover, et al, 2021).

Recommendations for Post-Secondary Institutions

American Indian/Alaska Native college students need to feel a sense of belonging on any college campus they choose to attend. Certainly, tribal colleges and universities take measures to highlight tribal cultures, foster inclusivity, and respect the unique perspectives, learning styles, and heritage of American Indian/Alaska Native students (Bryan, 2019; Bonitatibus, 2022). Indeed, it is in their mission and vision statements. For traditional non-TCUs, I recommend they create programs to foster inclusive and culturally sensitive environments to support students from diverse backgrounds (Korkow, 2008). Sponsor and promote cultural activities from all backgrounds. Staff and students should be educated that not all American Indian/Alaska Native students share the same heritage and background. They are not a one-man/woman Rosetta stone for all things native. Being singled out as such may create a feeling of isolation or anxiety when, in all likelihood, that was not the intention (Conrad, C., & Gasman, 2015; Carjuzaae, et al, 2019).

By actively implementing these best practices, educational institutions are best able to actively promote resilience through mentorship, counseling, and educational programs that focus on personal growth and overcoming challenges (Lundeberg, 2014; Ishitani,, 2008; Izzo 2018). However, much can be said about attending TCUs. Overall, college completion rates are higher when students attend one, even if it is only to receive an associate's degree and move on to another four-year institution (DeLong, et al, 2016). Encouraging students to begin their educational journeys at a TCU might be the best recipe for success (Bonitatibus, 2022; Roksa & Calcagno, 2008).

Recommendations for Both Secondary and Post-Secondary Institutions

Both high schools and colleges should establish mentorship programs to guide students, especially those who are first-generation or face unique challenges (Chelberg and Bosman, 2020; Balemian and Feng, 2013). It has been my experience, as a thirty-year veteran educator, that trust is the number one factor in establishing a solid mentor/mentee relationship. If a student has a strong mentorship relationship with a high school teacher, coach, counselor, or other adult, trust has been established, and that relationship should continue as the student transitions from high school to college. In an ideal setting, a formal outreach program would be established on a volunteer or even paid basis. Included in this type of mentorship program should be an opportunity for college students to become mentors to high school students. High schools should sponsor frequent panel discussions where alumni share their stories with high school students. Every opportunity to share success stories should be taken (news articles, online posts, etc.). The philosophy of "when you see it, you can be it" was never more relevant than when working with American Indian/Alaska Native students (Windchief and Joseph, 2015).

Furthermore, it is often taken for granted that all students are aware of the resources available regarding academic support and mental health services. With many of our American Indian/Alaska Native students having first-generation student status, they may not have someone back at home telling them that certain support services are available on most college campuses. It is paramount that institutions ensure that resources, including academic support and mental health services, are easily accessible and well-publicized for students (Brookover, et al, 2021). The well-placed poster, table tent, or flier is helpful, but human guidance is best for American Indian/Alaska Native students and relates to mentorship. Having a human help you set up an appointment with a tutor and walk you there for the first time adds a double layer of support to students in need (Chelberg and Bosman, 2020).

Implications for Future Research

Throughout the process of conducting the focus groups and analyzing the findings, I often found myself curious about side issues that were mentioned, but not necessarily central to the purpose of my study. There are a number of areas where research is lacking. With that in mind, I devised a potential list for future research.

- Investigate the influence of family expectations on educational priorities and the diverse paths individuals take based on their unique circumstances.

- Examine the experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native students in predominantly non-Native academic settings to understand the challenges and social anxieties associated with cultural shock.

- Explore the role of personalized support systems in bridging the gap between high school and college preparedness, particularly for first-generation college students.

- Investigate the effectiveness of mentorship programs in high schools for facilitating successful transitions to college, especially for underrepresented student groups.

- Explore strategies to address systemic barriers faced by first-generation college students, including delayed entry, remedial coursework, and lower completion rates.

- Examine the phenomenon of transfer shock and the need for culturally responsive support systems for Indigenous students transitioning to predominantly White institutions.

- Explore holistic support mechanisms for Indigenous students navigating higher education to enhance academic success and retention rates.

While each of these topics were introduced in my study as a challenge or a support, a deeper dive into each would likely result in more robust and thorough understanding.

Summary

In summary, the participant's narrative provided a rich tapestry of experiences, touching upon various themes related to the college journey, from preparation and challenges to resilience and motivation. The stories shared offered valuable insights into the complexities of the college experience, encompassing personal, academic, and social dimensions. The participants highlighted various challenges faced during college, the importance of support systems and mentors, and the role of personal resilience in overcoming obstacles. They also emphasized the need for better high school preparation and self-advocacy skills. By considering these suggestions, other institutions could evaluate whether these practices are appropriate to implement.

ARTIFACT 3

On April 18, 2024, members of Winnebago Public School, Nebraska Indian Community College, Littlepriest Tribal College and select community members were invited to participate in a Zoom meeting in which I presented the findings of my study (Appendix 9). I chose to focus on the study and findings themselves, rather than the review of the literature. The presentation was recorded (Appendix 10). There were some technical issues with Zoom, and participants were kicked out of the meeting; however, I was able to speak with everyone onsite and update them on what they missed. The entire staff was provided the video link.

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Appendix 1: Invitation Email

Good morning, afternoon, evening:

I hope this email finds you well. I am excited to invite you to participate in a research study aimed at understanding the challenges and, more importantly, the supports that have led to the upward trend in college enrollment and completion among American Indian students. This study is being conducted to benefit your community and Indian country as a whole. The purpose of this study is to gain insights and experiences from former graduates of Winnebago Public School and recent college graduates like you. Your perspectives are invaluable in helping educational practitioners and institutions better serve students on their educational journeys. I expect this recorded Microsoft Teams interview to last 60-90 minutes. By sharing your experiences, you will play a vital role in shaping future educational practices to support the continued success of American Indian students.

If you have any questions or if you would like to participate, please contact me, Stacy Brasch, at sbrasch@winnebagok12.org. Thank you for your consideration to contribute to this important research. Your insights are greatly appreciated.

Respectfully:

Stacy Brasch

Winnebago Public School

Appendix 2 Thank you email

Subject: Thank you for your participation my study

To [insert name]

I wanted to take a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude for your invaluable contribution to our recent educational study. Your participation has been instrumental in our quest to understand the factors influencing college enrollment and completion among American Indian students. Your insights, experiences, and willingness to share your journey have provided us with a deeper understanding of both the challenges and the critical supports that impact educational success. Your input will undoubtedly contribute to improving educational practices and fostering an environment that empowers future generations of students.

I genuinely appreciate the time and effort you dedicated to my focus group discussion via Microsoft Teams. Your participation was not only essential but also inspiring. As a token of my appreciation, I have sent you a $20 gift card to area vendors, which I hope you will find enjoyable. Your contributions are helping us pave the way for a brighter future in American Indian education, and for that, I am truly thankful. If you have any further thoughts or insights you'd like to share, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. Please look for an email of my findings in the next two months. I look forward to anything further you'd like to share or any details that were not reported accurately.

Once again, thank you for being an integral part of our study. Your commitment to improving educational opportunities is a testament to your dedication and passion for positive change.

Respectfully,

Stacy Brasch

Winnebago Public School

sbrasch@winnebagok12.org

Appendix 3: Informed Consent

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

The University of South Dakota

TITLE: *Educational Attainment: American Indians/Alaska Natives Phenomenological Study of a Northeast Nebraska Indian Reservation*

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: *Dr. Jesse Sealey*

877-269-6837

jesse.sealey@usd.edu

STUDENT INVESTIGATOR: *Stacy Brasch*

712-389-1002

sbrach@winnebagok12.org

DEPARTMENT: *Educational Administration*

You are invited to participate in a research study aimed at understanding the challenges and, more importantly, the supports that have led to the upward trend in college enrollment and completion among American Indian students. This study is being conducted to benefit your community and Indian country as a whole.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to gain insights and experiences from former graduates of Winnebago Public School and recent college graduates like you. Your perspectives are invaluable in helping educational practitioners and institutions better serve students on their

educational journeys. By sharing your experiences, you will play a vital role in shaping future educational practices to support the continued success of American Indian students.

Benefits: Although you may not directly benefit, participating in this study allows you to contribute to the improvement of educational opportunities for American Indian students, not only in your community but also on a broader scale.

Risks: The primary risk associated with this study is sharing personal experiences. During the focus group sessions, participants will be asked to discuss their educational journeys, which may include personal challenges and successes. Sessions will be recorded and transcribed for accuracy and coding purposes. However, your identity will remain confidential.

Confidentiality: I will record your participation so that I can make an accurate transcript. Once I have made the transcript, I will erase the recordings. Your name will not be in the transcript or my notes. Your privacy is of utmost importance. All information collected during this study will be treated with strict confidentiality. The recordings and transcripts will be securely stored, and all efforts will be made to ensure that your identity remains anonymous in any resulting reports or publications. Even though we will tell all participants in the study that the comments made during the focus group should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside the group.

The records of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. It is possible that other people may need to see the information we collect. These people work for the University of South Dakota, and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions or provide information at any time during the sessions. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, the University of South Dakota, or any affiliated organizations.

Compensation: I will be offering participants a $20 gift card to a selection of vendors to compensate for your time.

Questions: The researchers conducting this study are Dr. Jesse Sealey adviser and USD and EDAD candidate Stacy Brasch. . You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact:

Stacy Brasch   712-389-1002 or sbrasch@winnebagok12.org

Dr. Jesse

Sealey   877-269-6837   jesse.sealey@usd.edu

If you have problems, complaints, or concerns about the research, questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you want to talk with someone independent of the research team, you may contact The University of South Dakota Office of Human Subjects Protection at irb@usd.edu or (605) 658-3743.

Informed Consent: I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study titled "Understanding Factors Affecting College Enrollment and Completion among American Indian Students." I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, and I have the right to withdraw at any time.

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Signature   Date

Thank you for your willingness to contribute to this important research. Your insights are greatly appreciated.

Appendix 4: Focus Group Questions

1. Could you tell me a little bit about how your high school experience prepared you for college?

    a. Did you feel academically prepared? (Why/Why not?)

    b. Do you think any of your high school extracurricular activities were beneficial in college? (Why/Why not?)

    c. Were there any areas in which you did not feel high school prepared you for college?

    d. Now please think about any friends or family members who did not complete their college program. Did any of them share particular challenges that impeded their educational attainment?

    e. Did they ever share with you that they believed they were not academically prepared for the rigors of college?

2. Did you begin at a four-year institution or begin at a community or tribal college?

    a. If you began at a tribal or community college, how do you believe that impacted your overall education and success?

    b. If you began at a four-year institution, how do you believe that impacted your overall education and success?

    c. Did you notice any differences in how successful friends or family members were based on where they started? (If yes, please explain)

3. Next, I'm going to ask you to describe the support you received from your family and community.

a. First, please tell me about how you felt your family supported you in completing your college program.

b. How do you feel your community supported you in completing your college program?

c. Were there areas in which you felt your family or community failed to support you?

d. Now please think about any friends or family members who did not complete their college program. Were there areas in which you saw them struggle because their family or community did not support them?

4. Did attending college create any financial hardship for you or your family while attending college?

a. If so, describe.

b. How do you meet this challenge?

c. Were there financial supports you felt were important for your success?

d. Did you observe financial barriers impacting friends or family who did not complete their programs?

5. Was there a person or persons in high school who influenced or provided you with inspiration or support in high school? College? What was the impact of that support?

a. Did you have any other mentors that supported you toward your educational attainment? Explain

6. Were there any other factors that we have not talked about that you feel were important factors in your educational success?

7. Did you go to college with people who did not graduate, were there challenges we have not discussed yet that you saw them face?

8. What was your strongest motivation for wanting to finish your degree?

   a. When times got tough, what were strategies that you used to persevere?

   b. Did friends, family, or fellow Native students share their motivation with you? If so, what was it?

   c. Did friends, family, or fellow Native students share perseverance strategies with you? If so, what were they?

Appendix 5: University of South Dakota IRB Approval

Date: January 23, 2024

University of South Dakota
414 E. Clark Street
Vermillion, SD 57069

PI: Jesse Sealey
Student Investigator(s): Stacy Brasch
Re: Initial - IRB-23-193 *Educational Attainment: American Indians/Alaska Natives Phenomenological Study of a Northeast Nebraska Indian Reservation*

The University of South Dakota Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for this study. Because this study is exempt, its approval does not expire. Please submit a closure form to the IRB when this study is complete.

Decision: Exempt
Category: Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

Research Notes: Focus group study; AI/AN participants, study has tribal IRB approval (Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska-IRB); final manuscript must be submitted to tribal IRB before publication; focus group will be recorded to make a transcript; compensation; date-stamped consent with DocuSign signature.

Dear Jesse Sealey,

The proposal referenced above has received an exempt review and is approved according to the procedures of the University of South Dakota Institutional Review Board.

A date-stamped copy of your consent can be found in the "Attachments" tab of the application. Please make sure to use this date-stamped version when collecting signatures.

Annual continuing review is not required for this exempt study. However, two years after this approval is issued, on about January 22, 2026, we will contact you to request an update on the status of this study.

When the study is complete, you must submit a closure form to the IRB. You may close your study when you are finished collecting data, no longer have contact with the subjects, and the data have been de-identified. You may continue to analyze the existing data on the closed project.

Please promptly report to the IRB any proposed changes or additions (e.g., protocol amendments/revised informed consents. site changes, etc.) in previously approved human subjects research activities BEFORE you put those changes into place.

Any modifications to the approved study must be submitted for review through Cayuse IRB. All approval letters and study documents are located within the study details in Cayuse IRB.

If you have any questions, please contact: irb@usd.edu or (605) 658-3743.

Sincerely,

University of South Dakota Institutional Review Board

Marc Guilford, J.D.
Director, Office of Human Subjects
University of South Dakota
(605) 658-3767

Appendix 6: Tribal IRB Approval

November 29, 2023

Stacy Brasch
University of South Dakota-Vermillion
Principal Investigator

Dear Stacy,
The Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska-IRB has approved your request for the research project titled
"Educational Attainment: American Indians/Alaska Natives Phenomenological Study of a
Northeast
Nebraska Indian Reservation". Any changes to the scope must be approved by the WTN-IRB
before
implementation. Any reports or manuscripts based on the research conducted must also be
submitted
for approval to the IRB before publication.
If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at (402) 878-2380 ext. 112 or
irb@littlepriest.edu.

Sincerely,

Channing Stellato, Ph.D.
Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska IRB Coordinator

Appendix 7: Focus Group Reflections/Correspondence with Advisers

Focus Group 1 Reflection

Focus group session one took place on January 28, 2024. Four WPS alumni attended. After a bit of technical trouble, we were able to begin the session. I set the tone by sharing the reason why I was conducting the study and ensuring them that everything they shared would be confidential. They would only be identified as participants 1, 2, 3, etc. I also stressed that nothing they said would upset or offend me, so they could speak honestly and openly. I created a slide show with overarching questions so that participants could see, process, and respond. The participants were quite eager and had many positive and critical things to say about their personal experiences. In an attempt to be more objective, my role was simply to read, clarify, and if needed to summarize responses for understanding. I used a transcription program to capture everything word by word which ensured nothing was missed or misinterpreted. I had to continually check myself-especially when they began to be critical of their high school preparation which I was part of. I wanted to "defend" certain practices or explain how we were now addressing the things that concerned them about their high school/pre-college preparation. Of course, I didn't and it became easier to keep this in check.

Focus Group 2 Reflection

Focus group session two took place on January 29, 2024. Three WPS alumni attended. This group went much more smoothly as some of the technical issues were smoothed out. I was able to streamline the questions a bit more to make the process easier and more efficient. I still found that participants answered questions before posed while answering other questions. I think there is a bit more focus and streamlining that can be done before tonight's final focus group. It was much easier to keep any inherent biases in check. It did create a couple of questions that I shared with my advisers regarding the rephrasing/streamlining of questions and what happens if I only have 10-12 respondents instead of the 15 planned. Here's the original email and the response:

Two down, one to go. A couple of items I wanted to share/ask...to date, I've had 7 participants in the two sessions I've hosed. I could potentially have another 6 this evening. Is that going to be enough? Will I need to do a bit more recruiting and hose one more? Will that mess up IRB? I have nearly 100 pages of transcript so far and feel that we're reaching saturation points with many of the overarching themes. Second question. I'm figuring out ways to streamline questions each time I do a new group. Is it a huge issue if I don't pose the questions exactly as they were planned? I am finding that students answer many questions before they're asked in the scope of responding to other questions.

Thanks.

Stacy,

1. I think the 'correct' stopping point is when you reach saturation. I think you'll just have to wait and see how much new material you get from the third focus group.
2. I think that if you are changing something you specified in your IRB application you should let them know, but depending on how minor it is they might be fine with just an email. E.g., if you are still under the number of people you were approved for but you have 4 groups instead of 3. If you need to go over the number of people you'll need to amend, but it should be a quick approval.
3. In qualitative research there is no goal to pose exactly the questions as planned, that is what we mean by semi-structured. The questions are a guide to help you answer the research questions but you should be adjusting the questions as you go based on your insights and the flow of the conversation to get the information you need to answer your research questions. In qualitative, *you* are the research instrument—you get to modify and adjust as you see fit.

Gabrielle Strouse, Ph.D.

Focus Group 3

This group met on Jan 31, 2024. Two new members e attended last night. A third popped because he had to leave the Sunday group early and he had more he wanted to share. I have over 200 pages of transcripts. A lot (and I mean a lot of shared experiences), but only 9 participants. The other 5 or 6 people who have said they want to participate cannot find the time to all meet together for many reasons-work, taking master's classes, kids's activities, etc-they asked if they could just email me responses. I said I'd need to run it through my advisers. I realize this would require permission from IRB. I am not sure I need much more. I just know that 9 participants might not be enough. The question format was quite streamlined and went well. I did not have any issues remaining objective and avoiding bias. Although this was the smallest group, I got the most dialogue. I emailed advisers to see if 9 participants were sufficient to conduct the study or if I needed to host one more group.

Appendix 8: Member Check Email

I am done writing up my findings. While there will be some "fine-tuning" and revision, the data you provided me is fully intact and will remain that way unless you see any inconsistencies. At your earliest convenience, look over the following report. If you see anything that you believe has been recorded inaccurately, please let me know. I will allow you one week to respond. If I do not hear from you by March 29, I will assume everything is accurate. Again, I cannot thank each you enough for your help on this project. Have a wonderful weekend. (Note: as of April 2, 2024, no one had reached out to indicate any inconsistencies).

Appendix 9: Invitation Email for Presentation

Dear Staff:

I am writing to invite you to a very special presentation. I have finally completed my dissertation, and I want to share the findings with you. In January, I hosted 3 focus groups with alumni from WPS who had finished their bachelor's degrees (and in some cases master's degrees). The purpose of these groups was to determine what led to the successful completion of their degree. I learned a great deal about what our school is doing well and somethings that we have room to improve. If you're assigned to be at any other meetings at this time, they will take precedence. This meeting is not required, but I'd love for you to attend via Zoom. It will take about an hour. Right now, I am planning it for 2:30 PM on Thursday, April 18. However, that could change if there's a meeting that I am required to attend. I will update you if the time changes. I will be recording this meeting, so if you're unable to attend, I can share the video link with you as well. There will be people from the community, tribal council, HCI, NICC, LPTC, and USD invited as well. I hope to see you there.

Title: Educational Attainment: American Indians/Alaska Natives

Phenomenological Study of a Northeast Nebraska Indian Reservation

Apr 18, 2024 02:30 PM Central Time (US and Canada Meeting ID 759

1167 4042 PasscodeQD2z15

Invite Link

https://us04web.zoom.us/j/75911674042?pwd=abbjPPxJTbHHSDl5Gn

LcNkbZdeh4sC.1

Appendix 10: Links to slideshow and video of presentation

Link to slideshow:
https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1tYjGmgdJl2E4Tx_JtR8vsMQLkgkr1-
CqVUOc3lcLoRY/edit#slide=id.g2c6fc04f135_0_5

Link to video presentation:
https://app.screencastify.com/v3/watch/boZQvgQfsBu5hmcX50M9