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# Examining the Lived Experiences of Native American Students at Predominantly White Institutions

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EXAMINING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF NATIVE AMERICAN  
STUDENTS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

By

Zachary Palmer

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Corey Rumann

Lincoln, Nebraska

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Examining the Lived Experiences of Native American  
Students at Predominantly White Institutions

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University of Nebraska, 2018

Advisor: Corey Rumann

This qualitative research study sought to examine the lived experiences and sense of belonging of Native American students at a predominantly white institution. Three participants were each interviewed twice for data collection purposes. Findings from data analysis process indicated that establishing and maintaining relationships within the campus community facilitated a sense of belonging and that racial microaggression were present in the campus environment which often made participants feel hesitant to reveal their Native American identity. Recommendations are offered for higher education professionals and areas for future research are noted.

## **Dedication**

*This thesis is dedicated to Native American students across the country. Without your persistence to better yourself and your tribe, our people wouldn't be able to preserve our culture and traditions while sustaining our ways of life in an ever changing world.*

*To my mother & father Shelly and Tim Palmer, who both worked two jobs during my upbringing to ensure that education was a possibility for me and for encouraging me to go out and earn what I want in life. And without whom I would not be pursuing a graduate level degree.*

## **Acknowledgements**

To the participants of my study, I would like to thank you for taking the time to share your stories with me and entrust me with the information you provided to ensure a better future for Native American students attend college across the nation. I hold your stories close as if they were my own. The experiences you have shared with me and the time you gave up to participate in this study is greatly appreciated. Without it, I wouldn't have completed my thesis requirements. I come from similar background from being both on and off the reservation, balancing the walk between two worlds: the Native world and the modern world.

To Dr. Corey Rumann, you have proved to be an invaluable service in helping me to understand and navigate this process while continually challenging me to strive to be better. You guided me along while giving me the independence to choose for myself what topic I would be researching and what avenues I would pursue to attain those goals. Without your confidence in me, I wouldn't have the self-confidence I have today to complete this journey. Thank you so much for believing in me and allowing me to define my own path within this program. Throughout this graduate program you have continually supported me, provided comfort in moments of need, and challenged me to break the norms. Your hard work and dedication to your students is greatly appreciated.

To my supervisor Dr. Jan Deeds, who has given me a platform from which I am able to continue and develop my own advocacy and activism for various forms of issues that I believe passionately about. At times when I needed guidance, you were there to help make sense of my journey and to process the pathways I have chosen next. Your feedback and encouragement has helped me not only through navigating this program, but also my work as a graduate assistant in the Women's Center for the past two years.

To my loving family, words cannot express my deepest love and appreciation for all the sacrifices

you have made during my upbringing to get me to where I am today. Your support, love, and guidance has paved a path for me to forge my own future. Your hard work over the years to ensure my success in higher education has given me the tools and support I have needed to reach the graduate level. I am forever indebted to you and I hope to one day pay you back for everything you have given me. Without you, I wouldn't be where I am today and I wouldn't have succeed in education if it wasn't for your persistence in getting me out the door and on my own. Thank you for your love and for how much you mean to me!

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

### Introduction

As the reader, consider for a moment, your understanding of Native American tribes and cultures. Do you have an understanding of the language, family structures, and collectivistic cultural dynamics of Native American tribes? Native American cultures, for years before the colonization of the United States, functioned as a collectivistic unit based on oral traditions and teachings passed down from generation to generation. Many of these stories not having been written until recently. Just like the oral history of Native American cultures, the lived experiences of Native Americans in the modern world have yet to be explored in depth including at predominantly white institutions (PWI) in higher education in the United States. Most important to purpose of this study, was the exploration of how Native American college students interact with and persists in higher education at PWIs.

Native American students who go directly into PWIs have a harder time navigating the higher education system than those who attend a TCU (Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002). Understanding how they navigate the process and their experiences while in college will assist higher education professionals in better understanding the student's needs and ways to increase their sense of belonging to the campus community. While education may not be the highest priority for all Native Americans, it is something that current generations see as being valuable in order to better the tribal communities.

The history of higher education and Native Americans begins with the colonization efforts of Eurocentric and religious beliefs. Sources of harmful rhetoric plagued the country as efforts were made to kill the Indian, and save the man. Cabrera, Tachine, and Yellow Bird (2017)

closely examined the first-year retention rate for Native American students and found it is the lowest amongst other racial groups on campus at only 70.5%. Cabrera et al. (2017) also noted that a sense of belonging is a theoretical antecedent to persistence of Native students in higher education. Scholars have emphasized the importance of assessing students' sense of belonging in ways such as whether a student feels they are part of the campus community and how institutions could more effectively meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Cabrera et al. 2017).

Additionally, awareness of the impact of colonization is critical to understanding its impact on society and the Native American community (Brayboy, 2005). With that in mind, it is important that we evaluate the experiences of this population while attending a PWI and recommend changes to the institution and campus community to better accommodate a diverse student body. This may also lead to the decrease of racial microaggressions and indigenous stereotypes. It is also important to note the intersectionality of the participants' individual identities and how that develops their sense of belonging to the campus community.

### **Purpose Statement**

This study sought to understand the lived experiences and sense of belonging of Native American students at a PWI. I investigated how participants' experiences in college impacted their sense of belonging at a PWI university and how they interacted with the campus community. This study focused on the perspectives of participants who identified as Native American and who are enrolled at a PWI and how their experiences that shape their perceptions of the institution.

### **Significance of Study**

Native American students are often one of the most underrepresented groups on campus and do not develop a sense of belonging unless they feel a connection to the campus, staff, or community (Cabrera, et al., 2017). This is an important factor to consider in the lived experiences and persistence of Native American students who attend PWIs. While research has been conducted at both TCUs as well as PWIs as students transfer from a TCU to a PWI there is less information on the experiences of this student population who matriculate directly into a PWI.

Additionally, efforts need to be made to understand the cultural and tribal traditions of these students to make meaning of their experiences and how they connect to campus. Much of the research considers the experiences of students who first attended a TCU before transferring to a PWI. Having an established network familiar to their own tribal traditions made not only the transition into college much easier on the student but also increased their degree completion rates. It is important to understand the lived experiences of the participants who attend a PWI and how higher education professionals can implement to better the experiences of these students.

Furthermore, recognizing that colonization is endemic to society, TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) and the Family Education Model (Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002) served as the theoretical frameworks for this study addressing both the connection of higher education to Native American students and their sense of belongingness to campus. Therefore, it was imperative to listen to participants' stories and their lived experiences at a PWI in order to better understand what is needed to better serve and support this student population.

## **Research Questions**

Two research questions guided this research study to understand the participants' lived experiences while attending a PWI. The questions focused on their identity as a Native American while enrolled at a Midwestern PWI. Those questions were:

- What are the lived experiences of Native American students as they navigate through their educational journey at a predominately white institution?
- What factors within the college environment make it so the students feel, or don't feel, a sense of belonging?

### **Research Design**

The primary objective of this study was to explore how participants made meaning of their lived experiences and sense of belongingness to campus. This qualitative research study was informed by the transformative paradigm. Three participants who identify as Native American agreed to participate in the study. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich and meaningful data, while allowing for authentic relationships to develop with participants. Data collected from these interviews was transcribed verbatim and were the focus of data analysis. The data analysis process consisted of first going through the data where I began highlighting information that stood out to me based on the research questions and my understanding of the literature. Different colors were used to indicate relation to different types of potential themes that began to emerge from the data. Meeting with the advisor became more regular during this process occurring typically once a week. Those meetings allowed me to work on reducing the data further and helped to remain focused on the process without getting overwhelmed by the amount of data and work needed. Three themes emerged from that process: *Indigenous Stereotypes, Belongingness, and Openness.*

## **Researcher's Positionality**

The transformative paradigm consciously and explicitly allows the research to position themselves side by side with the less powerful in a joint effort to bring about social transformation, it places a central importance on the lives and experiences of the diverse groups that have been marginalized (Mertens, 2015, p. 21). Additionally, an understanding of my identity, experiences, connection to the population, and bias is necessary for the reader to understand my positionality in the research process.

There were many reasons I wanted to study this particular topic. I identify as Native American from tribes located in the western and south western parts of the country. I have lived both on and off the reservation while growing up. This gave me a unique perspective to relate to the experiences of the participants who also grew up on and off of a reservation. At my previous institution, which was also a PWI in the southwest region of the country, I held several positions on campus that included orientation for first year students and coordinator for the Native American Student Association. In the coordinator role for the Native American Student Association, I spent a great deal of time working with other Native American students as well as the university to ensure that cultural events happened on campus to represent that Native Americans were present within the campus community. As the research has shown, incorporating Native cultures into the curriculum and campus community increases the sense of belonging students feel.

Identifying as Native American myself, I had a unique positionality to conducting this research study. I was able to build a relationship with the participants and relate to their experiences as a Native American college student. I have attended three previous institutions that are predominantly white, and was active in the Native American student organization. The

challenges I faced in college caused me to develop certain perceptions of PWIs and how I made meaning of my own sense of belonging to those institutions. Because of these experiences and previous perceptions of PWIs, I sought to understand if my own experiences are shared amongst other Native Americans at PWIs and explore ways in which we can continue to develop change.

### **Definition of Terms**

There are terms that will be used throughout this thesis that may not be familiar to the reader. Therefore, the following terms have been defined to give a better understanding of the language being used.

*Native American:* This term is used to describe the group of individuals who identify as Native American/Alaskan Native and have association with a federally recognized tribe.

*Indigenous:* This is a term is used to describe those who identify as Native American and will be used interchangeably throughout this body of work to represent the same population.

*Predominantly White Institutions (PWI):* This term is used to describe the institution whose student population is majority white identifying with racial minorities making up less than that of the white student population.

*Tribal Colleges or Universities (TCU):* This term is used to describe the institution that predominantly serves students of Native American identity and are often located on tribal reservations to serve that community.

### **Delimitations**

The confines of this study involved students who are enrolled at a PWI, over the age of 19, identifying as Native American, and able to meet for the number of meetings required for this

study. The age of consent in the state where this study was conducted is 19 years of age. This study only observed students who are currently enrolled at a post-secondary institution, defined as institutions that offered undergraduate and graduate level degrees. The geographic area confined this research study, as it was conducted in a Midwestern region. Participants came from different rural and urban areas within the same region in accordance to their tribal affiliation and reservations.

### **Limitations**

This was a qualitative research study and so the three participant's experiences were not intended to be generalized to the overall population of Native Americans enrolled at PWIs. Not having established previous relationships with the participants prior to the start of this study could be seen as a limitation as well as the number of participants within this study. However, from the data collected and through my interactions with participants a strong sense of their collective and individual experiences was understood. Also, as someone who had a personal understanding of the experiences of Native Americans in higher education and the history that preludes our time, I was able to demonstrate a genuine interest in listening to and understanding the stories they shared with me.

I was limited by the amount of time to conduct this study and to recruit a larger number of participants and gather more data. Though, I do feel as though the participants accurately represent the size of the Native American student population as it compares to other minority groups on campus. Being that the population is already smaller than 1%, recruiting a larger pool of participants proved to be rather difficult.

### **Conclusion**

Native American students who attend a PWI are often underrepresented and misunderstood when it comes to their experiences and belonging to campus. This study focused on the experiences of three Native American students currently enrolled at a PWI, in an effort to better understand their lived experiences on campus and their developing sense of belongingness to the campus community. The findings of this research study identified factors that led to the development of their sense of belonging and how higher education professionals can better support Native American students while attending a PWI. Additionally, recommendations for practice and future research are offered.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The study of Native American in higher education has increased over the past number of years to understand their complex and unique relationship to higher education. Brayboy (2005) found that exploring the social justice aspects of Native Americans in higher education and the colonization of this population is endemic to society. Native Americans make up one of the smallest populations on college campuses and has one of the lowest first-year retention rates of racial minorities at PWIs of just 70.5% (Cabrera et al., 2017). This has caused an increased awareness of this student population's interactions with the institution and the experiences that shape their overall persistence in college.

### **Colonial Impact and Rhetoric**

A review of the literature has uncovered several themes in what has already been studied about Native Americans in higher education. Beginning first with the establishment of colonial colleges that sought to educate the Indigenous peoples into a more civilized culture, as deemed appropriate by religious standards. One important aspect to note is the amount of harmful rhetoric used in the proposal of the institutions to justify their funding and education of Native Americans (Wright, 1997). The initial rhetoric described the Native people fueled many of the injustices they faced. As the sole purpose of prosperity and riotousness in the new world rose the era of desire to spread the gospel amongst the "heathens" of what would soon be called America (Wright, 1997). These heathens being referred to are the Indigenous people of this land. Education during the colonial age was a way for colonists to Christianize and civilize the Indigenous people as a way to assimilate them into society, rather than integrate (Wright, 1997).

Though much of the prevailing literature exaggerates the efforts to convert and civilize Native Americans to Christianity, an examination also points out various schemes in the name of Christianity to capitalize and profit the colonies (Wright, 1997). Many of the institutions would advertise that parts of their initial charter or purpose statements was for the education of the Native Americans. With over 1,000 acres of seized land from the Natives at Henrico near Jamestown, the Virginia Company in 1618 ordered “That a convenient place be chosen and set out for the planting of a University... in time to come and that in the meantime preparation be there made for the building of the said College for the Children of the Infidels.” (Wright, 1997, p. 73). Out of a vile scheme built on profit, the New England colonists constructed the Harvard Indian College which seemed to have benefited the English scholars as opposed to the Natives for whom it was intended. Though the actual Indian college was completed in 1656. The first Native American student did not enter Harvard until 1660. And, during the nearly four decades of the college’s existence it had only housed four Native students. The last Native scholar to attend Harvard was in 1685. The propaganda and interest in educating Indians at Harvard was merely a cover-up for the intention to use the education of Native people propaganda to extract English funds for the survival of the colonists (Wright, 1997).

### **Historical Eras in Native Education**

With rhetoric such as heathen, barbarous, savage, infidel, uncivilized, etc; the process of deculturalization of the Native people of America began. Either through the avenues of education or religious cleansing, the process of assimilation had begun to sweep eastward from the initial colonies. As we take a look at this transition, we note three different time frames while studying Native American education. In a study on the history of Native Americans in higher education by McClellan, Fox, and Lowe (2005) broke it down into three separate eras: Colonial Era, Federal

Era, and the Self-Determination Era. McClellan et al. (2005), noted that a reason for the failure of the institutions was that the founders were more interested in the appeal to educate Native Americans as a source of fundraising for their colonial growth, rather than education. A second reason given was that Native Americans saw this Euro-American higher education as having absolutely no value to offer them and their traditional ways of life, thus resisting to assimilate through education. There was an obvious disconnect from preserving cultural values in these educational formats.

The second era, the Federal Era, began with the development of many, many treaty resolutions between Native Americans and the United States government. During 1778-1871, ninety-seven treaties were signed with the intention of educating Native Americans (McClellan et al., 2005). In September of 1830, the first treaty with actual provisions for higher education (scholarship funding) was signed with the Choctaw Nation (McClellan et al., 2005). The Federal Era unfolded with many of the same objectives that developed throughout the Colonial Era. Those objectives included Christianization, forced acculturation, and assimilation.

The third era, the Self-Determination Era began with the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934 and the Progressive movement. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 affirmed Native American sovereignty and self-determination with regards to education, and it also included the first federally designated scholarship funds for Native American education (McClellan et al., 2005). The Progressive movement provided a change in the history for Native American education. It gave a greater appreciation for Native American culture and insisted that curriculums integrate the culture rather than suppressing it.

The historical context and eras of Native American education have established the foundation for the education of, and assimilation of, Native Americans into society apart from

their tribal traditional ways of life. This foundation provides insight into the development of theories to highlight the experiences of Native American students in higher education.

### **Theory Development**

As we see this transition to integrating Native American cultures rather than suppressing it, we also see more theoretical development in the study of Native Americans in higher educational systems. There has been an increase in the number of Native American students enrolling in universities across the country, nevertheless, many scholars are looking at the reasons behind low retention rates and high dropout rates with this population (Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002; Bowman, 2016; Brayboy, Bryan., Castagno, Angelina., & Solyom, Jessica., 2015; Cabrera, N. L., Tachine, A. R., & Yellow Bird, E. 2017; Guillory, R. M., 2009; Guillory, R. M., & Wolverton, M. Makomenaw, M. A. 2012; Thompson, M. N., Johnson-Jennings, M., & Nitzarim, R. S., 2013) Some say there is no consideration in valuing tribal traditions in the curriculum (Brayboy, 2005) and others say there is no sense of belonging for Native American students at these institutions (Makomenaw, 2012). Many of those institutions are predominantly white institutions and researchers are developing models to help us understand the experiences of the Native American college students.

One of those models comes from research done by Iris Heavyrunner and Richard DeCelles (2002), called the Family Education Model (FEM). This model was developed from a focus on replicating the extended family structure within the institution to enhance the student's sense of belonging, thus leading to higher retention rates. One assumption was to include family members in the life of college communities as partners with the institution with cultural and social activities. That way the entire family has a sense of belonging and investment in the institution.

FEM (Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002) was also developed around the concept of cultural resilience. This was easily done when developing programming at tribal colleges and universities, where the bulk of this research was conducted. Heavyrunner and DeCelles (2002) noted that FEM for tribal colleges provided Native American students with the development of a support system that could prepare them for the college culture. Many tribal customs and traditions revolve around the importance of one's family and community. What one does, learns, and gains is all at the benefit of the tribe as a whole. For Native American students who have gone through FEM programs at a tribal college before transferring to a PWI, four-year institution there has been a completion rate of four times greater than for those who enroll directly into a PWI (Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002).

A second model was developed by Jolene Bowman (2016) while researching TCUs (tribal colleges and universities) called the Many Trail Model. While studying the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians of Wisconsin, Bowman wanted a better understanding of the tribe's voices, experiences, and beliefs related to their persistence in college. Bowman (2016) based the Many Trail Model from previous work done in 1965 by Edwin Martin called the Many Trails design, which symbolizes endurance, strength, and hope from a long-suffering, yet determined people. Bowman described application of the Many Trail Model as a pathway of persistence that is constantly moving, noting that students may step out of college if they don't have the essential components to persist. However, over time, students may step back in to college once they build within themselves the components needed to persist and eventually earn their degree. Bowman cited Brayboy's 2005 TribalCrit Theory & Heavyrunner's Family Education Model as two of the four theories incorporated into the Many Trail Model. Bowman also noted a gap in the model in two specific areas. The first being the connection of

culturally responsive teaching and curriculum in high schools to open fixed mindsets while also working to end discrimination, stereotyping and prejudice. The second being the need for more tribal traditions, languages, and cultural programming for building and sustaining the native community (Bowman, 2016).

One of the more impactful theories to the study of Native Americans in education was developed by Bryan Brayboy called TribalCrit (Tribal Critical Race Theory). Similar to Wright who discussed the beginning of colonialization Brayboy's theory, in part, recognizes the past and the intergenerational trauma impacting tribes and their advancements in today's modern world. Brayboy stated that his model was developed based on Critical Race Theory (CRT), though he viewed CRT as being initially developed on a "black-and-white binary" (Brayboy, 2005. p. 429). A number of other theories have been built around CRT: TribalCrit, LatCrit, and AsianCrit. Brayboy also noted that in this TribalCrit theory, there is an understanding that colonization is endemic to society. As discussed earlier, historical colonization still influences society to date. Not only with education, but with social constructs that are harmful to the Native American culture and ways of life.

A brief summary of the nine tenets of TribalCrit was outlined by Brayboy:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.

5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429-430)

Brayboy's TribalCrit asserts that the goal, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, of interactions between the dominant U.S. society and American Indians has been to change ("colonize" or "civilize") Native Americans to be more like those who hold power in the dominant society. For example, boarding schools were intended to "kill the Indian and save the man" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430).

Brayboy goes into depth on each tenet of TribalCrit, and summarizes that it was developed to expose the inconsistencies of institutions and structured systems as they apply to Native Americans and how to better the situation. Although TribalCrit is applicable in a number of disciplines, it is heavily focused on education. It is a theoretical lens that practitioners could use to better understand the lived experiences of Native American students and communities (Brayboy, 2005). TribalCrit is an important resource in the understanding and development of educational practices that benefits Native American students. It also acts as an important

theoretical design that incorporates the educational experiences of American Indian students, teachers, and researchers in the areas of classroom participation, language revitalization, lack of Native students graduating from high schools and colleges, multiple literacies, overrepresentation of Native students in special education, pedagogy, teacher-training, and many other areas (Brayboy, 2015).

### **Intergenerational Trauma, Family Influence and Barriers to Higher Education**

Guillory (2008), surmised that family support and persistence is important to the success of Native American students. With the historical trauma from the past, many family members that had experienced that trauma do not see having an education as a benefit for their people. They often see leaving the community and pursuing advanced education as doing more harm to their communities as it assimilates Native Americans to the modern world rather than enriching their traditional ways of life (Guillory, 2008). On the other hand those that do support going through the process of higher education and support their student has shown to have a positive influence on the retention rates of Native American college students (Guillory, 2008). Thompson (2013) found that although higher education has historically been used as a means for cultural extinguishment recent data has indicated that Native Americans endorse higher education to facilitate societal improvement. Increasing our attention on cultural identity factors that relate to persistence intentions among Native American students in higher education is critical.

Guillory (2009) also acknowledged that financial factors remain a barrier for Native American students. Along with financial barriers, Guillory (2009) noted that there is also a lack of academic preparation for Native American students in grades K-12. Many of the students in Guillory's study said that they were in essence, rushed through the system, and that preparation for college was not a priority in reservation schools. This perspective was taking into account

both traditional and nontraditional students as they went through the higher education process. Guillory concluded that the emphasis on family and tribal communities reflect the communal culture these students come from and that influences their determination and desire to pursue and complete their degree.

### **Current Research & Belongingness**

Matthew Van Alstine Makomenaw (2012) discussed Native American students' success at a PWI after transferring from a TCU. Makomenaw noted that at PWIs, three factors impact persistence and success in college for Native American students: social support, positive relationships with faculty, and racism in higher education. As noted earlier, many of the students in this population come from a culture that places family at the center of their whole thinking. Removing students from their families and tribal communities can cause a great deal of stress for Native American students and impact their success in college. Having social supports such as a multicultural center or, more specifically, a Native American Student association provide the cultural support and opportunities to remain connected to their culture while at a PWI (Makomenaw, 2012) Also, the staff at these institutions reflects the institutional values and if there is a lack of Native American representation for staff, students are less likely to build relationships at PWIs (Makomenaw, 2012). Along with that, racism is on the rise across the country. Not only making it difficult for Native American students but any POC or marginalized identity to feel a sense of belonging on campus.

Current research on the state of Native Americans in higher education is fairly scarce. Native American students make up at or below 1% of the student population at many PWI and retention rates of Native students are some of the lowest rates when compared to other racial demographics (Cabrera et al., 2017). The National Center for Education Statistics through the

Institute of Educational Sciences provided a comprehensive overview of information in their report, *The Condition of Education 2016*. Much of the reason that belongingness of the Native population is so low is that many of the PWI's don't take tribal cultures into consideration during the development of their curriculum and programming. If PWIs intentionally took local tribal cultures into consideration when developing programming or their mission, it could potentially increase the Native American population on campus and their retention rates (Cabrera et al, 2017; Brayboy, 2005; Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002). Another possible consequence of this increase in Native American students at PWIs is an increased sense of belonging for Native American students overall.

Cabrera, Tachine, and Yellow Bird (2017) closely examined the first-year experiences of Native American students as a critical component to the students' sense of belonging on campus. The first-year retention rate for Native American students is one of the lowest amongst other racial groups on campus at only 70.5%. Also noting that a sense of belonging is a theoretical antecedent to persistence of Native students in higher education. Scholars have emphasized the importance of assessing students' sense of belonging in ways such as whether a student feels they are part of the campus community and how institutions could better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Cabrera et al. 2017).

Two studies have been conducted on Native American students' sense of belonging in college. One was conducted by a Native scholar, Oxendine (2015). Oxendine argued that the recognition and incorporation of cultural integrity contribute to Native students' sense of belonging. Cultural integrity being defined as "the ability to maintain a strong cultural identity through engaging one's culture as an anchor" (Oxendine, 2015, p. 11). Even more so, findings of the study revealed that the sense of belonging concerns the relationship between the student and

the campus community. The importance of the first-year experience of Native American students influences their persistence of higher education. Cabrera et al. (2017) research identified elements of the campus environment such as campus climate and culture that could be associated with the extent to which Native American college students feel like they belong in the campus community. It is also important to note that there are contextual variables that likely shape the way in which students experience the campus environment and moderate the relationship between campus and their sense of belonging. Cabrera et al. (2017) noted that further research was needed to better understand the relationship between campus environments and sense of belonging for Native American students.

## **Chapter 3 – Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Research on Native American students in higher education, their persistence, and their sense of belonging is an increasing focus of study. That information allows those who study and work with this population to develop a better understanding of the complexities of Native Americans' experiences going to a PWI. This research is useful in highlighting the lived experiences of Native American students in college and their connection to the campus community. It is imperative that educators understand the individualized and historic experiences of this population. Having this understanding can improve the efforts made by faculty and staff to remove barriers that Native Americans face at PWIs. However, based on the review of the literature, the participants' stories of their lived experiences while attending college has not been investigated in depth strictly at PWIs to highlight a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

### **Study Rationale**

Native American students are among the least represented ethnic minority in higher education at PWIs and often have the lowest first-year retention rates in college (Cabrera et al., 2016). While some scholars have identified factors that influence persistence for Native American students, limited knowledge exists in understanding Native students' connection and belongingness to campus. The literature I have reviewed has remained limited on the study of this population, with much of the research being published in the past 10 years. Using an indigenous-lens perspective allowed me to view how Native American students' experiences influence their persistence, belongingness, and openness about their Native identity.

Research on Native American students has increased over the previous years with focus on both TCUs and PWIs. Based on my review of the literature, Native American students' experiences of going directly to a PWI has not been investigated with the depth needed to increase enrollment and retention of this student population. The individual perspectives of the participants is valuable information to highlight the factors and experiences these students face at a PWI, to ensure that the support these students receive in the future is adequate and their connection to campus is strengthened. In addition, the purpose of this study was to increase awareness of the participants' perceptions of the university as well as the stereotypes and microaggressions they experience on campus. Providing an understanding that this student population has a unique history with higher education and the Eurocentric models of education have had a devastating impact on the history of Native Americans. Getting to the core of those experiences through research and by narrating participant experiences, information will be offered to create a more inclusive and supportive environment in which Native American students can succeed and develop a sense of belonging to the campus community.

### **Research Questions**

Two research questions guided this study:

- What are the lived experiences of Native American students as they navigate through their educational journey at a predominately white institution?
- What factors within the college environment make it so the students feel, or don't feel, a sense of belonging?

These questions incorporated important factors that I decided were critical to broadening the existing work on understanding of the lived experiences and barriers of this population. These questions guided this study by recognizing the individual perspectives of the participants' experiences at a PWI and the experiences that impacted their sense of belongingness to the institution.

TribalCrit theory developed by Bryan Brayboy (2005) and Heavyrunner's Family Education Model were two main theories of focused used to guide the design of this study and the data collection procedures. TribalCrit theory created a lens that provided a better understanding of how education has shaped Native American communities in the past, as well as how it is shaping the future of Native Americans in higher education institutions. The Family Education Model allowed for better understanding of the collectivistic culture that Native Americans incorporate into their lived experience in both family and social settings. I benefited from the framework as it allowed me to better connect to the participants in ways a non-Native American researcher might not have. Being able to connect and relate to the participants personally, provided a better understanding of their lived experiences and belongingness to a PWI.

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

In order for any research to be considered ethical and legitimate, certain standards and conditions need to be met in order to gain approval to begin research sanctioned by a research institution. To show that I was made aware of the standards that needed to be upheld when investigating and interviewing human subjects, I completed the Consortium for Institutional Review Board Training Initiative in Human Subjects Protection (CITI).

I then began to think of a topic that I was passionate about to investigate and spend an adequate amount of time and energy to complete the requirements of a thesis. I picked my topic based on my positionality and identifying as part of the population, and submitted a detailed application describing who and what I planned to study. I also described how I would go about collecting data, and the importance of this study. I submitted it to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was granted approval on January 8, 2018 to commence my research (Appendix A).

### **Research Design**

It is important to select a proper methodology when investigating this populations' experiences of being at a PWI and identifying as a Native American to gather meaningful data and to analyze it effectively. Many of the researchers investigating the lived experiences of Native American students have collected data on their experiences at TCUs before transferring to PWIs and how important it is to the persistence of this population in college to have models mimicking their tribal social structure rather than Native American students who go directly to a PWI. This research expands on current research to include data collected from individuals who went directly into a PWI that potentially highlights the experiences and perspectives of Native American students in college. It is essential to understand the lived experiences of this student population, their belongingness to campus and how they interact with the campus community. Having this understanding can improve their overall experience and retention of Native American identifying students. Mertens (2015) noted that in qualitative research individual perspectives incorporate different "beliefs, values, intentions, and meanings, as well as social, cultural, and physical contextual factors that affect causal relationships." (p.238). With this framework, it was determined that the in-depth interview process was necessary for this research

study to highlight the lived and individualistic experiences of the participants. It was my intent to gain a better understanding of how participants made meaning of their experiences and developing a sense of belonging to campus. Therefore, I chose to use a qualitative methodology for this study.

Mertens (2015) described the transformative paradigm through four characteristics: (1) placing a central importance on the lives and experiences of marginalized groups, (2) analyzes how and why inequities based on identity factors are shown in an asymmetric power relationship, (3) political and social actions, and (4) how it shapes the approach within the research (p. 21). Compared to other research designs, transformative research utilizes a more conscious effort to collect data from the participants to have their experiences heard, understood, and valued.

Transformative researchers consciously and explicitly position themselves side by side with the less powerful in a joint effort to bring out social transformation (Mertens, 2015, p. 21). It places central importance on the lives and experiences of marginalized groups. It also includes the study of the oppressors' means of dominance. Mertens (2015) notes that within the transformative paradigm, there is tension from trying to put indigenous research into a western-developed structure. But within this paradigm, the indigenous voice can be brought out as a way of stretching and enriching understandings of the meaning of conducting research for the purpose of social transformation (Mertens, 2015, p. 27).

Not only is the relationship between the knower and the would-be known interactive, it also takes into consideration the cultural complexities of that relationship (Mertens, 2015). Gathering holistic data requires that the interview questions cannot be completely constructed

beforehand and must be able to adapt to the interview as it progresses (Mertens, 2015). The choice to do a semi-structured interview protocol was made as the primary data gathering method. Information about the participants' backgrounds will be included in chapter 4 to give readers knowledge about how the participants' perceptions have been formed.

### **Research Site**

This research study was conducted in a Midwestern state that is predominantly White, Christian, politically conservative, and middle class. The state is made up mainly of rural towns with few middle to large cities and there are some reservations in the state. The institution is located in a Midwestern state with an approximate enrollment of 26,000 students with an estimated 15% of the student population identifying as a racial minority. Based off of those demographics, the institution classifies as a large, public PWI.

### **Participant Selection Process**

Participant criteria for this study included:

- Must Identify as Native American/American Indian
- Must be 19 years of age or older
- Must be enrolled as a full-time student at an accredited 4-year PWI.

Participant selection began following appropriate IRB approval. After approval, students were recruited to participate in this study by using a purposeful sampling process which allowed me to reach out to the population through resources in the Multicultural Center on campus (Mertens, 2015). I recruited participants primarily from a Native American Student organization

and the majority of the members are students who identify as Native American. Once I identified participants, I asked if they knew of any other Native American students who would be interested in participating in this study and to get into contact with me. This method of recruiting participants is typically referred to as a snowball sampling process (Mertens, 2015). A recruitment flyer was posted to the organizations Facebook page where members of the community could access information about the study and my contact information (Appendix B). I asked a colleague to share the flyer with more members of the organization who may not have been part of the Facebook group. Initial contact was through email communication to establish the date of our first interview. Three participants were selected based on the criteria for this study.

Students who volunteered to participate in this study were asked to provide the following information: their name for record keeping purposes which was later changed to a preferred pseudonym, age, year in school, major, and tribal affiliation. This information was kept confidential by using a password protected file on my personal computer. The participants chosen for this study included: Shelly, Jehan, and Chelsea (all pseudonyms). Detailed participant profiles will be provided in Chapter 4. I did not have an established relationship with any of the participants in this study which made establishing a relationship and developing rapport particularly important during the first interview.

## **Data Collection**

The qualitative method of using interactive interviews between the participants and I was best suited to get at participants' individual lived experiences. Socially constructed ideas can be gathered through interactive interviews and open-ended responses (Mertens, 2015). Although, it

can result in multiple conflicting ideas from participants, it is able to offer more holistic data. Gathering holistic data requires that interview questions cannot be completely constructed prior and must be able to adapt to the interview as it progresses (Mertens, 2015). Based on this the choice to use semi-structured interviews as the primary data collecting method was made.

I met with potential participants at a location mutually agreed upon to discuss the protocol in more detail. Before interviews could commence, I provided each participant with an informed consent document (see Appendix C) detailing the research study, its purpose and risk, and acknowledgement that participants could opt-out of participating at any time during their participation in the study.

This study aimed to describe the participants' lived experiences and their development of a sense of belonging to a PWI. Data was collected through the lens of the transformative paradigm in an intentional and meaningful way so that the process would respect and recognize the lived experiences of the participants. I strived to achieve this by using a semi-structured interview process with open-ended questions to help participants narrate how they made meaning of their experiences at a PWI. In-person semi-structured interviews provide flexibility in participants' answers while providing some structure with an interview protocol to help guide the process (Mertens, 2015). Additionally, having two separate interviews allowed participants and myself time to process what they expressed in the first interview. That process also, allowed for a deeper reflection. Conducting two interviews with each participant emphasized the importance of building rapport and showing genuine interest in their experiences. Initial interviews ranged from 55 to 59 minutes. Two interviews provided enough time for the participants to reflect upon their prior experiences of identifying as a Native American at a PWI and their perceptions of

belonging on campus. The second interviews ranged from 45 to 50 minutes, which allowed me to clarify any unclear information and ask follow up questions from the previous interview. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix D.

The privacy and confidentiality of the participants was vital in this study. All recordings and documents associated with this research study were filed and stored on a password-protected device that were only accessible to me. Participants were also given pseudonyms to protect their identity and confidentiality. All interviews were conducted in a close, private space which were agreed upon by the participant and myself. The recording device used for this study was an audio recording device, and the audio files were transferred once the interview was complete to a password protected folder.

Interviews were conducted during January 2018 and February 2018. I utilized locations on campus that were easily accessible to the participants while protecting their anonymity. The location was booked prior to the interview to ensure no disruptions would occur during the interview process. All interviews were conducted in person with each participant.

## **Data Analysis**

Mertens (2015) described three steps in analyzing data:

Step 1: Preparing the Data for Analysis

Step 2: Data Exploration

Step 3: Data Reduction

To prepare the data I transcribed the nearly six hours of data collected from the voice recorded interviews verbatim. Transcribing the audio recordings personally was helpful in critically listening to and comprehending the participants' stories during the data analysis process. Both during and after transcribing the audio recordings, I took the time to write journal entries to reflect upon the interview process and the recordings to better understand the participants' stories as well as my own reactions during the process. Having the audio recordings accessible on a password protected device allowed me to review them to get a sense of the tone of the participants' stories during parts of the transcript that indicated it was a meaningful expression. By that, I was able to tie the written transcript to the emotional tone of the participants when applicable. With over 150, double spaced pages of data, it was important to synthesize the information, which led to step 2 of the data analysis.

In step 2, I first went through the data and began highlighting information that stood out to me based on the research questions and my understanding of the literature. Different colors were used to indicate relation to different types of potential themes that began to emerge from the data. Meeting with the advisor became more regular during this process occurring typically once a week. Those meetings allowed me to work on reducing the data further and helped to remain focused on the process without getting overwhelmed by the amount of data and work needed.

In step 3, the different colored notes were used to create codes, themes, and subthemes to simplify the data. When themes and subthemes were identified they were separated and broken down by their respective relationships. Data from each participant was now becoming part of one document as an incorporation of all their experiences based on the selected themes. Themes

and subthemes were continually reviewed and reorganized to determine if the data would continue to be part of the thematic findings. Colleagues who are familiar with qualitative research processes were consulted to provide encouragement and clarification on the process of coding and discovering themes. They did not look at the transcripts, rather they offered advice on the process based on their past experiences with conducting research.

Throughout the data analysis process I continued to journal and record my reflections on the data analysis process. These reflections were important because it gave me a record of the data analysis process and recorded my thoughts and feelings as I analyzed the data. Based on that process three themes emerged which will be described in chapter 4.

### **Trustworthiness**

This study was designed to better understand the lived experiences of participants and their interactions with campus. In order to establish that this research is considered trustworthy and credible, additional efforts were made. The components that help establish trustworthiness in qualitative research were noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and included: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

#### ***Credibility***

Credibility involves activities that increase the probability that credible findings will be produced through three activities: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Though I did not have a preestablished relationship with each participant, I was able to relate to them by also identifying as a Native American student. In addition to establishing a relationship with the participants, it was critical to conduct two in

depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant as part of the research process.

Conducting two interviews increased my depth of engagement in the process and deepened my relationship with the participants. Lincoln and Guba noted that it is imperative the researcher spend enough time becoming oriented with the situation and that prolonged engagement requires that the investigator be involved sufficiently long to take into account any distortions that might enter the data, first, by dealing with their own personal distortions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302). The time I spent with participants and my ongoing, personal reflections during the research process strengthened the credibility of this study.

The second component of credibility, persistent observation, provides depth. Persistent observation is incorporated through the data analysis process by sorting through the data and sifting through extraneous information that would take away from the participants' stories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purpose of persistent observation is to identify the characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issues being pursued and focusing on them in great detail.

Triangulation is the third component of improving the probability that the findings and interpretations of the study would be found credible. Triangulation can be addressed by incorporating the use of multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, three different participants provided three different sources of data. Two semi-structured interviews were utilized as the method of gathering data. During the data collection process, only one investigator was present as the advisor acted primarily as a source of support and oversight of the research process to ensure

credibility. The use of multiple theories and frameworks such as TribalCrit theory and theories on Native American students were incorporated to provide the framework of this study.

Additional components that help establish credibility and trustworthiness include the following: peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Regular meetings with the advisor to review the data and discuss emerging themes and sub-themes provided peer debriefing throughout the process.

Member checking is considered the most crucial technique for establishing credibility according to Lincoln and Guba (1985). This was done by meeting with each participant and providing them with the findings of this study. During the meeting participants were able to provide feedback to correct any misrepresentations that might have come up during the data analysis process. This third meeting was conducted as a source of member checking to establish credibility and trustworthiness of this research study. Participants had the opportunity to review the findings and offer feedback. Feedback was taken into consideration, although none of it changed the way the findings were written. Rather how to clarify the emotional expression of their written stories.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability is a method designed to take data from a sample population and know that this sample that is being researched is representative of the overall population to which the generalization is to apply (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability can be gained through providing the widest possible range of information for inclusion by including a thick description

of the population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings in chapter four provided that rich and thick description and included a profile of each participant.

### *Dependability*

Dependability is a method that acts as a form of triangulation by having more than one person provide quality to the study by using “overlapping methods” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 317). The advisor acted as a support system and provided guidance by reading over and editing all portions of this study to ensure the development of a quality product and a more credible study.

### *Confirmability*

Confirmability is the capacity to produce evidence that the research study has been conducted, the major technique for establishing confirmability is the confirmability audit which cannot be conducted without documentation of records stemming from the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Six categories that address confirmability include raw data, data reduction and analysis, data reconstruction and synthesis, process notes, personal notes, and instrument development information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Raw data was recorded electronically on a password protected laptop which was only accessible to the primary researcher. I kept personal notes and journal entries that helped to describe the research process and the data analysis process. This audit trail provides a road map of sorts and helps others understand my personal reflections and interpretations during the course of the study.

### **Research Reflexivity**

Conducting a qualitative research study has allowed me to reflect upon my own journey through higher education at three different PWIs as a Native American student. The beginning of this process started when I noticed a need for future research on this population and a need for exploring improvements to the experiences of Native Americans at higher education institutions. Fortunately, I have made my way up to a graduate level education while being a first-generation student. Not to mention the first in my family lineage to attain a college degree. Being the first in my family history to have a college education has been a motivating factor in my persistence to encourage both the research of and persistence of Native Americans in higher education. Utilizing this experience and the lessons I have learned from this process, I hope to further improve the overall quality of Native American students who enroll in PWIs. Being a future student affairs professional allows me to continue this work and to further explore my own role and perceptions of higher education along with my Native American identity.

I am interested in learning more about the challenges of Westernized/Eurocentric models of research as it relates to the meaning making and understanding of Native Americans. At times I felt the challenge to understand a process that doesn't necessarily account or make room for the study of and incorporation of Native American ideologies and theories. I am hopeful that this type of research continues and develops further. This process has been challenging to the fullest meaning of that word, it has also been rewarding as I have not previously conducted an independent research study. Dealing with both anxiety and depression, it was important for me to continually stay in contact with my advisor to alleviate any anxiety and self-doubt. I am proud of my overall personal and academic growth that will continue to provide me a number of opportunities in the future. I have expressed my interest in pursuing a doctorate degree, but in the

field of psychology. And this process will help me to better comprehend the research portions of such program.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described the methodology and data collection methods utilized in this study. This study used a transformative paradigm and was accompanied by the use of a qualitative methodology. This chapter outlined participant recruitment, how interviews were conducted, and the data analysis process. In the next chapter, findings generated from the participant interviews and data analysis will be presented.

## Chapter 4 - Findings

### Introduction

This qualitative research study was designed to develop a better understanding of the lived experiences of Native American identifying students at a large, 4-year predominantly white institution. There is research on Native American students but much of it focuses on their experiences at tribal colleges and universities (TCU), rather than PWI's. This population comes from a long history of experiencing harmful rhetoric, intergenerational trauma, and lack of representation in educational settings. These students not only have to live up to societal standards of academia but also must find a way to bridge the gap between the modern world and the Native world. The research questions for this study were designed to understand the lived experiences of Native American students attending a large, public, PWI and how their Native identities played a role in their education. Those questions were:

- What are the lived experiences of Native American students as they navigate through their educational journey at a predominately white institution?
- What factors within the college environment make it so the students feel, or don't feel, a sense of belonging?

From the data that was collected, themes emerged that gave light to the importance of understanding the lived experiences of this student population at a PWI. The related themes are: (1) Indigenous Stereotypes, (2) Belongingness, and (3) Openness.

According to the participants, this was their first time being offered the opportunity to speak on behalf of their identity and experiences while attending a PWI. It was an opportunity to reflect upon their years in college, and the experiences that either hindered or facilitated their growth and belonging. Many of the experiences shared during data collection had to do with racial

identity, and how other identities of the participants interacted with the institution. Many of the experiences expressed in this chapter will give insight into one of the smallest racial minority populations at a PWI. Interviews and data were collected by using a semi-structured interview protocol that allowed for an in-depth conversation for participants to feel comfortable sharing their stories. A follow up interview was scheduled which allowed the interviewer and participant to provide some clarity from the previous interview and add additional commentary, if needed. The three themes listed above will be discussed in this chapter.

### **Introduction to Participants**

The participants in this study shared some commonalities but came from different tribal backgrounds. The three participants were registered with a federally recognized tribe of the United States. All have been accepted and are currently enrolled at a PWI with academic scholarships. None of the participants have any tribal scholarships funding their education which resulted in them enrolling at their current institution on the grounds that the financial aid packages offered by the institution were worth the investment. The three participants' reservation lands fall within the Midwest region. Two of the participants are undergraduates, while Chelsea is a PhD student. Each of the participants also have an individual in their family who is an alcoholic which is consistent with the rate of alcoholism found in many Native American communities. Two participants have a family member who has, at one point, gone through the higher education process ranging from technical and community colleges to four-year institutions. Chelsea and Jehan have family members who have earned a technical or college degree while Shelly is a first-generation college student.

### **Participants**

Pseudonyms were given to all participants. The following descriptions of each participant are based on information shared during the interviews. I did not know any of the participants before they were recruited for this study so establishing a trustworthy connection with each participant was critical during my interview process. These descriptions provide the reader with important context to better understand the participants' stories and their lived experiences that were shared during the data collection process.

***Jehan.*** Jehan is currently 21 years old and is a second-year public relations major. She was from a suburb outside of a large, metropolitan city before moving to the city where she is currently attending college to finish her high school education. She has an older brother who is attending college at a different and smaller liberal arts college in a different state. Jehan identifies as Winnebago from the Winnebago tribe of a Midwestern state. She also identifies as gay and has always been curious about the Two-Spirit identity often given to Native Americans who identify as LGBT.

Jehan shares a close connection with the local Lutheran Church and is an active member within their activities. Education was an important part of growing up for Jehan and her brother, and both were expected to attend college after high school. Her first year of college was unexpectedly tumultuous due to a number of reasons including being separated from her support circle (family), her dog, and mental health related issues. She tries to have a more active role in campus involvement and has developed a new social circle that acts as her support system for her. Although Jehan acknowledges that she may not look like your stereotypical Native American by her skin tone, she still holds her identity and culture with a high amount of respect. She is also aware of how her identities intersect, as well as how they relate to her experiences at a PWI.

Jehan recognizes the lack of representation for Native Americans on campus, and has often felt as if she couldn't fully express her intersecting identities. She felt that same fear when she thought about the experiences of her brother attending college out of state. Much to her surprise he is doing well for himself and is not as worried as she was before she visited his institution. Much of her own fear stems from the current campus climate at her respective institution, and across the country when it comes to race and other intersecting identities.

### *Chelsea*

Chelsea is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Band of Indians, and spent much of her childhood growing up near the Cheyenne River until she went to high school where her family moved to a Midwestern state. Her family always told her to follow her dreams, and when it came to her education Chelsea took it upon herself to make it as far as she could go. Both of her parents went to technical schools and that was her initial goal until reaching high school where she was determined to make it to a four-year institution. She is currently in a PhD program, with specific goals in mind for what she has planned after graduation. Part of her inspiration is to move back to the reservation after completing her education to promote higher education and inspire the next generation to become interested in the STEM fields.

Chelsea also has intentions to develop grant funded programming to provide outreach to Native American communities to promote higher education. She has a passion for this after recognizing that during her k-12 education, her family wasn't able to afford to take her to college visits. So instead of putting it in the hands of the students she wants to take a more proactive role in inspiring Native American youth to want an education. She shared that her father wasn't a big part of her life after the age of five when he left to his home reservation and continues to deal with his alcoholism.

If it wasn't for academic scholarships and her graduate assistantship Chelsea likely would not be in a Ph.D. program. Like other Native American scholars, part of what she wants to preserve is the notion that you return back to your communities when you leave to better it and inspire younger generations to follow through with their dreams. Like Jehan, Chelsea is also very conscious about how others view her as she doesn't look like your stereotypical Native American because she has a lighter complexion. This often makes her hesitate before opening up about her identity. However, throughout the years she has become more comfortable about being open and having dialogue about her identity as a Native American woman in the STEM field.

### ***Shelly***

Shelly is a 4<sup>th</sup> year, Secondary English and Language Arts Major from the Ponca and Santee tribes of the Midwest. Shelly and her older brother are the first in their family to get a college education. She grew up in a small town just outside the borders of the reservation as a child. Her father was not around starting at a young age leaving her mother and aunts to raise her and her siblings. Her mother received a GED and had little knowledge about how to help her two children navigate the higher education process. Shelly is an active member of the institution's Native American Student Association and plays a key role in keeping the organization active on campus.

Shelly has a full schedule as she navigates her final semesters within the program. She is one of two minority students in her academic cohort and has experienced some challenges with that reality. Like other minority students, she often perceives her accomplishments of getting into college and into her academic program were because she is Native American and is simply there to fill a quota as a person of color. She is often the point of contact from many departments and organizations who request presentations concerning Native Americans. Being the point of

contact and running the organization for several years, she has experienced burn out and is focusing on graduating soon.

A few key notes that Shelly brought up were how she has navigated through higher education and utilizing the token Native identity as a way to get ahead. She also finds herself struggling with that concept from time to time, and even questions how much the institution is truly committed to diversity and inclusion. Keeping close with the Native community on campus, she has found purpose and support from those within the organization and the multicultural center. She is on full academic scholarships from the university and doesn't receive any tribal support financially, even though it would help with her living expenses.

### **Introduction to Themes:**

Participants had a variety of experiences while attending the same institution and shared characteristics and similar experiences related to being female, openly Native American identifying, and a shared perception of being the token Native American. During the data analysis process, three themes emerged that provided both insight and context to the lived experiences of these participants. The *Indigenous Stereotypes* theme focuses on the number of life and college experiences participants shared involving racial bias, isolation, and campus community oppression. The *Belongingness* theme describes the connection participants felt or did not feel with the institution and its many internal entities. The participants were consistently asked during each interview to evaluate their sense of belonging to the institution and whether or not that connection was being fostered by the institution and its representatives. The final theme, *Openness* illustrates the participants' willingness (or hesitation) to express their identity as a Native American student on campus and their interaction with the current campus climate. Participants noted feeling like they are in a constant state of needing to prove themselves to

validate their presence at the institution, within their respected program areas, and amongst social groups when they express their Native American identity. The three themes will be discussed in detail with supporting data in this chapter. The themes and corresponding data within each will highlight the lived experiences of these participants, and their interactions with this PWI.

### **Theme I: Indigenous Stereotypes**

Although not all the participants came from living on their respective tribal reservations, they still experienced many of the stereotypes faced by Native Americans. Two participants noted that, due to the light complexion of their skin tone, they face a whole different set of stereotypes from people of color as well as white individuals. As Native American students the participants navigated through their educational experience and faced institutionalized and campus community racism. As a result, many of the participants felt as though their identities were in conflict with the institution and its values. There's also a lack of awareness of the intersectionality of different social identities, including being Native American. This theme relates primarily to the first research question examining the lived experiences of this student population.

#### ***Isolation Stemming from Indigenous Stereotypes.***

The participants recalled a number of examples of being subjected to stereotypes of the Native American community. Some they confronted and corrected, and some they questioned, "is it even worth it anymore?", or "I'm just too tired." to confront the issue.

Asking participants to recall examples of the stereotypes and racism they experienced was not explicitly stated in my semi-structured interview protocol, but those racist and stereotypical experiences were instrumental in how participants described their lived

experiences. For example, Jehan, who shared that she was also part of the LGBT community, noted that due to her light complexion she does not typically experience racial stereotypes until she expresses her Native identity. When asked about how that has impacted her experiences she shared that “it feels either ignored or you’re the token Native. There’s no in-between.” That is similar to the experiences of Chelsea and Shelly. Their Native identity is often tokenized and stereotyped by social circles, the campus community, and the university. Jehan gave this example:

There’s one teacher I know, she’s amazing and I know she meant really well. They had a guest speaker and I got called to the front in the middle of class in front of like 200 before class started so I had to scramble over all those theater seats. And I got introduced like “this is one of my Native students, Jehan.” And I shook his hand and that was it.

Jehan said that there was no reason for her to go up there other than for her teacher to point that there was “a Native student” in her class. The guest speaker of the class was addressing Native American topics as it relates to the Chief Standing Bear book. Jehan had felt tokenized and isolated from that incident stating that:

You wouldn’t do that in context of other races. Like you wouldn’t be like, “here’s my black student” or “here’s my Mexican student”. It just kind of felt really odd. And so, that’s one of the few times that I had a class where, because we talked about Native rights in that class a little bit I brought it up [Native American identity]. So when I bring it up in the context of classes, is it worth dealing with these weird things? Especially when I have anxiety.

Outside of the classroom, the participants noted times when they felt isolated and stereotyped by the campus community and in the city where the institution is located. As a PWI,

racial minorities often stand out from the majority of students on campus. Jehan's experience isn't an isolated incident. During her time at the institution she has experienced a number of harassing situations because of her racial identity and even some incidents of anger toward her, "If I saw someone being harassed, I would step in. But sometimes I started to realize that I would put my head down and not deal with it." She confronted a fellow student who was making claims that Native American's were less "culturally advanced" than "whites". She began questioning the student as to what he meant by less "culturally advanced" after he interrupted a conversation between her and a friend.

I was like, first of all culturally advanced? What does that mean? I was like, if you're going to be racist, use the correct terminology. I think he meant scientifically because the context of his argument was "scientifically advanced".

After this brief interaction with the student, Jehan was then called "Pocahontas" in a derogatory way.

I was talking to my friend about one of those racist preachers who come in. And started yelling about Natives and when I told him to "shut up!" he called me "Pocahontas". And someone tried to give him a dollar as a joke saying that he [the preacher] was the best comedian ever. And I said "don't encourage him by giving him money." And he [the student handing out the dollar] said "the drunken Indian is going to buy a beer!"

After these events, Jehan began to question if it was even "worth it anymore" or "is it worth even mentioning that you're Native" to try and combat these stereotypes and stigmas if this was the reaction she was going to get from members of the campus community. Shelly shared similar experiences about an instructor of her previous Native American studies course

who also claimed a Native American identity. In the middle of the class lecture the instructor paused and asked Shelly a question that caught her off guard:

I don't have a Native name and we were talking about Native names, well they were like a random side conversation and out of now where she asks me what mine was. And I was like, one if I had one I wouldn't tell you and two like you're just going to assume? You could have been like, do you have a Native name? But instead she was like, Shelly what's your Native name? And I was like, I don't have one and then carried on with my business.

Shelly explained that even if the instructor claimed to be Native American she would have understood that there are Natives that are connected with the culture in that way and there are natives that are not for all types of reasons. The assumption that each Native American is given a "Native name" is a common misconception that these students are continually asked. Shelly was singled out as being the only Native American in the classroom and was asked an assumption based on her racial identity. She proclaimed that she is here to learn just like everyone else, but time and time again she is continually singled out in class as "that one person." Shelly is continually stopped by professors to give her information about programs that are available to Native students. And at times intentioned isolation (being singled out) can make her feel as though she is a "unicorn".

So like, they're always willing to help. Which is understandable. But at the same time, like, I don't know. Sometimes we're always talking about treating people, I don't want to say treating people the same or equal or anything like that, but you know, just not treating them as if they're super different. Or like a unicorn. I feel like a unicorn.

Both Shelly and Jehan share similar experiences of isolation due to their Native American identity. Although Chelsea did not share an explicit example of being stereotyped or facing racial bias like the previous examples she went into great detail about how she feels as though many of her accomplishments that reflect where she is academically are due to the fact that she identifies as Native American.

***Belittling Accomplishments Due to Filling a Stereotypical Quota.***

Native identifying students have historically faced assumptions that they are only at institutions of higher education to fill racial quotas. Chelsea has had a long history of dealing with this stereotype as she worked her way through higher education to a PhD program in Chemistry. While she also credits some of her accomplishments to “being a woman in the STEM field”, she is also aware of the conversations others are having around her. When asked about how that makes her feel she stated:

It makes me angry! Because that means that they’re already discrediting everything I’ve worked for. Its like “oh that’s why she got the fellowship or the scholarship or the position”. Not just because she worked hard or got good grades or anything like that. And then it also feels even worse.

In her previous career before coming to college, she noticed the company where she was working had an exact minority quota to fill their diversity percentages. When asked about it she stated:

Yea so you always feel like ok well then I’m only going to get that job because of this. If that opportunity is there, you should still take it. Its growth for you. But then you also will have that over your head. Like, “did I deserve it or?” And then you have to prove that you did. It’s just, you’ll always have that feeling.

In a positive light, she uses it as an example that “we did it” when Natives fill a certain position to show that “we’re here”. Chelsea shared her perspective when looking at Native American students feeling as though they’re filling a quota as being in a constant state of having to “prove yourself” to others. In addition, she mentioned feeling as though she is a “collector’s item” to others in the field of academia.

When I got the fellowship. I’ll never forget, which I love my advisor and I have a lot of respect for her, she’s a cool lady. But she just doesn’t understand. But when you get it you’re like, well you know 17,000 people applied for this and you are Native, and you are a woman, and you are in science. So that’s probably the only reason why you got it. And you feel really crappy because you’re like, I’ve worked really hard and I’ve had to deal with a lot of stuff and I spoke in my personal statement, it was very personal. And for you to just write that up to me being in a subcategory of a population so that I’m only worthy because of it.

She noted that she has only felt this in the academic setting, which has been increasing as she makes her way through her PhD program.

It just makes you feel, I don’t know. Like no matter what you do and all the things that you will accomplish it will only amount to because you are Native. And it makes it sound like it’s a bad way. And it’s like, if it’s not going to change I want to see it in a more positive way. Like, “Yea! I did get that because I was Native. Because I was strong. Because I worked hard!”

Shelly and Chelsea shared similar experiences and feelings about being the “token Native” who is only here to “fill a quota”. Shelly, who is on a full ride scholarship for her academics, calls it a “white man’s world”. When she was applying for her academic program she

felt as though she only got into the program because they noticed on her application that she identified as Native American.

And part of me feels like I got into this program because they were like “oh look, there’s a Native coming through our program.” Like, “let’s bring her in here.” And so ever since then I’ve felt like in my classes I always have to bring like, that diverse voice and that different voice. Whether that’s Native or just a minority voice in general.

Shelly noticed throughout the first year in her academic program that it is designed for “white teachers to teach black and brown students”. Shelly values the information she is learning in the class, but it is “geared towards white people” as she is only one of two minority students in the cohort. When I asked her if she has ever felt like her education had suffered from these stereotypes she stated that:

No, because I’ve always been told just like, “it’s a white man’s world”. So you just have to play their game a little bit in order to get what we need. It’s kind of crappy, but I mean.

She was later recruited to student government, because she was representing the “Native voice” on campus. Once she realized she wasn’t able to put plans into action, she soon left student government and began to center her focus in on the Native American student organization. Like Chelsea, Shelly has adjusted her outlook on simply “filling a quota” and has intentions of using education as a powerful tool to protect her tribes.

I think it [being tokenized] definitely helped me get my foot in the door in a lot of things. I mean, like my brother hates when I say this but sometimes when he’s applying for jobs or applications, I’ll just be like “you’re Native, so you’re probably going to get a chance”. I hate to say that but, I mean sometimes you just have to use that token to your advantage

to be able to get to where you need to go. Like it sucks being a token, but it's a white man's world. You have to learn how to work the system sometimes.

In a way, Shelly is utilizing the stereotype of being a token Native that "fills a quota" at times to her advantage. When asked about if that causes any discomfort for her Shelly responded with: "if I don't do it then who is going to do it?"

## **Theme II: Belongingness**

The feeling of belonging to a campus community can stem from social interactions with the campus community to the connection with the institution as a whole. Through the data analysis process a theme emerged that indicated participants had either felt a sense of belonging or none at all depending on timing and connections in the University community. Participants' initial conception of belonging to the institution and campus community, their disconnection from feeling a sense of belonging, and the factors that initiated that transition are described in through this theme. This theme addresses both research questions exemplifying the lived experiences of the participants' as well as their sense of belonging to campus.

### ***Initial Sense of Belonging.***

Participants developed a sense of belonging to campus based on their initial connection with the community, whether that was in the multicultural organizations or within their academic departments. A sense of belonging, though not measured quantifiably, developed and changed the attitudes of the participants as they continually adjusted their relationships to campus and the community. Shelly, who is actively involved in the Native American student association on campus, helped to bring the organization back into good standing with the university. As a first year student, she was very proactive in her efforts to create a sense of community, not only for herself but for future generations of Native American students at the institution.

When I started school here it was really important for it to be a nice Native community here at [institution name], but I feel like we kind of established what we could with the few Natives that are here.

Shelly has carried a lot of the weight that comes with being seen as playing a key role in the re-establishment and continuation of the Native American student organization. She often listed her feelings towards the group and the amount of activity that they do as “exhausting” saying that she is “burnt out”. On the other hand, Jehan had a different set of experiences when she first arrived at the university. She was involved initially in several organizations such as RHA, LGBTQA+ organizations, multicultural affairs, and housing student committees. Shortly thereafter she began to realize that she left behind a structured family system that was built on household routines and had gained the freedoms that come with college of living on your own and setting your own schedule. Missing that structured family system, she began to suffer academically the next two semesters “last year was kind of bad grade wise and experience wise” as she put it. She felt as though she had a sense of belonging with her structured family system. When she came to college, she felt as though she lost her sense of belonging when it was comprised of a whole new social setting.

Jehan’s sense of belonging on campus slowly grew to where she had “many feet in different areas” across campus. Her struggle in finding a support system for herself faded away after her best friend from high school moved in with Jehan and both started to go to LGBTQA organizations and events where she found her “support system”. Jehan noted: “Being out and making sure I’m not in my dorm room all day helps with my depression and anxiety. So that’s been pretty level this year which is good.”

One participant though had a different type of development when it came to her sense of belonging. As mentioned previously, Chelsea is in a PhD program and as many graduates know it doesn't leave much time for socializing. "That I am trying to kind of be better at doing. Like being more involved". Her belongingness to the institution resides heavily in her investment to her program. She does a lot of engagement with the community in the local city and wants to be able to extend that to other communities where there are Native American populations. Her academic program, advisors, and networks all support her in fostering growth and belonging within the community. They support her dreams of giving back to Native communities. Her involvement and belonging in the institution developed around her academic program and love of community:

So I kind of want to involve myself more in the community here in [city]. Cause I feel like I'll probably stay in [state] to be able to help with that. Cause part of what I want to do, is right now I'm doing chemistry. A PhD for chemistry. I kind of want to be a professor and work in a predominantly undergrad institute and be able to do my own outreach programs for like, tribal colleges and reservation schools.

Although, when asked about her thoughts on feeling a sense of belonging on campus and if it fosters any growth for her Native American identity, Chelsea mentioned that it's not the university that fosters that growth or sense of belonging but rather her "network connections".

The participants have a common ally throughout the beginning of their discovery of belongingness, Amanda (pseudonym given to an individual that was continually brought up as someone who they encountered and connected them to the Native American student organization on campus). Although Amanda is no longer associated with the institution, she still had a

prominent influence on the participants who either “knew of her before I went to college”, or “Amanda introduced me to them [Native American organization]”.

*From Belonging to Questioning.*

The transition period of the participants’ sense of belonging to the institution while identifying as a Native American student was a slow transition. Each participant had a defining experience that led to their increasing separation from the institution and sense of belonging. Chelsea’s situation was somewhat unique from the other two participants because of the nature of her academic program. Chelsea also mentioned that involvement on campus is usually “oriented towards undergrads”. That being said, she also had moments when she questioned her belonging not only at the institution but also within her department. As noted in the description of the first theme earlier, Chelsea discussed having to prove herself to her colleagues who consider her acceptance into the program and fellowship was based solely on the fact that she is a woman and Native American. Along with her own self-doubt, she often doubts how other Native American students could develop a sense of belonging on a campus when a number of scholarships for minority students are funded by white donors. As she explained:

I helped out [friend] this summer and they had students come and we were supposed to encourage them and just show them that you can go to college and that this is something you can obtain. And that it’s possible. But then they had this group of people who were kind of like a panel and there were people who did the really big scholarships. All of those people who are funding you are, for lack of a better word, they are all white

Chelsea began to question the authenticity of the university when it comes to their commitment to diversity and making sure their students feel as though they belong on campus. “Somebody who is going to give you the money cannot relate to you in any way. How is that

encouraging to them?” The program Chelsea was referring to is an annual event that takes place each year specifically for Native American students. Jehan attended that program prior to enrolling in the university. As she recalled, there wasn’t much sustenance to it other than a scholarship award and a full day out of school to come and visit the campus.

Jehan has multiple identities that she finds a struggle connecting to campus. With students who have many multiple identities, the campus community doesn’t facilitate growth of intersecting identities. In Jehan’s case, she doesn’t feel as though her intersecting identities belong in the same room when she plays different roles on campus.

Kind of. I feel like they [my identities] don’t cohesively form a whole identity, it’s more like they’re just separate parts of me. So like, I’m Native so sometimes I go to these events. I feel like there’s, especially at this institution or other PWI’s that there’s no cohesiveness, there’s no intersectionality.

When I asked about her sense of belonging in the second interview with Shelly, she stated:

I don’t know really. I’m just at the point where I just want to graduate. And so I don’t know. I don’t really know how I feel. Like I don’t feel like I don’t belong. But I also don’t feel like I do belong. I feel like I’m just here to get my education do what I can for the organization. And get out. And then I’ve actually been second guessing myself.

Because I try so hard to get Native students to get to campus. But why would I even want them to come to campus? Especially with the tuition and the budget cuts. And I’m like, knowing other Natives and knowing that Natives that I’ve been recruiting, why would I want to bring them to a campus where Native voices are silenced and where there’s not going to be any funding. And programs that helped me might not be here to help them.

Shelly not only questioned her own sense of belonging at the university but she also started questioning the future of the Native American student population on campus. She is “second guessing” herself and questioning why she would even “want them to come to campus”. She has a genuine loss of her sense of belonging to campus and questioning her motives for recruiting other Native American’s to the institution.

### **Theme III: Openness**

Openness is a theme that addresses participants’ willingness to express (or not express) their racial identity on campus. This theme closely relates to the previous theme of belongingness because it describes how participants feel expressing their identities. Two supporting sub-themes emerged during the data analysis process that speak to participants’ openness: concerns about campus climate and resistance from the institution and the community. Racist incidents and issues recently at the institution where participants are enrolled have raised tensions and altered the experiences of underrepresented groups and racial minorities on campus. For the participants these incidents have shaken their sense of safety to openly express their identities, as well as impacted their sense of belonging to campus and the community. The overlap between theme II and theme III is illustrated by the lived experiences of the participants’ as they navigate their own perceptions of campus climate.

#### ***A Concern About Campus Climate.***

Jehan has questioned her ability to be open about her intersecting identities on campus. One place she feels able to express them is at the local Lutheran Center. In that environment Jehan can express her female, LGBT, and Native American identities openly. However, the elevated racial tensions on campus has shifted her perceptions of her ability to remain open about her identities. When asked about how these events have impacted her she stated:

Oh, it really makes you feel less safe. I mean, maybe as a woman I usually look over my shoulder when I walk around anyways. That's just something that I do anyways. But when it's someone like a neo nazi... and you know there's racism on campus. But when it's something specific like that, it really makes you nervous.

As a minority on campus, Jehan replied that "you just don't feel safe." Safety to openly express herself had been compromised. When she walked through a rally that was held on campus she explained how fear for her safety leads her to limit how she expresses her identities.

Like a Native student, I have these traditional beaded barrettes I like to wear to keep my hair out of my face. When I was heading by the rally, I heard rumors - which actually turned out to be false - that there were actual white supremacists there, so I took my barrettes out just in case.

A gesture as simple as removing an item of jewelry that signifies her identity as a Native American is an example of Jehan's fears of openly expressing her Native identity on campus. Jehan also felt removing the jewelry protected her from unknown harm that could result from it. "And I just thought, I'd rather be safe than sorry." Jehan's fears, were present in both of our interviews. As she stated in our first interview: "I feel like for diverse students or students who aren't what would be considered the [Midwest State] norm, it feels very unsafe." That norm she stated is her perception of a Midwestern, white identifying student. Jehan's feelings were present during both interviews and only intensified during the second interview after the climate of campus shifted following racial tensions on campus.

As part of her role in the Native American student organization Shelly has noticed a shift in the environment following the incident on campus that involved racism and fears of violence. When asked about how that experience made her feel she stated:

It's just, I've noticed that a lot of times, Natives are left out of the conversation, or people don't even really think about it. Or um, you know, if you're not white or black, it doesn't pertain to you. Which is what I've seemed to have noticed on this campus. Um, I mean obviously not everybody is like that but. Yea, it's always black versus white. And it's just like there's these, there's the Hispanic population there's a Native population, but like we just do our own thing cause it's black versus white at [institution].

The situation on campus prompted many organizations to take action by releasing statements voicing their concerns. Many of these statements included the name of the organization that Shelly is associated with. She recounted that she wanted to talk to her respective group to get a consensus rather than to speak on behalf of the whole group based on the small size. She stated that "Native voices are often silent or made silent and not talked about until stuff like this happens" and her and the group felt "left out of the conversation". I asked her if she had ever questioned her safety on campus being a person of color:

I kind of did a little bit because I work at the multicultural center. And I'm pretty sure that would be one big target for somebody. I work at the front desk, it's the first thing you see when you come in. I thought about it a little bit. But then I also thought I'm not, there's dangers where ever we go. No matter what we're doing. So I wasn't going to just sit here and be scared. On my campus.

Being open about your racial identity is one thing, but to have physical characteristics associated with that racial identity (ex: skin color) during a time when there are increases in the activities of white nationalist and white supremacy groups on college campuses across the nation is particularly stressful and scary.

Shelly, who has the mentality of “if it’s meant to happen, it will happen” has repeated a phrase that highlights her perception of the university and her willingness to openly express her Native identity: “it’s a white man’s world”. Shelly noted that this phrase is something that she is constantly reminded of throughout her experiences at a PWI.

It might be a little hard to navigate. But you have to remember that this is the rest of the world, outside of your home area. It’s not always going to be like that. And you’re going to have to learn to navigate it. Because this is just how it is. And you can learn how to navigate it and figure out what to change here while you do.

Chelsea identified other ways, compared to the other two participants that influence her openness to freely express her identity as Native American. As a student in a competitive PhD program, she is constantly having to prove herself not only as a woman, but also as a Native American who isn’t here to “fill a quota” within the department. Her experience is further complicated by her physical appearance:

And then it also feels even worse because when you see me, I just look like a normal white sorority girl with blond hair. Then it’s like, I don’t know, then that’s when you wonder “who really am I?”.. And it doesn’t make you feel like you are who you say you are. Ever! Like, ever! I think that’s just more of a “me” personally thing that I eventually have to get over. It will always stick with me. Yea, it will always feel like you have to prove yourself that, I don’t know. Just feels like you always have to prove yourself. Like I am who I am.

This idea of meeting physical characteristic standards to have the ability to openly express one’s identities is difficult to explore without taking into consideration the intersectionality of each participants’ identities.

*Openness to Speak Up About Institutional and Community Racism.*

The participants were extremely forthcoming about their experiences and how they make meaning of their time spent at a PWI. One sub-theme that was present in all three participants' experiences was that they noticed the institution was "all talk and words with no action" when it comes to their projection of diversity and inclusion.

Shelly, who has working knowledge of how the institution functions based on her work with the student organization shared her frustrations about the institution when it comes to supporting racial minority students and student groups on campus. When I asked her if the institution had helped to foster a sense of belonging on campus, she stated "I wouldn't say the university" noting that it was mostly from her interactions with individual people that helped foster her growth and not the institution.

I feel like a lot of people here say that they want to help Natives, you know. Be allies, and do this or that. Or they say stuff like Natives should get representation or recognition for this and that cause they're the first peoples. But nobody is actually doing anything. They're just saying all of these things so that's what I feel like what the university does, is a lot of saying stuff but not really doing anything.

When I asked Shelly if that has impacted her pursuit of higher education or hindered her growth while at the institution she stated:

No, because I've always been told just like, um. It's a white man's world. So you have to play their game a little bit in order to get what we need. It's kind of crappy but I mean.

Shelly also mentioned the changes being made in university policies regarding food sales. Which, as she points out, is a main source of income for many of the multicultural organizations on campus.

That [change in university food policies] makes it complicated for us for just minorities in general on campus, because a lot of our fundraising comes from homemade food. And stuff pertaining to that. And like other organizations can't afford to have catering or afford to do this or that. And I'm just like, I feel like minorities in general on this campus are being put on the back burner. I don't know if I really want other Native students to come to this campus and struggle like I did. Or if I want them to go to a more, a better option. I know this university needs work, but is it really, isn't it their job to do it?

By "it" Shelly means that if the university wanted to retain Native students and support their organization, the university would need to put forth more effort to do so. She finishes her statement by including the question, "I want them to be here but does the university want them to be here?" Shelly explained that Native American students feel as though the university doesn't want to keep them here. "I have to finish what I started", Shelly explained as she mentioned that her intentions were to look elsewhere to pursue her graduate studies.

Jehan shared similar sentiments: "it really seems like it's only on paper" she explained as our conversation focused on being able to openly express her Native identity and if the university is committed to diversity or if it's just on paper. Jehan was also open and frank that the "[university] can do something to show that they are committed to our safety." This comes in the wake of reported racial tensions on the campus of the university. When thinking about her older brother who shows physical features that connect him to identifying as Native American (dark complexion), Jehan stated that if her brother were to come to her institution, "he is just going to deal with racism". She provided an example:

After Trump was elected, there was a truck that had the American flag on it and they circled not only the multicultural center, but also [her residence hall] where it is known

that there is a lot of international students. They just kept circling the building immediately after Trump was elected. And just wouldn't stop circling the building. And I really feel like that was to send a message. And even though there's a lot of students who speak out against racism and stuff. Every now and then you have to make an active decision like... is this the place I want to mention that I am Native American?

When discussing this story you could tell that she was physically impacted by sharing her frustrations with her experiences of racism on and off campus. Following the Trump election and an issue with a white supremacist on campus, campus climate has shifted in a way that made participants feel uncomfortable and question if the university is committed to the diversity and inclusion statements that they release to the student body. Or if it's all on paper.

### **Conclusion**

Three themes emerged from the data analysis: Indigenous Stereotypes, Belongingness, and Openness, along with their respective subthemes. Participant profiles allowed for the reader to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences and identities which provided context for the findings. Overall, the three themes spoke to participants' experiences as Native American students on campus and their sense of belonging and safety at the institution. . In the next chapter, the findings will be used to identify recommendations for future research as well as implications for practice.

## **Chapter 5—Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will address the connection between past research and the findings of this study. It will also discuss implications for practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. This study used a qualitative research design and incorporated a semi-structured interview protocol that allowed for participants to openly describe their experiences at a PWI. Participants explored how they made meaning of their experiences and belongingness while attending the institution. Participants continued to explore their identities and their own relation to the institution by critically examining how that impacted their pursuit of higher education.

The importance of this study is informed by the ideology that colonization is endemic to society (Brayboy, 2005). It is addressed through the lived experiences of the Native American students who participated in this study which is what this study sought to demonstrate. Brayboy's (2005) TribalCrit Theory sought to explain the experiences of Native American students in higher education and other related fields. The nine tenets of TribalCrit outline the rationale for the theory which describes assimilation, an indigenous lens, and social change as a catalyst for understanding the experiences of Native American students in higher education. Along with political and education pressures, Native American students have to overcome a number of barriers such as finances which Guillory (2009) addressed along with a lack of preparedness for higher education stemming from the k-12 system.

### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study sought to understand the unique experiences of the Native American population in higher education and how their identities interact within the structure of

the university. Aspects of TribalCrit, Family Education Model, belongingness, and indigenous identity were used as frameworks and helped shape the design of the research questions and the study. The research questions were:

- What are the lived experiences of Native American students as they navigate through their educational journey at a predominately white institution?
- What factors within the college environment make it so the students feel, or don't feel, a sense of belonging?

As the primary researcher of this study, I also identify as a Native American at a predominately white institution. Participants went into great detail about their experiences in college, much of which I could relate to with my own experiences navigating higher education. The participants expressed an appreciation for having an opportunity to share their experiences as a Native American student at a PWI because as, they stated collectively, the voices of Native American students are often over looked or unheard. This was an opportunity for them to have their stories heard and shared with others. After the interview process was completed, all three participants reached out asking for updates as they are invested in the completion of this study. In addition, Shelly expressed her appreciation and stated that she was “glad to be here to help.”

The findings discussed in chapter 4 included three themes: *Indigenous Stereotypes*, *Belongingness*, and *Openness*. Those themes were intertwined and spoke to participants' lived experiences in college at a PWI. As this research process began, I expected participants to share similar experiences navigating higher education, experiencing indigenous stereotypes while in college, and questioning the support the university offers them. However, participants also shared how intersecting identities along with being Native American impacted their feelings of belonging at the university. Those varying aspects of belongingness were influenced by the lack

of representation on campus in faculty and staff who identified as Native American as well as the level of support the university offered them while in college. The overlap of the three themes was evident in the findings of this study. The next section will further describe the connection between the thematic findings and the literature.

### **Summary of Themes and Connection to Past Research**

The experiences of the participants were generally consistent with the literature on the experiences of Native American students at a PWI (Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002. Brayboy, 2005), as well as their awareness of the rhetoric being used by the universities to recruit Native American and other minority students both currently and historically. Participants' experiences were also consistent with the literature on how connected they felt to the university (Cabrera et al., 2017). All of the participants had experiences and thoughts on their connection to the campus community and how their intersecting identities played a role. Brayboy's (2005) TribalCrit theory relates to participants' experiences based on the nine tenets that seek to explain the experiences of Native American students in higher education. Cabrera, Tachine, and Yellow Bird (2017) found that Native students experience racial microaggressions and structured disconnections from their tribal communities, while the Native student center provided students with a home away from home type of environment. These different experiences impacted the student's sense of belonging on campus. For the participants in this study their sense of belonging was influenced by the Native community on campus, their connection with faculty and staff, and their interactions with the campus community. Participants also noted experiencing microaggressions based on their Native American identity.

The theoretical perspectives highlighted in the literature review give a perspective for researchers to utilize when studying Native American students in higher education. Brayboy's

(2005) TribalCrit is an important theory in developing research perspectives. As TribalCrit will be used throughout this section, its nine tenets are:

- Colonization is endemic to society.
- U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
- Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
- Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
- The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
- Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
- Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
- Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
- Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. (p. 429-430)

Although TribalCrit is applicable in a number of disciplines, it is heavily focused on education. Participants' narratives align with the third and eighth tenet of Brayboy's (2005) TribalCrit theory, noting that they make up theory and are legitimate sources of data. The

experiences of Native American's in higher education highlight the need for continual and increased understanding. Participants referenced a number of experiences that would have improved their perception of the institution if faculty and staff understood Native American ways of life.

### **Theme I: Indigenous Stereotypes**

McClellan et al. (2005) and Wright (1997) examined the historical aspects of higher education and the impact it has had on the Native American population. Primarily, the colonization and harmful rhetoric that was used to educate Native Americans to assimilate them as part of colonization. Brayboy (2005) stated that in developing TribalCrit, it was built on the notion that colonization is endemic to society. Participants collectively had several examples of how the institution or the campus community (i.e., faculty, staff, and students) enacted racial microaggressions toward them. Also, in times of tension and a racially divided campus climate, the instances of racial microaggressions were heightened. Brayboy (2005) is critical of the racism and colonization of Native Americans in higher education. Brayboy (2005) believes that in order for Native American students to succeed, the institution must remove the ideology of assimilation and develop a new culturally inclusive curriculum. That removal of the ideology and assimilation was not the case for participants based on their lived experiences.

Wright (1997) examined the rhetoric that colonizers were using in the initial stages of Native education much of which is harmful to the idea of humanity and was backed by Christianity ideologies. One example highlighted by Wright was the establishment of the "College for the Children of Infidels" (1997). That rhetoric echo's today with participants in this study stating they have been called derogatory names and experienced racial macroaggressions on campus. A phrase that the participants' were familiar with was, and brought up in the

interview process was, “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” which is a concept that developed during the colonization and boarding school era of Native American history as a way of influencing the education of Native Americans to assimilate them into the developing colonies.

Each participant had a point in their educational career where they have been singled out in a class for being Native American. One was even asked what her “Native name” was. That instance of a microaggression in the middle of a classroom made the participant uncomfortable as she is one of only two people of color in the class.

The participants collectively stated that there have been moments when their social circles, faculty and staff, and students have tokenized their Native identity. One participant was called to the front of the class to shake hands with a Native guest speaker and the instructor introduced her as “this is my Native student, Jehan”. Jehan mentioned that while the instructor’s intentions were good hearted, it came across as being “a collector’s” item to the instructor. In other words, she felt as though she was a shiny new object to show there was a Native student in the instructor’s class.

## **Theme II: Belongingness**

Cabrera, Tachine, and Yellow Bird (2017) closely examined the first-year experiences of Native American students as a critical component to the students’ sense of belonging on campus. The first-year retention rate for Native American students is one of the lowest amongst other racial groups on campus at only 70.5% (Cabrera et al., 2017). Also, a sense of belonging is a theoretical antecedent to persistence of Native students in higher education. Cabrera et al (2017) cited Brayboy (2015) who argued that Native Americans in college are in the racial battle lands who are engaged in an ongoing conflict between the normative (Eurocentric) culture and their Indigenous heritage. Scholars have emphasized the importance of assessing students’ sense of

belonging in ways such as whether a student feels they are part of the campus community and how institutions could better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Cabrera et al. 2017). This is also representative of the notion that Native Americans walk a thin line between two worlds: the Native world and the modern world. This concept was brought up by all three participants during the interview process as a way of meaning making as they progressed through higher education.

Two studies have been conducted on this student population to address students' sense of belonging, one of which was conducted by a Native scholar, Oxendine (2015). A quantitative study, Oxendine argued that the recognition and incorporation of cultural integrity contribute to Native students' sense of belonging. Cultural integrity was defined as "the ability to maintain a strong cultural identity through engaging one's culture as an anchor" (Oxendine, 2015, p. 11). Findings from the study also showed that the sense of belonging was primarily based on the relationship between the student and the campus community. The participants in this study willingly shared many of their experiences they had as they related to the campus community around them. Some of those experiences created a disconnection from the institution and others created some type of belonging on campus. The findings of this study support the work of Cabrera et al (2017), that a sense of belonging on campus is important to the success of Native American students because it builds retention and their overall connection to the campus community and the institution.

This research study brought to light several experiences that sustained the persistence of the participants' such as having a Native American student association on campus, and community organizations they could associate with. This facilitated a sense of community for the participants to network with those who shared the same Native identity. It has also created some

stress for one participant specifically as she feels as though without her work, the organization wouldn't exist or continue to exist on campus.

Makomenaw (2012) stated that interactions and experiences with Native American staff and students at PWIs was believed to give Native American students a sense of belonging in the academy and provided comfort for them while on campus. Participants stated collectively that their interactions with Native American faculty or students is limited because of the low number of representation on campus. The lack of Native American faculty and students on campus leave many Native students on campus feeling like PWIs are not for Native people because they rarely see any in the academy (Makomenaw 2012).

### **Theme III: Openness**

Makomenaw (2012) stated that students who transfer from a TCU to a four-year PWI experience success in that transfer in part because of their interaction and engagement with students, faculty, and staff at the institution. As stated in the previous chapter, the participants shared experiences the racial climate on campus and indigenous stereotypes that either facilitated or limited their willingness to disclose their Native identity. Even though Makomenaw's (2012) research focused on transfer students, its findings are still applicable to students who go directly into a PWI. The findings of that study indicated social support, positive relationships with faculty, and racism in higher education affected students' experiences in college (Makomenaw 2012). All three of these have implications for this study.

While there is limited research on students' openness about their racial identity, it is a critical component in understanding the experiences of these students at a PWI. The participants collectively stated that there were instances when their identity was called into question, intentionally hidden in times of fear of retaliation, and tokenized. Those factors, noted in chapter

4, limited the students' willingness to be open about their Native identity. Participants stated that in a moment when campus climate involved racial tensions, there felt little to no comfort being open about expressing their Native identity in fear of it bringing harm to them. Makomenaw (2012) stated that Native American students at a PWI kept their interactions with non-native faculty, staff, and students to a minimum. Not in a sense that they are anti non-native faculty or students, rather they were focused on what they wanted out of their collegiate experience. That interactions and relationships with non-native faculty or students was not a necessary component to their success. This is important to remember when we reflect on Heavyrunner's (2002) Family Education Model. The success of Native American students relies on the relationships and community building within the Native population. It facilitates growth for Native students to openly express their identity with the Native American community. Makomenaw (2012) also stated that students embrace the idea of interacting with Native American faculty, students and departments on campus.

### **Implications for Practice**

Near the conclusion of the interview process, I began to cultivate a number of implications of practice for student affairs professionals. Collectively, I offer three pieces of advice. The most important factor that the participants noted was that they wanted to see the university support the students in a way that is reflective of the institution's rhetoric. Whether that is their mission statement, their mission for diversity and inclusion, or even how they recruit Native American students to attend the university. The second was more representation of faculty and staff that reflected the Native American student population. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the participants had little to no interaction with any Native American identifying faculty or staff at the institution. And lastly, they mentioned creating an inclusive environment where racial

tensions weren't an everyday occurrence. Their advice is reflective of Brayboy's (2005) TribalCrit theory and Heavyrunner's (2002) Family Education Model. The institution should be reflective of their values and their commitment to diversity and inclusion.

For faculty and staff, participants stated they wished faculty who were instructing their class would remove the indigenous stereotypes from the classroom culture and conversations. Even though the students were willing to be open about their identity at times, they were often silenced when a situation came up that isolated them from the rest of their class based on identifying as a Native American. The participants also expressed feeling like their position in the program was part of a quota the program needed to fill based on diversity. By eliminating this negative perception, faculty and staff could begin letting Native students know they serve a greater purpose in their academic programs. And, consequently, Native students would feel more encouraged to participate in discussion and increase their openness about their Native identity.

By understanding that each Native American identifying student has a unique connection to their culture, Native American students would not feel as though their identity was being tokenized. Being asked to represent all Native tribes was a common occurrence for the participants. Each tribe has their own values, customs, and traditions that differ from tribe to tribe. The participants collectively said that they are often the only Native identifying student in their classes, and are often singled out as a representative for all Native Americans. Being tokenized has had a negative impact on the participants' perception of the university. It showed them that the university had little to no interest in understanding their culture or how they fit in at a PWI.

While it is important to continually strive for diversity and inclusion on campus, we often put the burden on our students to live through racialized experiences before change is

implemented. Brayboy's TribalCrit theory (2005) highlights the importance of deconstructing colonization and assimilation in higher education and to implement more culturally structured enhancements to the institution to foster growth for Native American students on campus. Brayboy's theory should be part of every mission of diversity and inclusion because of its basis in social justice and initiating change. Wright (1997) indicated a critical component to the practice of inclusive rhetoric on college campuses. The initial rhetoric that was used to begin educating Native American's was based on racism, assimilation, and colonization. If we are truly to support diversity and inclusion, we must reflect to our students that it is more than just rhetoric and put it into practice. Taking the perception of the participants into consideration, student affairs professionals and educators alike can increase their awareness of this student population and their experiences on campus.

By understanding the institution's lack of fostering cultural empowerment of Native American students, faculty and staff can increase the feeling of belonging that these students have to the institution. In addition, reducing racist climate on campus should be at the forefront of all campus employees (especially administrators), rather than on the students. Native American students make up less than 1% of the student population at PWI's which often leaves their voices silent at institutions of higher education. Institutions can facilitate more interactions with Native American students to better understand their experiences on campus and how to make the environment feel more safe and welcoming to Native American students. Being at a PWI Native American students often disconnect from their culture to ensure that they fit into the Eurocentric ideology of higher education. Faculty and staff can begin facilitating more culturally enhanced programs specific for Native American students.

Native American students are unique in that they come from a historical context that is different from other racial minority groups in America. Not to take away from the historical context of other racial identities, Native Americans are unique in that the entire basis of education Natives was to kill the Indian, and save the man. Participants recognized the lack of staff and faculty that identify as Native American, making them feel even more disconnected from campus because they did not have a Native American member on campus to relate to.

### **Recommendations for Student Affairs Practice**

Based on the findings of this study and implications for practice, the following recommendations for student affairs practice are offered:

- Facilitate the creation of an environment where Native American students can develop a sense of belonging and investment within the institution and campus community.
- Intentionally and proactively provide assistance and resources for Native American students. Such as information during orientation and meeting with advisors who proactively engage Native American students.
- Never stereotype or make assumptions about a student based on their Native American identity and refrain from tokenizing the students. This could be addressed on a one on one basis or by integrating Native American teachings into the curriculum. Also, raise awareness of Native American culture through training workshops and meaningful programming efforts. These programming efforts should be intentionally planned and implemented to address stereotypes and biases experienced by Native American people, which includes microaggressions.
- Examine the University's rhetoric to ensure that it is supportive of Native American identities and most importantly address the gaps from the written words to

action steps. Using TribalCrit as a lens to develop a more inclusive and supportive rhetoric is suggested.

- Actively support Native American student organizations so they can be a resource for Native students at the institution. Building a sense of community is important for retention and persistence.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

A majority of the theories and research noted in this study come from the past fifteen years, signifying that there is a need for this type of research and that it is in the initial stages of exploration. Furthermore, as noted, there is a significant lack of research focusing on Native American students at PWI's. While there has been a fair amount of research done at Tribal Colleges or Universities (TCU), it doesn't account for the experiences of being at a PWI where Native cultures are not part of the curriculum or most campus conversations and initiatives. Further research is critical in understanding the lived experiences of this student population, their connection or disconnection from campus, and their levels of persistence from matriculation to degree completion at a PWI. Areas for future research include focusing on how microaggressions affect the Native American student experience at PWIs and how faculty and staff perpetuate the marginalization of Native American students and culture. Research should also be conducted that recognizes the cultural similarities and differences of tribal organizations and how that influences students' experiences.

Native American students make up less than 1% of the population at PWI's, making them one of the most underrepresented racial minorities on campus. Brayboy (2005) theorized that there is a need to understand the complex intergenerational racism and colonization that education has facilitated from the beginning of the westernized world. More research is needed

to understand that complex ideology and how to better decolonize our education system. One point of interest that is missing in the research is the impact of intergenerational trauma on current higher education students following the Boarding School Era. This era impacts many of these student's previous family generations, thus impacting the family support many of these students need while away at a PWI. This research would focus on studying the gaps between generations in higher education as it relates to intergenerational trauma, the perceptions of higher education as a whole, and the lived experiences of Native American students at a PWI.

Lastly, the rhetoric that the institution uses has been persistent in the thought process of the participants'. Further research could be conducted to understand how the disconnection between the rhetoric from the university and the actual campus climate impact this student population.

### **Limitations**

During the recruitment process, identifying participants from an already low number of students who identify as Native American proved to be a challenge. That, along with the time constraints to complete this study limited the depth of engagement with participants and the data. For example, with more time a more in-depth examination of participants' intersecting identities and how they interacted with the university could have been completed. Also, taking a more narrative approach would have provided more rich and in-depth stories of participants' experiences over a more prolonged period of time than what was allotted for this study.

### **Reflexivity**

Throughout the process of this study, I kept a thorough journal about my experiences conducting this study. There have been times where I was surprised by what the participants had to share with me and other times where I felt complete anger and confusion. Identifying as a

Native American at a PWI, I share many of the experiences that the participants have. I have heard the same words they have heard and felt the same discouragement. The unique positionality that I have of having gone through undergrad at a PWI and now grad school at a separate PWI gave me insight into the regional differences when it comes to Native American experiences on campus.

Initially I felt discouraged by the lack of literature that was available on Native American students at PWI's. To me, that showed that this is an area of study where research is needed. It also posed as a limitation to the study, being that there is a need for more research. Second, the amount of Native American students that participated in the study made me feel uneasy. I reflected upon this more and came to the conclusion that this is a valid representation of how Native American are represented at this institution. I asked, how could I gather more participants from what is already a limited number of students who identify as Native American? That question furthered my desire to continue with my research and bring to light the lived experiences of Native American students at PWI's.

Throughout the interview process, participants were sharing their experiences and perceptions of identifying as a Native American at a PWI. Out of those stories emerged three themes: *Indigenous Stereotypes*, *Belongingness*, and *Openness*. Those themes resonated with my personal experiences navigating throughout the higher education system from a bachelor's level degree through my current Master's program. I continually asked myself if the Eurocentric models of research can account for the lived experiences of Indigenous people, and if the Eurocentric models of education can accommodate without assimilating Indigenous people.

The theme of *Indigenous Stereotypes* was expected. Throughout the interview process, example after example came up that included the use of stereotypes and microaggressions

towards the participants. I journaled about my reaction to those statements and the ways that participants were treated. I reflected upon my own experiences and how it can often feel invalidating to be isolated for being Native American or having my own success dismissed because of my racial identity. An instance from working at my alma mater is always in my consciousness when I apply for positions or programs. A colleague who also applied for this position who didn't end up getting it and expressed to me that because I am brown, I only got the job because I am a minority. And I will never forget that. And the experiences that the participants shared with me will never be forgotten either.

If the experiences of these participants continually goes unheard, then the system of higher education will continue to perpetuate the same stories as other Native students go to PWI's. During the interview process with my participants, there was a moment when the campus climate had become unstable and left myself questioning my own safety as a person of color at a PWI. When I asked the participants about this, they agreed that it had some sort of impact on how they interacted with the university and their campus community. These instances were not only highlighted during that time, but continue to be an obstacle while attending a PWI. My personal experiences may be different from the participants' but there is some overlap in how we interpret the experiences around us.

At the end of this study, I reflected upon the experiences of the participants, as well as myself. I was honored to look at the work I've been able to accomplish. I have a greater respect for research and an even greater drive to challenge the Eurocentric models to make room for the study of Indigenous people that accurately represents their lived experiences.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative research study was conducted in order to better understand the lived experiences of Native American students at a predominantly white institution. Three themes emerged that highlighted those experiences, which were *Indigenous Stereotypes*, *Belongingness*, and *Openness*. Respective sub-themes provided a deeper understanding of the thematic findings. Connections to the findings and previous research were made and recommendations for practice for student affairs professionals and faculty were offered. Lastly, I provided recommendations for future research.

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Official Approval Letter for IRB project #17565 - New Project Form

January 8, 2018

Zachary Palmer  
 Department of Educational Administration  
 5011 Vine St Apt 208 Lincoln, NE 68504

Corey Rumann  
 Department of Educational Administration  
 TEAC 129, UNL, 685880360

IRB Number: 20180117565 EX

Project ID: 17565

Project Title: Native American Students' in Higher Education at Predominately White Institutions

Dear Zachary:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as exempt.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Exemption: 01/08/2018.

o Review conducted using Exempt Category 2 at  
 45 CFR 46.101 o Funding: N/A

1. Your stamped and approved informed consent form has been uploaded to NUgrant. Please use this document to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the document, please submit the revised document to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

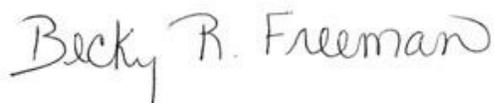
- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;

- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,



Becky R. Freeman,  
CIP for the IRB



[nugrant.unl.edu](http://nugrant.unl.edu)

## **Appendix B**

### **Participant Recruitment Script**

My name is Zac Palmer and I am currently a Master's student in the Education Administration program. I am looking for participants to be part of a study examining the lived experiences of American Indian/Alaskan Native/Native American at Predominantly White Institutions. Those of you that are interested in participating must meet the following criteria:

- 19 years of age or older.
- Enrolled student at UNL.
- Must identify as a member of a Native American tribe.
- Be able to meet for 2 scheduled meetings, with a possible 3rd meeting estimating 60 minutes each.

Those that are interesting in participating can contact me at [zac.palmer18@live.com](mailto:zac.palmer18@live.com) or 801-815-5981 to schedule an appointment. Or Dr. Corey Rumann, at [crumann2@unl.edu](mailto:crumann2@unl.edu) or 402472-8928. If you know others that could be interested in participating please feel free to give them my contact information or Dr Rumann's. Thank you!

## Appendix C



**IRB #:**

**Participant Study Title:**

*Native American Students in Higher Education*

**Formal Study Title:**

*Native American Students in Higher Education at Predominantly White Institutions.*

### Authorized Study Personnel

**Principal Investigator:** Zac Palmer Phone: (801) 815-5981 **Secondary Investigator:** Corey Rumann, Ph.D. Office (402) 472-8928

### Key Information:

If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:

- Both Males and Females 19 years of age & older.
- Students who identify as American Indian/Alaskan Native/Native American.
- Procedures will include interviews that will be recorded and transcribed.
- There will be a total of 2 scheduled meetings, with a possible 3<sup>rd</sup> as a member check.
- These visits will take an approximate 3 hours in total (about 1 hour each).
- There are little known risks associated with this study
- You will be given a small gift of appreciation at the end of this study in the amount of a \$5.00 gift certificate.
- You will be provided a copy of this consent form

### Invitation

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

**Why are you being asked to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a UNL Student who identifies as American Indian/Alaskan Native. You must be 19 years of age or older to participate. And enrolled as a full-time student.



### **What is the reason for doing this research study?**

Students who identify as American Indian/Alaskan Native who attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) often represent only 2% of the student population. What this study hopes to uncover are the lived experiences of Native American students as they navigate through higher education at non-tribal colleges or universities. This research is designed to (1) better understand those lived experiences and (2) determine how Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) can better support the Native American student population. Interviews for this study will take place on UNL campus.

### **What will be done during this research study?**

You will be asked to complete 2 interviews with a 3rd meeting being used as a member check. The first interview will take about 45-60 minutes. Once the interview recording has been transcribed you will be sent a copy to review and we can discuss any suggestions during the second follow-up meeting which will take about 30-60 minutes. These interviews will take place on campus at UNL.

### **What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

There is little-known risk to the participants involved in this study. Although, due to the nature of this study that is examining the lived experiences of Native American students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), participants could feel slight discomfort from sharing some of their experiences that may be negative while attending UNL. In that case you can contact UNL Counseling and Psychological Services at 402-472-7450. The first four sessions are at no charge for UNL students covered by student fees. Or you may contact the UNL Women's Center for free & confidential counseling appointments at 402-472-2597.

Interviews will take place on campus, there is little known risk to the participant of being known as a participant in the study. To reduce any small chance of risk and ensure confidentiality, the personal information of the participant is only known to the two investigators listed on this study and no identifying information will be listed on any documents that are presented at the end of this study. The participant's information will be kept between them individually and the primary investigator. All information that is kept will be on a password protected device that only the primary investigator has access to.

### **What are the possible benefits to you?**

You may benefit from this study by having the opportunity to have your story being heard as it relates to identifying as a Native American student. And the chance to represent your tribal culture. However, you may not get any benefit from being in this research study.

### **What are the possible benefits to other people?**

The benefits to education and/or tribal societies may include a better understanding of how to help Native American students navigate their path in higher education, increase retention rates, and overall degree completion rates for Native American students.

**What are the alternatives to being in this research study?**

Instead of being in this research study you can choose r



**What will being in this research study cost you?**

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

**Will you be compensated for being in this research study?**

You will receive a \$5.00 gift certificate at the completion of our final interview for your participation in this study.

**What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?**

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

*[Counseling and Psychological Services is also available for students at the University Health Center 402-472-7450 or the Counseling Coordinator at the UNL Women's Center 402-472-2597.]*

**How will information about you be protected?**

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data.

The data will be stored electronically through a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and any identifiable information will be removed at the completion of this study.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law or contract. The information from this study may be published in academic journals or presented at academic meetings/conferences but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

**What are your rights as a research subject?**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1(402)472-6965
- Email: [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu)

**What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?**

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not



to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

**Documentation of informed consent**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Participant Feedback Survey**

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln wants to know about your research experience. This 14 question, multiple-choice survey is anonymous. This survey should be completed after your participation in this research. Please complete this optional online survey at: <http://bit.ly/UNLresearchfeedback>.

**Participant Name:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Name of Participant: Please print)

**Participant Signature:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Investigator certification:**

*My signature certifies that all elements of informed consent described on this consent form have been explained fully to the subject. In my judgment, the participant possesses the capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research and is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate.*

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Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

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Date

## Appendix D

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

- How do you identify as an AI/AN?
  - What are your tribal affiliations?
  - How many people from your own tribe would you say are also in college?
- How important is higher education to you?
- What does it mean to you to be an indigenous student?
  - Does anyone in your family have a college degree? If so, what type?
  - How does your family feel about you working towards a college degree?
- What were some of the factors that led you to decide to pursue higher education?
  - What about this specific institution was attractive to you?
- How are you involved on campus?
  - What about outside of campus?
- Tell me about your experiences thus far at this institution.
- What sources of support, if any, have you sought out or found at this institution?
- Do you feel as though you have a sense of belonging on campus?
  - Tell me a little bit more about that..
- Have you been able to develop a sense of your purpose at the institution?
- What resources have you utilized on campus to help progress your educational experiences?