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# Native American Students: Perceptions of Lived Experiences Attending a Small Predominantly White University in the Upper Midwest

Dennis Richard Simons

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NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS: PERCEPTIONS OF LIVED EXPERIENCES  
ATTENDING A SMALL PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITY  
IN THE UPPER MIDWEST

by

Dennis Richard Simons  
Recital Diploma, Royal Academy of Music, 1963

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota  
December  
2010

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This dissertation, submitted by Dennis Richard Simons in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

Joseph A. Benoit  
Dean of the Graduate School

December 15, 2010  
Date

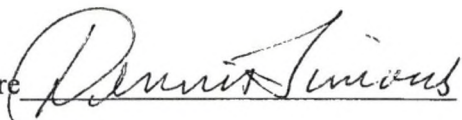
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the lived experiences of Native American students when studying on a predominantly white campus at a small university in the Upper Midwest. Using a phenomenological approach, the researcher interviewed each of the eight participants for one hour, although there were two interviews that took longer. Two participants agreed to meet for a second interview and, again, the time taken was approximately one hour. The resulting audio-recorded interviews were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Theme One: Participants depended on the support of home, the university, and especially the Native American Cultural Center, to help ease the culture shock of being a minority student in an alien environment. The paramount issue involved creating a new social support system, resulting in them seeking each other out or else committing themselves to strenuous commuting programs between university and home. It helped if professors took the time to understand their academic and cultural needs. Theme Two: With continued contact with the campus society, the participants gained more confidence in the white culture, and were finding their relationship with their home and culture was evolving. They expressed a desire for a multicultural society without prejudice, but remained adamant about maintaining their own culture. They tell each other not to quit, that it was probably worse back on the reservation. Theme Three: Assimilation was expressed as a negative

option. Culture was seen as important and the goals expressed were educational success and returning to the reservations to help their people. Many plan on pursuing further education by attending graduate school. They had chosen to live in another environment but the commitment to their culture became stronger over time.

The final assertion that emerged from this study was: Effective support of the cultural identity of Native American students studying on a predominantly white campus, by their family and the administration of the university, contributes to the retention and success of these students.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Greater emphasis is now being placed on the importance of diversity in higher education in both local and global communities. The education of the American Indians was problematic from the first contact with the white culture from Europe until the emergence of the Tribally Controlled Colleges, where they could be educated within a culturally sympathetic environment. Data is readily available, including from the United States Census Bureau, concerning the attendance, retention, and graduation of Native Americans studying on a predominantly white campus, but Tierney (1992) finds that “there is little research about Native American undergraduate experiences in higher education” (as cited in McClellan, Tippeconnic Fox, & Lowe, 2005, p. 7).

The Tribally Controlled College system is experiencing expansion with many now becoming four-year institutions. Even so, American Indians are still attending the white campuses and there are initiatives on the part of the white campuses to encourage enduring partnerships. With over half of all the Tribally Controlled Colleges located in the Upper Midwest, it is relevant to conduct a qualitative study in this region in order to better understand the perspectives of these students who represent a minority on these campuses.

A report by the Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics states, “The number of American Indian and Alaska Native students enrolled in higher



education has more than doubled in the past 30 years” (para. 1)...[and while]...more than half of American Indians attending college are enrolled at four-year institutions...just 8 percent attend one of the 32 tribally controlled colleges” (Wiedeman, 2008, para. 3).

#### Historical Perspective – Overview

The history of the education of the American Indian in the white culture is an account of the intransigence of two irreconcilable cultures. The Indian tribes were attempting to preserve an ancient, conservative way of life they would not be able to sustain. The civilization the Indians faced was the result of a progressive development of thousands of years of social, intellectual, and industrial evolution. The reluctance of the Indians to attempt to educate a critical mass of people in the white culture was crucial, and accompanied the retreat of their nation and culture in the face of the aggressive acquisition of land undertaken by the whites: A legacy of poverty and unemployment of alarming proportions was the result.

#### *The Divergent Philosophies*

The problem of the conflicting cultures is a constant theme in the narrative related to the Indians and the whites. The cultural philosophy of the Indian could be expressed as:

Humankind must live in balance and harmony with the rest of the Creator's world. All things of this earth...must be given respect...we...have not inherited this earth to do as we please...rather have only borrowed it from our children and grandchildren...[E]very decision...must be made with the utmost consideration of how that decision will affect...the seventh generation to follow. (Stein, 2003, p. 28)

Viewed by the white population, with its ethnocentrism, the Indian philosophy was dismissed as the rationalism of a “savage.” The capitalist system that the Indians

faced was based on the premise of the ownership of property and the accumulation of personal wealth and the dichotomy was expressed by a reform group of the 19th century as "unless the Indian could be trained to be selfish, they felt there was little hope of civilizing and assimilating him" (Prucha, 1973, p. 8). They believed in the urgent necessity to civilize the savage which could only be accomplished through education of the youth; the parents were too entrenched in the traditional cultures to change. We are, therefore, presented with a problem of communication that is described by Cook (1998) as "linguists and anthropologists working with [N]ative Americans...found you couldn't properly translate native American languages into English: the categories didn't match up...[B]ecause in fundamental ways native Americans didn't experience the world in the same way as English-speakers" (p. 76) and is echoed by Merleau-Ponty (1962) when he states, "The *full* meaning of a language is never translatable into another" (p. 218).

#### Need for the Study

When members of the selected university chose to mount a conference entitled "Reclaiming Our Cultural Identity: Native American Culture of the Northern Plains," it signified to me a need for a detailed investigation of the perceptions of the Native Americans who are students on the campus. Chávez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) state that "individuals often must filter ethnic identity through negative treatment and media messages received from others because of their race and ethnicity" (p. 39).

Creswell (2002) indicates the need for the proposed phenomenological study of this type when he observes, "Although past studies on ethical climate have addressed students on predominantly white campuses, the voices of Native Americans have not been heard. A study of this type would add to education knowledge" (p. 71). Lowe

(2005) also recommends more research into the experiences of Native Americans in higher education:

Qualitative research takes time, but already too much time has gone by without an adequate volume of research on the experiences of Native American students. Native students need to be asked about their experiences and given the opportunity to tell their story. (p. 39)

Garrod and Larimore (1997) confirm the need of the individual to be heard, which enables the reader to discover “a uniqueness that can be captured only by first-person accounts” (p. 2).

This study will be of interest to university administrators, educators, and all students who are interested in being a part of a campus climate that promotes an atmosphere wherein people can flourish as individuals, in a “living, complex reality with multiple dimensions” (Wildcat, 2001a, p. 116).

#### Gap in the Literature

This qualitative study sought to add to the literature concerning the perceptions of Native American students on a predominantly white campus in the Upper Midwest by giving “voice to people not heard, silenced, or rejected in society” (Creswell, 2002, p. 71). As stated in the introduction, there is statistical data that indicates the retention and graduation rates of Native American students, but Tierney (1992) finds that “there is little research about Native American undergraduate experiences in higher education” (as cited in McClellan et al., 2005, p. 7).

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the lived experiences of Native American students when studying on a predominantly white



campus at a small university in the Upper Midwest. In a climate of expanding cooperation with Tribally Controlled Colleges in the Upper Midwest, this study is important in order to research and explore the lived perceived experiences of Native American students who choose to study at a traditional four-year institution.

Wildcat (2001b) reinforces this concept when he advocates that to study at a traditional four-year university campus renders the native students more able to help the Indian peoples. Citing *God Is Red* by Deloria, he writes, “We need a generation or two of articulate American Indian philosophers, scientists, and engineers learning rather than being taught lessons our elders can demonstrate for us – right where they live” (p. 34). This resonated with a theme that emerged from the pilot study and data analysis carried out by the researcher: The Native American students valued education as a means of personal ascendancy and for their people.

Through individual interviews with the eight participants in the study, enlightenment was gained to better understand the affective, social, and educational experiences of Native Americans: the effectiveness of the support they received if the need was there; how they felt while studying when a minority in a class; how they interacted with the community of students on campus; their lived experiences off campus in the city and surrounding region; and ultimately, how all of this affected their resolve to graduate. Qualitative methods were used to collect and analyze the data in order to hear and better understand the individual voices of these students. The enhanced understanding gained from this study of Native Americans, on a predominantly white campus, is important. Deloria (2001) points out that most people in the United States find it difficult to understand the concept of Native Americans being “foreign...in cultural and

political traditions...so they...prefer to consider Indians as simply another racial minority, albeit one with considerably fascinating habits” (p. 124). I anticipate this study will contribute to the literature and the better understanding of the experiences of Native Americans as a minority group on a predominantly white campus. The study will benefit the subjects by creating a better understanding amongst the majority student population: With a greater understanding, improved relationships should emerge.

### Conceptual Framework

The study was a phenomenological study undertaken by a researcher whose cultural identity and experience is neither Native American, nor is it indigenous White American. The researcher was cognizant of the literature and the struggle of the Native American vs. the white dominant American society since the first contact – the attempts to annihilate the American Indian population, or its culture through assimilation. The literature shows that with establishment of Tribal Colleges, which provided Native American students with the opportunity to attend college within their own culture, there was a marked improvement in the graduation rates.

This study was looking to better understand how the effectiveness of the support systems affected the perspectives of Native American students who study at a traditional four-year university. Creswell (2002) argues that minority students are successful if they understand their status and are able to negotiate their individual path through the system that exists, but notes the need for “a person who can help them when they have problems” (p. 393). At the center of the research, the Native American students narrated their lived experience of studying as a minority in a white dominant society, a culturally



alien world. From the data gained emerged perceptions that will help to understand whether this environment is helpful, or an obstacle, in their pursuit of a degree.

The phenomenon observed was a group of students, a minority, away from their homes and family – a major part of their cultural life and support. I sought to better understand Native American students' perspective when studying for a degree outside their "comfort zone" to discover what is the lived experience, without bringing to the project pre-conceived biases that may have been accumulated by someone who has grown up in a White American environment. Some sense of objectivity is what one strives for in a study of this type and the challenge is in the literature with the statement of Deloria (1998): "The first point [when]...when reviewing any set of essays that pretends to offer an objective view of Indian affairs is that there never has been an objective point of view regarding Indians and there never will be" (p. 66).

#### Researcher's Position

Whilst growing up on the West Coast of Canada, I had attended school with several good friends who lived on a reservation. After living in England for an extended time, I moved to Saskatoon and again encountered the First Nations culture and peoples.

Gradually, the study of the perceptions of Native Americans (representing a minority, studying on a white dominated campus) seemed to be a study that I could pursue. Further, the fact that I am not Native American and was not born in the United States presented the opportunity to view the data through a different lens from others who have conducted studies on this population.

## Research Question

Creswell (2009) describes the research questions as “those questions that the data collection will attempt to answer” (pp. 111-112). The main research question was: What are the lived experiences of Native American students studying on a predominantly white campus of a small university in the Upper Midwest?

## Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations in this study were as follows:

1. The eight participants in this study were present and past Native American students who were attending a small predominantly white university in the Upper Midwest.
2. Seven of the participants were present students when contributing to the study.
3. The one past student who agreed to participate had graduated seven years before the interview and had completed a Master’s at the same university one year before taking part in the study.

## Definition of Terms

In this study, the terms Native American or American Indian are used to refer to the indigenous peoples of the United States. Tribal Colleges are the Tribally Controlled Colleges that are administered by the local tribe(s) who live in the geographical location of the College; these are also referred to by the participants as Community Colleges. For the volunteer participants who agreed to be interviewed, the terms participant(s) and interviewee(s) are used. The Native American Cultural Awareness Center is also known as the Native American Cultural Center, the Native American Center, the Center, and the NAC.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

“A methodology is not a correct method to follow, but a creative approach to understanding, using whatever approaches are responsive to particular questions and subject matter” (Laverty 2003, p. 16).

#### Phenomenology and Qualitative Research

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the lived experiences of Native American students when studying on a predominantly white campus at a small university in the Upper Midwest. The methodology of this study utilized a constructivist phenomenological approach that was subjected to hermeneutic interpretation. The main research question was: What are the lived experiences of Native American students studying on a predominantly white campus of a small university in the Upper Midwest?

Because the focus of the research was to explore the individual voice of each participant in order to understand personal experiences and perspectives, I considered qualitative research methods as the most appropriate. “There can never be a single story: there are only ways of seeing” (Roy, 2002, as cited in Holliday, 2007, p. 110). This indicated a need to apply a methodology that included constructivist principles, based on the premise “human beings have evolved the capacity to interpret and *construct* reality...the world of human perception is not real in an absolute sense” (Patton, 2002, p. 96). Polkinghorne (1983) also advises us that “there is a growing recognition of the



limitations of addressing many significant questions in the human realm within the requirements of empirical methods and its quest for indubitable truth” (as cited in Laverty, 2003, p. 2). I, therefore, chose to conduct this study using qualitative research methods:

[T]hey are more adaptable to dealing with multiple...realities;...such methods expose more directly the nature of the transaction between investigator and respondent...and hence make easier an assessment of the extent to which the phenomenon is described in terms of...the investigator’s own posture; qualitative methods are more sensitive to and adaptable to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40)

“The historical movement of phenomenology is the philosophical tradition launched in the first half of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, *et al.*” (Smith, 2008, para. 6). Merleau-Ponty (1962) defines phenomenology as “the study of essences...finding definitions of essences....But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence....It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is” (p. vii). The present study was concerned with exploring the essences of the lived experiences of a group of Native American students. These students represented a minority culture on the selected predominantly white campus; Patton (2002) indicates that culture is a legitimate phenomenon as a focus of inquiry (pp. 104-105). Creswell (2007) defines a phenomenological study as one that describes “the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept of a phenomenon” (p. 57).

Bogdan and Taylor (1975) describe the role of the phenomenologist as one who “views human behavior – what people say and do – as a product of how people interpret their world. The task...is to capture this *process* of interpretation” (pp. 13-14). This

interpretation process employs hermeneutics defined by Patton (2002) as providing “a theoretical framework for interpretive understanding, or meaning, with special attention to context and original purpose” (p. 114).

#### Participant Selection

Having decided to undertake this study, the first concern I had to address was the feeling of anxiety in approaching a study of another culture at such close quarters when I was not of that culture, a theme elaborated upon by Mihesuah (1998b) who “experience[d] a...feeling that I am being nosy” (p. 12). At the conclusion of one of the discussion periods that took place at the “Reclaiming Our Cultural Identity: Native American Culture of the Northern Plains” conference previously referenced, I presented my concern to one of the Native American presenters; she assured me that they “needed allies,” so this would not be a problem. This one statement addressed my concerns, and I felt empowered to continue.

I had been advised by many fellow students in one of my final graduate classes that the main problem of this type of research topic was to obtain willing participants. I already had the encouragement of the presenter at the aforementioned conference and had received a supportive response from a major gatekeeper, the Director of the Native American Center at the selected university, but how to obtain participants was a worry.

The Director of the Native American Center placed me on the agenda of the upcoming meeting and lunch of the Native American Club. I have it in my field notes that he spoke optimistically of the chances of cooperation from members of the group who I would be meeting with my comment of “we will see.”



When I arrived, I was made to feel very welcome and was invited to partake of the lunch with the members. I was treated as an elder by the university students, who wait until the elders are served before taking food. With this welcoming atmosphere, I was encouraged to proceed with my proposal to the group, extending an invitation for anyone who would like to volunteer as a participant in this project. When presenting to a group in this way, it is always difficult to assess the reaction: Only time would tell. Next on the agenda was a discussion of details of the upcoming Pow-Wow and the need for volunteers to staff various stalls and functions. After some deliberation, I telephoned the Director of the Native American Center and volunteered my services. For this study, I was seeking six to eight participants and, at this stage, with only one promise of a willing participant, I was remembering the words of my colleagues in the graduate class.

By the time I arrived at the Pow-Wow, I had acquired two definite and one possible volunteer participant for my project. Attending this event was a seminal experience for me. The energetic dancing in full regalia accompanied by the throbbing drums was exciting; I found the impressive Grand Entry and Honoring of the Graduates particularly moving. Attending this function turned out to be a very good decision; I then had promises from six participants with, I felt, the potential for more. The situation had lost some of the previously mentioned anxiety; the project was now viable.

Eight participants agreed to be involved in this study. Holliday (2007) maintains that “richness of perception” is possible even in small studies (p. 76) and “can be just one piece of a very large jigsaw puzzle, illuminating one instance of social behaviour, which, when put along-side other instances from other studies, begins to build the larger picture” (p. 84).

One of the first participants who volunteered to take part in the study had been a student in one of my classes. Another student I had taught had, at first seemed agreeable to partake in the study but eventually declined.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought and obtained from the University of North Dakota and the selected university in the Upper Midwest before any interviews were undertaken. Before proceeding with the interview, the participants were furnished with a Participant Consent Form (see Appendix A) requiring their signature, which outlined the purpose of the research project; the contact information of the researcher; the use of pseudonyms to safeguard confidentiality; and assurance that being a part of the project was entirely voluntary, with a withdrawal option available at any time. The participant was assured that all transcriptions were to be undertaken by the researcher who would keep all recordings and the resulting transcripts in a secure place and personally destroy them after the required passage of time.

#### Research Setting

The setting for this research project was a university in the Upper Midwest with a population of approximately 50,000 including a nearby military establishment. The university serves largely undergraduate students with 15 Master's programs available. The total enrollment is approximately 4,000 of whom approximately 4% are declared Native Americans.

#### Role of the Researcher

I am not American Indian, nor was I born in the United States, but I have read extensively on the topic of the proposed study. Having lived as an "outsider," as

previously described, I was hopeful of being able to bring objectivity to this study that may not be possible for someone who is of this country, although, I was cognizant of Deloria's (1998) contention that maintaining objectivity in Indian affairs is not achievable. Lavery (2003) reminds us of Husserl's proposal that the researcher needs to bracket out individual biases in order that they do not hinder the search for the essence of lived experience (p. 6). On the other hand, Janesick (2000) declares that "by identifying one's biases, one can see easily where the questions that guide the study are crafted" (as cited in Holliday, 2007, p. 47). Holliday advises that the researcher should be honest, and acknowledges the influence her prejudice brings to the thematic analysis (p. 97) but also informs us of the increasing importance of the presence of the researcher within a qualitative study when he writes, "The researcher is also being acknowledged more and more as an ideological force which impacts on relations with people in the research setting and the way in which they are perceived" (p. 120).

#### Profiles of the Participants

##### *Dan*

Previously, Dan attended four colleges, switching majors each time, before coming to this university to study criminal justice. The fact that he could study this choice of major, and his wife could be near her family, affected his decision to study at this university. The jobs he undertook between his colleges appeared to be a deciding factor in his returning to school. He commented, "I did not like to be the guy on the bottom and the only way to get up...is to get a degree." He said that he seems to get along better with minorities than he does with whites but is unsure whether it is just that it takes longer to achieve a level of trust with whites than with what he terms "darkies."



### *Lea*

Lea is a very light complexioned Native American and gets embarrassed overhearing conversations about Indians by white people. She refers to herself as being non-traditional, saying "I don't know anything about myself." Lea was in the process of transferring to finish her elementary education degree at a Tribally Controlled College near her home in order to enable her son to be educated within a native cultural program. This decision represented a dichotomy for her since she wanted to have graduated from this university, "but I have to leave." She expressed a discomfort level with researchers asking her questions about her culture, and studying her people, "because they are different from everyone else." She wants multiculturalism to be the normal mode of thinking for everybody.

### *TJ*

TJ is "proud of his culture," focused, and has his life planned out. He described himself as a "leader type" and was president of his class and president of the student council at school and involved with all the leadership community programs, stating "you name it and I was a part of it." He did dual credits at high school, "got the best scholarships out of my class," and transferred in as a sophomore. At first he felt a certain discomfort level coming to this predominantly white university campus, but now feels that he has adapted very well. TJ advises his friends to go directly to a traditional four-year university rather than waiting, as delay makes the transition more difficult. The courses he required were not offered at this university, so he found it necessary to transfer to complete his degree. He did not have immediate plans to return to the reservation after graduating. TJ does not see any problem with this decision, as he maintains that he is

representing his culture and proving “we can do what white people can do or any other race for that matter.”

*Sue*

Sue is a light complexioned native student who can pass as white or native. She had a happy childhood in a town on a reservation where there was a majority of natives but also a substantial white population. She describes this diverse environment as “in our town itself, everybody was really accepting of everybody else and there wasn’t much conflict or anything, even now.” She commented on the prejudice and racial verbal abuse towards her school team when traveling to sporting events: “the most discrimination I think I’ve ever encountered in my life and...half of our team was white anyway.” She has a broad view of multiculturalism. She shared that she had expressed an interest in joining the African American club; her friends could not understand her reasoning in wanting to join since she was not black. Sue believes that it is her generation that must promote cultural understanding. She has a son and a daughter. She traveled back to the reservation from campus every weekend.

*Sandra*

Sandra is an ex-military person who always wanted to pursue higher education but never had the opportunity or the money until she was able to take advantage of the GI Bill. Sandra had hated high school and entered higher education at the selected university after a gap of 10 years. She is the one participant who was not local to the area and was not raised on a reservation; her family is from Mexican and Native people. She did not connect with the native culture until she came to the selected university and became actively involved with the Native American Cultural Center. She selected this university

because she was here, married, and it suited her life circumstances. She related some difficult racially motivated experiences with authorities in the state, but only one incident on campus. There was, however, a disconcerting experience with accommodation in the city and believes that to have been racially inspired. She planned to get pre-requisites done here and then transfer to another university, where the courses she needs for her career are available. If there is no room in that program, she will stay and get another degree.

*Sydney*

She thinks her culture is important, “not when you are kid, but as you get older, you want to get to know the meaning behind things.” Sydney does not think of her culture as a major part of her life “but when you have kids you look at things differently.” She is now concerned that her daughter gets to experience her culture. Sydney is committed to education; she was taught that you don’t get anywhere without it and stated “that was how my parent brought me up.” She went to a larger college at first but was very unhappy there, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the campus and the classes. Sydney did not like the dorms, so she left, went home, and eventually enrolled at the selected university. She would consider going back “to all my family and my husband’s family” but she has no definite plans, as “there are no jobs offered.”

*Jane*

At the time of our interview, Jane had already earned her undergraduate degree and completed her Master’s degree one year previously. She was working in an educational position dealing with minority students. She was a “high school mom” and was determined “not to be a statistic.” Her first attempt at higher education was at a



larger university within the state, but she was overwhelmed by the class sizes and returned home to attend the Tribal College. After Tribal College, Jane enrolled and then graduated from the selected university; she was particularly appreciative of the Native American Cultural Center and the Director, who she cites as the person who helped her to succeed. She is adamantly opposed to any suggestion of assimilation, rejecting the “melting pot” theory and instead advocating the “salad bowl” theory of Native American and dominant culture relationships.

*BT*

BT is a person whose cultural identity is very important in his life. He is very conscious of the history of the conflict between his culture and the dominant culture and is concerned with the welfare of his people. He began his higher education career at a larger university in the state, where he was distressed with the derogatory comments that people made. His studies did not work out there, and he believes that one of the reasons related to his trying to raise a family as well. BT is always conscious of racial slurs about his culture and is proactive in trying to correct those who would make derogatory comments against his people. At the time that he interviewed for this study, he was preparing to graduate from the selected university. As a senior classman, he felt a responsibility to be a mentor in order to help the more junior Native American students, and a resource for others within the university who were interested to better understand his culture and the differences that existed between the two cultures.

## Data Collection

“[A]rriving at the themes can be the result of formal data analysis, but can also be born from what was seen during data collection. Often the themes have been growing within the researcher’s mind through the whole research process” (Holliday, 2007, p. 94).

This study was a qualitative study that used the emerging themes from the data in order to better understand the essence of the lived experiences of the participants. I identified and recruited the participants, one former and seven present Native American students at a small university in the Upper Midwest, initially identified by gatekeepers, to gain their perspective on attending and studying on a predominantly white campus. I had been advised to consider utilizing focus groups to supplement the findings of the individual interviews, hence the invitation to the prospective participant to join a focus group that appears on the Participant Consent Form (see Appendix A). After some consideration, I decided against this action, agreeing with Creswell (2002) when he writes:

A disadvantage of focus group interviews is that they require the researcher to find consensus on questions so one score can be marked for all individuals in the group. In addition, some individuals may dominate the conversation, leading to responses that do not reflect the consensus of the group. (p. 404)

In addition, Creswell advises that personal interviews are valuable for extending the parameters of the interview questions (p. 404). Holliday (2007) offers another benefit to utilizing personal interviews when he writes, “It only takes one instance of the unexpected to discredit generalization” (p. 85).

## Pilot Study

On obtaining IRB approval, a pilot study was undertaken with four of the participants; the resulting data would be blended into the full study. After obtaining their

consent to participate in the study, each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour. The interviews were all audio-taped for transcription and analysis; questions that guided the interviews can be found in Appendix B. Two of the interviews were conducted in the Multicultural Center on the campus; the remaining two participants preferred to be interviewed in the Native American Center (NAC), even though this did not ensure anonymity. I found the participants to be comfortable and willing to share their life experiences with me, although there was one participant who exhibited some reluctance to being interviewed; nevertheless, she shared important data that added richness to the study. I found no hesitation in the participants' willingness to relate their stories and, in a memo to myself, asked whether this was because of the way I had presented myself to the Native American Club in the NAC: as someone who, although white, had not been raised in the dominant culture of the United States.

All of the interviews were conducted in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The questions were treated as prompts to facilitate the conversation; interruptions from the interviewer were rare; the participants were allowed the freedom to narrate their life stories in their own time. The majority of the participants, both in the pilot study and the remaining interviews in the main study, referred to the Indian sense of humor and, interspersed between the relating of the life experiences by the participants, moments of jocundity were enjoyed by the participants and the researcher. The resulting rich data was coded and analyzed with three categories emerging from the data: support, relationships, and goals. When blended with the main study, these became the categories that emerged during coding and analysis. The results are reported in Chapter III. What emerged from this pilot study was the realization by the researcher that another participant, who had



already graduated, was needed in order to provide a different perception of life experiences at the university. The results of the pilot study are presented in Appendix C.

#### Continuation of the Study

Before undertaking the remaining interviews, I had found the eighth participant, a graduate of seven years, who had completed a Master's degree one year before the interviews. As for the pilot study, after obtaining their consent to participate in the study, each of the remaining four participants was interviewed for approximately one hour, although there were two interviews that took longer. Two participants agreed to meet for a second interview and, again, the time taken was approximately one hour. All of the participants kept their appointments for the interviews except for BT. I waited at the appointed time, at the agreed upon venue, for half an hour before I abandoned. At this point, I did not have any information as to why he had not kept the appointment, but I waited four days before contacting him by telephone. I made another appointment with him, without any questions asked on my part. We successfully met and completed the interview. BT never did say why he had not kept the previous appointment except to make a reference to "family issues"; I did not pursue the reasons for his failure to keep the appointment, out of respect for his privacy. BT's interview was one that was for an extended time and revealed the rich data for the study involving the importance of the family to his culture: how family always takes precedent over all things. The remaining interviews were all conducted on the campus at the selected Upper Midwest university in the Multicultural Center. Jane was the participant who had already graduated and was interviewed off campus at the venue of her choice; her interview was the other that was for an extended time. As in the pilot study, all of the interviews were audio-taped for

transcription and analysis; questions that guided the interviews were the same and can be found in Appendix B. The experience of the relaxed atmosphere of the pilot study continued throughout the course of all the remaining interviews.

At this point, the literature states that the researcher would be advised to take notes while the interview was taking place. I believed it to be more important to listen intently and to relate to each participant. “[T]he listener receives thought from speech itself....It is he who gives to words and sentences their meaning” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 207).

#### Data Analysis

“The formation of themes...represents the necessary dialogue between data and researcher...which emerges from and then helps to further make sense of the data, and then to provide a structure for writing” (Holliday, 2007, p. 94).

Audio tapes were transcribed entirely by me. All identifiers were given a code on the tapes, substituting pseudonyms for actual names. All data was coded and analyzed for emerging themes and subjected to hermeneutic phenomenological reflection in order to develop a “richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (van Manen 1990, p. 66).

After completing the transcription of the interviews from the participants, I made hard copies of these documents as well as kept them available on my computer in electronic form. I went through the documents multiple times making notes in the margins, both on paper and on my computer. With each successive rereading of the transcripts, different themes and relationships were emerging.

This process was repeated for each participant, and the coding process, combining the results of the pilot study with the continuing study, produced a total of 215 codes. The



codes for each individual participant were then grouped and cross referenced with the other participants, resulting in 86 codes that were subjected to analysis for relationships among the codes. Three categories emerged from the data on completion of this analysis for relationships.

#### Data Trustworthiness

“In the back and forth of social interaction the challenge is to discover what is really true of the phenomena of interpersonal knowledge and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) deal with the issue of trustworthiness with four questions that are conventionally asked by researchers of themselves:

1. *“Truth value”*: How can one establish confidence in the “truth” of the findings of a particular inquiry for the subjects (respondents) with which and the context in which the inquiry was carried out?
2. *Applicability*: How can one determine the extent to which the findings of a particular inquiry have applicability in other contexts or with other subjects (respondents)?
3. *Consistency*: How can one determine whether the findings of an inquiry would be repeated if the inquiry were replicated with the same (or similar) subjects (respondents) in the same (or similar) context?
4. *Neutrality*: How can one establish the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are determined by the subjects (respondents) and conditions of the inquiry and not by the biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the inquirer? (p. 57)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) further describe “peer debriefing” as a useful method for establishing credibility in a study. They suggest “the process helps keep the inquirer ‘honest,’ exposing him or her to searching questions by an experienced protagonist doing his or her best to play the devil’s advocate” (p. 308) by probing biases, meanings, and interpretations. Creswell (1998) lists eight appropriate procedures for the verification of the data and findings of a qualitative research study and recommends that researchers should utilize at least two of them (pp. 201-203). The two procedures chosen as most

appropriate for this study were peer debriefing with one other qualified qualitative researcher, and the services of an experienced external consultant in the field of qualitative research who also reviewed all the data and workings of this study.

Holliday (2007) informs us that in order for validity to be present in qualitative research, it is necessary to show all the workings in the study. He further posits that in any research there are many choices to be made and the inquirer must be prepared to justify and account for all selected options (p. 8).

### Categories and Themes

The three categories that emerged from the process of coding were support: cultural complexities; relationships: cultural challenges; goals: beyond survival. The three themes that emerged from analysis of the data were:

1. Participants depended on the support of home, the university, and especially the Native American Cultural Center, to help ease the culture shock of being a minority student in an alien environment.
2. With continued contact with the campus society, the participants gained more confidence in the white culture, and were finding their relationship with their home and culture was evolving. They expressed a desire for a multicultural society without prejudice, but remained adamant about maintaining their own culture.
3. Assimilation was expressed as a negative option. Culture was seen as important and the goals expressed were educational success and returning to the reservations to help their people.

The final assertion that emerged from the analysis of these three significant themes was: Effective support of the cultural identity of Native American students studying on a predominantly white campus, by their family and the administration of the university, contributes to the retention and success of these students. The codes, categories, themes, and assertion are summarized in Figure 1. Support for each of these themes is presented in Chapter III.

Codes	Categories	Themes	Assertion
Anxious Anxiety Scary Frightened scared of other people's perceptions Supposed to be part of safe environment You can always come back home NAC is island of safety You have to build a new social core network Collective society Out of comfort zone Help from NAC so not thrown out to the wolves Some professors take the time to understand Professors allow derogatory talk Very hard to come to university NAC valuable in my success Culture shock Family is all I have We very much stuck together NAC and dorms were the greatest help University closer to home No problems with professors Parents supported education Faculty very friendly Homesick at larger college Smaller classes here Instructors are helpful Overwhelmed in such a large environment NAC; these are the people I trust NAC is like a family	Support →	Participants depended on the support of home, the university, and especially the Native American Cultural Center, to help ease the culture shock of being a minority student in an alien environment	Effective support of the cultural identity of Native American students studying on a predominantly white campus, by their family and the administration of the university, contributes to the retention and success of these students.

Figure 1. Data Analysis.



Figure 1 cont.

Codes	Categories	Themes	Assertion
<p>Trust the faculty and they trust me                      NAC is comforting                      Everybody comes to the NAC                      I feel welcome                      I like it here                      Object to be singled out asking cultural questions                      I don't feel singled out                      NAC helped to overcome the culture shock                      NAC Director stands out                      We use a lot of humor                      Professor made me mad promoting prejudice                      Professors are on no level to promote that higher understanding                      Not being allowed up to the next level                      Uncomfortable when professors ask me to get into groups                      Problems with students and family ties                      Had the support of my mom                      Nervous and lost                      It's a whole world                      I've come across a couple of professors that don't understand or don't want to understand                      Many professors enjoy breaking students down so they can remold them                      Stick to your own people</p>			
<p>Tell each other not to quit                      The white kids made friends with each other faster                      I don't have a ton of friends                      Calls herself an apple                      Most of us have grown up on a reservation                      We very much stick together                      I try to avoid negative people                      Have made friends who are study buddies                      When I go home my friends are having a hard time understanding me</p>	<p>Relationships                      →</p>	<p>With continued contact with the campus society, the participants gained more confidence in the white culture, and were finding their relationship with their home and culture was evolving. They expressed a desire for a multicultural society without prejudice, but remained adamant about maintaining their own culture.</p>	

Figure 1 cont.

Codes	Categories	Themes	Assertion
<p>I don't go home a ton...as long as they know I am alive                      I have got used to being at college                      I was hoping the base would bring enough other minorities</p>			
<p>Don't like being singled out                      asking questions about my culture                      We are supposed to be part of a safe environment                      We are survivors                      We are warriors                      A lot of our reservations are still concentration camps                      I am proud to be Native American...and not going to let anybody change that                      I don't believe in the melting pot theory                      Important to maintain cultural identity                      You don't want to assimilate                      Accepting of other people and not lose yourself in the process                      Ideal is mutual understanding between races without the prejudice and discrimination</p>			
<p>I got to go back, I haven't got no choice                      Go to grad school                      I am already living my dream                      Individualism is important                      See myself leaving the state to work                      Speak to people and make some kind of difference                      Want to make a difference back home                      Believe in the salad bowl theory                      Why should I give up my culture just because I am away from home                      Can't go home...no jobs                      Teaching my kids that it is o.k. to be different                      Hopefully get a job                      Going home so my son becomes aware of his culture</p>	<p>Goals                      →</p>	<p>Assimilation was expressed as a negative option. Culture was seen as important and the goals expressed were educational success and returning to the reservations to help their people.</p>	

## CHAPTER III

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

In this chapter, the themes that emerged from the analysis are presented. Three themes characterized the perspectives of Native American students at this small university in the Upper Midwest. These themes are discussed under the following categories: Support: Cultural Complexities; Relationships: Cultural Challenges; Goals: Beyond Survival.

#### Category One – Support: Cultural Complexities

Theme One: Participants depended on the support of home, the university, and especially the Native American Cultural Center, to help ease the culture shock of being a minority student in an alien environment.

The rise of the Tribally Controlled Colleges since the middle of the 20th century has increased the higher education options of the Native Americans who live on, and close to, the recognized reservations. The students who choose to leave their cultural comfort zone to study at a traditional four-year university as part of a minority on that campus face many challenges. Support for these students is important in order to allow them to realize their potential in their chosen life path.

#### *Precursor*

The previous educational experiences of the participants were diverse and have need of introduction prior to sharing their perceptions as students on this campus. Two of



the students came directly from high school, while the remainder experienced a more circuitous route.

Sue came directly to this university from high school. TJ transferred into this university as a sophomore with 21 credits, having taken dual credits while in high school. This was not his first choice of college: "My first choice of college was [larger state university]. I decided to come here so I wouldn't have too big of a culture shock...it was just the size of the college that drew me here."

Sydney went to a larger state university to begin her higher education career and expressed her dislike of it: "I didn't know anyone...I went home every other weekend...I didn't like the dorms...it was too big...my biology class was like 300 people in it...you had to talk to their student aides and you couldn't talk to the instructor." She longed for home and the Tribal College: "[B]ack home I would have got more one-on-one."

Jane started her higher education at the same university as Sydney and also found herself "very overwhelmed. [I] was more of a number, I didn't last but a semester there and I went back home." She was much happier at her local Community College: "I like the class size; I liked the intimacy...and the fact that you know one another."

Dan described a very diverse experience pursuing his higher education, changing schools four times: "I went to school in Arizona for a while...went there twice, actually...the first time I moved back, I moved back to be closer to my girlfriend...we got married...I moved back down there and came back up." He kept leaving school and going home, then back to school again because, as he explained, "I get so bored...I go back to school because the jobs that I work...without a degree [are] just mind

numbing...I did not like being the guy on the bottom and the only way to get up...is to get a degree.”

BT never attended elementary school or junior high, but good grades and an ACT of 31 from his four years of high school allowed him to attend college. As he put it, “nobody really questioned that.” BT explained how his experience is grounded in his culture: “I didn’t speak English until I was 13...I speak 3 native languages and English was the last thing I had to learn.” Until recently, he used to carry an English dictionary around with him for different words in tests, and sometimes when hearing a word spoken in class he had to clarify when it sounded like another. His higher education career to this point is circuitous, as he explains:

I started in 1998 and I wasn’t ready for it...I had to work and tried to raise a child...family...so it didn’t work out...here the first time that I came...joined the youth military...spent approximately 6 years...then I was allowed to come back to university...then I went to a smaller community college. I did well there and then I transferred to [here] in 2004.

Sandra related her indirect route to this university from high school via the Air Force:

As far as the university...I have always wanted to get a higher education...never had the opportunity...before the Air Force, I worked in various jobs, never had a lot of money, no time to go to school...tried but it just didn’t seem to work out...once I got out of the military and had the GI bill...the university is so handy right here in town...I just signed up here...and now I have the time and the means.

### *Home and Family*

“The family is all I have...[I was] always taught that the family is the number one thing; nothing else is that important.” (Lea, participant)

The low graduation rate of minorities, especially Native Americans, is well documented. Jane gives some insight into how her culture is based on powerful bonding



within the extended family and, perhaps, is a contributing factor. Jane spoke of influences as a series of circles: In the white culture, at the beginning of a child's life, the first circle is the family; later, the influence of acquaintances becomes important; still later, friends become an important part of the person's life. She makes the comparison with the native culture when she explained:

In the native culture, that doesn't stand true because the first circle is always your family. So it is very difficult for grandmas, uncles, aunties, and mums and dads, which is considered immediate family...to let their kid leave that circle, and when they do, and they call and say "I can't do this, I want to come home." "Yes, you can come home." People say "I don't understand that, why don't they get tough, tough love, tough love." Tough love is still love. I get that; but to them it is the way of the village, you come back home, you can always come back home. It is always open, they have a hard time with that; people have a hard time understanding...not that the students want to leave...it's the fact they want to go back home.

Dan experienced the support of the extended family as he grew up. He describes his situation on the reservation as better than most "because my father...realized that in order for him to be able to work hard enough and make any kind of money...he had to put...me in the care of his sister and her husband."

Family support can be a contributing factor in providing the necessary incentive to actually attend a college of higher education. TJ describes his grandmother as the person who:

used to be a teacher's aide...she always taught me stuff at home...got it into my head to do good academically so you could go to college...my family have always stressed grades, all my brothers and sisters...I have set the bar very high for them but they all come pretty close...my grandma's [now] a reading teacher at the high school so she always watched...to make sure we kept our grades up.

Sue shared that her family's expectation was that she would attend college:

I guess I always knew that I was going to go to college and I think my mom always expected [it]...I have two younger sisters...I don't think we really had an



option...you're going to go to school...I don't know what else I would have done because I always had my eye on the money, if I want to make some money...I better get a degree in something

Sydney expressed a similar upbringing to Sue's in that her family stressed the need and desire for education. She stated, "I have always been taught that education...you won't get anywhere without it...so [it] is important...so we have to go...that's how my parents brought me up."

Dan was also influenced by family to choose this university and explained, "My wife wanted to be closer to the family." TJ had the combined pressure of friends and family which affected his decision: "My family and friends, they wanted me to be closer to home. I had a few friends who were from here and I figured it would be a nice place to start and just get the hang of things."

Jane spoke about how hard it was for her to be away from home:

Family, just not being around family, people of your own kind...I know that kind of seems silly in this day and age for some people...it's a big difference to walk into a room just to have lunch when you are back home, people will lean over and would say "I saw you last week...what was going on over there..?," that type of thing, but here, people just don't want to talk to you...I just realize now that it is so far from the community here in [xxx]. It is so [far] from what I thought...it was just me...it was the fear of the unknown.

The lure of home and family is always strong. The students may be studying away from home, but they were determined to maintain the connection with their family and culture whenever they possibly could. Some of the travel schedules were quite strenuous.

Lea's sister started at the university at the same time, which made her feel secure and confident; she also had a cousin who was already a student. Even with all of this family support, Lea felt the need to commit to a demanding travel schedule to be with her family and suggested that she was not unique:

I'm spoiled too...I live an hour and a half away...[and] drive home almost every day in spite of gas cost...I notice people that live four hours away still will make that trip that is home, no matter...they always talk about their reservation.

Sue also regularly travelled home, but not to the same extent as Lea:

I was going home every weekend, it was only an hour and I would go home, and I had a lot of friends that went to the community college there, or were just working, so I saw my friends and my family...I was home a lot.

When TJ began his studies, his travelling commitment home was similar to Sue's, but as his time progressed at the university, his trips became less frequent:

I went home every weekend the first semester...I think this semester I stayed here two weekends and then the weekend before finals week...This semester, I think I only went home three weekends....

TJ acknowledges there were some native students who stay within their own comfort zone and have as little contact as possible with the campus culture. He explained:

[they] just stay in their own little...go to school, go home, just stick with themselves, don't try and don't become part of anything. They get their education and then go back to their reservations.

When Dan started, he was planning to be a part of this element of native culture that invested minimal input to the campus life and culture: "When I first got here, I was just figuring out how to come to class...and go home."

BT corroborates there were others who thought like Dan: "There are many students that travel every day, back and forth...whether that is because they have to take care of certain family members or whether that's housing...inadequate housing here...."

A number of the participants referred to a "culture shock." Jane illustrated this point when she declared:

What I mean by culture shock is, people don't realize that by being [x] miles [or] whatever it is from the reservation, it is a world, it is a whole world. I don't care who you are, you are going to feel it. What I mean by the culture shock is even



the simplest things; the humor...native people use a lot of humor in their life whether it be in a comfortable situation or a death or an argument...I have gotten myself into trouble. People don't realize that you are joking, they kind of become offended like "Geez, how can you joke at a time like this?"...that has a culture shock...no one ever gave me a feeling of discomfort...I think the feelings that I felt were really my own and it had to do with the culture shock.

### *Tribal Colleges*

The Tribal Colleges are considered to be a successful means to provide a culturally sensitive environment for the higher education career of Native American students. One of the questions asked of each of the participants concerned the Tribally Controlled College at or near their home. Given their availability, would they advise a student to start their higher education career near to home, or go directly to a four-year traditional college experience? There was a mixed response to this question: two positive, two negative, and one well considered.

Jane was positive about the Tribal College experience before the traditional college:

For me, purely because of the sizes, I would advise people to take their generals back home just because of...I am speaking from my own experience, you are going to walk into a classroom and maybe there are 15 people, but the chances are you are going to know most of these people...so you are coming to [xxx] and it is a history class and there are 15 people, are you going to know any of those people? ...are you going to walk over to the people here at [xxx]...in that history class and say "Can I join your study group?" Chances are you're not. Back home, chances are, you will.

Sydney was also positive about the Tribal College experience:  
Always encourage them to stay at the community college for a while, that way you have two more years to grow...things change when you graduate from high school...get some experience before you move out...stay at the tribal college 'cause it's free and they offer more help...it helps your GPA when you are applying for grad school.



On the other hand, TJ was verbose in his opposition to the idea of attending Tribal

College first:

My thought on that is if you can handle the course work and...if you can get the money to go away, then I suggest leaving and going to college right away 'cause from what I saw, my friends who stayed home and went to tribal college...either had a harder time leaving after their two years, or they did leave, and didn't get past their two years; so I am against the tribal college, although I have taken classes there...They feel like they are stuck there, scared a little because they want to be with their friends and family. Just as soon as they are out of high school, they have started their own families so it is even harder to leave financially...to me it seems like the ones that leave right away are more successful...but the people that work at the tribal colleges say that the students that have started off there are more successful...I don't see it that way...I see these two years wasted when you could go to a bigger college...the ones that stayed at our tribal college struggle more when they get to a bigger college, just quit...because they can't handle the work...if you leave right away...you learn how to handle college better...when they leave after the two years of tribal college they get themselves an apartment and don't get that first year college experience and make friends. Also, the tribal colleges are not as academically challenging as the university...by leaving right away they get used to passing these harder classes so by the time they get into their core classes, the 300 level classes, they can study and prepare themselves...if they don't know how to study for them it is definitely a shock...plus...they have to get used to becoming part of the culture; it just seems that everything is way harder for them.

Sue provided a second negative response to the idea of having Tribal College

experience first for personal reasons:

I didn't want to stay in my town...I would have had to live at home...really don't want to...live with my parents, there's not enough houses there...[there is] no place to live in our town...that was one reason, another was just to experience something new...I liked that [xxx] wasn't so far away...that was pretty much my deciding factor in coming here...it was close to home and I had my son. My parents still live in [xxx] so I can go back if I need to go back and they come up to visit...it is the family connection I guess. I considered moving to [xxx] and, "oh my god, it is six hours away; what am I going to do?"

BT's response was the considered reply:

The two year colleges, it has its pros and cons: pros, you are closer to your family and you are allowed to maybe get some classes that are at a lower level that will try to make you a better student; the cons, you have a lot of politics that you have

to deal with in the two year colleges. There are a lot of staff there who have own family members who are vying for the same scholarships, they're vying for the same slots and positions and getting into certain programs and, of course, you want to see your family [do] well, so....

### *Institutional Support*

The Native American students have made the commitment to leave their homes, families, and their cultural comfort zone to become part of a minority student body studying on a predominantly white campus. BT describes his early experiences of attending university at the larger state university and the difference in the behavior of peers between the two institutions:

A lot of those things were really hard to be able to sit in the classroom and to hear people's perceptions...stereotypes...and they didn't care about how they offended anyone...they still don't...I have a sister there...it is my understanding here at [xxx] that in the last few years that that's not allowed, that you can't say certain thing[s] that you would like to say...if it [is] derogatory towards a person.

Sue had the support of her mom when she registered for classes here: "I just remember coming with my mom...I was undecided at the time...I just took some general classes and [they] gave me the date to show up for the first day of class and that was about it." When it came time to begin her classes, Sue felt "nervous and lost" but admitted she "didn't bother to do orientation or anything so spent some time trying to find what buildings and what classes I was supposed to be in." She was overwhelmed by the sheer size, a theme expressed by many participants:

This is just so much bigger...my graduating class was 43 people...I come here and I am in a class of 43 people...I didn't know anybody in my classes...I knew other people that were going to school here but not in my classes, it was kind of scary...I am a pretty shy person to begin with so it was kind of hard I didn't have anybody up here...from my school that graduated with me...I don't think anybody came here so it was interesting.



BT shared his first impressions of being a student at this university and why he felt as he did:

Yeah, it was pretty scary...it was going to be an element that I was never...probably wouldn't ever...I don't know, it was a new experience for me...I was scared anxious anxiety, that sort of thing...just people's perceptions I guess.

Jane also expressed feelings of anxiety when describing her first impression of becoming a student here and shared her sense of vulnerability:

I was pretty frightened; I was pretty scared, brighter after a little recovery. Again here was the fear of the unknown...the year before I moved up here my mom had passed away...when she passed away it was very sudden...she was the person in the family that everybody went to...I couldn't even call her.

TJ was also anxious but found the dorm experience helped him to rise to the challenge of making new friends; he described his new social support system this way:

My first days into the dorms...it was pretty scary because I didn't know anybody except my friends from home...the first week, it was just kind of...finding my classes, and...getting used to how college is set up...and making new friends...the RAs were the best way to make friends because the RAs are really nice, I made friends with the RAs right away...they have monthly activities...so in the dorms they help you...get to know each other better...become better friends...I would support being in the dorms in the first year because it gives...you a chance to make friends that you have all through college.

Sandra admits that she approached this university with eyes "stereotyped" as the university "seem[ed] to be in the 'middle of nowhere' but she was glad she got "stuck here," as it "seems very modern, up to date...good place to get an education...less expensive." When she actually started, Sandra was one of the participants who expressed being overwhelmed by the sheer size of this university. She was also apprehensive about returning to education after such a long gap, but persevered. Sandra recalls her experiences:



I don't remember being in such a large place...my high school was big...but this place, I was just so lost...finding the classroom...I had been out of the school system for over 10 years and to come back into it with what seemed like high school kids seemed like...going through all that again?...there were just so many young people...that first semester it was hard to keep up...second semester...that one...I coped better....

Dan was cautious and calculating when he first arrived on campus, saying "I never know going into stuff what the breakdown is going to be...I had no idea what it was...[like] being an Indian in a conservative state and in a conservative town...towards...minorities."

*Native American Cultural Awareness Center*

The Native American students represent a minority of the students on campus. They have come to study in an alien environment that is removed from their home and their culture. The NAC is an institutionally provided resource. Whenever I walk in, I feel, to use Jane's words, "it is a world, it is a whole world." All participants stressed the importance of the Center and expressed appreciation for the help given by the Director.

BT defines the challenges felt by Native American students away from home and studying on a predominantly white campus which stresses the need for a resource of this cultural sensitivity:

You are already away from your core social support system so you have to make a new one, a new social support system and all that you think you will find is another couple of other Native American students, and that is why they stick together.

The Native American Center is the first place Sue would send any native student arriving on campus, describing it this way:

There are people they can relate with, that are going to help...that [are concerned with] their well-being...they need the support system...to let them know that

there is somebody willing to help them out and they are not just thrown out to the wolves....

BT gives us insight into the effectiveness of this resource in providing an environment where the native students feel free and able to share their experiences while studying in an alien culture as a minority:

In the Native American Center upstairs, it is supposed to be a place where all people can come and they are all invited, but it pretty much becomes an island of safety for them between classes where they are able to talk about...and many times, a lot of them joke around about, the experiences that somebody might have had...15 minutes prior in a classroom you will have some person will get up and say a lot of derogatory things towards Native Americans, and it will bother some people that are younger than me, but I am able to stand up for myself and tell people "that is wrong what you are saying, it is not correct" but some people are not able to do that, and not able to be confrontational like that, but I am not going to hit anybody or touch anybody; but in an open discussion I will try and correct them in the best way I can, and tell them "that is offensive towards me" and I rely on that right being here at our university, but it allows other students to be able to come back and talk to somebody like me and allow them. We might make a joke out of it we use a lot of humor in whatever that we do and...we can talk about it, but the center is becoming more of a safety island.

Jane attributed her success as a student to the Native American Center and the Director of the NAC; with this support, she felt comfortable enough to practice her spiritual observances, describing it this way:

What helped me...was the Native American Center. I seriously believe that if it hadn't been for the NAC there would have been times when the tears that were flowing would have drove me back home...because you felt so alone. You were amongst all these people and the culture shock...was one of the big things for me, but the NAC...really helped because there were people who talked my language, knew where I was coming from...when I said earlier about the NAC being a big part of why I completed, there was so much going on in my life and...when I got the "D" I am so hard on myself that I said to myself "I can't do this" and [the Director of the NAC] sat me down and said "Are you crazy? You are three-fourths done and you are going to walk away?"...Even the little things like my abalone shell with my sage, even the little, like I would smudge my pen before my test, smudge myself, I would have to get myself into a good state of mind. I don't [know] if I would have begun that if I had been anyplace else.



When referring to the Native American Center, Sydney spoke highly about the friendliness of the Director. TJ particularly liked the family feel of the Center:

One thing that really helped me [to get a bigger circle of friends] was the Native American Center because there were people there that I knew from home and they graduated before me so when I came here they helped me out a lot. [The Director of the NAC] was really good to me. It felt that you could get along easier with the people up there, it's inviting, and they feed us, and it feels just like you are home when you are not...it's kind of like when you work someplace you become like a family...people that are here in the Native Center are kind of like my family away from home...I don't have any special relationship with them but I like to hang out with mainly...my first choice for friends before any other.

Lea feels comfortable in the environment the Center provided and described it in this manner:

I come to the Native American Center a lot...these are the people I trust the most...everybody comes to the NAC...anybody can come in here, it's fun, it is like your family...you can hear the gossip from back home...we know each other on personal levels...it is comforting...[other people ask] "what is a powwow"...here, everybody just asks "when is the next powwow?"

Dan was glad he discovered the Native American Center and shared his experiences at the Center:

[At first] I just figured I'd come here and head home...because I live close...and it makes it nice and easy for that I figured, o.k., I can just stay isolated...that's fine...that was my attitude, to get the degree...to get through...to get it done...if you meet people...or not, don't worry about it...I just happened to stumble on to the Native American Center, that helped out a lot... 'cause it is really homey up there with the kitchenette and stuff...you can just hang out...some of it is language...but up there...most people are from the res, there are some who are not, but they still, at least understand...the aspect of coming from a reservation

Sue felt awkward going to the Native American Center at first, but noted how that changed over time:

All the Native students that I have met have been through the Cultural Center...[at first] I felt kind of awkward because it seemed like they were all kinda from one reservation...there really wasn't anyone from my reservation that I knew...I just kept going and hanging out and getting to know people...I was



kinda “showing up”...it was awkward...it wasn’t that I didn’t feel accepted...it was just that everybody knew everybody...one of my friends ended up coming here but she quit halfway through her first semester...she just had personal things going on, I think she had just broken up with her boyfriend...she wasn’t real focused, she still isn’t focused.

Sandra was an active participant within the Native American Center and spoke of her ethnic roots and how she became involved:

My family is from Mexican and Native people in my family and also my grandfather, I understand that he has got some Native American...right from the border there is a reservation there, but I never bothered to check it out...I thought of going to the reservation and see if his name is there, but I just never got around to it...it is just something in my family that has never come up...[when coming here] I did not declare anything about being Native American, I did not declare anything...I think it was looking for something to be a part of, to participate in...I became involved with [the Native American Center]...because of my curiosity and I wanted to know.

By subscribing to all the reservation newspapers, Sue also likes the way the NAC “helps to keep you grounded with what is going...on if I didn’t go home that week.” She stressed her support of the Native American Center and its mission:

People think “oh, if I am not Native American, I can’t go up there or I can’t join the club” but yet that’s part of what we do is to promote the awareness...this is our culture...we want to teach you more about it so that you are not ignorant to the fact that there are different...just to reduce the negative connotations that a lot of people have...I think it’s not just on our campus, there’s a lack of education.

### *Faculty*

BT discussed his relationship with some of the faculty and revealed cultural differences that can provide a basis for misunderstandings:

I had a certain [professor] who wanted me to make bold eye contact and whenever I would speak or say something, he would want me to make eye contact, and for our culture that is not o.k. It is a sign of hostility towards another person...and expressly towards elders or any title. For instance, when all this is finished you will be doctor so and so and when it becomes...that, I would look at you as someone with more stature than I do, so it would be wrong for me to make direct eye contact with you unless I was trying to make a deliberate point to you; but

that is not a sign of my weakness but a sign of my strength that comes from inside.

For BT, the history of the conflict between the white and native cultures is also of concern and without apparent resolution:

I had a professor that actually taught a certain concept that says “people need to take responsibilities so people of my culture are able to heal.” As long as people deny that they did something wrong, it is not allowing it to heal...the kind of question that people should ask themselves...how are we able to heal?...that’s the biggest part and you have people that just say that over and over “get over it, get over it”...it is just like me telling somebody else that just because I am bigger and stronger than you, that I can take something away from you.

Sue voiced her frustration and feels that the campus as a whole could be more proactive in promoting cultural understanding:

[M]aybe the college [could] do more to dispel some of the myths and inaccuracies that some people have...I don’t know how they would do that and I guess that is what is the plan of what the club is trying to do, not only providing support for the native students on campus but to help to get information out there...I think the campus as a whole could do a lot more, not only the native population, but also all the other cultures that are present here...it would seem that [city] is its own little vacuum and not very much is, I wouldn’t say tolerated, but accepted maybe, I don’t know.

TJ spoke warmly about all the help he received from the faculty and staff, with some exceptions, and provided insight into what support is required to make a student feel welcomed and valued:

My advisor, he was actually my biology professor...helped me out a lot...we met maybe once or twice a month just to see how things were going...it seems that he always stopped me after class...really helped me out in my first semester...his class was hard but he was looking out for me...every department I had contact with was very helpful and very nice except for the financial aid department...they were nice but they were not as helpful as they could have been...the kitchen staff in the cafeteria were really nice...[one]...she kinda reminded me of my grandma...she remembers everybody’s names...all the professors here were very nice...I didn’t meet any professor I didn’t like. They all took the time to remember your name, time to remember your face, if you had questions...to help you out...you could just get more if you need it...you just got to ask.



Sandra described her relationship with faculty in this way:

I think it was pretty good except for one...[where she laughed]...I still keep in touch with many of my professors from my previous classes, I see them on campus and like to be able to talk to them, I think I have only had problems when faculty treat me when I don't get it, maybe they think I am not trying hard enough...sometimes I suspect it is [cultural] but I have no reason to actually say that; it is only my own little nagging suspicion [laugh].

I asked Sue about her relationships with faculty in general; in her reply, she revealed that the history of the conflict between her minority culture and white culture is of concern:

I haven't really formed any relationship...I do work study for a professor I have gotten to know him...even the co-workers...in his department, I don't really talk to any of them except the secretary and there's [Director of the Native American Center]...I didn't really feel any attachments to any professors or really even base support...I...felt as if I was on my own...you just do what you do to get your grade and...keep going...there is one professor I have really gotten to know a little bit better and really enjoy his classes...he likes to put things in perspective...he points out the different viewpoints...I guess I just see the atrocities and things I guess America has committed against minorities in general...the Native Americans...but they don't think that people are going to hold that hostility against them.

BT enjoyed sharing his account of a satisfying experience in one of his classes: You can see there are some professors who take the time and some understanding. I actually had a professor last semester, and I didn't understand some of the things that she asked of me, so I would say "can I spend a couple of minutes after class" and she would...she would explain what she wanted from me, and I ended up with a 98% in her class and that was an upper level 400 class that I took. The rest of the students didn't do as well...I pulled her aside when she said "have you any questions, you know I'll answer them"...it was a good thing when you come to a [helpful] atmosphere, like I said, sometimes it is not as good because you stand out.

### *Cultural Awareness*

BT outlined the strength of the bond between members of family in his culture. This is an alien concept to the dominant culture and can give rise to misunderstandings brought about by lack of empathy and tolerance:



There is a definite major problem that happens with students and with the closeness of your family...[the family] is the most important thing...it's above all your personal thing...I suppose they call it a collective society...and that's where we are...and it's really looked down upon. For instance, I have attended one, two, three, four funerals and it is hard to explain to the profs at [xxx] that funerals are a four day process...so I have come across more than 90% of professors that are quite accommodating once they realize what's going on and allow you to make up the work, but I've run across a couple that don't understand or don't want to understand....

BT related one professor's comments that illustrate his concerns:  
She had come across a few students of hers that she had allowed to enter the program and she had a hard time...they did well in their courses, but if a family emergency would occur, they would call and say "hey, I'm gone for the next couple of days or I'll fly back when I can get back." She said that she ran across difficulties in that area...so...what does a person do? Well, I still haven't found an answer to it.

Lack of cultural awareness has the potential to inadvertently impair a student's confidence and willingness to continue, as related by BT:

Just some days, I don't want to come to my courses because I have uncomfortable situations. Professors ask me to get into groups, and [in] our culture, we're not taught to jump to say "here, take me, take me, let me be a part of your group." There are a couple of people that are not bad, but otherwise...that is a really difficult situation...they are not assigned, that is a difficult thing...it is easier to assign certain groups of people...that helps in a way...you don't get rejected so many times.

When Dan talked about his experiences with faculty, he said that he had been treated just like any other student. The Director of the Native American Center "has always been there...he's a good guy but that is his job." He mentioned a new faculty member who had "a Native American background and he's been helpful in a lot of different stuff," including some transcript issues. He described his relationship with faculty generally as "pretty good...I don't have any trouble with anybody."

BT feels that people are endeavoring to understand the Native American culture and make a difference, describing his rationale for saying this:

I have been invited in a lot of professors' offices and they have asked certain questions...I don't know where I have ended up with the badge on my chest that says that I have all the answers, but when I am asked those kind of things, I take it that I will make it better for someone that comes in the path behind me.

On the other hand, BT revealed that many professors "enjoy breaking students down so that they can remold them and make them into better students." He explained why this doesn't work with Native American students:

Many of us are just happy to be here...stuff like the sweatshirt that has your school logo on...all you have to do is reinforce them...like "you're doing good"...hear that from a professor and that will carry you on for the next two or three days.

The history of his culture and his people is something that matters deeply to BT. He had a major concern with the cultural teachings of one professor, the remembrance of which sparked an impassioned utterance:

She is telling us, that...whatever culture, what heritage, or whatever race you are, you are all equal, you are all equal. I can understand [what] she is kind of saying but for us as Native Americans, if you [take] a little look at it...all these people trying to implement their languages, all these people, trying to implement their languages, all these people learn about their culture, their heritage...from 1492 even up until 1976, we didn't even have religion, we didn't have freedom of religion...finally you have the sun-dances, you are having powwows that people are going to, these are not hostile events...if you look at every powwow poster, it says "no drugs, no alcohol, no violence"...people come there just to have a good time...they share and enjoy and laugh, giggle, dance, exercise, see old relatives that they haven't seen for years...this is what the people are deciding they want to do.

### *Individualization*

Dan described how being in the same core classes during the summer helped people recognize him; he wondered if it was "because I am constantly one of the only Indian students in classes." I asked him if he was singled out in class by professors, and his response was:



Yeah, they do, I mean they don't, I mean, I like to think that they recognize [me] more than single me out...they don't...say [when] anything that has to do with Indians comes up in class, they don't automatically go "hey, Dan can answer that," no, they just...do it and kind of know I am the only Indian...I think it just makes me more recognizable...they can recognize me easier, but they don't single me out for stuff, they don't go "we can have Dan do it, he's the Indian kid, he knows most about it so...."

BT became somewhat upset when he described how he is targeted by professors to verify some data or concept concerning Native Americans. He shared how, on one occasion, he was asked by one of his professors about how social economic status might affect Native American learning:

So it kind of makes you seem special in a kind of way but at the same time, *it alienates me from the rest of the class* [my italics]...I don't come off to be intimidating...I always try my best to smile...every way I go, I always try and smile, that way I don't come across as intimidating or hostile...but a lot of people are coming around...my first experience is that they didn't want to stop and be recognized...I am sure there are a lot of students out there who don't like me or don't want anything to do with me...I am not the darkest person in the world...I try not to let it affect me much.

Lea likes being at the university and was positive in her comments, except when asked questions about her culture:

I feel very welcome...I don't feel singled out...people that do want to get an education will want to come to [xxx], they are willing to get out of their comfort zone and just do it...I trust the faculty and they trust me, as I am a good student...the faculty don't single me out except they find out that I am from near a reservation, then they are interested in how we live over there. I get offended by that 'cause I don't really know myself and we are not all the same...we have three or four different professors ask me; they are mostly from different countries...maybe because in their country they have tribal cultures.

### *Programs*

TJ indicated to me that he was transferring to a larger state university in order to finish his degree, since the courses he needed were not offered here: "If I could stay here at [xxx], I would, but I have to go...for my scholarship and for my major." Sandra was



also concerned with the courses that she required for the degree she wanted; the larger state university had limited access to her preferred programs and she was attempting to find alternatives that she could complete here before transferring. BT uses his personal experience to offer possible reasons why this institution is losing Native American students, despite the better cultural atmosphere here:

When they say in your books, say even for graduate level...that we strongly encourage people of race, color and those type of things to apply; that's pretty much just nice to say...they are not being allowed up that next level...how many Native Americans do you have in your graduate program [here]? You might have a couple of hundred people and you might have one, and that's right now, [xxx] is attracting so many Native American students over there, hostile environment, but they have a chance of bettering their lives...they got so many programs over there...it is taking away [this university's] students...they got graduate programs over there...they help educate people, if people want to fix or...help themselves...when I got into the program for addiction studies they asked me "why should we allow you in here?" and I sat there and looked...I was sure that was one of the questions.

BT could not understand the reluctance to admit him to the addiction studies program which he saw as a way of helping his people. He shared his concern in this way: "You hear every day certain people getting drunk, certain people crashing, and certain people dying on a regular basis."

#### *Changing Perceptions of the University*

The participants were asked how their feelings for the university have changed over time. Sue answered, "I am more...vocal in my opinions...if I have a problem with something, I am going to say how I feel about it or ask them to clarify more...." She was outspoken concerning the cultural capabilities of some of the faculty when she said:

[This one] professor just really made me mad because...she was promoting the prejudice...I told her exactly how I felt about it...I think being [at] an institution of higher education you would be more open...just not so closed minded...she just really made me mad...we are supposed to be an institution of higher learning

and a lot of times I think some of the professors...are on no level to promote that higher understanding, especially the cultural differences.

BT, however, was complimentary when detailing some of the teaching goals presented by this university in an attempt to foster cultural awareness amongst its students:

They have a lot of students that are learning the four year experience that they have here in what they can do or say. They have certain professors here that go out of their way to teach them that they need to learn certain things about Native American people because they are going to go into social work or nursing and that type of things you need to learn about how it is, to be to...I mean that is a good thing.

*Advice to Those Who Follow*

I asked each participant what suggestions they would have for a sibling who was thinking of attending university here. Sydney was complimentary about the faculty and facilities and would encourage students to come:

The faculty was very friendly...they meet the needs of the students and generally think about their students, what they feel is important...[The Director of the NAC] was very friendly...[I would] encourage them to come...smaller classes, lots of programs that you can get involved in, lots of student activities...teachers are friendly, the instructors are helpful, labs are small...people here are more friendly...at [previous larger university] until everybody was rushing to do their own thing.

BT's dream situation would be a genuine multicultural community, but his advice was more pragmatic:

It's hard to say...because I am now really close to graduating. I actually had a brother that came here and started this semester, came here and didn't like what happened in the first couple of weeks. He was headstrong, he was military strong. He had spent 4 years in the US military, came here to the institution, loved the idea of coming here. I tried to tell him the best advice I could. He decided it wasn't worth it...he said that he couldn't take certain things that were said; said about him, said to him, those type of things...I would suggest, I would love for the idea that other students could talk amongst each other, that there would be a multicultural [community] as this room says, but my best suggestion now would



be to stick to your own kind, stick to your own people, I mean, that's not a good thing to say but it is the truth.

BT then became more somber when he gave advice on how to succeed once you are at a university and committed to getting a degree in higher education:

I would say to somebody else, to keep on trying to keep on giving your best; it's a long best, it's a long road. You come in [at] a level that has got to be above and beyond others, you got to have a thick skin, so let's hope that you have a thick skin, to learn how to brush those things off your shoulder.

Dan's advice involved creating a new social support system, while maintaining a plan for success:

If I had a brother who was coming, I would tell him to...definitely get in and talk with [The Director of the NAC]...talk with your adviser...talk with the head of your department and make sure you have everything straight...don't neglect your studies but try and get to everything you can, whatever activity is going on...you might be there alone for the first few times but just hang out, try not to be in the corner hiding out...sooner or later you might meet one person...that person may know four or five people...become involved...without affecting your studies.

Sue also stressed the importance of the support system:

Focus on the support system...don't...lose the sense of where they came from...I think a lot of people who that happens to, especially if they go to the bigger schools...they are native but they don't know what it is like to be discriminated against...in a larger school system, there might be two or three other native students and that's it so they are not really going to identify with that culture especially if it's not home...look in the groups...I think there is not really a lot of emphasis on the different clubs and groups that are around...I didn't know half the clubs at the school existed...[students] think if they are not that major or in the same field that they can't be part of the different groups...I think they need to stress [that] more...the same with the Native American Center.

The advice that Lea offered to potential new students was very interesting given that she has a problem with being questioned about her culture. For example, she stated "I want to be left alone," and revealed that she does not make friends easily:

Find the Native American Center...get along with your teachers...don't get offended by being asked about being Native American...stay in the dorms, I never got to do that.



TJ advised “stay in the dorms first...it helps you make friends...to go to college, not for their friends but for their major, because you can make friends anywhere you want to go.”

When asked for his suggestions for helping Native American students feel welcome and valued, BT offered the following:

Try to find certain Native Americans that are able to help teach people what is appropriate or not appropriate...because we don't want to be assimilated. We are our people, we are trying our best to learn what our cultures are, we are trying our best to do these things.

In summary, these students, although choosing to study away from their comfort zone, retained their ties with their home and family. There was a divergence of experiences concerning different levels of institutional support but agreement about the effectiveness of the Native American Center and its Director. Advice offered to future Native American students attending this small Upper Midwest university was often a reflection of their own experiences.

#### Category Two – Relationships: Cultural Challenges

Theme Two: With continued contact with the campus society, the participants gained more confidence in the white culture, and were finding their relationship with their home and culture was evolving. They expressed a desire for a multicultural society without prejudice, but remained adamant about maintaining their own culture.

##### *Friends*

Relationships and the ability to make friends, regardless of cultural affiliations, are especially important when students are away from home and outside their comfort zone. Friends become the new social network that many participants stated was essential.

It may not be equally important to all; however, Dan initially declared “I don’t have a ton of friends, I have never had a ton of friends...people should not have to worry about me for some reason”; yet he went on to describe how his relationships with his peers on campus have evolved and improved over time:

Since I have become more involved...when I first got here I didn’t really do any extra-curricular or anything...since then I have become involved in activities and clubs outside the Native American Club and naturally they have expanded...you do this and do that with people and you just can’t help getting to talk...get a rapport...it’s really been easy there are a lot of outgoing people.

TJ expressed a certain frustration making friends at first. He felt a certain alienation and was the only participant to use the term “white dominant society”:

At first it was kind of annoying ‘cause I didn’t know anybody and all of my friends were in football...so they were always with their football friends...it was kind of a shock because I didn’t know anybody right away but...I got used to it and made new friends...one thing I noticed was that it seems like it’s harder for me to make friends, it seemed like it was easier for the other students...I don’t know, I felt a little distant from them...when I first got here I felt I was in a white dominant society and I felt it was hard to make friends with them because I have a feel for a different culture but then, after I looked past, I made friends easier.

I asked TJ if he meant the other Native Americans who were here:

No, I guess I could call them the white kids...they made friends with each other faster ‘cause most of them were from the [xxx] area and they already knew each other so...it made it a little bit harder to make friends with them...the only friends I made at first were students that were from farther away like me...I am actually way better friends with them this semester...now they are just easier to make friends [with]. Those that were friends before they got here stuck with each other.

In describing how focused he is to succeed as a student, TJ shared how he has made white friends:

I made a couple of friends [from my biology class] who were my study buddies, I help them out...they help me out...I have become good friends with them; but for some reason I still hang out with the Native Americans here as I did before that...whenever I go to classes, I am just there...I don’t go there to visit with my



friends but go with them after school and I have done my homework...I make friends and make the time to have friends and hang out with friends.

Jane found her relationships with fellow students relatively simple, as she had transferred from a Tribal College rather than beginning as a freshman:

For me...I think what helped was I had already finished my generals by the time I came to [xxx]. I was right away going into the Ed program; you do your core requirements, you do your practicum, and you do your student teaching, so the people that you started with in some of the core classes finished with us so you kind of...had a relationship...you scoped out those people you wanted to be partners with and those you didn't...I don't think it would have been that easy if I had only been working on generals because...I may be in a class with you and never in a class with you again...that type of thing.

Lea finds that most of her friends are Native Americans, because she has a "choice issue with choosing friends...[preferring] really close friends, not acquaintances." When Dan recounted his relationships with other Native Americans, on and off campus, he described it this way:

I get along real well with all of them, I'm not...I don't have a ton of friends, I have never had a ton of friends...I am just not that kind of guy. I have always been [that] people should not have to worry about me for some reason, friends always seem to have this idea that they should worry about you in some way...I have people I get together with and do stuff with but nothing really close friends...it's always group things...outside of my girlfriend, she's...a half-breed...she is a townie...her friends are hit and miss...they are actual townies...they are very negative about other people to make themselves feel better...I can't stand that...back home we just don't do that...I just can't identify with them...if I can't identify with you I just can't be your friend, because I just don't understand what you are talking about, and you generally don't understand a lot of when I tell a story or say something.

When I asked Sue about her relationship with her Native American peers on campus, she also commented on the differences in perceptions between those brought up on the reservation and what Dan calls "townies":

We connect on the social level because a lot of us have been through the same things...most of us have grown up on a reservation, then come here...one woman



that never lived on a reservation, she calls herself an apple...“I’m an apple, I’m an...” An apple is somebody who is red on the outside but white on the inside...you look Native American but you see yourself as white...more what is white culture...among my friends it was a bit of a joke...I think a lot of people feel that way especially if they are not raised on a reservation...just the differences growing up in an urban area vs. rural reservation...I think they don’t know a lot of the traditional ways, more so than if you are around it every day...I think we have a lot of esteem, interest, and ideals I guess, and a lot of us have faced the same pressures.

BT replied to the question regarding his relationships with other Native American students:

I have a good relationship with them, we associate on campus, we associate in the community, we very much stick together [even] if we have a tough time, say an aunt has just passed away or something. We talk it over and we try to tell each other not to quit, don’t give up, there are things that are worse, there is also something worse by going back to the reservation, there is always worse out there, just try to...stick together, there are some students that have their own responsibilities that just like to go home after the day.

Sandra had more difficulty in finding friends, because of having been exposed to more cultures in the military and not finding that same openness to diversity at this university. She explained it this way:

I try to avoid negative people...so as far as making friends, I have made friends with those who are more open...interestingly enough, the friends I have made are others from the military who, from moving around have had experience of more cultures so they are more open but people from [city], it has been a bit more difficult, because they are more closed it’s hard to...they don’t invite you in...so the friends are the military who have settled in...the other friends are Native Americans...Hispanics...one girl from the military...but...I haven’t many friends from here.

### *Separated from Home and Family*

The participants have declared, using positive language, what a central and important element the family and their home is in their culture. These students have chosen to remove themselves from this element, albeit it temporarily, subjecting

themselves to contact and influences from the dominant culture. The following conversations provide some insight into how their perceptions are affected as a result of their experiences:

TJ relates how his relationships with home and campus have evolved over time:

One thing I noticed this semester is that as I have stayed here longer, whenever I go home, it seems like...the way I talk...my friends from home...[are] having a hard time to understanding me because I am using bigger words and stuff...most of my friends from home are still in high school so...they understand...some of the things I have done and stuff...that is the only thing I can notice is different...between here and home...one thing at home is, I feel more comfortable...at home I just...relax and when I am here...it's kind of mostly in school and when you're here I am doing my homework...I hang out with my friends it just seems it is more comfortable at home, it is more inviting...this semester rather than last semester, it is more inviting here, just as much as it is at home...I have got used to being at college here...I feel comfortable here...I still miss home once in a while...I would rather be here than home sometimes...I guess I'd rather be home in the summer months for sure because this is a city and I don't care for city life.

Dan described his relationship with his home now:

I don't go home a ton if I can help it...part of when I get home I tend to be...[a long pause]...very close to being an alcoholic when I'm home...just when I'm home, it's...the influence of my family members...by day four, I'm going "no more, I can't do it no more"...I go home on occasions, most people can call me and get what they need, they don't need to see me...as long as they know I'm alive.

BT relates a disturbing conflict between what he has been taught at this university and his home and culture:

It is really hard when you come to an environment where they try and teach you that everything that you want to aspire for is "not what I am going to teach you." I mean it has been so frustrating this last year; I got to a certain level last year and they told me "what you need to do to help people." I am thinking that if I took this philosophy and I went to a reservation and tried to implement this philosophy that they are teaching me, I would probably get myself hurt.



### *Cultural Relationships*

Sue introduced an aspect of relationships that may not be immediately apparent to white people, indicating that non-white people have their own color-consciousness:

My mum's white and my dad's native, so I am just kind of stuck in the middle of everything and...if I were to go somewhere else, they would go "oh, she's white" but if I'm back home "oh, she's native" it's like once you get to talk to someone you ...figure out where they're from...I do that...a lot...we were just having a discussion the other day about native stuff and Arizona and how it is hard to tell them from Mexicans sometimes.

Having described herself as someone who is "stuck in the middle of everything,"

Sue shared her perceptions about being part of a minority in this way:

On campus...in [this city]...just because...you don't see...hordes of natives everywhere...you may randomly see one here and there but it's...not the majority...it does feel like you are the only ones [laughs quietly]...I think the Base helps, I think the Base is one of the best things that could have happened to [this city] because it brings in a lot of different ethnicities and it forces people to realize that there are other people around here...I think [this state] is pretty holed up in itself and people aren't really...you have some liberals, but for the most part, [this state] is very conservative and...it is not very open to other things unless they are forced to deal with it.

Dan was hoping that, in coming to this town and university, there would be a diversity that was more extensive throughout the student population on campus. With a critical mass of minority groups, he contends there would be more cultural support:

To be honest, I was hoping that the Base would bring enough other minorities...I always tend to say "darkies"...I am not very dark, but darker skin generally is minority people...a lot of times our backgrounds are quite different, and other things you had to go through are different, [but] we still understand...the general idea to having come up from...situations as opposed to...most of the Caucasians.

As BT nears his graduation, he feels a responsibility to promote a better understanding of his culture "to help other people, like professors and staff...people all



the way down the line, to other students that are not Native Americans.” He feels a responsibility to be a mentor for Native American students:

You have a choice, it is very inviting to quit; it is very inviting to want to...leave here...some students say it is not worth it, but I am 30 years old and it’s finally come around, and sometimes I have had to take part-time status as a student and those sort of things...at a four year institution, you are allowed to be able to come here and to try to get better yourself. That is a good thing for our people but it is a hard situation if you don’t have upper class men to tell you “this is the way things are going to go”... We talk...about which professors are more understanding, which professor has too many walls that are put up, which professor, in our minds is racist to an idea, and...ignorant to certain causes.

Sydney explained her commitment to her culture and her mission concerning her children and their cultural identity:

I think my culture is important, not when you are a kid, but as you get older...you want to get to know the meaning behind things...when we were young, we used to have people coming into class to teach us our native language because it was dying and we thought “do we have to do this?”...now, if my daughter were to marry someone who was not Native American, her kids would not be enrolled in our tribe...I mean it is not important to me for her to marry somebody, but it is important to me to introduce her to her heritage, like being at the powwow and be a part of it and to experience it...let her choose whether she wants to be a part of it or not...I guess it is how I was brought up...if you want to be a part of it we will support you...it is not a major part of my life but when you have kids you look at things differently.

Lea articulated a problem with being asked questions about her culture. She doesn’t like:

[being] singled out like now...asking questions about her culture...I live the same way as everyone else but not on the reservation...I don’t really understand all the sacred things and get upset when people keep asking and I don’t know the answer...I don’t want to appear to be ignorant...get offended that people [feel the] need to study them because they are different from everyone else...I don’t want to be asked that all the time [about her culture]...I don’t think people are being discriminating, they just want to know...I don’t know anything about myself...I am not traditional...I go to powwows...people come to the house and ask for Indian food just because we live near the powwow grounds.

As a senior student, BT exhibits confidence and leadership, qualities essential to influence a better understanding at the university that will help students who will follow:

There are certain professors that allow people to talk about derogatory things and sometimes I have had to remind professors that when you sign your contracts and you look inside your manuals that are put into place...there are things that you are not to allow to happen...we are supposed to be part of a safe environment and so, if you don't have upper class men to help, you find it hard to explain things.

BT described how he was actively trying to help people understand the native culture and deals with questions that reveal a lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity:

I have made many presentations, probably...upwards of 20 different presentations for different professors and different classrooms...I will come in my traditional regalia and my Dad's outfits, just anything you can possibly think of from a whole collection, and I explain that to these people that are in the classroom, I let them ask questions...I tell these people that nobody really has a stupid question. I have been asked "can you still make it rain?" and they are serious about that, so serious that they thought that Native Americans still lived in tepees...they were serious enough to think things like...Native Americans had larger livers and kidneys than an average person does...that there is something that is automatically in our brain that allows us to become violent once we have had our first drop of alcohol...those are a lot of difficult questions.

As he continued, BT provided some disturbing imagery in explaining why Native American students are survivors:

I tried to answer them the best way that was possible...it's very hard to come to a university system by itself. I meant there are not a lot of Native Americans that typically graduate and for one reason and another, they have a lot of fall-out rate...they have dreams and aspirations and when I make speeches and I know if there is a Native American in the classroom, I tell them that we are survivors, that we are warriors no matter what; that we are all survivors because we got to be able to leave the reservation and the confines...I spent some time when I went over to Germany and I seen a lot of the concentration camps, and to us, a lot of our reservations are still concentration camps.

#### *Assimilation and Accommodation*

TJ declares his cultural identity with pride: "I am not afraid to let anybody know I am Native American. I am proud of my culture...if people want to say stuff, they can, but I am proud to be Native American and not going to let anybody change that."



Sue likes the fact that more students are coming to study on campus from different countries through the transfer and international programs, creating a greater diversity of the student population. I asked her about the maintenance of her own cultural identity when studying as a minority on this campus: "I think there's an importance in maintaining it...I guess you don't want to assimilate...accommodation would...be the best word...you have to be...accepting of other people and not lose yourself in the process."

BT expressed deep concern about a stereotypical misconception about members of his culture:

What you hear is often "Native Americans are lazy"...they are not lazy, they love to work, they love having that pride, whether you are a man or a woman. I would like to think that of any culture, or any heritage, any country you come from. You will do a day's work and [that] makes you have a little pride that day...just makes supply for your family...supply for your loved ones...and maybe even yourself.

Jane, the participant who spoke at the greatest length about cultural spirituality, also commented on assimilation, stating:

I don't believe in the melting pot theory and I don't like to hear the horror stories of the boarding schools, you know, the assimilation "Kill the Indian and Save the Man" that type of thing...if you don't know where you come from you don't know where you are going.

Regarding the issue of assimilation, BT had this to say:

The old philosophy of relocation acts, old philosophy of assimilations, they are not working, they're not working, and it's driving people crazy. They're committing crimes that they wouldn't normally commit...you have people on \$168 a month, you got people [asking], what's the answer?...o.k. move to another city.



## *Prejudice*

A wish for a truly multicultural society was articulated by all the participants.

There were revelations, though, of the participants, that did not always achieve this ideal of a world of tolerance and understanding. Sue found that when she applied for jobs and gave her home address as on the reservation, she never received even an acknowledgment of the application; she had a friend who also experienced the same treatment. BT did not reveal his reservation address when finding housing, and his results were different:

I originally went to [xxx] and...didn't have too much problem finding housing because I never put down that I was from the reservation...you have to survive all of these things just to be able to get to the campus, and with all the harassing, it feels like they are always trying to pull you down, and many times it does.

Sandra has a friend coming here and I asked what advice she would give to that person:

You will overall have a good experience...people are friendly...I warned her that there will be a few people who will have to frown at you...they make it very obvious, it is not like they wait for you to walk away and then they whisper, they stare at you, or they make comments to your face...don't be surprised and don't feel bad if you run into a few individuals that might be rude.

Sue was born and raised on a reservation near to this university so has a longer relationship with this city than Sandra; her comments were more forthright:

I have met a lot of people on Base and they just hate it here...they are just like "this town sucks, they're so racist..." a lot of people I have met are black, Mexican, bi-racial...a lot of different people...they see the same things that the Native Americans in the [city] area have been seeing for years...it just puts a different spin on it once you realize somebody else has seen it as well.

Dan commented on his experiences with non-native people in this way: "under 15% of the people that I have interacted with that I have seen a negative attitude." TJ echoed this experience, not making it a large issue; "yeah, some people make racist comments" but other than a person he worked with off campus, "I haven't heard racist

comments from anyone else except from one Canadian guy...we just look past him and nobody cares.”

Sandra felt compelled to relate one distressing incident that occurred to her on campus. Hearing this story from her, I had to remind myself that she was a mature person who had served in the military so would not be easily frightened; yet, as this was an isolated incident, she did not allow it to spoil her overall impression of the campus:

In my freshman year...[I] was staying in the math tutoring building late at night, the janitors...just told me that...make sure you close the classroom door. One day...walking across the parking lot...nobody was in the building...the parking lot was empty except for my car...suddenly this truck drives by with these guys in it...as I am walking to my car, they started yelling and they say “white power, white power”...they have their fists in the air...it kind of scared me because...I had this image in my mind of “what are they going to do with me, are they going to string me up?” I don’t know, just something bad, I went to my car, locked the door...and by that time they had driven by.

After hearing this, I posed a completely unrelated question, but this incident must have been still troubling her; before answering my new question, she related how, subsequent to the above incident, she had researched some white supremacist websites in order to try to understand their justification for such actions.

Sue related an off-campus incident that obviously distressed her; the incident was troubling enough, but her reaction to it and the strength of feeling against cultural intolerance revealed the constant frustration caused by occurrences of this type:

I know a couple of the guys...got pulled over by the cops and the cop just straight off told them...“we pulled you over because you are not white,” straight off told them that. My god, what do we do? Well at least they are honest, I guess, I don’t know...I think it is really hard because Native Americans in general have a lot of pride and it is expressed in different ways, either through their dancing or even...you look at the vehicles, like my car, I have bear paw print stickers on my windows and I have moccasins hanging from my mirror...it would be the same with any other culture, I guess...some people have flags on their windows...just putting it out there, some people have said “you are just asking for trouble if you



do that,” well should it really matter? I don’t know...one thing I think that people don’t realize is that it’s not just white people are racist against other people because I know a lot of natives who are racist against other races and it doesn’t make any sense to me...everybody is going to have a similar experience...as long as you are a minority population.

From his description, BT might have been one of the people described in the above incident: “You just get pulled over so many times that it is just harassment...for my first year...here, I was pulled over 57 times...I ended up, just to be a smart-ass, I taped my driving license and my proof of insurance to the front windshield of my vehicle.”

After Sandra related some harassment she experienced when she first entered this state (that is outside the parameters of the current study), she went on to describe the general atmosphere in this city and surrounding areas this way:

I haven’t had any problems here; no gestures, no comments, and the feeling in the town very minimal...I think that in the town, they are acclimated to seeing other ethnicities because of the military so here they are pretty friendly. When I ask them for something, nobody gives me a dirty look...they are very helpful and friendly, but in the surrounding areas is where I think there [is] more trouble.

BT was distressed as he related this experience of direct involvement at a university in this state with a Native American mascot controversy:

There was a lot of hostility about the [xxx] nickname...lots of parades and newspaper articles where they were making derogatory things...there were girls dressed up in their traditional regalia, and they had a whole lot of things thrown at them, and jeering and joking and racial remarks it was...a hostile environment for me...one of the biggest things that was written...when I was in the recruiting process...on the bulletin board...was “Prairie Niggers Go Home”...I had some African American friends...they thought it was for them and I had to explain to them that no, that was...meant for me...I am the “n” word up here in [xxx].

Sue is baffled by the level of cultural ignorance displayed in the city:

It’s not so much the university but just the general population around here that needs some education...I am surprised, with the Native population in [xxx], so



many people don't know hardly anything about us...I don't know if it's because they are not willing [long pause] to learn or they don't have the opportunity to, but I think that is where a lot of tension arises...I guess maybe it's just because I was born and raised on a reservation...I just think that some of the ignorance people have is bizarre. How could you not come in touch with some part of the culture living in [xxx]? I definitely believe that beliefs...are passed down.

Sue went on to relate a recent experience that gives a lighter touch to this subject.

She obviously enjoyed sharing because she was laughing as she told it:

I went to the nursing home today, I am doing an internship over there, and I was talking with a woman...she was telling me how she was a fighter when she was younger...she was this little tiny old lady now...she was making me laugh and she was saying "yeah, people used to say I was like the savages because I was such a fighter" and wow, I was like "oh, o.k."

In summary, the participants had a diverse experience with making friends; most found their preferred friends remained predominantly or exclusively Native American. Absence from their home cultural environment, combined with influences from the campus culture, over time, tended to change some perceptions of their home. It would appear that racism is rife, if not on campus, but in the city and the state. How this affected the participants varied according to personal experiences. The history of their culture and relationship with the white dominant culture is a constant matter of deep concern to some.

### Category Three – Goals: Beyond Survival

Theme Three: Assimilation was expressed as a negative option. Culture was seen as important and the goals expressed were educational success and returning to the reservations to help their people.

Three of the participants were looking at careers, yet five were concerned with going back home and helping. Dan was working to complete his degree either in law, a

lifetime ambition, or accountancy. Sandra really wants her physical therapy degree: “I have to speak to people and make some kind of a difference...I don’t want to be a nurse...but still want to work in that setting...I would eventually like to have my own office.” TJ was transferring to a larger university within the state for the sake of the career of his choice: “When I am done with that I will go onto the master’s program in chemistry...I definitely see myself leaving the state to work.” When questioned whether he would ever return to his reservation and his people, he replied:

There seems to be more opportunity and better pay if you move away from home. I don’t see any problem with not living at home on the reservation [perhaps] you are not giving back to your community, but then again you are representing your community in a different way...representing our culture, showing that we can do what white people can do, or any other race for that matter.

Jane has graduated and is making her career in education. Her culture is very important to her, and she repeated her consistent stand against assimilation: “I don’t believe in the melting pot theory; I believe in the salad bowl theory. I believe that individualism is important; why should I give up my culture just because I am away from my home?”

Lea was going to transfer to the Community College at her home and finish her degree there in order for her son to know his culture:

I want to make a difference back home...[my] relations all seem to be wanting to teach at home...people never leave home they don’t want to leave home...I want to show the kids that they can get out of the comfort zone, get out and then go back and help...I still like the university but I have to leave...I have known a lot of people that have graduated from [xxx] and they have enjoyed it, I am not going to be one of them...I want my son to grow up in my home town...I want him to graduate...I want my son to be aware of his culture because I didn’t know anything and [xxx] has a cultural program over there...[xxx] is where the real stuff happens...I guess he will learn more than I did.



Sydney did not have definite plans after graduation: "I can't plan on going home because...there're no jobs offered...I would consider going back [to] all my family...my husband's family."

Sue was planning on going to grad school after graduating and then: "Ultimately, I would love to go back home and work. I would like to be back in my home town but even travelling to the other communities on our reservation." She expressed her main goal right now as:

Just teaching my kids that it is o.k. to be different...One thing that I like about having kids; they are not biased, they are not discriminatory by nature, it's society...I guess parental influence and family that...promote the different groups.

To the question concerning plans after graduation, BT replied, "Hopefully get a job...the professors...want me to sign up for graduate school...I am already living my dream." Ultimately, though, he wants to go back to help his people after he has completed his education. He describes this in terms that illustrate his deep concern:

No matter how rough it gets for me here, when I go back there I am so happy to go back and see my friends, my family. It's a good day the first day. The second day, I get to look around and realize that I am in a third world country and I am looking around and seeing how terrible it is, how they are suffering, and I get to telling myself, "I got to go back, I haven't got no choice, I got to go back."

### *Summary*

In summary, although some of the participants would be pursuing careers off the reservation, the majority were committed to going home to help their people. Most of the participants cared about their culture; it is a very important part of their lived experience.



CHAPTER IV  
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS WITH REFERENCE  
TO THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the lived experiences of Native American students when studying on a predominantly white campus at a small university in the Upper Midwest. The initial 215 codes were distilled to produce three categories: Support: Cultural Complexities; Relationships: Cultural Challenges; Goals: Beyond Survival. The three themes that emerged from analysis of the data were:

1. Participants depended on the support of home, the university, and especially the Native American Cultural Center, to help ease the culture shock of being a minority student in an alien environment.
2. With continued contact with the campus society, the participants gained more confidence in the white culture, and were finding their relationship with their home and culture was evolving. They expressed a desire for a multicultural society without prejudice, but remained adamant about maintaining their own culture.
3. Assimilation is expressed as a negative option. Culture is important and the goals expressed were educational success and returning to the reservations to help their people.

The final assertion that emerged from the analysis of these three significant themes was: Effective support of the cultural identity of Native American students studying on a predominantly white campus, by their family and the administration of the university, contributes to the retention and success of these students.

The study of Tate and Schwartz (1993) provides some perceptions for the low numbers of Native American students in higher education, some are outside the parameters of this study, but the remaining relevant issues that are revealed in this chapter include lack of support from the institution, faculty misconceptions and stereotyping, and poor student relations with the college institution (p. 22).

#### Category One – Support: Cultural Complexities

Theme One: Participants depended on the support of home, the university, and especially the Native American Cultural Center, to help ease the culture shock of being a minority student in an alien environment.

##### *Home and Family*

The reason most often cited for the choice of this university was the close proximity to their home and comfort zone, to minimize their culture shock. The desire to choose to enroll in higher education at an institution nearer to home is not limited to Native Americans; in her study of students from a broader population demographic in the U.K. that includes first generation seekers of higher education but not necessarily minorities, Leese (2010) found that the desire to remain near to home and family affected their choice of university.

Most of the participants in this study cite support and encouragement from their family as one of the main influences in their commitment to education and the quest for

higher education at the university. Encouragement of the family pre-university was found to be a major contributing factor to the success of Native American students by Pavel and Padilla (1993), and they encourage more programs to foster this activity of support from the home and family. Garrod and Larimore (1997) explain that going to college quite often represents the first time that the students have been away from their culture: “Gone...is the context of one’s identity and place in the world” (p. 4). The participants in this study were determined to maintain the link with their cultural identity, relating the frequency with which they made the journey to their homes and comfort zones. They spoke about some students who made no commitment to the campus culture, but would just attend class and journey back to their families, even though they lived four hours away.

There was no reference to skipping classes in the interviews of these participants but Lowe (2005) admits that when she was a student, she was guilty of skipping classes to make the six-hour long drive home; this took place with increasing frequency (p. 35). The commitment to strenuous commutes between the campus and home resonates with the participants in this study and is described by Garrod and Larimore (1997) as a need to counteract “intense feelings of loss and isolation...when leaving home to attend college” (p. 2). The reason why it is so important to these students to maintain their connection with their home, their family, and their culture is explained by Garrod and Larimore: “For many Native Americans, personal and cultural identity, as well as spirituality, are inextricably intertwined with connections to family, community, tribe, and homeland” (p. 3). Wildcat (2001a) points out that it is predictable that an American Indian “who understands...[his] personality as emergent from a specific environment or *place*”



(p. 114) would feel disorientated when attending a traditional four-year university, that they may feel “caught between two cultures” (p. 114). This agrees with the study of Huffman (2008) where it was found that the transition of Native Americans to higher education is more difficult for those who come to the university only having lived on a reservation, especially the older Native students, who are more traditional in their commitment to their culture (pp. 20-27).

Wildcat (2001a) confirms this struggle to maintain cultural identity, in that choosing to attend a traditional four-year university, students may feel “caught between two cultures” (p. 114). Garrod and Larimore (1997) explain their stress in this situation as “native students have constantly to guess what others expect them to be” (p. 11).

In his study of Indian women, Mihesuah (1998a) found that bi-racial Indians tended to be wealthier and better educated, but these were not considered desirable social traits by the traditionalists (pp. 39-40). The statement of Erdrich (1997) that “not a single narrative is about the wish to attain status, the ambition to make large amounts of money, or the desire to become famous” (p. xi) is at variance somewhat to the perceptions of three of the participants in the present study. Dan was concerned about his position in the work force: “The jobs that I work...without a degree [are] just mind numbing...I did not like being the guy on the bottom and the only way to get up...is to get a degree.” Sue said, “I always had my eye on the money, if I want to make some money...I better get a degree in something”; and TJ, who was determined to make a career for himself in his chosen field, transferring from the present university in order to get the program he needed, and eventually leaving the state declared, “There seems to be more opportunity and better pay if you move away from home.”

### *Tribal Colleges*

Within Chapter III, there was discussion about the Tribal Colleges and the perceptions of the participants. The first Tribal College was established as the Navajo Community College, later renamed Diné College in 1968 in response to the abysmal attrition of Native American students at traditional universities and colleges. These colleges are Tribally Controlled Colleges whereby the American Indian would be in control of his own university (Reyhner & Eder, 2004, pp. 295-296). The initial reaction was not popular with educators and government officials outside the tribes (Stein, 2003, p. 31). There was some discussion in the beginning whether these colleges were set up to preserve tribal culture or as a preparation for the student for the mainstream of American life. Stein (2003) argued that it was not enough to only educate the Native American students attending Tribal Colleges in their own culture, “but [we] must also prepare them to be proficient and strong in a world now controlled by a colonizing foreign culture” (p. 29). Given that the Tribal Colleges have now been in existence for over 40 years, it was timely to gather the perceptions of students who had access to these facilities. The participants were fairly evenly divided in their perceptions of the advisability of attending these Community Colleges before embarking on the traditional four-year university path.

### *Institutional Support*

The participants expressed feelings of anxiety, fear of the unknown, and culture shock when embarking on their careers in higher education. When native students go to study on a predominantly white campus, it is an alien world with values, beliefs, and expectations that are known to the dominant culture (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). Leese (2010) also introduced the concept of “alien,” citing Askham (2008), when she described



the environment for the students in her study. The study by Leese was conducted in the U.K. where she was researching “new” students, many of whom were from family backgrounds that did not include any previous graduates of higher education. This first generation student group entering higher education was the result of a deliberate government policy to broaden the demographic of the university student population. She reveals in this study that part of the transitional experience for some of these students included the prior perceptions accumulated from their “class” and family background; the predominant culture on her campus was middle class, and those from working-class family backgrounds needed to make adjustments in their values, beliefs, and expectations to overcome their culture shock. In anticipation of this, they were expressing fear and anxiety, which resonated with the participants in the present study. This adjustment of perceptions in class status is also required of minority students in the United States as indicated by Hornett (1989), when she cites Clark (1983), as one of the “incredible barrier[s] to success in higher education for [American] Indian students...[is that]...institutions of higher learning...are basically oriented to one segment of the population – that of the White Middle Class” (p. 12). In order to overcome this fear and anxiety of entering an alien environment away from home, minority students who have to make cultural changes require institutional support when studying in higher education in order to achieve success (Creswell, 2002; Garrod & Larimore, 1997; Leese, 2010; Lowe, 2005; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Tate & Schwartz, 1993).

In the study by Leese (2010), the students expressed a need for institutional support that continued for a more extended period, rather than just being confined to the initial arrival on campus. Sue, a participant from the present study, would have agreed



with this finding; she had missed the orientation; even so, she would have welcomed more continued help and support.

Tate and Schwartz (1993) suggest that the implementation of student support groups led by American Indian faculty and students would help them with their culture shock when they made the transition between their home culture and comfort zone to university life. These group sessions might cover a plethora of topics, including how to survive at university. They also advise having faculty as mentors, although they realize that this would place additional burdens on the time and commitments of the faculty concerned. They suggest a peer mentoring program to alleviate the time and cost for faculty. Lowe (2005) would probably support this suggestion as she posits that even one person supporting a student can help promote success. The resource of having one strong support person is also recommended by Hornett (1989), suggesting that many of these native students come from family homes where there is no previous experience of college life to draw upon. BT, as a senior classman, felt the responsibility of being a mentor and resource for both the faculty and for the students, so he has already discovered the need; in his interview, he recommended a program of mentoring that was identical to the one suggested by Hornett (1989).

In order to contribute to the retention of these students, Tate and Schwartz (1993) also recommend providing day care facilities; in addition, scheduling classes on evenings and weekends would make it easier for the older students who work full-time to take classes. This was not an issue that came up in the present study when describing the perceptions of the university; yet family commitments were cited as one of the reasons

why some Native American students would not attend this university, but instead chose to stay on the reservation and enroll at the Tribal College.

Ramsey (2004) observed, "Children growing up in more collective cultures may be uncomfortable with the emphasis on individual achievement that dominates most U.S. classrooms" (p. 112). This discomfort carries forward into the life experience of the native student who wishes to study at a traditional university. The clash of cultures occurs when, at white colleges of higher education, the emphasis for the student is to compete as an individual; to the native student, this emphasis is "immodest, inappropriately aggressive, and even selfish" (Garrod & Larimore, 1997, p. 6). BT expressed a problem he experienced with the "pushy" approach that he felt was expected of him to effectively join groups. It was a matter of some distress for him, since as it was outside his cultural expectations; he contemplated actually missing that class rather than experience the humiliation of his anticipated rejection as the groups were forming. This difference in approach is also referred to by other participants, and they made direct comparisons with the comfort level of being at their home Community College amongst people they know; Jane, in particular, brought up the issue of working in groups and how it was so much easier at the local community college than at the traditional university.

TJ strongly recommended staying in the dorms when first attending university and advises any student thinking of attending university to take advantage of this facility. He was impressed with the ease with which it helped him to feel at home and find new friends. The results of the Jessop and Williams (2009) study were similar with the observations of TJ when it was revealed that the students who chose to stay in



dormitories had a good experience, which helped their transitional experience from home to the university environment.

All the participants in this study expressed anxiety when first arriving at this university. Nevertheless, they were all positive about the desirability of obtaining their undergraduate degree in higher education. They felt their attendance carried the promise of better prospects for their future life experience. Garrod (1997), on the other hand, commenting on the writings in *First Person, First Peoples: Native American College Graduates Tell Their Life Stories*, found that it was not the undergraduates, but the more established authors, those who had graduated and were already in careers who seemed to be “the most positive about college and opportunities it afforded” (p. xvi).

The study by Jessop and Williams (2009) echoed the statement of general satisfaction of the majority of the participants of the present study, in particular Lea and Sydney, when the U.K. study revealed that the students “generally felt at home” (p. 100) and illustrated by the comments of one: “I feel like this is home...I love it as a place and I love the people here” (p. 100). In the study of Lin, LaCounte, and Eder (1988), it was concluded that providing a good environment on campus for Native Americans is beneficial to their academic success. This is also confirmed by Lowe (2005) as a recommendation to help create a positive experience for these students (p. 37).

Garrod and Larimore (1997), writing about the experiences of Native American students studying at Dartmouth College, state that one of the most important resources required for these students is a safe environment to encourage the retention of these Indian students when they are studying at a traditional university (p. 10). In this study,



BT made the point to faculty members that this is a requirement; they must maintain a safe environment where other students do not make derogatory remarks.

*Native American Cultural Awareness Center*

The study by Pavel and Padilla (1993) reveals the need to provide a social environment to help Native American students make the transition from their home to the culture of the university. The participants in this study were unanimous in their appreciation of the help and support of the Director of the Native American Cultural Center and of the facility provided, described by Dan as “really homey up there” and by Lea that she went there a lot: “These are the people I trust the most...it’s fun, it is like your family.”

These testimonies demonstrate the need for a Native American Center (NAC), a culturally sensitive environment, where these students can be totally themselves, if only for the time that they are within the club atmosphere provided by the NAC. All of the participants embraced the NAC and especially the Director, some citing him as the catalyst for their success; BT described it as “an island of safety...between classes...where they are able to talk about...experiences.” This “island of safety” concept is at variance with the Jessop and Williams (2009) study that was concerned with black and minority ethnic student experience on a predominantly white campus in the U.K.; all the students felt that their integration had been quite easy with most reporting a “strong sense of belonging on campus” (p. 99).

*Faculty*

The participants in this study had mixed perceptions about the degree of support they received from faculty; some were very positive, and others had mixed reactions. The

perceptions of the participants were similar to those in the Leese (2010) study, which revealed a divergence of opinion among the participants with relationship to the support they felt they had received. Hornett (1989) posits that the faculty is in a position to identify a student's needs early in his/her college career, implying that there is a responsibility of initiating dialogue with the student to forestall any possible concerns.

BT related the cultural difference that has the potential to inhibit a native student from approaching a professor with a concern; those who are in authority are to be treated with respect. TJ related good experiences regarding the support he received from his adviser, professors, and staff while at the university. TJ and Sue both related good experiences with members of faculty who were Native American; TJ was helped, in particular, with advising concerns and Sue enjoyed her classes with the professor who was Native American. In the Jessop and Williams (2009) study, it was found important and beneficial to one of the participants to have a lecturer "from a similar cultural background...[and] choosing a module with space for exploring values...enabled her to discuss what she valued...without the fear of ridicule" (p. 101).

Hornett (1989) reveals that studies concerning the retention of Native Americans tend to focus on support services. The role of faculty needs to be examined as they are at the forefront of the experience of these students; that is, through their efforts, an atmosphere can be provided that successfully balances the two cultures. She challenges the faculty to consider facing their own racial prejudices and ascertain whether they are prone to think of the natives in terms of cultural stereotypes. One of the problems that faculty encounter on a regular basis is the expectation of certain skills that a student should possess when entering the class. If these skills are not present, the faculty will



make a judgment call concerning the student and his/her capabilities, which then leads to low expectations – ultimately affecting the student’s performance. Hornett advises that “the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ is real and can work either positively or negatively for students” (p. 16). She does not mean that faculty should appear to give the Native American students preferential treatment. Mihesuah (1998b), however, informs us that Native American students taking Indian studies expect preferential treatment and leniency because of their “inherent knowledge of their cultures and...they have a different world-view and a lesser academic background than other students” (pp. 20-21). This practice is referred to as “essentialism” and the professors who do not subscribe to this practice are viewed with dissatisfaction (pp. 20-21).

BT had issues with professors teaching in ways that he found culturally offensive, which reflects the findings of Lin et al. (1988), who found that Indian students sense an “unspoken hostility” toward them by professors (p. 14). Hornett (1989) advises that sensitivity to the differences in the two cultures should be made apparent so that the students can “let down barriers...to have a more positive attitude about Anglos in general....[F]aculty can set the standard for student success by creating an appropriate, positive, academic environment” (p. 12).

The majority of participants in the present study felt a certain discomfort level when they were questioned as if they were the experts and authorities on Native American culture in class and elsewhere on campus; Lea, in particular, wanted “to be left alone.” Garrod and Larimore (1997) found the same problem at Dartmouth with many native students becoming “nearly full-time educators as they try to make Dartmouth a more bearable place to live...they must grapple with not only garden-variety ignorance



but overt racism” (p. 10). Sue was baffled by the level of cultural ignorance displayed: “It’s not so much the university but just the general population...that needs some education.” It was BT, however, who had examples of questions asked of him, when he made presentations on campus that might be labeled either as garden-variety ignorance or overt racism. He was asked such things as whether Native Americans could still make it rain and whether they still lived in teepees. The students were also asking whether the Native Americans had larger livers and kidneys than average and made reference to whether “there is something that is automatically in our brain that allows us to become violent once we have had our first drop of alcohol.”

#### *Cultural Awareness*

In the Leese (2010) study, the first impression of two of the U.K. participants was that they were very much in the minority, and they were conscious of how “white” the campus appeared (pp. 99-100). TJ, in the present study, was the only participant who commented on the fact that, when he first arrived, he felt he was now on a white-dominated campus.

Sue thought the university could do more to “dispel myths and inaccuracies” concerning her culture and exhibited frustration with some of the faculties’ cultural competencies. Hornett (1989) suggests:

Colleges must take steps to ensure that the personnel with whom students interact are culturally aware....Faculty must remember racism takes many forms....Professors should be able to recognize subtle racial questions and statements put forth by themselves or others. (p. 13)

The participants in the Jessop and Williams (2009) study would agree with Sue; while they were on campus, they expressed a desire for a greater cultural awareness to be

shown by the faculty and their fellow students. Galli (1979) suggests that it is not enough to have knowledge of other cultures; the challenge is when we are faced with ideals and values that are different from our upbringing (p. 146). Tate and Schwartz (1993) suggest that in order to improve cultural awareness for all, there should be programs for Native Americans and non-natives who would be party to joint ventures in understanding each other's culture.

### *Individualization*

Jessop and Williams (2009) found that lecturers would ask the minority students questions about their culture; they attributed this activity to demonstrating a level of discomfort when dealing with minorities in their classrooms (p. 104). Most of the participants in the present study of Native Americans experienced many instances of this pursuit with varying degrees of disquiet. Lea, for instance, was quite exasperated by being continually asked about her culture.

### Category Two – Relationships: Cultural Challenges

Theme Two: With continued contact with the campus society, the participants gained more confidence in the white culture, and were finding their relationship with their home and culture was evolving. They expressed a desire for a multicultural society without prejudice, but remained adamant about maintaining their own culture.

### *Friends*

Mihesuah (1998a) explains that there is a long history of conflict between the traditionalists and “those who see change as the route to...tribal, familial, or personal survival” (p. 39). This dissent was present in the study and took the form of the revelations of Sue and Dan that there were differences in perceptions between the Native

Americans who had been born and raised on a reservation and those whose only experience was town life. Dan, in particular, experienced difficulties when trying to relate to “townies.” Mihesuah (1998a) tells us that “those who valued tribal tradition and resisted acculturation believed themselves to be ‘more Indian’ than the ‘sellouts’” (p. 39).

A majority of the participants in the present study declared that their friends were generally Native American; it was a matter of trust for them. In the study by Leese (2010) it was reported that over half of the students spent most of their free time with friends who were outside the university context. In the study by Lin (1990) it was found that “students from more modern families were more trusting of other people than students from traditional families” (p. 20) The participants in this study of Native American students tended to stay together whereas, in the Jessop and Williams (2009) study, it was found that with the small number of black minority students on campus, they tended to integrate into campus life more.

#### *Separated from Home and Family*

The study by Stachowski and Brantmeier (2002) highlights an immersion project of white student teachers from Indiana University’s Cultural Immersion Project, who had been placed in K-12 schools on the Navajo reservation and in seven foreign countries working outside their own culture and comfort zone. They cite Adler (1975) when they suggest that “although a cross-cultural experience may begin as a journey into another culture, it ultimately becomes a journey of enhanced awareness and understanding of oneself and one’s home culture” (p. 3). This would appear to mirror the perceptions of the student participants in the present study who found that, as they spent more time on campus in the white dominant culture, they did not feel the same urgency to travel to



their home: defined by the findings of Stachowski and Brantmeier as “in seeing self through the other, participants identified changing perceptions of ‘home’” (p. 7). They further found that these student teachers, on immersion projects in the United States and abroad, began to “analyze and even question many of the aspects of their lives they had always assumed were a given” (p. 11).

### *Cultural Relationships*

When BT makes presentations that include Native American students, he tells them, “We are warriors no matter what; that we are all survivors.” This is echoed by Erdrich (1997) when she states, “Every Native American is a survivor...we were all slated for extinction before the march of progress. But surprise, we *are* progress” (p. ix). The participants in this study exhibited a high degree of tenacity and application toward the pursuit of their education. Huffman (2008) posits that a strong commitment to their traditions motivates Native American students to achieve success.

Most participants expressed a concern about their culture; Sydney thought that culture was not so important when you were younger but more so as you got older and had children. This is reflected in the study by Huffman (2008) who found that “older students and those from reservations also are more likely to indicate that being in college positively impacts their appreciation of Native heritage” (p. 22).

### *Assimilation and Accommodation*

Taking away a person's "mother-tongue" forces acculturation "because language embraces the spiritual, intellectual, historical, and cultural competencies and capacities of the people who use it" (Benham & Mann, 2003, p. 190).

Acculturation of a people by a dominant force is not unique to the history of the U.S. government and the Native Americans. Coleman (2007) compares the boarding

school movement in America with the attempt by the British to Anglicize the Irish, forbidding the use of their native language in the school system; the criteria for both were defined as “the complete erasure of deficient traditions [and] complete assimilation into the superior civilization” (p. 244). These were ambitious goals and, in the case of the Indian reform program in the United States, the concept was simply “[a] matter of exchanging one cultural skin for another” (Adams, 1995, p. 336). These projects proved to be failures in both cases; the scheme in Ireland resulted in the ultimate schism with Britain, and America saw the “survival of the Indian tribalism...and a growing sense of Pan-Indian identity” (Coleman, 2007, p. 244). It would appear that assimilation remains an issue that is prevalent in the mind of educators, as Ramsey (2004) feels compelled to caution educators about enforcing one-way assimilation when working for inclusion (p. 148).

Erdrich (1997) summarized the perceptions of the native student writers in *First Person, First Peoples* as “their common ground is a need to integrate” (p. xi), whereas Garrod and Larimore (1997) describe the “crucial journey” between the cultures of native students as “learning to walk this path...without losing oneself in the process” (pp. 1-2). This agrees with Sue, participating in the current study, who defined her stance on assimilation as “I guess you don’t want to assimilate...accommodation would...be the best word...you have to be...accepting of other people and not lose yourself in the process.”

Hornett (1989) takes a slightly stronger stance in the discussion of assimilation when he states, “[I]nstitutions must understand that Indian students, for the most part, do not want to become a part of the Anglo mainstream” (p. 12), which corresponds precisely



with the opinions of the majority of the participants in this study who were adamantly opposed to the concept of assimilation. Huffman (2008) presents the view that the concept of resistance to assimilation is no longer with us (p. 27). Mihesuah (1998a) tells us of an ideological struggle amongst the Native Americans when he states, "Those who valued tribal tradition and resisted acculturation believed themselves to be 'more Indian' than the 'sellouts'" (p. 39).

### *Prejudice*

Just having people be so open-minded...interest in learning about other people's culture...just understanding what their beliefs or religions...are...just a mutual understanding between races without the prejudice and discrimination that is usually associated with any group. (Sue, participant)

Berry's (2005) statement about race presents a sobering perspective for all the participants of the present study who were wishing for a multicultural society without prejudice happening any time soon: "Since we live in the United States in the twenty-first century, we have to deal with both the heritage and current practice of discrimination on many bases" (p. 125). Deloria (1969) suggests "minority groups must emphasize what they share with the white society, not what keeps them apart" (p. 240).

Sue was incredulous and could not understand the prejudice exhibited by her Native American friend against blacks. Garrod and Larimore (1997) call this "internalized oppression" and justifies it as "an attempt to uphold cultural integrity or to preserve group unity" (p. 15). According to Bennett (2007) the action of Sue's friend can be explained as the reaction of a person who sees himself as an oppressed minority and through his discrimination is responding in order to restore his sense of dignity. She



further argues that in order to eliminate racial prejudice, it will require everyone to work together; this includes the dominant as well as the minority cultures (p. 82).

In the study by Jessop and Williams (2009) it was found that white people felt uncomfortable when trying to connect with the black students. The researchers were disturbed to discover anecdotal evidence of racism with the students, especially with the students not recognizing its importance; racism was explained as a lack of diversity and cultural awareness. BT reported there were professors who allowed students to make derogatory remarks about his culture, and he related how he was asked difficult racial questions by students when he had volunteered to make a presentation about his culture. Sue revealed anger with a professor who she thought was incompetent to deal with diversity.

Dealing with the topic of popular stereotypical perceptions regarding Native Americans, Garrod and Larimore (1997) discovered a duality of purpose in the students pursuing a degree in higher education: encouragement from the family to attend college and to “disprove racist stereotypes of Native Americans as underachieving, unintelligent, and alcoholic” (p. 4). BT was determined to refute stereotypes about Native Americans, especially the image that Native Americans are lazy; “they are not lazy, they love to work, they love having that pride, whether you are a man or a woman.” This resonates with a stereotype concerning African Americans and their relationship with work that W. E. B. DuBois invalidated when he made a speech in Hampton in 1906. He declared, “We are not lazy; we work, we work continuously; and more of us work than do other Americans” (DuBois, 2001, pp. 23-24).

### Category Three – Goals: Beyond Survival

Theme Three: Assimilation was expressed as a negative option. Culture was seen as important and the goals expressed were educational success and returning to the reservations to help their people.

Hornett (1989) sets out the path that must be traversed to the goal of success in a way that underlines the “beyond survival” descriptor of this third theme:

Indian students, as well as all minorities, need confidence in order to survive the educational system and eventually graduate. They need to be able to face incredible obstacles that seem to be in direct opposition to the cultural values they have learned. In addition, they must deal with racial biases and misunderstandings from their professors as well as from their peers. They have to learn to bridge culture and a White institution to be accepted and to succeed. (p. 15)

The dedication to educational success exhibited by these successful students resonates with the study of Lin (1990) who posits that focussing on the task renders the student able to overcome all challenges. The findings of the present study are similar to the findings of Huffman (2008) who found that Native Americans who valued their culture also valued higher education. He also reported that his findings did not agree with some earlier studies.

Erdrich (1997) found “one of the most remarkable things about Native students at Dartmouth is how many have returned to work in their communities” (p. x). Five of the participants in the present study were also committed to returning to the reservation; one of the exceptions was TJ who, although not planning to return to the reservation immediately due to his career, justified his decision as “representing our culture, showing that we can do what white people can do, or any other race for that matter.” Lowe (2005) agrees with the reasoning of TJ when she states, “The success of even one Native student



brings success to a larger group” (p. 39). Alvord (1997) found that being successful in her career as a surgeon has helped her people realize what is possible (p. 228).

The need of educated native people to return to help their people is demonstrated by this address made by David Brien, Chairman of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, presented to the 12th State of the Indian Nations Address to the state Legislature of North Dakota in 2007, when he prioritized the primary areas of concern for the people on his reservation. His list is significant: “poverty, job creation, health care and wellness, housing, water quality and quantity, roads and transportation” (p. 64). These needs are basic. He immediately followed with this specific reference to the family and education:

All of these issues will be solved and supported by focusing upon the most basic unit of society, the family...through offering highest quality affordable educational opportunities to all ages of our state’s population, especially the poor, be it through home schooling, private schools, tribal school, or public educational institutions. (Brien, 2007, p. 64)

Deloria (1969) declares a purpose for the Native American students who choose to study as a minority at a traditional university, when he writes:

The stage is now being set, with the increasing number of Indian college students graduating from the universities, for a total assault on the non-human elements of white society. Ideologically the young Indians are refusing to accept white values as eternal truths. Such anomalies as starvation in the midst of plenty indicate to them that the older Indian ways are probably best for them.

Movements to re-educate Indians along liberal lines only serve to increase the visibility of the differences between their own backgrounds and the backgrounds of the non-Indians. Yet the bicultural trap, conceptually laid for Indians by scholars, does not appear to be ensnaring the most astute young Indian people. Accommodation to white society is primarily in terms of gaining additional techniques by which they can give a deeper root to existing Indian traditions. (p. 239)

BT articulates their achievement as “we are all warriors...we are all survivors.”



## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the lived experiences of Native American students when studying on a predominantly white campus at a small university in the Upper Midwest. An overview of the study and of the history of the education of Native Americans was in Chapter I. In Chapter II, the methodology of this qualitative research study was described. Eight Native American present and former students from a university in the Upper Midwest were interviewed and the resulting audio tapes were transcribed and analyzed for emergent codes, categories, and themes. In Chapter III, the findings that emerged from data analysis were presented. The individual voices of the participants were used extensively in order to better understand the lived experience of each individual participant while attending the selected predominantly white university. In Chapter IV, the themes that emerged from data analysis were discussed with reference to available relevant literature. In this chapter, a summative discourse of the themes of the study is provided. After the summary, conclusions and recommendations are presented.

## Category One – Support: Cultural Complexities

Theme One: Participants depended on the support of home, the university, and especially the Native American Cultural Center, to help ease the culture shock of being a minority student in an alien environment.

The level of success that these students experienced in the transition stages of this excursion into higher education will determine their willingness to remain at university to complete their degree requirements and graduate, or leave before they finish. The importance of the family support of the student before the university experience is revealed by Pavel and Padilla (1993). The institutional support of these students as critical to their success is cited throughout the literature (Creswell, 2002; Garrod & Larimore, 1997; Leese, 2010; Lowe, 2005; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Tate & Schwartz, 1993) and was discussed in depth in Chapter IV.

The majority of the participants revealed that their family, or a member of their family, was the prime motivating force in their decision to pursue education. When it came to moving from their comfort zone to make the cultural shift into the white dominant culture to begin their careers in higher education, all of the participants expressed anxiety. Their educational routes into higher education were quite diverse. Three of the participants made their first excursion into higher education at a larger university in the same state and were totally overwhelmed by the sheer size. They left to go home and study at their local Tribal College with its more culturally sensitive atmosphere, smaller classes, and more “one-on-one” attention. The Tribal Colleges are discussed separately in Chapter IV (Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Stein, 2003).

After enrollment at the selected university, every participant spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the size of the facility. This was even true for Sandra, who was not from the reservation, was ex-military, and had travelled globally. When these students arrived on campus, they approached it with some dread. "Fear of the unknown and the culture shock" characterized the feelings expressed by all. Having to find each of the class venues was often mentioned as a source of anxiety and stress. Although choosing to study away from their comfort zone, these students retained their ties with home and family, some committing themselves to torturous commuting travel schedules "in spite of the gas cost."

The participants in this study felt that the support they had received was mostly good from the institution; the faculty and staff was, for the most part, good. Five of the participants were happy with the friendliness, help, and cooperation they received. There were two dissenters among the participants who related experiences with some faculty who, it was felt, were culturally insensitive; these participants had major misgivings of cultural awareness of some of the professors, even bringing their effectiveness in dealing with diversity into question. There were incidents of cultural insensitivity related, where the professor was expressing points of view concerning the history of the conflict between the whites and natives which created some distress in the recipient. There were teaching techniques utilized that required the participant to react in a manner that was contrary to his upbringing which caused him some discomfort. Discomfort was voiced by two participants concerning the practice of singling out one Native American student in class, who was then expected to be the spokesperson and expert for the whole native



culture. These issues of the cultural awareness of faculty were discussed in Chapter IV (Hornett, 1989; Lin et al., 1988).

All of the participants eventually discovered the Native American Cultural Center and made use of this club atmosphere on a regular basis; they were unanimous in their appreciation of the availability of this facility and were noticeably appreciative of its Director. The sense of the safety the NAC provided, a home away from home, where all of their best friends would be “hanging out,” where they could share experiences and, if necessary, commiserate with one another, was cited by all as one of the major reasons for their success.

There was a difference of opinion amongst the participants when questioned about the value of attending Tribal College as a first step towards a higher education degree before enrolling at a traditional university. With one exception they had all taken courses at their local Community College, and their comments revealed a divergence of opinion that could bear close scrutiny by those involved in the teaching and administration at both the Tribal Colleges and traditional universities. In terms of tolerance, the selected institution in this study fared quite well as a whole when viewed against other institutions in the state, but it has not had to deal with the problem of a mascot controversy. It was felt by some participants that the university could be more pro-active in promoting cultural awareness on campus and in the community. Nevertheless, participants expressed the view students will choose to go to study where the programs they require are offered, regardless of the cultural environment.

The advice offered by these participants, to those that follow in their wake, is interesting. It reveals how their perceptions have changed due to their new perceptions of

life experiences, and tempered by the prolonged exposure to the dominant culture and the pursuit of a higher education degree.

#### Category Two – Relationships: Cultural Challenges

Theme Two: With continued contact with the campus society, the participants gained more confidence in the white culture, and were finding their relationship with their home and culture was evolving. They expressed a desire for a multicultural society without prejudice, but remained adamant about maintaining their own culture.

The participants found that, for the most part, they remained close friends only with other Native Americans; some declared this as a matter of trust. Their native friends on campus were their surrogate social system within their comfort zone. This agrees with the findings of Lin (1990) but was at variance with Leese (2010). There was a difference in values and perceptions revealed between Native Americans who were raised on a reservation and “townies.” This agrees with Mihesuah (1998a) who advises that there is an ongoing tribal conflict between the traditionalists and the non-traditionalists. There were some participants who made friends with non-natives but it was generally found that the white society tended to be less welcoming than other minorities.

There were different levels of cultural commitment that were expressed amongst the participants. Sentiment ranged from “not wanting to appear to be ignorant” as voiced by one participant to “if people want to say stuff, they can, but I am proud to be Native American and not going to let anybody change that” by another. The support of cultural identity was strong enough on campus for one participant to feel empowered to practice her personal cultural rituals. There were major concerns about the stereotypical images

that other people perpetrate of the Native Americans that these students wished to refute and correct.

The evolving relationships with their home and culture were revealed in the interviews; the longer students experienced studying and living outside their home cultural environment, the less they felt the need to travel back home. One participant described in some detail how he found it increasingly hard to communicate with his old friends from the reservation; another participant actively did not want to return to the reservation more than absolutely necessary due to the negative influences he experienced when he made the trip. This agrees with the findings of Stachowski and Brantmeier (2002) and the “changing perceptions of home” (p. 7).

Among this study’s participants, pride in cultural identity was also expressed by resistance to the concept of assimilation. One participant used the word “accommodation” instead of assimilation, which perhaps better describes the present situation that exists in the relationships between the dominant culture and the Native Americans at the selected university. Huffman (2008) states resistance to assimilation is no longer with us; Erdrich (1997), on the other hand, contends there is “a need to integrate” (p. xi); Hornett (1989) agrees with the position of the participants in not wanting to assimilate.

Participants in this study spoke of experiences involving racial prejudice, not so much on campus, but in the city and state. These experiences appeared to be, at best, racial intolerance and, at worst, racial harassment. Participants commented that the university was positioned in a conservative state and rationalized that the city and region represent a profile which is perceived as basically ignorant of other cultures, in need of



more cultural awareness, and in many cases, perpetrating the cultural stance of their parents. Incidents of stereotyping, racial prejudice, and discrimination are described by Berry (2005), Garrod and Larimore (1997), Bennett (2007), Deloria (1969), Jessop and Williams (2009), Leese (2010), and DuBois (2001).

### Category Three – Goals: Beyond Survival

Theme Three: Assimilation was expressed as a negative option. Culture was seen as important and the goals expressed were educational success and returning to the reservations to help their people.

Three of the participants were pursuing careers with one already in a teaching position. The majority of the participants expressed the desire to return to their reservations to help their people. Studies with similar findings include the following: DeLoria (1969), Lin (1990), Garrod and Larimore (1997), Huffman (2008), Hornett (1989), Lowe (2005), and Alvord (1997).

### Conclusion

The final assertion that emerged from the analysis of these three significant themes was: Effective support of the cultural identity of Native American students studying on a predominantly white campus, by their family and the administration of the university, contributes to the retention and success of these students.

In the declared ambition of five of the eight participants to return to their reservations to help, there appeared to be a perception amongst these Native American students that there is a need to be educated in the dominant culture in order to help facilitate the alleviation of the crippling problems facing their people on and off the reservation. In resisting assimilation, these students were declaring their cultural identity.

## Recommendations

The issue of assimilation of the Native American peoples was a controversial topic in the present study. The literature presents varying findings and opinions, but all of the participants from the local reservations were opposed to the concept of integration and assimilation that would endanger their cultural identity. Research would be required to ascertain whether a correlation exists between the proximity to a home reservation, with its traditional way of life, and the acceptability of the idea of assimilation into the dominant culture.

Further comparative research would be of interest to ascertain to what degree perceptions of Native American students attending predominantly white universities differ from a cohort of students from the dominant culture.

Emerging from the data was the perception that some academically ambitious Native American students would pursue programs even at the expense of a racially insensitive environment in order to further their careers. This might be an area of future research for the better understanding of educators and administrators.

In view of the divergence of opinion, when questioned about the desirability of attending a Tribal College as a transition to a four-year institution, it may warrant more research to discover whether there are areas of the Tribal College program that could usefully be reassessed.

## Reflections

“Our social environment is like a straitjacket thrown around us” (Johnston, 2006, p. 166).

As previously indicated, I approached this study with some anxiety that I might be intruding and that I would not be accepted. As I had been warned, there were difficulties in arranging appointments and, when arranged, sometimes abortive; but persistence and patience were rewarded. During the interviews, I was delighted to witness the participants displaying an eagerness to share their life experiences; there were minimal interjections from me. As Native American students studying on a predominantly white campus, they are presented with many challenges. The participants in this study were all success stories but there are others, like BT's brother, who was not prepared to be subjected to derogatory comments and innuendos; BT refers to all who attend university as warriors and survivors. In the time I have been involved in this project, I have developed a healthy respect for the determination and drive that these successful people possess and I am pleased that I undertook this research. I hope that my efforts, in allowing these individuals to be heard, will be useful in providing some knowledge and understanding of the people of this culture.



Appendix A  
Participant Consent Form

Researcher name: Dennis Simons  
Telephone: 701 858 0029 or 701 858 3035  
e-mail: dennis.simons@minotstateu.edu

You are being asked to participate in an educational research study that involves interviews and focus groups relating to your experiences as a Native American student at an Upper Midwest University.

**Who is conducting the research?**

Dennis Simons is a doctoral student in the Teaching and Learning Department of the University of North Dakota.

**What is the research?**

The working title for this research study is entitled, "Cultural Identity: The perspectives of Native American Students at a university in the Upper Midwest."

**What will the participants be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate, you will be agreeing to be interviewed for up to 1 hour for a maximum of 4 times. You are also invited to participate in a focus group: each session will take up to 1 hour for a maximum of 4 times. The researcher will record the interview using an audio recorder and will supplement with note taking. Following the interview the recording and notes will be transcribed and a copy will be provided to the interviewee for review and correction. The purpose of the focus groups is to provide background for any additional interviews.

**How much time commitment will there be?**

An interview will not take more than 1 hour and these will be a maximum of 4 times.

**How will confidentiality be maintained?**

All names of the participants will be changed in the transcripts and observation notes. The reports of this study will maintain the use of pseudonyms. The audio files, consent forms, pseudonym lists and any other documentation will be stored in separate locked file cabinets in my home. Other than persons who audit IRB (Institutional Review Board) procedures, the researcher will be the only person with access to consent forms, audio files, transcripts and observation notes, although a professional typist may be used for transcription purposes. All files and documents will be stored as described for 3 years after the research is completed after which they will be shredded.

**What are the risks and who will benefit from this study?**

There are no anticipated risks involved in this study. The study will benefit the participants by creating a better understanding amongst the majority student population: with a better understanding, improved relationships will emerge. The study will also create a greater understanding and awareness on the part of the administration of the university and encourage the inauguration of more culturally sensitive initiatives for the Native American students.

**Whom to contact?**

If you have any questions about the research, contact the researcher as above, or Dr. Kathy Gershman at 701 777 3157, or Dr. Myrna Olson, at 701 777 3188, Box 7189, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202. If you have any questions

regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at 701 777 4279 or Dr. Brent Askvig, Chair, Minot State University Institutional Review Board at 701 858 3052. Please call any of these numbers if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Any question which may be uncomfortable with you will not have to be answered. You may choose to discontinue your participation at any time by stating, "I no longer want to continue." Your files will then be destroyed with no adverse consequences to you.

Your signature below indicates you have read the consent form and understand its contents. You will be provided a copy of this form.

Signature of participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B Interview Questions

Questions will include, but will not be limited to, the following:

1. I would like to know about your decision to come to this Upper Midwest University to study.
2. Please tell me about your feelings when you first arrived.
3. How welcoming were your fellow students? How have your relationships with non-Native American students changed over the time you have been a student at the university?
4. How welcoming was the administration and any special accommodations that may have been provided?
5. What are your relationships with the faculty?
6. How important is your cultural identity to you?
7. How have your feelings towards the university changed over time, if at all?
8. What is your relationship with fellow Native Americans who are studying here?
9. What steps, if any, are you taking to retain your cultural identity?
10. What are your plans when you graduate from this university?



Appendix C  
Ongoing Analysis: Perceptions of Native American Students

<b>Support</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Relationships</b>
Home and family	Education	Home and family
Institutional	Career	Friends
Cultural: Native American Cultural Center	Caring for own peoples	Cultural Awareness
Faculty		Assimilation
Friends		Mascots
Tribal Colleges		Prejudice
Small classes		Off campus

**Patterns**

1. These people cared about their home and their family.
2. I found that the identified students were motivated to acquire their degree.
3. The students enjoyed studying at the Upper Midwest University of their choice.
4. There is some evidence of social activism and it is anticipated that future interviews will reveal the strength of feeling.

**Assertion**

The Native Americans value education as a means of personal ascendancy and for their people.

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