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Together, Our Voices Will Strengthen the Weaving: Using Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry to Indigenize Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

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TOGETHER, OUR VOICES WILL STRENGTHEN THE WEAVING: USING

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND NARRATIVE INQUIRY TO INDIGENIZE

SENSE OF BELONGING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Devon S. Isaacs

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

Psychology

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

Together, Our Voices Will Strengthen the Weaving: Using Autoethnography and

Narrative Inquiry to Indigenize Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

by

Devon S. Isaacs, Doctor of Science

Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Melissa Tehee
Department: Psychology

Academic success structures promote Native American student engagement,

persistence, and retention from a Western view of what it means to belong in higher

education, potentially missing crucial aspects of Indigenous worldviews. The following

qualitative study (re)centers Indigenous Ways of Knowing to define sense of belonging

for Native American students in their own words. Guiding questions are: How do Native

American students define *sense of belonging*? How do they define *spaces and places*

where they do and do not feel belonging in education? How does non-belonging impact

mental health and well-being, and by extension academic success? The study is rooted in

what I learned as a co-developer of a cultural competence course for faculty, staff, and

graduate students working with Native American students at a Predominantly White

Institution. Using autoethnography and narrative inquiry, I weave together seven

participant stories using methodology consistent with Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

The framework comes from a Cherokee double-walled basket- two weavings, that as a

whole, provide a stable structure for carrying wisdom. Seven key themes emerged from our collective storytelling: connection, safety, acknowledgment, respect, presence, purpose, and growth. Two additional themes—gatekeeping and way-making—constituted major influences on belonging. Findings resulted in a model of Indigenized belonging titled "Having the Spirit in the Circle". This Indigenized model of belonging has important implications for transformative diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in institutions of higher learning to benefit Indigenous student success.

(194 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Together, Our Voices Will Strengthen the Weaving: Using Autoethnography and

Narrative Inquiry to Indigenize Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

Devon S. Isaacs

Native American students in higher education are often asked to find a sense of belonging in places and spaces that do not reflect their cultures or worldviews. This can lead to isolation and a feeling of having to choose between themselves and their identities as Indigenous peoples. This contributes to poorer mental health, loss of well-being, and decreased academic success. The purpose of this study was to ask seven Native American participants how they defined sense of belonging from their own worldviews. Participants were also asked about spaces and places in higher education that helped or did not help them belong, and how this affected their mental health, well-being, and ability to succeed in the university setting. Using a metaphor of a Cherokee double-walled basket, we drew from our collective stories to define belonging in the following ways: connection, safety, acknowledgment, respect, presence, purpose, and growth. These themes became a model of Indigenized belonging called "Having the Spirit in the Circle". Two other key themes that affected belonging were gatekeepers and way-makers. Gatekeepers in higher education created barriers to success and waymakers decreased barriers. What we learned together will be used to inform universities about ways they can change current academic success structures to promote belonging that aligns with Indigenous ways of knowing and being and to help Native American students succeed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Roy Tidwell, from your "favorite daughter". I finally made it home. If only we had more time to hear each other's stories. Donadagohvi— until we see each other again. To my brother, Jason Tidwell, we made it! I am so proud of all you have accomplished. Mom and dad would be so happy to know the seed of education they planted in us has flourished. To my husband and step-children, who will always be my heart, thank you for teaching me the importance of presence and connection. You make me a better person every day.

To the Indigenous students still putting their spirit into their work, and to all the Indigenous students to come- earning that degree will be one of the hardest things you have ever done. You will feel like you have to leave pieces of yourself behind to gain an education. Don't listen. Be your full, authentic self. Find your way-makers. I promise you they exist, and they want to be found. When you feel exhausted and tired, find one another and be way-makers for each other. Share the wisdom that you carry with others. Remember your teachings, sing your songs, practice your ceremonies whatever they may be. Know that your voice matters. Tell your stories. We need them now more than ever. Your lives have so much meaning and purpose. With you, the world is a better place.

You are everything your ancestors dreamed of and more.

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PROLOGUE: A WORD TO THE COMMITTEE

I want to challenge you.

Challenge me, you say? You might be asking yourself, just who does this student think she is? After all, this is a dissertation. As a member on this committee, you hold a special place of power and privilege that is rarely ever challenged. Even opening this dissertation with the word "I" is a challenge. It undermines preconceived notions of power as evidenced by what "we" understand as acceptable language for a "Western" research endeavor. As a doctoral student, I am supposed to minimize myself (what we might call objectivity) while making my research visible. But, in doing so, I risk making myself invisible. Invisibility is a troubling word for Indigenous peoples, and I am called to remind you that this is not a Western research endeavor. The space our Westernized university occupies is Indigenous land. The voice you hear challenging you is an Indigenous voice. Make space for that, and read it again...

I *want* to challenge you.

There is less of an emphasis on you as holding power and more an emphasis on a desire to tell a story and to be *heard*— and to ultimately seek change. Now that the sentence has been reframed, take a moment to ask yourself what reaction this creates for you. How is this different from your initial reaction? What are your preconceived notions of power and privilege in academia? What is *your* positionality and role in academia? How does this influence your work with students? Now, bear with me as I explain why I want to

challenge you and outline the change that I seek. From here on out, I will serve as Storyteller, and you (along with my wider intended audience) will serve as my Dear Reader. Together we will work to break the hierarchal nature of dissertations and committees early in the relationship. Let us begin in our mutual learning

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to acknowledge that all Utah State University courses are taught on the traditional lands of the Diné, Goshute, Paiute, Shoshone, and Ute Peoples past and present, and honor the land itself and the people who have stewarded it throughout the generations. We honor them by name as living, thriving, and resilient peoples.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE DOUBLE-WALLED BASKET AS METAPHOR

There was a time when I was complacent in allowing myself to become assimilated into Western academia. This was the only perceived option for success. I am a biracial, bicultural, Cherokee woman and non-traditional doctoral student. I was raised in the heart of the Cherokee Nation, and my sense of belonging is rooted deep in Cherokee culture. For many Cherokee people, and often documented in the lives of educated Cherokee women, assimilation has been a familiar companion and necessary mechanism for survival (Moulder, 2011). One that often leaves us struggling between two ways of being (Herrera, 2011; Henze & Vanett, 1993). When we choose Indigeneity, there is a sense of needing to choose between parts of the self; either by assimilating or by uprooting the "internalized oppressor" (Soria & Alkrie, 2015; Duran et al., 1998). For me assimilation is no longer an option, and I have learned that decolonizing oneself creates sadness and tension as well as liberation. As an Indigenous scholar, I have asked myself if I must be only Indigenous or only scholar? When do we learn to meet *ourselves* where we are as researchers and be both?

Research is not acultural, or purely unbiased and universal, and we bring our identities into the work whether we know it or not. Because of this, I have decided to become more fully who I am. I would rather be authentic than risk losing myself. I am reclaiming my Indigeneity[1]. This is not without discomfort, but this reclamation of identity is empowering. In searching for this integration of selves combined with fullness,

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[1] I will use the terms Indigenous or Indigeneity when speaking of our experiences as first or original peoples of this land. The terms Native, Native American, or specific tribal affiliations are used when speaking about local or personal experience.

it sometimes feels as though I am a Native Dorothy leaving Kansas (a word derived from the Kaw language, meaning "people of the south-wind"). The cinematic magic of a muslin tornado is analogous to the current climate of academia as we deconstruct racial trauma and systemic inequities. Rather than whirling houses and ladies on broomsticks, I see inclusion and diversity statements. Terms like "committed action" and "focus groups" go whizzing past. I wonder about this strange (re)newed world of critical thought and wonder where I (like other Native students) will land. In truth, the old way of doing things is just far too dismal— too much like the sepia tones of Boarding School Era photographs. The promise of a technicolor landscape keeps me moving.

I would like to say this journey started during a graduate-level qualitative research course while reading Kovach (2010), but that would be untrue. The words of Margaret Kovach, her "uneasy feeling that my sense of self would intersect with my research", were merely a catalyst (Kovach, 2010, p. 6). Kovach reminded me that all good stories start with a prologue. This prologue explains the importance of positionality and reflexivity as this dissertation is woven together, like a Cherokee double-walled basket, into existence. Basket weaving is not a new metaphor for Indigenous researchers, and you will hear me reference basket weaving often (Ryder et al., 2020; Driskill, 2015; Wright et al., 2012; Archibald, 2008; Parent, 2020). I am weaving a story for you, *gvlvquodi digoliyesgi* (Dear Reader). I am merely the weaver holding the runner, the starting thread, weaving over and under, over and under, as I navigate my own story alongside the voices of other Native American students (See Figure 1).

Near the end of my story, I will cease the first stage of weaving and diminish the space I occupy to begin the second weaving, which will illuminate the voices of my

participants. Together, our voices will strengthen the weaving. This is as it should be. I am also weaving a r*elationship* with you *gvlvquodi digoliyesgi*—connecting you with the Native American students you serve so that you may learn the importance of interconnection to people, space, and place. Consider your own positionality and the tensions you experience while reading this. Are relationship and interconnection things you have typically valued or given much thought about in academia? That kind of reflection requires silence and listening… listening to hear, not to respond— at least not yet. To really hear this particular story, to immerse yourself in it, you must step into the epistemological and ontological frameworks of Native American students. Otherwise, our voices will remain stifled, silenced, and invisible.

Silencing in the academy is an epistemological and ontological reality for Native American students. Teo (2010) writes of epistemological violence in the social sciences as manifesting in constructions of the "other" in an era of post-colonial research and data interpretation. For me, post-colonialism is a misnomer and a suggestion that Indigenous peoples no longer face conquest of land, body, and mind. Neo-colonialism, an outgrowth of capitalism and imperialism upon labor and economy, doesn't quite capture our modern experiences either (Loomba, 2007). What I am talking about is intellectual sovereignty, or a refutation of the colonization of the production and consumption of knowledge. Of how we understand our modern experiences as living peoples with storied histories and modern experiences. Epistemological violence results in a deficit-oriented positioning of Indigenous students as intellectually inferior, ill-prepared, caught in cycles of substance use and trauma, helpless, and in need of saving. It situates Indigeneity as the problem, and education as the savior. Science, and here psychological research, becomes detractive

rather than additive in our understanding of ourselves (Castro-Gomez, 2019).

Additionally, ontological violence, or silencing of how we experience the world, leaves

us historicized, suppressed, and in conflict with Western education and ourselves

(Walker, 2004). It creates a dialectic of suffering and victimhood that negates any

possibility that we are capable of living lives that are transformative, meaningful, and

resilient (Macdonald, 2010). I can say in honesty, *gvlvquodi digoliyesgi,* that every

Native student I have worked with speaks of education as a necessity for giving back.

This is our gift to you.

Figure 1.

A bundle of honeysuckle reed used in Cherokee basket weaving.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The bear looked down at his feet and saw the little water spider. The animals began to chuckle and laugh. The bear, smiling, said, 'You're too small. How can you get the fire?' And the spider said, 'Let me try.' All the animals agreed, 'Let her try.' So, the little spider dove into the water and swam to the island. (Cherokee Heritage Center, 2016)

The first time I attempted college, I was twenty-four. As I stepped onto campus, books nestled in a backpack charged to my financial aid, I had a thought. It was a loud thought. A VERY LOUD thought. It insisted I get back in my car and leave and never look back. *"I don't belong here"*, it said. I shook it off.

It was finally my time, and this was a place destined to be on my path. I made straight A's and Dean's Honor Roll that first semester. Then life happened. Both parents became ill with cancer. My academic schedule, along with working twelve-hour overnight shifts in a children's group home, became too much in the face of chemo appointments and devastating grief. By my second semester, I just stopped showing up for classes. What was the use? I didn't belong there. The thought was seemingly confirmed for a great many reasons. I didn't belong there because I belonged with my family. I didn't belong there because, despite rich displays of my cultural heritage on campus (located in the heart of the Cherokee Nation), I wasn't Native enough. I was too old to belong with other students enrolled straight out of high school. It was too much. To be honest, I gave up.

Six years passed, and life found me working a regular nine-to-five job. We had lost my mother to the "C" word. My father was still seriously ill. I had a new marriage and a ready-made family of two amazing boys. Why would I return to that sense of non-

belonging? Well, I had made a promise to my mother to finish my degree. I also had new

roles to navigate and young minds to be a role model for, so I enrolled again part-time. It

was my first day back on campus, the same backpack now full of loose-leaf paper and

fresh pens, and again the thought returned. This time I was older, and the thought had

become a voice that was much more insistent— "*You* don't belong here". *You.*

This time it didn't sound like that warning voice we all have in our heads; the one

that keeps us on time for appointments or reminds us to stop doing 75 mph in a 65 mph

zone. This was something else. The place itself, the very idea of higher education,

seemed to be telling me I did not belong, simply because I was *me...* Indigenous. I

refused to look at my car, zipped my keys in my backpack so they wouldn't be

accessible, and stifled the urge to run away. I walked inside old Seminary Hall, part of

the original Cherokee Female Seminary my undergraduate institution was founded on

(Mihesuah, 1997), and into the classroom where I stopped in my tracks. It felt as though a

hundred eyes stared back at me. Each pair said, "you don't belong here, you're too old,

you're too Native, you're too White..." But I needed this to help my people; to counter

the intergenerational trauma, broken families, and poor mental health I saw in my

community *every day*. I channeled my inner Spider [...deep breath...] and sat down.

Belonging: A Trickster Story

> *... Let's see if you can jump across this branch... 'All right,' said the*
> *Rabbit. So, they went back to get a good start, and when the Deer gave the*
> *word Kû! they ran for the stream, and the Rabbit made one jump and*
> *landed on the other side. But the Deer had stopped on the bank, and when*
> *the Rabbit looked back, the Deer had conjured the stream so that it was a*
> *large river (Mooney, 1902, p. 277).*

As I write, I wonder why belonging was so powerful in making the decision to

persevere in higher education. I lived off-campus in my home community with my

husband and stepsons. I had friends who were also non-traditional students. My tuition

was paid through merit and need-based scholarships and grants. Living below the poverty

line, I could still feed my family with the help of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program) or tribal food distribution programs; note, you can't receive both,

you are either Native or you're not. It seemed like I had good support systems that

checked all the boxes for well-known factors of student persistence (Walton et al., 2020;

Manyanga et al., 2017). Why, then, had this idea of not belonging followed me through

undergraduate education, into a post-baccalaureate fellowship, and into my doctoral

program? The intensity of that feeling, "you don't belong here", left me wanting to know

how other Native American students defined *sense of belonging*— in their words and

from their own worldviews. How did Native students define *spaces* and *places* where

they felt belonging? How did they define spaces and places where they didn't feel

belonging? How did this impact well-being? Did everyone feel like me?

For me, not belonging meant I only stayed on campus when I had to for classes

and work. It meant I didn't frequent the library or traditional study spaces, preferring

instead to find a tiny corner in the also tiny and underfunded Student Support Services-

TRIO building. It meant I didn't join clubs or campus activities. It meant I didn't raise

my hand in class. It meant I kept my eyes down and my nose to the proverbial grindstone.

It meant I didn't ask for help.

Blessed enough to have a computer and sketchy internet access (something not all

students have), I trudged home to where I did belong to complete my assignments. My

stress came with me. It bled profusely into my family life and friendships. When my

stepsons asked me to play boardgames they walked away disappointed, voicing some

well-known iteration of "oh, you can't, you have homework". I felt anxious. Depressed. Overwhelmed. Guilty. I sought feverishly for some form of control and found it in hyper-productivity and copious amounts of ibuprofen. On the outside, I looked like a successful student. On the inside, it felt as though someone else was dictating my life. Someone else was writing my story. And for that "someone else", I wasn't even a main character. Just a sidenote.

Who Gets to Tell This Story?

Sense of belonging has been defined as "a feeling of connectedness and belief that one is important and matters to others in an organization" (O'Meara et al., 2017). Universities show their investment in students, that they matter, through institutional policies, practices, and support structures intended to guide students (sometimes quite paternalistically) toward degrees. Sense of belonging is rarely, if ever, considered from Indigenous perspectives when universities make decisions about creating and implementing these policies, practices, and support structures. When we show up at all, it is usually as an asterisk, a footnote, or a sliver of the data pie titled "other" (Shotton et al., 2013). In addition, universities work from a model of *shifting the student* to prepare for academic success and persistence. Few consider the impact of shifting institutional factors for student support to achieve this success (Lundberg, 2014). For Native American students and other students of color, these institutional factors can range from examining historical implications of federal and state policies (Martinez-Cola, 2020a), practices for generating a positive and inclusive university climate (Museus et al., 2018), healing of historical and family distrust of education (Schmidt & Akande, 2011), and

attending to the cultural competence of faculty and staff to address potential for

discrimination and prejudice (Tehee et al., 2020a, 2020b; Isaacs et al., under review).

Carey (2015) argues that even cultural competence has its limits as some

universities may view cultural competence as "a risk management technique to be applied

in culturally diverse workplaces and when working with culturally diverse clientele"

without actually attempting to disrupt the "binaried relationship between Indigeneity and

non-Indigeneity, upon which colonialist power relations are based" (p. 838). Even the

best-intentioned Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) trainings miss the mark if the

people creating and implementing them fail to consult genuinely with communities of

color (Isaacs et al., in press). To create beneficial institutional transformation, one that

doesn't reinforce historically oppressive power structures, we must collect data directly

related to Native students' lived experiences (Tinto, 2006). We must give voice to the

stories of our students by engaging them in conversation about what it is they want and

need from the education system to foster belonging and well-being. Doing so becomes an

act of rhetorical sovereignty, and a way to counter-narrative the current rhetoric of

motivation as a precursor for academic success (Caruth, 2018; Linnenbrink & Pintrich,

2002; Martin, 2002) and to refute the boot-strap pulling, meritocracy-based mentality

pervasive in systems of education (Berliner, 2014; Alvarado, 2010; Waldner, 2003).

What do I mean by rhetorical sovereignty? I mean that Native American students

get to determine their own futures and to resist the assimilative process still present in

education through (re)claiming an ability to speak and write about themselves for

themselves (Lyons, 2000). Speaking for ourselves requires the listener to acknowledge

our agency and right to self-determination, or the ability to govern our own minds,

bodies, and communities and to do such governing in our own way. We did this once.
Before European contact. Before colonization, genocide, war, disease, and forced
extinction for the sake of monetary gain and land theft and exploitation..

Decades upon decades of law and policy from the U.S. government have dictated
our stories for us, from how we are spoken about and spoken to, to how we are
misrepresented and even underrepresented in the realm of education (Lyons, 2000;
Grande, 2015). Deconstructing the ways in which we are written and spoken about as
Indigenous peoples with complex histories, languages, and relationships requires a sort of
"rhetorical alliance" where we can claim the right to "reframe the discussion" of self-
determination between Native peoples and Western education (King, 2012). And this,
must start with a conversation about the education system's obligation to consider its role
(both past and present) in how our lives have been shaped by colonization (Watanabe,
2014; Patel, 2015). Furthermore, although it finds its existence in language and words,
rhetorical sovereignty is a call to move beyond decolonizing the way we are written and
spoken about and to move toward actionable demonstrations of commitment on the part
of the universities we attend (Cobb, 2005; Watanabe, 2014). Hence, a Western academic
view on belonging must be positioned as the dominant space in this narrative, a contested
cultural space as real as any physical space, that we as Indigenous peoples must "map
Native space over/into/around/under..." (Riley-Mukavetz & Powell, 2015, p. 139-140).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has been called a critical factor in student retention and
attrition (O'Keefe, 2013), a component of "integration" affecting early departure from
university (Hoffman et al., 2002), and key for student academic success (Strayhorn,

2018). Much of higher education literature tells us why a sense of belonging is important

for universities and student outcomes in terms of actuarial data. However, it fails in

telling us why sense of belonging is so important for *Indigenous students* and *well-being*.

From a psychological standpoint, Maslow (1954) defined belonging as a basic human

need and placed it in the middle of his hierarchal pyramid; right below self-actualization

and esteem needs, and right above safety and physiological needs.

In her refutation of Maslow (who was said to have "borrowed" his ideas from the

Alberta Blackfeet and got it backward), Stone Brown (2014) proposed that self-

actualization realistically requires a return to our *cultures* to create *community*, thereby

placing sense of belonging at the forefront. For Brown (2016), lack of belonging has

occurred through ongoing processes of historical trauma, forced-choice (i.e.,

assimilation), oppression, and racism. Additionally, Hill (2006) states that we should

consider belonging for Native peoples as being impacted by factors like "socioeconomic

status, acculturation, traditional practices, spirituality, self-concept, culture, community,

and family values and beliefs"— and that all of these factors, in turn, impact psychosocial

health and well-being (p. 211). For Native students, belonging and connectedness (i.e., to

aspects of their cultural identity, or to places of origin) may run parallel; and are likely

not a singular, isolated level in Maslow's hierarchy but dynamic and synergistic (King,

2018). Belonging deeply affects self-esteem and greatly informs safety. Belonging shapes

ability to meet both physiological and psychological needs. Belonging *is* a large part of

reaching our full potential and a crucial piece of finding our most actualized selves.

However, as a whole, undergraduate students of color regularly perceive themselves as

having less belonging than their white counterparts (Johnson et al., 2007).

Can We Belong if We Don't Exist?

Maslow (1954) wasn't wrong when he positioned belonging as a basic human need. We just know less about how we come to feel belonging, why we do or don't feel belonging, and how we increase belonging particularly as it relates to Native students' academic experiences. Consider the following quotes from quantitative studies on academic belonging... "some groups (e.g., Native Americans) were not well represented in our sample, so the findings of this analysis might be less indicative of their realities than the populations that had greater representation in the participant sample" (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017, p. 203). Or... "another limitation concerns the decisions we made about the Native American students in the sample...we aggregated these collegians with those who identified with 'another race'..." (Duran, Dahl, Stipeck, & Mayhew, 2020, p. 142). Or this one, "Unfortunately, the analytic technique employed in this study precluded Native American/American Indian students' inclusion due to their low representation within the sample" (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, & Rowan-Kenyon, 2007, p. 559). Or this, "due to the low number of respondents who identified with certain racial groups (i.e., Native American, Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern) and students classified as multiracial, we were unable to include them in our analyses" (Lewis, Bruno, Raygoza, & Wang, 2019, p. 18). I could go on and on but that seems like a fruitless endeavor and there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of research articles that do not mention us at all. The key takeaway here, is that our current narrative in Western research is one of non-existence. A story devoid of presence. Indigenous researchers and students know this isn't true. We exist.

Belonging at Predominantly White Institutions

When I first walked the sidewalks of the Predominantly White Institution (PWI) that I now attend for graduate school, I was struck by the sheer whiteness of the campus population. Even in the greater community, I struggled to find anyone who looked like me or sounded like me. At grocery stores and gas stations, I encountered my fair share of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). "Are you an Indian? Cool! My great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess"....[deep sigh]. Not the first time I had been asked that. Where was my community? The one where I was not asked to educate others to make up for the gross inaccuracies and history curriculum failures of public school systems? I wondered if it was possible to build community here. I would eventually find my community, but it took time. What made it possible was the collective efforts of a small group of Native people and allies on campus trying to generate institutional change.

A key ingredient in creating sense of belonging seems to be community. Can a Native student have, or feel a sense of, community at a PWI without relationships built on cultural acknowledgment and respect? When a PWI has a lack of awareness or understanding about students from underrepresented and low-income groups lived experiences, they may perpetuate microaggressions that greatly influence academic persistence and ability to allocate resources toward goals thereby undermining belonging (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 12; Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Franklin, 2016; Jones & Galliher, 2015). According to Walton et al. (2020), Indigenous students' academic persistence is "challenged when programs [do] not reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, [are] not relevant to Indigenous students, or when students experience racism in their classrooms or on campus" (p. 435). In addition, Native students regularly report feeling

invisible or singled out as a spokesperson for all Indigenous peoples (Jackson et al., 2003). As we look across the educational lifespan, a pattern starts to emerge.

On the surface, Native American high school students need faculty support, cultural and identity-relevant structures like clubs and student organizations, and family support; while a deeper dive shows that experiences of *racism* hinder belonging (Buckley et al., 2020). For Native American undergraduates, social support and peer-group interactions, along with staff support and lack of social isolation, are factors for success (Oxendine, 2015). Inversely, Native undergraduates may be bombarded by "hostile college environments due to Native American imagery and mascots" that significantly impact collective racial esteem, or self-concept regarding membership in a broader racial group (Oxendine, 2015, p.270). Note, my undergraduate mascot was changed from the "Redmen" *years* after I earned my bachelor's degree. Experiences of racism continue to hinder academic persistence, a necessary factor for academic success, for those of us that make it to graduate school (O'Meara, 2017). Even reservation-based students deemed successful at navigating identity in non-tribal institutions found racism a large factor for academic persistence (Jackson et al., 2003).

When you experience racism long enough and pervasively enough, it starts to seep in quite insidiously. Many students of color experience internalized racism (Speight, 2007; David et al., 2019) and internalized oppression (Kalei Kanuha, 1999; Gonzales et al., 2014) that can lead to self-blame, shame, guilt, and acceptance of negative stereotypes. I often see the latter in statements by Native students like, "that's just how it is". We accept this reality as payment for our ability to *exist* on college campuses. To be free of these negative experiences, students may feel pushed to assimilate (or conform

and integrate) into the campus culture of the PWI to alleviate or avoid racial self-hatred, being singled out, or being tokenized (Gonzales et al., 2014). There is a pressure to disconnect from culture to survive, and any efforts to express pride in our cultures are questioned and even mocked. During our university-sponsored campus Powwow, we hear things like, "nice costume" or "is that turquoise even real?" We are Indigenous people trying to be fully Indigenous and authentic in non-Indigenous spaces. And when we can't, we fracture our identity to fit into different contexts and spaces with unfamiliar or potentially harmful social pressures. If we're lucky, like I was, we find a small community of support that allows us to feel a sense of wholeness.

For students of color, communities of support may consist of many things but are largely shaped by experiences had in the campus environment. Johnson et al. (2007) wrote, "Rather than expecting students to bear sole responsibility for success through their *integration* [emphasis mine] into existing institutional structures, sense of belonging illustrates the interplay between the individual and the institution" (p. 526). For example, one model of culturally engaging campus environments (CECE; Museus et al., 2018) stressed nine attributes across two levels of belonging-increasing factors. In level one, cultural relevance was marked by five indicators: cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, cultural community service, meaningful cross-cultural engagement, and culturally validating environments. In level two, cultural responsiveness emphasized collectivist cultural orientations, humanized educational environments, proactive philosophies, and holistic support. The word *culture* is used in this model multiple times while *humanizing* is used only once. Culture has become a DEI buzzword. Note that Museus' (2018) study was one of many where Native students were excluded due to lack

of representation. Broadly, use of the CECE model did promote positive diversity-building community outcomes for both students of color and white students (Museus et al., 2018). In addition, *effective* peer-to-peer interactions with cultural others and diverse peers are strong predictors of belonging for Native students (Strayhorn et al., 2016). However, on an institutional level, cultural knowledge or appreciation often translates to the university implementing a Native American cultural day, adding a singular Native scholar to an endless roster of white speakers, or providing a small corner office as a place for Native students to gather. It isn't enough.

Space and Place

For Indigenous peoples, the term "community" in relation to institutions of higher learning is complex and full of historically poor relationship-building. For example, the physical land an institution occupies is often a sensitive topic for land-grant universities as they benefit from the dispossession and theft of Indigenous lands through colonization (Lee & Ahtone, 2020). Native students often attend four-year universities situated on lands with deep meaning surrounding cultural origin and spirituality that goes unacknowledged by the institution and campus population. Furthermore, Native students are often unable to connect with these lands in culturally-relevant ways (e.g., the burning of sage and other medicines is prohibited in common spaces and dorms, lands may be restricted as private thereby limiting access, ceremony is mocked or minimized by peers). In truth, land-grant universities continue to receive subsidies from the often illegal sale and exploitation of Indigenous lands but rarely funnel those monies back into campus-housed tribal centers, tuition waivers, scholarships, housing, or hardship assistance-further perpetuating a relationship of distrust.

This leads to another key ingredient hypothesized as important for belonging-space and place (Windchief & Joseph, 2015). Deloria and Wildcat (2001) conceptualized Native identity as a confluence of power and place, neither of which has been historically allocated to Native students in higher education institutions. Indigenous-dedicated spaces and places are difficult to come by in universities, particularly at PWIs. Native-centered spaces on campuses increase Native student persistence, peoplehood, and cultural integrity and continuity (Tachine et al., 2017). Space and place are more than a physical location: "place is security, space is freedom" (Yuan, 1977). Space and place are locations that richly manifest human experience and relatedness with the natural world (Pearce & Louis, 2008). In addition, access to culturally-based organizations increases positive perceptions of college climates as non-discriminatory by boosting public collective racial esteem (how one believes others view their racial group), private collective racial esteem (how "good" one's social groups are perceived to be), and identity salience or how important those aspects are to identity (Oxendine et al., 2020).

Regardless, in available quantitative studies conducted by Indigenous researchers or with Indigenous participants, we must still draw on previously defined Western ways of knowing what it means to belong that obstruct Indigenous conceptualizations of space and place (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017; Strayhorn, Bie, & Williams, 2016; Soria & Alkrie, 2015; Oxendine & Taub, 2021; Alabanza, 2020). Tachine et al., (2017) recognized the limitations of Western constructs of belonging for use with Indigenous populations and supported their definitions with Holm et al.'s (2003) peoplehood model. This allowed for interweaving multiple aspects of identity such as nationhood, gender, and ethnicity while transcending widely-used, static categories of identity to include

sacred history, tribal language, ceremony, and land. Holm et al.'s model (2003) calls for recognition of the disconnections that may exist within this holistic system, such as separation from space and place or land and language loss. In addition, Strayhorn et al. (2016) distinguish belonging as being more than just abstract notions of community or campus climate to claim inclusivity of the wider scope of interpersonal relationships that Native students encounter throughout their university experience on culturally contested lands. This extends beyond people to relationships with land, nature, and animal relatives.

Soria and Alkrie (2015) situate belonging as existing within a sea of choices between academic success and other identity-related factors like family and home. They suggest that when belonging cannot be found in the campus environment there is a high risk for dropout and campus departure. According to Soria and Alkrie (2015) there is a strong negative association between homelife and academic belonging, where "The frequency with which students spent time with family was significantly and negatively associated with their sense of belonging, meaning that Native American students who spent more time with their families were less likely to feel a sense of belonging on campus" (n.p.). Soria and Alkrie (2015) posited that this was due to inability to allocate the time and resources needed to establish significant interpersonal relationships with peers, and did not evaluate for the quality of family relationships or distance of campuses from homelands or land of origin. I further suggest the authors consider how spending time with family generates an increased awareness of the disconnect between ways of being and knowing at home and those on campus, as well as the impact of disparities such as poverty, unstable or unsafe housing, food insecurity, trauma, and substance use often associated with colonial impacts on homelife among Native reservations.

Oxendine et al. (2020) also situated the previously mentioned definitions of belonging alongside the construct of cultural integrity (or distance between Native students' home identity, values, worldview, and behavior and those of campus culture) as an important indicator for academic achievement. Further argument was made that any resulting cultural conflict is greatly influenced by whether students and institutions view Indigenous culture as an asset or a deficit in contested academic spaces. According to Oxendine et al. (2020), "there is an institutional responsibility of cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, and cultural engagement" as a component necessary for students to maintain a sense of cultural integrity and to resist assimilative processes (p. 109). A deficit-based view of one's own culture directly attacks cultural integrity and encourages assimilation for the sake of survival. Alabanza (2020) adds to Strayhorn's (2012) definition of belonging as a sense of connectedness and "mattering" to include complex factors such as inequity due to structural and institutional barriers, racism, cultural bias, and feelings of marginalization leading to social inhibition.

Alabanza (2020) takes notice that we currently lack information on what Indigenous students actually perceive as academic success or failure. I agree with this, and believe this is also true of how Indigenous students define sense of belonging in the contested space and white property of PWIs (Patel, 2015). In many ways, this construct of "belonging" is like the main character in an academic trickster story (*Jistu*, or rabbit, for Cherokees, and Coyote for others). The trick is that students are encouraged to find a sense of belonging in academic institutions that were not designed for them, which often makes the connection to identity-affirming spaces, places, and people inaccessible.

As Indigenous students we look for spaces and places that look like us, sound like us, feel like us, and find none. Not only are *we* missing in higher education by sheer lack of numbers (NCES, 2017), but beneficial representations of our worldviews and ways of being (Fryberg et al., 2013) are absent in classrooms, syllabi, assigned readings, and scholarly works (Willmott et al., 2015). This doesn't have to be the case. We know that when faculty include diverse perspectives in classrooms, especially Indigenous ones, they contribute to Native student learning. Research shows that these expressions of appreciation for diversity are "related to the way students perceive faculty members in terms of their availability and support" (Lundberg & Lowe, 2016, p. 13). However, due to lack of representation and cultural competence on campuses broadly, people in positions of power and authority (e.g., mentors, admissions, financial aid, administration) aren't showing availability and support in tangible, culturally-relevant ways. And when Native students don't feel represented or even acknowledged in campus spaces, they often make difficult decisions to assimilate by abandoning aspects of Indigenous identity (Emery, 2011), or they leave education altogether generating a noticeable disparity in attrition rates. This leads institutions to focus on retention rather than relationship.

Jumping From One World to the Next

> *The young men traveled on until they came at last to the sunrise place where the sky reaches down to the ground...They waited until the Sun had come out and then tried to get through while the door was still open, but just as the first one was in the doorway, the rock came down and crushed him. The other six were afraid to try it, and as they were now at the end of the world, they turned around and started back again, but they had traveled so far that they were old men when they reached home (Mooney, 1902, p. 327).*

Jistu made it across the river in one leap. Maybe that is the trick. It's not that easy for Indigenous students to make the leap from their communities to universities, much

less to graduation, and even more challenging when the jump is to a PWI or university far-removed from our cultures of origin. There are sharp tree branches and rocks in that swift river. The bank is slippery, and our footing is unsure. When Jistu looked back the river had widened, and he thought he could never go back. When he finally did make it home, he was a changed rabbit. The men who travelled to the sunrise place had also been changed. When they returned home they had become old men, broken, and haggard, without ever truly reaching their goal. The Sun had blinded them, and they were crushed under the weight of the world. These are stories meant to caution us. There is a genuine fear in our Elders that if we journey to places of education, we will also be changed or crushed. They worry that educational institutions will harm us just as our Elders and Ancestors were harmed in Boarding Schools and Mission Schools through the assimilative process. If we do make it back, will we have forgotten ourselves and our cultural identities? Will we recognize our own reflections in that wide river? Will we feel broken and aimless? There is a very real history behind that fear.

Academic Tricksters

"Vizenor (1998) says that, "trickster stories of resistance and survivance, are eversions of tragic victimry" (p. 29). What does this say for belonging in higher education as a trickster story? An eversion requires a turning-inside-out of what we think we know about belonging and our protagonists' identities. Instead of re-situating the "Indian" as a "fugitive object" or "uncut cord of colonial dominance" (Vizenor, 1998, p. 33), we should turn toward helping Native students achieve balance. Meaning, this study does not seek to solely attain a constantly changing end goal of student success. That is like asking students to shoot an arrow at a target while doing jumping jacks. The

education system, should we near the bullseye, can simply move the target and we are just too exhausted to draw (or even hold) the bow. What this study does seek is to resituate the Native student as capable of navigating the constant motion and dynamics of identity and personhood in academe by diminishing and disabling colonial education as the purveyor of tragedy. It dreams of a narrative written by us and for us; one that tells the story of how we are taking our educational sovereignty back. An end to the Boarding School Era. True inclusion, not assimilation. Presence. Not absence. Life. Not death. A timely topic given the recent reclamation of our Indigenous children from hastily dug graves at Boarding Schools across the U.S. and Canada (Newland, 2022).

In literature, the "Trickster" has been situated as a "creative rebel", dangerous as an outsider, living "sideways" as an insider, an epitome of "what can go wrong in the greater society when the individual tries to live as a society of one" (Ballenger, 1989). Contrast this with potential as a "culture hero" and great corrector of experiences (Ballinger, 1989). Tricksters live in the great in-between and thrive on contradiction. In trickster tales, we see narratives of journey, change, transformation, and obscurity of either-or and neither-nor dichotomies, mixed amongst the "comic inversion" of social implications (Ballinger, 1989). And yet, Ballinger (1989) writes that trickster characters, however ambiguous, are not free from the constraint of assumptions. They even invite them. In hearing trickster stories, we justifiably do our best to make sense of the trick. Sometimes to our own folly or educative experience. Belonging, just like trickster, is nearly always ambiguous and polymorphic.

Higher education functions on principles of didactics and dichotomy that trickster turns upside down. How can we leverage that? This idea that we either survive or we

don't in systems of education? What can we teach the education system about our

survivance? A trickster's downfall is often self-delusion or "any other failure of self-

restraint" (Ballinger, 1989, p. 22). It seems Western, colonial education rests far too

securely in its comfortable nest as the status-quo. It assumes this is the nest we will all

flock to, the only nest in a storm of social unease and victimry— and it has made it such

that we need education in its current state to achieve our goals. It also assumes we aren't

very good observers of how to build nests. Untrue given our long history of maintaining

good relationships with relatives who build nests." (Research Journal, August 2021)

Well-Being and Cultural Identity

When I told my father in Oklahoma that I had chosen Utah to complete my

doctorate, he had big questions. Namely, "how long will you be gone" and the more

ominous "when will you be back?" Upon every return visit, I worked extra hard to prove

to him I had not forgotten my cultural heritage and had effectually improved upon my

knowledge of it. I resumed beadwork and basket making. I tried to make time to learn my

language, something neither he nor I ever really had growing up because of historical

assimilation policies. When I couldn't answer the question of "when," I tried to alleviate

his worry by telling him about the "what," meaning my work with students and why I

wanted to make a difference.

You see, my father was the reason I believed I could pursue a degree and use my

education to create systemic change. He earned a Bachelor of Arts through the

Montgomery GI Bill after serving in Vietnam. He attended the same university where I

had first encountered questions of belonging. After earning his degree, he served the

Cherokee Nation for over 25 years by helping provide resources to heat Elders' homes

and employ youth with summer job programs. At his funeral, I lost count of the number of people who came to me saying, "your dad is the reason I went to school". I didn't learn about his time in a Boarding School until the last year of his life, and he passed away before I returned home for good.

As we sat in his room in the nursing home in Muskogee, Oklahoma in the year before his passing, he got caught up in a story. Really, it was a memory. But what are stories if not the baskets that cradle our memories? He still had difficulty speaking due to a stroke he had experienced years earlier. He also demonstrated the confusion and lack of temporal continuity associated with dementia. He reached for a pair of fingernail clippers and motioned for me to hide them under the waste basket. What memory was he caught up in? What story was he re-enacting? I explained to him that we couldn't hide the clippers under the trash. That it wasn't reasonable. He was insistent, frustrated, and finally resigned to slumping in his chair to stare at the television. But his eyes were focused on some far-away place. Where was he? What was clear was that he was angry with me. He had pleaded for help and I had refused him. Later, when the fog of dementia had settled, I asked him about this episode. He told me that during his time in boarding school, he had been punished for letting his fingernails grow too long. His older brother had found a rusty pocket-knife and trimmed them, but his fingers had become infected. He was punished for both the original offense and the infection. Fingernail clippers became a valuable commodity to him at five years old.

There is little doubt that all of the many phases of colonization have disrupted sense of belonging in Native communities. These include: first contact, when lifeways are destroyed and disrupted; economic competition resulting in losses to the physical and

spiritual needs of whole communities; invasion and war, resulting in relocation and government extermination policies; subjugation and the reservation period, where Native people were confined to atrocious conditions on reserves; the Indian Boarding school period, a purposeful attempt to disrupt culture, traditions, family networks, and community survival; and the forced relocation/termination period, which served as an additional way to extinguish culture (Duran et al., 1998). Particularly critical lenses are needed for understanding the ways colonialism is perpetuated through higher education institutions (Brayboy, 2005; Haynes Writer, 2008). Native children and youth who attended Boarding Schools were physically and emotionally punished, even sexually abused, for speaking their languages, practicing traditional healing, and attempting to hold on to aspects of their identities or any form of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Punishment came at the hands of teachers, administrators, religious leaders, foster parents, health care workers, and other authority figures who reassured them that leaving their cultures behind would "save them", civilize them, and make them more productive members of a labor-driven society. Newland's (2020) most recent report for the Bureau of Indian Affairs' on the Native American Boarding School system states, "Federal records indicate that the United States viewed official disruption to the Indian family unit as part of Federal Indian policy to assimilate Indian children" specifically through "removal of Indian children from Indian tribes and Alaska Native Villages to off-reservation Indian boarding schools" (pp. 38-39).

Stressors for Native youth and young adults in education are often connected to these historical traumas (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998), where relocation, physical and emotional traumas, stereotyping, racism, discriminatory acts, harassment, and bullying all

impact self-esteem and self-efficacy, and most importantly safety. Blume et al. (2019) state, "Federal Indian policy has left a legacy of systematic racism that remains evident in contemporary social policy, disproportionate involvement with criminal justice system, poor educational attainment outcomes, health disparities, lack of funding allocated to American Indians despite a trust responsibility, and high rates of victimization" (p. 390). Fish and Syed (2018) argue that educational disparities among Native students are a direct result of these multiple layers, or ecologies, of oppression maintained by the current education system. Although punishment of identity is more covert these days, we can see it in the ways Indigenous voices are neglected or even silenced. We feel it when we are tokenized and asked to speak for an entire race or ethnic group in classrooms. We sense when Indigenous diversity-hires encounter barriers to implementing change in our institutions and classrooms. We notice when we are asked to sit at tables but not allowed to speak, and it greatly impacts our belonging and well-being.

Belonging and Well-Being

There is a good deal of evidence that sense of belonging, in relation to cultural identity, directly impacts Native American students' mental health. Thus, connection to identity, being able to step fully as oneself into educational spaces, matters for well-being. Much of this evidence highlights Native *resilience* stemming from cultural identity as a way to alleviate the problem of assimilation (Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2013; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010). For example, Barrett (2019) found that cultural identity was positively associated with academic optimism and self-esteem. Inversely, poor self-esteem is highly associated with increases in depressive symptoms and the hopelessness often associated with suicide in Native youth (Eaton et al., 2012). Self-

esteem, cultural identity, and academic optimism are protective factors for Native students (Barrett, 2019; Phinney, 1991), and cultural identity is empirically linked to psychosocial school functioning (Jones & Galliher, 2007). Keith et al. (2016) highlight research showing that cultural identity serves as a strength for Native students, but many Native students are left wanting to connect more deeply with their cultures. On the outside, assimilated students seem to experience less struggle in mainstream academia. Assimilation, often viewed as a requirement for upward mobility, has been found to have positive effects on outwardly evaluative measures of success such as grade point average but also increases risky behavior that can lead to poorer mental health and well-being. (Greenman & Xie, 2008).

Therein, lies the problem. Assimilation might appear to alleviate immediate distress in academic settings, but requires great sacrifice in the long term. However, enculturative activities are also known to alleviate psychological distress with adolescents residing on reservations (and hence more opportunities for enculturation) experiencing less hopelessness than urban and rural/non-reservation participants (LaFromboise et al., 2010). Native students need to feel connected to their cultures, not punished, particularly on campuses that are not located within their communities of origin. Conversely, LaFromboise et al. (2010) found that adeptness in white culture via bicultural competence, as opposed to competence only in Indigenous *or* white culture, helped mitigate hopelessness in a sample of 438 adolescents across 67 diverse tribal affiliations (75.8% Native only, 11.2% Native/white, 13% Native/another ethnic minority). For bicultural Native students, LaFromboise et al. (1993) proposed an "alternation model" of bicultural identity, stating it is possible to know, alternate between, and navigate two

cultures without losing a sense of self. Essentially, belonging can exist in more than one culture, space, or place. We can keep our Indigeneity intact and find community at a PWI when institutional conditions are amenable to building culturally-relevant support.

Finding Our Way Back Home on Our Own Terms

Higher education is one of the last remaining strongholds of the assimilation era. While we are making progress in DEI efforts, a critical lens shows us a long history of assimilationist policies that are still the status quo. Institutions of higher learning have to change the relationship they have with Indigenous communities to achieve true diversity; otherwise, the "old" goal of assimilation is still the current and ongoing intended outcome. This requires a look into the ways education systems maintain and perpetuate the racism, discrimination, and prejudice that impacts sense of belonging. For example, student engagement and retention initiatives overflow with ideas drawn from research on how to shift the student, rather than critically examining how to shift the institution to create systemic healing (Tinto, 2006). Even Tinto's (2006) model of student academic success and institutional change is not without critique, as it often assumes the desired outcome is integration or assimilation rather than cultural integrity. What it does do for us, is open up discourse on whether a particular academic environment is worthy of adoption as a community (or extended interpersonal relationship) without having to give up crucial aspects of self.

The Problem of Academic Success

The idea of student academic success seems to be ambiguous and a matter of perspective. However, extensive literature reviews and metaanalyses often target "academic achievement; engagement; satisfaction; acquisition of knowledge, skills, and

competencies; persistence and retention; attainment of learning objectives; career success; perception of learning environment; and academic self-concept" as important factors for success (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015, p. 4; Kuh et al., 2020; Kuh et al., 2006). I have referred often throughout this dissertation to the impact of relationships. I want to make time to zoom in on institutional relationships and institutional acceptance, or a feeling of being accepted and understood by authority figures that actively seek to engage and retain students while guiding them toward success (Ribera, Miller, & Dumford, 2017). Consider the following question...How does a university's *institutional habitus*, the ways that major characters in education systems collectively perceive and act on their students, influence academic success among marginalized groups (Thomas, 2002; Celik, 2021; Smyth & Banks, 2012; Byrd, 2019)? Dozens of research articles have examined individual factors like personality, intelligence, openness to new experience, grade point average, commitment, critical thinking, even library usage in the search for academic success (Farsides & Woodfield, 2003; Abedi, 1991; Sheard & Golby, 2007; Glick-Cuenot, 2014; Wells, 1995). Far fewer studies look at institutional or organizational change as a critical factor.

Institutional change requires an interrogation of the values that underlie engagement and retention efforts, as student engagement and retention models dictate the movement, the motion, the ebb, and the flow of our academic stories by either generating structural barriers or helping students resolve them. Returning to Tinto (1993; 2010), a Theory of Departure (as most universities focus their energies on drop-out interventions for Native students) is not sufficient for explaining why students who are perceived as having enough support (e.g., advisement, financial aid, mentoring) still lack what they

need to keep them enrolled and thriving in universities. Tinto (2015) would argue this point in his later works and adapt a model of student motivation and persistence to include sense of belonging.

Trowler (2010) describes his analyses of student engagement literature as a "mixed bag" of research often with a reductionist approach (p. 5). Across his sample of ten studies on engagement, individualistic constructs of student learning were overwhelmingly represented, while identity (i.e., belonging, representation, engagement of marginalized groups) was a far second. Only one study looked explicitly at structure and process (i.e., student representation on committees and as delegates, or tokenistic consultation). According to Trowler (2010), "there was very little focus in the student engagement literature on student engagement with institutional governance, and what there was tended to be found in grey rather than peer-reviewed literature" (p. 20). Trowler found that students who were supplied with opportunities to engage in institutional decision-making were given only shallow roles such as deciding what color to paint a common room or what art to choose for shared spaces. Further, Kuh (2004) cites national survey data that shows that Native American students actually are more engaged than their white peers, but their efforts at being engaged do not always translate to academic success. Why? Is their ability to engage with education really the problem?

In an attempt to apply Tinto's Theory of Departure to Native college students, Lee, Donlan, and Brown (2010) found that the model required elaboration to explain how the intersection of family and financial difficulties impacted attrition rates. They suggested that universities could attenuate attrition rates for Native students by improving relationships with families of origin and by becoming more sensitive to the role of family

obligations. They also suggested increasing grant and scholarship availability, and working to understand the overlap between financial hardship and family obligations as Native students don't leave those obligations behind when they enter university. Furthermore, studies show that "the most essential factors for college retention were campus social support, social events, and tribal support" (Windchief & Joseph, 2015, p. 270). The latter suggests that academic bridges must also be built with communities of origin in the form of nation-to-nation relationships as tribes are indeed sovereign nations with their own rules and governing bodies for allocating educational resources. Not only is there a need to repair relationship with students, but universities must consider that the history of poor relationship-building is salient for students' kinship networks and tribes. According to Manyanga, Sithole, and Hanson (2017) a key issue with current models of retention is the failure to accurately define and involve stakeholders. Federal, state, and private entities still hold the keys to the kingdom.

Tinto's Student Attrition Model (1975), and the later Student Integration Model (1993), suggest that a "good fit" must be made between student and institution but lack thorough consideration of external factors that contribute to withdrawal and drop-out. Other models, like the Social and Personal Beliefs Model (Fishbein & Ajzein, 1975) and Boshier's (1973) Congruence Model began to consider student perspectives on institutional support as well as external factors but were still rooted in an individualistic, capitalistic framework of individual student characteristics— essentially focused on retaining tuition dollars. Bean (1980; 1985), Pascarella (1980), and later Tinto (1993), would move the measuring stick of success to focus primarily on attrition rates but still prioritized fit, student intention to leave or complete degrees, student ability to form

positive interpersonal relationships, and *integration*. According to Astin's (1985) Theory of Involvement (an input-output model) it's up to the student to put forth the effort to fit in. You get out of education what you put into your educational experiences. This assumes we all have a sufficient amount of resources and social capital to do so.

Into the 2000s, research on engagement and retention began to look further at recruitment, admission strategies, orientation and first-year experience (Manyanga et al., 2017). But newer persistence models, which voice the importance of relatedness, still define self-determination almost synonymously with individual motivation (Kinsey, 2021). Across these models, institutional factors are alluded to and perhaps even named, but the focus is still on shifting the student. They are never about holding accountability for the institution (Patel, 2015).

Assimilationist and Inequitable Practices in Education

Education, as a microcosm of a larger society, has come to value the old idiom of the melting pot while undermining the relevance of how we as Indigenous peoples come to know and make meaning of the world around and in us. According to Grande (2015), "Indian education was never simply about the desire to 'civilize' or even deculturalize a people, but rather, from its very inception, it was a project designed to colonize Indian minds as a means of gaining access to Indian labor, land, and resources" (p. 19). We know this, and enter into systems of education with this knowledge in varying degrees. Often, this knowledge grows as we obtain more insight into our histories through our education and the implications are acutely felt. We take note of "codes of power", both spoken and unspoken (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). We identify the collectors (people who tokenize), nightlights (people who understand our challenges), and allies among our

potential mentors (Martinez-Cola, 2020b). But without any real educational sovereignty or voice, we are fenced in by hegemonic displays of academic bureaucracy. We know we must engage in "acting white" for our voices to be taken seriously (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). We change the tone of our voice, our ethnic inflection, our use of slang or culturally-oriented language to sound "educated" in admissions and scholarship offices. We are given unnecessary labor (also known as the run-around) when we fill out forms to meet institutional requirements. We take on excessive or unnecessary labor, work our white peers don't have to shoulder, to prove our worth and work ethic. We squeeze ourselves into the cracks and corners of classrooms, because if we are called upon our knowledge, positions, and arguments will likely be viewed as inferior. We accept dorms where the washer and dryer don't work, the heat is always on the fritz, and the showers stay clogged because that is what we are offered. We take on rent we can't afford just so we can live off campus in a clean, safe house for once in our lives. We work two jobs because our tribal scholarships fall through as the scholarship office won't accept our documentation or our program requirements exceed what is allowed by the tribe.

As Native students, we often find that authority figures in universities do not *think* like us, nor do they understand *us* on deep cultural levels. There is a serious lack of understanding about unique factors within our home lives and our communities that may contribute to academic success or failure. University power-brokers and gatekeepers don't understand why we would need a week off to attend ceremony after the death of a loved one, or the reasons why we saw so many funerals during the Covid-19 pandemic. They can't comprehend why we don't complete assignments on a reservation with limited WiFi access, or why we must sit outside council houses or fast food restaurants to

glean a sliver of bandwidth. They don't know how to navigate the tricky and complex tribal scholarship process. They lack the knowledge needed for understanding how it impacts us when courses don't transfer, or why we don't have the pre-requisites needed to jump into this new world of a four-year PWI.

Taira (2018) argues that, as a form of resistance, Indigenous students have developed academic identities built on the selective adoption of Western educational practices. My concern is that this selective process will begin to overcome the core of who we are until we no longer know where we begin and colonization ends. The fact is that authority figures in higher education operate in systems that were historically designed to discourage (and even eradicate) our ways of knowing and being in the world. Instead, promoting individualistic Western epistemologies and ontologies that disregard key relational elements of our teachings such as respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) as well as the reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy found in our stories (Archibald, 2008) in favor of competition and survival of the fittest. I am reminded of Lomawaima and McCarty's (2006) view that education has always been used to standardize the student- "Often masquerading as a tool for equal educational opportunity, standardization has segregated and marginalized Native peoples and others as it has circumscribed a narrow zone of tolerable cultural difference" (p. 43).

For many Indigenous students, attending university is a way to give back for the betterment and healing of our communities when we finish our degrees (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010; Fong et al., 2019). But at risk of losing self, is it worth the cost? When we do find our way back home, people tell us we have changed. Home doesn't feel like

home anymore. We become people that do not belong anywhere: too Native to exist in higher education, and too white to be recognizable to our people. Preserving our sense of self, our identities and our well-being, is crucial to fulfilling our purpose of bringing back the fire needed to rekindle our communities. If we lose ourselves on our way back home, the fire will dwindle.

At this point in the dissertation, and from an "empirical" standpoint, I understand that proof of the existence of assimilative processes in modern education is anecdotal at best. But I cannot begin to capture how often I have heard the types of stories I have just told you, *gvlvquodi digoliyesgi*. I hypothesize that this will change as we begin the second weaving of this basket. I am also called to remind you that this study is in part an Indigenous autoethnography, and carrying these stories is my truth.

As I draw closer to my methods for answering questions of belonging, I notice that my voice (which started strong) seems diminished, as if it were drowned in Jistu's widened river by the very act of substantiating why sense of belonging is so important for Native American students. I feel my identity pushed and shoved by the tide of citations. I wonder if our experiences, if my experience, is enough proof for why higher education has to change. I notice am tired. Tired of explaining. Tired of asking for people to listen. Are you still listening, *gvlvquodi digoliyesgi?* [...another deep breath]. Which means this is a good place to stop and join the weaving of my story with the voices of others; to bend the spokes over and into the final weaving of wisdoms to be shared by my co-participants in this journey. Together, our voices strengthen the weaving (See Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Considerations for weaving the basket
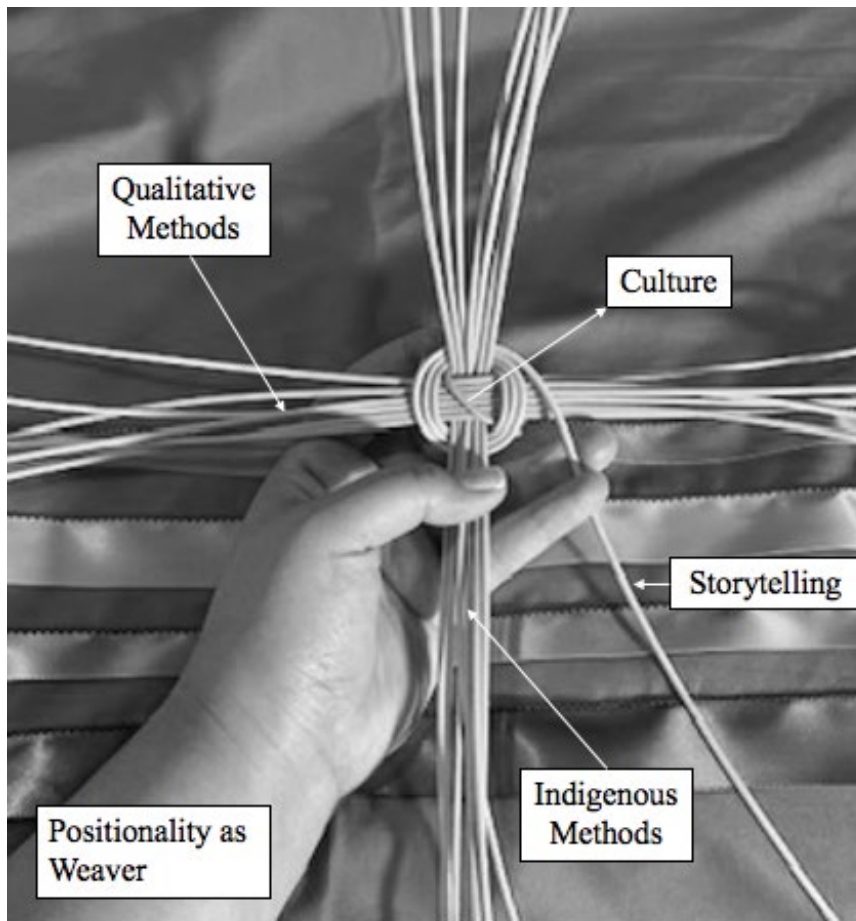
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Dear Reader, during my last months in Utah I had begun to encounter a feeling of helplessness to the transitions that lay before me as I journeyed toward my clinical internship and final year as a doctoral student. This usually manifested as writer's block, and as if that wasn't enough, quickly grew into the more insidious reader's block. It seemed I was waiting for something. Or rather, the universe was telling me to wait. I was in a space of transition that mapped on quite well to the idea of moving from one weaving of a basket to the next and I was very aware of the prophetic irony.

Toward the end of my data collection phase I moved back to Oklahoma life. This was good but also complexly strange and difficult. Clearly, Oklahoma was as good a place as any to transition to. Oklahoma was home. Also, there was no rent in Oklahoma and I was on a budget. But home came with a sense of struggle. Home was heavy. The town looked different on my arrival, but the struggles honestly hadn't changed much there. It was still incredibly poverty-stricken and full of traumas. Some people I knew were gone. Elders had journeyed to the next world. Younger generations looked at me like they would look at a stranger. I looked and felt different too (with a new proliferation of gray hair, aches, and pains), but my same set of struggles had followed me to Oklahoma as surely as if I had packed them in a box labeled "emotional baggage". I was hoping I had left them behind. Oklahoma, therefore, felt like a confluence of struggles.

On day one of re-acclimating to my Oklahoma life I noticed I felt restless. There was a burning need to fix and "do" and there was a lot to do. It came as no surprise that I had forgotten how to "be". After all, graduate school had taught me that I was really good

at not "being" for the sake of doing. I set up my workspace in my old house located on what is now formally recognized, but perhaps always was, the Cherokee Nation reservation. As I wrote, I glanced often at the hole that had formed in my living room ceiling while I was away. I worried endlessly whether it would widen and collapse sending a cloud of who-knows-what into my writing space. I was acutely aware of the drip drip drip of torrential rain during tornado season. The rains felt like they might wash me away. But the rains also brought life. Wild strawberries grew in the yard, sweet and tart no matter how small they might be. Granny Mays' rosebush, which had been hacked back to nothingness to keep it from destroying the already time-worn fence, had come back with vigor. It flourished under the same drip drip that also threatened to reclaim my tiny house and my sanity. Every drip sounded like the ticking of a great clock that boomed thunderously on the hour that I was not doing enough writing. And then, something shifted.

Maybe it was the sweet taste of the wild strawberries or the perfumed fragrance of those roses. The colonized parts of me considered that idealism at its finest. The Indigenous parts of me recognized it as connection to my relations. I started to listen to the birds and the little tree frog that lived in the yard. They seemed to be encouraging me. Words began to flow like the torrents of rain that converged in my muddied yard. I imagined my words were a river, and decided to go to water as is the Cherokee custom when one needs guidance and healing. Slowly but surely, the drip drip drip of rain resynchronized me to my task.

Home: Centering My Aims and Objectives for the Study

As a Cherokee doctoral student, I work to improve academic and mental health conditions for Native American students, often by considering sense of belonging. Much of this work involves improving cultural competence (Tehee et al., 2020a; Alizadeh & Chavan, 2016; Sue, 2001) at my Predominantly White Institution (PWI). This study on belonging, *gvlvquodi digoliyesgi*, is rooted in what I have learned through co-developing and delivering cultural competence courses for faculty, staff, and graduate students at a PWI. It consists of qualitative research that weaves together an Indigenous autoethnography and semi-structured narrative inquiry methods in a way that is consistent with Indigenous storywork. My framework comes from the Cherokee double-walled basket: two weavings, that as a whole, provide a stable structure for carrying wisdom. Denzin (2014) wrote, "autoethnographic work must always be interventionist, seeking to give notice to those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or who are denied a voice to speak" (p.22), and I purposefully chose to ground the study in Indigenous Ways of Knowing (IWK) and storywork to elevate student voices and to better inform future directions for Native student support at universities. As an Indigenous scholar, I know that we are making progress in many areas of Native student support. I also know we can do better. I want to know where we're missing the mark as educators, staff, and administrators. To do this, I need to tackle a construct that is less defined in higher education- Indigenous sense of belonging.

At the heart of this study lies the question, "In what academic spaces do Native American university students feel a sense of belonging?" This includes culturally-contested spaces and places: campuses broadly, as well as classrooms, labs, dormitories, and residential life, common spaces, curriculum, and syllabi. Alternatively, where do they

experience a sense of belonging the least? How does this impact mental health and well-being? It is simply not enough to ask faculty, staff, and administrators where they think academia is doing well at creating a sense of belonging. To most effectively answer this overarching question, it is important to conceptualize the problem from the viewpoint of the Native American student using IKS and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit); and to interpret student responses through a relational accountability and social justice lens. But first, we must understand how Native students understand belonging.

Theoretical Foundations

In writing this treatise on Native belonging, I've come to realize there needs to be some form of research paradigm that can journey into the in-between spaces that exist at the intersection of Indigeneity and Western education. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) acknowledges that more and more Indigenous researchers find themselves in this juncture where they have "struggled individually to engage with the disconnections that are apparent between the demands of research, on one side, and the realities they encounter amongst their own and other indigenous communities, with whom they share lifelong relationships, on the other side" (p. 5).

It is often difficult for the Indigenous researcher to know if the ways in which we are wading into the pool of knowledge production is completely reflective of Indigenous Ways of Knowing (IWK) or still drenched in Western colonial ways that permeate our modern understanding of what it means to obtain and disperse knowledge. In a Western sense, I situate this study as a dual weaving of autoethnography and narrative inquiry. Neither of these are rooted in IWK. And yet, I also explicitly situate this work as being derived from and honoring IWK. Can these things truly co-exist? I received a stark

reminder of this while attending a talk by a renowned Indigenous researcher who specializes in IWK and community-based participatory research. She asserted that if what I was doing was autoethnography or narrative inquiry, then I wasn't doing IWK. That shook me to my core. It felt like a direct attack on my sense of belonging. I sat with it for a while and consulted a Native Elder with experience in psychological research. She asked me why I couldn't do a new thing. Did my methods have to be purely situated as IWK or as Western research? Who said there had to be this dichotomy and either-or standard? "Who said...".

What she said rang true. I want to be clear that the heart of my methodology is IWK because my own heart, which draws deeply from my culture, is in this work. Conversely, autoethnography and narrative inquiry are necessary research paradigms because that is what academia understands and accepts. Like our students, Indigenous researchers also walk in two worlds; a place that can be devoid of belonging (Brown, 2010). Is it fair? Probably not. But when we are working with populations that fall through the cracks, we require a research methodology that can penetrate those cracks— and that means finding a precarious and difficult balance for ourselves. With the different research paradigms I propose, there are parallels but make no mistake they are not the same thing. It's all about finding balance.

After a great period of prayer, reflection, and consultation, I am reassured that finding the parallels, the connection, is a requirement of this particular study. As such, I am deeply humbled, respectful, and careful in asserting what this research is and isn't. As Tuhawai Smith (2012) says, "Indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity" (p. 5). And, in being shaken to my core, there was a deep humbling that occurred for me.

The experience taught me that as Indigenous researchers we can still hurt one another even when we have the same vision for our peoples. It taught me that I am not immune to this hurt and at the center of that pain is both internalized oppression and a deep need to protect the knowledge that has been taken from us. One thing remains the same throughout this teaching, at its core this *is* Indigenous research and we, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, can and should find a meeting place in the great in-between. Why? Because I need to go where my students are...and they are currently falling in-between and through the cracks of academia.

What we are really talking about are power relations and intersectional research (Christensen & Jensen, 2012. This is research that is meant to be corrective; a reclamation that is strictly for and by Indigenous peoples, but that must be able to speak to Western academics who make the policy and decisions given the current state of Indigenous underrepresentation in the academy. Power relationships have always been embedded within academia and the social sciences, essentially asserting whose knowledge is valid and whose is not. The result is that non-Eurocentric epistemologies have been deemed inferior and undermined to the point of virtually disappearing (Cox et al., 2021). Indigenous scholars have worked tirelessly to reassert traditional knowledge to counter the harms perpetuated on our communities through the erasure of our thought, values, and practices. That work must be acknowledged and honored. Finding a research paradigm that transverses the in-between, that permeates the cracks, should not perpetuate this ongoing erasure or undermine the work that has taken place to (re)vitalize a pure, traditional IWK paradigm. An in-between paradigm must be a paradigm of responsibility (Foley, 2006, 2003) and one that allows us to do the work that is needed

without treading over or obscuring the footsteps of those who carved the path before us in Indigenous research.

In conducting research to benefit Native American communities, Hart (2010) proposes that we no longer "[leave] our Indigeneity at the door" of academics or confine expression of our worldviews (p. 1). Rather Indigenous knowledge is crucial for understanding Indigenous worldviews. Hart (2010) defines worldviews as "cognitive, perceptual, and affective maps" used to "make sense of the social landscape" (p. 2). An IKS epistemology is vital for understanding Indigenous derived ways of viewing the types of, and quality of, relationships (with institutions, people, spaces, ideas, etc.) needed for attaining goals like increasing belonging (Kovach, 2010). IKS tends to center on holism, and as such, is dependent on connection. Knowledge is shared by many means, including oral traditions, narrative, and storytelling, but all methods rely upon experience, respect, and communal connectivity (Hart, 2010). Commonalities exist among Indigenous worldviews that help explain relationships conducive to and driven by goals, particularly as it relates to survival in education. However, it is important to note that experiences of survival can be varied due to heterogeneity of tribal cultures, community of origin, and family history; another reason why we must go straight to the source of lived experiences in students' own voices while mindful of relational accountability and the equity sought through social justice movements.

As theoretical lenses, relational accountability and social justice share common goals of achieving equitable and quality education for all students (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). For Native students, this serves as a response to the need for healing historical mistrust of the education system and shifting the way education systems view Native

students to honor IKS and increase Native students perceived worth and human capital-including their own perceptions of self-worth- and to expand imagined future possibilities (Prince, 2014; Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). Wilson (2008) demonstrates this social justice approach by shifting what is viewed as knowledge *beyond inclusion*, to a re-centering of IKS as a primary point of reference based in relationships. Wilson (2008) states, "relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality", suggesting that Indigenous researchers hold themselves accountable to the relationships that constitute respectful research (p. 7). I notice I use the word relationship often throughout this study because it's so important. Parent (2020) finds relationship is a key component of "bending the box" or finding balance in the use of Indigenous theory and methodologies that employ metaphors like the one I use when I speak about academic Tricksters.

In summary, an in-between paradigm widens the path, and is not a trade-off that lacks authenticity. It can be something in its own right, but there are paradigms already in place to help with this. As Foley (2003) asserts, "to the Indigenous scholar, Critical Theory, Standpoint Theory, and Insider Outsider Theory are emancipatory and liberatory epistemologies in their deconstruction process" (p. 45). I want you to know that I will draw most heavily from Tribal Critical Race Theory throughout my conceptualization of the stories in this study because it encompasses the vast interplay of the historical, political, economic, and social. But it is improbable, perhaps impossible, for me to consider how my positionality informs or even biases the work without also considering Standpoint Theory and the ways I walk as both insider and outsider.

Tribal Critical Race Theory

Critical Race driven theories have been highly contested paradigms as of late due to the ways in which they illuminate the failures and blatant perpetuation of oppression present in modern systems (CRT; Delgado and Stefanic, 2017), including that of the education system. CRT has been used to evidence that systems of education draw heavily from socially constructed views of race and racism present in the social sciences as a mechanism for perpetuating oppression (Ladson-Billings, 2013). CRT has at its core the understanding that racism has become a normal (or normalized) aspect of modern society (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001), and that any uprooting of this normalized standard can only occur through deconstruction of systems via critically-lensed counter narratives that verbalize and name the problems present in said systems. A CRT view of education also highlights the intersection between race and property. By extension, Goeman (2008) notes, "colonial spatializing of our land, bodies, and *minds* has occurred since contact" as a way of "separating land from people" (p. 296). I situate this to include ownership of knowledge and intellectual space, essentially who has the right to engage in knowledge production, who consumes or is allowed to consume knowledge, and the ways in which knowledge production is deemed acceptable in white spaces (Patel, 2015).

There can be little doubt that educational policies and laws are entrenched in Western values and cultural values (or axiologies) that exclude minoritized groups from engagement, much less achievement and success (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Knowledge is neither by us or for us unless we assimilate to the norms of white-privileging, Western thought in order to become consumers and producers of academic knowledge. Native students have a long and difficult history with education due to assimilation and disenfranchisement from IKS through colonization and ongoing

expressions of coloniality. Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) proposes that structures of higher education are rooted in this colonial framework that re-enacts or perpetuates hierarchal power structures associated with colonization. Brayboy (2005) outlines TribalCrit as central to grasping the complex history and unique positionality of the Native American student in higher education. Brayboy (2005) also proposes that an understanding of Native American sovereignty and legal/political relationships with the U.S. government is essential for conceptualizing issues relevant to Native peoples situated within the context of education. At this point in history, systems of education can hardly be called resistant to larger scale systemic, institutional change for Native students because they have not yet acknowledged the gross historical failures and resulting problems that undermine true equity and inclusion. In truth, we simply aren't there yet—to a place of true resistance— because higher education refuses to admit to its role in the oppression of Indigenous peoples. That is a serious problem that *demands* illumination of how we came to be where we are as Indigenous students that go unsupported, under-supported, or completely excluded and driven out of education systems through the marginalization of Indigenous thought.

As a paradigm that stands on its own two feet, Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit; Brayboy, 2005) is a necessary lens with which to understand the problem of the great in-between, or this falling through the cracks in academia. TribalCrit reminds us that our theories can be and have always been found in our stories, and this is a major reason why I draw from stories to make my assertions in this text. TribalCrit tells us that we can't ignore the historical, the political, the economic, and the social if we are to understand the underpinnings of inequity for Indigenous students in the education system.

Much like racism is a normalized facet of society, so too is colonialism, colonial attitudes, and capitalist practices (Brayboy, 2005). Colonialism is inherently rooted in imperialism, conquest, and eradication of "inferior" peoples for material gain. This is perpetuated by white supremacist ideologies present in education and society as a whole. As I have previously asserted, assimilation is present in the student support models and academic success structures widely used by academia today and this requires "unmasking, exposing, and confronting continued colonization within educational contexts and societal structures" (Writer, 2008, p. 2). An interrogation of these structures is needed to reclaim the sovereignty and self-determination of our students' in deciding their own futures.

Indigenous Standpoint Theory

Like Brayboy (2013), my experiences and observations (my own standpoint, if you will) seem as a good a place to start as any in this interrogation. From there I can see where the experiences of other Indigenous students converge, diverge, and intersect with my own. Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST), which draws from Black feminist and feminist thought as well as intersectionality research, recognizes "Indigenous participation and achievement within the academy", frees up space for Indigenous thought and deconstructs the "fences" around such thought, and is an approach that "can stimulate the Indigenous higher-degree research student to participate in the documentation of Indigenous knowledge within a framework of Indigenous acceptability that maintains academic rigor" (Foley, 2006, p. 26).

IST recognizes that when we work from a purely Western methodology, we work from a place of bias and historical oppression (Foley, 2003). IST requires the researcher

to be flexible as these truths hold a great deal of complexity as we navigate our own

cultural understanding (or standpoint) and the "space and place" we both historically and

currently occupy (Foley, 2003, p. 49). We must not forget there is overlap in historical

and contemporary understandings of how we came to be in such spaces and places in

education. One cannot be excluded for the sake of the other, but must be interrogated *for*

the sake of the other if we are to move toward a beneficial future. Foley (2003) insists

that both student practitioner and advisor/mentor of IST must be Indigenous, that the

practitioner must be well-versed in critical thought like Critical Race Theory and

TribalCrit, that the research must be designed for the benefit of Indigenous peoples, and

that traditional languages (if used) must be preserved in order to meet the standards of

IST. In addition, IST is explicitly designed to be inclusive of Indigenous Ways of

Knowing (Cox et al., 2021). IST inherently understands that Indigenous peoples may feel

"as though they exist daily in an in-between space flanked by Indigenous knowledge, on

the one hand, and Western knowledge claims, on the other" (Cox et al., 2021, p. 3).

Insider-Outsider Theory

I further suggest that Western academia is in the "business" of keeping

Indigenous knowledge in a liminal space straddling the boundaries of two worlds.

Liminality scholars refer to this state of being as "no longer-not yet" (Tilbury, Toussaint,

& Davis, 2005); in this case, no longer viewed as relevant, and not yet fully reclaimed or

re-centered. This diffuses our focus, taxes our mental and emotional resources as

Indigenous scholars, and helps maintain the status quo of Western knowledge as superior.

Education is indeed a business based on an economy of the production and consumption

of thought, and one where white, Western privileging occurs on a daily basis. Nowhere is this more evident than in what research is deemed acceptable.

Indigenous researchers must constantly examine the balance between their positionality as both Indigenous and scholar. For example, if we shift our weight too far toward acceptability as scholar, we become an insider to academia and an outsider to our communities. Insider-outsider Theory acknowledges that individuals who find themselves in the midst of fighting for movement towards institutional change may find themselves in a precarious position of in-betweenness (Pettinicchio, 2012). As an insider to academia, we may have access to resources, power, and the positionality needed to push for social change. As outsider to our communities, we lack the community recognition and credibility needed to use those resources. Inversely, as academic outsider (one who goes against the cultural norms of knowledge production) we are cut off from an academic lineage necessary to engage in that production with any credibility. And as insider to our community of origin, we are subject to the same harms we are trying to uproot but this time without any ability for resource mobilization (Pettinicchio, 2012).

You can see how difficult belonging becomes for the Indigenous researcher as we must stand firmly on both feet, giving this balancing act much of our energy and attention, lest we also fall through the cracks of academia like our students. But there are also intersections within this theory. As researcher we can become the outsider-within. Humphrey (2007) calls this activating the hyphen. Drawing from the experiences of marginalized Black women in the academy, Collins (1986) notes that these places of in-betweenness or the act of inhabiting the hyphenated space have "provided a special

standpoint on self, family, and society" (p. S14) and that this unique status can be beneficial although it may at times feel debilitating.

Parallels Between Methods and Methodology Used in This Study

To understand what it means to inhabit the hyphenated space we must first go back to the roots that sprouted this study. I want to begin by saying that I choose not to hyphenate the methodologies (i.e., autoethnography-storytelling) I attend to in order to honor that they are distinct, standalone methodologies. But as I move forward, I hope that you have an understanding that there is indeed a habitable space that lies between and that many of us are in it. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) notes we must often "choose the margins", a place of multiple struggles, if we are to truly engage in this type of social justice effort through our research (pp. 198-216).

Indigenous Ways of Knowing. At its foundation an Indigenous epistemology, or theory of knowledge, is about stories. Stories in the original oral, and now written, tradition are the way Indigenous knowledge is recorded and transmitted across time and space. Indigenous stories contain both spirituality and science via intuition and observation, ethical and moral philosophies founded in relationship, grounding regarding the interconnectedness of all things, guidance for generating holistic meaning from knowledge and experience, and identity-making via sense of space and place including information about our origins, roles, and responsibilities as Indigenous peoples (Grayshield, Mihecoby & Mihecoby, 2010; Madjidi & Restoule, 2008; Vine-Deloria, 1999). Contrast this with a Western epistemology that focuses on empiricism and the scientific method (thereby excluding spiritual and ancestral ways of knowing), ethical and moral responsibilities founded in conquest and capitalism, and individualist

worldviews that position humankind in roles of domination rather than connection and relatedness with the natural world.

I assert there is both power and healing embodied in the act of telling and receiving stories. So, to step back into ways of Indigenous knowing, it is crucial that I first recover my historical memory. This often means reliving the personal, historical, and intergenerational traumas that occur alongside our ancestral resiliencies- here through an Indigenous autoethnography or personal storytelling. Second, I must deconstruct the everyday, normalized ideologies embedded in the act of knowing; a difficult task as it means I must question the ways I've been taught to think about the very fabric of social reality for myself and other Indigenous peoples. Finally, I must "utilize the virtues of the people" (Martin-Baro, 1987), meaning I recognize that we as Indigenous people are incredibly capable storytellers at our core. Most importantly, I must recognize that Indigenous Ways of Knowing are not linear just as our stories are not linear (Fixico, 2003). Like our stories, they are cyclical, dynamic, and evolving. This might be a point of contention for some who view such paradigms as fixed Truths.

I assert that today IWK is a convergence of the ancestral stories that carry our traditions and teachings and our storied lived experiences. *We are living our stories even now as I write this.* The stories of the present are a continuity of the stories handed down through our ancestors. Just as there are lessons to be had from ancestral stories, we communicate modern wisdoms via the sharing of our lived experiences. At the heart of this study is a confluence of those two types of stories. They overlap, interweave, and inform one another. The question becomes how to share those interwoven wisdoms while maintaining the integrity of the stories, and how to interpret those stories in a way

congruent with IWK tenets of relationship and interconnectedness for an audience that may not have a theory of knowledge consistent with IWK teachings (See Figure 3).

Further, Simmonds and Christopher (2013) acknowledge the clash that occurs between Western science and Indigenous knowledge and the need for a decolonizing approach. They consider finding the balance between IWK and Western methodologies an act of reconciliation. In their own navigation between traditional teachings and narrative analysis, and toward a culturally acceptable methodology, they discovered that a symbolic anchor point rooted in traditional knowledge was needed (e.g., the metaphor of the Crow tipi). This was the relational foundation that generated trust between the Indigenous community and researchers, and provided a way to help the academic community visualize findings without "breaking apart peoples' stories" (Simmonds & Christopher, 2013, p. 2187). Breaking apart stories would result in loss of meaning and was viewed as disrespectful within their community-based participatory model. Similarly, Hart (2007) uses the symbolic imagery of the míkiwáhp, or lodge in Cree, for grounding in the transmission of Elders' knowledge.

In addition, we must not simply interpret Indigenous knowledge through a Western lens because we feel we have an appropriate metaphor with which to do so. There must be no artificial transplantation or "grafting" of meanings onto the original storied data and finding an acceptable methodology cannot be a process undertaken too quickly), as any "interface" of Indigenous thought and Western worldviews will be "uneven" and not likely to be viewed as "a mutual exercise, but as assimilation" (Ahenakew, 2016, p. 324).

Figure 3.

Inhabiting the space between: A intersectional research paradigm
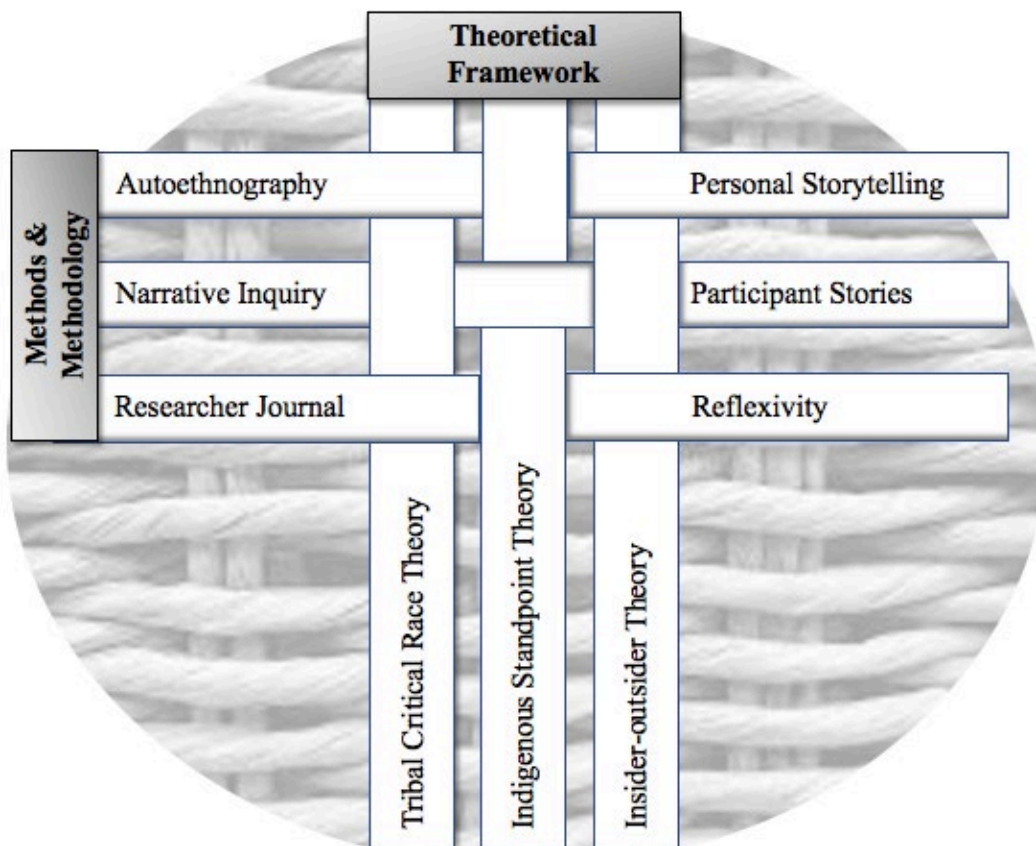
Autoethnography and Personal Storytelling. An important question that

emerges, as we look for an in-between methodology that centers IWK for a largely non-

Indigenous audience without assimilation, is whether or not Indigenous storytelling

includes the telling of our own personal stories. And while not an answer, the response

seems to be that Indigenous students' (while well-versed as members of storytelling

communities) *rarely ever tell their own stories*. Not because they aren't supposed to, but

because there are very real consequences for sharing less-than-flattering narratives

regarding their experiences in the education system. The fear of telling ones' story is

rooted in both a pervasive, historical mistrust of the education system and lived experiences with hardship and struggle, academic gatekeeping, and endless barriers to belonging and success. Therefore, telling our stories is an act of resistance (of "speaking truth to power") and courage (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. II). And in all honesty, we are used to other people telling our stories for us. Stories are necessary for our survival, but stories only told about us by others leave us with a myriad of false narratives. Not only about our capability for survival, but our worthiness for moving beyond survival and into thriving. Finally, with storytelling we are "compelled to listen", and I am a firm believer that we must also listen to our own stories through personal storytelling if we are to make meaning of our lives in any liberatory sense (Thomas, 2005).

Autoethnography may be an acceptable Western, qualitative approach to consider in achieving this goal but it too comes with a storied past. Autoethnography is derived from *ethnography*— essentially a method for telling other peoples' stories— but with an additional *autobiographical* component. It is considered a way of systematically merging the personal and the cultural (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Because it is culturally-bound, autoethnography is not value-free and is still subject to the same participant-observer biases found in traditional ethnography (Poerwandari, 2021). Both the auto and the ethnography component require an awareness of the context in which we observe, and ourselves as part of that context. Taken together, autoethnography recognizes that we shape both the observation of the stories and the stories themselves (Ellis et al., 2011). Rather than being a purely post-hoc reflection on any epiphanies that emerge in the narrative, autoethnography asserts that we must consider how culture and cultural identity work to shape the research process. According to Ellis et al. (2011), autoethnographers

"must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders" (p. 4). This may be done through the comparison and contrasting of cases, or the storied experiences of others.

The problem of autoethnography seems to stem from the facet of ethnography. Ethnography is historically rooted in the oppressive gaze of the colonizer upon the "other" (Kovach, 2017). A more critical approach to autoethnography provides a way to critique and interrogate these underlying tensions of power and hegemony (Poulos, 2021). In working through the process of decolonizing my own thought, I realize I find myself engaging in a colonized view of myself during the personal storytelling process. Essentially, if the personal narrative portion of this work is to be centered in IWK and become an Indigenous autoethnography then I must deconstruct the inward colonial gaze as well as refute and resist the outward one. Following this thread of thought, an Indigenous autoethnography (Whitnui, 2014) requires that I (re)construct the self-narrative through the lenses of my cultural identity and cultural connections, examine any disconnections, and provide an up-front explanation of my relationship to space and place with this awareness in mind. Bishop (2007) writes,

> Indigenous autoethnographies cannot and will not be defined or reduced to
> a checklist [as] they operate from a different axiology and ontology that
> does not seek to categorise, classify, or simplify; instead, Indigenous
> autoethnographies strive to increase complexity (p. 368).

I want to acknowledge that the internal colonizer in my storying often manifests as the idea that my story doesn't count (Whitnui, 2014). I choose to resist this and "walk

my talk" as I have sufficient knowledge and authority to tell my own story (Bishop, 2021; Houston, 2007). And Indigenous autoethnography constitutes my act of scholarly resistance (Houston, 2007).

Narrative Inquiry and Storywork. Narrative inquiry is positioned as a newer method for sharing lived experiences within the social sciences, but in truth Indigenous people have been doing it since time immemorial- just under different names. However, using the label of narrative inquiry seems to provide us a collective way for thinking and talking about stories. Narrative inquiry stands on principles of relational interaction and sociality, temporal continuity, and situational context thereby generating a three-dimensional view of lived experience (Clandinin, 2006). A narrative inquiry approach not only situates story as lived experience, it highlights the underplay of tensions and negotiations present in the telling and hearing of story- which are storied experiences in and of themselves. Another useful function of narrative inquiry is that it allows us to tell stories about real people in real settings (Wang & Geale, 2015). This is incredibly important as those false narrative about Indigenous people and Indigeneity situate us as historical, romanticized, or stereotyped figures within the larger story of relatedness. A view of us as uni-dimensional picture-book Indians only results in further dehumanizing and oppression.

One point of contention I have found within narrative inquiry is that the narrative interview process is often taken quite literally at the risk of forgetting that we are living alongside our participants during the interview (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Another point of contention is that conducting narrative inquiry as pure interview can create rigid environments, with overly structured and inflexible question-answer conversations

(Sandelowski, 2000). A more critical approach to narrative inquiry highlights assumptions that fence in the relational aspect of interviewing, such as mistaking our role as that of spectator, as these assumptions may serve to perpetuate the colonial gaze (Hickson, 2016). Drawing from arts-based, embodied theories of narrative inquiry (Bresler, 2006), narrative inquiry should embrace feelings of connection, of "mutual absorption" (Armstrong, 2000), and of bi-directional curiosity and lingering during the sharing of stories. It should break down and deconstruct the "I-thou" dichotomy present in much of Western-based research (Bresler, 2006).

Hence, Indigenous storywork is viewed as "an actual meeting place, in time and space" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2014, p. 16), and an educative process demonstrated through "wholism, interrelatedness, and synergy" (Archibald, 2008, p. 373). Tuhiwai Smith (2012) says an Indigenous approach should "problematize the insider model" with an understanding that the terms insider and outsider are complex for Indigenous researchers (p. 138). Finally, a decolonized and Indigenized approach to this work does not "totally dismiss Western methodological approaches; they encourage us as Indigenous researchers to connect research to our own worldviews and to theorize based on our own cultural notions in order to engage in more meaningful and useful research for our people" (Archibald, 2008, p. 6).

Method: Gathering Materials for the Basket

Qualitative research methods can be much more epistemologically congruent with Native American ways of being than quantitative research. Qualitative research, like IKS, values narrative, story, and experience. The research process becomes a way to build a community where researchers and participants impact one another in incredibly

meaningful ways. Additionally, qualitative work allows the researcher to recognize and acknowledge the impact of their presence in communities that have generally had research done *to* them rather than *with* them. Part of building accountability in the research relationship is consistency between theory and methodology.

Autoethnography as First Weaving

To begin this complex, layered account of belonging in academia, I use Indigenous autoethnographical methods to establish my positionality as the author/researcher and as a member of the Indigenous academic community where the study is conducted. In writing this dissertation, I am reminded constantly that I am both insider and outsider (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000), and yet I also walk in the space in-between. Exploring this phenomenon of "bothness" and, in some ways, "liminality" as tribal affiliations are both racial and political (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000) helps explain how the current research questions were developed and how the weaving of stories evolves over time. Bainbridge (2007) relates, "writing my personal narrative revealed a relationship between my biographical background and my interest in the research topic" (p. 9). The idea for this study came from my work with developing TEACH (**T**raining for **E**ducators **A**dvancing **C**ultural-competence in **H**igher education), a cultural competence course for faculty, staff, and graduate students working with Native American (NA) students on a PWI campus. Work on the TEACH course, and its many iterations, helped shine a light into academic spaces to accurately assess where and why students lack a sense of belonging.

Through this work, I realize that social justice, equity, and having a voice applies to me as well as my peers (a hard truth to own at times), and that my experiences are

valuable and useful sources of information. I have learned that being a member of my particular tribal affiliation affords me a great deal of educational privilege. This is something that brings balance and humility when working with non-Cherokee students. I also recognize that I have been fortunate to find a group of peers and colleagues that allow me to "become" fully myself as an Indigenous researcher, an opportunity not afforded to all Indigenous students. My positionality demands I use this "becoming" to help others.

Narrative inquiry as Second Weaving

I also use a narrative inquiry approach that draws heavily from storywork to engage my Native participants, and co-travelers in this discourse. Narrative research draws from lived experiences and peoples' stories (Glesne, 2016, p. 287; Richmond, 2002), and as methodological approaches are consistent with IKS situated traditions of storytelling. Oral traditions are important mechanisms for the sharing and transmission of culture-specific knowledge, particularly knowledge related to relationships. Glesne (2016) adds that narrative researchers typically draw from methods similar to that used by ethnographers and may use participant feedback to add context and enhance interpretation (p. 287). In terms of data, Native participants were asked to share their experiences of belonging within academic spaces through a series of flexible, semi-structured interview questions to help inform current understanding of the construct of sense of belonging through Indigenous perspectives. Participants were also asked to provide feedback on the accuracy of their narrative interpretation as part of a continual reflexivity process. Interview questions can be found in Appendix A. (See Figure 4).

Researcher Journal and Reflexivity

Autoethnography "not only has the potential to accommodate inner group diversity amongst Indigenous researchers but also to establish an Indigenous standpoint in the research project" (Bainbridge, 2007, p.6). Following the work of McIvor (2010), personal stories and journal entries recorded throughout the research process are used to

Figure 4.

Joining my voice with the narratives of other participants for the second weaving.
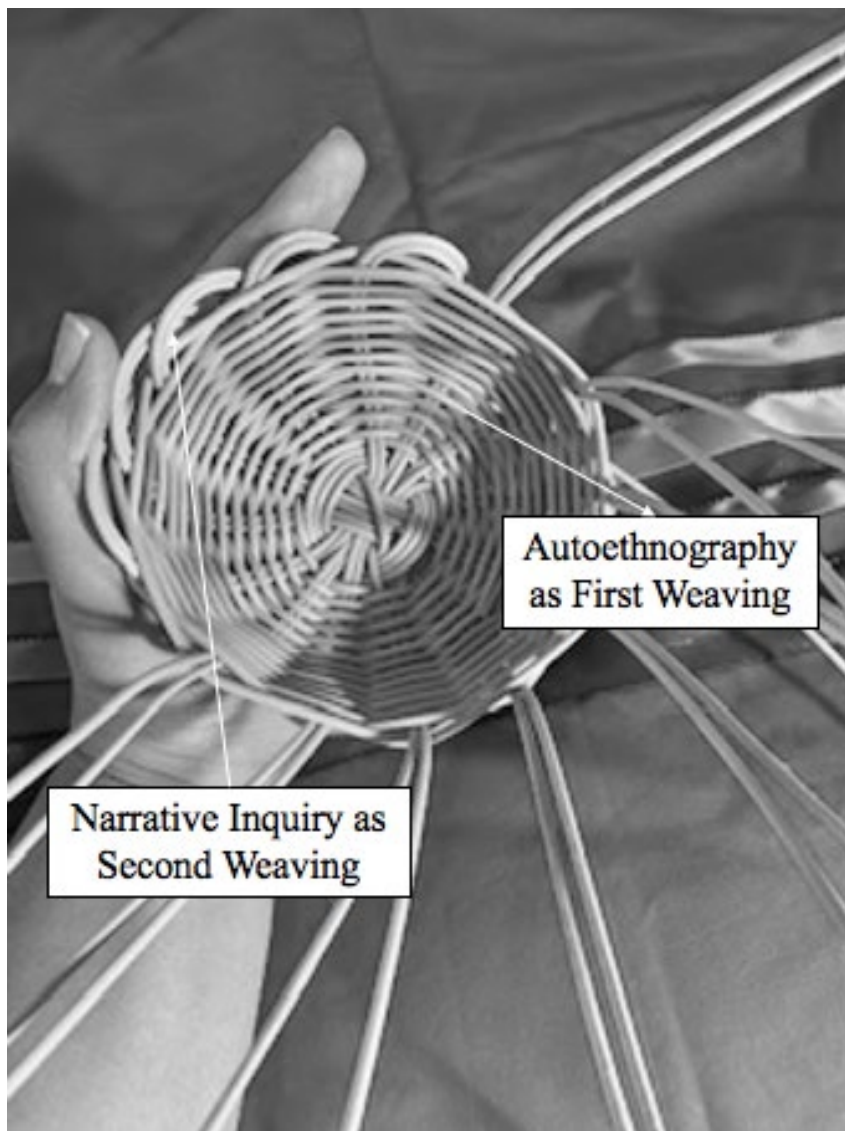
offer insight into my own personal growth as the author, and explore any reactions to emerging themes. In a sense, I anticipated my experience with the study would create a re-storying of my original experience at the conclusion of analysis. Critical analysis of this re-storying allows for deep reflexivity and uncovering any biases or preconceived notions that could impact accuracy. Re-storying is also an incredible tool for healing as we begin to recognize ourselves as the authors of our stories and externalize the problem of colonization (Parry & Doan, 1994).

Relationships, building rapport, and maintaining trust were key considerations in my journaling (Glesne, 2016, p.136-140). As a Cherokee woman interacting with primarily Navajo, Ute, and Shoshone students on the Utah State campuses, I navigate complex issues surrounding identity in being both an outsider (e.g., graduate student, different tribal affiliation) and insider (e.g.,. Native student, campus community member). Reflecting about the use of autoethnography and narrative inquiry grounded in IKS served as a strong approach for understanding any resulting tensions between the emic and etic positionality faced by Indigenous researchers working outside of their home community or tribe (Blix, 2015).

Participants

Participants for the study were recruited from a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and its state-wide campuses across Utah. One statewide campus, in particular, is located in Blanding, Utah, near the Diné (Navajo) reservation. Many of my participants identified as Navajo or members of tribes displaced from Indigenous lands in Utah. Inclusion criteria for students were 1) self-identification as Native American/American

Indian or a member of an Indigenous North American tribe and 2) undergraduate enrollment status at Utah State University. Self-identification was purposeful, as many forms of tribal identification such as Certificate Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) are fraught with colonial practices of exclusion or marginalization. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and word-of-mouth via Native-serving campus organizations and listservs.

The initial goal was to recruit ten students. This was amended as the storying involved in this study is simply too rich for that great a number. We ended up with four students, one Indigenous psychologist that works with Native students on issues like belonging and well-being, and one Indigenous Elder who has spent decades mentoring Native students to increase sense of belonging and well-being. The latter two participants were added to help generate that layered complexity and temporal continuity regarding how Indigenous students and scholars understand belonging in academia. As the study is partially autoethnographic, I serve as the seventh participant. Participants (excluding myself) were given an honorarium in the amount of a $50 gift card for the initial interview. An additional $25 gift card was offered to participants willing to check the accuracy of my interpretations of their respective interviews. Among Indigenous communities, honorariums are considered IKS- consistent ways to show that you value a person's time and contribution.

Procedure

Institutional approval was sought and obtained through the Utah State University Institutional Review Board prior to data collection (USU-IRB #12085). Data gathering consisted of a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) with each participant.

Interviews were held over Zoom technology and took approximately 60-90 minutes.

Zoom was used to help protect the wellness of participants as the study took place during

the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants were asked to confirm tribal affiliation (yes or no

answers) and/or USU enrollment status if applicable using a Qualtrics survey before

engaging in pre-determined open-ended conversation. This is also the stage where they

were given thorough informed consent and information about potential risks and benefits.

After completion of the interview, participants were instructed on how to obtain their

honorarium and thanked for their time. Prior to and after interviews, I wrote reflections

on any personal responses and reactions I had to interviews, and the act of gathering

stories, as part of the researcher journal. All participants were given the option of using

their real name or a pseudonym as an extra layer of identity protection. Specific names

and identifying characteristics within their stories were also carefully masked to prevent

any harms resulting from telling stories about difficult relationships or events.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and stored in a secure Dropbox folder. Line by line

coding was then conducted using inductive, interpretive analysis (Denzin, 2014). Denzin

(2014) wrote that interpretive analysis should "produce an interruption, a performance

text that challenges conventional taken-for-granted assumptions about the racialized past"

(p.81). Thus, I considered not only themes that informed belonging, space and place, and

well-being, but also themes that disrupted narratives about Native identity that maintain

oppression and "othering" in academia. As I have previously stated, it is important to

maintain the integrity of stories. Findings from the stories are not initially presented as

groupings of themes or codes. Rather, larger sections of text are interspersed with my

personal reflections for each participant. An additional section discusses commonalities and divergences amongst stories to "weave" them together. I also weave in any re-storying I experienced through the process of gathering participants' wisdoms.

To begin, as each student's story will be presented individually, it is important that you take time to listen to their individual voices. Don't attempt to read through them all at once. Sit with each one and hear the cadence and rhythm in what they have to say. This is their portion of the weaving, over and under, over and under. Following their stories, I present together the stories of the early-career Native American psychologist and the Native Elder psychologist with years of experience mentoring students. Both have experienced belonging and non-belonging as students themselves. This is the portion of the weaving that twines everything together, that secures the threads of our existence into place. Then you will be ready to hear our collective voice.

As you read, think about how we are experiencing similar or dissimilar themes in belonging across time, space, and place. Consider, that if we are to re-imagine our own futures as Indigenous people, we must think about seven generations past and seven generations into the future. There are at least seven generations represented across these stories– our ancestors, the Elder, grandmothers and grandfathers; mentors, faculty, parents; the early-career psychologist and the students who came before us to pave the way; my generation as a non-traditional student; the students highlighted in this work, their friends and peers; the students' siblings, and younger peers just coming into education; and our current and future children and grandchildren, or the students to come. Finally, I will present our stories together as themes that emerged across our experiences to share the wisdoms in our basket and define belonging.

The Basket Weaver: Ontology, Human (Be)ing, and Human (Be)coming

Thus far, I have written at length on the necessity of an Indigenous epistemology, but we cannot truly center IWK without also talking about "being" or ontology. There is no doubt that the act of weaving is about both being and becoming. A weaver makes mistakes, grows in awareness, and gains knowledge through the act of becoming a more proficient weaver (Parent, 2020). My participants are also engaged in being and becoming through the telling and consideration of their own stories. So, what does it mean to both be and become? Indigenous being and becoming carry assumptions about the capability for change and growth through the collectivity and interdependence inherent in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Henry & Pene, 2001). It is also a process of remembering our humanity, how to *be* human, after centuries of dehumanization. Sometimes this occurs through sharing and helping, thus the basket weaver helps the basket *be* and *become* just as the basket helps the weaver be and become (Driskill, 2015; Hart, 2010).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

"The stage was now set, the sacred mountains in place, and all was in readiness for Changing Woman to appear" (Mecham, 1969, p. 7).

Positioning Ourselves as Human (Be)ing

As I prepared to collect the materials for this co-envisioned weaving (the "data" in this larger story), I noticed I began to problematize myself as researcher. I questioned the virtual nature of space and place during our mutual learning- a difficulty I'm guessing many researchers have experienced during the pandemic. Most importantly, I questioned my way of *being* with students. Their way of being was enough. Was mine?

"In Fugitive Poses, Vizenor (1998) describes the trickster story as "liberative". The end goal of situating this research study as an example of an academic trickster story is to turn the "trick" (or deception) back in the favor of our protagonists— meaning positive outcomes for Native students through mutual learning. This is an act of resistance and survivance, and the chance to turn the narrative from an "aesthetic victimry" (or commentary on absence) toward a narrative of "active presence". It is presence, not absence, that follows the "natural reason" of Indigenous knowledge systems. Presence affirms Native identity. Absence maintains trauma and victimry. Vizenor (1998) cautions us on setting up space for Indigenous presence based on the "deceptive virtues of cultural immersion" (p. 23). I struggled with this for a bit. Psychological literature shows that enculturative practices are protective factors. So, what exactly is Vizenor saying? My interpretation is that setting up an Indigenous space could easily become a false show of Indigeneity (that fugitive pose), a presumptive measure based on who we think Native students are, and based on what we assume

Indigeneity to be. Needless to say, I will not be staging an Indigenous presence in research spaces. Rather, the goal is to show up with authenticity and to check my assumptions at the door. The research space is Indigenous because I am Indigenous, and because my participants are Indigenous. That can look like a great many things." (Research Journal, August 2021).

I stepped into that first meeting space with intentions of presence. Like any good academic researcher, I started each interview by instructing the participant on the purpose of the study, protocol for withdrawing, told them who I was, learned who they were, and asked if they had any questions. What felt more Indigenous was the added next step of naming the space: this was a conversation where they could pause, interrupt, lose their train of thought, circle-back, ponder, and ask questions of me. I viewed this as reciprocal. Corrective. A way of building relationships that had otherwise remained broken in research among Native communities.

Gatekeeping and Way-making (over and under)

Cheyenne, a Navajo woman, did not consider herself a "traditional" Native American despite growing up on a reservation, but she did indicate she had some fluency in her language and cooked traditional foods. This is where she felt connection to her Native identity. She noted her ability to use her language had lessened since moving to Logan, Utah. My first impression of Cheyenne was that she was smart but shy. Her voice was soft, but her words rang sharp and clear. She had struggled in college, and like many of us found that her path was not linear. It included set-backs and obstacles that she had to overcome. There were also victories, both in education and in finding well-being. This often looked like resilience and the act of overcoming.

Cheyenne shared that she felt like it was "ingrained in her" to go to college by her parents and by people in her high school early in her academic journey. She said this is what seemed like the only path for success, and there weren't many options given to her because she had always done well in school. People had always seen Cheyenne as the "smart" kid. Cheyenne started her journey with her associate degree in Blanding and later transferred to Utah State's Logan campus. She had received several scholarships and was involved in programs like Upward Bound in high school and as an undergraduate. Like me, she had several aspects of good support– family, scholarships, mentors– but she still struggled with belonging. This was highlighted during difficulties with losing a scholarship due to dropping a tough class. There was also an element of needing safety in her story. I asked Cheyenne how she knew she belonged.

> *If I feel comfortable there...yeah I think that's the biggest thing is if I feel*
> *comfortable, cause if I feel scared, if I feel anxiety, I don't think I belong*
> *there. And maybe I get comfortable by familiarizing myself with it, like if I*
> *go to the same class every day like, I feel like I belong there, or...if you*
> *know the same people and they acknowledge you when you go into class I*
> *feel belonged. Or if the professor knows me, I feel like I belong.*

Belonging, "feeling belonged" as she often referred to it, meant a sense of comfort and familiarity. She had felt belonged on the Blanding campus where she was close to her family and home community, and in high school which was predominantly Native American. I asked Cheyenne how she knew if she didn't belong.

> *Um, maybe if I feel alone? Yeah...yeah, if I just feel alone. Cause I can be*
> *in a huge class with a lot of people and I just still feel alone.*

Now with classrooms in mind, I described the concept of space and place and asked

Cheyenne about specific spaces and places on the Logan campus where she felt belonged.

> *Yeah, I would say the TSC [Taggart Student Center]. That's a big one.*
>
> *Especially on the third floor where the Native American room is. As well*
>
> *as [a specific therapy service]. Um...I've been to [this specific therapy*
>
> *service] a few times, so I feel very comfortable there. And I used to get*
>
> *coffee, like every morning at the TSC and they would know my order and*
>
> *they would know me, and they would know what time I would come in. So,*
>
> *I feel very comfortable there [laughter].*

I was curious how her definition of sense of belonging impacted her mental health and

sense of well-being, and found myself joining in her nervous laughter.

> *Well, if you do get acknowledged and if I do feel comfortable I feel...I feel*
>
> *good, and I feel, yeah like I feel comfortable and I feel motivated to be*
>
> *there, and I feel like I don't have to be on guard and if I don't feel like I*
>
> *belong somewhere, if I don't feel comfortable in a place, I feel like I am on*
>
> *guard and I do have anxiety and I'm more aware of my surroundings. I*
>
> *feel like I wouldn't be paying attention, um...yeah, I think it would just be*
>
> *the anxiety part that would have a big influence on it.*

I noted her use of the phrase "on guard" as interesting, and asked her if she felt like she

had to be on guard very often on the Logan campus.

> *Yeah, yeah. I think so. But I'm just a very like on guard person in general.*
>
> *[laughs]. Um, my mom...My mom would always tell us like be careful,*
>
> *like...Oh, and she's like one of those ladies that always watches Lifetime*

movies, and you know how those Lifetime movies are very dramatic and

always about being kidnapped, or getting stolen, getting abducted, sex

trafficking and all that. And she would watch that a lot and based.. well,

she has been kidnapped before, so that kind of like...made her want

to...she kind of instilled that in me and my sister. Like oh, you have to be

careful and then she's always telling my boyfriend like make sure you take

care of her. Make sure that you're never alone. So, I feel like getting that

instilled in me like from a very young age has made me very aware. Like I

try to make sure, like...that I don't present myself a certain way. That I

don't dress a certain way, and that I don't cause too much attention to

myself. And I'm just like that, in general, like ever since I was young, I'm

very shy and I don't.. I don't like attention. So, I'm kind of in the

background, and I just...I'm very observant.

I wanted to know if there were places and spaces where she felt like she had to be more

observant. In addition, the counselor in me wondered if this experience of being on guard

were similar to the hypervigilance we see associated with trauma.

Yeah probably in classes, because it is different. Because I'll take classes

and I'm the only Native American and there's like 200, 300, 1000

bilagáanas[2].

I recognized the warning her mother passed down to her and her sister because of my

work for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG; Ficklin,

Killgore, Isaacs, Mack, & Tehee, 2021; Tehee, Killgore, Mack, Isaacs, & Ficklin, 2021;

---

[2] Navajo term for white people, or people of European descent.

Isaacs & Young, 2019). As surely as the story of how Jistu jumped that wide river, the threat of sexual and physical violence is woven into our cultural stories as women. But Cheyenne was able to find a sense of belonging with a Native American therapist that helped her feel safe. I asked her if having a therapist who understood what it was like to be Native American made a difference in her mental health and well-being.

> *Yeah. I think so. I felt more connected to her during our session and it seemed like she knew a lot about um...um...She knew a lot about [trauma], because of the...her training like, um...before. ...another thing that she did that I haven't seen in other people was that she actually tried to give me coping strategies, and like specific strategies. Like she helped me with mindfulness and meditation, and she would give me these worksheets that would help me through my anxiety. And I think all of those really helped. Even if we didn't find out a root problem, because I think that was the other thing with other therapists was that they seemed like they were trying so hard to figure out where my problem was and at that time I just couldn't figure it out and I think that kind of gave me more...it frustrated me more because I didn't...I felt a certain way and I knew I felt a certain way, but I couldn't figure out why you know?*

For Cheyenne, another thing that felt unique to having a Native American therapist was the connection to culturally-relevant resources particularly for academic struggles. Resources like the Mentoring and Encouraging Student Academic Success program (MESAS) had made a positive difference for her when deciding whether she should drop the class; something that made her feel like the world was ending and like she would

never graduate. She specifically spoke about receiving help from the MESAS Faculty

Advocate and the role her Native American therapist had played in helping her get

connected to him. Cheyenne stated it would be helpful if some of these resources were

more readily known to Native students.

> *[The MESAS Faculty Advocate] helped me a lot and I came to him crying*
>
> *and he was still like...he was still very professional, and he would say okay*
>
> *calm...calm down, it's okay, and then he'd say, like okay, these are your*
>
> *options. You can think it over and we'll see what happens. And it seems*
>
> *like he's just always there. like, if I have a question, or like anything I can*
>
> *go to him and he figures.. he figures it out. I don't know how he does it,*
>
> *but he figures it out.*

A network of people who could close the gap between resources was crucial in Cheyenne

finding well-being. We considered the role of these "in-between" people in her life.

Cheyenne related that Native students share who these people are with each other once

they find them, but that they aren't always immediately identifiable. Warm, personal

connections to resourceful people were preferrable in generating relationships.

> *Yeah, [the Native American therapist] was the one that got me in touch*
>
> *with [the MESAS Faculty Advocate]. Because I remember that he would*
>
> *be sending out emails, him and [another staff member]? Yeah, they'd be*
>
> *sending out emails from MESAS, and I never knew that he.. that we could*
>
> *go to him for help and [the Native American therapist] told me. And I*
>
> *went to him for help, and ever since then, like, if I have a question I go to*
>
> *[the MESAS Faculty Advocate]. And then I also have other...Some more*

friends that go to USU. And they'll be stressing out about something, and I

tell them, like, go to [the MESAS Faculty Advocate] and they help them

like every single time.

Cheyenne identified availability and accountability as important for safe relationships. However, getting connected to someone of the same race or ethnicity didn't always guarantee a safe relationship was accessible.

And then another thing was the, with [a specific club for students of color]

um...the advisor for, for that, is...is not helpful and I wish that she could be

more helpful. Because she is [the same tribe], and she does...she is

helpful, but I feel like she could do way more than she does, and that...it

just, it's a downer because I have gone to her for help, and she has kind of

disappointed me for more than a few times. She makes me feel like you

don't help someone even though she is Navajo, and she is a part of like my

tribe and stuff. And I do feel like I get comfort in that, but I feel like I'm

more comfortable with [the MESAS Faculty Advocate], than I am with her

and I feel like that could be something that could be worked on.

I reflected on my work with MESAS and the cultural competence trainings. We, myself and the other course co-developers, functioned on the assertion that being a person of color didn't necessarily mean you were working on your own cultural competence. Because of this, we asked that Native American faculty, staff, and graduate students also take the course. Cheyenne's story pointed to the fact that we all may serve as either gatekeepers or way-makers regardless of race, ethnicity, or cultural background. She had found gatekeeping in white peers and faculty, as well as throughout the scholarship and

academic advisement process, but coming up against gatekeeping by another Native American felt especially painful.

This was also true of way-making, or connecting with students from other tribes to share resources. Cheyenne had tried to reach out to these peers through a culturally-relevant club but found students from other tribes were reluctant to become involved. She and friends had discussed why this might be. It was brought up in club meetings, where other club members had also voiced trying to connect with students from other tribes in the past but with little success. She wasn't sure what the barriers were but concluded that maybe these students wanted to "stay in their own circle" with what was familiar.

For Cheyenne, way-makers were people who built relationship with her, connected her to resources and resourceful people, and stood in the gap to give her options and allow her a sense of autonomy and choice. In the follow-up interview Cheyenne noted that way-makers were needed in classrooms and that class-size was often a barrier to finding connection. Familiarity and comfort came in smaller groups that shared common goals. Way-makers were also needed to help connect students from different tribal affiliations and she had tried to fulfill this role. She seemed frustrated that her efforts had not been fruitful. As a student in a researcher role, I had attended a meeting at the same club she had mentioned and felt a strong need to prove myself and my authenticity as Indigenous. I wondered about this.

Cheyenne readily identified way-makers that held talking circles on campus as a way to find connection outside of the classroom, but the move to virtual meetings interfered with being vulnerable. Cheyenne felt most connected with people if she could be vulnerable. Being able to let her guard down meant safety and a sense of belonging,

but feeling alone increased her anxiety and greatly impacted her sense of well-being and connection.

Connection and Disconnection (over and under)

Bronson's story carried several unique aspects that caught me by surprise. I had made an assumption that many of our stories would be similar in that we knew a sense of Native belonging prior to coming to a larger campus or PWI, and that Native belonging had effectually decreased as we stepped foot into white spaces where we would later find ways to reclaim it.

Bronson, a member of the predominant religion in Utah, grew up in a neighboring state without any knowledge of his race or ethnicity other than being white and living in a white household with a white biological mother and white step-father. It wasn't until he took a DNA test after high school that he started to have questions about his identity. Bronson's biological father was Native American and had been adopted. Because records were unavailable, Bronson didn't know what tribal affiliation his father was a part of. He and the two older siblings that had stayed with the father navigated what it might mean to be Native American in very different ways. For Bronson, digging any further into that part of his identity came with repercussions. He worked through tensions of not wanting to undermine or harm his healthier parental relationships by contacting his abusive biological father.

His story shouldn't have been so surprising. There is a long history of government entities taking children away from tribal communities to be placed in adopted homes with white families; generating a disconnection from identity for generations to come (NICWA, 2022). He didn't know if this was the case for his father, and for the most part

felt a sense of belonging with his white family. He seemed tentative. I focused on

exuding warmth and told him I appreciated him being willing to talk to me.

> *Yeah, no... I thought it was, like I said, it was a good opportunity because*
>
> *I don't know...when I first found out about it and, like I had... like I said,*
>
> *I've gone down to the Navajo reservation a few times like, I thought about*
>
> *like trying to tell them my story, but I didn't want to be like...hey look at*
>
> *me, you know...I should... you should... you should accept me or something*
>
> *like that, you know? So, since this is a study and it's kind of an open*
>
> *conversation I thought it'd be a good opportunity to [explore]... because*
>
> *this is the first time I've talked about it, really.*

When Bronson indicated he uncovered his ancestry with a DNA test, I noticed I had a

deep internal reaction. His experiences challenged me to think about my own cultural

competence. I felt a tension between protecting Indigeneity and being open to Bronson's

story. I wondered if I had ever been a part of the problem when students remained

disconnected from Native identities because of things that were out of their control. With

the DNA testing boom, companies like 23andme and Ancestry.com had made it possible

for thousands of people to attempt credibility as Indigenous people. But being of a

specific ancestry and being a part of a culture were not the same thing. Scores of

"pretendians", or pretend Indians, complexified already complicated issues of Indigeneity

(Nagle, 2019). Because of this, Bronson had held his truths silently and alone.

As the weaver for our stories, I struggled with finding a way to connect his story

to the larger narrative. It felt similar to weaving a physical basket when you run out of the

weaving piece of reed (the runner) and step back to find a way to insert a new reed

flawlessly and seamlessly. I was reminded of Vizenor's (1998) warning on aesthetic

victimry. This weaving did not have to be flawless or pleasing. It would be messy and

raw and real if it were to challenge perceptions of Native peoples as tragic. It would also

challenge my own growth as a storyteller. I reminded myself that the problem of

"proving" our worth to tell our own stories was part of the larger issue of non-belonging

in education. Hadn't I felt that too? Bronson had carefully held his story back to prevent

perceptions of him as just another pretender. Sharing his story was risky. In some ways,

disconnection felt safer. Given this, I asked Bronson what belonging meant for him.

> *I don't know a specific tribe that I'm a part of to... even be a part of a*
>
> *group, because I know there's like that... I can't remember with it's*
>
> *called...what's the club here on campus? [This was the same club*
>
> *Cheyenne had mentioned where she hoped to connect students across*
>
> *tribes]. Yeah, just to be able to hang out with...with people or spend time*
>
> *with them and hear their experiences, I think, would have been interesting*
>
> *you know, and I had thought about it, like you know looking into it, but*
>
> *like I said I just didn't want to feel like I was being a poser, I guess... and*
>
> *trying to be something that I never have been.*

We spoke for a while about what credentialing, or proof of identity, meant for Native

people. If you couldn't prove your identity, did you lose a piece of yourself? Bronson

thought on this for a while and answered "maybe", and that maybe proof is what "you

need to not feel like a poser". We moved to the question of where he did feel a sense of

belonging and found that his professional identity was a place where he had also found

some connection to his Native identity. As someone who loved stories, it made sense he

would pursue a career in professional storytelling. I asked if there were Native stories he had come across that mapped onto his educational journey.

> *I mean, they'll just be like even sometimes just online, I don't know... like reading stories about... not even stories that are that old, but you know stories about Native Americans in sports or Native Americans in World Wars I and II, you know, the Navajo Code-Talkers, things like that just even...even recently.*

What he said reiterated to me the importance of telling our own stories as an act of reclaiming identity and upsetting false narratives. Stories were where people who lacked cultural immersion or enculturative opportunities learned about themselves. We talked about how our stories were modern living stories, and not just relics of the past.

> *Do you know what extension is with the university? [I confirmed my limited knowledge]. Yeah, so basically what it is, like that's the research and extension arm, so they take the research from the university and extend it to the public. And we have extension agents around the state and one of them is Native American. Her name is [masked] and she graduated in plant science and her research is on Native American peaches, and peach trees, and she's working on restoring the varieties of peach trees that were originally in southern Utah before they were moved on to reservations...So, it's just stories, you know, and things like that really catch my attention that I want, you know, to connect to.*

Like the extension agent, Bronson had learned to use his professional voice to help people from other cultures tell their stories, and won several prestigious honors. He found

this to be a way of giving back but also felt like this is where he could prove his worth to others. He also gave back through helping family members navigate college as he hadn't received much guidance. Like many of us, he had learned how to navigate on his own and did not ask for help.

Bronson found his belonging mostly in family, friends, co-workers, and people with shared interests. However, belonging felt different once he knew about his Native identity. He struggled with knowing how to tell his children about their Native ancestry when he didn't know the specifics of tribal affiliation. He wanted to make sure that they felt "a part of something" too. The disconnection that came through his father's adoption was always in the back of his mind. Cross-cultural interactions on the Navajo reservation and while living abroad had impacted the ways he thought about his identity exploration. But he was still concerned about appropriating from cultures that never felt like they belonged to *him*. When I met Bronson again for the second interview he had clearly been doing some reflecting, and he had grown out his hair.

> *So, and I don't know the other thing that I've kind of noticed and this might be kind of dumb. But part of me, also because, like this is the longest I've ever had my hair. And part of me is like, oh that'd be kind of cool to like, maybe grow it out, and connect that way, a little bit more so, but I've been kind of been doing...not like deep dive research but, like some more of the meaning of different hairstyles for different tribes and things like that, and then I kind of realized that it has more...Like as far as growing it out, has more of a meaning than I thought it would you know, so that's...that's*

definitely one way that I've kind of subconsciously, and now more

purposely, [been] thinking about as a way to connect.

One complexity of identity was deciding how (and if) he should outwardly express it. He

had also connected to his identity through reading about a woman's experience with

navigating her own heritage and how she had embraced her culture. The difference was

this woman had grandparents to connect her to traditions and she knew her tribal

affiliation. We thought together about how this story of disconnection and connection

might help others. I asked him what it was like to know his story would be told.

Uh, definitely you know just hope that people can be proud of their

heritage, even though they might not know everything about it, and know

that there are people willing to listen to them and you know, listen to their

concerns and things...

His identity exploration seemed to have helped him navigate his own cultural competence

and gain perspectives that counter-storied negative stereotypes about Native peoples.

The more I am exploring, the more I'm...and I don't want to say sensitive

because I'm pretty thick skinned, but um...I'd say aware, you know we're

aware of things like hey I don't know, maybe that shouldn't be said or that

perspective may not be right, but it's also hard for me to know what the

perspective is of other [Native] people, because I never grew up on a

reservation or around a lot of Natives. I mean I've spent some time on

reservations volunteering and...And unfortunately, that's a lot of the

stories like from my parents who... so my mom grew up right across the

river from the reservation in [masked]. And then my dad taught on the

[masked] reservation, and so there were definitely a lot of negative stories

I heard from them, some positive but...the ones that come to mind are

mostly negative, you know about alcohol or gambling and things like that,

and so. But once you actually go and volunteer and meet some of these

people you realize that that's not the case for a lot of people in these

communities. You know I remember going down for fall break my

freshman year here at Utah State, down from that reservation and just

meeting the people who worked at [a specific tribal] high school, but you

know all the time and effort that they put into teaching those kids in a

situation that's not easy, you know...

In the end, Bronson remained troubled. Could he be both Native and a part of his white Latter-Day Saints family? Did he have to uproot one aspect of belonging to find belonging in the other? He felt his white family had sacrificed greatly to give him opportunities to go to college and gain a career. He understood the privilege of being given those opportunities. What would he have to sacrifice to have Native belonging?

Presence and Purpose (over and under)

Noquisi, as I'll call her since she asked me to use a pseudonym, was a Navajo woman with one of the most unusual stories of mistaken identity that I had ever heard. She grew up on the reservation where she was connected with her culture, but she also had a large amount of cross-cultural experience from helping her parents sell pottery to tourists. When it came time to attend high school, her parents decided to send her and her sister to a more well-to-do area of Utah that would give her greater opportunities and remove her from the threat of violence associated with poor, tribal schools near the

reservation. Once there, it was assumed that she was of Hispanic heritage. She was placed in classes geared toward Spanish speaking students and given homework only in Spanish. She was too shy to make the correction. She learned Spanish and felt protection under the umbrella of the Latinx community. Even her Latinx friends assumed she was Hispanic, but maybe grew up in the United States disconnected from that culture.

She did indeed find increased opportunities in a wealthier school district and earned a nursing certification. So, it just made sense that when her great-grandmother (who she also refers to as her grandmother) was at the end of her life, she would go home to care for her. Her grandmother was a respected herbalist in her community with a great gift for healing and one of Noquisi's greatest inspirations to become a scientist.

> *Ever since I was young, we always went to her because like the health*
>
> *care on the rez, at the time I didn't know it was bad I just thought it was*
>
> *normal, but it's like free health care which to me means longer waiting*
>
> *times, no chairs to sit at while you wait for your appointment, or waiting*
>
> *beside someone in a room and all sorts of stuff and so...I feel like everyone*
>
> *in my family would lean toward her before they went to IHS [Indian*
>
> *Health Services] or something and so she was amazing. I, at the time, I*
>
> *just wish I knew... like followed her to these like different sites like the four*
>
> *sacred... so I don't how much you are aware of, like the Navajo culture.*
>
> *There's four sacred mountains and you go to those, and she knew what*
>
> *plant for what health problem on those mountains, where to go to, and so I*
>
> *remember I got pneumonia and I didn't know I had pneumonia which is*
>
> *like life threatening. And my family didn't know what was wrong with me*

and she didn't go to the hospital or anything and she healed me with

these... with plants, and so, when I was with her taking care of her I

became really interested in plants and STEM, which is something I wasn't

really into in high school, well I guess like medicine and kind of becoming

a doctor is a part of STEM, but it wasn't my main focus. And so, then I

started taking classes while taking care of her up in Blanding like part

time, and then she passed away and then I started doing school full time in

Blanding and then eventually made my way to Logan here.

Her grandmother was her greatest mentor, but Noquisi also had a number of mentors as an undergraduate while earning her associate degree. These were people who could be "brutal", but she liked their direct way of communicating and the way they challenged her and encouraged her to grow. Because of these mentors she worked on strengthening her writing and speaking skills and learned how to apply for scholarships and research programs. She found that culturally competent mentors asked the right questions. When she told them about her experiences and struggles she knew that "it counted". They also brought her culture into the classroom. She felt like they really *saw* her and her potential. She spoke openly about one specific mentor.

Yeah, he was a great mentor to me, and he talked about Logan, he talked

about my future, he talked about a PhD and stuff. He saw like potential in

me right, like you have this potential, and so it like felt really good and

also he taught technology communications, he taught a lot of STEM

classes and I would take his classes because we became friends, and he

would...He would make my culture, like the Navajo culture, part of the

> *class, so I remember one time we were graphic designing a Navajo basket*
>
> *or something, and I just thought that was so amazing.*

She also encountered a great amount of gatekeeping when she began to struggle and attempted to reach out for help. The transition to Logan didn't just bring isolation and more difficult coursework, it had also coincided with grief at the loss of her grandmother, her sister's struggles with addiction and severe depression, and the unjust incarceration of her brother whom she worked hard to support through a potential life sentence. She also functioned as a source of strength and support for her mother who couldn't believe her son had been imprisoned without sufficient evidence for the crime. A lack of encouragement through academic gatekeeping was the last thing she needed.

> *I basically changed my major because my counselor was not very*
>
> *encouraging there. They had one counselor and she was like, just from the*
>
> *beginning, she was like I don't think you should choose... kinda already,*
>
> *like I don't think you can do this, you know? I don't think you should be in*
>
> *this degree, and in my mind I'm just like no like, I'm so inspired by my*
>
> *grandma, like I want to do this, I have to do this, like...And also, just*
>
> *life...it didn't really help that like a lot of things were happening... like*
>
> *family-wise, when I started going to Logan it just like piled on, and I like*
>
> *struggled a lot juggling family needs, specifically my siblings and*
>
> *pursuing this hard degree. And I have a very like...un-encouraging*
>
> *counselor and [other] students, or I'm not really finding a decent nice*
>
> *person...*

Noquisi kept her head down and did the work, but was struggling with her mental health and well-being. She also felt like an imposter in her research lab and sought out a way that she could learn to use the technology needed for both her degree and acceptance within a lab as a valuable member. She found that in a PhD student from another country who knew how to use the machines she needed to learn. They formed a close brother-sister bond that reminded her of her own kinship systems back home. She also fulfilled a need for this international student. She reminded him of his sister that he hadn't seen in over ten years. She found belonging in the kin-space he created with her; a space of shared understanding and shared knowledge. When she couldn't find belonging like she had with him, she studied alone in the basement of Old Main. Now in Logan, Noquisi found she had few reciprocal relationships like the ones she had in Blanding. As her mental health worsened she decided she needed professional help but again found disconnection during a mental health intake.

> *Yeah, so I thought I was with a therapist, and like I was like bawling my eyes out, I was giving it my all, and she was like okay I'm gonna... I'm writing notes down for your therapist, and I was like wait what? So, I was kind of like, oh this sucks...like I don't want to do this all over again. I don't want to open up and go into detail and feel this miserable again, so that was like my experience of trying to go and get therapy, and then I opened up another time and it was just... I just got this vibe that like no one really cares and so I was like...I like, I don't know I just basically was like I'm going to heal myself, so I like read books, I watched YouTube videos and I opened up to friends and my siblings...like just talking, I*

realized that like just speaking about the issue is therapy for me. Just

writing it, and so I was kind of... convinced myself that like I don't think I

need to go to see a professional now...I mean I have nothing against it, I

just had that first encounter, and I was just like they didn't tell me that I

wasn't seeing a real therapist and then I was like, I opened up! Also, a

third time with the [IHS] clinic, like because they have, always at the IHS

they have all these questions like are you depressed? And I'm like yes, yes,

yes, and they're like okay great you can go see a doctor...Like, what?

You're not... you don't care about....You didn't like offer something or

whatever?

Noquisi's struggles with grief, family mental health, and her brother's incarceration had re-opened some deep-seated traumas that she felt she had previously "burned out of [her] mind". As a way of seeking change and finding relief from her depression, she went on a trip abroad with other students and watched as they demonstrated a lack of cultural competence with a foreign culture. She saw how much it could pain other people to experience a lack of "open-mindedness" and reciprocity, and this pain resonated with her own experience of belonging in education. This awareness of people, particularly white students, lacking cultural competence extended to her work as a scientist conducting research. She noted that racism, prejudice, and discrimination went beyond peoples' actions and behaviors and into the very ways we conceptualize science.

Like the way you... the way where you're doing research, like those words

you're using like "STEM", that's Indigenous making and creating but

people call it STEM because, like STEM is like...Your knowledge is the

product of what you create, that's what Native, Indigenous [people] have

been doing. But...so that's why I said, like you're... you don't think you're

racist but you're using terms that are not inclusive, like...and not

including, not giving nod to people who've been here longer and have

already done something.

She specifically noted the importance of including Indigenous perspectives in science related to the land.

If with things like related to the land or related to the Earth, you shouldn't

be making your own way, you should always be including like Native

people because they're related to the land and...I think I just feel like

things would go so much smoother if...Like you're, if you weren't a

researcher and like the land is not your oyster to do research on...Like you

need to have the Native people involved in it because they know, like you

should just like, you should just like...[I could feel her frustration]. You

should just be this person who has this mindset that's like you know, I

don't know everything you know? I know a lot of academics do, like...you

become a PhD student and something, but like I feel like the more you

learn something or that's what I noticed, like the more I meet like more

intelligent people, the more they realize the less they know about the

world. So, if you just have that mindset, then you would include Native

people, because I feel like things would go smoother because they know

something you don't know, and you shouldn't just be like...No...science

[and] I gotta do it a scientific way for it to be efficient...you need

traditional knowledge AND science to accomplish anything related to

nature or Earth. Like I just wish people had more of that approach, and

like I wish science respected traditional belonging, and so I guess that's

where in my belonging it kind of hurts.

I was really impacted by her words, "you shouldn't be making your own way". Was I

making an assumption in finding my own way with this research? For Noquisi, some

assumptions had been helpful but could also be dangerous and harmful. Other students

had spoken about having to make their own way too. Was this a colonial imposition on

our ability to find belonging? Was an in-between research paradigm meant to illuminate

Indigenous belonging a dangerous place to tread? For her, it was more effective and more

aligned with who we are if we returned to our traditional knowledge systems for guidance

rather than taking things into our own hands. She called this coming full circle, or

"having the spirit in the circle". Not having the spirit in the circle is where we began, as

Native peoples, to feel a lack of acceptance and confidence in our ability to succeed.

This actually leads to another thing. It hurts, but I know like I value

myself, like, I know that being a Native American is like... it's a

superpower...you know? And I feel like I didn't feel that way when I came

to college, I felt like my traditional knowledge is not as valued as the

science, but I just wish like more people knew or more people were

confident as a Native.

It was Noquisi's Elders in her home community that instilled in her a sense of having this

"superpower" which in some ways might be defined as an awareness of her value and

worth, and an openness and capability for growth. She said that to build confidence in

other Native students, it could be helpful to remind them that our traditional knowledge has always been at the forefront of innovation. But unlike Western science, Indigenous knowledge was always a process of "filling each other back up" and never "leaving anyone empty".

> *So, when I talk about my great grandma who inspired me, that's on my dad's side and then on my mom's side my grandma, her mom, she is a weaver. And I used to weave when I was young and um, in Navajo culture you have the...you probably heard of it, but like the spirit line. So...you purposely imperfect, like you make a flaw on purpose right? So, I was told that it's because you become a master of your... like there's always room for improvement....kind of like be humble, like don't think you're perfect at everything. And then also like you'll make more rugs because you'll always have that flaw, you'll always improve...and then I was also told that it's called a spirit line because when you do something you put your spirit into it. Especially when it's something you care about, like you're definitely going to put your spirit into it, and it can get trapped in the rug and so that spirit line is for it to escape out. And then I heard for the Shoshone, like when they're bead making it's almost like a meditation and so their spirit gets trapped in their beads and sometimes a lot of people in the Shoshone tribe, they don't sell their work, because it feels like they're selling a part of themselves, and so like that's how I feel about like relationships... I'm putting my spirit into something and it's like so vulnerable... it's like you're giving yourself a part to something, and if*

it's...it's not reciprocated, or if you're not gaining anything, or it's just kind

of like taken or sold, you start to feel empty and that's where mental health

comes in, you know? And sometimes, like I think that's what students feel

with their grades is cause they're putting their spirit into getting that

grade, but then when the grade is like a fail or a C... or it isn't for what

they think that they put that time in [for] then, like it's gone... that spirit

isn't reciprocated back. And you just start to feel empty over time and I

feel like just those relationships, you need to treat it like... I think you just

need to place more like...I don't know, what's the word, it's fragile.

Reciprocity was key to Noquisi's well-being. The word itself was new for her, but the

underlying principles had existed since time immemorial.

[It's] just this you know symbiotic, synergistic relationship always

happening, but I feel like...And then again like when you think of like

science, or like the Western side, it's like you give of yourself but it's

sometimes, it's not reciprocated back to you and so that's where it's like...

it's not cultural anymore, it's a disconnect, it's not traditional knowledge

anymore, because you're just taking something and you're just... you're

putting it on display.

I felt like that disconnect, not "having the spirit in the circle" as Noquisi called it, was

exactly what Vizenor was talking about as the fugitive pose undermining our survivance.

Change and Growth (over and under)

Faustine, a Navajo woman and first-generation student, felt her first real

experience with education came during her time at USU Blanding, but her experiences

with seeking belonging occurred once she came to the Logan campus. She felt an immense pressure to be a better student and to be better than she was at Blanding where she felt a sense of comfort while surrounded by other Native peoples. In Logan, she felt intimidated and alone. Like Cheyenne and Noquisi, she found it "conflicting" to be the only Native person (and often the only Brown person) in the room.

> *I knew I have to prove to them to that I was capable of being worthy and like [in] a group, in a group with them, and let them know like I know what I'm doing, I know what I can bring to the table and I had to speak up louder than I did... This is way different from what I...what I was comfortable with, and that's what I was looking forward to when I came out here to Logan...to get out of my comfort zone. And you know I met a lot of students that were better than...well, not better, but like they knew more than me...they could learn faster than me. Or I met professors that were just like, what? You never had a chemistry class in high school? I'm like no I didn't, my school didn't have enough funding.*

Much of what she had learned about higher education came from teaching herself or through seeking out students who weren't first-generation students. Regardless, Faustine held a firm belief that, even if she had no one to teach her to navigate higher education, it was up to her to learn so that her own kids and grandkids wouldn't have to struggle. For guidance and grounding, Faustine regularly turned to stories and teachings handed down through her grandparents. The story of Changing Woman was particularly meaningful for her.

They taught me a lot with stories and my favorite one is Changing

Woman[3]...Changing Woman in our culture is kind of like who gave birth

to all. And like she took care of...she took care of everyone, including like

Mother Earth... so Changing Women is, in Navajo her name is Asdzą́ą́

Nádleehé, she's the woman who changes, is the one of the creation spirits

of Navajo. So, when I think about her, she changes in life, as well as the

seasons, so I think as a woman I started out as like Changing Woman, just

small. I started with like, for me, I started with Blanding, and then she

started with like just with plants and animals. You know, and as she

started gradually, like gradually evolved, she started growing and

growing and she built a beautiful life, a beautiful world and I think my

education, and like just my experience, evolve[s] me so much to where like

Changing Woman through the season, through the semesters, through the

years...And then, in the end I know everything is going to be not just for

me, but for everyone's benefit, to help...

Faustine shared that her culture was what she relied on for getting through school.

In fact, she was looking forward to her Walk in Beauty ceremony in the coming

weeks as a blessing for her journey into graduate school. Because of my own

cross-cultural interactions with Navajo peoples, I knew a little about the

importance of this coming-of-age ceremony (Aspen Institute, 2022). It was an

expression of both being and becoming. For Faustine, the ceremony was the

epitome of something that "evolves you". Something she had been waiting for her

---

[3] See Manuelito (2006) for a Navajo perspective on Changing Woman and self-determination.

whole life. It was a sign of acknowledgment from her community that she was ready for the journey ahead and recognition of her as medicine for her people. She anticipated push-back from faculty about leaving Logan for the ceremony, as she had encountered difficulties before from faculty who didn't understand the importance of ceremony and how time consuming it could be. People in academia didn't seem to understand how beneficial spiritual change could be. And change wasn't just occurring for her. Her community was also changing.

> *After all these years...your community is changing and the people you do know that were there when you were there all the time, are out of the office or they passed on or something. And people, the new people who are there...they're like who's this student that has a degree, who does she think she is...compared to the actual experience of actually being there, and you know it's very conflicting when you go back home with your degree. But I know that it's definitely worth it, and I know it's something that not a lot of us Indigenous students know until it happens to us, and there's not that many stories out there, that you hear [or] like books or like online or sources...that our... that students can look out for, that students will hear consistently you know, and I wish there was...I had friends now who graduated...that went back home and they're having a hard time like finding jobs because a lot of you know, our Elders or like a lot of community members will give them a hard time because... I have no, I have no reason why... I don't, I don't know why... but I'm scared that will happen to me.*

Faustine knew that navigating these changes would be well worth it in the end, once she had gained acceptance through re-entry into her community. She wasn't afraid of the challenge of evolving and she believed that in some ways she had to learn the hard lessons alone. Her family was supportive, but they were also doing what they had to do to survive in a community with numerous disparities in health, mental health, poverty, and resource availability. I asked her what belonging meant to her knowing all of this. How did she know she belonged? What did that feel like? She became quiet and emotional.

> *That's, that's really hard to say because in school like, I'm always like... with school, like in classes, and with peers it's always, I found myself out...[on the outside]. But I find myself...[she gave a long and thoughtful pause]. I guess that's what it is, huh? [Then belonging] is where I know what I'm doing now is meant for something that's going to happen, like what I'm doing now is going to be for something, for the greater good. That may not be in that group or with that program, but I know that it's also going towards that goal of helping.*

She found that a sense of non-belonging was discouraging. It hurt. She often felt like she didn't belong in her program because she felt like she was behind in her learning compared to other students. This sense of being behind was felt as early as her freshman and junior year at Logan and made quitting school feel like "the easiest thing [she] could do". She also knew that non-belonging greatly impacted her physical and mental health. She added that when you finally felt like you belonged somewhere, you felt safe. After a long history with bullying and being

on the outside, Faustine had found ways to make herself "fit" and to carve out her own belonging and her own sense of safety, but it was never true acceptance. Like other students she kept herself isolated and away from non-Native people, preferring people of color, and only going to white spaces when she had to for her program of study. And like other students, when she did go out it was to the Inclusion Center in the Taggart Student Center or to the one space dedicated to the Native American club on campus. We wondered together why this was how we lived?

>*Everything else is meant for other students, but this one place is actually meant for us...*

Faustine was aware of the Native Living Learning Community dorm available on campus and knew friends that felt comfortable there. We talked about whether there was a need for more shared spaces or a tribal center on campus.

>*It will be really nice, because I think a lot of us will be getting out of our social...social anxiety and you know, like even when you walk on campus you don't see that much like... pictures of like students of color. I feel like because I'm always on campus [and] when I look around it's like not pictures of people color until you get to the Inclusion Center...that's like the only part and....I know USU probably doesn't intend to do that, but it's just how it is.*

There was that phrase again, that's "just how it is".

>*Yeah, and you know if I saw more people like me not just in the Inclusion Center part, but like every now, like every here and there, and then yeah I*

would feel a little bit more comfortable, but if there's like a place where

we can all go I would definitely go there, I would definitely just go hang

out there, or just study or just hang out, and that's all... but there isn't...

other than that it's just the Inclusion Center or home.

Faustine said her grandfather always taught her that to be well, your mental,

physical, emotional, and spiritual selves had to be in alignment; and that your

mental health was directly influenced by your environment.

If you don't...w[hen] the environment at school does not [have] a sense of

belonging, it really does trigger you, and it really does make you feel

lonely, especially with being far away from home, from your friends and

your family and...I'm really grateful that I when I first started out here, I

was...it was lonely but I'm really grateful for finding the Inclusion

Center... It brought me up more, and if there was a bigger environment

like that, not just in the Inclusion Center, but like in every education

department for anyone of color, I think a lot of our students wouldn't be

dropping out, a lot of our students would be like going really far in their

degree, and I know like [belonging is] very limited because lot of my

friends that I mentioned, because they didn't have that for so long here, up

here, they all went back home. They're all back at home now because they

want it, they want it back.

I asked Faustine what she thought educators, counselors, and administrators could

do to increase belonging so Native students didn't drop out. Faustine focused on

faculty because that was who her greatest gatekeepers had been, particularly when

she went home for the summer to care for multiple family members who had
contracted Covid-19 during the pandemic.

At that time, the reservation went on lock down to minimize spread of
Covid-19 and the only available internet was accessed by going to a Chapter
House which could mean a significant drive to do homework online. Faustine had
cooked and cleaned for them while trying to keep herself well and while caring
for a terminally ill nephew (who in her kinship circle, was her brother). She had
faced other significant struggles in completing her coursework including a serious
car accident and the death of her mother in her early years in Logan. Faculty
members required extensive proof of her life situations, focused on equity and her
performance in comparison with white students who had significantly more
privilege and stability, or denied extensions on assignments and tests altogether.
She felt penalized when she needed to go home for extended periods of time for
ceremony or to care for her family. I asked her what might help.

> *To have each faculty member...who's white or who isn't familiar with*
> *students on the reservations– or even students from like...Latinx students,*
> *and African American students, and Queer [students], and even student's*
> *families– I think just have them prepared and understand the backgrounds*
> *where the students are coming from and I think that would really, really*
> *help. And just really have that open mind, and that like support, because*
> *that student is probably not getting it from home, or that student is*
> *teaching themselves, or that student [has] done a lot to get to where they*
> *are working in front of you...I think a lot of students would really*

appreciate it, and feel more comfortable to raise their hand up to ask for

help to say, like, I never did that kind of class or to say like I don't know

this, can you teach me from scratch. Because I've [run] into a lot of people

of color that would just say, oh yeah I definitely just nodded and just said

oh yeah I understand even if I don't. I mean [there's] a lot of people like

that. And people like that and me, together, we found [belonging], but it

was freaking hard.

Faustine also wondered how she could take what she gained from her education

back to help her family, to take care of her grandparents, to buy her dad a new

truck, to help her people, to create lasting change for the better. Family seemed to

be everything despite the hardships associated with returning to the reservation.

There was also concern among herself and her friends that they would lose

connection with their identity after having been gone so long; rendering them

unable to do that work.

There was one thing too about family, was like you know it's so strong

with a lot of us...even though like sometimes it's like um there's always that

one person that's kind of like elected [to leave and get education]... but

you know you can tell like deep down they want that [cultural identity],

and that's another thing that brings us back too, and [my friends and I

were] just comparing ourselves too as well, like what we all have to face

just to go to school and yeah it's very frustrating when sometimes you're

on the rez and then you come to like a city or to leaving the rez...[and] you

come across all these other things that you weren't aware that your

parents were trying to protect you from.

I asked Faustine what kinds of things she and her friends thought their parents

were trying to protect them from.

Um, so one was like... the one that thing kept popping up with us is like

racism.

Racism, lack of safety, not "being belonged to our environment", and language

loss were things their parents feared they might experience in order to "blend

into" this new world of four-year education. Faustine felt strongly that these were

shared barriers that Indigenous students faced in higher education. She was

emphatic about having spaces to share stories about our struggles but also our

overcoming of these struggles. Between the first and second interviews she had

reached out to friends and peers with some really hard questions that arose during

our discussions. She seemed to have a thirst to hear more stories. This brought

belonging and validated her experiences as a Native student.

This sharing of stories also prompted her to think of ways she could attend

to identity and well-being, not just for herself but for other students as well. This

was true of all four students I spoke with. Our conversations had not stopped

when we stopped recording our sessions. The students had taken their new

awareness and started to seek solutions. They seemed to want to find ways to

push back on non-belonging. They were tired and exhausted, but a fire had been

kindled in them. They wanted more. And they were beginning to realize they

deserved more too. They sought understanding and peace, but Faustine felt there

was a severe lack of understanding among authority figures in higher education about Native peoples and their unique struggles that undermined this.

> *You know you have to teach them and then and I'm just like...like I don't*
> *need to teach you, but it seems like I, in some situations, I have to so you*
> *can understand who I am. And I, in my head, I also think like you know,*
> *some other Native student or non-Native students is gonna come in here,*
> *[another student] of color, and at least I could be the first one [that has*
> *taught]this professor or this advisor...taught and prepared them better for*
> *the next [student]...sometimes I feel like I'm doing that.*

I sat back and wondered how much more our Native students could accomplish if they could spend less time teaching their faculty, staff, administrators, and peers basic cultural competence skills like building knowledge and having awareness. It was exhausting. I had a desperate desire to help them find rest.

Invisibility and Visibility (over, under, and over again)

I wanted to add the voices of two psychologists who had worked with Native students on belonging and well-being (and who identified themselves as having been Native students) to add to the richness of belonging across time and space, but greatly underestimated the richness I would find with these students. Still, I was curious if these two additional voices would map on, around, and under what we had found with each other. Would their experiences triangulate what we had collectively experienced? I envisioned this as finishing the basket, or those last moments where you tuck the spokes back into the rim of the basket to form a braid that holds everything safely together.

For Mary, a Turtle Mountain Chippewa woman and early career psychologist, one of the most salient experiences of navigating identity and belonging came through a co-learning process with another Indigenous peer who had received less opportunity to explore her culture. Together, they leaned on culture to help them through the stressors of becoming Indigenous scholars.

> *Whenever we were having a hard time you know, I taught her how to smudge[4], and she never felt very comfortable with doing it for herself, so I would always smudge her, and so it was something that we constantly would do together. You know, when we have like dissertation defense, thesis events, comps, a stressful time, relationship drama, you know fights with faculty, whatever it is that we had to deal with, that was one of the things that we always did. For each other and together, you know. Then...I think, for both of us we developed our own little mini-humanity that really is what got us through the grad program. I don't think either of us would have gotten through without the other. You know, and so, for me, I think about that as an experience of belonging on multiple levels, because it was belonging in more of a spiritual realm that was bringing the helpers that were there for each of us, bringing them into the journey of grad school, you know? And it was also just being each other's community and each other's visible helpers in addition to those unseen [spiritual] helpers over there, you know.*

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[4] The burning of sage, one of the four traditional medicines, for cleansing and healing.

Mary noted that higher education can easily become a space and place of disconnection when we don't have communities that allow us to share and learn together; a place where helpers seem invisible or inaccessible.

> *I think grad school is very much an experience of disconnecting, and I think school in general is very much an experience of disconnecting. I think for any student they disconnect from themselves, but I think Indigenous students disconnect from cultural identity if they don't have community to support staying connected, you know?*

Throughout all of the stories, identity was a formative piece of building belonging and well-being. Connection to identity was also a way to sustain belonging and well-being.

> *I think there are similar themes of a need for community [among all people of color], a need to stay connected and rooted in culture. A need to have people around who understand your culture, who understand experiences of discrimination. But at the same time, I also think, with Indigenous students there is a little something different, there that's you know...I think the spirituality is a big thing that's different for Indigenous students in particular. It isn't usually as big a part of therapy with other students of color I've worked with, it isn't usually as big a part of friendships with other students that you know I've had as friends. And if it is, it doesn't look the same as Indigenous spirituality you know, like smudging and kind of the unseen helpers around and that connection to, I don't know...connection to Mother Earth is something that has been there for other people of color, too. But anyway, I think most of those spiritual*

elements are different. The other thing that I find it in my experience has been more pronounced in Indigenous students, and I can't say it's been absent in other students of color, but it's more pronounced in Indigenous students is this...um, I don't think I've ever had an Indigenous therapy client ever, and I've had a lot by now...I don't think I've ever had one where identity wasn't a significant chunk of the therapy, whether it was, I grew up on the rez, now I'm away from the rez, I don't know how to be here, this world doesn't make sense to me, it's so different than the rez. And I don't feel like I belong, and can I make it, or it was you know urban students who are like I'm not Native enough, I don't know enough about my culture, and then there was you know...there's been talk about skin color, there's been talk about you know...people, people who are adopted by non-Natives, I mean it's always there and it seems like it's more at the heart of what [Native] people are coming to therapy with than it is with other groups.

Mary, like all of the students that I interviewed, also talked about the high likelihood of encountering gatekeepers. And like the students, Mary found way-makers were less visible and harder to identify. Once you found them, the resulting relationships were life-changing. Mary found one of her way-makers in her graduate student advisor.

[My graduate advisor] is the number one person that helped me navigate education, and I think the biggest thing that she did was just listen to me and like she just always believed in me, you know, and it didn't matter how bad I struggled...and boy did I struggle, you know, but she...I'm getting

teary-eyed now that I think about it, you know? She always listened to everything I said. I could talk for hours on end, [and] she was the one person who did listen yeah and, she believed me about how hard it was but, but always believed I could do it, always believed I could do it and waited patiently for me to do it, you know. And on my internship...You know I had been I had been studying some of the like Anishinaabe stories and was learning about Nanabozho, and so he's like the first... like first man kind of for Anishinaabe, and there's a story of like he was alone on the earth and then Gitchi Manitou, like the creator gave him a wolf as a companion, and he and the wolf wandered the Earth and named everything together and there was a period of time where they spent like a cold winter in the cave together, just him telling stories to the wolf. The wolf was like his buddy you know and his one companion, and then they went their separate ways at the end and I....that's what [masked] was for me, you know, I was going around naming everything I was going through trying to get through grad school, and she was she was there just listening, you know just there hearing it all and being my support and also [wipes tears] just never, just never stopped believing in me.

I silently wondered what could be accomplished, what harms could be prevented, if Native students found their way-makers earlier in their journey? If they had someone to build space for them as they "named" their experiences. It seemed like even one way-maker could undo the damage generated by several gatekeepers, and I tried to imagine what our lives could be like if we had many way-makers...helpers...those people willing

to stand in the gap with us...people that were visible, accessible, accountable, and safe. In addition, what if gatekeepers were held accountable for gatekeeping? I asked Mary about why she thought some students like those that transferred from the Blanding campus, which was near the Navajo reservation, had difficulty making the transition to the predominantly white campus in Logan. She felt that visibility of their culture made them feel safe and like they belonged.

> *[I got to] to visit Blanding campus a few different times in different capacities, but one of the times that I visited was with [masked], she used to be faculty at USU for a couple of years. And one of the things that really struck me, we were supposed to study why the Blanding campus was so successful in retaining Native students, and you know a lot of their faculty are Navajo and those who aren't like speak their language, and there's representation all over that campus, like the buildings are made to...The buildings are built to like, they fit Indigenous culture more, there was like a... some kind of, I don't remember, like a statue or something that had a quote from, oh what was his name? [I offered the name of Chief Manuelito[5]]. Manuelito, yes! Manuelito, yeah a quote from him about education, and I just...I think that they saw themselves reflected there and they were surrounded by people like them and who got their culture and then they come up to Logan and we don't have that.*

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[5] Chief Manuelito, *Hastiin Ch'ilhaajiin,* (1818-1893), "who encouraged the Navajo people to seek education and protect and preserve Navajo tradition and culture"- some Navajo students are eligible to receive a scholarship established in his honor (https://onnsfa.org/chief-manuelito)

Mary, having been an Indigenous student and therapist at various universities, helped me understand what belonging meant to her.

> *I think it's very personal...I think different people will define sense of belonging really differently, and how I define it is knowing your place in the universe. And for me that that's positioning myself relative to a lot of things, it's positioning myself relative to the spirits, the spirit world. To the extent I can, with the knowledge, I have. That's positioning myself relative to my ancestors, it's positioning myself relative to other Indigenous people and understanding how I relate to them...and how I don't...and learning how do I stand, where I stand, you know... I think when you're younger it's really easy to be super intimidated and not willing to own up to what you know and don't know, and who you are and aren't you, know what I mean...with Indigenous identity. And I've become more and more comfortable with saying like this is what I do know, this is what I don't know, and this is what I'm doing with it, you know? And I don't... I mean, I think I felt a lot of shame over that. I felt shame when I was really little. I always felt shame over being Indigenous you know because I was surrounded by white people that a lot of them are pretty racist you know. And then, as I got older, I felt shame over being Indigenous and not knowing any more about who I was other than to say my tribe, that's like all I could tell you, you know? Yeah, and learning how to let go some of that shame and just like sit...stand where you stand, and sit where you sit, be who you are, I think that to me that's what belonging means...and*

understanding that I still have a place, and I still have...I still have

connections in in the spirit world and in the world that I can see around

me, and not just human connections either, but you know animal

connections, like my little furry babies here [she shows affection to the

dogs by her side], you know things that I can root myself to. You know, to

me that's what identity is now and that's what belonging is now.

I asked Mary how we could help people better understand the connection between well-being, mental health, and sense of belonging among Indigenous students.

...depending on where they come from and what you know, what they think

of, I just point them to some of the articles that show it because we have

data that shows for Indigenous students, that when you incorporate this

spirituality, you incorporate culture, you incorporate ceremony, students

function better in school. You know I might point in that direction. But I

also might say, you know it isn't unlike, you know if you...if you're trying

to go to school with migraines. How much...How much are you going to

accomplish, you're ill, you're sick, you can't focus, and spiritually...you

also can't focus, if you...if you haven't had the headspace and you haven't

had the heart space to be able to attend to "you", if everybody else's voice

is getting crowded and it is crowding out your voice. You know, you need

to have some space for that, you need to have some space for connecting

to who you really are, and if you don't have that, how can you be well?

You're literally doing the exact opposite than what your ancestors know

and knew about what it means to be a healthy Indigenous person, and I

would argue, a healthy person period...

My last participant was Carolyn, a respected Blackfeet Elder who had spent

decades mentoring Native students in finding belonging and academic success. Her first

experiences with helping students find a sense of belonging was during her work at a

Native American boarding school. She found these students had experienced such

disconnection from feelings of safety or home that they really struggled with belonging

anywhere they went.

And they're a very vulnerable group and trying to find a way to belong,

and it really does not have any parameters because they're probably

willing to do anything somebody wants to make it feel like they belonged,

which really makes them vulnerable to all kinds of manipulation and

unkind things.

Boarding school students were willing to do almost anything just to find belonging.

Belonging was a crucial piece of understanding oneself. And, just like identity

development, finding belonging was a dynamic process.

And...course, I believe belonging is wired. It's wired in, we need to

belong. So, it isn't like it's we choose, or we do not choose. We need to find

a place where we feel like we have community, and we belong.

Belonging was a basic human need that often went uncared for. If left unattended it could

follow us everywhere we went. Carolyn described not belonging as a "terrible

loneliness". This loneliness might be observed in students as behaviors demonstrating the

need for attention or acknowledgment, anger, hurt, and eventually giving up and moving

on— sometimes onto risky behavior that kept them in cycles of trauma, substance use, and other harmful things as a way of coping "because where else would you go?" Carolyn's own experiences with finding belonging had spanned a lifetime. She grew up in a rural area where the nearest school was miles away. She found herself an outsider as a child because it always came back to an "us and them thing". As a child, she was physically beaten and bullied for being different.

> *And it's a very painful thing. You know I have great empathy for people*
>
> *who struggle with not belonging. I do not struggle with that these days,*
>
> *you know I have built community for thirty years. If you want to belong*
>
> *build a community that you can belong to...it's a very simple solution...if*
>
> *you know how to build community.*

Her experiences with not belonging were what inspired her to start a program to mentor and encourage Native American students to find belonging. She desired to build a community that was ready for them upon their arrival into higher education. She felt belonging was a kind of connection or "group cohesion" and a space to be vulnerable about the "unfinished business" (or mental health concerns) that students carried with them. She realized this took courage and a willingness to be a part of a group.

> *But I ran [counseling] groups, my entire career. And when you have a*
>
> *cohesive group that's willing to work, they're willing to risk because they*
>
> *trust. And their trust allows them to flourish and it's a spiral that keeps*
>
> *growing...So, when you destroy the cohesion then you don't get the work*
>
> *and you don't have the growth spiral happening.*

Carolyn described safety as one of the first tools we can give students seeking belonging. Building that safe community took effort, time and patience. We spoke about how to deal with views that building community might take too much work or become a drain on university resources.

Well...Would I say it? I don't know if I'd say it, but what I would think is 'you have no idea what you're talking about', you really do not understand how this works. Help them build community. But I think their goal is different. By the time you get to this level of education, you got a whole bunch of left hemisphere people who think rationally, step by step, scientific, the whole schmear. Unless you have someone in there who can understand group process and see the whole picture, and can build community, you have a bunch of individuals just doing whatever it is they're doing. And mostly it's called a committee I guess. [We both laughed at this]. You can spend a whole lot of time in a committee and never get anything done because you have a whole bunch of individuals who have their own ideas, as opposed to developing some kind of cohesion and work ethic.

Carolyn recognized the benefit of culturally-relevant organizations, something she had worked her whole life to support, but quickly endorsed that building community started with good leadership. I asked her what some of the qualities of good leadership were.

Well, patience because it's a growing thing, it's not something you just teach people like multiplication. You have to grow into it, and they have to give people time to grow into it, they have to be safe and be willing to

make mistakes. Because we learn from our mistakes and we get better, and

so you don't punish people when they make mistakes, you teach them what

they did wrong and teach them how to do it right and reinforce you

know... [reinforcement] is a system that everybody knows about.

She went on to say that people had to have buy-in toward a shared vision or goal in order to function as a team to create community. Good leadership and a cohesive team for building Native student support was an important benefit for students who had already proved they were tough and resilient but remained in need of mentorship.

So, the advantages of being a Native student is you probably had to be

tough enough to get there [to higher education] in the first place. Then,

hopefully they can survive it and pick themselves up. Some can't. [You

need] somebody who's paying attention to you, and providing you with

some structure, some quote 'moral guidance', decision making abilities,

solutions, problem-solving kinds of ideas. You have someone who helps

you with that whether it's someone in your church, someone in your club,

someone in your family. But if they just turn you loose and you have

nothing that can guide you, it is a hard time when they try to figure out

who they are, and how it's gonna work and if it's gonna work.

Representation was important to Carolyn in developing both good leadership and community.

I think for any university to try to deal with Native students without Native

faculty is whistling in the wind. Somebody has to understand what it is

like. And if you follow some very basic human ability of caring about

people, empathizing with people, listening, being able to try to put yourself

in more and learning about their culture, people respond to that no matter

what color you are. Kids have to be safe and feel like they fit. And they

have to feel supported.

Community building did indeed take effort. Carolyn noted this often meant way-makers

had to "swim upstream".

A bunch of us were invited back to NIH to talk about helping ethnic

minority students make it in programs, and it wasn't specific to

psychology, it was about how to help them be successful and there's a sort

of cynicism that I have because the university doesn't want to know about

those things. Because they're very good at doing what they do. Psychology

got very good at doing what it did, and [the psych department] has the

premier diversity program on campus. But nobody else cares about doing

that. And so, what do you say to people who are disinterested? Non-

believers?...There's another way to do this but they don't care because

that's not what their goals are. The whole idea of belonging, it's...I think

it's absolutely essential in education to teach about belonging and help

kids find a way of belonging and become good at making it work for them.

Our Voices...Together

The initial aims of this study were 1) to define and Indigenize sense of belonging

in Native American students' own words and from their own worldviews, 2) to determine

spaces and places where they do and don't feel belonging, and 3) to illustrate how

belonging or non-belonging impacts mental health and well-being, and by extension

academic success. Telling my participants' stories seemed easy in comparison to the task

ahead, which was presenting our shared knowledge in a cohesive and understandable

way. My participants gave so much of themselves and I trusted them. Perhaps the

problem now was that, as a doctoral student, I didn't yet trust myself. I sat with this a

while, and realized I hadn't yet prayed.

During my prayer I thought about my kayak trip down the Illinois river (in Osage,

ne-eng-wah-kon-dah or medicine stone river) a few days previous. As is common on the

Illinois, I had seen many great blue herons. I was used to seeing as many as three or four,

but that day I saw seven. One in particular stood observing me across from where I sat in

the chest-deep swirling water. He was on a mission to find his dinner, but he wasn't sure

if he could trust me not to interfere while he attended to his meal safely. I spoke to him

with respect in Tsalagi (Cherokee), "Osiyo, tsisqua. Osiyo, ginali. Tohiju? Tsayosihas?"

Hello bird, hello friend, how are you, are you hungry? He cocked his head to the side

curiously and resumed his search for atsadi (fish). He seemed to say to me, '"watch me,

watch how I do this". Tsisqua was slow, deliberate, and patient. He took his time, he

observed closely, he was focused. He trusted both the ama (water) and the atsadi to be

who they were, who they had always been, who they always would be. He trusted

himself. I thought about this and lit a braid of sweetgrass, another of the four traditional

medicines, and looked at the way each strand embraced one another. Each strand retained

its uniqueness even though it had belonging within the braid. A basket is much the same.

You can trace the weft and the warp of each reed with your fingers. Nothing is taken

away from the uniqueness of each reed when they become the basket. They are simply

stronger together. The same was true of our voices as participants. I needed to trust that knowledge.

Aims One and Two: Belonging in Space and Place

Belonging was as complex as we were. However, common threads emerged among our stories. Tying them all together was a need for connection— to our ancestors, our families, our communities, our own spirits, and to each other. Belonging, space, and place are presented as woven together because, in truth, they are.

Connection. Although seven themes emerged, connection served as an overarching theme or anchor-point for the six others. Connection was often referenced through specific relationships, spaces, and places. For example, connection to family and community was situated in the space and place of reservation lands or tribal communities. Connection could also be found in the few culturally relevant spaces located on campus such as the Native American room in the Taggart Student Center (a small room utilized by the Native American Student Council) or where sources of Native-identification such as Native or allied therapists, staff, and peers were accessible (i.e., specific therapy services, the MESAS faculty advisor's office, the Native American Living Learning Community, the Inclusion Center). Visible displays of Indigeneity and Indigenous culture in these spaces helped students locate them as places for connection.

Disconnection was often associated with places on the Logan campus that represented predominantly white spaces— which are the overwhelming majority of spaces— and associated with people in positions of power like university faculty, advisors, and staff. White peers also functioned as people that furthered disconnection. Indigenous peers were generally associated with connection, but students perceived

difficulties with connection between tribes or to one another; i.e., when they were less connected to their own identities as Indigenous people, or when there wasn't sufficient space to share experiences conducive to building connection. Cross-cultural connection was most effective when the non-Indigenous member, or person from a different tribal background, displayed a degree of cultural competence (e.g., knowledge of the student's cultural background or context, awareness of themselves and others as cultural beings, and skills such as empathy, listening and effective communication). Connection was also found through culturally relevant clubs and organizations that allowed participation in group activities and leadership roles. Autonomy, sovereignty, and collective goals were key aspects for membership in these organizations. The following six themes were what was needed to form strong, secure, beneficial connections (see Table 1).

Safety. Safety was a major component of connection that needed to be established prior to forming a sense of belonging. Students that had transferred from the Blanding campus endorsed safety at Blanding because of the comfort associated with familiarity of, and visibility of, other Indigenous people and their cultures. Students felt a decreased sense of safety on the Logan campus. However, they also seemed to feel they would need to put themselves at risk for decreased safety in order to gain an advanced education. For the less Native-identified student, safety was less of a concern broadly (as he had previously held a white identity) and more of a concern regarding the ability to share identity with more Native-identified peers[6]. For more Native-identified students safety ranged across the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual domains that we associate

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[6] Native-identified students are defined as those who had enculturation in communities of origin.

Table 1.

Definitions of belonging derived from our collective storying

Theme	Examples from Participant Stories
Connection	*"being involved"* (e.g., leadership, clubs, organizations, sports) *"I felt more connected", "that you can connect", "accepted"* *"spend time with [other Natives] and hear their experiences"* *"I don't feel alone", "you're in it, together", "able to network"* *"cohesion", "being each other's community"*
Safety	*"if I feel comfortable there", "I felt more comfortable"* *"I feel like I can go to them with things"* *"you feel safe", "[safety to] be who you are"* *"I know I can ask for help"* *"they're always there", "available", "accountability"* *"[can] tell my story"*
Acknowledgment	*"being acknowledged"* (e.g., faculty, in classrooms, on campus) *"I was enough", "[could be] authentic"* *"there's representation all over [the] campus"* *"having somewhere to turn where somebody is going to get it without you explaining"* *"[if] science respected traditional belonging"*
Respect	*"you just feel respected"* *"there'd be more like understanding"* *"I don't need to teach you"* (who I am culturally) *"being really considerate of others"* (open-minded) *"[not being in] competition with someone", "[not] judged"* *"[not having] to prove myself to other people"*
Presence	*"I had more familiar faces"* *"being belonged to our environment"* *"could see myself there"* *"they saw themselves reflected there"* *"when you incorporate this spirituality, you incorporate culture, you incorporate ceremony"*
Purpose	*"giving back"* *"sharing what you think is helpful, all the way around, and receiving what that person thinks is helpful"* (reciprocity) *"my struggles had meaning and purpose"* *"knowing your place in the universe"* *"What I'm doing now is meant for something"*
Growth	*"I feel motivated to be there"* *"to be more fully who I am", "evolves you"* *"[not] trying to be something that you're not"* *"a sense of wholeness"* *"places that like continuously feed you and make you grow and don't leave you feeling empty handed"*

with the Medicine Wheel[7]. There were specific concerns about physical safety from the threat of sexual and physical violence associated with trauma (e.g., personal and inter-generational). Trauma was also linked to racism, discrimination, prejudice, and bullying. Occupying space on the Logan campus seemed to increase hypervigilance toward these threats, although there were still concerns about safety in reservation communities. Emotional safety was a concern when there weren't spaces that allowed for vulnerability and healing congruent with students' worldviews, and again in trying to make connections with peers. In addition, epistemological violence (mental safety) was identified within the sciences and in the production and valuation of Indigenous knowledge. A need for spiritual safety was expressed multiple times in connection with receiving ceremony. Safety was also associated with connection to non-Indigenous people of color, and Indigeneity was not always a precursor to safety. Safety could be found in culturally competent relationships with people from many backgrounds.

Acknowledgment. Acknowledgment was either available or unavailable through multiple paths: with peers (e.g., white, Native, non-Native students of color, students with other marginalized identities); in classrooms particularly via faculty but also with student instructors (SIs), tutors, graduate students, and research labs; in relationships with advisors, campus staff, scholarship/financial aid organizations, and student support organizations; through representation among people in authority broadly; through representation among the general campus student population; in visibility or invisibility of Indigenous presence in campus marketing materials located in common spaces; and in specific academic disciplines such as those related to STEM. Acknowledgment felt like

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[7] The Medicine Wheel is a well-known symbol of holistic well-being among Native American communities and widely used in culturally-relevant Native mental healthcare models.

the capability of bringing oneself fully into spaces and places on campus and in professional disciples, a sort of ability for authenticity, and being "enough" regardless of level of acculturation or enculturation. Land acknowledgments were seen as respectful ways for universities to recognize Native peoples when they were done in collaboration with Native communities. The same was true of research where a lack of acknowledgment, or even refuting Indigenous identity, looked like the re-labeling or repurposing of Indigenous knowledge without the involvement of Native collaborators. Allocation of, and connection to, appropriate and sufficient resources (e.g., financial aid, housing, dedicated physical space) were also viewed as forms of acknowledgment.

Respect. Acknowledgment and respect were intimately connected, as were all of the themes, and both carried a subtheme of not having to teach others about your cultural background. However, respect seemed to capture the power imbalance inherent in needing to teach others the context for your personal experiences. Placing the onus of responsibility on students to explain themselves and the issues they faced relative to culture, race, or ethnicity was viewed as disrespectful. There were also blatant forms of disrespect mentioned by students such as refusal to acknowledge Indigenous kinship systems. For example, one student mentioned needing to care for her terminally ill brother who, in a Western view, was actually her nephew. The student shared that her professor refused to hear her request for accommodation because this was not viewed as an immediate family need. More Native-identified students regularly referenced having to prove the validity of their struggles or concerns to white faculty and being discouraged by faculty and advisors who viewed them as incapable of success or needing to prioritize education over family and spiritual responsibilities. Additionally, the importance of

ceremony and traditional healing was regularly undermined or unacknowledged by white faculty because it required students to be physically absent for long periods of time or disallowed use of technology, internet, or electricity needed for distance learning.

Presence. Presence, or the ability to be fully aware and invested in a space or place, were linked to familiarity and comfort. When students' cultural identities (and culturally-relevant objects within a space and place) were visible, students were able to "let their guard down" (i.e., they could be less observant and more present, or they experienced less hypervigilance). Students could see themselves in spaces and places where Indigeneity had presence and could imagine themselves as having success and forward movement toward their goals. Authentic and genuine cultural appreciation was viewed with gratitude. However, cultural appreciation could not be a "false show" of Indigeneity or viewed as putting their cultures on display. Demonstration of presence via cultural appreciation had to occur in collaboration with Native students and their communities to be respectful and relevant. If Indigenous presence was not respectful and relevant, or worse inaccurate, students were acutely aware of the incongruence between their own values and Western values– particularly regarding university actions toward a diverse and inclusive campus (i.e., individuals with Western views sought ownership and praise for inclusion of diverse cultures, rather than creating space for (re)claiming their existence).

Purpose. Across all participants, one of the strongest themes regarding connection was found in having meaning or a sense of purpose. Students shared that they understood they would have to sacrifice some aspects of themselves or their individual desires to achieve their goals through the mechanism of higher education, but there was a

line to be drawn as students could be asked to sacrifice too much. That line differed for individual students, but one clear demarcation line was loss of identity. Too often, a student's immediate goal became proving their worth because of their identity. This was the case if they were less Native-identified (i.e., proving credibility as a Native person), if they had been away from their community of origin for extended periods of time (i.e., proving they had sustained identity as a Native person), or in professional disciplines and classrooms where they had to be "twice as good" as their colleagues and peers (i.e., proving the value of being a Native person). The long-term and primary goal I heard again and again across all participants was that they sought an education to give back– whether this be to their families, communities, other Indigenous people, or to other people of color or marginalized communities. Purpose in academia was demonstrated through sharing and reciprocity– whether one-on-one, in smaller groups of people (e.g., talking circles, study groups, organizations), or through larger arenas linked to professional identities, research, and careers. For more Native-identified students there was concern that being away from their communities too long in order to achieve their degree would mean what they shared upon return to their families or community of origin would not be received as it was viewed as a "white man's education". If this were true, the goal would again become proving one's worth but this time to their communities.

At its core, giving back was a way of situating the student's larger purpose in the world or "place in the universe", and this place was located through determining their identity relative to their relations (e.g., other people, the spiritual, plant and animals, the Earth). Students sought to make larger changes for their people, but also for society as a whole. Some of these changes were identified as health care reform, decreasing health

disparities, advancements in biological sciences, advancements in education, mental health, and healing, and telling the untold stories of farm and agriculture workers previously drowned out by labor economies and capitalism. Most importantly, students needed to know that what they were doing *now*, the barriers they faced and their ability to overcome those barriers, were meant for something greater than themselves. Fulfilling one's purpose is commonly recognized in Indigenous communities as being medicine for the people and is considered a great honor.

Growth. When the previously mentioned elements were in place, participants could fully attend to growth. One student called this allowing your experiences to "evolve you" and added that change was a necessary feature of growth. Change could also be painful. Growth occurred whether the themes above were present or not, but without them change wasn't always toward the intended long-term goal of giving back or fulfilling one's purpose. Fully attending to growth meant you had a majority of the elements necessary for connection. Not having any or all of these pieces often meant students had to draw from their already limited or overtaxed resources to "make their own way", or create their own belonging, connection, or even safety. Participants consistently used words like "exhausted", "tired", or "ready to give up" when talking about the toll "making their own way" took on them.

True growth meant authenticity, as giving back had always been a way to fulfill one's purpose and they often expressed they had known this even as children. Growth meant you were in alignment with the stories your ancestors and families had handed down as guides for fulfilling one's purpose. Instructions for growth had already been woven into the fabric of their cultures, just like the spirit line (which I'll discuss more) in

the Navajo rug was woven in as a reminder to be humble and continually increase

learning. True growth led to motivation to increase learning and a sense of wholeness. As

one student put it, spaces and places that led to true growth were *"places that like*

continuously feed you and make you grow and don't leave you feeling empty handed".

This identified the problem at hand. Students were being asked to increase

learning, to grow personally and professionally, in an environment where growth was not

being reciprocated. Institutions of higher education were not learning. The people in them

made the same missteps, replicated the same mistakes, perpetuated the same ineffective

status quo, and even solidified this status quo through inequitable policies, practices, and

procedures. Higher education and the people in it did not apologize or even acknowledge

when these mistakes were made. Instead, they pointed back to the status quo as if it were

written in stone. This felt like hypocrisy in a space and place that openly verbalized that it

valued diversity and inclusion but failed to achieve it. All of the Native participants in

this study embraced and valued change and growth. The question was whether higher

education, particularly PWIs, felt the same.

Aim Three: Mental Health, Well-being, and Academic Success

A sense of belonging alleviated the isolation and loneliness associated with

increased mental health difficulties via positive connection. Not having a sense of

belonging, or being disconnected, contributed to increased mental distress, leaving the

university, or interpersonal difficulties both on campus and at home. A majority of the

participants noted the need for culturally-congruent healing and had either attended

therapy services in a Western setting, through Indian Health Services, or ceremony for

traditional healing. Mental health difficulties that were mentioned included: increased

stress, depression, anxiety, social anxiety, imposter syndrome, identity issues, trauma (including re-experiencing of trauma), interpersonal concerns, and low self-esteem. Gaining helpful counseling experiences in a Western setting through availability of a Native American counselor was mentioned by two participants. Barriers to effective counseling services included lack of availability of Native therapists, a lack of clarity about what to expect when engaging in services (e.g., that an intake was required prior to therapy, often with a person who was not the primary therapist), and a focus on determining the root problem rather than providing specific coping strategies or guidance toward resources. In their opinion, this was also true of Indian Health Services.

Some distinction was made between mental health services and services that promoted well-being. Mental health was viewed as working through the "thoughts and feelings" associated with or stemming from an identified problem. Well-being was associated with "how your spirit feels" and spirituality was noted as missing from many Westernized therapy settings. Both mental health and well-being could influence one another and were viewed as "conjoined" or "two sides of a coin". Although a distinction was made, there was still a connection between mental health and well-being. However, one participant described belonging as being more connected to overall well-being than mental health. Another participant shared wisdom handed down from her grandfather, "[he] says your whole body, your spirit, and everything is connected... bilagáanas like to separate it, but you know you're created as one... and he says, like you need to take care of your physical health, your mental health, [and] your spirit".

For the latter participant, her whole being wasn't healthy until she addressed her spiritual health even though she had previously sought out counseling services. Once her

spiritual health was aligned, everything else fell into place. The early-career psychologist participant agreed that many mental health services exclude the spiritual aspect of Indigenous healing. Overall, there was a sense among students that "no one really cares" about Native student's mental health until it impacted them academically, and that students had to attend to mental health and well-being on their own even though they often felt isolated or punished in doing so.

Poor mental health and a lack of well-being impacted students academically. They were emphatic about this. Students found it was harder to perform due to a lack of focus and ability to sustain concentration. They agreed there was less motivation to attend to coursework and complete their degrees. This is not something unique to Indigenous students but perhaps affects them exponentially due to the disparate lack of resources and connection. In Logan, students with poorer mental health and lack of well-being performed more poorly than they did in spaces where they felt a sense of belonging. They shared that their grades dropped from A's to C and below. They often failed and had to re-take courses which lengthened their stay in a place that did not contribute to belonging. This also impacted their families, and they were regularly asked why their education was taking so long and when they would return home; placing them in a state of tension between the demands of academics and the demands of family and community. This state of tension exacerbated their poor mental health. Some of the students shared this was a widely known reality for Indigenous students and they had heard very similar stories from their Indigenous peers. Academic success then, was often defined as having the tools and strategies necessary for overcoming barriers to achievement, engagement, and retention. This was often situated as an "overcoming" or resilience when faced with

barriers. They found they needed helpful, resourceful people to formulate new strategies and to gain access to tools for academic success.

Two major influences on belonging: Gatekeepers and way-makers.

Throughout every story I encountered, including my own, there were two major influences on the ability to form a sense of belonging: gatekeepers and way-makers (See Table 2). Gatekeepers were defined as people who created or increased barriers to belonging, particularly through academic achievement structures and access to healing practices. Way-makers were people who removed, and even empowered students to learn how to navigate or lessen the impact of, barriers to belonging in higher education. For every *one* way-maker available, there seemed to be *multiple gatekeepers*. Gatekeepers were viewed as repeat offenders as they had the power to dictate the fate of our students from class to class, and semester to semester. Students often encountered the same problems each academic year, with little or no change on the part of those with the authority and power to make change. Gatekeepers stated that equality, rather than equity, was their goal when denying students' requests for assistance; in other words, they wanted to be "fair". They pointed back to university rules, policies, and the status-quo as reasons for equality rather than considering the unique context of each student or structural barriers for Indigenous students broadly. White gatekeepers practiced gatekeeping as a standard across Indigenous students. Gatekeepers of color functioned more like collectors, meaning they mentored students based on their own perceptions of worth and value, by practicing selective way-making and favoritism.

Table 2.

Examples of gatekeeping and way-making viewed through a Tribal Critical Race Theory lens (TribalCrit; Brayboy, 2005)

Nine Tenets of TribalCrit Theory	Gatekeeping	Way-making
Colonization as Endemic	Maintains power structures associated with keeping students in marginalized status. Views relationships through indebtedness. De-values relationship building. Resists personal/institutional change. Driven by needs of institution or personal gain, prestige, or image.	Disrupts or dismantles power hierarchies. Views relationships as reciprocal. Values relationships built on collaboration, safety, trust, and sharing. Advocates for personal and institutional change. Stands "in the gap" for others. Driven by values and ethics.
Imperialism and White Supremacy	Demonstrates racist attitudes or behaviors that center whiteness as the means of success. Engages in microaggressions. Reinforces and perpetuates stereotypes. Growth based on financial or material gain through retention. Decreases worth and de-values the student.	Examines own biases and beliefs. Demonstrates varying degrees of cultural competence. Acknowledges racist attitudes and behaviors in education. Refuses to engage in stereotypes. Growth based on increasing human capital via students' intrinsic worth. Increases worth/value.
Liminal Spaces and Racialized Identities	Maintains position of students in a place of survival by reinforcing the status quo. Students must establish their existence. Minimizes resources for achieving goals. Siloed. Refuses interconnectedness. Failure is a problem of identity.	Promotes students' existence to others. Helps students thrive and engage in "becoming" to achieve their own goals. Maximizes resources for achieving goals. Interdisciplinary. Connects students to other way-makers. Success is a result of identity.
Sovereignty, Autonomy, Self-determination, Self-identification	Provides student with limited choice or options. Undermines right to self-govern. Views Indigeneity through a homogenous lens of Pan-Indianism. Minimizes presence/influence of culture.	Provides student with choices and options. Helps students develop new strategies when old ones are ineffective. Views Indigeneity as heterogenous. Works to understand culture of both student and university.
Meaning Through Indigenous Culture, Knowledge, and Power	Dis-empowers student. False (or minimal) appreciation of culture. Western knowledge is expectation. De-legitimizes student knowledge.	Empowers student. Elevates unpacking culture as crucial to success. Draws from student's knowledge. Helps student make or co-make meaning.
Problematic Goal of Assimilation	Focuses on standards. May put "culture on display" or virtue signal appreciation of	Focuses on potential. Engages in actions to promote true diversity and inclusion.

	culture. Views identity in terms of identification with the university. Individualistic. Competitive. Lacks connection.	Encourages individual and group identity exploration. Views identity as complex. Values collectivism. Encourages connection.
Understanding Lived Realities, Differences, Adaptability	Refuses worldviews incongruent with their own. Negates the context of students when considering struggles. Rarely listens or listens with their own goals in mind. Views students from a deficit approach. Closed-minded. Inflexible views of education or students. Assimilative.	Embraces worldviews different from their own. Incorporates the unique contexts of students when aiding in decision making. Does their own research into influence of context and culture. Listens with goals of the student at the forefront. Open-minded. Takes a strengths-based approach to helping. Adaptive.
Stories are Not Separate from Theory	Undermines and disallows Indigenous knowledge and wisdom. Re-labels knowledge to fit own understanding. Discourages use of Indigenous knowledge as "un-scientific", folk knowledge, or superstition. Views storytelling as overly subjective and without scientific basis.	Re-centers Indigenous knowledge. Uses terms appropriate to culture. Generates opportunities to promote Indigenous knowledge in professional disciplines. Views Indigenous knowledge as having scientific value. Understands Indigenous knowledge's contribution to society as a whole.
Theory and Practice are Connected	Students feel unsafe. Limits space for students to tell their stories. Imposes their own narrative on the story. Furthers inaccurate narratives about Indigenous peoples. Engages in the view of the "single story", all student experiences are the same. Invisibility or tokenism. Establishes victimry as central to the story. Students feel disconnected or lack belonging.	Students feel safe. Increases or gives up own space for students' stories. Encourages students to counter-narrative harmful stories or re-story once resources are in place. Connects students to each other, and others in the university, through beneficial and healing storying. Visibility and presence. Establishes survivance as central to the story. Students feel connected and have a sense of belonging.

Way-makers helped students connect to their identities, provided autonomy and choice,

helped them locate and utilize resources, and built relationships on foundations of trust

and safety. Participants viewed these relationships as spaces where they could be vulnerable, honest, and direct. Way-makers were accountable. They followed through and followed up with the resources and support they shared. Students found they had to teach way-makers far less about their historical context and modern understandings of what it meant to be a Native American person. This made room for the kinds of change and growth they needed to have a sense of meaning and purpose, and to fulfill their hopes of giving back to their communities. They did not have to assimilate in way-making spaces to have worth and value and this decreased the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual taxation associated with asking for help.

The spirit line: A way out or through. Although a new model of belonging was not the primary aim of this study, (I initially sought a culturally-relevant definition), one quickly came into being of its own volition. I considered drawing from my own knowledge in naming this model and instead chose a quote from a student participant that stood out as a way to verbalize what had been missing in previous conceptualizations of belonging. This was captured in Noquisi's reflection of "having the spirit in the circle". Having the spirit in the circle both names the model and is embodied in the model by the addition of a *ch'ihónít'i, or* spirit line, found in traditional Navajo rug weaving and basket making. The purpose of the *ch'ihónít'i* is to provide a way out of the weaving so the maker's spirit doesn't become trapped within the creation (Ahlberg-Yohe, 2012). Ahlberg-Yohe (2008) describes this as follows:

> Most weavers consider it a release mechanism, a pathway or way out, to
> release one's thinking within the rug. Unless one is put in, a weaver's
> thinking can become unclear and scattered. In the worse case, a weaver

will remain "inside" the rug, weaving her thoughts within the object. A

ch'ihomt'i is also a preventative measure, one that wards off the side

effects of excessive weaving and restores the health of the weaver. It may

also be added to release one's thinking toward the next rug and future

weavings (p. 379).

To an outsider, the *ch'ihónít'i* or spirit line might look like a mistake (an example can be

found in Appendix B). It is no mistake. Rather, it is a purposeful attempt to protect the

weaver from harm.

      Having the spirit in the circle. The large circle in our model represents the

education system (See Figure 5). The circle is not closed. It is intersected by and bisected

by the spirit line. The spirit line provides a way out or way through the education system.

When a student is asked to remain in survival mode, the spirit line becomes a way out to

a place of greater belonging; usually meaning a student leaves the university and returns

home. When a student is allowed to thrive and sustain themselves through acts of

survivance, the spirit line becomes a way through education to achieve one's higher

purpose. The dashed spirit line running from left to right indicates that gatekeepers and

way-makers may influence the spirit in making choices to find ways out or through. The

intersecting and bisecting lines create four quadrants indicative of the mental, emotional,

physical, and spiritual domains corresponding to the Medicine Wheel. At the center of

the circle is the basket we have been weaving. The basket represents the overarching

need for connection. Surrounding the basket are the six themes that emerged in relation to

connection: safety, acknowledgment, respect, presence, purpose, and growth. The

resulting hexagon is a reminiscent of the female Hogan (or hooghan, "place home"), a traditional Navajo dwelling place. The female Hogan housed families and was a place to shelter. In many traditional Navajo accounts, First Woman and First Man built the first Hogan, and Coyote— the Trickster— stole the fire from within (A. Thomas, *Diné*, personal communication, July 4, 2022). But those are Winter Stories, to be told another day.

Figure 5.

Having the spirit in the circle: An Indigenized model of belonging
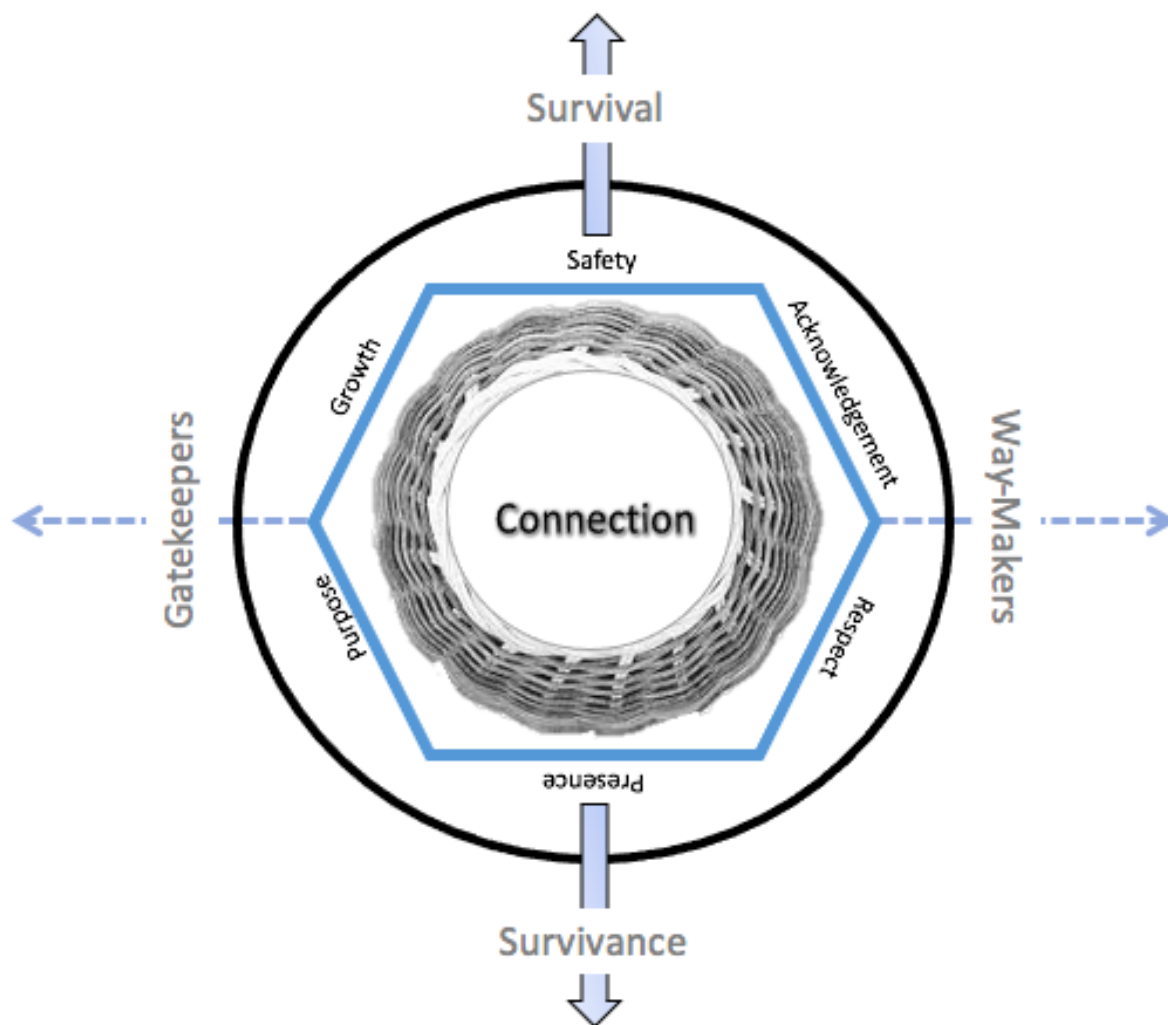
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

As I read, reread, and reflected on the narratives, I realized my participants choose this research because they believed they could help others be and become through the sharing of their stories. This is something they voiced unanimously when explaining why they agreed to participate. Thus, we had a shared vision of helping other students navigate belonging in academia and wondered how we could help the students who came after us avoid the pitfalls of non-belonging.

We all recognized in some form or fashion that we were *becoming*: becoming more aware of the weight of our educational experiences, the changes we experienced during acts of survival, and the ways in which we resisted assimilation to reach out toward survivance and growth. It also seemed we were becoming more self-confident that we were not the source of the problem. Rather, failures within the education system were the problem. *Externalizing the problem felt like a source of healing*. As weaver, I am cautious about the ethics or axiology of weaving, such as the values I hold, weaving toward the right purpose, and my own proficiency as weaver. I carefully weighed this push toward healing. As a psychologist in training, I understood this was not therapy. But it felt therapeutic. I imagined my experience in gathering their stories is what it feels like to finally "*have the spirit in the circle*". And this wasn't just healing for them. It was also healing me. This *was* ceremony (Wilson, 2008). This was connection: where the need for safety, acknowledgment, presence, respect, purpose, and growth was reciprocated.

Crucial aspects of building the basket together included: establishing trust; knowledge of participants' cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds and worldviews;

awareness of each other as cultural beings; open-mindedness; listening to hear; naming and communicating experiences together; sharing and reciprocity; autonomy; and validation. During the telling of their stories, I witnessed participants gauging how much they would need to teach me for me to truly understand their experiences. They also gauged my openness to receiving what they had to share. Once we had established these unspoken ground rules, they became vulnerable with me, curious, willing to explore and name what they previously had no words for because *no one had ever really asked them what it meant to belong*. Interview sessions that were meant to last thirty minutes lasted an hour. Hour-long interview sessions lasted ninety minutes or more.

The Basket

On a firm foundation of trust, we began to build toward the first aim of the study, to define and Indigenize sense of belonging in higher education. Belonging was ultimately defined as feelings of connection and the elements necessary for connecting. I wondered about this within the conceptual framework of belonging and in relation to what Noquisi had said about "re-labeling" Indigenous knowledge to fit Western science. As Indigenous researchers we must be careful that we are not "grafting" meaning onto concepts already known by Indigenous people since time immemorial (Ahenakew, 2016). Connection was reflective of the interconnection expressed in Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Interconnection was an epistemological truth and spiritual way of being for every tribal affiliation I had encountered. Belonging, on the other hand, held connotations of property. Bronson had mentioned that he felt Indigenous culture did not "belong to [him]". More Native-identified students called belonging "being belonged" as if it was more important for them to be acknowledged in a space and place than to own a space or

place. I was finding there were many hints of ownership and owning in the spaces

between those phrases. For Native students, belonging— the "belief that one is important

and matters to others in an organization" (O'Meara et al., 2017)— from a Western

academic view seemed contingent on proving worth, having value, and the ability to "fit

in". This was echoed in academic structures where students had to minimize or explain

identity to receive help and resources, and in practices bent on academic retention rather

than building a community worth connecting to.

Second, we named the spaces and places where we did and did not feel belonging.

Spaces where we belonged were places filled with culturally-identifiable meaning-

making, where we could share our stories and experiences, and where we could be fully

ourselves regardless of level of enculturation or acculturation. These were spaces were

we could find the elements of belonging needed to form connection and included

physical places that housed the few culturally-relevant clubs and organizations available.

Connection to meaning-making spaces helped students persist, explore their personhood,

and promoted cultural integrity and continuity (Tachine et al., 2017). These spaces also

boosted racial self-esteem and empowered them to give back to their academic

communities (Oxendine et al., 2020; Windchief & Joseph, 2015; Deloria & Wildcat,

2001). They could see themselves in these spaces and imagine themselves succeeding in

their academic endeavors (Prince, 2014; Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). There was a clear

need for more of these spaces as the places currently available were not enough. When

students found a space for belonging it had to be utilized for multiple purposes and

participants indicated that these multiple roles of space and place often conflicted with

one another (i.e., use of social space made it difficult to utilize a location for studying,

and vice versa). They indicated that they would frequent more dedicated space, like a tribal center, if one were available; and that this would help alleviate the isolation and loneliness associated with mental distress and academic difficulties. The majority of the Logan campus, which is overwhelmingly white space, generated a feeling of not belonging. Places of belonging were spaces that were "meant for us", so by extension the majority of campus was not meant for them. It truly was another world they were inhabiting. And while they had some experiences of preparation for the academic aspects of existing in Logan, they lacked preparation for the historical, political, economic, and social aspects of adapting which narrowed their academic choices to assimilation or departure (Brayboy, 2005).

And third, we verbalized the mental health struggles that we faced as Indigenous students in higher education, how this contributed to our well-being, and how it all came together to determine whether or not we would remain in education or depart to find places where we did belong. Students who had been able to cope with the transition to Logan campus from their communities of origin were finding their way through the education system despite the disparate amount of barriers that seemed placed in the way. According to the participants, those who did not have coping strategies returned home to where they could find a sense of belonging. Students related they dealt with increased stress, depression, anxiety, social anxiety, imposter syndrome, identity issues, trauma (including re-experiencing of trauma), interpersonal concerns, and low self-esteem. They sought culturally-relevant and appropriate mental health care and ceremony for coping but also encountered barriers to receiving it. Mental healthcare that was available often missed the spiritual component of identity needed for true healing. Disconnection from

identity led to hopelessness (LaFromboise et al., 2010), poorer self-esteem (Barrett, 2019; Eaton et al., 2012), a lack of optimism that they would ever reach their goals (Barrett, 2019; Phinney, 1991), and poorer psychosocial functioning (Jones & Galliher, 2007). Students attempted to draw from their identity for strength and resiliency (Keith et al., 2016; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2013; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010) to counteract the effects of increased mental distress but felt punished for doing so.

What We Carry

In weaving their stories together, I noticed that many of the participants "first experiences" with higher education began before they attended a physical university. They unanimously stated that higher education was expected of them by parents, educators, and peers as a means for success at very young ages. "Especially being a Native American, like everyone pushes that on you... so, I felt like I wasn't really given a choice" (Cheyenne). However, their first experiences with lack of belonging came after high-school and a crucial moment of identity development (for Bronson, who went straight into a four-year education), or after making the transition from a two-year education at the Blanding campus to four-year programs at the predominantly white campus at Logan. Native students who had attended Blanding had felt belonging there but lost that sense of belonging in Logan.

Difficulties with belonging, and coping with non-belonging, were often addressed alone as there was a lack of understanding in academia broadly of what it meant to be an Indigenous student, much less and Indigenous student who didn't feel belonging. More specifically, a lack of understanding of Indigeneity existed on campus among faculty, staff (i.e., scholarship offices, advisement), counseling service providers, tutors, student

instructors, and peers in classrooms. For the less Native-identified student (Bronson), who had always held a white identity previously, difficulty with belonging came through family due to the tensions he held about maintaining family homeostasis. Family homeostasis also came into question for more Native-identified, or enculturated, students as family members often did not understand the requirements that academics and university life placed on students. All student participants attempted to connect or stay connected to their cultural identities through seeking out stories– whether these were traditional teachings handed down through grandparents or contemporary stories with themes of resilience and overcoming struggles. Stories came from a variety of places ranging from home communities and family, online sources and print media, and Indigenous peers.

Students also sought connection through culturally relevant clubs and organizations, the Inclusion Center on campus, and the singular shared space Native students have allocated to them in the Taggart Student Center. This space is currently the size of a small office, and was down-sized (according to a non-student participant) when the previously larger space it occupied was taken over to create a lab. When these spaces weren't available or enough to cover the demands of both social space and study space, students found isolated spaces like the basement of Old Main or places in nature where they could be "away from other people" (Faustine). They came to campus only when they had to for their classes and coursework, and then quickly returned to their housing. For those that came from reservation communities, there was a longing to spend more time with family; but this was rarely possible due to physical distance from their home of origin, the demands of their programs and faculty, or lack of transportation and finances.

All participants wished they had someone to help them navigate higher education. Although there were varying degrees of familiarity among parents with higher education (e.g., some technical schooling, associate degrees, or uncompleted bachelor's degrees), participants agreed their parents gave them what information they could but lacked the specific knowledge or resources needed to help them in their current roles as four-year students. They voiced that education had "changed" since the days when their parents were students, as had the financial and social stressors. Thus, any parental information seemed outdated and less useful. Keeping in mind that these were all students who had been retained by the university (i.e., none of these students had dropped out), they all identified someone in the education system that had mentored and encouraged them to achieve their academic goals. We defined these people as way-makers.

Way-makers were most often an advisor, advocate, program coordinator (i.e., Upward Bound, TRIO, Student Support Services, or specific scholarship advisor), faculty member, or research mentor that saw their "potential" and encouraged them to develop their skills and talents. Sometimes this mentor was a high school advisor or counselor. For students that came from Blanding, most of these way-makers were employed at Blanding; far fewer way-makers were identified at the Logan campus. Way-makers at the Logan campus were often graduate students and teaching assistants, or staff employed by the Inclusion Center or through MESAS, and occasionally they were an empathetic faculty member. All of these way-makers demonstrated some level of cultural competence; knowledge of students' background and cultural context, awareness of themselves as cultural beings in a university with Western values, and skills such as communication and resource gathering. Students also seemed to want to be way-makers

for each other through sharing resources. But resources were difficult to identify, or didn't exist in a centralized location, alongside an interesting disconnect between students from different tribes that eliminated knowledge-sharing as a possibility. Way-makers were also family members early in a student's education, but as time wore on family members became frustrated at the demands that education made on their student.

Gatekeeping, often discussed in communications literature as people or systems controlling the flow of information (Deluliis, 2015), was the most profound reason why students failed to engage, persist, or allow themselves to be retained by the university. (Note, my use of the word gatekeeper in this study is not positive. There are some psychological interventions such as Gatekeeper Training for suicide prevention that are positive). Gatekeepers could be anyone, even individuals that were tribally affiliated. It was the lack of relationship or harmful relationship with the individual that dictated whether or not gatekeeping was present. I again point to Wilson (2008), who asserts that our relationships do more than shape our reality. Relationships become our reality. And the reality was that students were encountering unacceptable numbers of gatekeepers, as well as ongoing gatekeeping by what I earlier termed as 'repeat offenders'. Gatekeepers shut doors to educational content (e.g., refusing to let a students take a test because of a late assignment thereby failing them, telling a student they weren't capable of a demanding degree) and to resources (e.g., letting a tribal scholarship fall through the cracks because of a missing phone number when all students receive a university email address). Access to resources seemed to be the number one way gatekeepers controlled the flow of information, and the number one way that way-makers undid the harms gatekeepers had done. Gatekeepers increased the invisible labor of students. Way-makers

decreased or shared the work. Students felt exhausted from this invisible work compounded by the weight of academic demands and family responsibilities. This was a burden their white peers were not asked to carry.

Human (Be)Coming

Gvlvquodi digoliyesgi...earlier in this heartwork, I spoke at length regarding the need for an in-between research paradigm because I wanted desperately to reach students that continually fall through the cracks. I want to tell you about what I found in the in-between spaces.

I found connection.

I found meaning.

I found purpose.

I always had the vague idea that I would continue my journey into academia to increase true diversity and inclusion among our universities through elevating the unheard voices. But I do not have sufficient words to describe the whirlwind of emotions I felt in hearing my participants recount their narratives. It did indeed generate a re-storying of my original experiences. I had many great moments of clarity in which I did not feel alone. (There's a difference between knowing you aren't alone and *really feeling* you aren't alone). The connection I experienced wasn't just solidarity in our collective pain and struggle. It was joy and elation at the ideas these students had for how they could help their communities. The leadership they demonstrated. The research and writing they engaged in. Their outreach to others after our discussions. Their intelligence, commitment, and strength shone brightly. In the beginning of this story, I had imagined myself as Grandmother Spider going to get the fire to bring it back to her people. I found

the fire. But there is also a fire in these students to succeed and fulfill their purpose in the world. Imagine the changes we could make if we could only help them make their way.

What was surprising was the difficult conversation with Noquisi about *making our own way*. It was what we had learned how to do to adapt to the world of education. It was what we had to do when we felt pulled between two worlds. I had felt this in developing the research paradigm for this study. I felt pulled between legitimizing my knowledge as an Indigenous person and credentialing myself as an academic scholar. It was the same old tension of "too white" or "too Native" and I had played it out again in my work. I felt the weight of colonial imposition in that phrase. It was woven throughout my researcher journal and reflections time and again. But what choice was there? We are peoples that have to constantly assert and reaffirm our existence in a society that rarely acknowledges us or shows us respect. What started out as making my own way became a translation process. It wasn't about changing our core teaching of interconnectedness but about making it relevant and relatable to an education system that currently holds a preponderance of power and authority over our ability to live meaningful lives.

Limitations of the Study

When I saw we are *peoples* that have to assert our existence, I mean it. We are not one set of people. In conducting this study, I had to be aware of the differences and similarities in our worldviews and I hope that I was able to honor them all in meaningful ways. Researchers that study issues that impact Indigenous peoples must be aware of the heterogeneity of Indigenous cultures as well as how their own worldviews impact the research and the participants. This study was limited in that it only provided a small view of the many varied perspectives that exist among Indigenous communities. Universities

must do their own research on whose ancestral lands they reside upon, and which tribal affiliations are represented among the communities they inhabit, as well as the many communities represented in the campus population. Another limitation was found in needing a clearer understanding of how Native identity was represented in terms of bicultural identity, acculturation and enculturation, or across constructs like collectivism and interdependence (Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack, 2013). Participants gave many clues to these factors in their narratives , and sometimes explicitly stated them, but the scope of the guiding questions for the current study was not sufficient to hear how they explained their own identity in these terms without ambiguity. For example, Cheyenne identified as a Navajo woman with connection to her language and traditions but later mentioned that students who were "more traditional" would likely have a harder time developing a sense of belonging.

Future Directions: Transformative Practices

Institutions of higher education need to embrace change as Indigenous students often embrace change; with the goal of giving back to the community and society as a whole. Universities that do not awaken to the potential of a more inclusive campus environment where Indigenous partnerships can be built are likely to get left behind. A surprising influx of universities are acknowledging the need for reconciliation of historical harms and are committing themselves to action through tuition waivers and the establishment of dedicated spaces and places in which to increase Indigenous personhood. Some of these way-making universities are located in states adjacent to Utah and closer to students' originating communities (Carrillo, 2022; Weissman, 2022). I hypothesize that USU may see Native student enrollment decline as students weigh

options for attending universities that offer greater culturally-relevant support and

resources and are located closer to home. That would be a great loss to the university. In

spite of their fewer demographic numbers and the less than welcoming environments they

encounter, Indigenous peoples are leading the way for innovative work in the sciences

from space to climate change to medicine. We've always been innovators. For example,

if you took an aspirin today you can thank an Indigenous person (Weatherford, 2010).

Universities also have a lot to learn about the elements needed for connection

voiced by students in this study. Interdependence among organizations, adaptability,

shared governance, awareness of values, a "culture of risk", exploration of knowledge

gaps, vision, buy-in, and enhanced relationships with students through acknowledgment

of the intersections of race, power, and colonization are crucial for institutional change in

systems of education (Kezar, 2011; Hrabowski, 2011; Pasque, Khader, & Still, 2017).

One might argue that universities need to find ways to place the "spirit" back in their own

circles within the education system. Listed below are some offerings, based on

participants wisdoms that emerged through our collective storying. Please look to them

for actionable ways to commit to transformative change (see Table 3). It is imperative

that each focus area be attended to in collaboration *with* Indigenous communities and not

for them. Universities can do this by using a Cultural Safety framework (Wepa, 2003,

2004; Williams, 1999; Brascoupé & Waters, 2009), which originated from nursing and

public health literature among Maori populations in New Zealand. Cultural Safety

procedures and protocols could easily be adapted alongside Indigenous communities for

use with these focus areas. Cultural Safety is grounded in awareness of power imbalances

and respectful engagement.

Table 3.

Recommendations for institutional change and growth gathered from participant stories.

Focus Areas	Action Items
Building Connection for Indigenous Students	Campus-wide Acknowledgment and Reconciliation Efforts
	Increasing Dedicated Spaces for Indigenous Students
	Wider Reach of Cultural Competence Trainings
	Opportunities for Cross-Cultural and Intertribal Interaction
Identifying and Increasing Visibility of Way-makers	Tribal Liaisons: Financial Aid, Admissions, and Advising
	Community-to-College Bridge Programs
	Parent and Community Outreach
	Increased Representation across Campus
Accountability for Gatekeepers	Renewed Focus on Equity Rather than Equality
	Grievance Process for Students Experiencing Gatekeeping
	Decrease the Silos Built Around Academic Departments
	Promote Interdependence as a System of Check and Balances
Accessibility of Academic Resources	Central Location for Resource Gathering and Distribution
	Tuition Coverage Commensurate with Progressive Universities
	Commitment to Sustaining Existing Programs: ex. MESAS
	Graduate and PhD Bridge Programs
Mental Health Resources that Encourage Well-Being	Use of More Holistic Measures of Health and Well-being
	Process Group/Talking Circles for Navigating Identity
	Training for Service Providers on Culturally-Relevant Issues
	Availability of Indigenous Providers and Providers of Color
Institutional Change	Acknowledgment Privileging Associated With Being a PWI
	Funds Obtained Via Land Grant Status Allocated Toward Support
	Shared Governance with Tribal Stakeholders
	Commitment to Increasing Way-making/Decreasing Gatekeeping
Institutional Growth	Indigenous Presence in DEI Initiatives Via Recruitment
	Indigenous Presence among Faculty/Staff
	Development and Implementation of a Campus Tribal Center
	Alignment Between Expressed DEI Values and Actual Behaviors

From the Navajo Beauty Way *(Aspen Institute, 2022)*

Hózhóogo naasháa doo. Shitsijí' hózhóogo naasháa doo. Shikéédéé

hózhóogo naasháa doo. Shideigi hózhóogo naasháa doo. T'áá altso

shinaagóó hózhóogo naasháa doo. Hózhó náhásdlíí'. Hózhó náhásdlíí'.

Hózhó náhásdlíí'. Hózhó náhásdlíí'

Today I will walk out, today everything negative will leave me.

I will be as I was before, I will have a cool breeze over my body.

I will have a light body, I will be happy forever, nothing will hinder me.

I walk with beauty before me. I walk with beauty behind me.

I walk with beauty below me. I walk with beauty above me.

I walk with beauty around me. My words will be beautiful.

In beauty all day long may I walk.

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APPENDIX A: GUIDING QUESTIONS

A1: Guiding Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Students

(these may be used whole or in part as needed to prompt relational and rich discussion)

1. Tell me a story about your first experience with higher education.

    a. Tell me a story from your culture that you connect to your *journey* in higher ed.

2. Can you help me understand who taught you how to navigate higher education?

3. Did you have certain people in your life who taught you how (family, friends, community members, teachers, peers, etc.) and what were your relationships with them?

    a. If not, were there people you wish had taught you?

4. How do you understand sense of belonging in higher education?

5. How did/do you know if you belong? What does that feel like?

6. Tell me about places and spaces where you feel you belong and why?

    a. Tell me about places and spaces where you feel you don't belong and why?

7. How do you think belonging impacts your mental health and well-being?

    a. How do you think belonging impacts your ability to succeed in higher education?

8. Tell me about some of your successes in higher education and whether these successes are (or are not) tied to feeling like you belong.

A2: Guiding Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Non-Students

(these may be used whole or in part as needed to prompt relational and rich discussion)

1. Tell me a story about your first experience with helping students navigate higher education.

    a. Tell me a story from your culture that you connect to what it's like to make the *journey* through higher ed.

2. Can you help me understand who you think is most likely to help students navigate higher education?

3. Based on your own experiences, did you have certain people in your life who taught you how (family, friends, community members, teachers, peers, etc.) and what were your relationships with them?

    a. If not, were there people you wish had taught you?

4. How do you understand sense of belonging in higher education?

5. How did/do you know if students feel like they belong?

6. Tell me about places and spaces where you feel Native students are most likely to have experiences of belonging and why?

    a. Tell me about places and spaces where you feel they might not experience belonging and why?

7. How do you think belonging impacts students' mental health and well-being?

    a. How do you think belonging impacts students' ability to succeed in higher education?

8. Tell me about some of your own successes as a student in higher education and whether these successes were (or were not) tied to feeling like you belonged.

APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTAL VISUALS

B1: An example of a *ch'ihónít'i* or spirit line in Navajo rug weaving (from Ahlberg-Yohe, 2008).
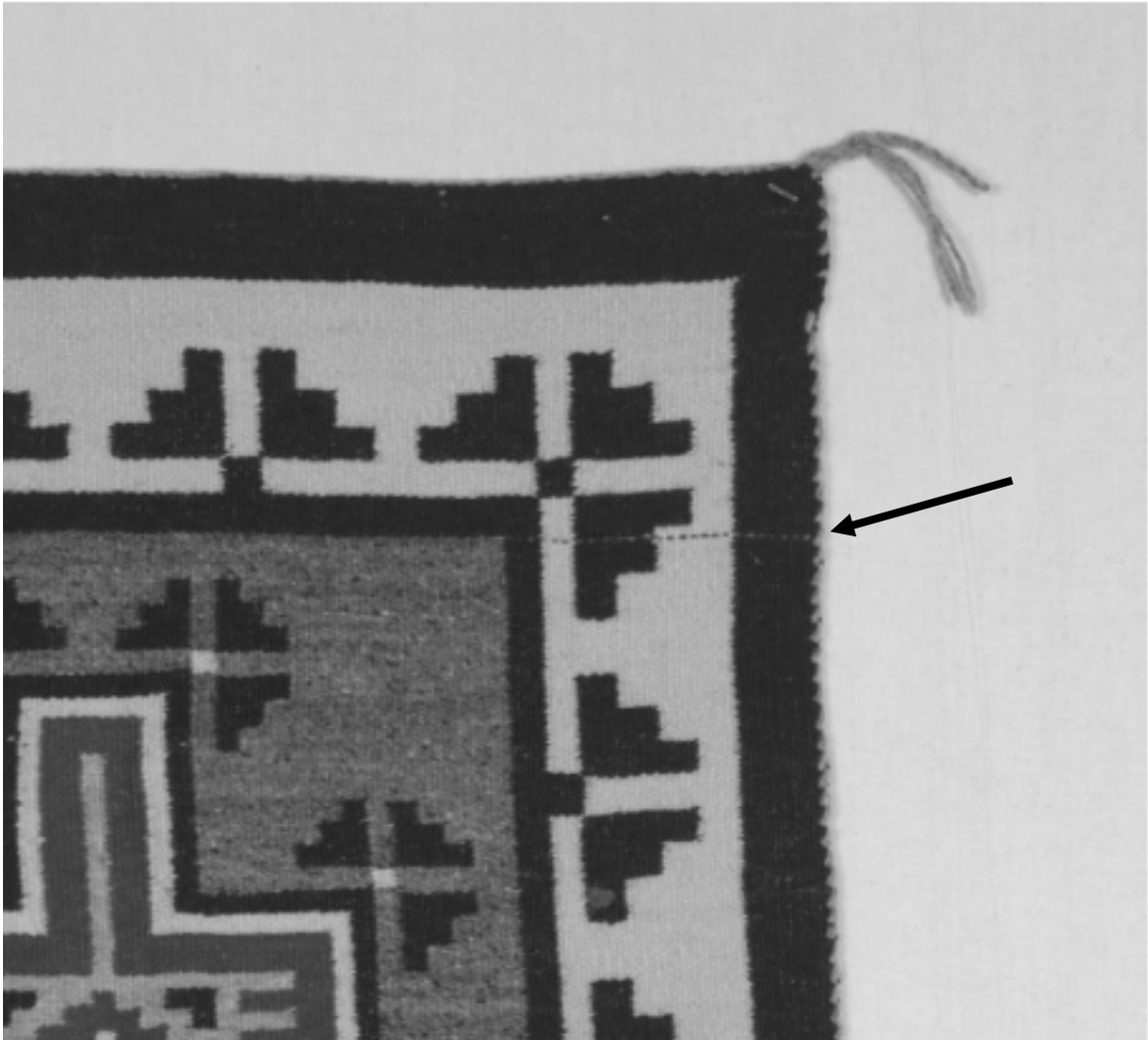
B2: Example of Cherokee Double-Walled Basket Weaving

A double-weave basket is two baskets with one inside the other, woven together at the rim. The weaver begins at the base of the inside basket and works upward to the rim. At the rim, the cane is bent downward, and the outside is woven from the top to the base, which makes the basket sturdier. (Cherokee National Treasure Vivian Cottrell, courtesy of the Cherokee Phoenix; Chavez, 2017)

CURRICULUM VITAE

Devon S. Isaacs
Citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma

Education

2017-2022   **Doctoral Student, Combined Clinical/Counseling Ph.D. Program**
Utah State University, Logan, UT
Multicultural Emphasis
Dissertation Proposal: "Together, Our Voices Will Strengthen the
Weaving: Using Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry to Indigenize
Sense of Belonging in Higher Education"

2020   **Master of Science, Combined Clinical/Counseling Psychology**
Utah State University, Logan, UT
Thesis: "Rumination and Quality of Life Among Northern Plains Indians"

2016   **Bachelor of Arts, Psychology, summa cum laude**
Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, OK
Humanities Minor

Fellowships

2019-2022   **Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship**
The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

2017-2021   **Presidential Doctoral Research Fellowship (PDRF)**
Utah State University, Logan, UT

2016-2017   **SGCoE Post-Baccalaureate Fellowship**
Seven Generations Center of Excellence in Native Behavioral Health
Center for Rural Health, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND

Academic Honors and Awards

2022   Society of Indian Psychologists, Graduate Student Award
2021   Joseph E. Trimble and Jewell E. Horvat Award for Distinguished
Contributions to Native and Indigenous Psychology for a Student
American Psychological Association, Division 45
2021   K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award
Association of American Colleges and Universities
2020   A. Toy Caldwell-Colbert Distinguished Student Service Award
American Psychological Association, Division 45
2019   AISES Winds of Change Student Spotlight
2019   Presidential Doctoral Fellow Student Spotlight
2019   Keepers of the Fire, Cedar Award
American Psychological Association, Division 35, Section 6

Clinical Experience

2022-2023   **Psychological Intern**
University of Missouri Counseling Center, Columbia, MO

2021-2022   **Clinical Trainee/Practicum Student**
USU Student Health and Wellness

2020-2021   **Clinical Graduate Assistant**
USU Counseling and Psychological Services

2019-2020   **Clinical Trainee/Practicum Student**
USU Counseling and Psychological Services, Logan, Utah

2018-2019   **Clinical Trainee**
Sorenson Center for Clinical Excellence, Logan, Utah

Academic and Research Experience

2018-2022   **Lead Facilitator**
Howard Hughes Inclusive Excellence Grant
Mentoring and Encouraging Academic Success (MESAS)
TEACH Training: Teaching cultural competence skills to faculty, staff,
graduate students, and residence life serving Native American students

SU 2020   **Graduate Research Assistant**
Seed Program to Advance Research Collaborations (SPARC)
Cultivating Connections: Designing Field Experiences to
Develop Sixth Graders' Cultural Competence
Supervised by Dr. Breanne Litts and Dr. Melissa Tehee

SU 2020   **Learning Designer for TEACH Training**
Supervised by Dr. Breanne Litts and Dr. Melissa Tehee
Funded by the Office of Research at USU

2019-2020   **Project Facilitator/Researcher**
Cultivating Connections: Designing Field Experiences to
Develop Sixth Graders' Cultural Competence
Supervised by Dr. Breanne Litts and Dr. Melissa Tehee
Funded by the Office of Research at USU

2019   **Project Facilitator/Curriculum Development**
SPARC: Cultivating Connections
Pre-Field Experience Lesson Planning to Develop Sixth Graders'
Cultural Competence: "Exploration Nation- Tribal Sovereignty"

2018-2020   **Training Developer and Lead Researcher**

Training for Educators Advancing Cultural competence in Higher Education (TEACH)
Tohi Lab, Utah State University
Supervised by Dr. Melissa Tehee
Funded by Howard Hughes Inclusive Excellence Grant

2018-2020   **Mentoring and Encouraging Student Academic Success (MESAS) Team Member**
Native American Living Learning Community (NA-LLC)
TEACH Cultural Competence Training
Outreach and Program Support

2018-2020   **Graduate Research Assistant**
Mentoring and Encouraging Student Academic Success (MESAS)
Tohi Lab, Utah State University
Supervised by Dr. Melissa Tehee
Funded by Howard Hughes Inclusive Excellence Grant

SU 2018   **Research Mentor**
Native American Summer Research Program (NASMP)
Project: Journey Maps- Path to Education

2017-2018   **Graduate Research Assistant**
Native American Mental Health Research
Society of Indian Psychologists Retreat and Convention
Tohi Lab, Utah State University
Supervised by Dr. Melissa Tehee

2016-2017   **Research Fellow**
Seven Generations Center of Excellence in Native Behavioral Health/
North Dakota INBRE, University of North Dakota
Supervised by Dr. Jacqueline Gray
Wac'in Yeya, The HOPE Project

Scholarly Publications (* indicates peer review)

*Tehee, M., Killgore, R., Mack, S., **Isaacs, D.S.**, & Ficklin, E. (2021). When justice does not work: A solution focused approach to violence against Indigenous women. *Wisconsin Journal of Law, Gender, & Society, 36*(1), 33-58.

*Straits, K.J.E., Green, J., **Isaacs, D.S.**, Tehee, M. & Smith, M. (2021). *Leading through collective resilience: Creating an Indigenous mental health response to climate change.* In H. Weaver (Ed.). *The Routledge international handbook of Indigenous resilience* (1st edition), 314-330. Routledge.

*Ficklin, E., Tehee, M., Killgore, R., **Isaacs, D.S.**, Mack, S., & Ellington, T. (2021). Fighting for our sisters: Community advocacy and action for

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. *Journal of Social Issues, special issue on Decolonial Approaches to the Psychological Study of Social Issues, 78*(1), 53-78. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12478

*Isaacs, D.S., Tehee, M., & Gray, J. (2021). Rumination and quality of life among Northern Plains Indians. *Psychological Services.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000547

*Litts, B., Tehee, M., Baggaley, S., Jenkins, J., **Isaacs, D.S.**, Hamilton, M., & Yan, L. (2020). Culturally disruptive research: A critical (Re)engagement with research processes and teaching practices. *Information and Learning Sciences, 121*(9-10), 769-784.

*Isaacs, D.S., Killgore, R., Mack, S., Ficklin, E., Ellington, T., & Tehee, M. (2020). All you have to do is "ASK": An Indigenous approach to holistic wellness in academia. W*omen, Gender, and Families of Color, Special Issue- Crosstalk: Graduate Students of Color Reflect on Lessons Lived and Learned in the Academy, 8*(2), 119-125.

*Isaacs, D.S., Tehee, M., Green, J., Barrett, T. & Straits, J.K.E. (2020). When Psychologists take a stand: Barriers to trauma response services and advocacy for Native American communities in crisis. *Trauma, Advocacy, and Social Movements: A Special Issue of the Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, 21*(4), 468-483.

*Isaacs, D.S. & Young, A.R. (2019). Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW): Bringing Awareness through the Power of Student Activism. *Journal of Indigenous Research*, *7*(1). https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir/vol7/iss1/2

*Gray, J.S., Schrader, L., **Isaacs, D.S.**, Smith, M.K., & Bender, N. (2019). Wa'cinyeya: Hope among American Indian Youth. *Journal of American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, *26*(2), 151-171.

*Gray, J.S., **Isaacs, D.S.**, & Wheeler, M.J. (2019). Culture, resilience, and Indigenist Feminism to help Native American girls thrive. In T. Bryant Davis (Ed.), *Multicultural Feminist Therapy with Adolescent Girls of Color*, 43-77. American Psychological Association Press. Washington, D.C.

*Tehee, M., **Isaacs, D.** & Domenech-Rodriguez, M. (2019). The elusive construct of cultural competence. In L. T., Benuto, F. Gonzales, & J. Singer, (Eds.), *Handbook for Cultural Factors in Behavioral Health: A Guide for the Helping Professional,* 11-24. Springer Publishing.

Selected Scholarly Presentations

Isaacs, D.S., Tehee, M., Killgore, R., Ficklin, E., & Yazzie, J. (2022, Jan.). *Knowledge-Silencing in the Academy and Beyond: Disrupting Colonial Systems of*

Oppression in Research Spaces. National Multicultural Summit, 2022 Bi-Annual Convention.

Mack, S., Ficklin, E., **Isaacs, D.S.,** Killgore, R.M., Tehee, M., & Ellington, T. (2021, June*Fighting for Our Sisters: Community Advocacy and Action for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.* Canadian Psychological Association, Annual Convention, Virtual.

Yan, L., Litts, B., Colleni, M., **Isaacs, D.S.,** Tehee, M., Baggaley, S, & Jenkins, J. (2021, April). *(Re)presenting nature: Sixth graders' place-based field trip experience through restorying.* International Society of the Learning Sciences.

Litts, B. K., Tehee, M., Hamilton, M., Jenkins, J., **Isaacs, D. S.,** Baggaley, S., & Yan, L. (2021, April). *Culturally Disruptive Design Research: An Ethical and Cultural Methodological Shift to Support Partnership Work.* Paper at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting: Virtual Conference.

Yan, L., **Isaacs, D. S.,** Colleni, M., Jenkins, J., Baggeley, S., Litts, B. K., & Tehee, M. (2021, April). *Connecting with the Land: The Human and Nature Relationships Emerged from Six-Graders' Field Trip Experience.* Poster presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting: Virtual Conference.

Isaacs, D.S., Yan, L., Tehee, M., Litts, B., Baggaley, S., & Jenkins, J. (2021, April). *Beyond the Field Trip: Multimodal, Place-based Learning Enhances Learners' Experiences with Indigenous Lands.* Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Annual Conference (Virtual).

Killgore, R., Mack, S. A, **Isaacs, D. S.**, & Ficklin, E., & Tehee, M. (2021, April). *Violence Against Indigenous Women: Restoring Resilience.* Paper presented at the World Congress on Intergenerational Trauma, Virtual Conference.

Tehee, M., Killgore, R., Mack, S., **Isaacs, D.S.**, & Ficklin, E. (2021, Feb.). *When justice does not work: A solution focused approach to violence against Native women in Indian Country.* Paper presented at the Confronting Violence Against Indigenous Women and Peoples Symposium, hosted by the Wisconsin Journal of Law, Gender & Society, Virtual.

Litts, B.K., Tehee, M., Hamilton, M., Yan, L., **Isaacs, D.S.**, Jenkins, J., & Baggaley, S. (2020, November). *Toward a culturally disruptive framework in partnership-based research and design.* Paper presented at the Association for Educational Communications & Technology Annual Conference, Virtual.

Isaacs, D.S., Ficklin, E., Hicks, T., Mack, S., & Tehee, M. (2020, Oct.). *TEACH: Promoting cultural competence for faculty working with Native students.* Workshop presented at the National Indian Education Association annual conference, Virtual.

Tehee, M., **Isaacs, D.,** Ficklin, E., Mack, S., & Killgore, R. (2020, August). All you have to do is "ASK": An Indigenous approach to holistic wellness in academia. In K. J. E. Straits (Chair) *A "Three Sisters" Approach to Strengthening the Field of Psychology.* Symposium presented at the annual American Psychological Association Convention, Washington, DC (Virtual).

Litts, B. K., Tehee, M., Isaacs, **D.S.,** & Hamilton, M. (2020, July). *Equitable stewardship: Ethical, cultural, and historical considerations of data practices in RPP work.* National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships Annual Forum, Virtual.

Ficklin, E., Hicks, E., Mack, S., **Isaacs, D.S.**, & Tehee, M. (2019, October). *Cultural competence training for faculty.* Poster presented at the Society for Teaching Psychology's 18th Annual Conference on Teaching, Denver, CO.

Isaacs, D.S. (2019, October). *Rumination as a factor for mood disorders and substance abuse: Influence on quality of life among a Northern Plains Indian sample.* Presentation at the annual Conference of Ford Fellows, San Juan, PR.

Baker-Oglesbee, A., Bruce, F., McDaid-Morgan, N., **Isaacs, D.**, Hosoda, K., & Tsosie, R. (2019, October). *Indigenizing academia from the ground up.* Presentation at the annual conference of the American Indian Science and Engineering Society, Milwaukee, WI.

Garcia, M., **Isaacs, D.**, Henry, S. (2019, August). *Restoring our circle: Ambiguous grief and complex trauma in Indigenous communities.* Symposium presented at the American Psychological Association Annual Convention, Chicago, IL.

Tehee, M., Savitzky, A. Weglarz, K. & **Isaacs, D.** (2019, January). *When you thrive, we all thrive: Creating a model for Native American student success and support in STEM fields.* Grant presentation at the Howard Hughes Inclusive Excellence PIC Meeting, Tempe, AZ.

Tehee, M., Savitzky, A. Weglarz, K. & **Isaacs, D.** (2018, October). *When you thrive, we all thrive: Creating a model for Native American student success and support in STEM fields.* Symposium presentation at the annual American Indian Science and Engineering Society Conference, Oklahoma City, OK.

Tehee, M., Barrett, T., **Isaacs, D., & Ficklin, E.** (2018, August). *Native American psychological wellness: Considerations of sex across the lifespan.* Roundtable

presentation at the American Psychological Association Conference, San Francisco, CA.

Gray, J.S., Schrader, L., **Isaacs, D**., & Smith, M. (2018, August). *Wac'in yeya: Hope among Lakota Youth.* Poster presentation at the American Psychological Association Conference, San Francisco, CA.

Gray, J.S., Schrader, L., **Isaacs, D**., & Smith, M. (2018, August). *Wac'in yeya: Hope among Lakota Youth.* Poster presentation at the annual Society of Indian Psychologists conference in Logan, UT.

Isaacs, D. & Tehee, M. (2018, April). *Promoting cultural integrity through education: Indigenous faces and spaces as expressions of sovereignty.* Discussion/Talking Circle presented at the 46th Annual Symposium of the American Indian, Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, OK.

Brionez, J., **Isaacs, D.**, Gray, J.S. & Petros, T. (2017, August). *Psychometric evaluation of depression measures with Northern Plains Indians.* Poster presented at the American Psychological Association Conference, Washington, D.C.

Isaacs, D., Gray, J.S. & Petros, T. (2017, August). *Rumination as a factor for depression and anxiety among Northern Plains Indians.* Poster presented at the American Psychological Association Conference, Washington, D.C.

Isaacs, D. & Gray, J.S. *Rumination as a factor for depression and anxiety among Northern Plains Indian men and women.* (2017, June). Talk presented by invitation during the annual Society of Indian Psychologists Conference in Logan, UT.

Professional Memberships
2021	International Society of Learning Sciences (Wallace Scholarship)
2020-2021	American Educational Research Association
2018-2021	APA, Division 2: Society for the Teaching of Psychology
2018-2021	American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES)
2017-2021	American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAG
2017-2021	APA, Division 45: Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, Race
2017-2021	APA, Division 35: Psychology of Women, Section 6
2015-2021	Society of Indian Psychologists (AIANSIP, SIP)
2015-2021	National Indian Education Association (NIEA)
2014-2021	Pi Gamma Mu, Oklahoma Zeta Chapter
2014-2021	Psi Chi Honor Society
2014-2016	Southwestern Psychological Association