

Defining success on their own terms: Narratives of American Indian/Alaska Native master's degree recipients from a predominantly white institution

By
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Defining success on their own terms: Narratives of American Indian/Alaska Native master's degree recipients from a predominantly white institution

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Abstract

This is a qualitative, basic interpretive study of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribal college/university (TCU) alumni of Haskell Indian Nations University who have subsequently completed and graduated with their master's degree from a large, predominantly white research university, the University of Kansas between 2013-2019. The purpose of this study is to understand their experiences and successes as graduate students completing their programs at a predominantly white institution. A sub-goal is to identify factors that were effective in their persistence as master's students. Harper's Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (2010) was the inspiration in developing the interview. This study highlights the positive aspects of AI/AN graduate students experiences, shares the success of the students. and includes the challenges and barriers commonly referenced in research studies and scholarly articles for context. The findings from this study shows the main factor in AI/AN graduate student success was support received from family, faculty, mentors and remaining culturally connected. This study encourages more research to be done on AI/AN undergraduate and graduate students and seeks to contribute to the current literature as well as make recommendations for practice and future research.

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I want to acknowledge the Native American and Indigenous college students and the tribal colleges and universities without whom this research and dissertation would not be possible. My motivation in completing my doctoral degree is to inspire our Native American/Indigenous youth to show they can accomplish anything they set their heart and mind to. I want them to see themselves in me and know that anything is possible and more importantly, that there will be people willing to support and mentor them along the way.

Thank you to all those involved in my study especially those who took time to visit with me and share their stories. Without you, none of this would have been possible. You all have inspired me and I hope to share this research to encourage more Native American and Indigenous students to consider graduate school.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my parents, my late mother Millicent whose everlasting love has kept me going and to my late father Burgess whose encouragement, love and support has always inspired me to do my best. And to my daughter Mia who has taught me so much about life and has shown me what matters most.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The University of Kansas (KU) has touted its success in increasing the number of students enrolled and the diversity in its freshmen class and overall student population the past few years (University Daily Kansan UDK, 2018). The most recent data released by the KU Office of Analytics and Institutional Research (KU AIR) shows an increase in minority student enrollment from 6,074 in 2018 to 6,241 in 2019. However, one student population that appears to be decreasing in the student enrollment count is the American Indian/Alaska Native population (AI/AN). The AI/AN student enrollment at KU in 2019 was 116 compared to 133 in 2017 and 153 in 2016 (KU OIRP, 2020)

In previous years, KU has tried to develop programs and positions dedicated to better serve the AI/AN student population. KU has worked with Haskell Indian Nations University, a tribal college/university (TCU), located in Lawrence, Kansas, in various capacities that include recruiting Haskell students into KU academic programs. In 2014, a former Vice Provost of Diversity and Equity created the Haskell Community Liaison position to work with students who were transferring from Haskell Indian Nations University to KU (University Daily Kansan, 2014). However due to budget cuts made by the institution, this position was eliminated in the summer of 2018 (Lawrence Journal World, 2018). KU currently has one full-time employee who has a small percentage of time dedicated as the Haskell/KU Partnership specialist (M. Peterson, personal communication, 2018). This employee also serves as an advisor for the First Nations Student Association (FNSA) at KU, which is a student group for AI/AN students and other students to engage and promote Indigenous culture, tradition and education.

With Haskell located near KU, it could be assumed the AI/AN student recruitment and enrollment in KU undergraduate and graduate programs would be consistent and stable.

However, there is no immediate information on the number of students who transfer from Haskell to KU or who matriculate into graduate programs. In addition, Haskell does not track graduates after they have finished their respective program (personal communication, 2018).

Looking to the past, KU does have Haskell bachelor recipients who have applied to, enrolled in, and completed their master's degrees from various graduate programs. Much can be learned about this particular population and their experiences being AI/AN graduate student in the context of an institution like the University of Kansas. Though there are studies focused on AI/AN students regarding persistence and retention, they often look solely at the barriers and challenges experienced by these students (Cunningham, McSwain, & Keselman, 2007; DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008; Pavel, 1999; Pavel et al, 1998; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). There is a need to begin looking at the success of AI/AN graduate students and experiences within academia (Shotton, Lowe & Waterman, 2013).

AI/AN students in post-secondary education make up 1% of the total student population in the United States (NCES, 2020). When looking at the entire postsecondary student population, the AI/AN student population has historically been the smallest and least studied (Shotton, Lowe & Waterman, 2013). Research specifically pertaining to AI/AN students should be relevant to institutions of higher education (IHE) that have AI/AN students currently enrolled. Study results could be shared with Haskell and KU, as well as with other TCUs (tribal colleges and universities) and predominantly white institutions (PWI) to allow them to prepare TCU students for graduate school and to learn about AI/AN graduate student experiences to assist in programming and supporting this population.

Purpose of Study

This research study is aimed at exploring the successes of AI/AN students who received their bachelor's degree from Haskell (TCU, a minority serving institution) and their master's degree from KU (a large, public, research institution). The findings from this study will provide administrators and faculty who work with AI/AN students, especially those at Haskell and KU, with information on how these students navigated their graduate programs and successfully earned their graduate degrees. In addition, it will provide valuable information to both Haskell and KU on working with students interested in pursuing graduate degrees. There is no current research directly addressing TCU student success in graduate school and as noted very limited research addressing AI/AN student persistence (Lopez, 2017). The research will reference Harper's Anti-Deficit Framework (2010) in the development of research questions and interview questions and help guide this dissertation.

Research Questions

This research study seeks to identify factors aiding KU AI/AN graduate alumni in completing master's degree programs between 2013-2019. The overarching research questions directing this study is as follows:

1. What did KU AI/AN alumni (who received bachelor's degrees from Haskell Indian Nations University and a master's degree from the University of Kansas) perceive as important in helping them persist in their graduate programs?
2. What challenges did they face in their academic journey and how did they overcome those challenges?

Context of Study: AI/AN Students, Haskell and KU

This section aims to provide the reader information on AI/AN college students attending postsecondary institutions and background information on tribal colleges and universities (TCU), Haskell, and KU. The information shared will also provide an idea of the participant profile and the post-secondary institution environments they chose to matriculate.

AI/AN Students in Postsecondary Education

American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) college students historically have low enrollment and graduation rates compared to other racial/ethnic minorities attending college (NCES, 2020). The number of AI/AN students attending postsecondary institutions in 2016 was 0.8% (143,000) of the total postsecondary student population (19,841,000) (NCES, 2020). A further breakdown of the 2016 academic year enrollment numbers shows an estimated 129,000 AI/AN undergraduate students and 14,000 AI/AN graduate students. The number of degrees conferred to AI/AN students in 2015-2016 totaled 23,576 with 9,491 receiving Associate degrees, 9,737 receiving bachelor's degrees, 3,540 receiving master's degrees, and 808 receiving doctoral degrees (NCES, 2020).

In 2014, NCES reported the academic programs with high numbers of AI/AN students receiving bachelor's degrees were business, health professions, social sciences, education and psychology (NCES, 2016). McKinley-Jones et al (2009) conducted research on AI/AN PhDs and shared the most popular disciplines pursued by AI/AN doctoral students were educational administration, educational research, biological/biomedical sciences, educational leadership, and psychology. This information is being shared to show the academic programs AI/AN students are most likely to major in comparison to all students. As information is collected from the interviews, the researcher will be able to see what graduate programs Haskell alumni are

matriculating into at KU and if this lends to the pathways for AI/AN students in specific disciplines as they move from Haskell to KU.

Tribal Colleges and Universities

Tribal Colleges/Universities (TCU) are a type of Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) established for AI/AN students living in or around a tribal reservation or community (AIHEC, 2020). There are currently 35 TCUs located across the United States with over 16,000 students attending. Most TCU's have open enrollment allowing non-Native students to attend and there are two TCU's serving only AI/AN students due to their federal funding status (Haskell Indian Nations University and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute). Most are accredited and offer certificate, associate, baccalaureate and graduate degrees in various disciplines. The TCU student profile shows most students are female, non-traditional, low socio-economic status and AI/AN descent (AIHEC, 2020)

TCU's have been around for over 45 years and provide educational opportunities for AI/AN students and non-Native students living on or near reservation areas and communities with a high AI/AN population (AIHEC, 2020). The American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) is a non-profit organization providing memberships to TCUs who meet criteria (tribal college, accredited, majority of students enrolled are AI/AN) and provide professional development, funding, and serve as a clearinghouse on information for TCUs (e.g. statistics, data, etc.). However, the percentage of TCU students matriculating into graduate school was not immediately found or referenced. This information is vital to this study due to the overall low percentage of all AI/AN students in graduate school.

About Haskell

Haskell was established in 1884 and was first known as the United States Industrial Training School (www.haskell.edu/about). Students who attended during this time were taught trades such as blacksmithing, sewing, and other trade skills. The school was part of the U.S. Government's efforts to assimilate Native people to the ways of the white society. Later, Haskell became a secondary school and was known as Haskell Institute. During this period, classes were offered to high school students and vocational training provided (HINU, 2018).

Haskell then went through a transition period from high school to junior college and offered associate degrees. Then in 1993 the institution officially became Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU). At this time the only 4-year program that was being developed was Elementary Education (K-9). The program received approval from the North Central Association of Colleges (NCA) and was granted provisional accreditation through the Kansas - State Department of Education. Other four-year programs followed in the areas of Business Administration, Environmental Science and American Indian Studies.

HINU is one of two tribal colleges that has 100% AI/AN student enrollment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) an average of 700 students attend. Most are female, full-time, non-resident and reside on campus (NCES, 2020). Because of Haskell's federal status and funding, students do not pay tuition but pay fees ranging from \$480 for off-campus students to \$950 for on-campus students. The university's graduation rate is 45% and no retention rate was reported to IPEDS (NCES, 2020). The university does not keep data on the number of students matriculating to graduate school. This information would be relevant and beneficial in determining how many students actually apply and are accepted into KU's graduate programs and other programs as well.

About the University of Kansas (KU)

KU was established in 1865 and is one of seven state-funded universities in the state of Kansas. (KU, 2020). KU has five campuses which include the main campus in Lawrence, KS; KU Medical Center located in Kansas City, KS, the School of Medicine campuses in Wichita, KS and Salina, KS; and Edwards Campus in Overland Park, KS. The total enrollment at KU averages over 27,000 per year and the school currently offers over 360-degree programs.

KU is known for its academic programs in special education, city management, speech-language pathology, rural medicine and social welfare. The university recently began offering degrees through online programs in education, health professions, nursing, pharmacy and social welfare (KU, 2020). KU is a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU) and is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Based on the Carnegie Classification, KU is categorized as a large, comprehensive, public institution with a high level of research activity (KU, 2020).

The current student profile at KU shows the majority of students are white, female, traditional age, on-campus, residents and full-time students (KU AIR, 2020). KU's graduation rate is 61% and has a 31% transfer out rate (NCES, 2017). The university also reports a first-year retention rate for full-time students is 86% and 4-year graduation rate at 50%. The average price to attend KU is for an undergraduate degree in liberal arts is \$11,166 for in-state residents and \$32,033 for out of state residents (University of Kansas, 2020). Haskell students who choose to attend KU (and other state institutions) qualify for in-state tuition regardless of their residency based on Kansas State Law KSA 76-731 (University of Kansas, 2019). The university is focusing on increasing diversity and being accessible and equitable to all students. Recently

the university has revised admission standards to recruit top students and is also working to attract more international students.

In the fall of 2019, the KU Office of Analytics and Institutional Research (AIR) reported 116 self-identified American Indian/Alaska Native students enrolled with a breakdown of 93 undergraduates and 23 graduate students (KU AIR, 2020). In looking at previous years (e.g. 203 enrolled in 2010), there has been a steady decline of AI/AN student enrollment at KU (KU, 2020). The decline of AI/AN students enrolling at KU should be a concern for the university and this research on AI/AN student success could be used to identify possible causes for the decline and recommend recruitment strategies for future students.

KU and Haskell Partnership

KU and Haskell have been working together in providing opportunities for AI/AN undergraduate students and faculty. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) currently exists between the two institutions that includes an articulation agreement, support for research and grant opportunities, and programs and services (KU, 2020).

The following summary provides an overview of programs and services jointly agreed upon by Haskell and KU:

- Haskell/KU Exchange Program – A limited number of undergraduate students from each institution will be selected to attend classes on the “cooperative campus” while an enrolled student at their home institution and the program also provides advising and assistance in the enrollment process for students.
- Library privileges - Students and staff have mutual library privileges at both campuses at no cost.

- Staff and faculty exchanges – Institutions conduct and coordinate staff and faculty exchanges.
- Developing committees (as needed) with representation from both institutions to review opportunities that might include agreements, research, and other academic and extracurricular activities.
- Cooperate in using mutual resources that include libraries, museums, website, instructional technology, and cultural events and programming.
- Cooperate on future endeavors that benefit campus communities.
- Explore developing teaching and/or research protocols between faculty at both institutions.

The MOU also states that each campus would work on providing additional opportunities and resources to encourage further cooperation. Haskell would provide professional development opportunities for KU faculty, staff and students; provide guidance and support in recruitment efforts of AI/AN students at KU; and support registered student, faculty and staff organizations at KU. KU in turn would provide professional development opportunities for Haskell, assist in the recruitment and transfer of Haskell students to KU and assist in identifying scholarships and financial aid opportunities; support registered Haskell organizations; and support the policy of allowing Haskell students (undergraduate and graduate) to transfer to KU as residents for fee purposes (KSA 76-731) (KU, 2020).

Since this MOU was established, there have been changes in leadership at both institutions and there have been no updated revisions to the MOU. And there are currently no programs or services offered for Haskell students interested in KU graduate programs.

Using the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework as a Guide

For this research study, Harper's (2010) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework was used as inspiration and a reference in the development of the research questions and interview questions. Harper used the data from the National Black Male College Achievement Study "Black Male Student Success in Higher Education" to develop the framework and later adapted it for a research article focusing on students of color in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) (p.8). The framework was initially developed to better understand Black male student success in college and was influenced and informed by over 30 years of literature on Black men in education and society. The strength of this framework is Harper's reframing of questions repeatedly asked by researchers that had negative connotations of students being disadvantaged, underrepresented, not prepared for college, lack of involvement and Black male student attrition. The study provides relevant examples of how a deficit-oriented question would appear and then shows the same question in an anti-deficit frame:

Deficit-oriented: Why do so few Black male students enroll in college?

Anti-deficit: How were aspirations for postsecondary education cultivated among Black male students who are currently enrolled in college?

The framework highlights three pipeline points and is a linear timeline. The points include pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement and post-college success. In the framework used for the Black male college achievement study, there are 2-4 sample questions listed under each pipeline point sub-heading. The study is unique in that it capitalizes on the rich data and responses of the Black male college students to show how well they performed and maximized their college experiences.

Harper (2010) used the Anti-deficit Achievement Framework to examine the students of color in STEM. He referenced an article which highlighted a study by Schmidt (2008) on why minority students perform poorly in science. Schmidt provided theories related to students of color performance, which included being “mismatched” with institutions and how affirmative action policies have allowed students of color entrance into institutions in which they cannot keep up with white peers (p. 63). Harper discusses how news stories, reports and research on students of color in STEM are founded on repeated investigations that share the same or similar questions. These questions have negative overtones and are set up to find out “why” students of color are underprepared, underrepresented, underachieving and have low performance in STEM disciplines. Harper states finding out this information is important however most studies discussing students of color achievement gaps and inequalities in STEM are centered on students failing and unpreparedness (64). The purpose for sharing this in-depth overview is due to the similarities in “deficit-oriented inquiry” and comparable frameworks and methods to study all students of color and success in STEM.

For this study, the interview questions were framed in a positive manner to highlight success and achievements. This is consistent with the Harper’s anti-deficit framework and allows for the researcher to learn more about the participant’s experiences and get a deeper understanding of how they were able to navigate their graduate school experience and experience success.

Significance of Study

The two main reasons for this study are to identify the successes of AI/AN graduate alumni and to contribute to the research focused on AI/AN student success. In 2013 “Beyond the Asterisk: Understanding Native Students in Higher Education” was published and released and

its development was a response to the lack of research and information available on American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students in postsecondary education (Shotton, Lowe & Waterman, 2013). The editors and authors of the book wanted to make AI/AN student voices heard and understood and inform institutions of higher education how they can better serve AI/AN students (Shotton, Lowe & Waterman, 2013). A major issue the editors noted is the data for AI/AN students is not reported or discussed in quantitative research or is labeled as statistically insignificant (Shotton, Lowe & Waterman, 2013). This repeated practice by research studies and articles has made AI/AN students invisible in the higher education landscape.

The present study can provide valuable information to TCU's with students who are aspiring to attend graduate school and for mainstream universities who seek to recruit TCU students. There are no other academic research studies that have been conducted and focus solely on KU AI/AN graduate students who previously attended Haskell Indian Nations University and were successful in completing and receiving a master's degree. This study is the first to gather qualitative data on this specific topic and could spur other studies related to TCU students in higher education. In addition, the findings from this study will benefit both Haskell and KU as they work with AI/AN students interested in attending graduate school to enhance and strengthen their programs in areas such as recruitment, retention and persistence.

Organization of Study

This research study contains five chapters. Chapter one introduces the topic and provided the purpose of the study, the research question, background information on AI/AN students in higher education, significance of the study, and a brief overview of the literature review and how Harper's (2010) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework inspired the development of the research questions and interview questions.

Chapter two reviews the literature associated with the topic. This will include literature related to AI/AN tribal college student persistence, retention, and success. Due to the limited research on AI/AN tribal college student preparedness for graduate school, research focusing on minority students preparing for graduate school was included.

Chapter three describes the methodology used for this qualitative study. Interviews were conducted with eight AI/AN students (who graduated from Haskell) and who also completed their graduate school program at the University of Kansas. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded to identify recurring themes. Data was also be collected from each participant using an online demographic survey to develop a participant profile. Interview questions and a demographic survey is included in the appendix.

The findings from the interviews will be discussed more in depth in chapter four. This chapter will be set up by themes identified in the data analysis and the supporting research available as well as varying themes that may be relative and have significant impact on AI/AN tribal college student success in graduate school.

Chapter five will be the final chapter and will provide a summary of the research, discuss the study limitations, and share recommendations for working with AI/AN graduate students. Suggestions will also be shared for future research and immediate actions related to AI/AN tribal college students matriculating into graduate school.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This basic qualitative study concentrates on AI/AN student success in graduate school, specifically graduate students who transferred from Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) to the University of Kansas (KU). This study focused on tribal college and university (TCU) alumni who attended HINU and graduated with their bachelor's degree and also received their master's' degrees from various fields of study from the KU between 2013-2019.

Current academic research on American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students tends to concentrate on undergraduates attending mainstream institutions. However, due to the low enrollment numbers, AI/AN students are commonly grouped with all students of color in research articles and studies or their data or information is not shared at all (Shotton, Lowe & Waterman, 2013). There is a need for current research on AI/AN students in postsecondary education to serve as a reference and resource for institutions that work with this student population.

The literature review for this study discusses student identity and persistence for AI/AN students. Research articles on AI/AN student identity will provide a reference for understanding influences that have shaped a participant's development. The research shared on AI/AN student persistence will highlight how students navigated issues, challenges and barriers and what factors aided in their perseverance and success. Also, a few articles presented will discuss how institutions and academic programs worked specifically with AI/AN college students in providing opportunities. Lastly, current research on AI/AN graduate student persistence will tie identity, persistence and programming studies together and share relevant findings.

Cultural Identity and Influence on AI/AN Student Development

To get a sense of what AI/AN students experience in higher education, it is vital to understand who they are and how AI/AN identity and culture has shaped their person. AI/AN identity is important to understand and recognize due to the fact there are over 560 Federally recognized tribal nations in the United States each with their own language, customs, traditions and beliefs. (NCAI, 2020)

Horse (2005) describes Native American identity as multifaceted; there are many issues and elements that shape the identity of American Indian nations and people which include attitude, ethnic nomenclature, legal and political status, change over time and what it means to be American Indian in today's society. Horse goes into more detail about each of the issues and elements and provides insights from his own personal experience and interaction with Native American people from across the country. He acknowledges that there is no standard definition or nomenclature for identifying as American Indian. American Indian tribes and Alaska Native people are diverse and have their own sovereign governments and treaties with the United States government. Each tribal nation is unique in culture, traditions, and language.

Horse (2005) provides the current theories on racial identity are limited especially when describing and discussing American Indians (p. 67). It is up to college administration, staff and faculty to get to know their students and learn more about who they are, where they come from and what their values are, this could be discussed on an individual level and also as a tribal/community perspective. Horse notes the effects of cultural assimilation on American Indian people and also informs in his article that identity is different. It would be in the institutions best interest to know who and where their Native American students are so they can become connected to the campus and persist.

Today, American Indian people deal with many stressors that include poverty, high rates of school dropouts, drug and alcohol abuse, and chronic health conditions on reservations and communities with high populations of American Indians (LaFromboise et al, 2006, 195) However there are some positive traits that American Indian people have that they hold on and try to instill in their young people. An example is that family and group identities are more meaningful than an individual's (Fixico, 2003).

The importance of family and community are vital to the existence of American Indians. LaFromboise et al (2006) conducted a research study focused on identifying protective factors assisting American Indian youth in the upper Midwest to have higher pro-social behaviors. The findings included students who were family oriented, enculturated and had community support were more prone to have higher pro-social behaviors and outcomes. LaFromboise research provides American Indian educator's tribal organizations and communities a basis to begin working with at-risk youth. Even more promising, the items mentioned are values that American Indian people hold in high regard. The participants in this study remarked how important their AI/AN identity, family and staying connected to their culture was to their persistence and how it made an impact on their success.

AI/AN Student Persistence in Postsecondary Education

This section on AI/AN student persistence will share research and studies by scholars both Native and non-Native and provide findings on AI/AN students' experiences that include challenges, issues, and barriers encountered as well as factors that helped them persist.

Lopez (2017) produced a comprehensive yet limited literature review on American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) student persistence. The author immediately cites the lack of research available to measure AI/AN persistence and factors that influence persistence in

postsecondary. Lopez shares key statistics regarding the historical low enrollment rates of AI/AN students in postsecondary. In 2009, 43% of AI/AN students who enrolled in postsecondary institutions did not persist (compared to 33% of White students). The researcher suggests the issue of AI/AN students and their persistence is attributed to their experiences at college and home. Therefore, the need to investigate factors influencing AI/AN student persistence is vital and necessary.

As noted, the main methods used in Lopez's (2017) article was a comprehensive literature review that focused AI/AN persistence in postsecondary education. The author states due to the limited number of articles available, both quantitative and qualitative articles were included. Past research studies have encouraged mainstream institutions to develop programs and services aimed at AI/AN student retention.

Lin, LaCounte, and Eder (1988) conducted a study at a mid-size, predominantly White institution (PWI) which examined the effects of school environment on academic performance and graduation of American Indian (AI) students. Initially ten variables were used in the study and the factor analyses reduced this down to four variables: attitude toward college education, attitude toward professors, the perception of campus hostility and feelings of isolation.

Lin, LaCounte, and Eder's (1988) study found that if AI students' have positive attitudes toward their professors and they maintain a positive perception of college. However, if they have significant feelings of isolation this in turn can be related toward their feelings of the campus being hostile. Final conclusions from this study encouraged campuses to be more aware of the isolation and hostility AI students feel when they attend a PWI and to assist AI students in overcoming poor academic performance then support must be a priority. This was proven to be a

factor with participants in this study and their responses aligned with how vital their relationships were with their faculty.

There appears to be new research emerging discussing the characteristics AI/AN students have that make them resilient and successful in college. Marroquin and McCoach (2014) focused on transculturation theory when examining cultural integrity of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students. The transculturation theory postulates AI/AN students who are socially integrated at school have more interactions of cultural exchange, more successful academically, and are least likely to assimilate (Huffman, 2011). The researchers used the North American Indigenous College Students Inventory (NAICSI) to assess cultural integrity of AI/AN students within the realms of faculty/staff support, social/peer support, tribal/village support, family support, and institutional support. There were 501 AI/AN students who participated in the study attending over 40 colleges and universities and representing over 50 American Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages. After a factor analysis was done on the initial data, eight factors were prevalent – family support, tribal community support, faculty support, staff support, institutional support, social support, cultural resiliency factor, and cultural reciprocity factor. The analyses showed that AI/AN students who are more transcultural, have a high-grade point average and a high cultural exchange will have more cultural resilience. The AI/AN students with a high level of transculturation appear to have support from their schools, family, friends, and tribal community. It would appear for any AI/AN student wanting to enter graduate school they would be transcultural and would remain strongly connected to their native heritage. The ‘support’ identified in the factors analysis is important to this study and the findings.

Research on AI/AN college student enrollment and retention provides background information on where AI/AN students are attending, what factors into their decision-making

process for choosing an institution and what retention efforts students appreciate and respond too. Also, the statistics in most of the studies shows the low numbers of AI/AN students in college compared to other race/ethnicities.

Brayboy, Fann and Solyom (2012) provide an overview on the current status of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students in college which discusses enrollment and retention services, AI/AN student experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWI), and the role of tribal colleges in student preparation. The opportunity for AI/AN students to attend college is often influenced by several factors ranging from the individual to family to tribal and community. The number of AI/AN students currently attending college has doubled over the last 30 years. In 1976 an estimated 76,000 AI/AN students enrolled in college and in 2002 that number had grown to 166,000 (NCES, 2005). However, the percentage of AI/AN students between the ages of 18-24 attending college is low in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups and all groups combined (AI/AN 26%; all students 37%). In 2006 the percentage of AI/AN female students attending college was significantly higher than AI/AN male students (61% female, 39% male) (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2008).

Brayboy, Fann and Solyom (2012) identify previous studies that discuss AI/AN student persistence and retention models that have been developed to assist students and arrive at the following conclusions: American Indian/Alaska Native students are more apt to attend a two-year institution (Cunningham, McSwain, and Keselman, 2007; DeVoe and Darling-Churchill, 2008; Pavel, 1999; Pavel et al, 1998; Pewewardy and Frey, 2002) and those AI/AN students that do choose to attend a four-year institution are more likely to complete a degree (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Bowen & Bok, 1998). Other relevant studies provide links to other issues that may be related to AI/AN student persistence such as issues with high school preparation and

socioeconomic status and the limited selection of colleges to attend (McDonough, Korn, and Yamasaki, 1997). AI/AN students have the lowest graduation rates compared to other racial/ethnic groups (AI/AN 36.7%, Latina/Latino 38.2%, African American 44.8%, Asian American 62.6%, White 57.2) (NCES, 2005).

With the issues, challenges and barriers AI/AN students endure, colleges and universities have turned to utilizing programs and services to aid AI/AN students in persisting.

HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) created the family educational model (FEM), an indigenous based retention model that encourages universities to develop an extended family structure for their AI/AN students to enhance the students sense of belonging. Recommendations from the authors to assist in AI/AN student persistence include strengthening K-12 educational preparation, tribes and corporations assisting students with finding funding sources for college and suggest PWI's reevaluate services to AI/AN students to serve them.

In a study involving mainstream institutions in the northwest, the perceptions of barriers to degree completion was examined and the findings could be applicable to any institution with AI/AN student population. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) discuss findings from a previous qualitative study conducted by Guillory that was designed to explore the similarities and differences of perceptions between Native American students and state officials and university administration and faculty regarding persistence factors and barriers to degree completion. The Native American students involved were from Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman, Washington; the University of Idaho (UI) in Moscow, Idaho and Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman, Montana. The researchers cite previous studies involving Native American students and persistence attending mainstream colleges and universities are affected by factors that include lack of college preparation, family support, supportive faculty and staff, and staying

connected to their culture (Astin, 1982; Barnhardt, 1994; Brown, 1995; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Huffman, Sill and Brokenleg, 1986; Lin, 1990; Patton & Eddington, 1973; Reyhner and Dodd, 1995). In order for Native American students to be successful in college, their academic, social, cultural and psychological needs must be considered in providing adequate and effective support.

The findings from Guillory and Wolverton's (2008) study provided different perceptions that exist between Native American students and institutions. One recommendation encourages institutions to move away from only providing monetary support for Native American students and to expand their services that allow the Native American students to connect with institutions more and their home communities as well.

There is limited research available discussing TCU students and persistence at mainstream institutions. Martin (2005) shares his insights on the importance of culturally relevant programs and services for AI/AN students attending college and how mainstream colleges and universities can learn from tribal colleges in how to help students persist. He discusses how tribal colleges were established to provide AI/AN students access to a postsecondary education and how much culture is connected in a tribal college campus setting from curriculum to programming to the events held for students and community. The majority of tribal colleges are located on tribal reservations and communities, they primarily serve AI/AN students but have open enrollment, the tribal college student profile shows students are mostly women, non-traditional, and low-socioeconomic status (SES). An example is provided of how partnerships would enhance AI/AN student experiences especially those attending tribal colleges on reservations. In addition, there have been tribal colleges who have established relationships with mainstream institutions to assist their students who may be entering a four-year program or graduate school. This case study provides practical information on what colleges and

universities could be doing to learn more about AI/AN students especially those who may be transferring to their institution.

There were a lot of common factors found throughout the articles aiding in AI/AN college student enrollment, retention and persistence. Most common was in regard to persistence and the main factors that aided were support from family, faculty, institutions, academic programs and staying connected to culture. The present study builds upon the prior research and seeks to discover if there are any new factors that assist with AI/AN student persistence and success.

AI/AN Graduate Student Persistence

There are a few studies discussing AI/AN graduate student persistence. The findings from these studies show similar factors that aid in AI/AN graduate student persistence which include support from family, community and staying connected to culture.

Secaro's (2009) research was a qualitative analysis looking at the persistence and success factors of 23 American Indian graduate students. An indigenous corn model was used to illustrate well-being factors and personal accounts to define success and persistence factors. From this research four issues were identified that aided in student persistence: 1) spiritual well-being was an important success factor which focused on family, beliefs, and community; 2) mental well-being included critical thinking, academic rigor, leadership and career development; 3) social well-being was seen as networking, mentorship, communication skills and advanced literacy; and d) physical well-being included work ethic, endurance and a healthy lifestyle (viii). All of these issues are in align with what we have seen in AI/AN graduate student persistence research with the additional factors such networking and communication skills under social well-being which are not normally discussed.

A more recent study by Heavy Runner-Rioux (2018) looked at the influence of factors on American Indian graduate student persistence. The quantitative study was focused on identifying correlations between academic factors and graduate student persistence and provide an understanding on how likely degree completion is for American Indian students. A survey was used to compile information and there were 63 participants with 78% identifying as female, 48% with children, and 80% were employed. The study shared AI students did have difficulty balancing family, school and cultural responsibilities but felt a personal responsibility to complete their degrees for their tribal communities (p. 32).

Heavy Runner-Rioux's (2018) research conclusions were drawn from an in-depth of analysis of the data collected. Heavy Runner-Rioux's study referenced Tinto's (1972) theory of student departure which identified students' reasons for leaving an institution was connected to their inability to adapt and adjust to their new environment and lack of support (p. 36). Tinto's (1993) Model of Institutional Departure was also discussed and the model shows reasons students leave school can be connected to difficulty with academics, unable to set goals, and inability to connect with the campus and culture. Heavy Runner-Rioux makes a case for how the respondents in their study carry their culture with them while they were in school and when they returned to their home areas. Heavy Runner-Rioux states that Native American students did not sacrifice their culture when attending graduate school and how important it is for institutions of higher education to support their AI/AN graduate students and their culture. The AI/AN graduate students in Heavy Runner-Rioux's study illustrated what culture meant to them which included spirituality, customs, traditions, beliefs, identity and family (p. 37).

Heavy Runner-Rioux (2018) discusses how similar findings are to HeavyRunner-PrettyPaint's study on tribal college student persistence when asking students how they balanced

academic, social and cultural responsibilities. The findings from Heavy Runner-Rioux's study shared factors that aided in American Indian graduate student persistence included having a supportive family and community, staying connected to culture and focusing on school was a priority, and taking care of self in all aspects (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual)(p. 37).

Heavy Runner-Rioux (2018) provides several recommendations for institutions of higher education to consider when working with American Indian graduate students. These include to support and promote American Indian culture for students and include American Indian students in any planning or initiatives to improve the campus climate. Out of the recommendations the one that has not been discussed before is the support and promotion of American Indian culture for students which can be a key in their feeling they belong and finding a place in their academic community.

Conclusion

As noted, there is no research directly addressing TCU student persistence in graduate school at a mainstream institution. Most of the literature that is available on AI/AN student persistence focuses on undergraduates. There is so much more to be learned about AI/AN graduate students that can fill a gap in the research literature. As this study is completed one of the goals of the researcher is to have this research published and used as a reference on TCU student success in graduate school. Another goal of this study is to inspire more research where previous studies on AI/AN college students can be reviewed and compared with recent literature to observe any substantial changes in enrollment trends, retention practices and factors aiding in persistence.

Chapter 3 - Methods

This is a basic qualitative interpretive study on American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribal college/university (TCU) alumni (Haskell Indian Nations University) who have subsequently completed and graduated with their master's degree from a nearby large, predominantly white research university (University of Kansas). The study explored their experiences and successes in completing their graduate programs. The participants were TCU alumni who attended Haskell Indian Nations University and graduated with their bachelor's degree and also received their master's degrees in a variety of fields at the University of Kansas (KU) between 2013-2019. The purpose of this study is to understand their successes and experiences at a predominantly white institution. A sub-goal is to identify resources that were effective in their persistence as master's students. This research study will seek to capture new and relevant data and uncover personal narratives through interviews with these former graduate students.

Research Questions

This research study seeks to identify factors aiding KU AI/AN graduate alumni in completing master's degree programs between 2013-2019. The overarching research questions directing this study is as follows:

1. What did KU AI/AN alumni (who received bachelor's degrees from Haskell Indian Nations University and master's degrees from the University of Kansas) perceive as important in helping them persist in their graduate programs?
2. What challenges did they face in their academic journey and how did they overcome those challenges?

Research Design

Merriam (1995) describes the interpretive qualitative approach as understanding how individuals “experience and interact” with the world. Interpretive qualitative research has key characteristics that include understanding how people make sense of their experience. In such studies, the researcher is the “primary instrument” for data collection and analysis. The process is inductive and relies on researchers to gather data and develop hypotheses and theories. The final product of a qualitative inquiry is “richly descriptive” through the use of words and visuals instead of numbers (p. 5).

Merriam (1995) states there are three major data sources in qualitative research that includes interviews, observations and documents. Interviews are guided by a list of structured questions, which often lead to unstructured questions that provide more details and information. This method has been determined to be the best approach for this study and will provide relevant data on this research question.

The research design for this study is directly in line with the “interpretive qualitative approach” described by Merriam (1995). Interviews will be used to collect data and will be analyzed for recurring themes. Using Harper’s Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (2010) as an inspiration to develop the interview questions, this study focused on the positive aspects of AI/AN graduate students experiences and share the successes of the students as well as the challenges, and barriers commonly referenced in research studies and scholarly articles.

Merriam (1995) states that researchers using qualitative methods for a study often use this approach due to the lack of a theory or the failure of a theory to explain a phenomenon (p. 5). With the focus of this study and limited research available, the information acquired and

shared will be valued and possibly provide explanation to AI/AN student graduate success at a predominantly white institution.

Participants

This research study is specific in the population it is targeting. The participants met the following criteria:

1. Must be American Indian/Alaska Native (enrolled member in Federally recognized tribe);
2. Must have received a bachelor's degree from Haskell Indian Nations University;
3. Must have received a master's Degree from KU between 2013 to 2019.

Sample

The interviewee criterion for this basic, interpretive, qualitative study included students who had earned a bachelor's degree from Haskell Indian Nations University and who have also received their master's degree from KU between 2013 to 2019. The research question for this study is centered on discovering how these Native students were successful in completing their respective graduate programs. Therefore, the sample must be purposeful to obtain rich information to contribute to the academic programs and processes for Native graduate students at PWIs.

Purposeful sample

Purposeful sampling in qualitative research is characterized by the information collected from limited resources and the selection of individuals or groups used in the research who are very experienced or knowledgeable with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002). With qualitative research, the methods utilized are to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon with an emphasis placed on saturation (i.e. collecting

information until there is nothing new to learn) (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). This sampling is ideal for this research study and supported the information needed to answer the research question. This study did use a purposeful sample strategy in the recruitment of participants who had to meet three criteria and shared similar academic experiences.

Snowball sampling

Snowball sampling was utilized to assist with identifying potential interviewees. Snowball sampling is used to identify more resources i.e. people to participate in a study who may not be readily known to the researcher (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2016). When a potential interviewee is contacted, they are also asked to share contacts they know who might be interested in taking part in the study as well.

KU AI/AN graduates who resided in Lawrence, KS were contacted and provided tentative verbal commitments to participate in the study. The goal for this study was to identify at least eight people to ensure a quality data sample and use the snowball method to identify potential interviewees. Eight people were recruited and participated in the study and all interviews were conducted in person.

Research Process

The interviewees were contacted to schedule a meeting time and location for the interview. Once a date and time was set, participants were sent a confirmation email providing details and an overview of the interview process i.e. length of time, consent form, online form link, etc. Interviewees were asked to review and sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the study (Appendix A).

The location for the interview was determined by the interviewee. The interviews were all in person. The location and set up of the meeting were important to ensure the interviewee

was comfortable and relaxed during the interview. The in-person meeting locations were public areas i.e. coffee shop, office, etc. and accommodated the interviewee's schedule.

No issues were anticipated, nor did any occur during any part of the interview process (initial contact to interview). However, if a situation were to occur the interviewees were informed they need to let the interviewer know right away and the meeting would end. This study did adhere to the guidelines and protocols set forth by the KU Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) for conducting interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour each. The interviewer informed the participants they might be contacted in the event information needed to be clarified.

Before any data collection could begin the study had to be approved by the KU Human Research Protection Program. An application was submitted in March 2019 and approved in April 2019. This research study included a consent form for participants that described the study in depth and provided contact information (Appendix A).

The dissertation committee suggested a pilot interview be conducted to allow for the interview questions to be tested to ensure the necessary information is being received. The researcher was able to secure an interview with a recent AI/AN master's degree recipient who completed their master's in a KU School of Education online program. The pilot interviewee did not fit criteria exactly (program was online) but did provide relevant information that led to reassessing and restructuring the interview questions. The following information was noted and observed from the pilot interview:

- Identity and culture appear to have a strong presence from interviewee when introducing the study.

- Revising the questions and the order in which they are asked is necessary to capture relevant information.
- The interviewee was passionate about their responses which leads the researcher to assume all interviewees will have a similar response/reaction.
- More probing questions need to be prepared ahead of time.
- These interviews will take at least an hour and it will be to the researcher's advantage to transcribe immediately.
- The researcher was able to identify potential themes that might emerge from future interviews – these included family support in regard to persistence, sense of responsibility to completing degree, lack of support for Native students at KU, lack of preparation for graduate school.

Role of the Researcher

Research studies can take on personal associations and meanings for a researcher. “Me-search” is the term used to describe research (in education) that is conducted about one’s own identity or in one’s own setting (Gardner, Hart, Ng, Ropers-Huilman, Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). The researcher has shared their personal narrative on why they chose this topic and how “mesearch” describes this study:

I feel very connected to this study because of my own experience as a Native graduate student at KU. I graduated from Haskell Indian Nations University in 2007 with my bachelor’s degree in American Indian Studies. I know what it is like to attend a tribal college and to be a Native student and to also fit the tribal college/university (TCU) student profile (female, non-traditional, low income). I wanted to continue on with my education and applied to KU and was accepted into the Higher Education Administration

master's degree program. I was able to complete my degree within two years and graduated in May 2009. However, my journey was not easy and I experienced a lot of barriers Native students seem to encounter while attending a PWI. But those moments also allowed me to grow, thrive and gain my own success. I bring with me these experiences as I frame the questions, interact with the participants, and make sense of the data that will be collected.

My role as the researcher must be clearly defined and focused on the research question to capture usable and authentic data (responses). I want the interviews to be open and engaging and believe that my serving as the researcher will allow for the interviewees to be highly involved and allow them to be comfortable in sharing a lot of information, details and experiences. The questions asked will allow for the interviewee to share as much as they want regarding their experiences at KU and I will ensure they are treated respectfully and that their confidentiality will be protected as outlined in the research study consent form.

As the researcher, it will be my job to serve as an 'instrument' to the process of collecting data and producing a descriptive outcome (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). The data collected will be analyzed to identify recurring themes that "cut across the data" to compare and contrast and capture the most salient information from AI/AN graduate students who are like me.

I have reached out to participants who I know personally or am acquainted with through my time at Haskell and KU. Many of these contacts still reside in Lawrence, Kansas which will allow me to meet with them in person and there are several living in other locations that I will be conducting video meetings. When I made the initial contact with

the individuals they were receptive to my study and all agreed to participate. What made this process easier to secure the contacts and interviews was that I already knew the participants and they gave me information on other potential interviewees who might be interested in participating in the study. Had I not known any of the individuals I am certain this would have taken a lot of time to locate participants. I do not believe my knowing the individuals will have any influence on responses or the study. Each interviewee will be encouraged to provide answers that reflect their own personal experiences in a safe and trustworthy space and manner.

Interview Protocol

Using Harper's (2010) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework as a reference in developing the overarching research questions and interview questions, the intent was to develop questions without negative connotations and focus on the positive aspects of the AI/AN graduate student's experience. There were 13 interview questions developed with five questions seeking background and character information, seven questions focused on discussing success and support, and one question focused on negative experiences encountered by the participant.

Interview Questions

The following is a list of questions that were asked during the interview:

1. What were the reasons and influences that led you to choose KU for your master's program?
2. How did you prepare yourself for the transition from your undergraduate institution to graduate school?

3. How were you connected and involved in your tribal culture or Native culture at KU?
How important was this involvement? Did this impact your experience and success at KU?
4. What goals did you set for yourself your first semester in graduate school? And what goals did you set for the remainder of your program?
5. How supportive was your program and did that support lend to your success in completing your degree?
6. What were the most memorable successes you had during graduate school and how did it make you feel?
7. What were some challenges, issues, barriers you experienced at KU and how did you work through them?
8. What or who were your sources of support while at KU? Did these sources change from your undergraduate experience?
9. How has achieving your master's degree impacted your personal and professional goals?
10. What do you share with people about your experience at KU?
11. What did attaining your master's degree meant to you as a Native person?
12. What recommendations do you have for the KU administration to improve their support of AI/AN graduate students?

The interviewer briefed the interviewee about the study and shared the research questions. The interviewees were encouraged to listen to each question and elaborate in detail their responses. The interviewer listened for opportunities to ask probing questions and draw out more detailed answers. The researcher has previous experience conducting interviews with individuals and small groups and this experience will aid in capturing an informational interview.

Data Analysis

This is a basic qualitative interpretive study in which the researcher I wanted to understand a phenomenon of a group. Merriam and Tisdall (2016) state that constructivism is the central characteristic in this type of study in which individuals build the reality in their social worlds (p. 7). Researchers using this type of method in a study are interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences; (2) how they construct their worlds; and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (p.7).

The data from this study was collected through in-person interviews that were recorded and transcribed. Each transcription was reviewed and paired with meeting notes taken by the researcher. Coding was used to identify themes from the interviews. Coding allowed for the data to be categorized and items within those categories compared to assist in developing theoretical connections (Maxwell, 2005).

It was vital for me to have a solid routine for the entire process from the interview to the transcription to writing up the discussion section. Merriam and Tisdall (2016) strongly suggest the researcher creating an inventory of the data set that might include a list of terms used in the interviews, notes, documents shared, and anything related to the data collection process (p.70).

Merriam and Tisdall (2016) describe the process of data analysis in a qualitative study as repetitive and always changing (p.65). Even when all the data has been collected there is still a lot of processing, refining and verification to do making this process timely. The goal of this study's data analysis is to establish clear and concise themes and provide meaningful discussion and findings which contributes to academia.

The process for analyzing the data was standard for a qualitative study. The interviews were transcribed, reviewed and the researcher determined if any follow up was needed for clarification. Coding was used to group common themes in which several topics were drawn out. After the data analysis was complete the findings were developed and shared in the discussion section.

Validity and Reliability

Merriam (1995) discusses the issues with validity and reliability in qualitative research in education and offers several strategies for safeguarding the trustworthiness of the findings. Merriam shares there are concerns with the rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research and it is vital to ensure findings are believed. Users of the research should be confident in incorporating the findings in their own work and practice. Merriam's view of validity and reliability concepts through a "qualitative or interpretive worldview" lens is to share approaches to insure validity and reliability are consistent with the "qualitative paradigm" (p. 52).

Guba and Lincoln (1986) established arguments on how an interpretation can be credible. One method is to characterize trustworthiness, which can be described as internal validity (credibility), external validity (transferability), reliability (dependability) and objectivity (neutrality). Another way is to understand and make sense of an interpretation and have confidence in the interpretation. This can be done through observation especially in body language, tone of voice and the appearance of how important a thought, statement or experience is to the interviewee. For this study, ensuring validity was to be done by contacting interviewees if further comments, descriptions or clarification were needed when transcribing the data. Member checks involve taking preliminary data analysis back to the participant to ensure the researcher's interpretation is on target with what the participant conveyed (Merriam & Tisdall,

2016). However, there was no need to do any follow-ups which might have impacted the data analysis.

Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the research methods that were used in this basic, interpretive, qualitative study. Interviews with participants who meet the study criteria will be used in the data collection and data analysis. This research method was the most effective for this study and the results will be shared and discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 - Results

This qualitative study shares the successes of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) graduates and the factors aiding in their successes along with barriers they encountered along their academic journey. Participants were asked questions on their success, what helped them be successful and challenges they encountered during their tenure in graduate school.

Participant Profile/Introduction

The interview profile for this study was showed participants were mostly female and received bachelor's degrees from Haskell Indian Nations University (Haskell) in American Indian Studies or Elementary Teacher Education. Participants received master's degrees from the University of Kansas (KU) in Social Work, Global Indigenous Nations Studies, geography, and education. Tribal affiliations of the participants included Lakota, Dakota, Osage, Hidatsa/Arikara, and Shawnee/Delaware. Two participants are Kansas residents and the remaining participants relocated to Lawrence to attend Haskell and KU and ended up staying in the area. For the purpose of anonymity, the participants were given pseudonyms for identification purposes.

The following descriptions of each participant provides a context as it relates to this study, data analysis and findings.

Mary attended a few colleges before coming to Lawrence and enrolling at Haskell. She is originally from the upper Midwest and relocated to Lawrence for school and currently resides and works in Lawrence. She received a Masters degree in Social Work from KU. She stated the main reason she chose to attend KU for her graduate program was because she was not ready to return home and enjoyed living in the area. She was also considering attending Washington

University in St. Louis for her master's degree but her Haskell "family" was very influential in getting her to choose KU. She shared that she had several mentors at Haskell who encouraged her to apply to graduate school. During her time at KU, Mary experienced some difficulty with her first practicum and having to deal with family issues that altered her academic plans and goals. She identified family and her tribal people as a major influence in her pursuing her education: "I think it is the foundation for everything I do, is for the people, for my tiwahe (family) and then my tiospaye (extended family) and then the whole entire tribe."

Sarah's family is originally from the upper Midwest and she has resided in Lawrence off and on for the past several years. She is a single mother raising two children. She initially came to Lawrence to attend school at Haskell. After graduating with her bachelor's degree from Haskell she worked for a few years. She was interested in attending graduate school but had a lot of questions about the process. Sarah attended a local Native American cultural event and the KU Indigenous Studies program staff had an information table set up. Sarah visited with the staff who were engaging and answered all her questions about their program and graduate school. Due to her current personal situation, she was hesitant to apply. She did eventually submit her application and was accepted into the program. Sarah had to take the GRE, write an essay and was interviewed by the program faculty. After she was accepted into the program, she learned she would be receiving a scholarship as well. She felt encouraged by the faculty in the beginning of her program but understood it was going to be a transition going from Haskell to KU. Sarah earned her Masters degree in Global Indigenous Nations Studies and is considering beginning another master's program at KU. As Sarah was introducing herself during her interview, she shared details about her culture: "I was born in a traditional family and have strong ties to my Lakota family."

John is married and has children. He is from the southwest and came to Lawrence to attend school at Haskell. John received his bachelor's degree from Haskell and began working after he graduated. He was interested in attending graduate school and was encouraged by his Haskell mentors to apply for the KU Social Work program. He chose to go into the administration and advocacy specialty area of his degree program as opposed to the clinical track. He felt he could do more with that emphasis and that it was a better fit for him. John shared his reason for choosing KU for graduate school was because of how comfortable he was in Lawrence and because he appreciated the Native community.

Well I think coming into Haskell, I knew there was a relationship that Haskell already had with KU academically. So, it almost seems kind of like that would be a natural progression to kind of get funneled into KU, especially if you end up living in Lawrence.

He received a lot of support and encouragement from his Haskell faculty and mentors. His employer also made it easy for him to work and take classes and he appreciated that flexibility. John received his Masters degree in Social work from KU and became a faculty member at a minority serving institution.

Nancy received her Masters in Education, Curriculum and Instruction. She is originally from the upper Midwest and moved to Lawrence after she got married. She was encouraged by family to attend Haskell and is appreciative of the support she received by the Dean and faculty and staff there. Nancy shared her inspiration for attending Haskell to pursue her educational goals:

I moved here, relocated here and decided that I always wanted to be a teacher since I was little because my grandma was a teacher. So, I decided that I should take advantage of Haskell because it's in my backyard and so I applied and got in.

After she completed her degree at Haskell, she was interested in pursuing a master's degree. KU was the only choice for her due to her husband's influence (he is an alum) and learning the education programs were top rated in the country. Nancy was accepted into the School of Education's Curriculum and Instruction graduate program, which was a hybrid program (classes online and in the classroom). Adjusting to the online courses was a challenge for her but she was able to utilize her time efficiently and effectively. She also had concerns about being able to write for her graduate program but was determined and motivated to learn and earn her degree.

Ann relocated from the upper Midwest to attend school at Haskell. Upon graduating from Haskell she was not quite ready to return home. She liked Lawrence and had made a lot of friends in the area. She remarked she had been encouraged by Haskell faculty to consider KU for graduate school. Ann worked with her Haskell advisor and completed the application for graduate school and even had the opportunity to tour KU. One major factor influencing her decision to attend KU was the in-state tuition offered to Haskell students (regardless of state residency or degree). Ann appreciated the affordability and could not pass up the opportunity to attend KU and work toward receiving her master's degree. In her story, she says that she dealt with a lot of personal issues during her program and she had to work through those challenges on her own. She noted how she felt empowered after completing her degree. "I feel like it gave me an opportunity to be a voice and a light for other Natives."

Jane started college later in life. When she enrolled at Haskell she was a non-traditional student and she chose to attend Haskell for personal reasons. Jane shared she did not grow up

around her tribal people or community and attending Haskell allowed her to reconnect to her Native American culture and heritage.

I was born in Oklahoma. I didn't start my college career until very late. I was a first-generation student. I didn't know anything about college at all. So, when I have first came to college I had kids in college who tried to help me navigate that process but it was still very difficult and that kind of translated or played out in graduate school too.

She appreciated the support she received from Haskell and was connected to the campus community. When she was getting ready to graduate from Haskell she decided she wanted to pursue a master's degree. She liked Lawrence and wanted to stay in the area because of Haskell and she would be within a short driving distance to her home area. When she began looking at the graduate programs at KU there were two programs in the School of Education she found interesting. She ended up choosing one program over the other program because of the cohort model and felt it would be the best fit as a new graduate student. Jane's experience at KU was eye-opening for her and having support from family and her Haskell mentors was vital in her success while in her graduate program. She currently lives in Lawrence and works in a postsecondary student affairs program.

Susan received her Masters degree in Social Work from the KU. Susan is a mother of two and is immersed in her culture and heritage. She relocated to Lawrence, KS to attend school at Haskell and her family was a big influence in her pursuing her education. She also shared her reasons for choosing KU for graduate school which came down to family influence, location and Haskell mentors.

Well some of it was the fact that my uncle when there and so I was kind of like following that tradition. Some of it was me living here, I didn't really want to move anywhere to go to school.

Susan also noted that her program faculty at Haskell promoted the KU Social Work graduate program and helped (i.e. letters of reference, resources) students who were interested in the program. Susan's experience in her graduate program was challenging at times but also rewarding. She was the first person in her family to attain a master's degree and wanted to be an influence on others in her tribe to pursue their academic goals.

Hannah is a mother and grandmother and has worked continuously while she has been in school. She received her Masters Degree in Geography from the KU. Hannah has lived in northeast Kansas since middle school and did not go to college right out of high school. She started a family and ended up pursuing her education later in life. While she was still a student at Haskell finishing her senior year, she was approached by a KU faculty member who was running a large grant program. The faculty member had met Hannah before and kept in touch with her and knew of her academic and research work. Going to school, working two jobs and raising a family was very challenging for her. The faculty member informed Hannah that the grant program had funding available for her to attend KU and that also provided an assistantship and they wanted her to consider the offer. During the same time, Hannah was also offered a full scholarship to attend another university in Montana. Hannah went on to state that funding was the deciding factor in her choosing KU. She shares in her interview the struggles she had with trying to keep up with coursework, writing and the lack of preparation for graduate school all while trying to take care of her family.

...my first semester, I remember that semester because it's the semester I struggled the most with trying to keep two jobs and doing the best the best that I could and keeping up with everybody else.

The transition from Haskell to KU was difficult especially since she was moving into a graduate program where she did not have the foundational background compared to her peers. This would prove to be an issue early on in her program and cause some difficulties throughout her tenure in graduate school. Hannah persevered and received her master's degree and overcame a lot of obstacles.

This section provided background information on the study participants. Each participant arrived at KU under various circumstances, but they all had Haskell in common. These introductions will serve as a reference moving forward and give some insight and background on the participants and their graduate school experiences.

Findings

The participant interviews provided detailed information and the main theme drawn out from the interviews was support. Support aided in the participant's persistence and success in graduate school. Other noted findings included how the participants were not fully prepared for some aspects of graduate school; how various challenges and barriers they encountered impacted their graduate school experience and taught valuable lessons; how the support they received from various sources aided in their persistence; and how each participant experienced success differently.

Adjusting to Graduate School

There were a few areas where participants were not as prepared for entering KU and beginning their graduate school experience as they might have been. The following examples show how participants dealt with adjusting and adapting to program courses and grade expectations in graduate school and also how they handled minor issues.

Lack of preparedness for new graduate program. All participants shared in one way or another how they did not feel adequately prepared for graduate school. Some did prepare by seeking out information, resources and mentors while a few just started and felt they could use their undergraduate experience to help them along.

Nancy entered a hybrid graduate program (courses online and in classroom). She never had any experience with online learning and discussed the challenges she faced in trying to adapt to the new program.

So, I'm an "in the classroom" type of student. Most of my classes were hybrid. So, I was there fifty percent of the time and the other fifty percent was online. So, in the beginning that was challenging for me to have to make sure everything was ok and that I made it a point to get everything done because you're not meeting with your professor to ask you where's your assignment in or turn it in. Not that they were that intense but being there with face to face made it be like okay, I need to make sure that I have this done.

Nancy struggled with adjusting to online coursework and turning in assignments on time.

So that was one of the, in the beginning, real challenging for me to get my mindset around disciplining myself to getting stuff done when they were supposed to be done even though I wasn't going to be there. And understanding, okay I'm coming in this week,

but I don't come in for another three weeks and just okay I need to write that down. So that was challenging on that level.

Nancy's struggles were overcome once she was able to work with deadlines and utilizing tools for time management on her own. Though she was not initially prepared for the hybrid graduate program, Nancy was able to adjust, adapt and persist.

Grade expectations in graduate school. There were several of the participants who shared they did not know about the grade point average (GPA) required for graduate school. For example, upon learning about the grades required for graduate school, Ann knew she needed to adjust how she participated in class to reach her goals and be successful.

So, I made sure that my grades were always up and that I actually ... I'm really a typical quiet person, so I wanted to ask more questions and be more vocal. I felt like at Haskell I sat back and wasn't really vocal, didn't ask the questions that I wanted to ask in class because I'm super quiet for the most part. And so, I wanted to make sure that I let that fear go and ask more questions. Or, if I didn't ask directly in class, I would make it a point to go ask after class.

The participants who said they were unaware of the grades necessary for graduate school made similar adjustments to their learning like Ann to ensure they would be able to persist in their respective programs.

Writing in graduate school and lack of confidence. All participants indicated they had a difficult time adjusting to writing expectations for their graduate programs. The thought of having their writing submissions not meet graduate level expectations left many doubting their

ability to write and perform in their programs. Susan, for example, shared the challenges of writing in graduate school and how she was not prepared when entering her program.

Yeah, I know when I first started it was different because I thought I was a good writer when I went to Haskell and then I wrote my first paper and it was all marked up in red. I was just like, okay that's new. And I was expecting that to happen, but I didn't think was going to happen like that.

Susan was able to gain confidence in her writing skills and was able to move on in her program. All participants remarked how underprepared they were for graduate school in some areas, yet they were able to figure out what they needed to do to remain in good standing and on track to graduate.

Funding for graduate school. Most participants had the concern of receiving adequate funding to cover costs associated with graduate school. Some participants had no issues or delays with the funding and assistance received each semester and there were a few that had concerns with delays in funding received from their tribes. When asked about other sources of support while in graduate school, all participants mentioned funding for graduate school was a major factor. The perspectives shared by participants ranged from the appreciation for financial support received to frustration with funding not being disbursed on time or concern with not having adequate funding to cover the costs of graduate school.

Sarah, for example, received funding from her tribe for attending school. She was very appreciative of the aid and described how the additional funding was used.

And my tribe really helped funding my school and everything. So that's what kept me afloat because if I didn't have that from my tribe as well, I probably wouldn't even have a

place to live. And it helped me keep my food on the table and kept with my rent and things like that.

Several of the interviewees talked about the lack of funding to cover their tuition and fees or the delay in receiving funding before the start of the semester. Nancy went into detail about their issues she encountered her first semester in graduate school.

I don't know, I mean it all kind of balanced out. I would say in the beginning was the funding because I didn't receive my PELL (grant) or my loan at that point and I also didn't receive my funding for American Indian Graduate Center so that was kind of challenging in the beginning which I guess can kind of contribute to not the outside funding but the PELL part of it. You know my fees weren't paid right away that very first semester.

Participants had various experiences with funding received while in graduate school. Most participants had received scholarships, tribal assistance, and all received in-state tuition due to their status as a Haskell student or due to establishing residency in the state of Kansas.

In these few examples the participants' described what they did not know or fully understand before entering their respective programs. Each participant interviewed did have to adjust and adapt to their new programs, campus environment, institutional processes and policies and learn who they needed to work with to deal with situations or issues.

Barriers, Issues and Challenges

Before explaining how participants achieved success and graduated, it is helpful to note that each participant at one time or another had to deal with barriers, issues and challenges. The participants were asked to share a difficult moment and how they were able to work through the

program and move on. There were some extreme situations few participants experienced and there were also similar incidents experienced by all participants. The following examples discuss topics that include feelings of isolation, dealing with prejudice, having to decide between helping family or staying in school, imposter syndrome and the participants trying to figure out if they really belonged at KU.

Would this have happened to me if I wasn't an AI/AN Student?

A few of the participants had to deal with feelings of isolation, prejudice and one participant was singled out and questioned for receiving a scholarship by their peers. This left one participant to ask “would these experiences have happened to non-Native students at KU?” The barriers they experienced appeared to be based on being an AI/AN student and what helped them work through these challenges was support from family, KU staff and faculty and their own self-confidence.

Being the only AI/AN student in class. Several participants provided examples of feeling isolated. Except for the one participant enrolled in the KU Global Indigenous Nations Studies program, the remaining participants each commented they were the only AI/AN student or one of a few AI/AN students in their respective programs.

The participants who had dealt with this experience discussed having to listen to uninformed opinions and comments and debate topics that dealt with Native American people, history and current issues. A few participants stated they had to speak up and make their voice heard. Susan shared her experience on how those experiences made her feel.

And then it was just, I mean sometimes it was kind of weird sitting in class, like being that only Native student in there, especially like when Native topics came up, that got

kind of weird a little bit. And like I didn't want to be the only voice in there. I was hoping for a healthy conversation and sometimes that didn't really happen.

The participants described being the only AI/AN student in class and were also aware this would occur more often in their graduate level courses.

Experiencing prejudice at KU. One study participant, Jane, shared a detailed account of encountering prejudice at KU.

Jane had an experience while riding the bus that made her realize how being a minority student at a predominantly white institution (PWI) could prove to be challenging, frustrating and made her realize how different attending a PWI really was in comparison to a TCU. She was harassed by an affiliate employee who disapproved of her displaying a pen that supported a Native American environmental issue, the Dakota Access Pipeline protest.

So, at that time that I processed that, but I had this experience on the bus where the bus driver and I were the only two people on the bus, and he saw my NODAPL pen. This was two weeks into the fall semester, and he went on a tirade. At first, I thought he was just being curious, but he knew what it meant. And so, he was talking bad about the protest. When I realized this happened, I just put my headphones back in and then people started coming on the bus, but through the entire route, he was trying to get my attention, and another passenger tapped me on the leg and said, 'The bus driver's trying to get your attention.' So, I looked up and pulled out my ear plug, and he kept going on and on, and so I put my headphones back in. I just shook my head, and when I tried to leave the bus, he tried to get my attention again, and shut the doors on me as I'm leaving, which I assume that he was trying to get my attention again.

This experience was traumatic for Jane. She went on to share in her interview that a student followed her off the bus to offer their sympathy and support. The student suggested Jane report the driver. Jane visited with her family about the incident and was encouraged to report the driver as well.

But I was literally terrified, because I was thinking, 'If this person was so passionate about this issue and I get him fired, he knows where I work, he knows where I go to school.' You know what I'm saying? So, it was really a terrifying experience. So, at that time, I really didn't have anybody to reach out to in the community, to talk about it with, or to process it with.

Jane's experience was unfortunate and no other participant had to deal with anything similar. She was able to find support she needed to process and work through the incident and that led to her being more engaged to the university.

When your integrity is questioned. This next experience was unique to Hannah and no other participant encountered anything similar. Hannah shared an experience on being questioned for receiving an award and how she was perceived by peers and faculty when the issue started to escalate.

So one of the challenges and barriers was being accepted as a bright student, being accepted into a program where most of the scholarships and awards go to my dominant cohorts, so there was a group of students that didn't believe I should've received the National Science Foundation Award, and they believed that I was awarded because I was a minority.

Hannah went on to describe what took place next – a complaint filed against the department due to her being selected for the award. Hannah went on to describe how she was treated after the complaint was filed.

I wasn't treated the same after that but at the same time I was also welcomed into spaces that did understand what I was going through, so there was getting through that mess and I developed some close relationships with professors at that time who were really supportive of helping me through that, talking me through being strategic about how to deal with certain professors that have had issues similar to this, so it was a lot of navigating, but I got through it, and I don't know if it made me a better student but it definitely made me aware of what I was, how I was seen by everybody else as a minority and as an American-Indian.

Hannah commented it took her longer to complete her master's program than her cohort peers. She was open and honest about the difficulties she faced inside and outside of the classroom, but in the end she did achieve her goal of finishing her program and graduating with support from new relationships she was able to develop with faculty and students.

Interactions with peers as a barrier. Jane discussed her experiences with other students of color in their program. She commented on how all the students of color stayed together and supported each other both in and out of the classroom. She went on to share this experience was the same in their assistantship.

It was that way in my assistantship too. I mean, there was no Natives in my assistantship in my department, but we (AI/AN students at KU) all sort of collectively would help each other. Now, that isn't mean to say that folks outside of that group in my assistantship

weren't supportive, because they were. I mean, that assistantship was really, really difficult.

Even though most of the participants said they were the only AI/AN student in their programs, Jane was the only one to describe this situation and provide a scenario that the university may not know about or understand.

These participants' experiences were uncommon and stressful and affected their graduate school experience. The participants were able to find support and work through each of the situations. Their ability to deal with and overcome the negative experiences shows their resilience and motivation to persist.

Was attending Graduate School the right choice?

Participants described the difficulties of being in graduate school. A few of the interviewees questioned whether or not they belonged in graduate school. The difficulties experienced by the students included self-doubt, the stress of keeping up with classes and peers, and having to deal with family matters beyond their control.

How did I get here? A few participants talked about doubting their ability to be in graduate school. The reasons for them to think and believe in themselves were vastly different. Jane was able to breakdown why she had doubts and how difficult it was to navigate the transition from being an undergraduate to becoming a graduate student.

I think too, also, in my entire college experience, that non-traditional students are treated a little bit differently. So, they think, 'Oh, you got this, right?' But in higher ed, where they study those things, they understand that maybe, especially if you're a first-generation student, that that is not the case. So, I feel like that I got the support I needed from my

program, but not necessarily the university as a whole. Because even as a first-generation student, when you're going from a bachelor's to a master's program, I still had no idea what was happening. Right? And I didn't even really know who I could reach out to, so I relied on the people in my assistantship to try and guide me through the things that I needed to do to be successful. And then later on, the program was supportive.

Jane was able to gain the confidence she needed and was supported by her program and her on campus appointment. Though she did not feel supported by KU on a larger scale, she was able to find support from her immediate connections.

Do I stay in school or do I stop out? Participants in this study shared many challenges and barriers that could have led to them leaving KU. Like many students, trying to balance school, family, work and other activities can become overwhelming. In this next account a participant's difficulty with balancing work, school and family was an issue yet she was able to manage these challenges from the support they were able to receive from her faculty and program.

Mary described how much her practicum was starting to be impacted by her lack of transportation and life events began causing her more stress. She was having issues with being late to her practicum and was unable to work things out with her practicum supervisor. Due to how far into the semester it was already, she was unable to get another practicum started.

So, I had to do another practicum somewhere else, and it was already too late. And boom, boom, boom, next thing you know my best friend died of suicide the next semester, so it changed my whole projection on grad school. I was really questioning if I wanted to

continue. I just had so much on my plate. I felt like I failed my practicum, which really was a setback.

Even though Mary had to find another practicum site, her program encouraged her to continue and she ended up changing her full-time student status to part-time.

They said, 'Yeah, don't take it as a failure. Take it as just that you needed someone to understand you more. You need another practicum site, another practicum supervisor.' So, I stayed. My grandpa passed eventually. I mean, he was sick. And that was going on, and so I had to go part-time. So, I end up having to change my whole plan of trying to graduate in two years. I had to end up having to say, 'Okay, I have to graduate in three total.' So, I went part-time for a year. So, I told myself, 'All right. I'm going part-time for a year. And then I go back full-time my last year.' So, one thing is to definitely get more involved, now I have more time to get involved, at least, as much as I can, and do as much as I can, learn as much as I can, take advantage of all the opportunities the program has. So yeah. That was a lot, right?

Mary's program was able to assist her and work through her practicum issue. She was appreciative of their encouragement and being able to accommodate her as much as possible. Mary shared she was hopeful to complete her degree within a two-year timeframe but going part-time and extending her education by a year was necessary.

All participants experienced challenges during their graduate program. The examples they shared were not uncommon especially for students of color e.g. feelings of isolation, insecurities, lack of preparedness for graduate school, etc. However, there were a few issues that could only have happen because of the participant's AI/AN identity. All participants were able to

work through their challenges with support and assistance from KU, Haskell, family, friends, mentors, and other external resources which led to persistence.

Support and Persistence

The participants in this study shared stories and experiences that shaped their time at KU and gave their personal views on what success was and what it meant to them. The overarching theme of support which contributed to the participant's persistence and success is presented in the following discussion. The corresponding themes to emerge under support include finding and building a support system in graduate school.

Figuring Out Who to Turn to While at KU

The transition to KU for each participant was challenging. All the participants remarked how difficult the adjustment was and they were able to remember who their support was or identify new support systems in their initial year at KU.

Faculty and staff support at KU. All participants did eventually find support and made connections at KU to aid in their success of completing their graduate degrees. The support came from their program faculty, non-program Native faculty and staff.

Several participants worked with adjunct faculty at Haskell who also worked at KU. These participants commented on how they continued to receive support from these Haskell/KU contacts during their graduate school experience and considered them mentors. Ann shares the encouragement she received from her mentor when she enrolled in a statistics class and was not doing very well. Ann stated:

And she was really always on my case, made me get a planner, come to her office, and write down dates, and would always ask me, how am I doing, how am I coming along? If

there's something she could do to help assist me or point me out to any resources. She was supportive, and I felt like, just having a familiar face on the heel helped me to feel more comfortable.

Nancy, for example, shared how supportive and accessible the faculty in her program were. She shared that one faculty member encouraged students to contact them via text message and gave students their personal cell phone number:

'If you have a question you can text me at any time. I will answer your text message, I will call you.' As a matter of fact, that particular professor, we met a couple times so that she can help calm me down because I was stressing over the big picture when all I really needed to focus was on this thing so you know, just being there to be my cheerleader, say you can do it.

Some participants did not have positive experiences and struggled with feeling supported at KU. Hannah took initiative and changed advisors and felt more supported after the process was completed. She believed this was necessary and the right decision for her to persist. By changing advisors, Hannah felt better about being in graduate school.

I would encourage developing relationships with professors that you trust even if it's not your advisor. I had one advisor who ... I actually changed advisors through midpoint of my graduate work, and I found that one advisor was very supportive, knew resources in the community, knew how to access those resources, and also really gave me feedback on my writing, didn't just glance over my work. To me, that was a supportive resource to be able to meaningfully go through and give you feedback on your chapters, your outlines, setting realistic goals, and encouraging.

Jane stated she did not seek out her advisor initially. She only interacted with them when she had them for a class. She alludes to her lack of self confidence in not initially making the connection.

Well, I didn't really meet with my advisor, and I think that that, it's just something that I've had to learn the hard way. I'm just not a person that reaches out very well. That's part of the reason why I came to college. In my thinking, why I started college late was because I really lacked confidence and I wanted to try to build on that. So, I didn't meet with my advisor at all, but we did have several really good conversations, like after class, or I would email her, and she would direct me in those ways. So that's kind of something that I wish I would have done better at. So, my advisor in the program was very supportive in that way.

When the participants reached out to faculty and staff or if faculty and staff contacted them, they all appeared willing to assist and work with participants.

Getting involved with Native American Groups at KU. There were a few participants who were able to get involved on campus. These participants actively sought out people, groups and resources to feel more connected to the campus.

Mary stated it was a culture shock for her when she arrived at the KU campus. Being the only AI/AN student in classes by her own observation, feeling unsure about fitting in because she was a lot older than her peers, and realizing the major differences between undergraduate and graduate programs was overwhelming. However, she was able to get involved with the Native student organization on campus which was positive and allowed her to stay in touch with her Native culture.

In the beginning when I had to prepare myself, someone told me get involved with First Nations Student Association (FNSA), or it used to be called the Native American Student Association (NASA). So, get involved with that. So yeah, so then that's when I said I got to get involved with FNSA, and who do I contact there? And so, I jumped into it. I started going to the meetings, and I really thankful for First Nation Student Association, FNSA.

Even though the organization was primarily undergraduate students, they did welcome graduate students and they were able to connect with more Native students on campus.

Ann also mentioned connecting to the Native American student organization and how that made her feel as though she had a 'place' on campus.

Well, I attended a couple of the First Nations Student Association meetings and then they put on a lot of different pow-wows on campus. So, I'd attend those, and that allowed me to be connected on the cultural level while being in the university. And it made me feel like I had a place, although I wasn't really directly involved with them. Seeing them and their presence on campus made me feel like I had a place on campus and our culture wasn't so foreign to everybody else.

Jane said she came from an urban area and did not grow up near her tribal community. When she arrived at Haskell to begin her undergraduate program, she knew it was going to be an adjustment and it proved to be challenging. After graduating from Haskell and entering KU she thought the process would be seamless, but it was not. The transition proved to be even more challenging. She was able to make connections at KU by participating in a graduate student organization.

So when you come from a community like Haskell, when you're used to just talking about issues that affect you personally and your people all the time, and then you're plucked out of that and then into a situation where you have no one there that you're talking to about any of those things, it was kind of a shock. So, it was important to make those connections and keep that going. And so, I was able to get into the KU Graduates United in Indigeneity, and so that connection, it was almost like I could breathe a sigh of relief. Like, "Okay, I think I can do this. I think I'm going to be able to do this now."

Jane had an unfortunate experience during her first summer school session at KU. She was able to connect with a staff member from KU who helped her process the experience. That connection also led her to become involved in a Native American staff and faculty group on campus.

But shortly after that (experience), I started to get involved in Native Staff, Faculty and Staff Council because of a staff member. So, this staff member was my saving grace in everything, in that. Outside of the program in the university, she got me involved in that, and First Nations. My friends were involved in the Graduates United in Indigeneity, so I knew that when they got back on campus that I could start hanging out with them and stuff.

A few participants shared their experiences of being involved with the First Nations Student Association at KU and other groups on campus. This engagement was important for the participants to allow them to feel they were a part of the campus community at KU.

Staying connected to Haskell. All participants commented on how they stayed connected to the Haskell campus and community while in their graduate degree programs. The

participants stated how they relied on the Haskell community for support during challenging times while at KU and for the cultural connection. Mary, for example, mentioned how encouraging her Haskell “family” was, especially her role models when she mentioned she would be pursuing a master’s degree at KU.

I had several role models (at Haskell) who that have already been to KU or somewhere near, and they had experiences. So they were telling me their experiences, and just being up front about it, their successes but also their challenges and what to expect and even one of my role models was telling me that no matter how much you prepare for, you’re always not going to be 100% ready so just take it by each moment or something like that.

Several participants shared that some of their Haskell instructors were KU alumni and they understood the challenges their former students had or were experiencing. This connection made it easy for participants to return to Haskell campus and visit with their former instructors any time.

John, for example, was working at a minority serving institution while he was a graduate student. He described how supportive and encouraging the institution’s administration and his colleagues were during his graduate school experience.

Most of the people here on campus, a lot of people I knew were really supportive because we had different Deans and things like that at the time I was with student support program, like the Dean of the school my program was under, she was really supportive it was interesting because we had different supervisors for our program and all of them were pretty supportive of what I was doing, going to school. One of the top administrators who oversaw the university services programs and departments, she was

really supportive of course because she was my practicum supervisor because I did an employment-based practicum for my last two semesters.

Hannah stated initially she did not feel supported by her KU graduate program and went back to Haskell to find support and resources. She also remarked about being one of the few AI/AN students in her program and did not find a cultural connection at KU and would go back to Haskell to engage in cultural events and activities.

I did not have much support at KU, not in that department. A lot of the support came from, again, going back to Haskell to access resources, and I had to be self-reliant to get through.

All participants spoke of Haskell fondly and most discussed the support they received from their Haskell mentors and appreciated being able to remain culturally connected.

Family is Always There

Each participant shared how important their family is to them and how much their family supported them during their time at KU. The participants each had different ways their family supported them which included words of encouragement, financial support and through family teachings e.g. tradition, ceremonies, etc. The following accounts provide details on how families supported participants and kept them motivated to reach their goals.

Family is important. All participants commented on how important family support and involvement was during their time in graduate school. Six of the participants had partners and/or children and all participants were close to their family who provided encouragement, motivation, and financial support. There were a few participants who were involved with family that lived in

another state and often had to deal with family issues that caused stress yet remarked how important family was to them and their success.

John, for example, discussed the support he received from family and how it helped him be successful. He also shared the support from the local Native American community, which was helpful as well.

So, I think all in all, if I didn't have that support network, it probably wouldn't have happened. Also, the support of my wife, we discussed it kind of for a while before I even went back and how it was probably going to be tough. Overall, I think it was just that support which I think was important, that kind of local family and community support of people saying hey you should do this. And I think that's an important thing about Native communities is a support that is given to each other.

When interviewing the participants, the encouragement and involvement from family was seen from partners, children, parents and grandparents. Nancy, for example, shared a story that showed encouragement from an elderly family member.

My grandpa used to tell me, when I'd say, 'I don't know what to do Grandpa, what should I do?' His response, not all the time, but majority of the time would be 'You need to figure it out yourself, my girl because I'm not going to live forever. What are you going to do when I die? Are you just going to sit there because you don't know what to do?'

Nancy remarked how much having her family support and having family at her graduation meant to her. She found a lot of support from her husband who was encouraging her all the way through her program and she also found long-distance support from her parents. She knew how proud her family was when she received her degree.

Ann stated how close she is to her family. Her mom was also in the same program with her and they graduated together. She was dealing with personal family matters and this really impacted her yet strengthened her relationship with her mom and brother.

My sources of support were definitely my mom. She was there, because we lived together, we were roommates. She laughed about having our own sorority. She was there definitely for the highs and lows. And my brother, I feel like my brother and I the last few years have gotten really close, and able to share different things with each other.

Mary noted how close she was to her family and how she struggled being so far away from them. There were family issues that arose and she could not immediately provide assistance and these concerns began affecting her practicum.

And I think another factor in my life was that of course I'm by myself here living in Lawrence, moving out of dorms. That wasn't a transition. Had my own spot, struggling. I had my own job too, so struggling to pay rent and making sure rent's paid on time. But I felt like also family was also a concern. There were some family conflicts, stuff going on in family that was also affecting me. So, all of that together made my first semester just stressful, like really stressful being on my own for the first time. And so that's what probably affected my practicum. I think my supervisor didn't understand that, being non-Native.

As these examples show, participants in this study remarked how family was their motivation, inspiration and support in getting through their program. Even for the few students whose families relied on them from afar, family was always shared as a vital factor in their persistence.

Relying on traditional beliefs in challenging times. The participants in this study acknowledged in one way or another the importance of their tribal culture and traditional beliefs. They all mentioned their appreciation for Haskell in keeping them connected especially those who were far away from their home areas. For a few participants, when times became challenging while in graduate school, they relied heavily on their culture and traditional beliefs to help get them through difficult times.

Sarah stated she had several challenges she encountered during her time in graduate school. Sarah mentioned mental health issues hinder her family and acknowledged she was affected too and was learning how to cope and deal with the problem. She relied heavily upon her cultural beliefs to help during these difficult periods.

But keeping your mental health (in check) is key to really getting through some of life's things. Like even if you're not in school, people go through things. It's financially, it's mentally, its family issues, its deaths in the family. It gets hard. And those things get brought up and you don't know how to deal with them. And sometimes you have to go to your advisor and tell them, 'I'm really not feeling good this week. I can't do it. Can you just please set back the deadline for another week, another couple of days or something because seriously I can't do it.'

Sarah noted a major difference in how Native American people and non-Native people deal with loss and grief. She shared about losing a loved one and how they were taught to cope with the loss and explaining this to her professors.

'This is what happened, I'm still grieving, I'm still in the grieving process, I'm still mourning.' And you have to tell them, 'This is our beliefs, this is how long we mourn.'

And tell them why we're mourning, why it's good for us to be alone sometimes or be around people.

Sarah went on to elaborate further on the importance of sharing cultural beliefs and the reason why AI/AN students need time to deal with loss.

I was honest with them, just being honest with your colleagues and friends and telling them and letting them know that like, because our culture, we have like a year of mourning and it's supposed to last to four years and it doesn't go away and this's our society, and it's like... I read somewhere, I read an article about how other cultures only mourn for month and some mourn for a year. And I was like, 'Well, I don't think a mourning for a month is really what I could handle.' But missing them never goes away. And I just, to have that foundation, that help, I think that's what's really helpful in Indian country too, is that people deal with mental health issues and we could just start crying at the drop of a dime. And we need that. We need that support, especially with women.

Sarah's honesty about the issues she had to deal with during her program sheds light on a range of issues some students have to tolerate and manage. Sarah's example is one that includes a teachable moment for her program faculty.

The participants all remarked about their support systems in their undergraduate program which included family and how much they appreciated support received from their Haskell family (faculty, staff, friends). When they were asked specifically about support at KU they all stated family, their Haskell family and KU faculty and staff and student organizations. There was no change from their familiar support from their undergraduate program to their graduate

program but once they entered KU they had to expand their network to adjust to their new experience and persist.

Experiencing Success, Gaining Confidence, and Achieving Goals

The themes from the data regarding success, as experienced by the interviewees, were seen in many areas such as making good grades, taking advantage of opportunities to enhance research and learning and building self-confidence. Each interviewee shared memorable and meaningful experiences regarding what they viewed as being successful. There were a few interviewees who stated no one had ever asked them about their success and what it means to them. What is important to note is how success was seen and acknowledged by the participants.

Celebrating Wins

Each participant talked about achieving goals and how that moment felt and what it meant to them. With every goal achieved, participants expressed a sense of pride because to them it meant they were able compete with their peers and get one step closer to achieving their ultimate goal of graduating with a master's degree.

Making good grades and building confidence. All participants expressed doubt and anxiety when beginning their graduate programs and passing their classes was a major goal for their first semester as a graduate student. Nancy shares a "big win" by making all A's during her first semester and receiving support and encouragement from her program advisor.

So, I did and talked with my advisor and told her the situation and she's like, 'It's going to be challenging, but I think you can do it.' So, I'm like okay. She's like 'my goal for you is just to shoot for B's, because B's are passing, C's are not.' So, I'm like okay. So that was

my goal was to get all B's. I surprised myself. Got all A's. All A's. And so, after that, that was my goal. All A's.

Nancy went on to discuss how completing her program has given her confidence to talk to undergraduates about graduate school. She had self-doubt about being able to make it at KU and succeed in a graduate program.

Because, you know, I'm glad that I was able to do that and to be successful because now I can tell students at Haskell, if I could do it, you could do it. I was a full-time mom, a full-time wife, a full-time employee, and a full-time student. If I could be full time at all those and successfully pass all my class, you could too. This is little old me, coming from tribal schools to division one graduate school. That's just like, I mean, and I lacked a lot of confidence academically, coming from tribal schools.

The excitement in this participant's account is genuine in how much this achievement meant to them. The experience instilled self-confidence and also in their abilities and they were more aware of what they could achieve and even further the impact they could make on other AI/AN students.

Self-worth. Participants made discoveries about themselves and their abilities that aided in their persistence. When they realized what they could achieve they seemed inspired and motivated as they were sharing these moments. For example, Hannah described the opportunities and rewarding work they were able to do while in her program.

Oh my gosh. There are so many successes, so many opportunities that opened up. I was able to develop a program...we had a collaboration with a Haskell faculty member and

we were able to recruit and train Haskell undergrads to do graduate work, graduate research, how to put projects together. And so, that was a huge success.

Ann was honest about being asked about success. Ann remarked she had never been asked about her success or successes before. She shared being accepted into KU graduate program and receiving a scholarship was a major success for her.

Successes ... I think it was a success definitely, because I was surprised that ... First of all, I didn't even know that KU had minority scholarships in the school. So, being notified that I received one, and that there was actually a minority banquet-type thing, that was really shocking and surprising. When I think of KU, I think it's huge, and I can't believe, how did they even see me? I thought I was a number, or whatever. But it was cool to be recognized.

I think another success is just being there, being a student, getting accepted. I remember when I got the acceptance e-mail, I was just crying my eyes out in my Haskell dorm. My roommate was like, 'What's going on?' I'm like, 'Oh my God, I'm going to KU!' And she was crying, too. So, just being a student is really something to be proud of.

Many participants reflected on how achieving small personal goals whether planned or not made them feel accomplished. The feeling of being able to achieve a goal or get through an issue or situation was impactful.

Stepping Outside Comfort Zones

A few participants said they had research experiences in their undergraduate programs, but in graduate school, research was a part of the participant's experience. Though there was

discussion about the struggles with writing in graduate school, there were two participants who took advantage of every aspect of research which included traveling internationally.

Taking advantage of opportunities. Two participants shared moments in their academic journey that provided growth and made them step outside of their comfort zones. Mary described the immersive experiences she participated in while in graduate school which included receiving a graduate assistantship and the opportunity to travel abroad.

Well, going back to my first year... Study abroad, I feel like I've never thought I was going to even get accepted. I just went on a whim and applied, and I got it. And I feel like not everyone gets in the study abroad program. I was told that it was like they'll choose only 10 out of how many applicants, so I was like, 'Wow. I got chosen.' And to leave the continent, go to another continent, was like, wow. So, I experienced that, loved it. I feel like that was a success, and then also getting the graduate research assistantship for a year. Of course, the money helped. But the experience around research part. I feel like Haskell didn't... I mean, I didn't have enough research classes to prepare me for a research course in my grad school. So, the graduate research assistantship helped me in my research skills. So that was a success.

With Mary's experience of being selected to study abroad she also was able to enhance her research skills that aided in her persistence in her program.

Hannah also shared her opportunities to travel abroad and conduct research which made an impact on her graduate school experience.

And I was later awarded a diversity fellowship from that work and also I was able to learn to say no to a couple of professors that encouraged me to focus on local issues and I

refused to do that because one woman said ‘This is your graduate program. You can do whatever it is you want.’ So, I did, and by able to step up and really focusing in on the project it took me to do some international work in the Arctic working with indigenous communities in Northern Norway and Sweden, and I've been all over ... I wouldn't say the world, but all over. It felt like it. I've been to the High North. I've done work indigenous communities in Mexico. So, there was that. So, there was a lot of successes.

These participants both shared how much their research experience impacted them. They were able to challenge themselves and seek out opportunities and immediately realized the value and reward in these experiences. Though they were the only two that had the opportunity to travel abroad and conduct research, other participants were able to gain valuable experiences in their programs.

Goal Setting and Persisting in Graduate School

Participants gave many detailed accounts of accomplishing goals while in graduate school. The experiences shared and described gave each participant the confidence needed or the reassurance that they were able to persist and they were one step closer to achieving their ultimate goals.

Achieving goals. Goals set by each participant were mostly similar in that they wanted to finish school and attain their graduate degree. All participants remarked how important it was to them but how their families and close network were their inspirations to finish. Mary, for example, stated her main goals for their first semester was to pass their classes and get an assistantship. She was able to achieve both goals.

I applied to study abroad and I got accepted. And then I applied to an assistantship and got accepted to that. So that was a lot on my plate for the first semester. And then, yeah, that was my thing was to pass, to get through, because I knew it was going to be the hardest part, just transitioning in. For the most part of my classes I did pretty good. As far as my practicum, I ran into some barriers there. So, I mean overall, I did pretty good for my first semester.

Susan reflected on what receiving a master's degree meant to her, her family and her tribe.

It actually meant a lot and it just meant a lot because I knew that for one, it was going to give me a bigger capacity to do some work I wanted to do with Native communities. Like I would be allowed those opportunities. But then it was like also the fact that I was well aware of graduation rates or lack thereof. And so, I wanted to be someone who was just like, I don't want to be that statistic that doesn't graduate. Like I don't want to do that. And then it was also kind of like going into the whole ... I was technically the first in my family to get a master's degree. And so that meant a lot and just kind of being able to share that with my tribe too. That really meant a lot, and yeah, it was super important.

Jane found her motivation to attain her goals by wanting to honor her late grandparents. She said that her grandparents could not read and grew up in poverty. Being at Haskell also allowed Jane the opportunity to reconnect with her Native heritage. Receiving her master's degree was the ultimate achievement and success and she connected it to her family's humble beginnings.

But the thing that was probably the most salient that I think about when I think about getting a master's degree is that my grandparents couldn't even read. So they, if they

were alive today, they wouldn't have any idea what it meant to even get a bachelor's degree, or associate's degree, or a master's degree, and that is so sad, but that is motivation for me, knowing that that needs to change, that that needs to be part of how we move forward or how I am going to move my people forward, and how I'm going to help other students move their people forward as well.

Goal setting was a factor that motivated students and aided in their success. The interviewees shared their goals and aspirations that ranged from making good grades in their graduate level courses to taking advantage of unique opportunities to receiving their master's degree. All participants shared some amazing stories about their experiences and several factors were identified that aided them in attaining success while in graduate school.

Summary

The analysis of the data showed support as the main theme that contributed and led to the participant's successes. Corresponding themes were drawn out from the interviews, which showed the various types and forms of support received as well as participants recognizing successes, achievements and accomplishments:

- The participants felt supported by faculty, staff, and programs at both KU and Haskell, KU student organizations, and external sources e.g. funding for school.
- The participants shared how family support and involvement were vital to their success.
- All participants had initial concerns about academic performance e.g. writing skills, grades and preparedness for graduate school but all of them eventually succeeded in earning their degrees.

- Participants had experienced culture shock, feelings of isolation and prejudice as a KU graduate student.
- Success was experienced by the participants in many ways. Participants experienced success by overcoming challenges and accomplishing goals with support from family, faculty, mentors and other relevant sources.

As noted in the beginning of this chapter, the themes identified in the interview data were grouped under the research questions (success at KU, factors aiding in success and challenges). This study relies heavily on the interview data shared by each individual participant to capture what success means to them, what and who helped them be successful and the challenges they worked through to help them attain success. The next chapter will discuss the results and recommendations for the working with AI/AN graduate students at KU and future research on this topic and related topics pertaining to AI/AN graduate student persistence.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This basic interpretive qualitative study highlights the successes of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) master's degree recipients who attended a predominantly white institute (PWI) by sharing their personal narratives and perspectives in what success looks like and means to them. There was a total of eight participants in this study and interviews were conducted in person. The research questions that guided this study included:

1. What did University of Kansas (KU) AI/AN alumni (who received bachelor's degrees from Haskell Indian Nations University (Haskell) and master's degrees from KU) perceive as important in helping them persist in their graduate programs?
2. What challenges did they face in their academic journey and how did they overcome those challenges?

This final chapter summarizes the significant findings, discusses similar research on AI/AN student persistence, summarizes the current partnership status between KU and Haskell, provides recommendations to improve AI/AN graduate student experiences at KU, and offers future research suggestions to improve the graduate experience of AI/AN students.

Significant Findings

The analysis of the data showed an overarching theme of support which contributed and led to the participant's success and the corresponding themes highlighted featured a diverse range of support for participants. In chapter four, most of the discussion centered on participants dealing with issues, challenges and barriers and how they were able to navigate through those experiences with the support and guidance from family, faculty and mentors. This is an interesting dynamic to the study given the majority of the interview questions focused on

discussing success, support and learning about the participants and only one question directly asked about negatives experiences. The following provides a summary of the corresponding themes extracted from the data:

- The participants felt supported by faculty, staff, and programs at both KU and Haskell, KU student organizations, and external sources e.g. funding for school.
- Family support and involvement were vital to their success.
- All participants had initial concerns about academic performance e.g. writing skills, grades and preparedness for graduate school but all of them eventually succeeded in earning their degrees.
- Participants had experienced culture shock, feelings of isolation and prejudice as a KU graduate student.
- Success was experienced by the participants in many ways. Participants experienced success by overcoming challenges and accomplishing goals with support from family, faculty, mentors and other relevant sources.

The participants had experiences that were often similar to each other and also very different. Each participant was able to reach their goals of graduating from KU and were satisfied with their accomplishments. The support they received from family, KU faculty, Haskell mentors, and new connections made at KU were all vital in their persistence and ability to be successful. In the next section support received by the participants will be discussed to show how it impacted them in navigating a situation or providing the motivation and confidence needed to get through an issue.

Discussion of Support

This study is unique because all research participants graduated with a bachelor's degree from Haskell Indian Nations University, a tribal college/university (TCU) and completed their master's degree program at the University of Kansas, a predominantly white institution (PWI). The most common reasons these participants chose KU was due to the influence and encouragement from faculty and staff at Haskell and KU, wanting to stay in Lawrence, and affordability. There were a few participants who did not prepare for graduate school in advance and relied on their own volition to transition to KU. There were several participants who tried to prepare for graduate school and sought out assistance from Haskell and KU mentors. Support was the main theme to emerge from the data analysis as the major factor in their ability to persist and be successful at KU.

Discussion for Research Question #1

The first research question asked what factors the participants perceived as important in their persistence in graduate school. From the collected data, the main factors included support received from each of the following – their family, their program faculty at KU, the First Nations Student Association, and their Haskell mentors. All of these factors were mentioned by each participant with some factors having more influence and bearing in the student's persistence than others.

The participants in this study discussed how important it was to have the support and involvement of their family. This is consistent with prior literature that also concluded that family is a vital and positive factor in persistence for AI/AN students (Heavy Runner-Rioux, 2017; Heavy Runner, I. & DeCelles, R., 2009). Family support gave participants in this study motivation and inspiration to persist. Support was found in many forms, which included

emotional, mental, spiritual, and financial. Participants often turned to family when going through challenging moments and family was the first to know about the participant's successes. Yet, for a few participants, family involvement caused some disruption and one participant had to extend her time in graduate school by a year due to family reasons. Regardless of how the participants were impacted, family support was a main factor for their persistence.

The importance of faculty engaging with students, in general, has proven to be effective in student persistence (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). The participants in the present study shared various experiences of engagement with their faculty. There was one participant who did not actively engage with their program faculty outside of classes while attending KU. However, most of the participants did take time to develop relationships with their faculty in and out of the classroom and this interaction assisted them in persisting and being successful. For example, one participant shared how supportive one of her professors was in encouraging her in achieving her semester goals. The professor provided personal contact information and encouraged students to reach out to them with questions any time. By providing this opportunity to their students the professor showed support and encouragement for the student to succeed. In a research study by Lin, LaCounte and Eden (1988) AI students who had positive perceptions of their faculty had positive perceptions of college and their experience. There are more articles discussing engagement with faculty and positive outcomes none were specific to AI/AN college students.

As Astin (1984) has shared in his research, involvement in a campus community aids in student persistence and productivity. In addition, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) research describes how a 'sense of belonging' aids in a student's motivation, success and persistence and for minority students this allowed them to be their true self and develop meaningful relationships. Participants discussed feelings of isolation and culture shock in adjusting to their

new campus environment and being the only AI/AN graduate student in their classes. There were a few who missed being with other AI/AN students and these individuals actively sought out people and organizations to help them connect with their AI/AN culture. One organization that helped fill that void was the First Nations Student Association (FNSA). FNSA is primarily made up of AI/AN undergraduate students and hosts events throughout the academic year. They are known for organizing an annual spring powwow and coordinating other cultural activities. Several of the participants remarked how they often had to return to the Haskell campus to feel connected culturally. Yet there were a few who did state how they were able to interact with FNSA and develop a cultural connection and expand their network. This, in turn, assisted them in feeling more involved at KU and a part of the campus community. Heavy Runner-Rioux (2018) shared there were many factors that aided in AI/AN student persistence which included staying connected to their culture. KU does offer this on a small scale and has potential to grow and develop these efforts for their AI/AN student population.

All the participants noted how much Haskell meant to them and how they were able to stay connected to the campus and their mentors. One participant shared how she did not connect at KU during her first year in graduate school and would return to Haskell often for support and assistance. Participants acknowledged how much they appreciated their Haskell mentors and the support they received from them throughout their graduate studies. The participants felt comfortable reaching out to their mentors and welcomed when returning to the Haskell campus. Being able to return to their undergraduate institution and their Haskell family and community was a factor in their success. The participants looked to the Haskell network for support and was able to stay culturally connected by events held at Haskell. Martin (2005) shared the importance of mainstream institutions in making culturally relevant programming and services available to

AI/AN students is vital in their persistence. Perhaps KU can assess the current programming they have in place and work with their Native faculty, staff, alumni and local community to enhance and improve what is offered to AI/AN students.

Other sources of support were identified by the participants but were not as prevalent as the examples provided. How do you take all these factors and make them work together for the benefit of KU AI/AN graduate students? The basis of all the identified support sources is relational and to keep KU AI/AN graduate students motivated and encouraged to persist these relationships must be given priority and nurtured.

Discussion for Research Question #2.

The second research question for this study focused on challenges participants encountered during their tenure at KU and how they overcome those challenges. The participants each had unique individual experiences and shared similar experiences with other participants. The basis of this question lends itself to the overarching theme of support. In each of the challenges encountered, the participants were able to navigate the experiences and find the necessary support to help them get through a situation and continue to persist.

A few participants experienced some difficult challenges that made them question their decision to attend KU. One participant experienced prejudice and harassment during their first months at KU and was unsure who to turn to or what to do about the incident. The participant had to deal with the experience on their own at first and did alert their immediate family about what they had encountered. It was not until a few weeks later the participant was able to discuss the incident with a Native American staff member who would become a source of support and valuable connection for the participant during their time in graduate school. Another

participant's integrity was questioned by peers in their graduate program cohort. The students in the graduate program filed a complaint on how the participant received an award. How is a student, especially an AI/AN student, supposed to feel being singled out and seen as undeserving of receiving an award? The participant was able to navigate through this difficult time during their first year in their program with support from several sources at KU and Haskell.

These two experiences were impactful on the two participants. What if they were provided information and resources before they attended KU to help them navigate processes and network with KU faculty and staff so they would know who they could turn to? Would this have been helpful in their dealing with these experiences? For AI/AN students having this information and these connections in place before transferring to another institution would help with their transition to any new campus environment. The efforts by an institution in developing a meaningful and relevant orientation or graduate preparation program for AI/AN students would be beneficial and give students the jump start they need to persist in any academic program.

Further, these struggles connect to prior literature. Specifically, Lin, LaCounte, and Eder (1988) examine how feelings of isolation and a sense of hostility on a campus can negatively impact an AI/AN student's academic performance. Institutions wanting to work with AI/AN students need to ensure their campuses are fully engaged in understanding and supporting diversity and show how they are making this happen throughout the academic year and not just during designated holidays, celebrations or heritage months.

Other challenges experienced by the participants included adjusting to writing and academic expectations in graduate school, adapting to new ways of learning (hybrid program), and being the only AI/AN student in a program or class. The only newer issue that has not been addressed in previous literature is adapting or adjusting to new ways of learning supported by

technology. Participants were able to work through these types of challenges and sought out support and resources. In these instances, KU faculty and on campus resources were primarily utilized in working through these issues.

Providing AI/AN graduate students the opportunity to become a part of a community can make a significant difference in their persistence and success. The participants in this study show how important support is whether it comes from family or their faculty or campus programs/organizations and also feeling they belong and are a part of the campus community adds to their motivation to achieve their goals and be successful.

Recommendations to improve the KU AI/AN Graduate Student Experience

Participants in this study shared many factors that aided in their persistence and success in their graduate programs. The following recommendations stem from this study's findings and suggestions from the study participants and also considering current practices, programs and policies relevant to both KU and Haskell.

Suggestions from the Participants

All participants were asked to make a final comment, statement or to share any thoughts they might have at the end of their interviews. This question was not part of the original interview questions but was added to the protocol to allow participants to open up and share what they thought would be helpful for AI/AN graduate students at KU.

The responses from the participants focused on what KU could be to assist AI/AN graduate students. The suggestions included having better communication with students especially on culturally relevant events and activities, hiring more Native American faculty and staff, adding more Native American content to program curriculum (where possible), developing

a bridge program for students wanting to attend graduate school, providing opportunities to learn about research, assisting with job placement and collaborating more with Haskell. This information was considered in the development of recommendations to improve AI/AN student success at KU.

Improving AI/AN Student Success at KU

The following recommendations are based on the data analyzed from the study and taking into consideration best practices for engaging AI/AN students at other institutions of higher education. These recommendations are separated by audience – KU, Haskell, and students.

Reestablish an American Indian/Alaska Native (Native American) Program

Coordinator at KU. As noted in chapter one, KU established two positions to work with the AI/AN student population in 2014 but those positions have since been defunded (source). In supporting KU's mission and strategic plan especially where it pertains to diversity and recruiting more students and faculty of color, having a coordinator level position specifically to work with the KU Native American community would be beneficial in helping to recruit and retain AI/AN students, faculty and staff at the university. This position and office can be an initial contact for KU AI/AN students to go to with questions or concerns when they encounter an issue and be a resource for information.

Budget constraints do limit what campuses are able to do when it comes to establishing new positions. However, the declining enrollment numbers especially with the AI/AN student population and reviewing the KU's last strategic plan regarding AI/AN student's enrollment and faculty and staff recruitment and retention should provide a sense of how the institution is doing.

Host an orientation for new and continuing AI/AN graduate students at the beginning of the fall semester at KU. A full-day orientation could be held for all AI/AN graduate students, both new and continuing. The idea behind this orientation is to welcome the graduate students to campus and to provide information and share resources before the semester begins. The event would also incorporate cultural and traditional pieces such as a blessing by a local Native American elder and encourage speakers and presenters to include culture in their presentations. By the end of the day, the students will have made new connections, met with potential mentors and established a network of contacts at KU.

The orientation gives incoming and returning students an opportunity to meet and make connections with KU faculty and staff. By including AI/AN members of the local community to be involved and Haskell Indian Nations University representatives, the event is providing a cultural connection and assuring the students of KU's commitment of providing a well-rounded experience.

KU and Haskell Collaborate on a graduate school preparation program. KU and Haskell could work together and establish a graduate school preparation program. The program could begin during a potential student's senior year at Haskell. The program could include four meetings (two in the fall, two in the spring) to assist the student with making the transition to KU.

The information obtained from this study provides solid information on the needs of AI/AN graduate students. The recommended meeting/workshop topics might include the following:

- “Applying to Graduate School/Finding Funding for Graduate School” workshop – The Graduate Studies (admission to graduate school), program recruiters, and staff from financial aid could collaborate and host this workshop. Another piece to this would be to invite a speaker to share tips on writing a personal statement.
- “What is required and expected for graduate school” - This would be a seminar series and would include program faculty and staff from various schools and allow them time to discuss entrance requirements and expectations of the program and discuss internships and practicums. The seminars could be pre-recorded and made available online for potential students to access at any time.
- “KU Graduate Panel: My Experience at KU” – This would be a facilitated discussion to include currently enrolled AI/AN graduate students to share their experiences. The facilitator could be an invited KU administrator to engage with the group.
- “You have a place at KU!” – A gathering to include a short presentation by KU administration to share diversity initiatives with potential students and answer questions. Also invite the First Nations Student Association and the Native Faculty and Staff organization to share information. A short mixer would follow inviting all AI/AN faculty, staff and students.
- “KU-Haskell Peer Mentoring Program” – This would be for KU AI/AN graduate students who want to serve as peer mentors to new AI/AN graduate students or upper-level undergraduate students. This program would provide training for peer mentors and match them up with a new student matriculating from Haskell.

There are currently no graduate school preparation programs for AI/AN students at either institution. Being able to offer an “Introduction to Graduate School” program at KU would be

beneficial to AI/AN students and possibly expand to include all students of color or allow groups to coordinate and host their own orientation.

Haskell Develops a Program and Materials to Work with Students interested in Graduate School. A program could be developed at Haskell to assist students interested in attending graduate school. This program could be offered through academic services or student services. The participants in this study discussed their lack of preparedness for graduate school which included adjusting to academic expectations (writing in graduate school, maintaining a 3.0 GPA) and adapting to new learning experiences. Would their experience have been different if they participated in a graduate school preparation program? The main idea behind this recommendation is for a TCU to support their students in achieving their goals and to provide assistance to students. This program could be set up over an academic year and include meetings over lunch. Meetings could be held on a bi-weekly basis and include topics such as applying for graduate school, writing a personal statement, finding funding for graduate school, how to write in graduate school, research in graduate school, attending a PWI as a TCU student, and learning how to persist as a AI/AN student in graduate student (research based). Also, scheduling field trips for students to visit the KU campus and tour a library or sit in a graduate level class could be helpful. If funding is available, the program could be incentivized for participation and offer student's supplies or assistance with an application fee. This program could work in conjunction with other campus offices and help establish other programs and track students applying for graduate school as well.

Another suggestion for Haskell if the institution is severely limited on funding and resources would be to develop printed and/or online materials on the graduate school process and/or designate an office to work with a university's graduate school recruitment office and

alert them when a student expresses interest. The printed/online materials could be general information but at least give students an idea of the timely process involved in applying for a graduate school program. Also, if a student is interested in a graduate program and unsure where to begin in making contact designating an office to assist students would be helpful. This could allow for data to be tracked and used in institutional reports. These services are basic but would serve a need for the institution.

Haskell and TCUs work with National Organizations. TCUs are often faced with issues that include shortage of faculty, staff and/or faculty taking on extra duties, lack of funding, unsteady enrollment and outdated or lack of technology and resources (Stull et al, 2015). How feasible is it to add graduate preparation programs if the institution is already being pushed to its limits? There are a few national organizations that not only provide scholarships and funding opportunities for AI/AN students but have begun to include programming to fill the voids that TCUs cannot offer. These organizations such as the American Indian College Fund, the American Indian Graduate Center and the Cobell Scholarship Program are extending their support to include student success programs and outreach. Haskell and other TCUs could be encouraged to work with these organizations and share their information in their campus communication and give students more opportunities to gain information especially in the areas of graduate school preparation.

TCU Students Prepare Themselves for Graduate School. The participants in this study were goal-oriented and determined on attaining their master's degree and graduating from KU. What the data showed is with limited preparation, a student who is driven and motivated can find the means to persist and be successful. The participants each exemplified that determination. In this study, the participants made it clear their reasons for wanting to attend KU – personal goal

of attaining a master's degree from KU, influence from mentors, location, and affordability. TCU students with an interest in graduate school should be encouraged by faculty and staff to learn about master's degree programs and to direct students to offices on campus that can assist with that research. Even further, students should be encouraged by their TCU faculty, staff and mentors to make contacts through their networks about TCU students who are in graduate school or who recently received their master's degree in an effort to help them gain a graduate student perspective.

Haskell Indigenous American Indian Studies Program and KU's Social Welfare Program. Half of the participants who graduated from Haskell with a bachelor's degree in Indigenous American Indian Studies (IAIS) entered KU's Social Welfare graduate program. This is not an uncommon occurrence and credit for recruitment goes to the Haskell IAIS instructors and adjunct instructors who are KU Social Welfare alumni. Haskell has an associate degree in social work and has developed upper level courses with a social work focus which falls under the IAIS academic program. To expedite a Haskell's student's application process to KU's Social Work graduate program, developing incentives to encourage the student to apply by their senior year first semester could be developed. Other factors that could aid in the matriculation would be to assign the potential student a peer mentor and/or faculty to work with over the course of an academic year to keep them informed and engaged.

These recommendations are feasible and could fit in with a university's plan to retain AI/AN students. The basis for each recommendation is to assist the universities in general with recruiting more AI/AN students and increasing the retention and graduation rates as well. KU and Haskell will need to review all current programs and opportunities available for their AI/AN

student population and determine what is working and what is not working and make those necessary improvements and needed changes.

Limitations of Study

The limitations of this study include the sample size and data collection. This study had only eight participants and could have used more participants with master's degrees from other disciplines i.e. science, technology, engineering, math, fine arts, etc. The initial recruitment of the study was done by contacting potential participants and asking if they were interested in being interviewed and then asking if they knew of anyone else who might be interested. Initially there were 13 people interested but only eight people responded to emails and followed through with setting up an appointment for the interview. The timeframe for conducting interviews was extended due to issues with securing and scheduling interviews. There was concern from the researcher with the oversaturation of the data collected especially with participants from the same degree programs. This was not an issue overall, but it would have been ideal to have participants from other disciplines to gain more perspectives and experiences.

The limitation with data collection is seen in the missed opportunity to gain more information. The research questions and interview questions could have been expanded to discuss more than persistence and include questions related to recruitment and graduation. There is no other study like this one in terms of the participant profile and the experience of graduating from a TCU and matriculating to a PWI. If more questions could have been developed to address recruitment and graduation this would have provided more valuable information from this study. Also, the study required participants to have completed their graduate degrees between 2013 and 2019. Would the numbers of participants have been higher and responses different if the timeframe was longer? Or would the data have been different if the timeframe was shortened and

only focused on graduates from a specific program? There is potential for other studies to be conducted similar to this research and look at persistence and success from other perspectives. These studies might include focusing on specific disciplines of AI/AN graduate students or even look at doctoral students as well.

Future Research

Research on the AI/AN student experience in graduate school level is minimal compared to other minority students (Lopez, 2017). Current and relevant research needs to be encouraged and conducted by academics, especially AI/AN researchers, to update older research and examine new trends impacting AI/AN students. This study could potentially add to the current research in the area of AI/AN graduate student persistence and AI/AN student persistence in general. The characteristics differentiating this study from other research on AI/AN graduate student experiences are the focus on two universities located in the same city with students matriculating from a TCU to a PWI.

This study has shared many factors aiding in AI/AN student persistence and there is potential to pursue those as individual topics for future research. There is also potential for similar studies to be done focusing on other AI/AN student populations as well. Here are recommendations for possible studies and future research:

- Family influence on AI/AN students in their persistence - All students discussed how important family was even when dealing with issues not school related. What does AI/AN student family support look like and how is it different than other ethnic student family support?

- Examining articulation agreements between a TCU and PWI and how effective are these agreements - How many currently exist and are beneficial to both institutions? This might be beneficial for institutions wanting to work with TCUs in recruiting potential AI/AN students and ensuring campuses have the necessary resources for AI/AN student success.
- Understanding cultural and traditional practices and beliefs of AI/AN student and how these factors impact persistence at both undergraduate and graduate level – Often times non-Native faculty and staff at a PWI may have had limited experience or no experience in working with AI/AN students. A study to discuss why understanding AI/AN culture and tradition and how it also factors into persistence would be valuable to the AI/AN student research.
- Examining the types of prejudice and discrimination AI/AN student’s encounter at PWIs – Many AI/AN students have encountered prejudice and those experiences can be traumatic. A study on this topic might show how a campus supports students and responds to prejudice and discrimination and how AI/AN student work through these experiences.
- Graduate School Preparation Programs - How many currently exist and are effective? How beneficial are they to students of color especially AI/AN students? With the participants in this study, being able to attend a preparation program may have assisted with the transition to a large, public, research institution.
- AI/AN graduate students attending and graduating from PWI’s - How do PWI’s with high numbers of AI/AN enrollees recruit, retain and graduate their students?

This potential study could look at what institutions do to help their AI/AN students persist and what best practices can be shared with other institutions.

- AI/AN graduate student enrollment - Are the numbers of AI/AN graduate and doctoral students still low in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups? If not, what disciplines are experiencing increased numbers? If so, why is this still an issue?
- TCU students in doctoral programs - What does their journey look like? The study could use the same research methods as this study and possibly be a mixed methods research project.

These are a few potential research topics to emerge from this study. There is still a large gap in the literature on AI/AN students. The opportunity to expand the research on AI/AN students is now and this study has provided potential topics that could be explored.

Conclusion

This study has shown how AI/AN graduate students viewed success and factors aiding in their success while in their respective programs. The data collected and analyzed revealed students received support from many people, programs and resources especially during challenging and difficult moments. When they encountered issues, they were able to seek out assistance or found assistance through their support systems. The literature review when discussing student persistence supports the action of the participants being able to work through challenges, barriers and issues with the assistance of a support network e.g. family, faculty, on campus resources, etc.

The participants shared both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with KU's efforts in working with the AI/AN graduate student population. The positive views from several of the participant's described how program faculty and AI/AN faculty and staff at KU were helpful and willing to assist. Negative views by the majority of the participants shared they did not feel they were truly a part of the KU community. KU needs to reevaluate the support, interactions and outreach it has in place for AI/AN students and work on improving their experience at the institution.

Success was seen in many scenarios encountered by the participants. The support they received was a vital contributing factor in their attaining their academic goals and graduating with their master's degree. As the participants have moved on in their own professional careers and personal endeavors, graduating from KU with a master's degree is something they feel was a huge success and share their experiences with AI/AN students wanting to do the same.

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Appendix A: Sample of Informed Consent Form

Adult Informed Consent Statement

For the study titled

Defining success on their terms: Narratives of American Indian/Alaska Native master's degree recipients from a predominantly white institution

KEY INFORMATION

- This project is studying University of Kansas American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) master's degree recipients (who also received their bachelor's degree from Haskell Indian Nations University). The purpose of this study is to understand their experiences as graduate students at a predominantly white institution.
- Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary.
- Your participation will take up to one hour or more and will be a video recorded interview.
- You will be asked to provide a convenient meeting date and time for the interview.
- There are no risks or anything that would cause discomfort.
- There are no benefits for participating in this study.
- Your alternative to participating in this research study is not to participate.

DETAILED INFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This is a qualitative, basic interpretive study on American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribal college/university (TCU) alumni who have subsequently completed and graduated with their master's degree from a large, predominantly white research university. The study explores their experiences and successes in completing their programs. This study will focus on TCU alumni who attended Haskell Indian Nations University and graduated with their bachelor's degree and also received their master's degrees in a variety of fields at the University of Kansas (KU) between 2008-2018. The purpose of this study is to understand their experiences as graduate students at a predominantly white institution.

PROCEDURES

Participants will be asked to sign a consent form agreeing to be interviewed and videotaped. The average time for an interview will be one hour. The participant will provide the researcher a date and time for the interview to take place. The researcher will follow up with a confirmation email that will include the date, time and meeting location. Participants will have the option to stop the video recording any time during the interview. The videotaped interview will be transcribed and the data analyzed by the researcher. The

researcher will be the only person that will have access to the interviews and the data memory cards will be kept in their possession. After the study has been completed, all videotaped interviews will be erased.

RISKS

There are no risks involved in participating in this study. The participant will be interviewed and will be asked if the researcher can follow up for clarification if needed. Other than that, there are no major risks or discomforts for the participant.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits for the participant nor are there any indirect benefits from this study.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

Your name will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher will use a pseudonym rather than your name. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission.

Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. The study is anticipated to be in progress February 15, 2019 through June 30, 2019. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to:

Darryl Monteau

1625 Irving Court

Lawrence, KS 66044

dmonteau@ku.edu

If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the researcher may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher listed at the end of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email irb@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

Type/Print Participant's Name

Date

Participant's Signature

I agree to being videotaped for the interview for this study.

Initial: _____

Researcher Contact Information:

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Lawrence, KS 66044

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