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# Career Dilemmas among Diné (Navajo) College Graduates: An Exploration of the Dinétah (Navajo Nation) Brain Drain

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# Career Dilemmas among Diné (Navajo) College Graduates: An Exploration of the Dinétah (Navajo Nation) Brain Drain

## Abstract

Like many Indigenous nations, the Navajo Nation has worked to develop its human and economic potential. It has provided scholarships and other supports to enable its members to pursue post-secondary education. However, relatively few of these college-educated members return to the reservation to contribute directly to its development. This phenomenon has been termed a *brain drain*. This study explored the experiences of 28 college-educated Navajos who, while raised on the reservation, were living off the reservation after completing their post-secondary education. Participants indicated a number of factors that went into their decision to live off the reservation. These included:

1. *Ké'*: Relationships/Connections to Family, Culture, Homeland, People;
2. *Iná*: Lifestyle/Lifeway, Desirable Setting, Learned Work Ethic, Social Atmosphere, Togetherness (Diné) vs. Individualism (Mainstream);
3. *Bee ach'í' na'hwii'ná*: Resources and Roadblocks to Making a Life, Infrastructure, Services, The "System";
4. *Bee ajit'9*: Opportunity, Prosperity and Personal Improvement, Education, Extracurricular, Job Availability, Work Experience.

## Keywords

brain drain, Navajo, post-secondary education, Indigenous, Native American, American Indian

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## **Career Dilemmas among Diné (Navajo) College Graduates: An Exploration of the Dinétah (Navajo Nation) Brain Drain**

The Navajo Nation makes significant investments in educating its people, but returns from these investments are not always realized. Scholarship funds and other resources are often provided to students pursuing higher education outside the reservation. However, many of these students do not return to the reservation to work once they have completed their education. Education is an important means of overcoming poverty and related social challenges, but when college graduates do not return to their sponsoring nation, little benefit is realized. Making educational investments that bring a greater return would help the Navajo Nation develop systemic solutions to poverty rather than simply mitigating problems (Ruffing, 1979). The purpose of this study was to better understand the experience of college-educated members of the Navajo Nation in deciding whether to live on the Nation after they complete their education.

### **Overview of the Navajo Nation**

The Navajo Nation covers areas of the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah in the U.S. With an area of over 27,000 square miles (over 70,000 square kilometers), it is roughly the size of Ireland or Sierra Leone. The population is approximately 176,000, of which about 96% identify as Native Americans or American Indians. The median income on the Navajo Nations is about \$27,000 per year. This is about half the median income of the state of Arizona, the state within which most of the Nation is contained (Arizona Rural Policy Institute, n.d.)

### **Education and the Navajo Nation**

Levels of education are much lower on the Navajo Nation than for other regions or ethnic groups in the United States (see Table 1). Choudhary (2002) states, “According to Census 2000, only 55.93% of the total population living on the Navajo Nation over the age of 25 have high school degree or higher and only 7.29% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. These numbers are consistent with most American Indians who have a high school graduation rate of 54.22% and a college graduation rate of 4.85%” (p. 48). These numbers are far below both the national and regional averages, which show a high school graduation rate of 80.4% and a college graduate rate of 24.4% for the United States (Choudhary, 2002).

In spite of this discrepancy, legislation and policy are constantly being targeted to African Americans, Hispanics, and under-achieving minority groups, while very little, if anything, is said regarding the state of Native American education and how it can be improved.

**Table 1. Comparison of High School and College Graduation Rates**

	Percent Graduating from High School	Percent Graduating with Bachelors Degree
U.S. Population	80.40	24.40
European American	83.58	26.08
African American	72.26	14.26
American Indians	54.22	4.85
Navajo Nation	55.93	7.29

There appears to be a correlation between education levels and income, as well as employment: These are factors that greatly influence development within any particular region. Harbison and Hanushek (1992) supported this idea by showing a correlation between a nation's inability to develop its level of intellectual capital and effectively utilize its educated people with its inability to instigate any type of development. Woo (1991) explained, "In educational planning, the limited resources of a country should be allocated to develop its human resources. The framework of carefully and deliberately matching educational output with social and economic needs results in the most effective human resources development" (p. 1). In the case of the Navajo Nation, it is not so much a matter of failure to develop human resources; rather, funds are being allocated and human resources are being developed, only to be lost as individuals gain post-secondary education but do not come back to the reservation, which is a "brain drain." This experience resonates with the understanding of brain drain as a zero-sum gain, where "one party's gain is presumed to be another's drain" (Baldacchino, 2006, p. 143), thus benefitting the *winner-take-all* society (Frank & Cook, 1996). The Nation needs to find ways to enhance human resources, as well as ways to keep them on the reservation to contribute to development.

The development literature consistently names education as the most salient indicator of any nation's ability to reduce poverty and spark development. For example,

Education has moved from being the floor on which a country builds its competitive success to being its competitive success... The single most important question for economic success is now: How smart are your people? Knowledge does not respect geography or old economies. Ideas have wings, and in the information technology age they fly at the speed of light.  
(UNESCO, 2000, p. 15)

Thus, a nation's ability to produce sustainable development rests heavily upon its ability to create effective learning experiences and develop professional skills matched with societal needs. The needs expressed by the Department of Education and Skills (2003) in the United Kingdom could be applicable to any nation or region in the world today: "Our future success depends upon mobilizing even more

effectively the imagination, creativity, skills and talents of all our people. And it depends on using that knowledge and understanding to build economic strength and social harmony” (p. 2). While generally left unstated, it is also crucial that developing regions be able to retain the professional skills acquired through investment because losing these skills could be considered even worse than not developing them in the first place.

## **Brain Drain**

The problem of losing professional skills, which were gained through public investment in students’ education, is a problem facing the Navajo Nation. This problem is often referred to as brain drain. The literature explains brain drain to be a phenomenon in which educated or skilled professionals depart from one country, generally their native country, to another in order to obtain better wages or working conditions or other more promising opportunities, presumably unavailable at home (Bagdanavicius & Jodkoniene, 2008; Kwok & Leland, 1982). As a corollary term—brain gain—can also be used in reference to a nation or region that obtains experienced professionals whose skills were developed outside and brought within (Salt, 1997). The term is generally reserved for those with a higher education, generally termed “highly skilled professionals,” or those who have expertise in their field (Iredale, 1999). The World Bank (2006) defines highly skilled professionals as those with professional or post-secondary education.

In general, the nature of our current global economy is such that the developing areas of the world are often subject to brain drain, to their detriment, while the more established, strong economies entice professionals with higher wages, better opportunities, and higher living standards—producing brain gain (Ward, 1967). Baldacchino (2006) refers to this in terms of “proximity to large centres of population” (p. 144). This idea seems to be closely related to the idea of geographic hegemony and the “development of underdevelopment,” suggested by Frank (1989), in which the powerful, developed metropolis exploits its relationship with the satellite regions, using its power to control, manipulate, and perpetuate poverty of the peripheries for its own development. The current global economy perpetuates a system in which:

... Locations unable to muster a knowledge critical mass will find themselves exporting people, brains, investment and other forms of capital to attractive metropolitan zones or their immediate suburbs. Local employment opportunities will stagnate or fall; actual entrepreneurs will move away; potential ones will look askance. The young and educated people will relocate first, often never to return but to visit relatives and friends on short trips and vacations. (Baldacchino, 2006, p. 143)

With such a system of free capital movement (brain circulation), it can be extremely difficult for developing regions to maintain levels of education and expertise substantial enough to catalyze development and reverse poverty. Brain drain is a salient issue, especially given that “many countries explicitly replace their personnel loss with highly skilled foreigners attracted from less developed countries” (Vinokur, 2006, p. 8). Brain drain can also have severe economic impacts on any state or governing body. The issue of brain drain has relevance for any group’s investment in educating workers or citizens, and seeking to “secure the returns from their investment” (Vinokur, 2006, p. 8).

Millions of dollars are spent every year to provide scholarships for Navajo students to receive higher education and training, in hopes of increasing the intellectual capital of its citizens. Choudhary (2002)

stated, “In 2002, a total of 13,172 requests were made for financial assistance. Of this number a total of 4,659 students were awarded one or another type of financial assistance totaling an amount of \$11,159,080” (p. 47). When these students choose not to return to the reservation, not only does this constitute inefficiency in terms of educational and indirect social investment, but also such activities fail to contribute to any type of development or increased quality of life for the rest of the Navajo Nation. Kwok and Leland (1982) stated specifically “indigenous college graduates frequently leave their countries for advanced studies in the Western world, but only a handful return after completing their work” (p. 91). Although some scholars argue that the development of individuals needs to be considered (Baldacchino, 2006), the primary concern here seems to be whether the priority of a nation be to develop the skills of individuals or the capacities of the nation. When individuals leave the reservation to develop their skills and knowledge, a much greater potential exists for migration, in which case investments are lost. If action is taken for national development, the group can be developed together as one whole and, as the nation progresses, so can the skills and knowledge of the individual to fit the level of progression and the nation’s stage of development (Woo, 1991). When we consider that a nation is concerned first and foremost with the development of the group rather than the individual and that it invests in individuals with the hope of future benefit to the whole, it can be suggested that nations have a primary responsibility to concern themselves with the group’s development.

The literature also identifies the notion of “brain waste” being one of the reasons that some college graduates are reluctant to return to the Navajo Nation. Brain waste refers to the waste of professional skills and qualifications that occurs as a result of migration into a job that requires lower levels of skills and training than those attained by the graduate (Bagdanavicius & Jodkoniene, 2008).

The Navajo Nation is highly invested in educating its young people in order to increase development and improve standards of living for all of its people. Better understanding of the brain drain and how it may be impacting the Nation’s long-term planning for nation building will lead to more efficient use of education funds, as well as facilitate the process of development for all. In order to facilitate understanding of brain drain, this study explored the experiences of college-educated members of the Navajo Nation in deciding whether to return to the Nation after completing their post-secondary education.

## **Method**

The method for this project was based upon several philosophical assumptions. First, we assumed a relational ontology. In other words, we assumed that knowledge is produced, gained, and maintained through relationships (Gergen, 2009; Levinas, 2002; Oliver, 2001). We rejected the notion that knowledge is an independent commodity to be had by individuals. Second, we subscribed to the ideal of collaboration as informed by the notion of “working the indigene-colonizer hyphen” (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 471). That is, we acknowledged at the outset the implicit challenges, ambiguities, and advantages of working as a team of reservation-based policy researchers (indigene) and university-based academics (colonizers). Third, because the study was initiated by, focused on, and intended for members of Diné, we agreed that the study would be grounded in Diné philosophy and values (Grande, 2008). Rather than adopt the dominant Western positivistic tradition, we opted for a more postmodern philosophical foundation that we deemed more consistent with Diné values.

## Participants

The participants were 28 self-identified members of the Navajo Nation consisting of 12 men and 16 women. Their average age was 37. All indicated that they met the following criteria:

- Grew up on the Navajo Nation. This was defined as having spent at least one-half of their school years (K - 12) attending reservation schools.
- Left the Navajo Nation to pursue post-secondary education.
- Had lived and worked off of the Navajo Nation for at least two years.
- Were still living off of the reservation.

In order to identify efficiently a sufficient number of individuals meeting the study's criteria, we recruited individuals attending the Gathering of Nations—an annual gathering of Indigenous people in Albuquerque, New Mexico (see Gathering of Nations, n.d.). Participants were recruited from a booth sponsored by Diné College and the Diné Policy Institute. Potential participants were engaged in conversation to determine if they might meet the criteria. If they did, they were asked if they would be willing to participate in the study and were given informed consent information.

## Procedure

Interviews were conducted by one of the research team in or near the Diné College and Policy Institute booth. The interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes. The typical interview was about 40 minutes. Interviews were transcribed by members of the research team and distributed to the entire team for review. Identifying information, such as references to specific places and people, were removed from the transcripts.

The transcripts were analyzed using what we called Collaborative Hermeneutic Interpretation (CHI). This method of analysis was predicated on the assumptions outlined at the beginning of this section and on principles of qualitative interviewing and interpretation as outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). The analysis proceeded as follows:

1. All members of the research team read all the transcripts. The purpose of this was to get a general sense of the interviews.
2. Each member of the research team proceeded in subsequent readings of the transcripts to identify meaningful passages. The purpose of this was to identify sections of dialogue that seemed to have meaning relevant to the research questions.
3. Team members shared the meaningful passages that they had identified.
4. Each member of the research team generated some preliminary interpretations or themes.

5. Team members met to share their preliminary themes and begin to construct a final collaborative interpretation.
6. The team's collaborative interpretations were vetted by Diné elders who are cultural experts able to critically evaluate the interpretations in terms of Diné philosophy and values.

## **Collaborative Research**

In our observation, qualitative research has struggled with two problems when applied to Indigenous issues. First, the predominance of qualitative research paradigms are somewhat individualistic. That is, they depend primarily on the interpretation of a primary expert researcher. This is obviously problematic when the primary researcher is not a member of the Indigenous community being studied (e.g., a White academic studying problems on the Navajo Nation), but may also be problematic even if the researcher is a member of the community (e.g., a Navajo researcher studying problems on the Navajo Nation). An obvious solution to the problem seems to be to collaborate. However, the means of such collaboration raises the second problem: A drift away from qualitative methods back toward the positivistic traditions that qualitative research has tried to overcome in the first place. For example, collaborations often follow the postpositivistic paradigm of methods such as Collaborative Qualitative Research or CQR (Hill, 2011). Such methods revert to the inherently colonizing practices of positivism. These include subscription to the notion of a universal, objective reality based in the physical world and the related idea that validity is established by consensus about those realities. The idea is that the reality is in the data and that that data are independent of human construction. Therefore, the purpose of such research is to mitigate or manage any human construction that would interfere with the inherent reality of the data.

In this study, we worked to avoid both individualism and positivism and their inherent negative implications for Indigenous research. Our purpose from the beginning was to collaborate in such a way that we could make collaborative interpretations of the data without relying on either individual interpretations or simple inter-rater reliability, in the positivistic sense. As a result, our process required a lot of conversation as the analysis began. Our initial interpretations were made in the interviews themselves and in subsequent conversations among the researchers. These initial interpretations were written by the members of the research team and then discussed as a team. As the discussion progressed, these initial interpretations were revised as team members learned from each other's interpretations and refined their own. This process, sometimes called the hermeneutic circle, required the researchers to continually return to the data and consider the interviews from both micro and macro perspectives. Each interpretation was considered in the light of the inherent difference that each team member brought to the team—in particular, the difference between the predominantly White members from the university and the Indigenous members of the team from the Diné Policy Institute. In effect, there was a parallel process. There was a hermeneutic circle that the team used to reflect on the particulars of the data, as well as the more global aspects of the data, and the ongoing evaluating of the fit of each with the other. At the same time, the team was conducting a similar process as it returned repeatedly to the interpretations and considered them as constructions of team members, as well as constructions of the broader group, and considered their reciprocal "fit" with each. That is, each thematic construction had to stand up as a legitimate Indigenous construction, as well as a White academic construction. These constructions, in turn, had to stand up as collective interpretations of the entire group. The validity of



the study rests in this dual application of the hermeneutic circle to both the data and the interpretive process. We termed this method Collaborative Hermeneutic Interpretation or CHI.

As with any method, this approach had its limitations. Our focus on interpretation did not allow for the focus on problem solving that might be a part of an action research approach. In addition, our attention to inclusion and “working the indigene-colonizer hyphen” (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 471) may have limited the analysis or diluted it to some degree. Nonetheless, we trust that we and other like-minded researchers will be able to refine this approach and improve our efforts to better understand Indigenous issues.

## Results

Four complex themes were identified after: (a) successive readings by all members of the research team, and (b) two meetings in which the research team discussed possible themes. To best represent meanings within Navajo culture, theme labels were discussed by native Navajo speakers and subsequently translated into English. The Navajo speaking members of the research team and the Navajo Elder consultants to the Diné Policy Institute reported some frustration in trying to translate the Navajo constructs into English. In keeping with the recommendations of several scholars of Indigenous methodology (see for example Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008), we decided to retain the Navajo terms to reflect the imperfection of the translations and to signify ownership of the interpretations by the Navajo members of the research team. The four themes that emerged were:

1. *K'é*: Relationships/Connections to Family, Culture, Homeland, People;
2. *Liná*: Lifestyle/Lifeway, Desirable Setting, Learned Work Ethic, Social Atmosphere, Togetherness (Diné) vs. Individualism (Mainstream);
3. *Bee ach' í' na'hwii'ná*: Resources and Roadblocks to Making a Life, Infrastructure, Services, The “System;”
4. *Bee ajit'ǵ*: Opportunity, Prosperity and Personal Improvement, Education, Extracurricular, Job Availability, Work Experience.

### **K'é (Relationships/Connections to Family, Culture, Homeland, People)**

The Navajo word of *K'é*, in one application, can be used to describe relationships and connections. This complex theme showed that many Navajos feel a deep desire to return to their family, culture, homeland, and people. Many participants, while living away from the reservation, maintained a strong attachment to their homeland although their circumstances sometimes made it difficult or impossible to return. Subthemes were desire to return and help one's people; family; culture, language, and traditions; sense of belonging; and spouse non-Navajo.

**Desire to return and help one's people.** Most participants maintained a strong connection with the tribe and their reservation homeland. Several participants expressed a desire to return to the reservation as soon as they were able to do so.

I really wanted to go back to the reservation and become some sort of a liaison. Or you know, I wanted to deal with students. I wanted to help people. I wanted to help the Navajo people get their kids to go to school and to get an education. I was willing to do outreach and talk to people and tell them what I had gone through and tell them, if I could do it they could do it. And just spread the word, education is very important. That is what I had planned to do.

Another participant expressed similar sentiments:

I did a speech and I said if any of you know any jobs that are available I want to come home and help my community. I want to be back home and see if there is anything I can do to help students. And they said they would, but nothing came through.

A third participant captured a feeling expressed by several other participants:

For some reason, the older I get, I feel like somebody is pulling me to the reservation—to go back there to make a difference. So I am looking at that.

**Family.** Participants worked off the reservation, but felt connections to family members who stayed on the reservation. Several participants discussed sacrificing to get back to the reservation as often as they could to be with family:

I am driving five hours at least twice a month to visit my parents—visit my family. There are always functions, birthday parties and stuff like that going on. I am really close to my family.

Another participant expressed something similar:

I [could] easily say, “Do you know what? I’m tired. If we stay here... we save all this money.” I [could] easily say, “Hey, you know what... this is a hundred and twenty dollars in my pocket... times four.” That’s what? Five hundred dollars extra in my pocket? But, I don’t look at it that way. That’s not the issue... family is.

Yet, another participant expressed it this way:

The people who are going to the big corporation or schools or colleges, they always will come back home because I think we are all attached to the reservation. We are all attached to families... I believe our grandparents are always our teachers, like grandma and grandfather are our teachers. I learned from them and they raised me pretty good, that is the only reason I go back.

**Culture, language, and traditions.** This was a complex theme-within-a-theme. Many participants expressed continuing connections to Navajo culture, language, and traditions, while a few expressed disdain for traditional Navajo values.

Many who lived away from the reservation continued to have strong grounding in their tribal language and customs. One participant expressed how important it was to keep her children grounded in the culture:

I don't want my kids to lose that love for their culture that I have. And I want to instill it in them while they are young—to love who they are because I feel like I see a lot of urban Indians who don't love who they are and they don't love their culture and they are kind of embarrassed about it. And then they come to [college] and they want to be part of it and find out who they are and so they start researching about their culture. But I want my kids to have it instilled within them.

Another participant said it this way:

I think for so long we were told that being White is better, but it is not. When you discover—when you move away from the reservation—it's really awakening. You realize it's not like that. We have a strong culture, we have a rich language and history and we have to be proud of it. And it is really about learning about the outside world. It is still important to maintain who you are . . . Remember where you came from your language your culture, your land, your family—it is really important.

Some participants expressed their desire to stay away from Navajo tradition. This is captured in the following quote:

One thing I didn't approve of is how they pushed the . . . traditional . . . practices on the kids. You know . . . they make them learn traditional things. And I think that should be an option. If I want my kids to learn, I'll teach them. It just . . . a lot of it is superstition and I just don't agree with a lot of it. That's why to me it should be optional.

**Sense of belonging. Being rooted in homeland.** A significant number of participants noted a sense of belonging or being rooted in their Navajo homeland as influencing their interest to return to the reservation. While participants found it difficult or impossible to return to live on the reservation, they maintained strong connections to their home. One participant expressed the following:

It's just the fact that it is home, there's no other place in the world, you know. Like the reservation was the best place in the world to me because . . . you can always go back to where you feel safe . . . It will always be home.

Similarly, another participant said:

Always come back because whatever you do in a dominant society it is temporary—you always know you have a place to come back.

Another participant expressed his dilemma at being drawn to the reservation but being unable to find work:

I think we'll always have a strong spot in our heart for it, for the reservation. But at the same time, I'm a little turned off because there's no place to work, really.

**Spouse non-Navajo.** Some participants believed that they were unable to return to the reservation due to their spouse's lack of affiliation with the tribe and reservation. These perspectives are illustrated by the following quotes:

My partner lives here in [off-reservation city], so and I decided to move out here... probably down the road as I get older. Cause I think that [the reservation] is where I would rather be unless my partner was to live off the reservation, which ... she's a White person ...

Yeah and my husband is also not Native. He is Hispanic. So, you know, I am sure it would probably be different if he was Native.

### **Iiná (Lifestyle/Lifeway)**

The second main theme identified by the research team is Iiná, or lifestyle or lifeway, which for many participants represented reasons they would not return. This was another complex theme and includes the subthemes of preferring city life, finding fewer activities on the reservation, finding a Native community off the reservation, and moving from a traditional lifestyle toward a more mainstream, Westernized lifestyle.

**Preferring city life.** Several participants expressed a preference for life away from the rural confines of the reservation. They expressed a preference for the convenience of city life as captured in the following quote:

I never went home. I like the city and I like the city life—like the mall, so I stay here ... Reservation life—you are home and [always have] something you have to worry about: using the water, you have to haul the water. We had to worry about the electricity because we did solar panels. And the electric, water, and sewage lines don't go as far [on] the reservation. And the roads aren't paved, so they are not suitable. So there is a big difference, you have to travel one hour to go to town, so its kind of hard ... In the city everything is convenient, everything is right there. That's what I like.

Another participant expressed it this way:

It gives you more independence. You can make your own money you can be proud of. And you can experience something other than where your family is right now—just to be free and open, meet new people, go new places. You know, try new things rather than being at home and just going to the flea market every now and then. It is a huge difference and it's a good opportunity. It gives you great independence.

**Finding fewer activities on the reservation.** Some participants enjoyed what they could do away from the reservation. They expressed their belief that there was more to do away from the Navajo Nation:

I wouldn't want to raise my kids in that area because I want them to experience the new things in the city and meet new people with different background and have the opportunity to experience restaurants and new technology.

Another participant suggested the following:

Here in the city you have different types of museums, you have different backgrounds, you have different artist, musicians and you have the military branch here so you can learn something about them—or just being friends with someone rather than the same race as them. And they can learn a lot, that is the difference.

**Finding a Native community off the reservation.** Some participants expressed the belief that they could maintain their connection to Navajo culture off the reservation because they found other Indigenous people with whom they could associate. One participant stated the belief as follows:

Like I said I found a Native community there that's kind of accepted me. So yeah, I am kind of fortunate to find that especially in this city you know somewhere so far away from where I grew up—and be able to establish that connection. So it's good. I feel very grateful for that.

**Moving from traditional lifestyle toward mainstream, Westernized lifestyle.** Many participants said that living off the reservation they were moving away from Navajo traditions and adopting more mainstream, Westernized traditions. One participant suggested that her grandfather believed it was important to try to blend the traditions:

My grandpa ... he kind of saw in a way ... how the future is going to be. He understood that we really can't rely on our culture. Because this new way is coming in ... we have to adapt to it. The trick is ... not to fully get assimilated into it ... But instead of [it] crashing into us ... What if we gained their knowledge and ... weave it with ours? But our ways stay on top.

Another participant suggested that she could find a better way away from the reservation:

Yeah, it depends on how people raise their kids. They might raise them traditionally or they may raise them in a Christian home, a Catholic home, but it depends on how the child will take it in. Me, I have seen people on the reserve suffer. I wanted more. I wanted a house you know. I wanted nice things and I want be able to go here and there. So ... my mentality was to get out and get a life and get a good life. That's where I am right now.

One participant appeared resigned to adopting a different lifestyle and culture:

Understanding that more and more the American way of life is taking over people—that they're their own individuals and that they are not accountable to anybody else. I think that's the information that our youth are getting thinking that they are their own individuals and not a part of our community.

### **Bee ach'į' na'hwii'ná (Resources and Roadblocks to Making a Life)**

This was another complex theme. Many participants indicated that there was a lack of resources on the reservation that made living there more difficult, which was a primary reason why many participants would not or could not return. The sub-themes were identified as Infrastructure, Services, and “The System.”

**Infrastructure.** Some participants identified the lack of infrastructure on the reservation as a roadblock to them returning. One participant expressed frustration with not being able to start a business due to the lack of infrastructure and the difficulties with red tape:

Speaking of the process, if you want to start a business on the reservation you are just a business owner. So if I wanted to put up a, let's take for example, a café. I want a piece of land. Here I've got to go to the tribe, go to the [tribal office], to make sure there are no artifacts on it. And then you have to lay in the water line, electricity line, and then you've got to go to the department. You have to go through the chapter house, and then through the Navajo Nation to give them your proposal. And then they got to take it to the government, and [it] just goes on and on. And then people just quit.

**Services.** Several participants expressed concern about getting housing on the reservation. One participant discussed the struggle finding housing on the reservation as a reason she could not return:

[I] could come back as an art teacher. I don't know, but there is no place to live. I have a home here in [off-reservation city] but I want to move back to [reservation town]. And I am thinking "where am I going to live?" I used to live right across from [Navajo politician], but I am not married anymore. Teacher housing? But everybody fights for those. So I don't know.

Another participant said:

They need to establish homes. They need to know that we have a home site that we can move back. There's nothing... You know, you have to buy a trailer and live in a little trailer park. They don't establish home site leases for everybody. I'm just lucky. I've lived in [town] for so long. I do have friends that... all my friends that have graduated... A lot of them have gone for that reason.

**"The System."** Several participants discussed how the bureaucracy on the reservation created problems for them. One participant expressed frustration with the tribal government:

One of the reasons why people stay away is maybe because they don't feel like they can trust the tribal government. Why do you think folks stay away from the rez—like yourself—who's got a lot of education now? What would keep you away from the rez?

Another discussed the red tape in the government:

Unfortunately there's a lot of bureaucracy with the rez. I mean just to move back. You've got to apply at Windowrock (Navajo Nation capital) with [agency]. As soon as you get that on your way, you still have the grades and permits that you have to do with the land... You know there's a lot of set up that you have to do... So I think to expedite that process would help people come back to the reservation. And it wouldn't discourage the people from coming back to help the reservation. You know... I think there's too much red tape.

Several participants suggested that there were frequent abuses of power on the reservation. One participant stated that the tribal government wasted money:

But the only thing [that] matters to me a lot now is—I used to work with the Navajo Tribe and I know there is a lot of misused funds there. And now working with the [agency] the government job, looking back, it's a lot of waste of money. Our students should be the ones that we should be using all the money [for].

Another participant decried perceived corruption:

Corrupt, as far as, you know, politicians everywhere. But I think it's really bad because there aren't qualified people there in powerful jobs on the reservation. And when that happens everybody suffers.

### **Bee ajit'9 (Opportunity, Prosperity, and Personal Improvement)**

The final complex theme is Bee ajit'9, which translates as opportunity, prosperity, and personal involvement. This theme showed the dilemma many Navajo citizens feel with regard to their desire for personal growth and opportunity. Participants identified a number of reasons that prevented them from returning to the reservation. Subthemes included education, job availability, and work experience.

**Education.** Many participants expressed concern with educational opportunities available on the reservation. One participant suggested that schooling on the reservation created problems for her:

The schools aren't very good. I don't really want to put my own kids through a lot of things I went through as a kid.

A second participant related her discussion with her husband regarding schooling for their children:

The other thing too is that I told him, you know when... if we ever have kids... I don't want them going to school on the reservation because I've seen what happens, and what can happen. I just... I didn't approve of their... system.

A third participant expressed similar sentiments:

And the education for kids, the education needs to be bumped up a little bit higher for students. If I was young and had children now, I would not go back.

**Job availability.** Many participants suggested that they would like to come back to the reservation but found that the job opportunities were limited. One participant expressed this as follows:

I think we'll always have a strong spot in our heart for it... for the reservation. But at the same time, I'm a little turned off because there... there's no place to work, really.

Another participant discussed his inability to find equivalent employment on the reservation:

You know looking at a job market [on the reservation] there is really nothing where I am at where I want to be ... But I need to find something that is going to be equivalent to what I am doing right now and it's going to keep me, you know, wanting to perform and succeed.

A third participant discussed his experience coming out of military service:

When I came out of the Navy and got a job on the reservation, the job opportunities on the reservation were nil ... I am more of a craftsman, there is nothing like that on the reservation—just more service oriented jobs. There was nothing there for me that I could be satisfied with, so I had to get off the reservation.

**Work experience.** Several participants discussed their belief that they get better work experience off the reservation. These individuals suggested that they have greater and more varied opportunities off the reservation. One participant expressed this sentiment as follows:

I am staying [off the reservation] because I like the job. It is really good experience. I do have plans to eventually return home. But like I said, the main reason why I am staying is to get as much experience as I can. And school is providing that to me, and I do like the people I work with, so it's kind of really hard to leave.

Other participants suggested that work experience off the reservation was essentially different from what one receives on the reservation.

It is good to get some experience off the reservation for several years so you have an idea of what it is like to work for a corporation. And where you're working for a for-profit organization— with that experience you can bring a lot to the Navajo Nation and kind of reorganize their organizations the way they are—and really emphasize performance and quality services.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we endeavored to explore an important aspect of Navajo experience and provide a model for collaboration between university scholars and tribal policy researchers. The implications of the study are discussed below. We anticipate that this study will have implications for other Indigenous nations and communities that experience the loss of members who receive formal post-secondary education.

## **Recommendations**

The results of the study provide several implications for both post-secondary educators and tribal policymakers. First, post-secondary educators need to be aware of the experience Indigenous students have as they prepare for graduation and explore their various career options. For example, it would be helpful for advisors and placement personnel to be aware of the K'é (Relationships/Connections to Family, Culture, Homeland, People) dimension of Indigenous students' experience. Awareness of this dimension would encourage discussions of how students might incorporate these connections into academic and career planning.



Likewise, awareness of the importance of Iiná (Lifestyle/Lifeway) will help counselors and advisors to encourage Indigenous students to consciously and purposefully consider the trade-offs that might be a part of either returning to live on their reservation or continuing to live away from their reservation. For example, for students who find it necessary to live away from their reservation after graduating, exploring ways to maintain a traditional Iiná might include: (a) making connections with other Indigenous groups in their community, (b) planning regular visits to the reservation for ceremonies and family gatherings, or (c) finding ways to learn or maintain one's tribal language.

Tribal policymakers might also consider the implications of this study. A primary finding of this study was that many tribal members feel a strong desire to contribute to their reservation and its communities. We found that the challenges in doing so were related to Bee ach'į' na'hwii'ná (resources and roadblocks to making a life) and Bee ajit'9 (Opportunity, Prosperity, and Personal Improvement). Policymakers need to focus on resource and opportunity issues in order to take advantage of the desire of many graduating members to return to their reservation and contribute. For example, housing was a primary challenge for many considering returning to the reservation. For the Diné, it might be helpful to reconsider the tribe's home site lease policy and its related procedures. Employers might adopt the strategy that schools have taken, in making housing available as a benefit of one's employment. If tribal administrators provided incentives for employers to facilitate housing for their employees, a significant barrier to returning to the reservation might be reduced.

Another way for policymakers to take advantage of the existing passion for reservation service would be to restructure more of the financial aid for post-secondary education to encourage such service. Rather than providing just scholarships, tribes might consider providing low interest student loans. These loans could have contingencies that would reduce or remove the loan if the student returns to the reservation to work for a time after graduation. Such policies have already proven effective in the Indian Health Service (n.d.) and more broadly in the National Health Service Corp (n.d.).

A more radical strategy involving both tribal policymakers and higher education administrators would be to consider how to minimize the need for students on reservations to leave the reservation in the first place. If students could get more of the education they desire while living on the reservation, they might be more likely to remain on the reservations and use that education to better the community. One way to do so would be to have tribal colleges partner with off-reservation colleges in providing pathways to degrees. Many state and private universities are already involved in this practice. For example, Utah State University has satellite campuses in Price, Utah and Blanding, Utah. The satellite campuses are approximately 200 and 400 miles away from the primary Utah State University campus in Logan, Utah. This means that students in these primarily rural areas can live and work at or near their homes while completing all or most of their bachelor's degree at Utah State University.

A similar strategy could be employed on rural reservations. Many tribes, including the Navajo Nation have tribal college campuses across their land. If these campuses could become affiliated with off-reservation colleges and universities and provide the education students have been seeking off the reservation, it could significantly reduce the brain drain phenomenon. Of course, the logistics of such mergers would be challenging. There would be a host of political, legal, and practical issues to resolve. However, doing so could be a primary means of addressing the brain drain phenomenon and the overall economic development of Indigenous reservation communities.

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