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An Exploratory Study Of How American Indian College Students Develop A Sense Of Well-Being As They Pursue An Associate Degree In a Rural Community College

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF HOW AMERICAN INDIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS DEVELOP A SENSE OF WELL-BEING AS THEY PURSUE AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE IN A RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

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ABSTRACT

Using a qualitative, naturalistic inquiry research design, and following the guide principles for conducting research with American Indian populations, this study explored how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being as they pursue an associate degree in a rural community college. To understand well-being from an American Indian perspective, I used an indigenous model, Secatero's (2009) four Well-Being Concepts, which include physical, social, mental, and spiritual aspects, as the conceptual framework for my study. The participants in my study described well-being as identity, beliefs, values, relationships, perseverance, and financial stability. They were developing a sense of well-being as they pursued an associate degree.

The themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews I conducted with students pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college helped me to interpret the results and reconceptualize Secatero's four Well-Being Concepts. The reconceptualized well-being concepts radiate from the inner core to the outer ring, progressing like the growth of a tree. At the innermost core is cultural identity, progressing into spirituality and family-community support to the outermost college preparation, all of which contribute towards the development of well-being as students pursue their degrees. American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being if they are grounded in their cultural identity, have a strong sense of spirituality, and have family and community support to take them through college. In addition, college preparation prior to enrollment helps them succeed as students. Challenge and persistence were part of the participants' lives through their associate degree program of study.

Several implications are suggested for how higher education administrators and faculty can support American Indian college students to develop a sense of well-being to succeed in obtaining their degrees. Future research using more in-depth interviews with diverse American Indian college students in diverse contexts can develop a comprehensive understanding of the well-being concepts explored in this study.

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I am an American Indian educator who values education as an investment. One day, my grandmother said in Navajo, “Go to school; your education will help you get a job. Your job will take care of you, and it will pay your bills to take care of your family.” My grandmother never attended school but was wise enough to use her knowledge and experience to make sensible judgments. She was telling me that an education would lead to a better way of life. Despite challenges, I got my GED and associate degree with her advice and support. My associate degree was my ideal path to continue my education and employment. I went through many hardships to get an education, so I want to learn about other American Indian students’ experiences with education.

An associate degree is an undergraduate degree, usually the next step after secondary-level education. Students could get an associate degree in accounting, business, or secretarial studies at the business college I attended years ago. In those days, the instructor used chalk to outline the day’s agenda on a green board. There are many more opportunities available to students today. Students can get an associate degree from rural community colleges, tribal colleges, and even some universities. An associate degree program might last over two years for a full-time student taking over twelve credit hours per semester. Students can take face-to-face, hybrid, and online classes and continue employment. Students can earn associate degrees in fields like nursing, information technology, and carpentry. The associate degree programs include health care, business administration, and culinary arts courses. Liberal arts and science and auto technology are among the fields in which students can earn associate degrees. High

school students who want to take college courses while completing the requirements for a high school diploma are possible. It is less expensive to get a 2-year degree than a 4-year degree. Also, getting an associate in a shorter time offers opportunities to be employed sooner. An associate degree can be a stepping-stone to further one's education. The three courses taken at the 2-year college were beneficial when they transferred to my bachelor's degree at the 4-year university.

College enrollment and graduation rates for American Indian students in 2-year and 4-year colleges are lower than those of mainstream US college students, as stated by Guillory (2009). The enrollment and retention rates for American Indian students in higher education are the lowest compared to other populations (Shotton et al, 2013). Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI, 2021) found that Native American students comprised just 0.6% of total postsecondary enrollment during fall 2020. American Indian students aged 18-24 have a college enrollment rate of only 22%, while the overall United States (US) population has a rate of 40%. In the fall of 2020, 15.9 million undergraduates were enrolled in college. Of these, 8.1 million were White, 3.3 million were Hispanic, 2.0 million were Black, 1.1 million were Asian, 669,000 were of two or more races, 107,300 were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 42,500 were Pacific Islander (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). American Indian/Alaska Native enrollment decreased by 43%, from 187,600 to 107,300 students between 2009 and 2020.

Although American Indian students face low enrollment in higher education, they still pursue and receive a college degree (Jackson et al., 2003). Despite their challenges,

American Indian college students persist in getting their education; they continue even though their life experience is challenging. Secatero (2010) stated that American Indian students' perseverance supports their attributes, such as talents, thinking skills, friendliness, perseverance, dedication, knowledge of culture, and other positive factors.

Educational statistics indicate that there is a steady increase in American Indian students receiving their associate degrees:

- 1976-1977, 2,500 American Indian students received their associate degrees. In 1995-1996, the number of associate degrees attained by American Indians/Alaska Natives increased to 5,600. In 2005-2006, 8,600 American Indians/Alaska Natives earned their associate degree (Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2008).
- In 2017, 27% of Native Americans earned an associate degree or higher, compared to 54% of white students (PNPI, 2017).
- As the Digest of Education Statistics (DES) reported, between 2007-2008 and 2017-2018, the number of associate degrees awarded to American Indians increased by 3.5%, from 750,000 to 1,011,000 (DES, 2019).
- According to PNPI (2020), in 2019, 25% of American Indians over twenty-five had an associate degree or higher, compared to 42% of all those over 25. Between 2010 and 2019, the percentage of American Indian students aged 25 to 29 who had attained at least an associate degree increased from 21% to 25%.

Problem Statement

There is limited research on how American Indian students in associate degree programs stay in college. In the early years, it was almost impossible to find the number of American Indian students who attended college (Demmert, 2006). The writings of Drywater-Whitekiller (2010) covered how American Indian college students were categorized as "other" in educational reports. Regarding Shotton et al. (2012), the authors asserted that the data reporting and research excluded American Indians; an asterisk showed American Indians were too few to be counted or denote the population as not statistically significant.

Students in associate degree programs of study have taken the first step toward achieving their college education. Sadly, a few students will not graduate or return to finish what they started. An associate degree can provide knowledge, experience, and better job opportunities. Students who earn an associate degree can advance to a bachelor's degree or a higher-paying job. This study explores how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college.

Conceptual Framework

I selected Shawn Secatero's indigenous Corn Model and its well-being factors (2009) as the conceptual framework for my study. The well-being factors are physical, social, mental, and spiritual. Secatero (2009) created the Corn Model to promote indigenous well-being and practices in higher education. Secatero (2009) utilized the Corn Model in his dissertation to determine the factors that lead to success and

persistence in graduate and professional schools. I am using the Corn Model as my conceptual framework to explore how American Indian students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree.

Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts

I discuss Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts that are part of his Corn Model in this section and discuss the origin of Secatero's Corn Model in Chapter 2. The title of Secatero's (2009) dissertation is Beneath Our Sacred Minds, Hands, and Hearts: Stories of Persistence and Success among American Indian Graduate and Professional Students.

Secatero (2009) categorized the data into themes of success that related to the indigenous Corn Model, which holistically examined American Indian identity factors such as physical, social, mental, and spiritual well-being. All participants showed crucial traits related to their success factors through their stories and survey responses. As part of Secatero's findings, the success factors relate to the Corn Model and offer supporting evidence from the participants. To succeed as an American Indian graduate or professional student, one must show the following qualities. Here are the excerpts from the Corn Model (2009) findings:

1. Family Support—Physical Well-Being Concepts. All participants in this study showed that family was essential to their success and graduate career. Family support begins when a child is born; it is the job of parents, siblings, grandparents, and extended family to nurture a child. In the Corn Model, family support is at the root of all learning. Being a role model shows a symbol of strength, successful graduate students can be a role model in for younger generations. As an American

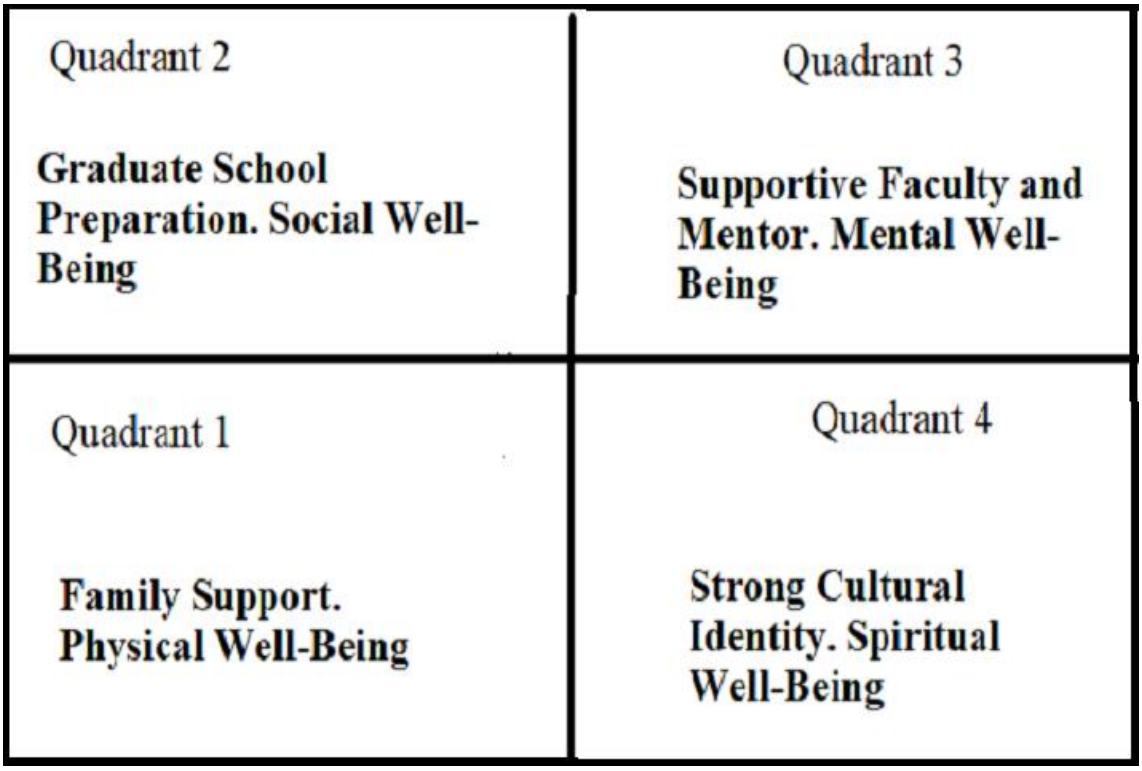
Indian graduate student, one must also embody physical well-being to succeed. All participants rated physical well-being aspects, such as diet, exercise, hard work, and endurance, with their success (Secatero, 2009).

2. Graduate School Preparation—Social Well-Being Concepts. Adequate preparation for graduate school requires strong literacy skills including reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Building a social network of mentors, financial aid, academic opportunities, and internships is necessary. (Secatero, 2009).
3. Supportive Faculty Members and Mentors—Mental Well-Being Concepts. American Indian professors and faculty members can be the strongest allies for American Indian graduate students. Faculty members and mentors can help graduate students with personal support, advanced thinking skills, professional development, and cultural awareness workshops. The participants felt that their immediate advisors were helpful and provided guidance. However, all participants felt the universities could have met their needs or expectations regarding student services, mentorship programs, and professional development. Certain cultural situations like being called on in class or talking about American Indians, make most participants feel uncomfortable and isolated. They might also experience “Indian Tokenism” (Secatero, 2009).
4. Strong Cultural Identity—Spiritual Well-Being Concepts. One can define spirituality as the belief in oneself and beyond our world. Many participants in graduate school workshops cited their tribal culture as crucial to their educational pursuits.

There was no concluding graphical representation of Secatero's dissertation findings. Therefore, I created a diagram and called it Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts to gain a better understanding (see Figure 2). These four well-being concepts are relevant, as they are foundational to understanding the phenomena of my study. I used Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts as the conceptual framework to develop the research questions, select a research design, collect data, and analyze data.

Figure 2

Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts



Note. Quadrant 1: Family Support. The physical Well-Being Concept is at the lower left side of the quadrant. Quadrant 2: Graduate School Preparation. The Social Well-Being Concept is at the top left side of the quadrant. Quadrant 3: Supportive Faculty Members and Mentors Concept. The Mental Well-Being Concept is at the top right side of the quadrant. Quadrant 4: Strong Cultural Identity. The Spiritual Well-Being Concept is at the bottom right side of the quadrant.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study explores how American Indian college students developed a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college. This study focuses on the individual student as a person (holistic approach), builds on their strengths (strength-based), and encourages them to express their emotions, beliefs, and values. I wanted to understand each student's experience by conducting interviews to understand their thoughts, actions, and views of how they applied well-being concepts that enabled them to remain in college. Insights from my study might serve as the foundation for making more widespread changes that provide better academic experiences for American Indian college students as they obtain their associate degrees.

Research Question

This study tried to comprehend the participants' experiences while getting their associate degrees. The research question for the study is: How do American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being as they pursue an associate degree in a rural community college?

Research Design

This study explored how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college. I used several research approaches in this study. They are (1) a pilot study that led to the current study, (2) a basic qualitative research design as described by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), (3) a naturalistic inquiry design proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985), and (4) the Guiding

Principles for Engaging in Research with Native American Communities by Straits et al., (2012).

I used the pilot study as a reference. I used a basic qualitative research design to understand how American Indian students perceive and make sense of their experiences. Qualitative researchers believe people construct knowledge continuously as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I used naturalistic inquiry to collect, code, and organize the data into themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The primary research design by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and the naturalistic inquiry by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are Western research practices. Still, I used them to investigate my research question as these approaches apply to my study and provide a foundation for the research design. As Smith (1999) identified, researchers should not reject all Western methods and theories, as they may be adapted if deemed appropriate and beneficial by the local community.

My participants are American Indians, and I followed the policies and procedures disclosed in the Guiding Principles for Engaging in Research with Native American Communities (Straits et al., 2012) in this study. There was a genuine rapport between the participants and me during the interview, which ensured we valued dignity on both sides. The participants shared their knowledge and experiences, which made me feel honored. I treated the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the findings with respect, honesty, and care.

Researcher's Positionality

To understand my position in the research study, I included my cultural identity, experiences, and connection to the study. My positionality statement explains why I chose to study the experiences of American Indian students in the associate degree program. It is American Indian cultural etiquette to share information about one's maternal and paternal clanships at the first contact. In the Navajo culture, your four clans give information about who you are. My maternal clan on my mother's side of the family is the Tó'áhaní (Near the Water). My maternal clan on my father's side is the Kinlichii'nii (Red House). Next, my paternal clan on my mother's side of the family is the Tsi sikaadnii (Clump Tree). Finally, my paternal clan on my father's side of the family is the To'dichii'nii (Bitter Water).

I am an American Indian affiliated with the Navajo Tribe of Indians. My great-great-grandfather was Chief Manuelito, a Navajo Chief during the mid-1800s. My grandmother was married to one of his grandsons. Chief Manuelito believed education was the answer, and many Navajo families have taken to heart the words of Chief Manuelito (Begay, 2014). The year 1868 marks the beginning of the educational development for the Navajo Tribe of Indians. The Treaty of 1868 was between the United States government and the Navajo Tribe of Indians (Navajo Treaty of 1868, 2019). The stipulated ruling affected the lives of young Native American Indian children between the ages of six and sixteen, forcing them to receive an education (Smithsonian Institution, 2019). Children were removed from their homes and placed in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding schools. During that time, the federal government overtly worked

to eradicate tribal languages and culture and to “Americanize” them from elders, family, and community (Strand & Peacock, 2002). Children were sent to schools on or off the Indian Reservation to attend the BIA boarding schools (Lomawaima, 2006).

Suina (1985), a member of the Cochiti Pueblo and college professor, wrote about his experiences with the BIA boarding school system. In his memoir, Suina (1985) reported that he was six years old when he began his education. He wrote about leaving home to attend the BIA boarding school as one of the saddest events of his life. He reported that he had given up part of his life and had no choice but to compete with the “white” man on his terms of survival.

Like Suina (1985), I began my BIA boarding school experience at about six. I went to four different BIA boarding schools, three on the Navajo Indian Reservation and one in a border town near the Navajo Indian Reservation. Although there was apprehension under the care of the BIA boarding schools, it provided a home-based environment, such as a place to sleep and eat.

I experienced many hardships while living in BIA boarding schools. The BIA boarding school system developed strict and abusive policies imposed upon American Indian students (Adams, 1995). According to Robinson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon (1996), some parents believed the BIA boarding school system hurt their children academically and culturally. The US government set the BIA boarding schools like military units with authoritarian rules. The dorm students were assigned cleaning duties to maintain the dormitory. We performed marching exercises and stood extensively in line throughout the day, mainly during mealtime. The younger girls had their hair cut short and wore a

'bob' haircut. The matrons assigned all dorm students to attend Anglican church denominations such as Lutheran, Baptist, Catholic, and Episcopalian. I was assigned to attend an Episcopalian church. The authorities prohibited the four-day event for puberty rite ceremonies for adolescent girls, so I missed the one-time puberty rite of womanhood.

I spent my summer breaks herding sheep with my grandmother. I was happiest when I spent time with her because she cared about me. There was no electricity or running water at my grandmother's sheep camp. We cooked our food and heated the water to wash the dishes in an open fire pit every evening. I never complained about walking after the sheep on those hot days or carrying water back from a stream that funneled from the Assayi Lake.

The most damaging effect on my childhood was that both parents ended their parental responsibilities. Both parents moved on with their lives—divorced, remarried, and started new families. During those years, I often cried, afraid my parents did not want me anymore. I was a dorm student for many years and became insecure; the feelings of doubt and low self-esteem still affect me today.

The BIA boarding school era ceased about half a century ago in the southwest area of the United States. Alvord and Van Pelt (1999) discussed the language loss that began when BIA boarding schools perpetuated European colonization and how it has continued today due to globalization and indifference. Children who participated in the BIA boarding schools could not speak their native tongue and practice their culture (Lomawaima, 2006). Speaking our native language was strictly forbidden at the BIA boarding schools, and we knew we would be punished if we did. Years of being trained

not to speak my native language have hurt me extensively and have had a domino effect on my future generation. I am limited to carrying on a conversation in the Navajo language. There is a term called “broken English,” which means speaking faltered or poorly spoken English; I speak “broken Navajo.” I still understand my native language because my grandmother spoke Navajo, but I find it difficult to enunciate some words in a sentence. I was taught to speak and write English since childhood.

I get the impression that Suina (1985) and I may have shared similar experiences growing up in the BIA boarding school systems. One day, my mother took me out of the BIA boarding school system to help care for my younger siblings. Two adults and eight children lived in a one-room house without running water or electricity. My life was so sad and fearful there that I wanted to go back to the BIA boarding school, but it was closed. I lost interest in school, ran away, and dropped out of high school. I was married and divorced in my early twenties. I had two sons to support without an income, education, and self-confidence. My sons were the ones who motivated me to get a General Education Diploma (GED). After I received my GED, it offered me an opportunity to pursue higher education at a vocational 2-year college administered by the federal government’s BIA grant program. I had to make an important decision for us to either stay on the Navajo Indian Reservation or move away from it for me to get an education. I chose education because I wanted to give my sons a better life. While my youngest son stayed at the daycare center, my oldest and I attended school. Sometimes we barely had food, but we were happy. The highlights of our lives were when we played school using the outdated Sesame Street Magazines; we read and followed instructions to

complete various activities. We called ourselves “The Three Musketeers” carried our cardboard swords on our belts, and believed we were invincible.

My associate degree was vital because it opened my opportunities to further my education. My business degrees include an Associate of Arts in Business and a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration. I held managerial positions in private and governmental sectors for years with my business degrees. I married again and had two daughters. I stayed home with them. When they were younger, I did not put them in their cribs to take their afternoon naps. I held them in my arms while they napped instead.

Years later, I continued my educational goals to give my children a better way of life. I worked my way up, one degree at a time, and continued pursuing a doctorate. My academic degrees included a Post-Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education and a Master of Arts in Education Administration. I got educational degrees and eventually acquired teaching positions. I currently have the title of associate professor at a higher education institution. As an educator, I have taught face-to-face, web-enhanced, hybrid, and online courses for over two and a half decades. I have state licensure to teach K-12, emphasizing business and information technology. To keep my state licensure compliant, I teach regular and special education classes at local public schools twice a month.

I chose my study on American Indian students in the associate degree program of study because they are taking their first step toward a college education, just as I did many years ago. Pursuing an associate degree can be considered a test of success or failure in higher education. When I started my associate degree, it was like taking the first step on a flight of stairs. Vacillating to the next step forward seemed doable, but it was

impossible to step back. Being in college for the first time had negative and positive effects. A few adverse effects were feelings of insecurity, debts, family responsibilities, and fear of failure. Earning an associate degree, finding a job, being self-sufficient, and pursuing further education are all positive results. Therefore, I can identify with the American Indian students because of our relatable experiences. Most of my college students are American Indians who are approximately eighteen to sixty-one. I know the hardships of working while attending college, the expectation to take part in cultural functions, providing childcare and elderly care, and trying to study without a computer or the Internet at home. Having an associate degree gives a sense of satisfaction that comes with finishing something challenging. Although an associate degree is considered the lowest level of a college degree, it helped me to access opportunities for a better way of life.

With my associate degree, teaching experience, and current pursuit of a higher degree, I understand the challenges American Indian students face while obtaining their associate degrees. From an American Indian perspective on relations, I care about my participants as I am their sister, mother, and grandmother. In addition, I have the experience, background, and identity that enabled me with the perspectives and insights that combine everything I do as a researcher. I can use my position to explore how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college. Many American Indian students will withdraw from college for various reasons and never return. A few will continue their education and attain an associate degree. I believe positive changes need to occur for

American Indian college students before they give up their educational pursuits. American Indian students need support from the administration, faculty members, advisors, and mentors to finish college.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it contributes to understanding how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college. To understand and respect American Indian college students, we should learn about their knowledge, language, culture, traditions, and way of life. This study will help us make sense of their thoughts, actions, and experiences in higher education. The advantages include wanting to make positive changes, becoming more self-aware, and being more socially active while also becoming more resilient and improving their quality of life. This study can help colleges support American Indian students to succeed in college by promoting their well-being.

Definition of the Terms

The following list defines the meaning of terms used for this study:

- Challenges. Challenges are barriers that disrupt college students as they pursue their educational goals. Other terms used for challenges include barriers, deterrents, and obstacles.
- Chapterhouse. Chapterhouse is a gathering place where community members share information.

- College students. A college student includes any undergraduate student 18 years or older and is a full- or part-time student in an associate degree program.
- Community Cultural Wealth. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework provides an asset-based perspective of students of color; instead of pointing out what students of color lack, she highlights their assets.
- Corn Model. The Corn Model is an indigenous well-being epistemology and practices for higher education, developed by Shawn Secatero in 2009. He aimed to help American Indian college students with a guide focusing on physical, social, mental, and spiritual well-being.
- Corn Pollen Model. The Corn Pollen Model is an expansion of the Corn Model.
- Holistic Approach. A holistic approach supports an individual's overall well-being, including physical, emotional, social, mental, and spiritual aspects.
- Indigenous. The term Indigenous means people of the places inhabited or initially inhabited by Native, Native American, American Indian, and Alaska Native, interchangeably and intentionally (Cross et al., 2019).
- Indigenous perspective. Indigenous perspective is the art of knowing and honoring indigenous worldviews.
- Identity. Identity is the inner core of the individual's frame of mind about their existence, including their character with beliefs, rights, feelings, decisions, and actions.

- Participants. Participants 18 or older are full- and part-time American Indian college students enrolled in an associate degree program.
- Persistence. Persistence is the means to continue a task even if there are challenges.
- Resilience. Resilience means the ability to adjust to change.
- Rural Community College. Rural community colleges, sometimes called junior colleges, are two-year schools that provide postsecondary education.
- Strengths-based. Strengths-based approaches focus on the person's strengths consistent with community values and principles.
- Success. Success is having a sense of accomplishment.
- Tribal College. Two-year and four-year education is available at Tribal Colleges on the Indian Reservations.
- Well-being. Full integration of physical, social, mental, and spiritual well-being that is interwoven and creates a sense of balance.

Delimitations

The delimitations or boundaries of this study are:

- The study took place at a single rural community college.
- The study participants are American Indian students who are members of an American Indian Tribe.
- The participants are enrolled in an associate degree program of study.
- They are eighteen years of age or older.

Limitations

The study was conducted at one rural community college, so the findings may not be applicable to other institutions or American Indians living on or off the Indian Reservations in other locations.

Summary

First, this chapter discussed the introduction, problem statement, and Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts. The following section includes the purpose, the research question, and the research design of this study. Then the section covers the researcher's positionality, the significance of the study, and definitions. The discussion of delimitation, limitations, and summary follows. The following chapter addresses the literature review for this study.

"My grandchild, education is the ladder. Tell our people to take it."

Words of The Great Chief Hastinn Ch'il Haajiin (Manuelito) of the Navajo Nation shortly before he died in 1893.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The literature review contains four sections. The initial section covers American Indian college students in higher education and discusses their history, rural community colleges, and tribal colleges. The following section consists of the topics on challenges and persistence. The next part is about the development of the conceptual framework that includes the importance of corn and Secatero's Corn Model. Finally, the last section of the literature review contains a summary.

Context of American Indian Students in Higher Education

History of American Indian Education

We need a historical perspective regarding American Indians in higher education to understand the social and cultural settings that affected people's lives in the past, especially the current American Indian students in the associate degree programs. Szasz (1999) pointed out five significant federal government policy periods in American Indian history. The Treaty Period in American Indian history started in 1778 and ended in 1871. During this time, The US government took responsibility for the educational needs of American Indians. The US government made treaties with American Indians during this time, including provisions for federal funding of Indian education for tribal land (American Indian College Fund [AICF], 2011).

The second federal government policy period from 1887 until 1934 was the Forced Assimilation Period. History teaches us that American Indians lived in America for many generations before Europeans conquered their land, culture, and citizenship (Spring, 1994). The author concluded that the primary purpose of cultural domination or deculturalization of American Indians was to civilize and Americanize them. He said that the BIA boarding school system aimed to prepare American Indian youth for American citizenship by making them more individualistic, and republican, and qualifying them as fit candidates for American citizenship (Spring, 1994). In 1928, the United States Congress received the Meriam Report. The Meriam Report condemned the BIA boarding school systems for failing to provide the life skills to help Indian youth (AICF, 2011).

The Restoration Period is the third federal government policy period from 1934 until 1951. During this time, Indian education moved away from assimilation practices. The Meriam Report (Szasz, 1999) provided a source for developing the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934; its purpose was to reverse the traditional goals of cultural assimilation of Native Americans into American society.

The Termination Period is the fourth federal government policy period from 1951 until 1974. The National Council on Indian Opportunity was established by President Johnson in 1968 to encourage Indian self-determination with federal sponsorship (Szasz, 1999). Accordingly, the Navajo Nation established the Navajo Community College (Diné College) in 1968, the Indian tribe's first tribally controlled college. During this era, the United States Department of Education established the Office of Indian Education in 1972 (AICF, 2011).

Finally, the fifth federal government policy period from 1974 to the present is the Self-Determination Period. In 1975, the Indian Self-Determination Act gave Indian tribes the authority to prioritize federal funds for education (AICF, 2011).

According to Phillips (1983), there was a belief that Western education would it weaken American Indians' customary ways, despite the idea that could provide a better life. He adds many culturally traditional individuals regarded formal education as irrelevant or harmful to their traditional ways. He mentioned how US government agencies, schools, and churches tried to destroy American Indian tribal structure, clans, customs, and traditions (Phillip, 1983). Pewewardy and Frey (2004) claimed that grief and distrust of non-Indians made American Indian people feel angry and confused. According to Buckmiller (2010), educators and schools took away American Indian culture, which still has lasting effects today.

Rural Community Colleges

American Indian students living on or near the Indian Reservations pursue associate degrees at rural community colleges, tribal colleges, and universities. Rural community college typically offers the first two years of a standard college curriculum and some terminal career and technical education programs (Digest of Education Statistics [DES], 2019). Rural community colleges offer education and career opportunities, especially for those American Indian students seeking to stay connected to their communities while pursuing an associate degree. For example, American Indian students who live close to home are near family and can take part in cultural events.

According to Benjamin et al. (1993), American Indian students may benefit from attending a nearby 2-year college before pursuing a bachelor's degree.

Tribal Colleges

Tribal Colleges and universities primarily serve rural communities without access to mainstream postsecondary institutions (American Council on Education [ACE], 2016). The majority of American Indian students at tribal colleges complete their program, while only 10% of those at mainstream universities do. These trends showed an increase in American Indian students enrolling in higher education. Tribal college students perform better than those enrolled in predominantly white colleges or mainstream universities (Tribal Colleges and Universities [TCUs], 2017). TCUs have been formed by 37 American Indian Tribes and Alaska Natives (AIAN) to suit their unique cultural and geographic settings. The mission of TCUs is to support revitalizing cultural identity and individual and tribal self-determination (Crazy Bull et al., 2020).

Challenges in Higher Education

Although many American Indian students consider education necessary, many leave school before completing their degree or program (Demmert, Jr., 2006). Many authors discuss the challenges that American Indian college students face while seeking associate degrees. In his dissertation, Shawn Secatero (2010) identified challenges for American Indian college students, including lack of mentors, homesickness, no sense of belonging, family issues, and a shortage of financial aid funding. Harrington and Harrington (2012) found that American Indians have a low college attendance rate due to several factors, such as a shortage of high school graduates, a lack of administrative

support where the student attends college, non-existent or inadequate programs and services, faculty misconceptions and stereotyping, and poor student relationship with the college institution and other students. Mosholder and Goslin (2013) agreed that American Indian students are the most likely racial/ethnic group identified in post-secondary American education to be affected by poverty and limited educational opportunities.

I believe challenges can include the meaning of living in "two worlds" or existing in two different situations simultaneously. For example, Huffman (2003) found that American Indian college students are culturally and demographically diverse in higher education, on or off the Indian Reservations. In addition, Gulliford (2004) pointed out that American Indian students live in "two worlds" with two languages and sets of expectations. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) proposed that cultural discontinuity between these 'two worlds", the Native American and the mainstream worldview, has historical roots. Alvord (1999) achieved the distinction of being the first Navajo woman surgeon. She lived in two different worlds: the traditional world of her ancestors and the modern world of Western medicine.

When it comes to challenges, most of us agree that keeping healthy is an essential factor in our daily lives. The Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) epidemic caused severe health problems and devasting consequences, particularly for American Indians/Alaska Natives. The Indian Health Service (IHS) reported Covid-19 is a major public health challenge in the US today, especially for American Indian/Alaska Native communities. Using one illustration, data show that American Indians/Alaska Natives have infection rates over 3.5 times higher than non-Hispanic whites, data show they are over four times

more likely to be hospitalized because of Covid-19 and have higher mortality rates at younger ages than non-Hispanic whites (IHS, 2021).

The Geographic Remoteness of the Indian Reservations

One of the significant drawbacks is the geographic remoteness of Indian Reservations. American Indian students living in rural, remote areas and attending rural community colleges continue to face obstructions in accessing postsecondary education (Benjamin et al., 1993). The authors mentioned that daily hindrances included weak economies, commuting long distances to the community college, wrangling inclement weather conditions, inaccessible roads, poor educational preparation, and inconsistent access to technology. Students who do not have access to a family vehicle may have to share rides, ride a public transportation bus, hitchhike, or walk some distance to the campus (Benjamin et al., 1993). Besides the weather conditions and inaccessible roads, American Indian college students face extraordinary time and expense traveling to and from their homeland (Bitsoi et al., 2013).

Technology

Gunawardena et al. (2018) developed an instructional design model that fosters a culturally inclusive wisdom community in online learning environments. The authors discussed potential impediments that prevent a particular learner or learning cohort from receiving the instruction, in whole or in part. Of the five levels of technology accessibility barriers, I list three technology accessibility barriers mentioned in my research. They are (1) Infrastructure access concerns whether participants can connect to the Internet, (2) Bandwidth access concerns whether participants can stream or download content at

sufficient speeds, and (3) Hardware access concerns whether participants have sufficiently powerful and feature-rich devices (p. 89).

The weak economic base of Indian Reservations makes it challenging to support technology infrastructure investments, and the poor state of their infrastructure undermines economic development (Bailey et al., (2001). Limited access to the Internet and technology creates challenges for underserved populations to engage in distance education programs (Dahl, 2004). Home Internet access in the Indian Reservations is below the national average, at slightly less than half of all households (De Mars, 2010). American Indian students face difficulties due to limited Internet access, both physically and digitally. Some remote areas on Indian Reservations lack underground cables for Internet connections. Living in these remote locations remained a setback for delivering distance education and training (Bates, 2012).

Chapterhouses (gathering places for community members) on the Navajo Indian Reservation have few computers and Internet for the community to use. My experiences at the chapterhouse revealed some delays in Internet use because of the weak Internet connection. Events at the chapterhouse also restrict computer use. Mobile cell phones provide Internet access; however, many communities on Indian Reservations do not have reliable cell phone coverage. Thus, there can be no Internet services where there is no cell phone service. Some of my American Indian students travel more than thirty miles one way to a rural community college to do their online coursework and participate in discussions.

Learning Preferences

Hilberg and Tharp (2002) concluded that learning styles vary among cultural groups. The authors recommended that educators should use different teaching methods that suit the learning style of American Indian/Alaska Native students who prefer: 1) a global or holistic approach, 2) a visual representation of information, 3) a reflective style in processing information, and 4) a collaborative approach to task completion. Johnson et al. (2010) confirmed that many American Indian students have a unique learning style than others. The authors noted students may learn more from visual rather than auditory presentations. Students may prefer collaborative learning and sharing ideas about lectures may be more desirable to students than competing individually. Finally, students prize interaction with elders, group leaders, and teachers. These types of social support may be available in a smaller lecture format (Johnson et al., 2010).

Etiquette in the Classroom

American Indian college students face obstacles due to cultural etiquette that interferes with their learning activities. As stated in the college syllabus in my face-to-face class, points count toward a grade for student participation in class discussions. However, American Indian students choose to remain silent and listen to show respect for someone who has authority instead. Basso (1970) wrote about the communicative silence practices in the culture of the Western Apache; he reported that silence means being appropriate to show respect to a specific individual or individuals. Plank (1994) pointed out that students in college may refuse to answer a question because it would put them above their peers. American Indian college students often choose not to answer questions,

even if they know the answer, as it would be inappropriate to respond because it goes against their cultural etiquette. Gulliford (2004) wrote about a professor who taught Southwest studies at a four-year institution in the Four Corners region. The professor described American Indian students in his class as quiet and hesitant to speak up or challenge the professor. Gulliford (2004) suggested motivating American Indian college students to challenge academic discourse on authority and authenticity.

Class Attendance and Cultural Obligations

I sat on a committee that reviewed and recommended course and program additions. The attendance requirements in the course syllabi are complicated and can be challenging for American Indian students who want to participate in cultural events. One-time life events like puberty ceremonies and bereavement observances can take several days and are more important than going to class. Benjamin et al. (1993), reported that American Indians feel a tendency to go home to help their families or to attend ceremonies, even if it means missing classes. Gulliford (2004) confirmed that American Indian students from traditional families who still speak their native language or believe in their traditional practices may be required to attend or participate in ceremonies regardless of the impact on their college studies. The tribal ceremonial calendar, rather than the academic calendar, takes precedence (Gulliford, 2004).

English Language Usage

Leap (1993) talked about how American Indian language use differs from "standard" English, which affects success in school, work, and opportunities. Colleges and universities do not always provide programs that support the language (Demmert, Jr.,

2006). Bad English grammar or poor language proficiency affects students' performance in their various disciplines and their academic progress (Wornyo, 2016).

Persistence to Continue

Persistence means continuing education despite the challenges. Persistence is the determination to keep moving toward a goal. Students who are persistent refuse to give up and keep attending college until a degree is obtained. Resiliency is the ability to cope (mindset) with stress, the positive capacity of an individual to respond under pressure (Thornton & Sanchez (2010).

Jackson et al. (2003) studied persistence among American Indian college students. The authors learned students found ways to cope with cultural and societal pressures unique to American Indians. The students faced several challenges, such as taking long breaks from studying, feeling discouraged by racism, frequently switching colleges, and feeling unsupported by their college. These students showed persistence in pursuing their degrees even after struggling academically. American Indian ways of knowing, cultural identity, social norming, educational support mechanisms, and unique student learning styles have proven to impact the academic success of American Indian college students (Pewewardy, 2002).

American Indian students who feel connected to family both at home and college are more likely to stay in school and feel less resentment from family members for being away (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). According to Keith et al. (2016), American Indian students can succeed with the help of supportive family relationships, instructors, staff,

peers, and educational institutions. They also benefit from guidance with study skills, identifying personal goals, and staying connected to their home and cultural practices.

Development of the Corn Model Conceptual Framework

My research process began with a topic about American Indian college students in the associate degree program. I had planned to use a non-indigenous-based conceptual framework when I first started. My mentor advised me to explain the variables and relationships from an indigenous perspective in my conceptual framework. This was a piece of good advice. If I had used the non-indigenous conceptual framework, it may have contradicted the findings of my study. I found a few indigenous-based theories that explained students' participation in higher education. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (2006) created the Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) which examines the impact of colonization, race, and tribal sovereignty. Another theory, Family Education Model (FEM) by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) addresses student retention. I selected the Corn Model by Shawn Secatero (2009) to use as the foundation of my study because it contained the theoretical context I needed.

Importance of Corn

I discussed the importance of corn and then broadened my ideas to include Secatero's Indigenous-based framework of his Corn Model (2009). According to Wall & Masayesva (2004), corn holds great importance in American Indian culture in physical, spiritual, and symbolic terms. Corn is viewed as both a sacred food and a symbol in the lives of American Indians who reside in the southwest area of the United States, as per Secatero (2009).

Corn is a traditional food that provides strength and nourishment to families and communities. Traditional food such as corn is a source of health, often referred to as medicine by American Indians (Fialkowski et al., 2012). Corn is an essential dietary component and is the principal ingredient in corn stew, blue corn mush, and kneel-down bread. Livestock such as horses, cattle, and sheep eat corn kernels, husks, and cobs.

Corn is used in cultural ceremonies. The corn pollen is vital in the Navajo religion. The corn tassels produce corn pollen, which the Navajo use in their ritual observances and procedures performed in ceremonies (Raitt, 1987). The girl in the Kinnalda grounds the corn kernels into yellow cornmeal to make the corn cake pudding. The corn leaves are soaked and sewn in a circular mat, which is used to enclose the corn cake pudding. The corn cake pudding is placed underneath an open fire pit overnight (Roessel, 1993).

Corn appears in verbal and physical art forms in American Indian culture. For instance, verbal art includes poems, songs, prayers, and stories. Physical art includes jewelry, basketry, and handicrafts.

The Origin of Corn Model (Shawn Secatero, 2009)

Dr. Shawn Secatero is a member of the Canoncito Band of Navajo Indians. His positionality statement in the dissertation highlighted the difficulties he faced in obtaining his undergraduate degree. After he graduated, he took a part-time job at a community high school and tutored in English and social studies. He mentioned that he found it enjoyable to work with his students and observe their graduation in 2009 (p. 5). He added that at graduate school; he was the only American Indian in the program and felt isolated

and alone. He had no computer, vehicle, or mentors to turn to for help. He was considering dropping out of school because he believed he was less intelligent than his classmates. When he went home and shared his struggles in school, his grandmother reminded him that he had survival in his blood from his ancestors who survived the Long Walk (Secatero, 2009). Secatero listened to his grandmother, and to this day, he continues to assist American Indian students in pursuing their educational endeavors.

In 1990, Secatero's interest in American Indian higher education began with an interview with a Navajo elder from Tohajiilee, New Mexico. He asked, "What advice would you offer our younger generations who plan on attending college?" The elder answered, "I would tell them to remember who they are, where they are from, and where they are going in life." The elder talked about the importance of taking care of yourself spiritually, socially, mentally, and physically. The older person also emphasized the need for close connections within the individual, family, and community.

Secatero (2009) described the sense of well-being as a phenomenon that occurs through identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community. The term "sense of well-being" is grounded in the indigenous perspective. Secatero (2021) added well-being is a positive sense of self, spirit, and belonging when met with cognitive, social, spiritual, and physical needs.

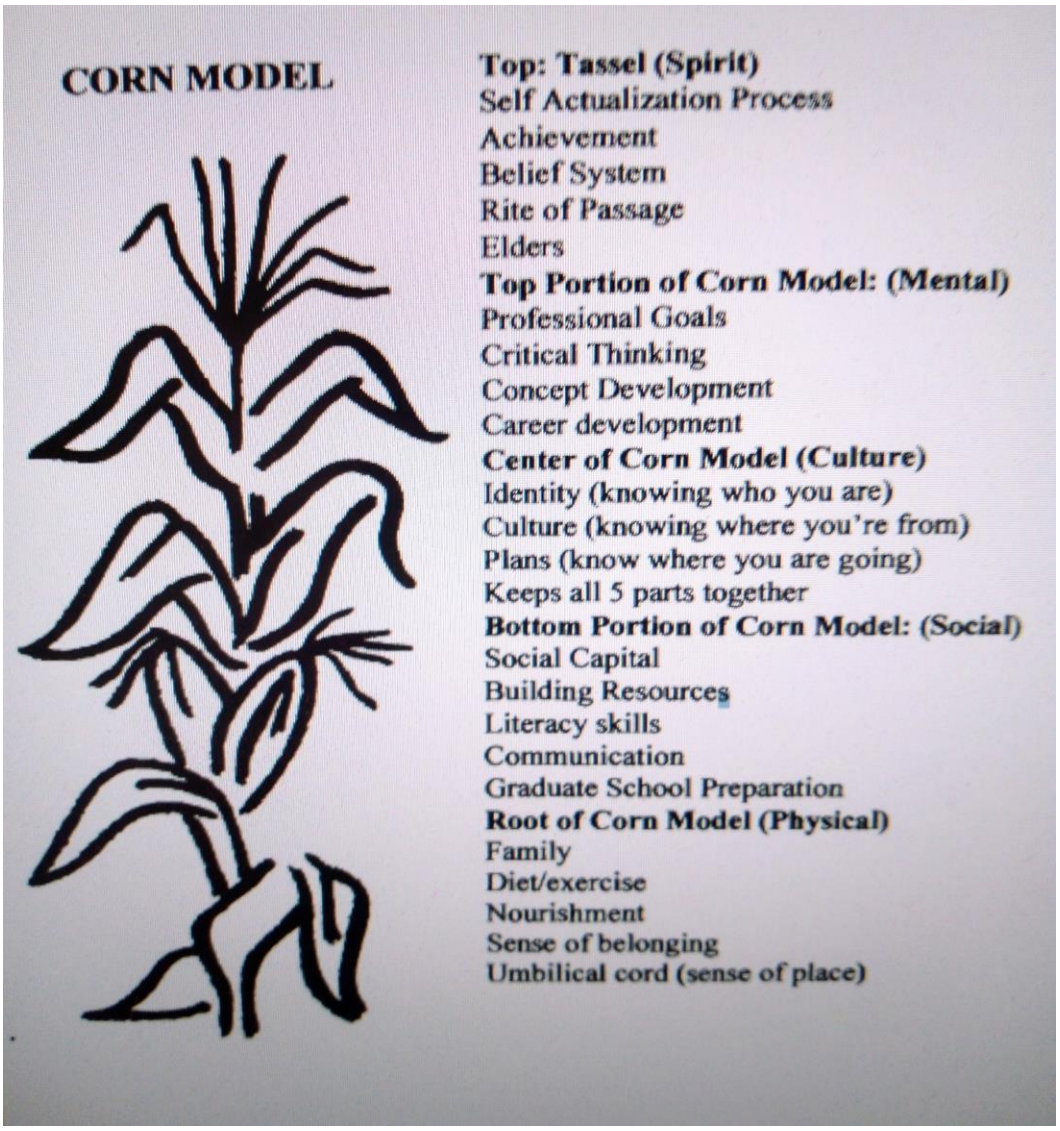
Secatero used the symbolism of corn to show sustenance in his dissertation study. Secatero (2009) developed the Corn Model as the conceptual framework for his dissertation study. He made the Corn Model by combining his experience, research, and theories for his dissertation. The Corn Model, based on Indigenous knowledge,

encompasses all aspects of the student's experience in higher education (Secatero (2009). The dissertation findings grounded American Indian perspectives on well-being. Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999), who has written about indigenous research protocols influenced him. The Corn Model was used by Secatero (2009) in his dissertation to examine the effects of well-being on persistence and the success of American Indian graduate students and professionals. Secatero gathered stories from indigenous participants, focusing on their way of knowing and honoring their worldview. The study participants had key traits related to success that were revealed in their stories and survey responses.

The Corn Model can help determine a course of action for students to continue their educational pursuits. Secatero (2009) conceptualized the Corn Model of a cornstalk as the metaphor for the five well-being concepts in his dissertation. They are (1) the root of the Corn Model (Physical), (2) the bottom portion of the Corn Model (Social), (3) the center of the Corn Model (Culture), (4) the top portion of the Corn Model (Mental), and (5) the tassel of the Corn Model (Spirit). Here are excerpts from the Corn Model by Secatero (2009). See Figure 2.

Figure 2

Corn Model developed by Shawn Secatero (2009)



Note. Conceptual Representation of the Corn Model

Physical Well-Being (Root)

As we begin life, the umbilical cord serves as the vein that must be nourished, loved, and fed through knowledge. Parents and grandparents provide the nourishment for

knowledge. Physical well-being can also serve as a tie to one's homeland. The expanding roots served as the physical connection to Mother Earth and the basic survival needs. Physical well-being is necessary in life to ensure everyone can care for themselves. Aspects include rest, dance, drug-free, hard work, patience, safe sex, deliverance, dedication, humor, and diet with exercise. Graduate students must practice healthy lifestyles by incorporating a well-balanced diet, plenty of rest, and daily exercise (Secatero, 2009).

Social Well-Being (Lower Portion of Corn Model)

For American Indians to prepare for higher education, social well-being is a vital component. Social well-being involves learning resources, literacy skills, language, and financial literacy for higher education. Social well-being brings American Indian graduate students together to communicate and utilize resources on campus. Social well-being can include financial aid and employment skills necessary for financial stability (Secatero, 2009).

Culture Well-Being (Center of Corn Model)

Cultural well-being is the main part of the cornstalk that keeps all five well-being factors in a holistic manner. According to Navajo elders, culture is based on three elements: knowing who you are, knowing where you are from, and knowing where you are going. The growth along the trunk of the Corn Model represents the signs of life and success factors (Secatero, 2009).

Mental Well-Being (Top Portion of Corn Model)

Mental well-being enabled American Indians to think critically and analytically while in graduate and professional school. Secatero's (2009) examples are: using resources from beyond tribal boundaries, completing statistics courses, or exploring the medicinal properties of tribal plants. The upper portion of the Corn Model signifies those aspects that allow one to survive the cognitive elements of attaining a graduate school degree. Mental well-being incorporates maturity and becoming a professional in a chosen field of study. This portion of the Corn Model can symbolize self-acceptance and integrating Native epistemologies into thoughts and actions. Mental well-being is important for cognitive processes like perseverance, knowledge, and information processing (Secatero, 2009).

Spiritual Well-Being (Corn Tassel)

Many American Indian tribal groups believe that spiritual well-being is essential for connecting to a higher level of thinking and reevaluating history and heritage. Spiritual well-being encompasses hope, family, healing, clan systems, faith, history, cultural ways of life, a sense of belonging, and survival. American Indian families, clans, communities, and tribal groups feel proud when their medicinal leaders prioritize spiritual well-being. Medicinal leaders include medicine people, healers, and historians. Spiritual well-being can also be the self-actualization process. The corn tassel represents spiritual well-being and ultimate purpose in life. According to Secatero (2009), fulfilling one's ultimate goals and purpose in life happens when one becomes older (Secatero, 2009).

Secatero (2009) used the Corn Model as the foundation for college students to start a plan of action. Thus, the Corn Model has become a prominent indigenous research tool. The foundation of the Corn Model developed by Secatero (2009) continues to grow to address higher education's goals for American Indian students. Secatero expanded the philosophies of his Corn Model conceptual framework, later known as the Corn Pollen Model. Secatero (2009) offers educational training and leadership seminars to encourage personal growth, using the Corn Pollen Model, on the Indian Reservations and worldwide.

Summary

The literature review discusses American Indian students in higher education, including their challenges, persistence, and the significance of corn. It also introduces the Corn Model conceptual framework and concludes with a summary.

Chapter 3 – Methods

In this chapter, I examine how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college. Initially, I present an overview of the pilot study I conducted in 2015, which led me to my current line of research. Next, I would like to discuss the methods used, participants, and trustworthiness and conclude with a summary.

Pilot Study

In Fall 2015, I did a pilot study for a course called Research in Distance Education at a college in the southwest United States. The research studied how eight American Indian students at a rural community college utilized self-directed learning to complete their online coursework. The study also examined cultural influences on their learning. The pilot study used Garrison's (1997) Interactive Self-Directed Learning Model, which is not an indigenous conceptual framework. The three overlapping dimensions are Self-Management, Self-Monitoring, and Motivation. My understanding of these three dimensions is:

1) Self-management is concerned with task control issues. It emphasized the social and behavioral aspects of learning goals, which are the external activities associated with the learning process.
2) Self-monitoring addresses the cognitive and metacognitive processes. It includes monitoring the repertories of learning strategies and an awareness of and an ability to think about our thinking. Self-monitoring is the process whereby the learner takes responsibility for constructing personal meaning.

3) Motivation plays a role in the initiation and maintenance of effort toward learning and achieving cognitive goals.

The research questions were: 1) What self-directed learning strategies do American Indian students employ to complete their online course requirements? 2) How does American Indian students' culture impact their online learning? The qualitative research design emphasized using content analysis in the pilot study. Data collection included in-depth interviews. The data analysis included transcription, creating meaning units, coding, and developing categories and themes.

Eight American Indian college students participated in a pilot study and answered questions about their demographic characteristics. These students answered open-ended questions about their self-directed learning strategies in online courses. These students had to take the online course offered as it was the only course available in their program of study that semester. In their online class, it was difficult for the students to understand the written instructions because they needed help to get started or what to do next. One finding was that students who were behind with their classwork reached out to their peers in the same predicament. A strong bond appeared among the students who worked together to complete their homework assignments. The students shared their knowledge and built a sense of belonging by working together. Completing a task and knowing what to do in their subsequent positions gave the students the initiative to continue their classwork. As a result, students were engaged in the learning process and motivated to continue their class assignments.

A question about sharing clanship online was not answered by any American Indian college students during the interview. I asked this question because I thought introducing their clans would unite the group or give a sense of belonging. Sharing their clans was a personal matter, and they felt more intimidated doing it online than in person. Most students in the pilot study reported that they needed technology to take part in their online courses. Five students who lived on the Navajo Indian Reservation did not have a computer or access to the Internet. For that reason, they traveled to the rural community college to use the computer lab to complete their online class assignments. One student enjoyed taking the online course because it let him get ahead with his homework assignments.

The pilot study and this study are similar in that they use qualitative methods. They are both focused on the experiences encountered by American Indian students in higher education. By doing a pilot study, it helped me to plan this study. When I did the pilot study, I used a non-indigenous conceptual framework. For this study, I used an indigenous conceptual framework. I used Shawn Secatero's Corn Model to strengthen the quality and dependability of this study. I reviewed the questions in the pilot study. I wanted to create more effective questions that would provide in-depth information from the participants in this study.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study explores how American Indian college students developed a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college. This study focuses on the individual student as a person (holistic approach), builds on

their strengths (strength-based), and encourages them to express their emotions, beliefs, and values. I wanted to understand each student's experience by conducting interviews to understand their thoughts, actions, and views of how they applied well-being concepts that enabled them to remain in college. Insights from my study might serve as the foundation for making more widespread changes that provide better academic experiences for American Indian college students as they obtain their associate degrees.

Research Question

This study tried to comprehend the participants' experiences while getting their associate degrees. The research question for the study is: How do American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being as they pursue an associate degree in a rural community college?

Research Design

This study explored how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college. I used several research approaches in this study. They are (1) a pilot study that led to the current study, (2) a basic qualitative research design as described by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), (3) a naturalistic inquiry design proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985), and (4) the Guiding Principles for Engaging in Research with Native American Communities by Straits et al., (2012).

I used the pilot study as a reference. I used a basic qualitative research design to understand how American Indian students perceive and make sense of their experiences. Qualitative researchers believe people construct knowledge continuously as they engage

in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I used naturalistic inquiry to collect, code, and organize the data into themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The primary research design by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and the naturalistic inquiry by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are Western research practices. Still, I used them to investigate my research question as these approaches apply to my study and provide a foundation for the research design. As Smith (1999) identified, researchers should not reject all Western methods and theories, as they may be adapted if deemed appropriate and beneficial by the local community.

My participants are American Indians, and I followed the policies and procedures disclosed in the Guiding Principles for Engaging in Research with Native American Communities (Straits et al., 2012) in this study. There was a genuine rapport between the participants and me during the interview, which ensured we valued dignity on both sides. The participants shared their knowledge and experiences, which made me feel honored. I treated the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the findings with respect, honesty, and care.

Basic Qualitative Research Design

I chose a basic qualitative research design by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). I followed the five steps outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), focusing on interviews with American Indian students as the data-gathering tool.

1. I am interested in understanding the phenomenon's meaning for those involved. The purpose was to understand how people make sense of their lives and

experiences. I conducted a preliminary qualitative study and was interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.

2. I used purposeful sampling to discover, understand, and gain insight. I selected a sample to learn about how American Indian students develop a sense of well-being as they pursue an associate degree in a rural community college. My purposeful sampling directly reflected the purpose and guided me in identifying information-rich cases.
3. I collected the data through interviews, observations, and document analysis. I identified the data techniques, specific information, theoretical orientation, problem, purpose, and sample for the study.
4. I conducted the data analysis that required me to think inductively. I focused on description, patterns, and developing codes from the responses to the interview questions. The process of data analysis involved recognizing recurring patterns that characterized the data.
5. I used the findings that were the data received with recurring patterns or themes backed by the data. The overall interpretation is my understanding perspective of the well-being aspect being examined.

Naturalistic Inquiry Paradigm

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) explanation of the flow of naturalistic inquiry serves as the basis for the basic qualitative research design used in this study. I used seven of the

fourteen operational principles outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to guide the research process of this study:

1. Natural Setting. The natural setting for the American Indian students is at the rural community college.
2. Human Instrument. I am the human instrument or the Naturalist. The Naturalist uses herself and other humans as tools to gather data and create an adaptable tool for various realities encountered.
3. Utilization of Tacit Knowledge. A Naturalist remembers words, symbols, or other rhetorical forms. For example, using tacit knowledge allowed me to recognize faces, comprehend metaphors, and 'know ourselves.'
4. Qualitative Methods. Naturalists prefer qualitative methods over quantitative because they are more adaptable to dealing with multiple realities.
5. Purposive Sampling. The Naturalist looks for participants who are 'information-rich' on the main topic or questions presented in the study.
6. Inductive Data Analysis. Inductive data analysis is preferred by Naturalists to uncover various realities within the data.
7. Gatekeeper and Gaining Entrée. In the qualitative paradigm, "gatekeeper" refers to the people who must give permission for initial contact and gain entrée (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, I gained entrée (access) into one of the rural community colleges in a border town near several Indian Reservations.

Guiding Principles for Conducting Research with American Indian Communities

A multi-ethic group of researchers including active tribal members developed the Guiding Principles for Conducting Research with American Indian Communities (Straits et al., 2012). Of the eleven principles discussed, I followed the eight principles when I interviewed the participants: (1) Native-centered in terms of relevance to the experiences of the participants, (2) Respect, which involves treating all participants with respect, honoring their cultural traditions, (3) Self-reflecting and cultural humility among participants, (4) Authentic relationships, which involve building a genuine rapport with the participants (5) Honoring the participants' time frames and their inability to meet during time frames convenient to me, (6) Building on the participants' strengths, (7) Engaging in co-learning, which involves the reciprocal exchange of knowledge and ideas, and (8) Integrity, or acting with honesty and morality throughout every phase of research.

Research Site

I conducted my research in the most natural setting for American Indian students with whom I feel connected. The research site was at a rural community college in the southwest region near several Indian Reservations such as Hopi, Navajo, Laguna, and Zuni.

Recruitment and Selection

I followed naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and chose 12 participants for the study using purposive sampling. They had to be American Indian students from an

American Indian Tribe, enrolled in an associate degree program, and 18 years of age or older.

The recruitment procedure began with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this study. I sent a letter to the Chancellor and Dean of Instruction (Exhibit A) requesting permission to conduct research. The letter to the college administrators requested permission to interview American Indian students in the associate degree program of study, as well as asking the Registrar to send a mass email to potential participants.

The screening procedure began once the potential participants interested in the study contacted me by email. After this initial contact, I sent an email to the participants with details about the study and their role in it. I also shared the Informed Consent information (Exhibit B) that explained the study's purpose, procedures, and commitment required from them. In addition, each participant provided me with a date and time for the face-to-face or Zoom interview.

Face-to-Face Interview

I set up a schedule to meet with each participant. I contacted the rural community college library to reserve an interview room on specific dates and times. The participants signed the Informed Consent (Appendix B) before the start of the interviews. Those who preferred a face-to-face interview were required to wear masks because of the Covid 19 pandemic policy at the rural community college. The interview lasted less than 1.5 hours. After the interview, I handed each participant a hand-sewn leather corn pollen pouch that aligned with the theme of the study as a gesture of gratitude for their participation.

Zoom Interview

A participant joined through Zoom and required a computer, Internet, Zoom, and Adobe PDF to sign the Informed Consent (Appendix B). I provided instructions for joining Zoom and creating a meeting password. If we encountered any technical difficulties, I encouraged the participants to take part in a face-to-face interview. This interview also lasted less than 1.5 hours. I expressed gratitude to the participant for attending the Zoom interview and requested she get her hand-sewn leather corn pollen pouch from the librarian at the rural community college library.

Only American Indian college students enrolled in an associate degree program, either full- or part-time, meet the inclusion criteria. Exclusion criteria comprise American Indian students not enrolled in a degree program.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

I submitted a consultation request to meet with an IRB staff regarding recruiting study subjects. I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) on January 3, 2022. The participants in this study reviewed and signed the Informed Consent (Appendix B) before the interview started. I assigned participants pseudonyms. As stated in the Informed Consent (Appendix B), participants can withdraw their participation by emailing me anytime.

Research Instrument

Along with the naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I was the human instrument and relied on the Interview Guide for data collection. The Interview Guide is the research instrument I used to collect, measure, and analyze data. I created the

Interview Guide (Appendix C) and aligned it with Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts (physical, social, mental, and spiritual) from Chapter 1. I wanted to understand how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being by exploring well-being concepts in-depth. I referred to the questions in the pilot study so that I could create more effective questions to get the intended result for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) specified that good interview questions are open-ended and yield descriptive data, even stories about a phenomenon.

The Interview Guide contains consists of two sections and 22 questions. Demographic information is covered in the first section of the Interview Guide. Participants were asked five closed-ended questions about their socio-demographic data, which included information about their Indian tribal affiliation, full- and part-time student enrollment status, employment, age, and gender. In the second section of the Interview Guide, there were 17 open-ended questions that focused on Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts. There were questions for each of the well-being factors such as physical, social, mental, and spiritual.

Data Collection

I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and permission to conduct research before collecting data (Appendix A). I used the Interview Guide (Appendix C) to complete the interviews. Participants choose their interview format: face-to-face or Zoom.

In the face-to-face interviews, I emailed the participants to explain the study and schedule a meeting. The person-to-person encounter is the most popular way of

discussing, where one person elicits information from another (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The participant signed the Informed Consent (Appendix B) before the interview started. The cell phone was used to record the face-to-face interviews.

In the Zoom interview, I used the Internet to facilitate communication with the participants. The use of email allowed participants to communicate quickly and efficiently regardless of geographic location (Chen & Hinton, 1999). I contacted the participant via email to explain the study. I sent her the Informed Consent (Appendix B) to get her signature and scheduled a Zoom meeting. In addition, the discussions lasted less than 1.5 hours. I recorded the Zoom interview on my cell phone.

Data Analysis

I used narrative inquiry to focus on interpreting the narrative from the participants' personal stories. I wanted to explore how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college. I sorted and analyzed data using Microsoft Word. I split documents: Document 1 for interview transcriptions, Document 2 for recurring patterns and codes, and Document 3 for categories of themes and subthemes.

I completed the following steps to create Document 1, which included the interview transcriptions. The participants were de-identified using a pseudonym. I audio-recorded the interviews using my cell phone and listened to the entire audio recording before transcribing. While listening to the recording, I read the transcript to make sure it was accurate and focused on the content.

I finished each task to create Document 2. I read the interview transcriptions several times and let the codes develop from the participant's own words. I made notations of the recurring patterns and began grouping the patterns into codes in Document 2.

I used Ose's (2016) instructions to categorize the data in Document 2 into an Excel spreadsheet. After I created the label headings in the columns in the spreadsheet, I began to copy and paste the data from Document 2 into the spreadsheet. While transferring the data, an error occurred with the syntax. I received an error message that read "#NAME? Error" which is an invalid reference formula that occurred since I moved data to a different location. I tried to solve the problem but decided on a different approach.

I created Document 3 by completing the following steps. In Microsoft Word, I used the Navigation Pane to use the Find function. I typed in words and found phrases and categories of recurring patterns and codes. After, I performed the process by typing in similar meanings and looking for recurring patterns. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed working inductively with the data to develop a rich setting image. I placed the categories of the emerging themes and subthemes in Word Document 3. The last step was to interpret the findings.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) used four criteria to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Qualitative researchers need to show

that their studies are credible. Trustworthiness has four conventional criteria: internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility replaced internal validity and showed confidence in the 'truth' of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used my pilot study as a reference to construct the content and format of the interview questions that give credibility to this study. In addition, I used a reflexive journal to enhance the credibility of this study. The journal is a diary where I record various information about my ideas, thoughts, and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I maintained a journal and made entries to set goals and record insights. Also, I wrote words that needed to be defined and described some of my experiences with the research process.

Transferability

The term transferability replaced the study's external validity. Transferability is used in the study to show that its findings can be applied in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used a thick description to describe the participant's experiences. I want to enable anyone interested in pursuing the research topic to transfer the conclusions to a similar context. Using purposeful sampling enhanced qualitative research's 'thick description' characteristic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

The researcher replaced reliability with dependability and demonstrated that the findings were consistent and replicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I chose Secatero's Corn Model (2009) for my research on American Indians to ensure dependability. It had the

theoretical context for my indigenous-based conceptual framework. Inquired bias determines how much the inquirer resisted early closure. The steps include accounting for all data, exploring all reasonable areas, and assessing the extent to which practical matters such as sponsor deadline or client interest influenced decisions about conducting the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability has taken the place of objectivity. Confirmability helps to maintain neutrality in a study by ensuring that respondents shape the findings and not the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), an inquiry auditor reviews the process and outcome of an inquiry to make trustworthiness judgments and confirm attestations. I reviewed the data collection and analysis phases carefully and saved the documents on a flash drive as part of the audit trail for this study. The research study includes documentation of records in the inquiry to ensure confirmability. I proved confirmability by making an audit trail. I can review the study's interview transcripts, data collection, and data analysis documents like a financial auditor.

Summary

This chapter provides a plan for implementing the research study to answer the research question. In addition, this chapter discussed the pilot study, research design, and recruitment and selection. After the research instrument, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and summary follow. The next chapter addresses the results.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter explores how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being as they pursue an associate degree in a rural community college. The first section describes the data collection. The following section includes the participant demographics and participants' profiles (stories). Afterward, I present the emerging themes and subthemes of well-being. The chapter ends with a discussion of the study's trustworthiness and a summary.

Collection of the Data

Twelve participants were enrolled in an associate degree program. The participants are Saline, April, Darrell, Calvin, Trenton, Marie, Rachael, Linda, Frank, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby. Eleven participants took part in the face-to-face interviews at the rural community college library. Charlene took part in a Zoom meeting. The participants signed the Informed Consent before the interview (Appendix B). To ensure confidentiality, I explained to the participants that I would not use their names anywhere in the research study.

I made the participants comfortable in the face-to-face and Zoom meetings by sharing small talk before the interview began. I introduced myself as Navajo naming my four clans. The length of the interviews varied, but each was less than 1.5 hours. I gave each interviewee a leather corn pollen pouch to thank them for participating in the interview. I asked Charlene to pick up her hand-sewn leather corn pollen pouch for her

participation from the librarian for the Zoom interview. The participants graciously accepted the gift. The corn pollen pouch matched the theme of this study.

After I conducted the interviews, I assigned pseudonyms to the participants. I transcribed each interview recording using verbatim transcription and developed a word-for-word transcript of the recording. Transcribing each interview required 30-45 minutes for every 10-minute audio-taped interview. The recording quality of the face-to-face interviews was good except for two participants (Calvin and Rachael) whose voices changed to a lower volume. In the Zoom interview, there was an issue with the audio echo and lagging of the Internet connection (low bandwidth) with my computer. Therefore, I shared the interview questions on the screen with Charlene.

The Demographics of the Participants

Twelve participants provided their American Indian tribal affiliation, full- and part-time college student status, employment, age, and gender. They identified themselves as American Indians, predominately from the Navajo Indian Reservation. Charlene specified that she was part Mexican. Bobby mentioned he was part Zuni, and his grandmother was half Anglo. He shared his genetic results (DNA), which include English and Scottish ancestry. Saline, April, Darrell, Calvin, Trenton, Rachael, Betty, and Bobby were full-time college students, taking 12 or more credit hours. Marie, Linda, Frank, and Charlene were part-time college students, taking fewer than 12 credit hours. April, Calvin, Marie, Rachael, Charlene, and Betty stated that they had jobs. Saline, Darrell, Trenton, Linda, Frank, and Bobby commented they were unemployed. The

average age of the participants is 32 years old; eighteen is the youngest, and 61 is the oldest. There were seven female and five male participants (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographics

Participant	Tribal Affiliation	Gender	Age	Enrollment	Employment
Saline	Navajo	Female	18	Full-time	No
April	Navajo	Female	19	Full-time	Yes
Darrell	Navajo	Male	19	Full-time	No
Calvin	Navajo	Male	20	Full-time	Yes
Trenton	Navajo	Male	22	Full-time	No
Marie	Navajo	Female	25	Part-time	Yes
Rachael	Navajo	Female	28	Full-time	Yes
Linda	Navajo	Female	33	Part-time	No
Frank	Navajo	Male	43	Part-time	No
Charlene	Navajo, Mexican	Female	45	Part-time	Yes
Betty	Navajo	Female	56	Full-time	Yes
Bobby	Navajo, Zuni, English & Scottish	Male	61	Full-time	No

Note. Demographics contain the pseudonyms name, tribal affiliation, gender, age, enrollment status, and employment.

Participant Profiles

I gave pseudonyms to each of the 12 participants: Saline, April, Darrell, Calvin, Trenton, Marie, Rachael, Linda, Frank, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby. To be consistent in presenting, I listed the participant profiles according to their age, from the youngest to the oldest. I listed April and Darrell alphabetically since they are both nineteen years old. I made grammatical corrections to present their stories.

Saline

Saline is a Navajo. She is a full-time student and is unemployed, 18 years old, a female, and lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation with her parents. She pursued an associate degree and said, “I can get started on my nursing path to become a nurse.” It is possible she will continue her education beyond nursing to become a physician. She remarked, “I told them (her parents) that I wanted to become a doctor. And they told me I can do it.” She has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When asked how she became a persevering student, she explained, “I became a strong person because of my mom, dad, and grandparents; they always told me I could do what I want. Later in the future, I am going to believe them.” When I asked her what well-being, meant, she remarked, “When I hear the word well-being, it is how I am mentally and physically.”

One of the advantages of living at home is maintaining a secure relationship with her family. She has a solid support system that includes her parents and grandparents. They encourage her to do what she needs to do to complete her education. In addition,

her parents helped her financially with tuition, textbooks, and transportation and allowed her time to study at home.

She lives near family members in a small community and participates in family events. They have family activities in the summer: volleyball every night, softball on Sundays, and some basketball here and there. She has helped cook and clean at her sister's Kinaalda. She must keep track of the time when there is a ceremony scheduled at her home. She wears her traditional outfit to attend classes at the rural community college. When she gets home, she is ready to transition quickly from school to take part in the ceremony.

Saline has a Straight Talk Home Internet Service Plan. She explained, "I have a laptop and use my cell phone, Wi-Fi, and our hotpot to help me do my homework. Out where I live, we have a good connection with Straight Talk." As a result, she is excited about learning and is current with her assignments. One of her study strategies is using her cell phone to open apps to use the dictionary and solve math problems. Transforming notes into a Word document improves her comprehension of the material.

April

April, a Navajo, is a full-time student and is currently employed. She is 19 years old, a female and lives with her parents off the Navajo Indian Reservation. April pursued an associate degree and commented, "Something I have always wanted to do. I felt that is something that everyone does." She has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When asked how she became a persevering student, she replied:

> I have always been working hard on my grades. I have always focused on my education first because having a future in our daily lives is essential. Yeah, I work very hard, especially with my parents helping me.

When asked about well-being, she said, “It is about being kind to oneself and finding balance in mental, spiritual, and physical aspects.” She was in a dual enrollment program in a high school that allowed her to take college classes while still enrolled and could pace herself. Now, being in college, she admits to procrastinating, submitting her homework until the last minute, and doing this affects the quality of her work. She recently started using a planner to focus on the due dates for each assignment.

April needs help with writing essays. Depending on the genre of the assignment, the work required a student to read, analyze, compare, contrast, and add clarity. She needs help with structuring or mapping an essay. She has improved in her writing and her parents can see it and agree she has improved. When she gets a lower assignment grade than expected in a course, her parents give her advice and encourage her to boost her grades. Her parents occasionally help her pay for her tuition fees and textbooks.

The pictures, pottery, blankets, and rugs are some items she sees with cultural values at home. She comments that she is proud of her heritage because it is valuable. She said that nowadays, people talk a lot about racism and make others feel inferior because of their backgrounds.

April explained, “Before taking these courses, I had no Internet connection and had to drive into town and find places to study.” Finally, her family moved into town, and

her brother hooked up the Wi-Fi. After that, she bought a computer and could do her homework assignments and take tests.

Darrell

Darrell is a Navajo, a full-time student, and is unemployed. He is 19 years old, a male, and lives off the Navajo Indian Reservation with his mother, two brothers, and a niece. He pursued an associate degree and voiced his reason:

> Because I wanted to get some education, I am the second one in my family, other than my mom, at least to get this far in college. My brothers applied, but they never registered for classes. I do not want to be where they are because they still live with my mom at the ages of 25 and 26. I want to get out of there as soon as I can and make my life. And yeah, I want to make my mom happy.

Darrell has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When I asked him how he became a persevering student, he said, "Focus and motivation. My niece motivates me because I want to be the uncle advising her on the importance of school. She is six years old. I am her role model." When I asked him, what well-being meant, he remarked, "When I think of well-being, it makes me think of your mental health. It could also mean your physical. It just means are you doing okay."

He took college-level courses while completing the requirements for his high school diploma. He has been taking classes in the Health Careers program for three semesters. A daily challenge is the commute to the rural community college. Darrell does not own a vehicle nor rides the public transportation bus. His mother usually drops him off early, and he gets picked up from school at about 5:00-ish because that is when his

mother gets off work. Depending on her work schedule or the errands she needs to do, Darrell sometimes relies on one of his brothers to pick him up. Another problem he faced as a commuter was the inability to take part in a study group after class.

His mother constantly transferred him to different elementary and middle schools when he was younger. Transferred means being unenrolled at one school and enrolling in another school. At each school, he had to introduce himself to the class. When he was in high school, his peers from previous schools remembered him. Their introductions went something like this, “Oh, I remember you” and “You were that guy that….” For those reasons, he developed social skills; he is talkative and extroverted. He has substantial public speaking skills, is proud, and mentions that his education helped him. Darrell does not like being called an indigenous person. He emphasized, “I feel that when someone affiliates himself as an indigenous person, they practice their cultural beliefs. My family is not traditional; we are Christians.”

He said his four clans and admitted he was unfamiliar with the relationship between the clan system. He asks his mother and grandmother to explain the relationship between him and the person from another clan when he hears about them. Unfortunately, they cannot provide any details. For those reasons, he commented, “I really do not consider myself indigenous, I use my brown skin to represent who I am.”

Darrell remarked, “I recently purchased a laptop. I live in town and can access the Internet at home.” However, he is concerned about buying a Texas Instrument graphing calculator for his class. He is using a basic calculator, but he requires a more advanced one to solve complex equations.

Calvin

Calvin is a Navajo, a full-time student, and is also currently employed. He is 20 years old, a male, and lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation with his parents. Calvin provided why he pursued an associate degree and said, “I want to understand my subjects better. Get a better job in the field I am pursuing.” He has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. I asked him how he became a persevering student, and he declared, “I believe in myself; I looked up to my elders and those before me, how they did their thing, worked, and lived.”

He could work well with his hands. He assisted his father in constructing different structures, including framing a house, mixing and pouring concrete foundations, and working on various short-term construction projects. Since he works alongside his father, he has learned a lot about construction work. He commented, “Sometimes the construction projects are small, but they were still something I learned from.”

Calvin does not have a computer or access to the Internet at home. He explained, “I commute to the library to work on my assignments, especially for online classes. I have a cell phone account with T-Mobile. Last Wednesday, the Internet was down, and I had to use my cell phone. It was hard to see the screen.”

Trenton

Trenton introduced himself being a Diné (Navajo). He is a full-time student, unemployed, 22 years old, a male, and lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation with his grandmother. He is a first-generation college student and named his four clans. Trenton pursued an associate degree and said, “I just wanted to find a better job that will help me

get a job out of the state." He has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When I asked him how he became a persevering student, he stated:

> I have wanted to attend college since I was a little kid because no family member completed high school or got a college degree. If I graduate and do this and that, I will be the first in the family to graduate and go to college. This drives me to continue my education because I will be a role model for my younger siblings, nieces, and nephews.

His parents and grandmother tell him it is up to him to do what he wants with his education. When asked what well-being meant to him, he said, "Well-being is about a person on how they are doing and who they are."

Every morning, he and his siblings burn cedar and pray so he can stay spiritually and mentally strong. He wore a turquoise necklace given to him by an uncle and two bracelets made by his grandmother. His uncle and a medicine man told him to wear turquoise jewelry for protection. He wears his jewelry wherever he goes because they represent him as being Navajo.

Trenton was well-prepared for college. He commented, "I am not trying to brag, but the classes I took in high school came to me easily. So, college classes came by, and I guess it was easy too." He jots down his assignments and test schedules and then makes plans to complete his assignments and study for his tests.

Trenton mentioned that the Internet connection is challenging for those like him living on the Indian Reservation. He explained, "Even if we had Internet access, it would not be as fast as the one in the rural community college library. I can do homework on

Microsoft Word at home, but going online is hard." He must go to the rural community college library to access the Internet. And when he is at the rural community college library, he does all he can to complete his assignments and take his tests.

Marie

Marie is a Navajo, a part-time student, and is also currently employed. She earned her General Education Diploma (GED). She is 25 years old, a female, has two children, and lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation. Marie provided the reason she pursued an associate degree and said, "I have two children at home. I am a single parent. I wanted to change our lives and become more stable than what we had before." She has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When I asked her how she became a persevering student, she expressed, "I am strong enough to keep going even though it gets overwhelming. I look at my two children and tell myself not to quit because they need their mom. My children motivate me." When I asked her what well-being meant, she specified, "The way you live your life." Marie seems overwhelmed with responsibilities, and expectations of being a mother of two and being a caregiver at home. She is busy throughout the day, eats once a day, and barely gets four hours of sleep. When she has time, she takes walks with her children.

Marie had to find childcare to take part in the study and seemed rushed. Going back to college as a single parent with children can be challenging. She claimed, "I do not have support. It is just me alone. I try to ask for help, but I do what I can and make it throughout the day." Even if she asked her parents to help with childcare, they could not help.

Due to her PTSD and anxiety, she prefers studying alone to stay focused. For those reasons, she likes online classes. She has problems reading, especially when she sees unfamiliar words, and carries a little notepad to write the meaning of the words she does not understand. She replied, “The skill I do not have is writing and reading hard words I do not understand, so I keep a little notepad.” Her writing skills are poor, and she needs help to improve them. She likes math; before, she felt she was not good at math until she started pushing herself.

She never felt prepared academically for college. She said, “When I started college, I was nervous and scared.” She wants to improve her level of education and acquire new skills and likes what she is doing. Marie has a computer and access to the Internet at home but wants to buy a new computer.

Rachael

Rachael is a Navajo and introduced herself being a Diné (Navajo). She is a full-time student and is currently employed. She is 28 years old, a female, and lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation. Rachael pursued an associate degree, and she commented on her reason:

> I wanted to become more self-sufficient and, you know, not depend on anybody besides myself. School is the only way to achieve it. You cannot work forever at one job; you got to go to school; you got to go up the ladder, as Chief Manuelito quoted.

Rachael has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When I asked her how she became a persevering student, she announced, “It is my mother. It is

the reason. It does not sound very pleasant, but I will outdo her one day in academics. Become self-sufficient one day. Pay my bills. That's pretty much it." When I asked what the word well-being meant to her, she remarked:

> Well-being means having peace for yourself and a rational mind to continue what you set yourself out to do, which is a big thing for me in school. If you have chaos at home or in your personal life, it will affect your school, studies, and grades. Well-being will bring peace of mind. It would be best if you found peace.

Her mother is her role model because she is the only person in the family to have gone to college. Rachael does not speak fluent Navajo. She specified, "Not knowing Navajo means having no cultural identity or roots." Therefore, she is learning to read, write, and speak Navajo. Speaking Navajo helps her connect with her community especially when she returns to the 'deep rez.' Deep rez is American Indian slang for remote areas of the Indian Reservations. She claimed, "The importance of your identity is your language." She provided examples: Hispanics speak Spanish, and Muslims have Islamic writings. She is taking a cultural anthropology class and learning about her culture.

Her mentor assured her she would get her through the associate degree. That kind of support makes all the difference in her school experience, which is why she is here. She does not have a computer or access to the Internet at home. So, she goes to the rural community college library to use the computer and the Internet.

Linda

Linda is a Navajo, a part-time student, and is unemployed. She is 33, female, and

lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation. She is a first-generation college student. She pursued an associate degree, and she commented that the reason is, “I am the first generation. I am the first one, and I am the oldest as well. It is all for me. I enjoy learning new things; I am excited to go out and help in the field I am pursuing.” She has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When I asked how she became a persevering student, she expressed:

> Experience. I started school in 2010 but did not take it seriously and missed classes. Despite being older, I continued and had different role models. I finally found the excitement of school and the support from mom, dad, and grandma. It took a long time for me to get back to school.

I asked Linda what well-being meant to her; she remarked, “Well-being means being 100% yourself, being safe, being nourished, food, or even with love.” In the following years, after the birth of her daughter, she could not concentrate on her homework. She commented, “I am very social, and being stuck at home, stopping school and work, made me angry toward my spouse because his life did not change.” It was a tough time, and she ignored her own needs. She slowly changed her attitude and became more caring about her well-being because she had to care for her daughter. Her daughter is a six-year-old and attends the first grade.

While growing up, Linda’s parents never mentioned her going to college. She said, “From the beginning, I felt I had no support; my parents did not encourage school. I wish they knew more about the college system.” Since 2010, she has been taking college courses off and on at the rural community college. She might have already graduated if

her parents had supported her when she began taking college courses in the health field. But, despite the long road to getting the credits needed to graduate, she continued her education. Linda has attention-deficit disorder (ADHD), and because of that, it is hard for her to understand the lectures in the classroom. She feels she is always behind in keeping up with the lectures. When she hears or sees a word, she cannot process the information. Therefore, she looks up the definition on her cell phone. As a result, the lecture topic shifted when the meaning became clear to her. She took a course in American Indian History and learned about the BIA boarding school system.

Linda grew up in a Christian household. Many years later, she struggled with her spirituality. She questioned her faith and moved away from Christianity. She said, “I am searching spiritually. I often prayed and asked myself; Do I see God? When driving along, I pray for support and to be safe.” In addition, she is trying to figure out her identity, especially her cultural identity. She is learning about the Kinaalda and is excited to have one for her daughter.

Her parents are medically unstable. Since Linda is the oldest child, her parents depend on for their hospital visits, which involve transportation, language interpretation, and medical translation. Besides being her parents’ caregiver, she checks in on her grandmother. She claimed, “Family matters have always been getting in the way of homework and exams.” Despite not being involved in her community, she received three scholarships from her chapterhouse during college. She is appreciative that her community has supported her during those times.

Linda lives in an area that offers no cell phone services. She has no laptop and cannot access the Internet where she lives. Spending time at the rural community college library helps her complete her assignments. She explained, “My five-day-a-week routine is after I drop off my daughter at school at 7:30 a.m., I come straight to the rural community college library. I use the Internet all day and leave after 3:00 pm to pick up my daughter.”

Frank

Frank is a Navajo, a part-time student, and unemployed. He is 43 years old, a male, and lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation. He introduced himself, naming his four clans. He pursued an associate degree, and he shared:

> I have six kids, and life is just getting a lot tougher and more expensive. I think it is best to get some degree so I can get a better-paying job. I was not told to go to school when I was young. There was a lot of abuse in my family; my parents were alcoholics and did not tell us to go to school. They told us school was unimportant, but I think it is more critical today. I think everybody needs education.

Frank has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When I asked how he became a persevering student, he emphasized, “I lost my sister, losing relatives, and it seems there is nobody to look up to for help. It is just me and my wife. We are trying to get a better life.” When I asked what the word well-being meant to him, he remarked, “A person who goes about life, being self-reliant and being better prepared and not live the life of counting on others.”

Frank used to donate his blood plasma to put food on the table. The blood donation center temporarily deferred Frank from donating, which means he cannot contribute for a certain period. Because of this, his wife donates her blood plasma to buy gas to get him to the rural community college. During the summer, his wife and children help him with landscaping jobs in town. He expressed:

> We do yard work. Sometimes people pay so little for big jobs. I try to complete the yard work in one day so we can get paid and get something to eat and drink. Depending on the landscaping job, it might take three days to complete the job. He gets aggravated when the landscaping job must be completed before the landowners pay him.

He is a member of the Native American Church (NAC). He burns cedar and uses mother peyote to strengthen his family. The all-night ceremonies require a roadman (peyote chief) to conduct the services and administer sacramental peyote (Csordas, 2000). One helper to the roadman is the fireman. Frank is the fireman, and his role is to carry the fire for the drum. In addition, he performs the duties required of his position for a positive outcome of the Native American Church meetings. In return, he receives gifts such as drumstick bags, cedar pouches, and gas money from the Native American Church members.

Education is crucial for survival in today's world, especially for necessary job requirements, according to Frank. He explained how hard it is to find employment and commented, "Even McDonald's requires college credit nowadays. It is getting harder to find a job with a high school diploma." He continues his education and trusts his

spirituality to keep moving toward his goals. Frank has a computer and access to the Internet at home with Frontier Communications.

Charlene

Charlene is a Navajo and part Mexican on her father's side. She is a part-time student currently employed at a hospital on the Navajo Indian Reservation. She is 45, female, and lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation. She received her high school equivalency diploma (GED). She introduced herself by stating her four clans. Charlene provided the reason she pursued an associate degree, and she explained:

> I am a high school dropout. I raised my brother and sister because we had lost our mom at a young age when I was fifteen, my younger sister was three, and my brother was six. My sister was in an accident with my mom, and she became paralyzed. I had to take on the family responsibilities as a mom, caregiver, and nurse. I got my GED to start college because I wanted a career. I started about 20 years ago. There were bills to pay, and I had to get a job. I was hesitant to go back to school because I had a job. I questioned why I needed to return to school to get a degree. But something was missing. I always wanted to teach and share my knowledge. I want to be a teacher, so I want to get my degree in education. Continuing my job with no education is more challenging than having a degree. I like that stability where I can have that degree instead of doing the work experience process.

Charlene has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When I asked how she became a persevering student, she expressed:

> My husband is working on his master's and that motivates me to work on my associate degree. If he can do it, I can do it. My dad, aunts, and cousins have degrees on my dad's side of the family, and they motivate me. It would be hard to tell my nephews and nieces to continue their education when I do not have an educational background.

She has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When asked what the word well-being meant to her, she remarked:

> Having well-being brings your body together because those keep me going daily. I pray every day and do mental health meditation to deal with my pain and my healing. I am social with my work and family. I am physical by taking care of myself and exercising when I can. If you have something off balance, you can feel that. The mental part was a hard struggle for me growing up. What brings it together is spirituality. All of them relate to me.

After Charlene met her husband, she handed the family responsibilities back to her father. She and her husband lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. After 17 years of living off the Navajo Indian Reservation, they returned home. She has worked for the past 17 years at a hospital on the Navajo Indian Reservation. She handles work deadlines as a supervisor, tends to family responsibilities, and completes her homework assignments. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she used sage to protect her family and staff at work. She mentioned, "I prepared sage to drink every week, for me and my team; we drank sage to stay strong and to keep a clear mindset because we were

the frontline staff at the hospital." Sage grows in the southwestern United States. Sage has medicinal properties and is considered sacred to the American Indians.

Charlene spoke about her ancestors' strength and how they survived the Long Walk. She is pleased that the Navajo Code Talkers who served in World War II helped the United States to win the war. She is proud to be a Navajo and remembers her great-grandmother, grandparents, and mother telling her to be proud of who she is because of her people. She commented, "Knowing where you come from will always be a part of you. If you do not know who you are, then you will not have a place in the world to help what is there." She learned to work outside the norm from her grandfather and uncles, including repairing vehicles and building animal shelters.

Charlene has a laptop for school. She remarked, "We still have limited access to the Internet. We live in an area that does not have a good Internet connection with Frontier Communications. There is no service line out here." There is limited service with the Cellular One Internet towers. She said, "I live in a dead zone. We use Hughes.net Satellite Internet, and that's not great, but it gets us by."

Betty

Betty introduced herself in Navajo and shared her four clans. She is a full-time student and is employed. She is 56 years old, a female, and lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation. She pursued an associate degree, and she mentioned the reason:

> I will not stay home after I retire. My mom got bored when she retired. I do not want to get bored. My kids influenced me to go back to school and try something

different. Right now, my profession is corrections. I have been doing that for 25 years now. I want to do something different from that.

She has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When I asked how she became a persevering student, she said:

> I always wanted to return to school but never did because of my job and kids. I prioritized providing for my kids and stuck with my job this long. Now, I have free time since my kids have graduated. It is just me, so I want to do something different.

When I asked what the word well-being meant to her, she remarked, "Diné be' iiná." (Navajo way of life). She completed high school at a mission boarding school on the Navajo Indian Reservation. Next, she took college classes at Union College in Nebraska and returned home to care for her grandfather. Then she attended Fort Lewis College, became pregnant, and quit school. Next, she worked at a nursing home, where she became interested in the medical field. Finally, she worked temporarily at a health facility on the Navajo Indian Reservation.

Betty is currently taking anatomy and physiology classes. Recently, her mother had a stroke. Betty is learning about the signs of strokes in her medical terminology class; one of the course objectives is to know the risk factors and causes of strokes. Since she was a chapter official for years, she knows what the community needs in health care services. After getting her associate degree, she plans to move back to care for her mother and provide geriatric care in her community.

Betty is retiring from her job of 25 years at a correctional facility. She has considered going back to college to expand her knowledge. However, doing something new brought self-doubts. She said, “I felt overwhelmed, but you know, after thinking about it, I ask myself, why do I have this negative attitude when I can do it? Now my attitude has changed. I can do it!”

Betty gets up before dawn to pray. She said, “I get up early in the morning before dawn and meet the Deities (Navajo Gods and Goddesses) to pray.” She was taught the teachings from the Bible ever since she attended the mission boarding schools. Her grandmother used to like to sing gospel songs in Navajo. Betty can mimic her grandmother and continues to sing gospel songs in Navajo. She speaks fluent Navajo and cannot read or write in Navajo. She used her Navajo language as a tool to help her understand a concept. She explained, “When I am reading and do not understand a sentence in English, I have to translate it into my Navajo language to understand.” Translating the content into another language helps her understand the meaning of the concepts, such as the vocabulary.

Betty is taking online courses this semester. She has a cell phone and a laptop but has no Internet at home. She goes to town and sits in coffee shops that offer free Internet services. When she buys a drink, she sips it for three hours and does her homework.

Bobby

Bobby is part Zuni and is registered as a full-blooded (4/4) American Indian according to his Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CIB) with the Navajo Nation. The CIB is an official document that certifies an individual has a specific fraction of

American Indian ancestry of a federally recognized tribe (Federal Register, 2008). Bobby's maternal grandmother is half-Anglo. The result of his genetic test (DNA test) found that his ancestry included English and Scottish.

Bobby is a full-time student and is unemployed. He is 61 years old, a male, and a GED recipient, and a veteran going to college on a GI Bill. He lives on the Navajo Indian Reservation. He stated his four clans. He decided to pursue an associate degree, and he explained his reason:

> I am getting an associate degree in environmental design. That is the closest thing I can get because I have been taking classes off and on for twenty years. I am bragging that I was a civil engineer without a degree. I managed $15-20 million in roads and bridge projects. Talk about the motivation to understand who I am and to learn my language. It is in all of us.

He has taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. When I asked how he became a persevering student, he said, "I think a lot of it is my dad. My spiritual life is probably one of the biggest parts of it. Of course, mentors." When I asked what the word well-being meant to him, he expressed:

> Well-being means being able to think right and treat people right. It could mean financial too. If a person does not have a lot, it affects everything else. No matter what people say about money, it is nice to have money to take your kids out to buy them ice cream. I can encourage somebody or help somebody. That is well-being for me.

Bobby thought he was part Anglo because of the way his parents raised him. Both parents had different educational experiences on the Navajo Indian Reservation. He thought his mother grew up in the 'white' world because of her education. His mother obtained an education with the help of a family member. An older sister who worked for the Tuba City school system cared for his mother. His father, however, started attending kindergarten at the age of 12 and eventually dropped out of school due to being bullied, resulting in a lack of education.

When he was about six to eight, Bobby recalls praying to God to be white (Anglo) because he thought white people had everything. While staying with his grandmother, he heard the Navajo language. He said:

> My grandmother was traditional, and I remember staying at her place and hearing Navajo songs on KGAK (radio station). And that was the only time I heard the Navajo language. At my place, of course, we spoke English. I know there was this belief back then that if you knew Navajo, you would not go far.

Looking back, Bobby remembers a lack of self, a sense of not belonging or knowing who he was. He exclaimed, "I did not know who I was when I grew up. I used to hear the terms loss of identity or no identity. I did not understand that until I got older that I was one of those." He thought he was white until a few years before entering the military. While in the armed service, his military nickname was "Chief," and he was proud of that. After being discharged from the military, he struggled with alcohol. He commented, "I married my wife in a bar." Bobby preferred to be called an American

Indian and said, “I am a Navajo man, an American Indian, not a Native American but an American Indian.” He wears his hair long as part of his cultural identity.

Bobby had already carved out a career without a college degree by employment with the BIA as a land surveyor and civil engineer. Then, he became a road/bridge inspector. He knows how to use the Global Positioning System (GPS) to build roads and AutoCAD to create 3D models of roads and bridge structures. He helped construct public highways and bridges that served as the primary access for the tribal communities. He recalls how much he enjoyed working on several roads and bridges, especially the ones in Pueblo Pintado, and Torreon. One day, a crew leader provoked him by asking, “Did you get your degree?” He said, “No.” The crew leader remarked, “Then you do not know if you know what you are doing.” He remembered the remark but did not say if this exchange motivated him to return to school.

Last semester, he took a course in cultural anthropology because he wanted to know his cultural identity. He felt his cultural identity was the part that was missing and wanted to learn more about being a Navajo. Besides that, he wanted to know what happened to his people. He learned about the treatment of his people and understood the meaning of assimilation, integration, and colonialism.

He spent a month researching the BIA boarding schools for a class assignment in an American Indian History course. Reading about the treatment of American Indian children made him feel strong emotions and empathize with his people’s experience. He was lucky he did not have to attend the BIA boarding school system. He commented, “I

was blessed. I did not have to go through that, but I walked to school through the rain, mud, and everything else."

He is still determining if he will return to work since he has another year and a half before retiring. And if he returns to work, he wants a job like his prior work experience building roads and bridges. He commented that what he learned in his classes would make him a better employee.

Bobby has a laptop and Internet at home. He had Choice Wireless before he ordered Elon Musk Starlink satellite Internet. They installed the satellite dish and removed it within a week and told him they would provide services in 2023. Since his grandson needed the Internet during the Covid-19 pandemic, he ordered Hughes.net Gen5 Internet Satellite that runs slower than Choice Wireless.

Analysis of the Findings

American Indian college students' stories guided the development of a well-being sense while pursuing an associate degree at a rural community college. Full integration of physical, social, mental, and spiritual well-being that is interwoven and creates a sense of balance.

Defining Well-Being

The participants described the meaning of well-being. Calvin said well-being is how life is going for you. Trenton said it is how a person is doing and who they are. Marie said it is how you live your life. Saline said it is how you are doing mentally and physically. April mentioned that well-being means being kind to yourself and how balanced you are with your mental, spiritual, and state of things. Darrell explained,

"Well-being makes me think of your mental health. It could also mean your physical. It means are you doing okay."

Rachael and Linda provided more context in their responses to the meaning of well-being. When reflecting on the importance of well-being, Rachael shared:

> Well-being means having peace for yourself and a rational mind to continue what you set yourself out to do, which is a big thing for me in school. If you have chaos at home or in your personal life, it will affect your school, studies, and grades. Well-being will bring peace of mind. It would be best if you found peace.

Linda said, "Well-being means being 100% yourself, being safe, being nourished, food, or even with love." Frank mentioned, "Well-being means a person who goes about life, being self-reliant and better prepared and not live the life of counting on others." Charlene made known that for her well-being means:

> Having well-being brings your body together because those keep me going daily. I pray every day and do mental health meditation to deal with my pain and my healing. I am social with my work and family. I am physical by taking care of myself and exercising when I can. If you have something off balance, you can feel that.

She also said, "The mental part was a hard struggle for me growing up. What brings it together is spirituality. All of them related to me." Betty asserted that well-being means "Diné be' iiná." (Navajo way of life). Bobby said well-being means being able to think right and treat people right. It could mean financial too. If a person does not have a lot, it affects everything else. No matter what people say about money, it is nice to have

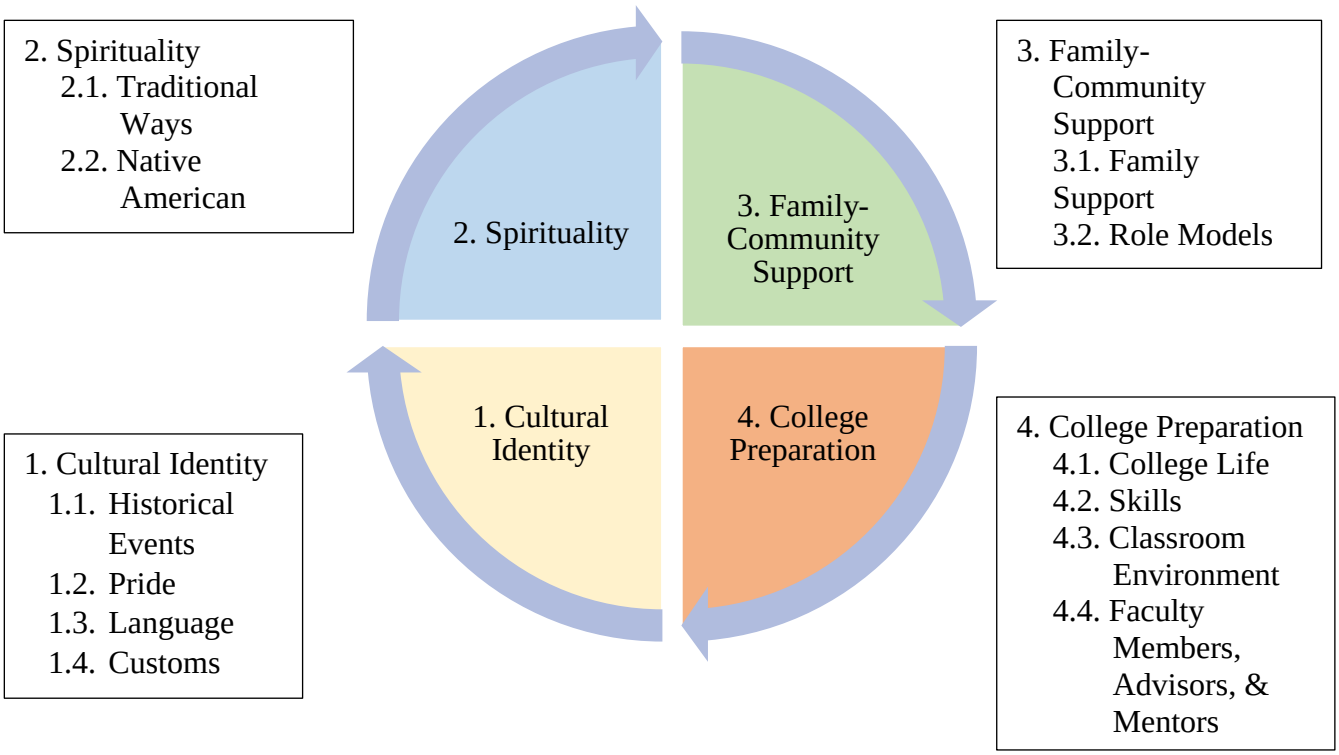
money to take your kids out to buy them ice cream. He added, “If I can encourage or help somebody, that is well-being for me.”

Emerging Themes and Subthemes of Well-Being

This section considers the themes and subthemes that emerged about how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being as they pursue an associate degree in a rural community college. I will discuss the emerging themes and subthemes of the well-being concepts, which include cultural identity, spirituality, family-community support, and college preparation as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Summary of Emergent Themes and Subthemes



Note. Summary of Emergent Themes and Subthemes. The four themes are cultural identity, spirituality, family-community support, and college preparation. Each of the themes has subthemes.

1. Cultural Identity

Our cultural identity is constantly evolving. As individuals grow, they may have a shifting understanding of their identity, which could include rediscovering their American Indian heritage (Martinez & Dukes, 1997). The conceptualization of cultural identity differs from how the US federal government classifies a person as an American Indian. According to the US federal government, a person must be registered with an Indian tribe to be an American Indian. Most of the over 300 federally recognized Indian tribes in the US require applicants to have some specified degree of Indian ancestry (Nagel, 1997). The procedure process to enroll a child as American Indian is as follows. After a child is born, the parents must register their child as a member of their tribal affiliation. The parents must present the birth certificate and register with Vital Statistics. The officials register the child as a tribal member and issue a census number and Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood. A census number allows a person to get medical treatment at the Indian Health Service (IHS). IHS provides medical treatment to enrolled members of recognized Indian Tribes. My participants are enrolled in their respective tribes. Cultural identity as an American Indian includes historical events, pride, language, customs, and cultural events.

1.1. Historical Event. Historical events contribute to the cultural identity of being an American Indian. The participants mentioned historical events of the past generation that shape our memories and emotions. Calvin reflects on how his elders before him

worked and survived. In 1864, the United States government forced the Navajos to leave their homeland. Calvin, Trenton, Linda, and Charlene commented they are proud of their ancestors who took part in the Long Walk and World War II. Trenton and Charlene mentioned Navajo Code Talkers were Marines who used Navajo to send coded messages during World War II. Bobby learned about his people's treatment in a cultural anthropology course and began to understand assimilation, integration, and colonialism. Linda and Bobby mentioned the BIA boarding school era. Linda learned that the children attending the BIA boarding schools could not speak their language. For a class assignment in American Indian History, Bobby researched the BIA boarding school system for American Indian children. He was sad to read about how the children endured hardship living apart from their families.

1.2. Pride. The participants are proud of their cultural identity which includes their traditions, achievements, and values handed down from generation to generation. Participants have a strong sense of self-worth and are proud to be American Indians. April, Calvin, Trenton, Rachael, Frank, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby have confirmed they are proud to be American Indians.

1.3. Language. Language plays a vital role in the cultural identity of American Indians. Guardia & Evans (2008) found native languages are vital to American Indians as it is part of their cultural identities and heritages. Betty, Rachael, and Bobby believed speaking Navajo is part of their cultural identity as American Indians. Knowing how to speak the Navajo language gives Trenton, Linda, Frank, Charlene, and Betty a sense of ownership and pride. Trenton speaks Navajo to his grandmother because she does not

speak English. Rachael and Bobby are learning to speak and write Navajo because it represents their cultural identity. Rachael values herself as a Diné (Navajo) and wants to learn the Navajo language. She remarks, “When I go to the ‘deep rez,’ I try my hardest to speak Navajo because my language is my identity.”

1.4. Customs. The participants have customs that have developed over a long time. April sees her surroundings daily, reminding her of her cultural identity. She said, “I have a lot of things inside my house which are like a daily reminder when I wake up, and I see that every morning and every night. It is like a reminder of who I am.” Linda shared that she used a Navajo cradleboard to carry and protect her daughter.

Charlene’s great-grandmother told her to present herself with her clans. When meeting someone for the first time in Navajo culture, it is customary to introduce oneself by following social roles or expected behaviors. I did not mention the participants had to state their clanship. Conversely, Darrell, Trenton, Frank, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby shared their clans when they introduced themselves. Werito and Belone (2021) highlighted the older participants commented on the importance of clanship in their study. These elders stated that many of the younger generations do not “use our K’é (clan relationships) to greet and help each other” because they are not taught about the meaning of k’é (p. 366).

Physical appearance provides a means for expressing cultural identity. Saline, Marie, and Rachael wear traditional outfits to various cultural events. Bobby wears long hair to remind people of his American Indian heritage and cultural identity. He expressed, “I wear my hair long. I want people to see and understand who I am.” He keeps his hair

long because it is sacred and represents his cultural identity. In addition, having long hair gives him a sense of belonging and self-esteem.

Wearing jewelry is an American Indian norm; participants wore jewelry for personal expression, protection, and to present their culture. To represent their cultural identity, Saline, April, Trenton, Marie, and Rachael wear turquoise and silver jewelry like necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Trenton wore a necklace and bracelets. His uncle said, "Nephew, wear this necklace; it will protect you wherever you go."

1.5. Cultural Events. Participants went to different cultural events to socialize and celebrate with family, friends, and the community. The Kinaalda was a popular cultural event among the participants. The Kinaalda is a Navajo girl's rite of passage into womanhood. One of the common goals of sharing responsibilities is setting up shelter, hauling wood and water, and bringing food items. Two participants, Saline and Trenton, reported how they helped with a Kinaalda. Saline claimed, "I helped cook and clean at my sister's Kinaalda." Twice during the Kinaalda, Trenton chopped and hauled wood and tended to the fire all night to bake the corn cake. April does not remember when she last went to a Kinaalda. Gourd Dances, Powwows, Harvest Dances, and Squaw Dances are social dances. Charlene has helped with grocery needs at a few of the Squaw Dances. Bobby takes part in the Gourd Dances and Harvest Dances. A powwow is a combined social and sacred getting together of American Indian people (Rybak & Decker-Fitts, 2009). Darrell goes to the Navajo Nation Fairs to watch the performers dance at the Powwow arena. He specified, "When I go to events like that, I see these little kids in their fancy outfits, traditional regalia, which makes me happy, but it also makes me sad. I wish

I had gotten into it. I feel lost." Shalako is a dance conducted by the Pueblo of Zuni at the winter solstice, which Bobby attends annually.

2. Spirituality

Most participants pray for strength and thankfulness. Csordas (2000) identified three types of Navajo spiritual healing: traditional ways, Native American Church (NAC), and Christian.

2.1. Traditional Ways. The traditional ways are still prevalent for some participants. Trenton and Frank burned cedar as a part of their prayer. Trenton says, "Every morning during winter, my siblings and I burn cedar on a stove, pray, and bless ourselves." Trenton's grandmother arranges for him to see a medicine man. The medicine man blessed Trenton to stay spiritually and mentally strong to continue his education. Marie attends healing ceremonies. Linda and Charlene tell us how they use sage. Linda commented on how we simplify our lives rather than embrace the traditional values of hard work. She explained, "When we were younger, our mom let us get sage when we were sick. Gathering, washing, and boiling the sage took a lot of work. We could get Vick's; it is convenient." During the Covid 19 pandemic, Charlene used sage to prevent it from entering her home and work. Bobby's uncles and grandfathers were medicine men. Betty prays to the Navajo Deities before dawn.

2.2. Native American Church (NAC). Frank is a member of the Native American Church. Every day before dawn, he burned cedar on the stove and prayed to the holy beings for a good day. He performs the duties of the fireman and helps the roadman in the Native American Church. He is spiritually strong for his children and wife and believes

in his faith. Frank expressed, “I identify myself as American Indian through the Native American Church.”

2.3. Christianity. April, Darrell, Calvin, Rachael, and Linda grew up believing in the teachings of the Bible. April, Darrell, Calvin, and Rachael attend church regularly. Linda is uncertain about her spiritual beliefs, questions her Christianity, and does not go to church but still prays. Bobby tells us his spiritual life is the most important thing and attends a Mennonite church. He added that being thankful, trying to understand, being patient, and remembering where he came from keeps him spiritually strong. Betty and Charlene both practice traditional ways and Christianity. Betty sings gospel songs in Navajo. She reminisced, “My grandmother used to like to sing in Navajo. That is where I picked it up. She taught me a lot of songs in Navajo. I cannot read Navajo, but I can sing gospel songs.”

3. Family-Community Support

This section discusses family support, role models, and community support. These are the participants living in Navajo Indian Reservation communities: Saline, Calvin, Trenton, Marie, Rachael, Linda, Frank, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby. April and Darrell live off the Navajo Indian Reservation. Saline, April, Darrell, Calvin, and Marie live with their parents. Trenton lives with his grandmother. Linda, Frank, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby are married. Rachael does not give information about her living environment.

3.1. Family Support. Saline and April have a solid parental support system at home. In contrast, the grandmother is a support system for Trenton. Trenton’s

grandmother made bracelets to protect him on his educational journey. In addition, his uncle gave him a necklace to protect him wherever he went. Family support also included encouragement from the adult children of Bobby and Betty. When Darrell needs a ride to and from the rural community college, his mother and brothers will provide him with transportation. However, Marie and Linda mentioned their parents being unsupportive. Marie deals with no support from her family. She claimed, “I do not have support. It is just me alone. I try to ask for help, but I do what I can and make it throughout the day.” It was important for Linda to start college, but it became difficult because she had no parental support. Years later, her parents supported her to continue her education.

3.2. Role Models. Participants talked about their role models who gave life advice that helped them pursue education. Saline, April, Calvin, Trenton, Charlene, and Betty were taught by their parents and grandparents about the significance of education. April remembers her grandfather being part of her life, and she exclaimed, “I have memories of my grandpa and how he used to talk, and that is internal for me.” She remembers their conversations about life and his teachings. Calvin’s role model is his father, who teaches him about the construction field. Darrell and Rachael's role models are their mothers. Charlene pointed out that in the ceremonies, the teachings were about who we were, where we came from, and where we were going, and not to forget it. According to her, waking up early and growing up with hardships like hauling water, chopping wood, and caring for your animals makes you a stronger person. It prepares you for what comes into adulthood.” Betty said, “In my generation since we were little, our grandparents and

parents told us how to behave, show respect, help, and work. Compared to today's generation, it is not the same. It is way different."

3.3. Community Support. Community members ask, "Trenton, when are you graduating?" Linda did not participate in the community, but the chapterhouse gave her three scholarships during college which she was grateful for. In addition, Charlene gets encouragement from her boss to continue her education. As for community support, Bobby commented that his ex-bosses and coworkers all support him in continuing his education.

American Indian families teach their young to get an education and help their community. Saline, April, Calvin, Trenton, Rachael, Linda, Frank, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby said they would give back to their community. Saline plans to work at a hospital on the Navajo Indian Reservation and help her people to receive health care. April wants to provide a set of hands to assist in the hospital or any other connections to help. Calvin would build wooden ramps for wheelchair users. Rachael complained about the stray dogs in her area and wondered what she could do to help shelter them. Frank proposed community engagement through speeches with educational messages, citing Chief Manuelito's quote about education as a ladder to success. Charlene explained college students who go back home to help their communities show that they care. Betty served as a councilwoman for four years at her community chapterhouse. She wants to return home to help her community in the health field when she finishes school. Bobby wants to speak at his chapterhouse as his father, a semi-politician, did. Darrell and Marie did not say if they would help their community.

4. College Preparation

College preparation includes college life, skills, classroom environment, faculty members, advisors, and mentors.

4.1. College Life. Saline, April, Darrell, and Trenton said they were well-prepared for college. April and Darrell were in dual enrollment programs that allowed them to take college classes while enrolled in high school. Although Saline and Trenton did not take part in the dual enrollment programs, they were ready to attend college. Trenton asserted that transitioning from high school to college classes was easy. Trenton and Linda are first-generation college students, meaning neither parent has more than a high school education. Saline, April, Darrell, Trenton, Linda, and Betty completed high school. Calvin, Rachael, and Frank did not give information about receiving their high school or General Education Diploma (GED). The only participant who attended a boarding school was Betty, who went to a church missionary boarding school on the Navajo Indian Reservation. Marie, Charlene, and Bobby received their GED. Charlene, Betty, and Bobby did not feel prepared for college when they started their courses. Charlene recalled, “Time management was a struggle because I was trying to balance work and school.” Marie, Rachael, Linda, and Frank were unprepared and had little clue about how to start college. Linda was not ready for college-level work due to family demands. She commented, “I had absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into. I struggled a lot with transportation, with tutoring. I did not know where to go or what questions to ask.” She faced difficulties with no childcare or transportation, falling behind in schoolwork,

and feeling academically inferior to other students. She did not know how to study, connect to the campus, or contact her instructors.

It costs money to attend college. Some participants must work and make ends meet. April, Rachael, and Betty have full-time jobs and attend classes full-time. Calvin and Marie both worked part-time, and Charlene worked full-time. However, Marie and Charlene attended classes part-time, whereas Calvin attended classes full-time. Darrell does not own a vehicle and depends on his family members to drop and pick him up at the rural community college. Frank's wife donates her blood plasma for gas so he can attend classes. He talked about the difficulty of finding employment, even at McDonald's.

4.2. Skills. The participants described their skills in their college classes. Betty and Bobby are familiar with using technology. Betty taught herself how to use her laptop through trial and error. Bobby explained, "Skill-wise, I knew how to use a calculator, laptop, computer, and cell phone. Knowledge-wise, I was barely proficient." Bobby not only did his schoolwork on the computer, but he also learned how to install the electrical wiring for his house by watching YouTube videos. Darrell has public speaking skills. He said, "I am proud I can do public speaking." He emphasized that his education enabled him to do well in public speaking.

Saline, Rachael, and Frank enjoy reading, and Marie likes math. Trenton and Linda both take notes in class. April, Marie, and Charlene wish to improve their writing skills. Charlene said, "I like to write. However, I am not a strong writer. I am learning a lot and seeing the changes from when I started school. It is exciting that I know I am

accomplishing something." Betty likes to study with somebody because it allows them to share information or bounce off one another, which helps to come up with a solution. She also uses the Navajo language to help her understand a concept. She explained, "When I am reading and do not understand a sentence in English, I have to translate it into my Navajo language to understand."

4.3. Classroom Environment. Saline, April, Trenton, and Frank felt more comfortable to be in a small classroom. Bobby feels a classroom environment should be like a classroom, not a coffee bar with music in the background. He mentioned an instructor did not have the technical knowledge to integrate the laptop into the Smartboard. Since the instructor did not know how to connect the computer to the video and USB cables, he had to switch classrooms so that someone could hook it up correctly.

Marie liked the online courses because she has anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and prefers to study alone. Rachael preferred the hybrid classes, and Betty looked for places to access the Internet. Darrell and Betty expressed the importance of using a syllabus. Darrell would like a copy of the syllabus before class starts so that he can purchase his textbook. He said students get the syllabus on the day of class and need time to get their textbook to turn in their first assignments. Betty uses a syllabus to guide her in completing her assignments. Linda says, "It is always awkward when you are in group sessions, you are alone, and no one wants to be in your group. Finding a lab partner has always been problematic. I am a lot older, and the kids are a lot younger. It has not been easy, even with their behavior."

The participants explained how they accessed the computer and the Internet to complete their assignments and take tests. Saline, April, Darrell, Trenton, Marie, Frank, Charlene, and Bobby have a computer and Internet access at home. Trenton and Betty have laptops but do not have access to the Internet. Calvin, Rachael, and Linda do not have a computer or Internet access at home. Linda lives in an area where she cannot get cell phone services. Saline, Darrell, Calvin, Trenton, Rachael, Linda, Frank, and Betty use the computers and the Internet at the rural community college to complete their assignments and tests. April, Marie, Charlene, and Bobby do not use the computers at the rural community college library.

Sometimes students must decide to take part in a cultural event or take a required exam. Trenton would take part in cultural events like the Kinnalda because he believes it is a one-time life-changing event. On the other hand, Saline, April, Marie, and Linda felt that taking the required exam was more important than participating in a cultural event. However, Calvin, Rachael, Frank, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby considered cultural events to be important. They would coordinate with their instructors to take the exam before or after the scheduled test date.

Saline, April, Darrell, Calvin, Linda, and Bobby agree that American Indian culture and mainstream academia are still influencing each other. Technology has become a part of the culture for American Indian students in mainstream academia, as noted by Darrell. Bobby gave an example of the sameness of the culture of American Indians and the culture of mainstream academia. In his Navajo class, he uses an iPad and

iPhone to learn how to spell and write in Navajo. He states, “You cannot have one without the other. There is no separation anymore, and they go together.”

4.4. Faculty Members, Advisors & Mentors. Participants agreed that faculty members helped them to stay on task in their program of study. Many participants reflected on their appreciation of the faculty members who are eager to help them. Saline mentioned an instructor who helped her to understand when she needed help. April gets many emails from her instructors asking her if she needs help. Sometimes, she goes to an instructor after class to get more explanation on a concept she did not understand. Calvin feels he gets a lot of support from his instructors. Trenton added the professors are helpful at the rural community college; each is unique and supportive. Marie’s online instructors remind her to submit her assignments. Marie commented, “They encourage me to do my assignments before the due dates.” However, Linda feels the instructors are unhelpful and give little opportunity for her to ask them questions. Instead, they prefer to teach from the syllabus and have that “see you later” attitude. Because of those feelings, she said, “I never connected with the instructors.”

Frank stated the instructors provide a lot of support. He said, “Two instructors sent me emails asking if I need help and if I am comfortable taking after-class support groups or tutoring.” Charlene’s instructors emailed her to check on her and recommend Zoom meetings. Betty appreciated it when the online instructor met her face-to-face to help her with a formula to show the representation of the data. Bobby reflected on two past instructors and expressed how much he enjoyed being in their class. He said, “The instructors have been beneficial to me.” For example, one instructor who taught Algebra

allowed him to take a missed exam. He was thankful for that opportunity to enhance his academic performance. He worked with the other instructor, who provided more information about a concept so that he could understand it better. This instructor, who offered unconditional support, became his friend.

Darrell received emails from his advisor, reminding him to contact the Center for Academic Learning (CAL) if he needed tutoring**.** He stated, "My advisor offered me an application to join the TRIO." Trio Upward Bound is a college preparatory program. Trenton sees an advisor who supports him. But, equally important, he contributes to her willingness to keep him pushing toward his goal of graduating. Linda sees an advisor who gives her information regarding scholarships. Rachael replied, "Mentors are important because I am here right now because of some of them." Bobby agrees that mentors are important.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, I followed an audit trail. In an audit trail, a researcher can go back through the transcriptions and records of the study and determine the pathway of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My audit trail includes the raw data as the written field notes and the audio recordings. I relied on the comments from the interviews to provide a thick description of the participants' experiences. To make sure there were no errors, I listened to the audio recordings while reading the interview transcripts. I can access the audio recordings, transcripts, and documents to examine the ongoing progress and changes. The themes and subthemes became the foundation of the data.

Summary

The discussion included a demographic overview, the interview responses, and the findings of the well-being concepts were discussed. Last, a discussion on the trustworthiness of the study and a summary.

Chapter 5

Discussion

American Indian college students face challenges in earning their degrees, but they persist in their studies (Jackson et al., 2003). Knowing how much American Indian students want an education gives us a sense of understanding and respect. This study explored how American Indian students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college, using a qualitative, naturalistic inquiry research design, and following the guiding principles for researching American Indian populations.

The participants may not have fully registered the word well-being or given it a name in their minds. They agreed they are developing well-being after realizing its meaning as a word and action. The participants focused on their well-being during the interview by feeling more connected to something other than themselves. American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being if they are grounded in their cultural identity, have a strong sense of spirituality, and have family and community support to take them through college. In addition, college preparation before enrollment helps them succeed as students.

Challenges were part of the participants' lives through their associate degree program of study. The in-depth stories provided insight into how the well-being concepts helped the participants overcome their challenges to continue their associate degrees. Yosso (2005) defined aspirational capital as holding onto hope in the face of structured inequity and lacking the means to make such dreams a reality. The difficulties that Frank encountered while earning his associate degrees exemplify aspirational capital. Frank's

focus was providing food for his family and getting money for donating his blood plasma to save lives. Since the blood bank temporarily deferred him, his wife donated her blood plasma to earn money for gas to take him to the rural community college. With his wife's help, Frank is more determined to get his associate degree to find employment and support his family.

Despite the challenges, the experiences give the participants strength to persevere. Saline was influenced perseverance by her parents and grandparents, who believed in her. April has always focused on her education, which empowers her to persevere because it is essential to her future. Darrell is aware that perseverance is a trait, and his niece motivates him to work towards a goal by staying focused on his education. Calvin mentioned that his perseverance is because of his belief in himself. It was Trenton's perseverance to go to college. Marie's parenting in college requires perseverance in giving her children a better life. Rachael stated she wants to become self-sufficient and pay her bills. Linda has persevered by trying and working toward her educational goal since 2010. Frank persevered with tragedy and said, "There is nobody to look up to for help. It is just me and my wife. We are trying to get a better life." Charlene reflects on being perseverance and wants to be a teacher. Betty's perseverance is to take greater responsibility for her learning. Bobby attributes his perseverance to family members' advice, spiritual growth, and mentors.

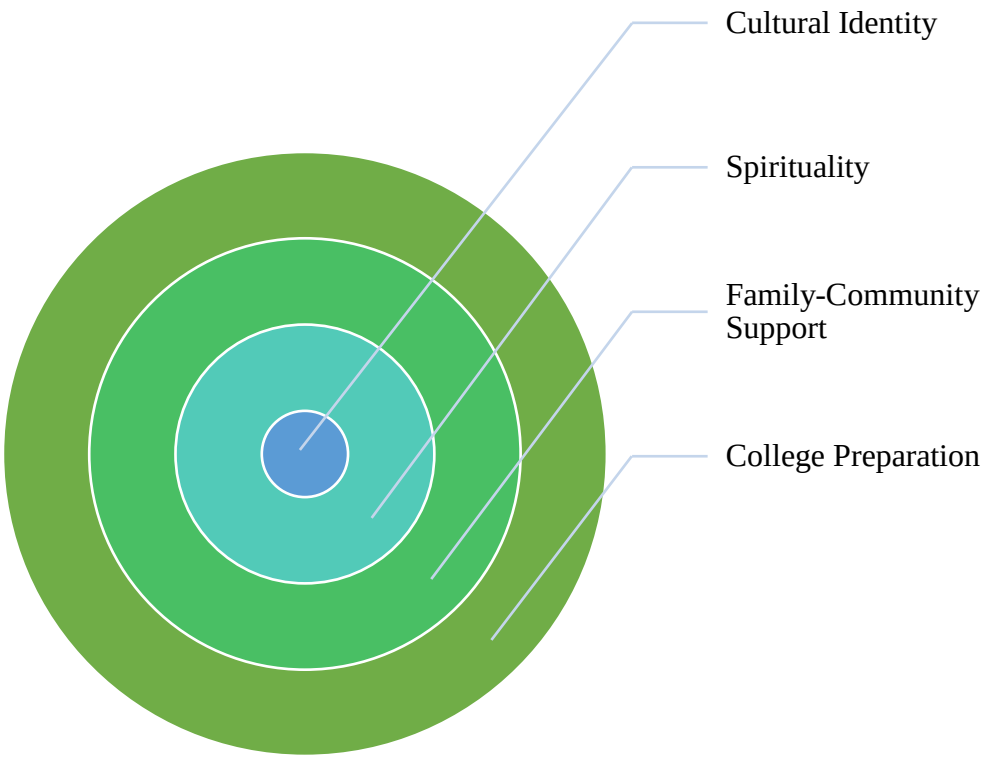
Reconceptualized Well-Being Concepts

My research question is how American Indian college students develop a sense of well-being while pursuing an associate degree in a rural community college. I studied the

concept of well-being from an American Indian perspective using Secatero's (2009) Four Well-Being Concepts: physical, social, mental, and spiritual aspects. I interviewed American Indian students pursuing an associate degree and used their themes and subthemes to understand Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts. This study helped me to develop the Reconceptualized Well-Being Concepts which are found in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Reconceptualized Well-Being Concepts



Note. Reconceptualized Well-Being Concepts. The four themes include Cultural Identity, Spirituality, Family-Community Support, and College Preparation.

The Reconceptualized Well-Being Concept has four concentric circles, like the rings on the inside of a tree's trunk, that stand for cultural identity, spirituality, family-

community support, and college preparation. The well-being concepts radiate from the inner core ring to the outer rings progressing like the growth of a tree ring. Each concept comprises several subthemes that form a unit in developing a sense of well-being.

The first ring represents cultural identity at an individual's core. Cultural identity is an innate quality embedded within the self. The ring is a circle and significant; it means the self or growth is circular (Garrett, 1994). The subthemes are historical events, pride, language, and customs.

The next ring represents spirituality, the belief systems an individual has adopted. Spirituality comes from the participants' strength to overcome challenges. Spirituality helps provide a sense of purpose in life. The subthemes are traditional ways, the Native American Church (NAC), and Christianity.

The third ring represents family-community support, an essential ingredient of an individual's survival. Family-community support is the connection that provides love, respect, and hope and gives us the strength to believe in ourselves. The three subthemes are family support, role models, and community support.

The last ring represents college preparation, which encompasses the experiences, skills, and mentorship that have aided someone in enrolling for a college degree. College preparation includes all aspects of academic preparation and the learning environment. The subthemes are college life, skills, classroom environment, faculty members, advisors, and mentors.

Interpretation of the Findings

Cultural Identity Well-Being Concept

The study found that the cultural identity well-being concept is mostly the same as Secatero's Strong Cultural Identity concept, except for one finding. In my research, my participants expounded on a powerful reaction; they were assertive in expressing their values more so than the participants in Secatero's study. My participants' self-disclosure of their unique thoughts, goals, and values shows their strong identity, making this finding significant. Calvin works with his hands doing physical work or manual labor. As young as he is, he holds high esteem, having completed a construction job. He stated no matter how small the construction project is, he learns from doing the work. Darrell commented, "I really do not consider myself indigenous, but use my brown skin to represent who I am." Rachael is engaged in academic competition with her mother. She speaks realistically about her mother and boldly states she will outdo her one day in academics. Bobby outrightly boosts his pride in himself and his accomplishments. He stated, "I am bragging I was a civil engineer without a degree. I managed $15-20 million in roads and bridge projects."

Secatero (2009) discussed the Strong Cultural Identity concept and found that his participants relied on their tribal culture to finish their education. My participants share their tribal culture through historical events, pride, language, customs, and cultural events. Historical events are the foundation of cultural identity that gives American Indian students a sense of belonging. Calvin, Trenton, Linda, and Charlene take pride in their ancestor's experiences during the Long Walk and the involvement of their men in

their tribe who took part in World War II, which has influenced their identity. The BIA boarding school era had a massive impact on the parents and grandparents of the participants. Bobby shared his thoughts on the difficulties that children in the BIA boarding school system faced by living away from their families. BIA boarding schools had long-term consequences, including "broken families" and current disruptions in family life (Reinschmidt et al., 2016).

Cultural teaching of the past can be passed down by word of mouth instead of being written down. When Secatero (2009) laid the foundation of his dissertation; he explained a bit of advice given by a Navajo elder from Tohajiilee. The elderly man stated, "Remember who you are, where you are from, and where you are going in life." The advice given by the elderly gentleman is crucial to well-being. The younger generation still repeats these meaningful sentiments. Charlene expressed Secatero's conception and commented, "Knowing where you come from will always be there for you. If you do not know who you are, then you will not have a place in the world to help what is there."

We learn about our identity through cultural teaching. The Alutiiq people from Alaska want to learn their history, define themselves, and reclaim pride in their heritage. Pullar (1992) wrote about the Alutiiq people (Alaska Natives) who are looking back to their cultures for answers. The author concluded, "A loss of heritage and ethnic identity has made it difficult to feel pride in who they are as Native people" (p. 182). Bobby pointed out how he felt about his identity and recalled a lack of self, a sense of not belonging or knowing who he was. He exclaimed, "I did not know who I was when I

grew up. I used to hear the terms loss of identity or no identity. I did not understand that until I got older that I was one of those."

Pride is essential for cultural identity. April, Calvin, Trenton, Rachael, Frank, and Betty commented, "I am proud of being an American Indian." Charlene specified, "I am proud to be a Navajo. I take pride in our ancestors, knowing their strength during the Long Walk. After our veterans (Navajo Code Talkers) took part in World War II, society acknowledged us as American Indians." Bobby was also proud of his heritage and said, "I am part of the Zuni clan, and I am proud of that."

Language is the foundation of cultural identity. The American Indian language is vital to the communities and ways of life. Some of my participants are native speakers and familiar with their traditional ways of life than others. Alvord commented, "Navajos were told by white educators that, in order to be successful, they would have to forget their language and culture and adopt American ways" (Alvord & Van Pelt, 1999, p. 86). Preserving and revitalizing native languages is crucial because they are essential to a tribe's cultural identities, traditions, spiritual beliefs, and self-governance (US Department of Education, 2021).

Linguistic capital means using multiple languages and communication skills to improve learning for Students of Color (Yosso, 2005). Rachael and Bobby are learning about their language and culture; they both agree that their language represents their cultural identity. Trenton, Linda, Frank, Charlene, and Betty speak fluent Navajo and English and are proud to be bilingual. An asset that empowers both the individual and the community is speaking two languages. Linda, a caregiver, has the medical power of

attorney for her parents. She has bilingual skills and translates medical information into Navajo for her parents and into English for the medical staff. Betty can translate a sentence written in English into the Navajo language, where she can grasp the concept's meaning. Her knowledge of her native language is part of her schema in reading comprehension to help her understand what she is reading.

Customs are traditional ways of behaving related to cultural identity, such as introducing yourself by naming your four clans. Social roles such as shaking hands and stating one's four clans are cultural etiquette. Darrell, Trenton, Frank, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby willingly shared their clans. At the end of the interview, Frank thanked me by stating, "Ahéhee' shimá yázhí" (Thank You, Auntie) to show his respect. All participants discussed taking part in traditional ceremonies like Kinaalda to express their cultural identity.

Spirituality Well-Being Concept

The Spirituality well-being concept most follows the findings reported by Secatero's (2009) concept of Spirituality. In my research, most of the participants are spiritually oriented or seeking connection or believe that there is something greater than themselves, just like the participants in Secatero's (2009) study, except for one finding. Linda grew up in a Christian household and struggled with her spirituality. She questioned her faith and moved away from Christianity.

Reinschmidt et al. (2016) claimed that practicing spirituality, regardless of religious preference, such as attending church or ceremonies, praying, and asking for help, is linked to personal strength. American Indian healing practices demonstrate

critical cultural perspectives and impact the identity development of American Indian people. Such healing practices are based upon traditions and perspectives outside the mainstream of Western psychological principles yet can have a significant impact on the sense of well-being of American Indians (Rybak & Decker-Fitts, 2009). The participants shared how their beliefs in spirituality helped them to continue their associate degree. Trenton's grandmother arranges for him to see a medicine man. Betty prays before dawn to the Deities (Navajo Gods and Goddesses). Frank is a member of the Native American Church (NAC) and said, "Everything from our tongue is sacred, and we respect that and ourselves as we are five-fingered human beings [American Indians]. In Christianity, the religion is based on the belief in God and the sacred scriptures in the Bible.

Family-Community Support Well-Being Concept

The family-community support well-being concept and Secatero's Family Support concept show similar findings except for one finding. As explained by Secatero (2009), all participants in his study showed that family was essential to their success and graduate careers. However, two of my participants had opposite family support experiences. Linda had no parental support at the beginning of her college life. After many years of struggling to get her associate degree, her family finally supported her. Marie claimed she did not get help, and it was her alone.

The family remained a significant part of the support system (Yurkovich, 2001). Family members provide encouragement and emotional support, enabling the participants to continue their education. Guillory (2009) found that family and tribal connections are important for American Indian students to stay in college. American Indian college

students are likelier to have strong ties to their family and extended family (Keith et al., 2016). As reported by Secatero (2009), role models such as the elders symbolize strength for the younger generation to see that they, too, can go to college. The elders have decades of experience and wisdom, and people respect their advice because of their life experiences. The parents are the role models for Calvin and Rachael. Charlene's role model includes her husband and her father, aunts, and cousins who have degrees on her father's side of the family. Darrell, Trenton, and Charlene are role models for younger family members.

Community support is so vital. Verbal community support comes in varied ways; phrases such as "I am proud of you" and "keep it up" and the one question asked of Trenton, "When are you graduating?" are strong, caring words that inspire students. Community support includes monetary funds, such as scholarships and fundraising at the chapterhouse.

The following examples of giving back to the community reflect Yosso's (2005) Cultural Wealth Model, an examination of cultural capital. Familial capital is a form of cultural wealth that engages a commitment to community well-being and expands the concept of family to include an understanding of kinship (Yosso, 2005). Saline, Linda, and Betty are taking health-related courses and making pledges to help their community in the future. Charlene wants to further her education after she gets her associate degree to become a teacher, perhaps a bilingual teacher. Calvin and Trenton are majoring in construction, and both agreed they would give back to their community. Frank wants to

give motivational speeches about the importance of education to the younger generation at his chapterhouse.

College Preparation Well-Being Concept

Our studies found differences in the levels of degrees, length of the program of study, program focus, and career opportunities for college preparation well-being concept and Secatero's Supportive Faculty Member and Mentors concept. Secatero's participants have advanced degrees, and my participants are beginning their college life in a 2-year associate degree program and taking general education classes.

Another difference between the college preparation well-being concept and those described by Secatero's concept of Supportive Faculty Members and Mentors is that some participants in my research have "stepped out" of college for some time before they returned to college to continue their associate degrees. The participants in Secatero's study do not discuss leaving college anytime. A few of my participants have "stepped out" and returned to college to get their associate degrees. This is important to note because my participants have contacted the advisors or mentors to start college again.

Sometimes college life involves "stepping out" rather than "dropping out" for those students who choose to leave for various reasons. According to Brayboy (2015), students may step out to address personal issues and family matters, but given the proper support, they return to complete their degrees and pursue advanced studies. Linda, Charlene, Betty, and Bobby had to "step out" to take care of their priorities. These included taking care of the family, providing childcare or elderly care, moving, and

working to support their family. They returned to college to earn an associate degree and set themselves up for a better way of life.

Linda is 33 years old, a part-time student, and is unemployed. She is a first-generation college student. Linda left college to take care of her daughter, and years later, returned to college. Because of the institutional changes in her program of study, she had to take additional credits to continue with her associate degree. Charlene is 45 years old, takes care of her family, is physically ill, attends school part-time, and works full-time. She wants to be a teacher to inspire the younger generation and contribute to her community. Betty, a correctional officer, qualified for early retirement at age 56. The best time of one's life can be retirement, but her fulfillment is finishing the education she started years ago. Bobby is a veteran and is 61 years old and can retire, but he has a "drive" (enthusiasm to achieve something) to get his associate degree. He worked as a land surveyor and civil engineer with the BIA road system for thirty-one years and earned a good salary despite not having a college degree. He remarked, "They got rid of us old dogs and brought in some of the young ones." After attending college sporadically for the past 20 years, he returned to college to get his associate degree in environmental design. He has work experience and will soon have an associate degree; he wants a job building bridges and roads to support community development on the Navajo Reservation.

Secatero (2009) stated that to be ready for graduate school, strong literacy skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening are necessary. The participants in my research are getting started on their literacy development and have various skills they use in their college classes. They worked on their communication, writing, math, and technical skills,

essential in college. Communication skills include note-taking, which is what Trenton and Linda do to help them understand. Writing skills are part of communication, allowing April, Trenton, and Charlene to communicate a message in a text format. Marie liked math and understood numerical values and making calculations of amounts. Betty and Bobby have technical skills, which means they can edit and format documents on Microsoft and access the Internet.

Secatero's study found that participants with advanced degrees have more experience with social network connections in school. Most participants in my research are younger and are still learning how to navigate their way around their associate degree program of study. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most classes were offered online. A social element included interactions in a small classroom worked best for Saline, April, Trenton, and Frank. Marie said, "I have nothing, but online classes this fall, and I like it." Rachael stated, "I prefer hybrid classes because I get to manage my own time, even with the instructor present." However, Bobby raised an instructional aspect of the classroom and emphasized that instructors must know how to integrate technical devices onto Smartboard. An emotional tug of apprehension comes from Linda regarding finding a partner for an in-class assignment.

Yosso (2005) recommended that students use their navigational capital to navigate unsupportive learning environments. The participants are taking online courses and want to pass their courses. They explained how they access the computer and the Internet to complete their assignments and take tests. Saline, April, Darrell, Trenton, Marie, Frank, Charlene, and Bobby have computer and Internet access at home. Trenton

and Betty have laptops but do not have access to the Internet. Betty goes to town and sits in coffee shops that offer free Internet services. Linda lives in an area where she cannot get cell phone services. Despite having a laptop and or Internet at home, Saline, Darrell, Trenton, Frank, and Betty drive to the rural community college library to use the computers and the Internet. Calvin, Rachael, and Linda drive to the rural community college library to use the computers and the Internet because they do not have them at home.

Both my study participants and Secatero's participants interacted with instructors and peers, registered for classes, and asked assignment-related questions. According to Secatero (2009), American Indian faculty members can be the best allies for American Indian graduate students. Bobby mentioned he took a Navajo language course with an American Indian instructor. My participants were mostly content with the instructors except for Linda. She stated the instructors are unhelpful and give little opportunity for her to ask them questions. Instead, they prefer to teach from the syllabus and have that "see you later" attitude. Because of those feelings, she said, "I never really connected with the instructors."

The other participants discuss their experiences with their instructors. Saline mentioned that one of her instructors would help her to understand when she needed help. April gets many emails from her instructors asking her if she needs help. Calvin and Trenton feel they get a lot of support from their instructors. Frank was contacted by two instructors who offered support options like tutoring or after-class support groups. Bobby spoke of two instructors who made a positive and lasting impression on him. He stated,

"The instructors have been really beneficial to me." One instructor who taught Algebra allowed him to take a missed exam. He was thankful for that opportunity to enhance his academic performance. He worked with the other instructor, who provided more information so that he understood them better. This instructor, who offered unconditional support, became his friend.

Secatero's report found that the universities did not meet participants' expectations in terms of student services, mentorship programs, and professional development. Secatero's study involves participants with advanced degrees, including master's and doctoral degrees, as well as professionals like lawyers, accountants, and engineers. Professional development can consist of training that helps employees to learn new skills to maintain their licenses. The professional development component does not apply to my participants since they are in the associate degree program of study.

My participants were more satisfied with the student services and mentorship compared to those in Secatero's study. Linda, Charlene, Betty, and Boby had to "step out" of school for a period. They had to contact their advisors or mentors to start classes again to continue with their associate degrees. Darrell, Trenton, and Linda see their academic advisors, who help them select classes needed in their program of study. Darrell received emails from his advisor, reminding him to contact the Center for Academic Learning (CAL) if he needed tutoring. Trenton sees an advisor who helps him to realize his potential. Linda sees an advisor who helped give her information regarding scholarships. Mentors can serve as guides to allow participants to apply for college and get financial aid. Rachael believes she is where she is in school because of her mentor.

She expressed, “I come across some good ones, thank God, knock on wood, good people put me on a good path.”

Implications

Institutions can use this study to improve their services for American Indian students who are motivated and interested in learning about their cultural identity. The institution should offer more American Indian courses in the general education requirements. By taking a course on American Indian well-being, students can learn about their cultural beliefs and use the Corn Model to continue their education.

Educators should be trained in digital learning to better serve students (Hedayati-Mehidiabadi & Gunawardena, 2023). The instructors can plan with students when they can take their tests or alter assignments so that they can take part in their cultural events. Additional suggestions on how institutions can improve their services are: (1) Build comfortable interactions with parents, family members, and community members to support students. (4) Recruit American Indian students who have “stepped out” and support them in returning to school. (5) Keep the rural community college library open longer for American Indian students to have better access to computers and the Internet. (6) Create a program that lends laptops to American Indian students.

Future Research

The study was limited to a rural community college, so it might not be applicable to other contexts or American Indian students. Therefore, future researchers should conduct more interviews with diverse American Indian college students in various contexts, rural, urban, within reservations, etc., to develop a more comprehensive

understanding of how they develop a sense of well-being as they pursue their studies. Researchers should conduct more in-depth interviews in diverse contexts to explore the four well-being concepts from this study. Secatero (2009) conducted a study in an urban, larger, more prominent Research 1 university and found that students were less satisfied with their needs or expectations in terms of student services, mentorship programs, and professional development. But, in my research at a rural community college, students were more satisfied with the student services and mentorship program. Researchers can gain insight into the challenges that American Indian students face in diverse higher education contexts.

Thoughts on Research

American Indian college students learned about themselves in this study. Educators and researchers learn from a person's life experiences that they will never personally experience. American Indian college students understand what well-being means. They are actively performing well-being in their lives because of their experiences and perceptions of what is essential. Pursuing an associate degree with the guidance of well-being can help American Indian college students support their tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

Summary

Secatero's Four Well-Being Concepts (2009), served as the conceptual framework for this study. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews conducted in this study and how the well-being concepts were reconceptualized to explain how American Indian students develop a sense of well-being as they pursue an

associate degree in a rural community college. I recommended ways for higher education administrators and faculty members to support American Indian students in achieving well-being and obtaining their associate degrees. To better understand well-being concepts, future research should include in-depth interviews with diverse American Indian students in different contexts.

Appendix A

DATE : May 5, 2022

TO : Dr. James Malm, Chancellor of UNM-Gallup Campus
: Dr. Daniel Primozic, Dean of Instruction, UNM- Gallup Campus

FROM : Elvira Martin, Associate Professor

SUBJECT : Permission to conduct research at the UNM-Gallup Campus

As a doctoral candidate in the Organization, Information, and Learning Sciences program at the University of New Mexico, I Elvira Martin am conducting a study to explore how American Indian students develop a sense of well-being as they persevere to obtain an associate degree in a rural community college. This research question focuses on a holistic and strengths-based view examining the inherent talents, knowledge, skills, and experiences that American Indian college students bring with them to an educational environment. Gaining this understanding might serve as the foundation for supporting American Indian college students in their educational pursuits.

The study will use a qualitative research design (Merriam & Tidwell, 2016) applying the Corn Model (Secatero, 2009), an indigenous research framework. The researcher will explore the knowledge, values, and beliefs of American Indian students. The basic qualitative research design will employ naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to collect, code, and organize the data into themes.

I am requesting permission to conduct research at the UNM-Gallup Campus. I plan to interview up to 20 American Indian college students (females and males) who are members of an American Indian tribe, enrolled in an associate degree program of study, and are eighteen years of age or older attending the University of New Mexico Gallup Campus. The interview questions will seek answers to their sense of well-being, their experiences as American Indian students, and the kind of support they need to succeed in college. The face-to-face interview will be held in the Zollinger Library or on Zoom. It should take about one hour to 1.5 hours to complete the interview. There are no names or identifying information associated with their responses as I will be assigning them a pseudonym. The recruitment procedure will begin with the receipt of approval from the University of New Mexico's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this study.

Due to time, I am requesting your assistance to ask the Registrar to send a mass email regarding the study to potential participants interested in the study to contact me at ejmartin@unm.edu. The screening procedure will begin once the researcher is contacted by the participants. The researcher will send an email to the participants providing (1) information about the study including the purpose of the study and the participant's role in it, (2) UNM Informed Consent Form detailing the purpose, procedures of the study, and the commitment required of each participant. Participants will be asked to email the researcher if they have any questions regarding the UNM Informed Consent Form. Each participant will be asked to provide possible dates and times for the face-to-face interview or the Zoom interview. After the participants agree to participate in this study, a face-to-face or Zoom interview will be scheduled. A signed UNM Informed Consent Form will be collected from each participant (via Face-to-Face or Zoom) before the interview. As a token of appreciation for the participant's time and effort, upon completion of the interview, the researcher will give the participant a hand-sewn corn pollen pouch that aligns with the conceptual framework of the study.

I appreciate your support.

Appendix B

An exploratory study of how American Indian students develop a sense of Well-Being as they pursue an associate degree in a rural community college
Informed Consent for Interview
[05-05-22]

As a doctoral candidate in the Organization, Information, and Learning Sciences program at the University of New Mexico, I, Elvira Martin am conducting a study under the supervision of Charlotte Gunawardena (Principal Investigator) to explore how American Indian students develop a sense of well-being as they persevere to obtain an associate degree in a rural community college. You are being asked to participate in this study as an American Indian student enrolled at the UNM Gallup Campus.

Your participation will involve responding to interview questions that pertain to your experiences as a college student and should take about one hour to 1.5 hours to complete. The interview questions will seek answers to your sense of well-being, your experiences as an American Indian student, and the kind of support you need to succeed in college. Your involvement in the research is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate. You can refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There are no names or identifying information associated with your responses as I will be assigning you a pseudonym. There are no known risks in this research, but some individuals may experience discomfort or loss of privacy when recalling educational experiences. The interview will be conducted face-to-face at the UNM Gallup Campus Zollinger Library. If you prefer not to do the interview face to face, I will arrange for a Zoom interview. With your permission, your interview will be recorded using an audiotape recorder or cell phone. Put an "x" on the type of interview you want to participate in.

- ☐ Face-to-Face Interview
- ☐ Zoom Interview

Information collected from you for this study will NOT be used or shared for future research, even if we remove identifiable information like your name. The findings from this study will provide information on how to design more conducive learning environments for American Indian students. If published, results will be presented in summary form with quotations from your interview, but not your name to identify you.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please feel free to call Prof. Charlotte Gunawardena at 505-277-5046. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or about what you should do in case of any harm to you, or if you want to obtain information or offer input, please contact the UNM Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (505) 277-2644 or irb.unm.edu.

By signing this form below, you will be agreeing to participate in the above-described research, either face-to-face or electronically.

_____	_____
Name of Adult Participant Date	Signature of Adult Participant
_____	_____
Name of Research Team Member	Signature of Research Team Member Date

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

Section 1: Context 1

1. *Appreciation and Introduction*

Thank you for giving me your time and energy to help me with my research study. Before we start the interview, I want to give you some information about myself. I want to give information about the study and the questions I will be asking you. I also need to let you know about confidentiality.

I will introduce myself in Navajo. I have 24 years of teaching experience. I have taught elementary, middle, high school, and college students in the Gallup area. I am committed to helping American Indian college students to finish their associate degrees. I am studying toward a Ph.D. degree.

2. *Overview of Purpose and Goals of the Interview*

My research study is about how American Indian colleges develop a sense of well-being as they pursue an associate degree in a rural community college. There are two main sections in this interview. The first section is about your background to help me to get to know you. The second section includes questions on the well-being factors. There are no right or wrong answers. I ask that you provide answers in your own words. You do not need to answer any questions if you feel uncomfortable.

3. *Confidentiality*

As a researcher, I will write about what you tell me. I will not use your name anywhere in my study. I will use a pseudonym for you. If you do not understand a question, you can ask me to clarify that question.

4. *Recording*

I will be using an audiotape recorder or cell phone to record our conversation. You will see me writing a few notes during the interview. I will do the transcription of our conversation. I will listen to the recorder and type what was said. I will be the only person listening to the recording. I can provide you with a copy of the transcription.

5. *Questions*

Do you have any questions for me before we begin? If you have any questions at any time during the interview, please feel free to let me know.

Section 2: Interview Questions

A. Background and Preparation

First, I would like to ask you a few questions about your background.

Demographics information (Closed-Ended)

1. What is your American Indian tribal affiliation?
2. Are you going to school full-time or part-time?
3. Are you currently employed?
4. How old are you?
5. What is your gender affiliation?
6. Why did you decide to pursue an associate degree?

B. General Questions on Well-Being.

7. When you hear the word "well-being" what does that mean to you?
   Probing Question: How does it relate to you?
8. You have taken a big step in enrolling in an associate degree program. How did you become the persevering student you are today?

C. Questions on Well-Being Factors (Open-Ended)

<u>Family Support (Physical Well-Being)</u>

9. How does your immediate family and/or community support you going to college?
10. How do you meet your needs in taking care of yourself—eating, sleeping, exercising?
11. How do you value yourself as an indigenous person?

<u>College Preparation (Social Well-Being)</u>

12. Were you well-prepared for college when you started taking classes?

Probing Question: What skills helped you and what skills would you like to have had when you started in college?

13. How do you meet technology requirements for your courses regarding access to a computer and Internet connection?
14. What is it like for you when you must decide between taking a required exam and participating in a cultural event?
15. How will your community benefit from your college education?

Supportive Faculty and Mentor (Mental Well-Being)

16. How have faculty and mentors helped you stay on task in your program of study?
17. Describe the strengths and skills you have in continuing with your education. (e.g., Learning how to learn skills, reading, and writing.)
18. What would make the classroom or online environment more comfortable for you?

Strong Cultural Identity (Spiritual Well-Being)

19. What are the ways in which you think of yourself as an American Indian?
20. What are some of the things you do to keep yourself spiritually strong to continue with your educational goals?
21. What cultural activities do you actively participate in?
22. Tell me about how you may feel living between two worlds, your culture as an American Indian and the culture of mainstream academia.

Thank you for sharing your experiences and thoughts with me today. I appreciate it.

Do you have any questions for me?

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