The Value of an Education - An Exploratory Study of the Relationship Between Cultural and Institutional Values and First-Generation Native American Student Success

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THE VALUE OF AN EDUCATION – AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL VALUES AND FIRST-GENERATION NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT SUCCESS

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Shimásání [my Grandmother], Matilda Brown, she has been my guiding light and now my angel through every life endeavor. It is through her teachings, prayers, support, and inspiration that I am who I am today. I am forever grateful and it is for that reason that I entered into this Doctoral journey, to honor her. My life’s goal is to continue to carry on her legacy of kindness and love for all things.

Ayóó áníníshní Shimásání!
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The purpose of this study was to explore the value and meaning that first-generation American Indian students place on higher education. Are these values different from those of the institution and how does that impact their educational journey? Finding purpose and meaning in your education encourages continued commitment to your educational goals. I conducted a single-site qualitative study at a Southwestern Non-Tribal Community University (SWNTCU), collecting data through an arts-based inquiry methodology employing photovoice narrative as a tool. To situate these narratives, I utilized an Indigenous paradigm interweaving Tribal Critical Race Theory, Relationality, and an Indigenous Wellness Model (Brayboy, 2006; Secatero, 2015; Wilson, 2008). The most notable findings of this study were: students’ connections to cultural wealth and knowledge carry substantial meaning that compels one to thrive; education holds fundamental value in one’s pursuit for a better life and developing one’s capacity for leadership and advocacy to ultimately help others.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Equivalent to the beat of a drum, I rise to the sound of “the thud” of the weaving-comb as it hits the rug (see Figure 1). The loom is no longer, yet the sound of “the thud” remains louder than ever in my mind, heart, and soul.” –M. Lee

Figure 1

Sound of “The Thud”

As a child, I grew up sharing my sleeping quarters with my Grandmother. She taught me many lessons, some of which I did not understand at the time but are now emerging with an abundance of valuable meaning. We slept in a small room that housed
the stove, two beds, and a sitting chair. One of the beds I shared with my Grandmother
and the other, my older brother slept on. My Grandmother was a Navajo Weaver and so
she would tie her loom to the foot of our bed. It is there that she spent many hours
working very hard to create beautiful rugs that she sold to earn supplemental income. She
was an early riser, a woman of great faith and the routine that she followed is still fresh in
my mind to this day. She would rise very early and do some stretches while still in bed
and then rise to pray, out loud, for everyone in our family but also for families all over
the world. She would then turn on the radio, always KTNN, to start her day. Before my
brother and I were wake, she would work on her rug. And this is what I woke up to every
morning. I would be sleeping soundly and suddenly feel the entire bed gently
reverberating with “the thud” as the weaving-comb repeatedly hit the rug. I say “the
thud” because it seemed to vibrate throughout my body, not only could I hear it, but I
could also feel it. At first, I would feel a little grumpy that my peaceful slumber was
interrupted but as the days went on I found it to be very comforting and invigorating.
There were days when she would also sing and all of this culminated into feelings of
happiness and excitement for the day. When I heard all of the aforementioned, I knew
that everything was good; that my Grandmother was strong and in good spirits, and to me
that meant that everything in my world was right! I would rise with excitement for the
new day and still I try to rise with that same energy every morning.

    This memory of my late Grandmother and my childhood is very near and dear to
me because through these experiences there manifested many lessons learned and
acquired strengths and values that I still carry with me today. The knowledge and
skillsets gained from these experiences have brought me this far and has helped me
navigate life. These memories contribute to my overall well-being in a way that motivates me and centers me when I need reassurance. I am who I am today because of the experiences and lessons that shaped my identity. As I entered into higher education, I harnessed those learned lessons of hard work and perseverance to get me through tough times and remind me of my purpose.

Similarly, many of our students have their stories and lived experiences that manifest as cultural knowledge that they bring to the table. Yet, Yosso explained, “This cultural knowledge is very valuable to the student and her/his family, but is not necessarily considered to carry any capital in the school context” (2005, p. 76). Yosso further explained, “So, are there forms of cultural capital that marginalized groups bring to the table that traditional cultural capital theory does not recognize or value. CRT answers, yes” (2005, pp.76-77). How then do our students find connections between what is valued by Indigenous folks with those values espoused by White western institutions, however implicitly or explicitly expressed?

What is important to convey is that we as Indigenous people find meaning and purpose in our lives through our stories and the connections that we have with our cultural identity, values, and knowledge, all of which impacts our overall well-being. Just as my need to hear “the thud” of the weaving process to determine the energy of my day, I must sense that same metaphorical energy to determine my holistic well-being and outlook on life. Without this holistic state of well-being, the absence of this metaphorical energy may result in negative repercussions and pose greater challenges to my ability to succeed. Secatero profoundly explains, “Indigenous well-being can be defined as the holistic connection of spiritual (purpose), mental (mind), physical (body), and social
well-being” (2015, p. 113). Maintaining all quadrants of one’s well-being is critical to staying grounded and functioning to one’s full potential.

It is this story that drew me to develop a research question that is meant to explore the relationship between what first-generation American Indian students value and what higher education institutions value. How does this relationship impact their success and connectedness to their educational experience? This study helped me take a step towards understanding this relationship.

**Geographies of the American Indian in the Southwest**

The Navajo Nation spans the states of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico and covers over 27,000 square miles known as Dine’ Bike’yah or Navajoland (Navajo Nation Government, 2011). The population surpasses over 250,000 members. Current population numbers show an increase from the previously reported statistic as reported in the New York Times. Last year, a rush to secure federal hardship benefits increased the Navajo Nation’s official enrollment to 399,494 from 306,268, according to the Navajo Nation Office of Vital Records and Identification (Romero, 2021, p. 19). The government structure supports a council chamber of 88 council delegates representing 110 Navajo Nation chapters. Those chapters are divided into agencies known as Chinle Agency, Crownpoint / Eastern Agency, Fort Defiance Agency, and Shiprock Agency.

There is also the great Pueblo of Zuni, the main reservation, which is located in McKinley and Cibola counties in the western part of New Mexico. Zuni Pueblo is estimated to encompass about 450,000 acres (Keshi, 2020) with a population of 6,302 as of the 2010 census (United States Census Bureau, 2020).
Southwestern (pseudonym), New Mexico is a border town to the Navajo Nation and the Pueblo of Zuni. All of these regions described fall into the service area of this Southwestern Non-Tribal Community University (SWNTCU) or have students attending from each of these regions. The SWNTCU campus is a two-year, open access institution located near the Navajo Nation and Zuni Pueblo and serves a population of about 68% American Indians (*Official SWNTCU Enrollment Report, 2019*), a decrease from 2015 when there was an 81% American Indian student population, but still representative of a majority minority population.

Sense of place is integral to American Indian Identity and culture. It is imperative to understand how important it is for many of our American Indian students to stay near home and still have access to higher education opportunities. Many students who are of nontraditional (nontrads) status are already situated and have built homes and families that require them to stay within the region. Many other students, whether they are nontrads or traditional, also have responsibilities that include caring for older generation family members and hence must stay close to home; not to mention that one’s economic status will also dictate a student’s mobility and opportunities to relocate. Whatever their rationale or obligations are, having an option for higher education within the region can be an invaluable asset for these students.

**Statement of the Problem**

I am a student affairs professional in higher education. I work for a non-tribal community college-style campus that serves predominately American Indian students. Statistically, I know that underrepresented populations in higher education have always been at a disadvantage and out of that population there is an even more vulnerable
population that is classified as first-generation American Indian students. Students who are “low-income students, first-generation college-goers and other traditionally underrepresented students are particularly vulnerable to the mixed signals sent by these conflicting exams and the lack of clear definitions around college readiness, as these students are the most dependent on high schools to prepare them for college success” (Venezia & Voloch, 2012, p. 71).

American Indians are one of the smallest ethnic minorities in the United States, and American Indian students are among the most underrepresented groups in academe (McClellan, Tippeconnic Fox, & Lowe, 2005, p. 7). This is alarming, seeing as how the importance of aspiring to continue one’s education beyond high school now carries a more urgent relevance. Higher education as a preferred qualification has quickly evolved into a required attribute in certain job markets, for instance in education and health fields among others. Earning a bachelor’s degree or a graduate degree leads to the highest earnings, the lowest unemployment rates, the widest range of career opportunities, and the sharpest differences in civic participation and health-related behaviors such as smoking and exercise (College Board, 2016, p. 7). Bachelor’s degree recipients paid an estimated $6,900 (91%) more in taxes and took home $17,700 (61%) more in after-tax income than high school graduates (College Board, 2016, p. 17). As the economy continues to struggle, having that competitive edge can mean the difference between sustaining a better quality of life and just barely getting by, if at all. However, making that aspiration a reality has proven to be a challenge for many American Indian students who courageously take those first steps toward envisioning a brighter future and realizing that their dreams are farther out of reach than they had anticipated.
Potential incoming first-year students at the SWNTCU have a high chance of being declared not college ready per the Accuplacer entrance assessment. In fact, “it is estimated that over 60% of students nationally are placed in at least one developmental course” (Ngo, Kwon, Melguizo, Prather, & Bos, 2005, p. 1). Additionally, the odds increase for those students who are American Indian:

Despite the fact that many American Indian students want to pursue an education past high school, most appear to be unprepared to do so and may be more unprepared than any other racial or ethnic group in America, according to recently published data from the ACT... American Indian students are the only group that has experienced a decline in that area since 2009. (Bidwell, 2013, p. 1)

The projected statistic of 60% of the students being recognized as not being college ready is not far from the truth. Based on the Accuplacer database utilized to generate my semesterly report, this has been an ongoing trend for years on the SWNTCU campus (Accuplacer Semesterly report, Spring 2019). All too often, as a result of a single Accuplacer assessment score, students at SWNTCU are deemed not college ready within their first week of stepping onto campus.

The entrance exams most notably used by many colleges are ACT, SAT, Compass (now obsolete), and Accuplacer. A majority of incoming freshman students at SWNTCU do not take the ACT or SAT test in high school or their scores are very low and therefore, they need to take the Accuplacer assessment. Students who did not take their ACT or SAT and those who took it but had scores that fell below the university’s cut scores for placement in English and math had to take the ACCUPLACER; these students were typically non-traditional students (Hodara & Cox, 2016, p. 3). At the
beginning of February 2019, SWNTCU migrated to a new version of the Accuplacer referred to as the NextGen Accuplacer. Colleges typically use a single measure to place students in developmental education courses: standardized exam scores on the SAT, ACT, ACCUPLACER, or ACT Compass (Hodara & Cox, 2016, p. 1). According to a 2019 study from the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR), 99% of two-year institutions and 94% of four-year institutions use some form of standardized test to determine a student’s math course placement (Martin & Kruegar, 2020, p. 4). However, in 2020, pandemic-related testing shutdowns required state agencies and postsecondary systems of education to consider course-placement alternatives (Martin & Kruegar, 2020, p. 4). Students that take one or more courses of remedial level (aka developmental) classes are considered “not college-ready” and require either remediation or must consider adult basic education courses to refresh their skills prior to retesting.

This information is particularly significant for a few reasons that have the potential to be counterproductive in terms of access and first impressions for the students. First, when a student is determined to require remediation, this means confronting a series of obstacles. For instance, we know that requiring remediation will result in a longer completion timeframe, in some instances adding up to an additional year or more (Boatman, 2021, p. 928). Boatman also highlighted, “The more time it takes a student to graduate, the more opportunities for life events to interfere with academic progress, particularly among low-income students facing multiple demands for their time” (2021, p. 930). Increased time in college can also put students’ financial dollars at risk, given that 12 terms is the current maximum eligibility period of receiving Pell grants, and
Direct Subsidized Loans are only available for up to 150% of the published length of a degree program (Boatman, 2021, p. 930).

It is important that SWNTCU provide equal opportunities for all students by potentially adjusting placement methods and creating an extra supportive environment to accommodate for variations in learning styles that may exist due to cultural differences. The first step towards working to that end means recognizing that there is an issue. From my perspective as an academic advisor, when students first encounter this new environment, it is imperative that they feel at ease and have a sense of belonging. Being told that they are not college ready, based on an entrance assessment score, may result in immediate feelings of intimidation and self-doubt. Further, they may question their relationship with their advisor; all of which can be harmful to the excitement of a new venture. We advisors are challenged to protect the fragility of our new relationship with our students and forge a trusting relationship that students seek. This can be a difficult task when advisors are forced to tell their students that they are not yet ready to take college-level courses. Obviously, the method of delivery can make a difference, but regardless, it can still create some distance.

Historically, “trust,” an emotion for American Indians, has been an issue. In academic advising, trust is the foundation upon which a positive rapport is built. However, an advisor’s motivational efforts may come off as disingenuous if the student already feels that they have preconceived notions of their ability due to their remediation designation. A decrease in remediation designation would help to curtail many of these undesired effects, which can diminish a student’s chances at overall success.
Finally, the messaging, whether intended or not can be interpreted as a rejection of the student’s ability and hopes. The Accuplacer assessment from the very beginning sets a standard of acceptance into this new world for the student. The student may interpret this standard of acceptance as what the institution values, and result in the student reassessing their own values and desire to continue. This standard along with other similar processes utilized by most westernized institutions, may be symbolic of the rigidity of expectations in higher education. Even more damaging might be the misconception that the knowledge that a student brings to the table is not considered valuable or useful. This further creates inequity in opportunity when a majority of those students determined “not college ready” are from an underrepresented population.

Furthermore, it is important to note that higher education institutions are embedded within a broader societal context that continues to perpetuate the marginalization of underrepresented populations through mainstream ideologies. These mainstream ideologies encourage individuality, competitiveness, and capitalism, all of which are contrary to Native American culture and beliefs (Cajete, 2015, pp. 148-149). Many of these students come from cultural backgrounds of collectivist ideologies. Indigenous cultures share a collectivist mindset in which the needs of the group supersede the needs of individuals, a reliance upon stories, and commitment to a biopsychosocial and spiritual approach (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2021, p. 321). Students bring with them a set of values, beliefs and attitudes that they have acquired through their own cultural constructs. These values and beliefs undoubtedly played a profound role in their decision to pursue higher education. For example, it has been my experience that students rarely decide to come to college for self, but rather they are
hoping to provide a better life for their families and, ultimately, contributing to the state of their communities, and Native Nation. It then becomes imperative that we capitalize and strengthen those connections, because ultimately that is what drives these students to persevere and keep moving forward.

Efforts to cultivate a more inclusive environment will ultimately benefit all. We want all students to do well and that means we have to continuously find ways to support and strengthen our students not only academically but holistically. Ultimately, over time, this will also benefit the institution through quantifiable measures of success.

**Purpose and Scope of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the value and meaning that first-generation American Indian students place on higher education. I asked, are these values different than those of the institution and how does that impact their educational journey? We know that having a sense of belonging is important and many times people have an affinity for shared interests and in this case, values. If there is a disconnect in those shared values, then how might that affect one’s desire to continue that relationship?

I also feel that understanding the student perspective is important for the sake of awareness. The hope is to find ways of not only validating those perspectives but also using that information to facilitate a stronger relationship with the students. Finding purpose and meaning in your educational experience is so important for not only committing to your educational goals, but also for sense of direction. For Native American students, strong cultural identity serves as an emotional and cultural anchor that promotes self-confidence and even a sense of purpose, where “they know who they are and why they are engaged in mainstream education” (Chow-Garcia, Lee, Svihla,
Sohn, Willie, Holsti, & Wandinger-Ness, 2019, Discussion Section). Understanding how students reach that point to help spur them to completion can provide invaluable insight. We can also use that information to provide support programs and make intentional efforts of incorporating Indigenous pedagogies that support their interests.

This research is important due to the large percentage of students who are coming to college with hopes of attaining a college degree at SWNTCU only to stop out, never return or need a longer time period to graduate. There may be a way to decrease attrition rates and improve retention rates by learning about the value of an education through the lens of first-generation American Indian students. Many studies have indicated that first-generation students are more likely to be considered “at risk” for low retention rates as well as lacking college readiness (Aronson, 2008, p. 45).

Through my research questions, I sought to contextualize these reports on a local level while also exploring potential motivational factors that may contribute to student retention, progression, and completion. I wanted to know the perceived value of an education from a student’s perspective and how it drives their desire to commit. In many conversations, I have noticed that students come to college with a very short-term goal in mind and a detached sense of commitment to their education. I wanted to understand that missing link to help make those connections for students in similar states of disconnect. I hypothesized that first-generation American Indian students’ academic ability is not adequately gauged via a one score determinant while disregarding other valuable motivating factors; that first-generation American Indian students develop interest and commitment in their educational journey when there is a meaningful connection to the outcome; and, that first-generation American Indian students at SWNTCU are greatly
influenced by their family, community and institutional support that correspond with increased levels of commitment to college success. The theoretical implications of this study helped to establish a greater understanding of the relational value of cultural influences, or lack thereof, that may be affecting the number of American Indian students that are deemed not college ready. The practical implications of my study are to spread awareness to SWNTCU, area high schools, and to parents in hopes of a collective effort toward strengthening those needs.

**Research Questions and Methodological Overview**

The research questions that guided this study are:

1) How do Indigenous students utilize cultural wealth and knowledge to navigate post-secondary education?

2) What are the relationships between institutional values, Indigenous students’ descriptions of their well-being, and the way Indigenous students make meaning of their educational journey?

To address these research questions, I conducted a single-site, qualitative study at a Southwestern Non-Tribal Community University (SWNTCU). This approach seemed most appropriate to answer my research questions because “the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). I wanted to understand how students interpret their experience based on their own personal narratives.
I collected data from multiple participants through an arts-based inquiry methodology utilizing photovoice or an arts-based visual as a tool. Using a purposeful sampling approach, I conducted individual interviews and a focus group with participants from the targeted demographic for this study. I centered the individual interviews on the students’ experiences with higher education in the context of values and connectedness to the institution. I asked participants in the focus group to reflect on those same experiences and explore how they utilize their own cultural values to find meaning in their journey. Both data collection approaches incorporated a photo visual aid to express participants’ experiences and values. Through this process, the visuals engaged deep critical thought but also helped to encourage and guide discussion for all participants.

Data analysis consisted of recording, transcribing and thereafter coding into consistent emerging themes the students’ perspectives and comments. The themes that emerged were determined by and dependent on the data that were collected. Data triangulation of the artists’ statement on visual submission, individual interviews, and focus groups served to maintain research integrity.

I utilized the framework of an Indigenous methodology that emphasizes that colonization is endemic to society, Tribal Critical Race Theory, as well as interweaving concepts of Relationality and an Indigenous Wellness Model throughout this entire research design (Brayboy, 2006; Secatero, 2015; Wilson, 2008). This allowed for a holistic research experience that encapsulates Indigenous ideologies.
Definitions and Assumptions

Some of the terms used in this dissertation may be either used differently across disciplines or carry multiple meanings; therefore, I am providing definitions for the purpose of this study:

- **American Indian / Native American / Indigenous Peoples** – These terms may be used synonymously and interchangeably throughout the text due to varying contexts and participants’ preferred terminology.

- **Indigenous** – The term Indigenous, as an adjective, has come to mean “relating to Indigenous people and peoples,” which differs from the “small I” indigenous, which is sometimes used to indicate things that have developed “home grown in specific places” (Wilson, 2008, p. 15).

- **Cultural** – Culture refers to behaviors and values that are learned, shared, and exhibited by a group of people (Yosso, 2005, p. 75).

- **Cultural Capital / Wealth / Knowledge** – Critical Race Theory identified various indicators of capital that have rarely been acknowledged as cultural and social assets in Communities of Color (i.e., aspirational, social, navigational, linguistic, resistant and familial capital).

- **First-generation** - The term first-generation refers to “a college or university student from a family where no parent or guardian has earned a baccalaureate degree” (Pike & Kuh, 2005, p. 277).

- **“Not-college-ready” / Underprepared** – Students who do not test into a gateway course such as College Algebra or Composition I.
• *Developmental or Remediation courses* – Courses that are not college level and are meant to prepare students for the rigor of those gateway courses such as College Algebra or Composition I.

• *Traditional / Nontraditional students* – These are categories used to classify post-secondary students who enroll immediately after high school (traditional) or who may have been out of school for many years and have decided to return to higher education (nontraditional).

It is also important to state that this study is not meant to represent a universal experience of all first-generation American Indian students, however it may provide insight into student perspectives that may not have been taken into consideration. This study examined how students draw meaning from their experiences through a cultural lens and the impact this understanding may have on their academic journey.

**Researcher Positionality**

Positionality is understanding your connection or relationship to the subject or topic of the research project as an insider or outsider (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 64). In Wilson’s description of relationality, we can see his attempt to understand his place or position in the Indigenous paradigm (2008, p. 77).

Currently, my role in the institution where I am working requires that I understand the student success dynamic and how we can improve this aspect of the student’s experience. This position exposes me to four states of positionality: 1) Students may see me in my current position as the student success manager as an authoritative figure and place me in an outsider position. This may have prevented students from fully disclosing their experiences as participants in this study. 2) I feel that I can relate most with the
students when I share my experience as a student, knowing firsthand what it is like to be a first-generation American Indian student. I believe that this position can only be beneficial in contributing to my ability to understand the students on a deeper level and hopefully make me more relatable. As a consequence, the students may place me in an “insider” type of position. 3) Throughout this project, I may have needed to communicate with the administration and faculty to gain perspective on their views and thoughts. Much of the rhetoric that is shared about student success comes from literature about best practices but rarely incorporates a local context seen through a cultural relevant lens. These meetings are generally exclusive and leave little room for discourse from non-faculty or non-administrator, which would place me in an outsider position. 4) As an Indigenous academic researcher, I feel that I am in an insider position and this is my most powerful asset. This position enhanced my ability to gain trust and relatability. As an Indigenous researcher, I am an appropriate candidate to conduct research on issues related to American Indian Education to ensure that all research is done ethically and for the benefit of our American Indian students. Having that understanding of Native culture hopefully put students at ease and provided an opportunity for them to share their full experience without reserve.

**Significance of Study**

This study contributes to research and practice in higher education in a number of ways. First, it adds to the limited but growing literature on Indigenous issues in education and Indigenous methodologies in research. These topics of Indigenous stories of success and the celebration of cultural wealth and value have never been more crucial as we find ourselves in a political climate that has reignited racial tensions across America. A richer
understanding of ways to empower our students to overcome feelings of inferiority and oppression through embracing their cultural identity and strengthening their search for belonging can assist in reestablishing a sense of pride in themselves.

I focused this study on a local context to examine an issue that is uniquely related to student success. Understanding cultural wealth and knowledge as motivational factors that contribute to student success can provide useful information to better support the student body. An institution striving to move beyond a goal of enrolling a diverse population to creating an inclusive environment with intentional efforts to understand cultural values as they pertain to student success only adds to the arsenal of support efforts that encourage retention.

**Summary**

As we find ourselves in an unprecedented and historical moment in our lives with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the political pressures that have intensified our educational climate, it is an opportune time to reevaluate what is important to our students. Now more than ever, we must support our students through understanding how they can continue and push forward through these additional obstacles beyond an already marginalized landscape. This has never been more apparent as we have witnessed students fall short of completing their courses successfully due to challenges ranging from personal health and family obligations, to the lack of technological infrastructure on American Indian reservations.

We must capitalize on the revelations of this pandemic. It has pushed the creative boundaries of our educational systems and forced a technological paradigm shift. As educators, we must exercise due diligence in exploring how we might better equip our
students in navigating these new expectations within an already complex society, one that is not always equitable in opportunities for our underrepresented population.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

To gain a better understanding of the extensive narrative of education and the American Indian student’s experience, I will start with the historical context within which American Indian education was founded. The literature aids in supporting the need for increased efforts for positive change in higher education as it relates to my research questions. The literature adds value to the cumulative understanding of education for American Indian students. For generations, this population has been told that their ability for success is not adequate based on Euro-American standards (Grande, 2004, p. 20). We must be knowledgeable and accountable for the historical role that education has played in Native American communities as a tool for assimilation, and the elimination of Native cultural values, experiences, and traditions. To understand the necessity for change, one must first understand the historical journey of the population of interest. As Guillory and Wolverton (2008, p. 58) stressed, “To say that American Indians are ill-prepared for college only scratches the surface of a deep, historically unresolved problem- getting American Indians student through the mainstream higher education pipeline.”

Following my presentation of the historical context of American Indians, I highlight culturally related motivational factors involved in American Indian student identity, learning and progression followed by a discussion of college readiness and a sense of belonging, American Indian values, and the Indigenous Wellness model. Finally, I touch on the importance of Tribal Critical Race Theory and its relevancy in addressing American Indian student issues.
Historical Journey

Grande brings to light the historical relationship between schooling and American Indians, “grouping them into three eras; 1) the period of missionary domination from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, 2) The period of federal government domination from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries, and 3) the period of self-determination from the mid twentieth century to the present” (2004, p. 16). During the first two eras, she highlighted the “intentions” of the government as they expressed the benefits of an education. However, many times these benefits were deceiving such that they were to be perceived as advantages for the American Indians but realistically it was mostly for the comfort and benefit of the government. The government’s deceptive message of the benefits of an education always had an underlying agenda to “reeducate” Indians to live “domesticated” lives (Grande, 2004, p. 17).

The manner in which education was forced upon American Indians is almost unimaginable and undeniably inhumane. Children were taken from their homes and forced to live in boarding schools where they were discouraged from speaking their language and practicing their cultural beliefs. This was the beginning of the educational journey of American Indians and the creation of their feelings of distrust, inferiority, insecurity and even hatred towards education.

McClellan et al. further described, “the notable resistance to the idea of higher education for American Indian students” (2005, p. 8). They noted that American Indians saw Euro-American higher education as having nothing of value to offer them. Those who took part in attending higher education institutions were not welcomed into colonial society, and other American Indian people viewed them skeptically when they returned to
their tribal communities (AIHEC, 2000, p. 5). The perception of higher education was that it resulted in a lessening of important traditional skills without a concomitant gain in new skills of value in tribal life (McClellan et al., 2005, p. 9).

**Period of Missionary Domination**

During the era of missionary domination, “missionary groups acted as the primary developers and administrators of schools while the federal government served as the not-so-silent partner, providing economic and political capital through policies such as the Civilization Fund” (Grande, 2004, p. 16). Furthermore, “the work of teachers, church leaders, and missionaries were hardly distinguishable during this era; saving souls and colonizing minds became part and parcel of the same colonialist project” (Grande, 2004, p. 16). Although funding came from the federal government, “missionary groups administered most of the schools” (Szasz, 1974/2003, p. 9). The overall intent of this period was to replace traditional and cultural knowledge with western thought and ideations. It is during this time that we see an emergence of missions and federal Indian schools for the purpose of the so-called civilization of American Indians. As described by Lomawaima and McCarty, “Americanization,” mandated the transformation of nations and individuals: Replace heritage language with English; replace “paganism” with Christianity; replace economic, political, social, legal, and aesthetic institutions (2006, p. 4). Over time, friction among rival churches over funding arose and for that reason the funding of the Civilization Act was repealed, ending the missionary reign. The federal government stepped in to fill the void, ushering in a new era of federal control over Indian schools (Grande, 2004, p.17).
**Period of Federal Government Domination**

The era of boarding schools and the establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) followed the missionary period. The boarding schools “worked explicitly with the U.S. government to implement federal policies (i.e., allotment) servicing the campaign to ‘kill the Indian and save the man’” (Grande, 2004, p. 18). The campaign began with “the (often forcible) removal of young children from their homes and communities and transporting them to geographically and ideologically foreign place” (Grande, 2004, p. 18).

All the while, the government was telling the American Indians that this was for their own benefit, but the schools had a very different rationale for their existence and that was to change the way of the American Indians. As the Board of Indian Commissioners wrote in their 1902 annual report, “Schools alone cannot make over a race, but no one instrument is so powerful in producing desirable changes in a race as are schools for the young” (Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs [ARCIA], 1901, p. 781). In addition to providing vocational training, such schools introduced the concept of forced labor as part of Indian education, transforming the ostensibly “moral” project of civilizing Indians into a for-profit enterprise (Grande, 2004, p.17). We see the emergence of the infamous Carlisle Indian School (1879-1918), the first of its kind in this new era of federal control (Grande, 2004, p. 17). We see many other boarding schools emerge thereafter, such as Pierre, Flandreau, Chamberlain, Rapid City, to name a few. Nevertheless, “despite the efforts of the BIA officials, missionaries, and teachers to stamp them out, Indigenous languages, spiritual practices, and sociopolitical forms were not
only continued by tribal elders, but transmitted from generation to generation” (Grande, 2004, p. 18).

As the efforts of the boarding schools become less successful, there was a shift to public schooling. The release of the 1928 Meriam report resulted in “the transition from boarding schools to public education…which not only dealt the final blow to the boarding school experiment but also levied the decisive political spark that launched the next era of reform” (Grande, 2004, p. 19).

**Period of Self-determination**

The 1928 Meriam Report “excoriated the off-reservation boarding schools for inadequate academic training and menial ‘drudge’ work masquerading as a vocational training” (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. 67). Szasz explained, “In the years of reform that followed its publication, the Meriam Report became the symbol of definitive response to the failure of fifty years of assimilation policy” (1999, p. 24). In response to this report, we see the emergence of the Johnson-O’Malley (JOM) Act of 1934 but also an approach called the Elimination through Termination. The Termination policy along with the Relocation Act were both attempts to remove the American Indian students from their homes and culture to integrate them into mainstream culture. All the while, the initiative was passed off as an opportunity for life off the reservation, but it, too, had a hidden agenda. While resistance took many forms, Indians implicitly expressed their antipathy toward termination by refusing to enroll in the associated ill-conceived vocational training programs ostensibly designed for their benefit (read: ready labor exploitation) (Grande, 2004, p. 20). It is during this period we see civil rights movements and eventually the American Indian Movement (AIM) was created in 1968.
Ultimately, “the efforts of Indian education and leaders also prompted the publication of two major studies in Indian education: “Indian Education: A National Tragedy – A National Challenge” (U.S. Senate, 1969), commonly known as ‘The Kennedy Report’ and ‘The National Study of American Indian education.’ These reports helped secure passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Act in 1975, which provided American Indians increased control over their children’s education” (Grande, 2004, p. 20).

Today, the struggle continues as we work toward Sovereignty and advocating for Indian education. However, we must first acknowledge and be aware of the resistance and distrust towards education. Lomawaima and McCarty explained, “A democratic citizenship requires civic courage and a multicultural consciousness that acknowledges and confronts the historical and institutional roots of oppression” (2006, p. 8). Furthermore, we must also understand that “sovereignty includes the right to linguistic and cultural expression according to local languages and norms, the right to write, speak, and act from a position of agency” (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. 9). Hence, we must continue our advocacy for educational reform that supports that effort.

**Sense of Place, Identity, and Culture**

Today, students are taught to value their culture and to never forget their family and their tribal affiliation. A major part of one’s identity is influenced through place and culture. To know yourself and to fully embrace your self-identity, it is imperative to know the history of your people. With this history comes a reference to place and within that place we see a practice of culture that has sustained our people throughout the years to our present day. Given that “nearly two-thirds of American Indians remain closely tied
to their reservations not only points to the continued significance of land in the formation of American Indian identity, but also suggests that a larger portion of the Indian population remains fairly segregated from the rest of the nation” (Grande, 2000, p. 478).

**Place**

It is important to note that while place is important, it is also equally important to understand and support that connection to one’s identity. Indigenous people represent a culture emergent from a place, and they actively draw on the power of that place physically and spiritually (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001, p. 32). Since schools and colleges are also places where students “learn,” it is imperative to find ways to integrate that knowledge into their westernized education. Many students stay close to home for a myriad of reasons making it a requirement and not an option. When considering a “sense of place, there is incalculable benefit for students being able to stay at home, in community, to complete their tertiary studies” (Van Gelderen, 2017, p. 20). Students who go away to college often times will make multiple trips home to help their family or participate in ceremony and this can become a difficult balance of their time and responsibilities. Wallace noted, for remote Northern Territory Indigenous communities, “taking part in formal education (is) often described as opposing full participation in family or community identities or activities” (2008, p. 11). Ultimately, it becomes a burden that results in making difficult decisions that may impact their future.

**Identity**

As can be argued, “the social identities of Native youth, like all identities, transcend territorial boundaries and become reterritorialized” (Anthony-Stevens & Stevens, 2017, p. 333). However, I can attest that it can be difficult to practice the
cultural beliefs that you identify with and feel that sense of community and support when you are not in the company of others from your tribe. Indigenous students from remote communities experience tensions “between furthering ‘mainstream’ ambitions/job prospects and maintaining kinship-relationships and connections to ancestral land through participation in ceremonial life” (Van Gelderen, 2017, p. 20).

We can then take this a bit further and recognize yet another issue of students and their development of cultural identity. As Native American children, we are taught to learn about our culture through observation. Rarely are we given a formal setting to learn but rather we are expected to observe the actions of others to learn how or what we can aspire to be. This can become an issue when our learning institutions do little to incorporate a culturally relevant curriculum early on in our educational experiences. Even within some of our reservation schools and surrounding border town schools, we do not see a strong representation of professionals of our own identity or non-Natives who are interested in learning about the local culture (Van Gelderen, 2017, p. 15). I feel that this absence of representation could play a critical role when students are thinking about a career pathway. Having professionals that we can identify with is absolutely critical in understanding our own possibilities. Observation of professionals from one’s own tribe can only help in identifying with that individual and developing a concomitant sense of belonging within that space.

**Culture**

Within the educational arena, “The linguistic and cultural choices children and their families make need not be either-or ones; no child should be forced to accept another language – or identity – at the expense of her or his own” (McCarty, 2002, p.
Anthony-Stevens and Stevens further describe the predominance of dominant White culture despite schools being on tribal lands and attended by majority Indigenous students (2017, p. 332). While reservations are often strongholds of Indigenous (minoritized) culture, the presence of schools and churches on reservations remind Indigenous people of the hegemony of White culture (Anthony-Stevens & Stevens, 2017, p. 338). “Due to the imposition of these ‘Eurocentric’ pedagogies, in the past schooling has been explicitly and implicitly a site of rejection of indigenous knowledge and language” (May & Aikman, 2003, p. 143).

In order to change that narrative, we must acknowledge that, “Education is not neutral, but must be negotiated as a form of identity reclamation, a challenge to inequality, and an alternative to assimilation (Cajete 1994; Paulston & Heidemann 2006; Stairs 1994;)” (De Korne, 2010, p. 119). Cajete explained, “Indigenous culture and experience create unique relationship with place: our Peoples have engaged the unique environments and economics in our homelands and have interacted with place over generations to develop a sense for the spirit of the place” (2015, p. 122). We must further understand the impact of removing culture or undervaluing culture in our students’ lives:

One might speculate that contemporary life styles, which may mean the forfeiture of Navajo traditions, result in instability during the adjustment period or, in other words, a temporary normlessness which might negatively influence school outcomes. While this is a speculation, I have personally experienced the push and pull of familial and traditional obligations and feeling a sense of imbalance in a spiritual sense and this added to my worries about how this transition is affecting my family members. (Chan & Osthimer, 1983, p. 19)
As an advisor, I have seen this many times; some students return while others have no choice but to quit and talk about returning, yet I do not see them again for years.

**College Readiness and Sense of Belonging**

Understanding student needs plays a critical role in providing adequate student support programs, initiatives, and resources to cultivate an environment for success. As students begin to make that transition to higher education, many might find themselves contemplating two very important self-reflective questions that can mean the difference between a positive or negative response to their new environment. First, they are asked to prove that they are ready for college-level courses by their test scores, whether it be via Accuplacer or other placement methods. Second, throughout their experience with higher education, they will at some point question whether they feel a sense of belonging, the question we ask ourselves in any new environment. Both of these questions contribute to the overall potential for success for our American Indian population. Are our predominately non-Native institutions providing enough of an environment that is welcoming and if not, then what might they do to work toward that end? Tribal Colleges play a key role in the transition from Secondary to Postsecondary Education for American Indian Students (Brown, 2003, p. 6). The Tribal College has the ability to create an environment that is familiar and works very intentionally to create an environment where students can feel pride in their heritage. Based on this ideology, might universities such as the institution where I work be lacking in terms of providing a culture rich environment for our students on our campus and promoting a sense of belonging?
**College Readiness**

During the years that I have worked with the Accuplacer assessment, I have observed many discouraged students that had to be placed in developmental level courses based on their test scores. The Accuplacer assessment is one of the first encounters a freshman has with the institution and this encounter, rather than being a pleasant encounter can sometimes be very discouraging. The first-year freshman experience has been a current area of concern at SWNTCU, which necessitates the need for acknowledgement that there are negative implications of placement methods and remediation requirements.

The Education Commission of States (ECS) advocates for changing current developmental education systems so that all students, no matter their skill level or background, have a real opportunity to earn a college credential, but at the same time, “70 percent of community college students take at least one developmental course” (ECS, 2012, p. 3). More recent estimates suggest that half of all students enrolling in postsecondary institutions are assigned to at least one high-school-level course with community colleges reporting that nearly six out of 10 students enroll in remedial coursework during their college career (Boatman, 2021, p. 927). Longer sequences of developmental education courses contribute to students dropping out. Boatman suggests a redesign from a sequence of remedial courses to one, since traditional developmental courses create a greater number of potential exit points out of a sequence of courses (2021, p. 930). Taking many developmental courses and not receiving credit towards your degree may feel like you are spinning your wheels with little to no advancement. Additionally, the ECS found, “the long remediation sequences simply don’t work for the
purpose they were intended, which is preparing students for college level courses” (2012, p. 3).

Boatman and Long revealed that there are negative effects for those students who are on the margins of the college-level class but are placed in higher-level remediation courses (2011, p. 2). Being assigned to upper-level developmental courses rather than college-level courses suggests negative effects on long-term college persistence and degree completion (Boatman & Long, 2011, p. 3). These students who are placed in higher-level remediation courses earn 6.4 fewer college-level courses than their peers. There was no significant difference for students who were on the margins of the lower-level remediation course.

This study suggests that there should be other factors to consider beyond the test score alone to give students the best possible start to their higher education. Belfield and Crosta (2012, p. 39) agree that other factors should be considered for the most beneficial placement of students beyond the one score test determinant. Their research suggests that placement test scores are not particularly good predictors of course grades in developmental education classes, but “high school GPA is an extremely consistent predictor of college performance” (Belfield & Crosta, 2012, p. 13). In a different study, a multiple measure approach using high school GPA for placement will not sacrifice educational quality, but will further the completion agenda and help many more students to achieve their educational goals (Bostian, 2012, p. 3). In a similar study, “results indicate that lower-scoring students who received a multiple measure boost that placed them in a higher course performed no differently from their peers in terms of passing the first math course they enrolled in” (Ngo et al., 2005, p. 4). They conclude that utilizing a
multiple measure boost based on GPA and test scores can enable community colleges to increase access while ensuring student success in developmental math courses (Ngo et al., 2005, p. 4).

Awareness of placement methods must be shared with the parents of high school freshman (Bersola, Bueschel, Contreras, & Slama, 2004, p. 44). Many students, their parents, and educators are very confused or misinformed about how students should prepare for college (Bersola et al., 2004, p. 45). High school counselors where this research was conducted mainly visited only the honors classes to talk about college admission requirements, which leaves out a majority of students who are unaware of how to prepare for college (Bersola et al., 2004, p. 28). This leaves first-generation students at a disadvantage to figure out what they do not know to be prepared for post-secondary education.

Finally, Rochford explored the topic of alignment of high school material with developmental course material (2006, p. 7). The purpose of Rochford’s study was to help eliminate the need for developmental courses to enhance students’ success upon entering into one of those classes (2006, p. 3). Rochford explained, “this underscores the problems inherent in alignment between state k-12 standards and newly emerging college readiness standards” (2006, p. 22). I think that this recommendation to explore alignment efforts between schools is a logical solution that has been long avoided. It only makes sense that there should be increased collaboration and accountability between k-12 and higher education institutions.
University Values

High stakes testing and measures of success utilizing metrics and quantifiable data can be intimidating for those students who are first-generation students and labeled as needing remediation. Student standings within the campus are usually expressed in terms of test scores, GPA, tuition rates, retention rates and graduation rates. While data such as these are useful and necessary, institutions should also be aware of how this emphasis on numerical data may be interpreted by their student population. While the messaging may be unintentional, the university might be perceived as valuing only those students who contribute to the overall metrics that favor institutional optics.

The climate and atmosphere of a college campus is very reflective of institutional values. The university expresses its values through dedicated programs and centers that contribute to the success of its students. While some institutions may feel that they do not want to favor any one type of student, still it may be beneficial when their demographics are comprised of a student body that has traditionally been recognized as underrepresented in academia. Guillory described an example, “Distinctively, students suggested that social support on campus was critical to their persistence, for example the NA (Native American, information added) or Multicultural Student Centers on each campus provided the ‘community’ the students deemed essential in reducing their sense of isolation and alienation” (2009, p. 11).

These perceived values of the institution may be interpreted as pushing an agenda that is far removed from the traditional values of the students. Family members over time, especially the older generation, begin to see these changes in their children and could potentially be turned off by their influence. We can see that there is generational
resistance to education and university values may be a contributor to that resistance.

There may also be resistance to the recovery of Indigenous knowledge because “some of the greatest resistors…are our own Native people who have internalized the racism and now uncritically accept ideologies of the dominant culture” (Wilson, 2004, p. 72).

**Sense of Belonging**

All students want to feel some sense of belonging, in whatever environment they find themselves in (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 2). When a student comes to campus, they are seeking to fit in and find a place that they feel comfortable, what that looks like depends on the institutional climate that is made visible through physical spaces and décor and the campus resources provided. Mostly, students are searching for that family support that they may have left behind or wish to be a part of because family support was a major motivating factor when it came to making the transition from high school into college (Benally, 2013, p. 4). Once they get into college, family support continues to play a vital role in student success. A study of retention in higher education of American Indians revealed that family was the most frequently mentioned factor affecting persistence in higher education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 74). There is, however, a frustrating paradox that students struggle with where families act as both a persistence factor and a barrier. On the one hand, students persisted through college to make their families proud; and on the other, they felt the “pull” from their families to come home (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 74).

Feeling a sense of belonging is critical and may mean the difference between persevering or searching for other options (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 2). Students may feel a sense of inferiority, as if they do not matter or are not being seen. Native Americans, for
example, are “made invisible or, if talked about, are overwhelmingly presented in
inaccurate ways that demean the student’s identity” (Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2017,
p. 35). Students may experience a sense of not being seen or even worse still, they may
experience microaggressions. The “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or
environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile,
derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue,
Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007, p. 273) and
“microaggressions contribute to the mosaic of the racial campus climate that students of
color endure on a daily basis” (Mendez & Mendez, 2013, p. 46). While this may be an
unpleasant picture, we must understand that microaggressions are present all around us.
Providing students with a safe haven, whether it be a physical space or a support group, is
one way of mitigating those effects (Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2017, p. 43).

**American Indian Values**

It is important to note that American Indian values and culture have a central
focus on relations including our relations with our ourselves, family, and community.
Cajete found, “Every member of a healthy community must have a sense of belonging,
love, and affective meaning. If these basic human needs are met within family and
community, people grow up experiencing a positive sense of being, a sense of personal
power, and a sense of what it means to be related – to be a relative” (2015, p. 58).

These “relations” extend beyond just human to human but also with our
environments. We maintain a “continuing connection to the land, and fulfilling our role
within that ongoing relationship, is centered on our specific environment and the
relationships that it holds, rather than on events that may be seen as historically important
to others but hold only tenuous connection to our land” (Wilson, 2008, p. 88.). For instance, caring for the land and all that lives on it is far more important than ownership of the land.

We then have our relationship with our spirituality because “for many Indigenous people, having a healthy sense of spirituality is just as important as other aspects of mental, emotional and physical health” (Wilson, 2008, p. 89). At most American Indian gatherings, it is of proper form and practice to start all meetings or gatherings with a blessing. While students have the freedom to practice their spirituality, it has long been known that there is a clear separation of church and state in many institutions. However, Wilson explains, “In reality, spirituality is not separate but is an integral part of the whole in the Indigenous worldview” (2004, p. 89). Navigating what is allowable or acceptable can be convoluted and result in an abandonment of those traditions.

Our values and culture are centered around understanding and strengthening those relations, but at the same time, “we do need to sort out that which has been imposed on us, consciously and critically assess whether it supports or harms Indigenous value systems and worldviews, and make appropriate changes” (Wilson, 2004, p. 75). Dropouts and ‘stop-outs’ (those who leave for a while but return) “choose not to conform to the values of the dominant society, and many remain frustrated because the academy does not meet their needs” (Mihesuah, 2004, p. 191). If retention is an institutional goal, then greater emphasis should be placed on valuing the impact of culture.

**Cultural Wealth and Knowledge**

Nelson-Barber highlighted the need for an ecological approach to ‘real world’ student knowledge and experience (2017, p. 3). This ecological approach “finds central
importance in aspects of learning that have gone unrecognized, such as relationships contexts, languages, tools and practices based on community knowledge” (Nelson-Barber, 2017, p. 3). Students come to college with a lot of knowledge and skills that will be useful to them during their educational journey. This cultural knowledge comes in a variety of forms, can be very powerful and can withstand the test of time. Native students “found that using the spiritual and cultural strengths that have sustained Native Nations through genocide psychological colonization, erosion of Native identity and cultural invalidation are what sustained them in their higher education experience in the dominant culture” (Shields, 2009, p. 49).

Educators “often assume that schools work and that students, parents and community need to change to conform to this already effective and equitable system” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). The result is school efforts that “usually aim to fill up supposedly passive students with forms of cultural knowledge deemed valuable by dominant society” (p. 75). However, the means by which the university gauges a student’s level of ability is not always a holistic measure; rather there may be other qualities that may attest to the student’s true ability to succeed. Yosso acknowledges, “The main goals of identifying and documenting cultural wealth are to transform education and empower People of Color to utilize assets already abundant in their communities” (2005, p. 82). Colleges would do well to discover, embrace, and utilize those assets because “as humans, we have the right to argue that our ways of knowing are equal to any on earth and we have a right to challenge colonial claims to superiority” (Wilson, 2004, p. 79).
Culturally Relevant Material

As we move toward understanding the pedagogical approaches used by our current educational system, we must also recognize the inherent issues that exist within that context. I believe that many times, students do not feel a sense of connection with the material that is being taught and soon lose interest or become bored with the topic, simply because they cannot relate to the subject matter presented and they are not waiting to be “filled” (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 44). This is also true of the questions and examples used in the Accuplacer assessment, the vocabulary can be intimidating and many of the examples provided are foreign to our American Indian students and not personally or culturally relevant (Cajete, 1988). Resistance is a barrier exemplified when “students within this framework chose to leave the institution due to difficulties with the aspects of education that clashed with their view of their identity and culture” (Keith, Stastny, & Brunt, 2016, p. 4). This continues to perpetuate the marginalization of our American Indian students within the higher education system.

Wilson urged, “We must look at the truths within our forms of knowledge and bring them forward to the modern world while simultaneously working to transform the modern world to create a society more in tune with our traditional values” (2004, p. 75). This focus on culturally relevant materials can benefit all members of the institution where “institutional emphasis on diversity not only assists American Indian students, but the entire student population, exposing them to diverse peoples with whom they will interact in the real world in the future” (Mendez & Mendez, 2013, p. 61). Universities have been known to promote an agenda that encourages students to be productive members of society. Culturally relevant pedagogy can only help in understanding this
diverse society that our students will have to navigate. Higher education is “a vehicle of social mobility and an agent of societal socialization. We would be remiss not to take full advantage of opportunities to reach greater awareness of ourselves” (Mendez & Mendez, 2013, p. 61).

Many American Indian educators and advocates have fought hard for an opportunity to provide our students with an education that provides these culturally relevant materials. Deloria Jr. explain how his generation was “part of a movement that, facing termination and the demand for minorities to integrate into society, refused to support the further destruction of Indian communities and sought instead to offer an alternative philosophy” (2004, p. 16). While this effort is worthy of praise and acknowledgement, we must still work towards furthering these efforts into our local Non-Tribal Universities (NTUs). We must continue to find ways to bridge our knowledge systems for the benefit of all, rather than finding alternative pathways. Deloria Jr. emphasized, in reference to traditional knowledge, “Nor did they consider that the tribal traditions they wrote and spoke about represented an alternative philosophy to Western materialism” (2004, p. 16).

**Individualism Vs. Collectivism**

The primary focus of education in American Indian communities has always been sustaining the needs of its collective members. This principle continues to serve as a motivating factor for many American Indian students. However, many western-based ideologies seem to promote a more individualistic mindset. Cajete expressed, “Americans extol and practice “rugged individualism” as a distinctly American trait, and they attribute their country’s success as a world leader to their “me against the world” mindset
and the individualistic value system that goes with it” (2015, p. 109). The American dream slogan itself caries this idea that if you work hard then you can be successful. This belief, while inspiring, is seemingly focused on personal upward social mobility. “It allows us to conceive of reality in whatever way we find beneficial, encouraging a self-centered disregard for others and a blindness to the repercussions of our own thoughts and actions on others” (Brayboy, Lomawaima, & Villegas, 2007, p. 237).

In most cases, this desire to give back to the community is still very much a motivating factor for many American Indian students. Anytime there is an interview highlighting the success of an American Indian student, you will always hear those exact remarks. Education is an intentional effort to bring knowledge back to one’s family, community and/or their Nation. In addition to improving on their current means of providing for their families and livelihood there is also this desire to help others within the community and sharing that knowledge with others because “community-based knowledge systems require individuals to be concerned for the welfare of other people” (Brayboy et. al., 2007, p. 237).

**Purpose – Indigenous Wellness Model**

Purpose and meaning are two very important objectives that people look for in the pursuit of any endeavor. If we are able to find purpose and meaning in the task that lies before us, then we are more likely to feel a sense of responsibility to follow through and complete. However, if one is unable to find meaning in their journey, then it may be more difficult to stay focused on completing that journey successfully. Having a sense of purpose and meaning is also an important contributor to one’s overall wellness and maintaining a stable mindset. It has been observed that a “lack of purpose in life has been
found to contribute to the frame of mind that leads men in these communities to place themselves at significant risk” (Adams, Mataira, Walker, Hart, Drew, & Fleay, 2017, p. 49). They go on to express that “evidence from both the international and Australian literature suggests that the well-being of Indigenous people is enhanced when they maintain their traditional culture” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 48).

**Connectedness**

On a daily basis, we strive to understand the purpose behind why we do the things that we do. Understanding and making those connections are all a part of developing higher level critical thinking skills. There have been many occasions where I have asked myself, what is the missing link? Many students come through my office with no real sense of direction but a desire to go “back to school.” Semester after semester, I see our students going through the motions and sometimes, in the end, I still get the sense that they do not know what to do with their education. We have made intentional efforts to work with students to help them make some of those connections for themselves such as identifying their purpose for an education and how it connects to the workforce, a next level program, or whatever goal they may have in mind. Some students just need a little coaching and come to that realization on their own. While some of those are the more tangible outcomes, there are usually deeper meaning connections as well. Native American students’ “sense of purpose was a commitment to their Nations, their people, and their families. This sense of love for their people and for their families enable them to move beyond the ‘odds’ and make the impossible possible” (Shield, 2009, p. 62).
Relations

To take this concept a step further, it is useful to examine how one’s education relates to their ability to contribute to helping their people. It is always hard for students to discern the value of an education when they do not know how to apply their program and what they have learned to their overall desire to give back to their nation. Again, it all goes back to the concept of “relationality.” There is a relationship of all knowledge that expands even beyond a pedagogical sense or attainment of credentials. By recognizing “the importance of the relational quality of knowledge and knowing, then we recognize that all knowledge is cultural knowledge” (Wilson, 2008, p. 91). Again, we find ourselves searching for deeper meaning. It is this deeper meaning that leads us to the conceptualization of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008).

Relational accountability emphasizes respect, reciprocity and responsibility. It is through these concepts that we apply our knowledge to helping our people and seeing “education and educational goals as a part of loving others, in that it could provide help to other Native people, especially their children and other family members” (Shield, 2009, p. 61).

Overall Indigenous Wellness

In Secatero’s (2015) description of the Indigenous Wellness Model, there are four areas of focus, spirituality, mental, physical, and social well-being. Our overall well-being is a very strong determinant of our ability to be productive. For many, a holistic measure of our well-being is overlooked due to one reason or another. However, what we should understand is that it is an integral part of who we are and how we perform.
Shield found, “Every participant identified spirituality as a main strength that contributed to their successful completion of a higher education experience; however, the identification and use of spirituality as a main strength was not limited to obtaining a college degree or completing educational goals. Spirituality is an entire way of being: the way to experience reality and the world” (2009, p. 51). Secatero also expressed the importance of spirituality in one’s educational journey where “each individual must develop a sense of purpose for pursuing college, which can include having prayers conducted at the beginning of each semester by a medicine man, a pastor, or a priest or even a wellness ceremony” (2015, p. 116).

Next, we have mental well-being, which focuses on the mind, trains “your mind, body, and spirit, to ‘learn to be resilient, overcome challenges and adapt to changes and be strong’” (Archuleta, 2012, pp. 164-165). Mental well-being includes “study skills, learning styles, problem solving, test preparation, research, creativity and stimulating the mind” (Secatero, 2015, p. 121).

A third level is physical well-being, which, as you might expect, focuses on the body. Physical well-being can be defined as “the ability to understand what can make our body most efficient and effective and the ability to recognize our own limitations” (Secatero, 2015, p. 119).

Finally, we have social well-being, which has an emphasis on relations. Secatero explained, “…social well-being includes positive attributes that include cooperation, teamwork, family, social circle, dialog, and bringing people together for a common and important purpose” (2015, p. 124). As we venture forward in our educational studies, we learn that networking and collaboration are critical skills to develop.
Tribal Critical Race Theory

Research studies on Indigenous education issues tend to utilize the work of Brayboy and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit). TribalCrit emerges from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and is rooted in the multiple, nuanced, and historically – and geographically – located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities (Brayboy, 2006, p. 427). Like CRT, TribalCrit places an emphasis on challenging traditional views of education. Traditional views of education are rooted in dominant society and have very specific expectations that do not always align with American Indian ways of knowing. For example, TribalCrit values narratives and stories as important sources of data (Brayboy, 2006, p. 428). The most significant tenet of TribalCrit emphasizes that colonization is endemic to society (Brayboy, 2006, p. 429). Tribal Crit has nine basic tenets. Colonization and its influences are at the heart of TribalCrit and the other eight tenets are all offshoots of that vital concept (Brayboy, 2006, p. 431).

Brayboy has expressed a hope that TribalCrit will prove to be useful in experiences and issues that are unique to American Indians:

TribalCrit provides a theoretical lens for addressing many of the issues facing American Indian communities today, including issues of language shift and language loss, natural resources management, the lack of students graduating from colleges and universities, the overrepresentation of American Indians in special education, and power struggles between federal, state, and tribal governments. (2006, p. 430)
Summary

The literature paints a very grim picture of the evolution of American Indian education. While policies and operations have improved, there are still many areas of needed attention. The literature clearly indicates the value of all aspects of place, identity, and culture for American Indian students. What the literature lacks, and what I hoped to uncover with this study, is the student perspective on institutional values, the meaning and purpose of an education and how that impacts, promotes, or impedes their retention and success. Also, I hoped to learn how to identify areas where institutional resources and efforts can be directed. There are times when institutional resources are misdirected. For example, in one such study of persistence, the administrators’ perceptions differed from the population that they serve. They did not have a clear understanding “of the students and their barriers…they believed that persistence was attributed to students having adequate financial support (not family support) and academic programs tailored to meet the needs of American Indian students” (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 69).
Chapter 3

Research Design

The purposes of this study were to explore and gain a more in depth understanding of the value that students place on an education, to determine how to strengthen the students’ educational experience, and support the ways in which education can serve, to truly establish meaningful connections. The research questions that guided this study engaged students’ perspectives and what the students value in comparison to the western ideations and values espoused by white western institutions. In this chapter, I describe the research methods I utilized for this study. I start with a description of my research philosophy followed by my rationale for choosing a qualitative method approach. I share the details of my methodological approach, which drove the implementation of my research design. After a description of my data collection and analysis, I share my efforts to ensure research integrity followed by a discussion of the study’s limitations.

Research Philosophy / Paradigm

My research philosophy derived from Critical Race Theory, constructivism, and, more directly, Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Critical Race Theory talks about oppression as it relates to race and the marginalization of a certain race of people (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 61). Critical race theory “offers an alternative to the positivist and post-positivist view in that it holds that reality is more fluid or plastic than one fixed truth” (Wilson, 2008, p. 36). Constructivism, which is often used interchangeably with interpretivism as described by Merriam and Tisdell, assumes that reality is socially constructed: that there is no single, observable reality (2016, p. 9).
While my stance is not to say that there are multiple realities, I do believe that there is not one interpretation of any particular event. In both Critical Race Theory and constructivism, “knowledge in itself is not seen as the ultimate goal, rather the goal is the change that this knowledge may help to bring about” (Wilson, 2008, p. 37).

While Critical Race Theory is helpful in understanding marginalization dynamics, there are others who argue that it does not do enough to cover the Indigenous perspective. Indigenous people experience oppression, but “the deep structures of the ‘pedagogy of oppression’ fail to consider American Indians as a categorically different population, virtually incomparable to other minority groups” (Grande, 2000, p. 468). Hence, it is essential to incorporate an Indigenous paradigm such as that described by Tribal Critical Race theory (TribalCrit). Tribal Critical Race Theory is based on nine tenets as outlined here:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialize natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.

8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.

9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. (Brayboy, 2006, pp. 429-430)

My goal is to use the knowledge I acquired from my research project to inspire change and improvements in student support efforts. Understanding all perspectives of the power dynamics at play can be helpful in gaining an understanding of the greater picture.

I also make references to relationality as described by Wilson (2008) and the Indigenous wellness model as described by Secatero (2015) as guiding sources to understanding how we can each work on ensuring that we are holistically taking care of ourselves and recognizing the medicine that drives our desire to be our best selves. All of these Indigenous ideologies (TribalCrit, Relationality, and the Indigenous Wellness Model) allowed me to contextualize and derive the full power of Indigenous knowledge and story (Brayboy, 2006; Secatero, 2015; Wilson, 2008).

**Mode of Inquiry: Qualitative Method**

I utilized a qualitative method approach to explore my research questions. My research questions as presented “… are about understanding their (students) experiences and would call for a qualitative design” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). As I sought to utilize student narratives and perspectives as data and “understand how people interpret
their experiences…construct their worlds…and attribute meaning to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6), I felt that a qualitative research project would be most helpful. My goal was to “seek to make sense of personal stories and ways in which they intersect” (Glesne, 2016, p. 1) while keeping in mind that “the word qualitative implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4).

I felt that this method was most helpful as I explored my overarching research questions. We must consider the implications of institutional practices such as placement testing for example and the values and norms tied to that process, which may initiate an instant disconnect of a student’s desired educational expectations. The placement process not only engenders a set of unacknowledged barriers but can also have detrimental subjective implications of inferiority. The qualitative method was useful for deeper inquiry into what students experience not only with the placement process but the value they place on higher education and their feelings of connectedness to this investment. Understanding the coping and motivating mechanisms utilized by students can further strengthen current support efforts and programs.

This allowed me to compare and contrast student perspectives of institutional values with the overall institutional intention of strengthening students’ prospects for success and greater educational satisfaction.

**Methodology**

For my research project, I attempted to understand student values and perceived institutional value based on student perceptions. Much like Tinto who clarifies, “Student
perspectives versus institutional perspective, while related, are not the same. Their interests are different” (2017, p. 254). I appropriated an arts-based inquiry framework, utilizing photovoice (or other form of artwork) narrative, individual interviews, and a focus group/talking circle method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 65). Images “can serve as signifiers of culture, highlighting values and expectations of individuals, communities, and society” (Liebenberg, 2018, p. 3). Photovoice inspires critical thought and reflection, which made for a richer narrative and discussion. With this approach, “images are then collectively interpreted, and finally, resulting findings, and emerging knowledge together with identified issues and resources are shared with policy makers with the intent to promote social change” (Liebenberg, 2018, p.4).

**Relationality**

Relationality is the key catalyst that inspired me to do this research project and brought meaning and value to my efforts. I feel that each participant’s personal journey held a greater purpose of communal accountability based on relations. We each have a story and from within that story we derive meaning in our relationships, relationships with ourselves, those around us and our relationship to living and nonliving subjects alike (Wilson, 2008). In that same light, I feel that we each have a relationship with our everyday endeavors, our goals and the journey that gets us to those goals. Relationships are more important than “the concepts or ideas…that went into forming them. Again, an Indigenous epistemology has systems of knowledge built upon relationships between things, rather than on the things themselves” (Wilson, 2008, p. 74). Therefore, it is also fitting to employ narrative inquiry because “the oldest and most natural form of sense making is that of stories or narratives” (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002, p. 66).
Photovoice and narrative inquiry helped to ensure that I acquired a well-rounded description of those relationships that the student was experiencing. Photos and narratives are a part of our main styles of communication, not only in historical times, but in contemporary times as social media platforms continue to grow in popularity. My hope was to inspire the creation of a creative medium for expression and, in the process, organically induce critical thought and reflection for the student.

Site of the Study

I conducted my study at the SWNTCU. This institution attracts many American Indian students from the region (see Appendix A for IRB approval letter). The SWNTCU campus has a 68% American Indian student population with enrollment at about 2,500 (Official SWNTCU Enrollment Report, 2019), which is a higher percentage than any of the other non-tribal community campuses including the flagship campus within the state which has a 5.3% American Indian student headcount for undergraduates (Official SWNTCU Enrollment Report, 2019). While the student demographics have shifted toward becoming more diversified with the addition of the on-campus high school programs, the American Indian student population remains the majority at 68.2%, which is a decrease from the 76.3% reported in 2017 (Official SWNTCU Enrollment Report, 2021). With the onset of the pandemic the enrollment numbers have seen a steady decline in enrollment, including that of the American Indian student population, with a drop down to 63.9% in Fall of 2020, and signs of improvement in the Fall of 2021 which reported 65.6% American Indian student population (Official SWNTCU Enrollment Report, 2021).
The retention and graduation rates for American Indian students made this an ideal site to conduct my study. American Indian students have always been underrepresented in the field of higher education and using this location as my site of study has the capacity to impact a larger number of students in the long term. I also want to make note that despite our high representation of American Indian students, there are no culturally related resources or programs available. While we may not have the opportunity as of yet to offer transformative change on a grander scale, I felt that we should at least try to understand the challenges at the community college level.

**Method of Data Collection and Sampling**

I sought to capture the student perspective through their own interpretation and experience. I felt that the best approach to capturing the students’ perspectives was through photovoice or other artistic expression, individual student interviews, and a Focus Group or Talking Circle. I utilized a nonprobability sampling method with a purposeful sampling approach to ensure that there was richer discussion and insight with a group of people who “know the most about the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 114). I distributed a campus-wide recruitment flier through email and campus postings. I also relied on word-of-mouth referrals from our Native American studies and Navajo language courses. My hope was that those students who agreed to participate would encourage their peers to participate as well, a process known as snowball sampling, which identifies possible participants from people who know people who might be good examples for the study (Patton, 1990, p. 176). This study was also available to alumni, as they are students who could possess significant hindsight. This study was designed to focus on an in-depth understanding and therefore sought to recruit no more than 25
participants and a minimum of 10 participants to ensure that I had enough data. In quantitative studies, power calculations determine sample size (N) however, in comparison, for qualitative studies no similar standards for assessment of sample size exist (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016, p. 1753). For interviews, there have been several general references to a 10-60 sample size frame of reference before reaching a saturation point and general rules of thumb (Sim, Saunders, Waterfield, & Kingstone, 2018). There are also no published hard and fast rules on group sizing for focus groups, however Merriam and Tisdell recommend between six to ten participants (2016, p. 114).

Students who were interested in participating were asked to fill out a screening survey. The criteria for selection was based on the following: (a) must have been 18 years of age or older, (b) must have identified as a Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native student, (c) must have self-identified as a first-generation student, (d) must have been a registered student within the timeframe of 2011 and 2021. The students were then notified via a welcome email that outlined their next steps.

My final sample consisted of 12 students, six of whom participated in the focus group/talking circle (see Table 1 for selected participant demographic information and focus group identification). Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 67 years of age (self-reported). Almost all students reported growing up on the reservation and are currently still residing on the reservation. With the exception of one participant who reported being partially raised on the reservation and now lives in a reservation border town. Eleven of the participants are citizens of the Navajo Nation with one reporting as being Sioux.
### Table 1

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Tribal Membership</th>
<th>Raised on the reservation?</th>
<th>Years of attendance at SWNTCU?</th>
<th>Are you first generation?</th>
<th>Are you bilingual?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timothy</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>One Year</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah*</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>One Year</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica*</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>Three Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly*</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>Three Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>Eight Years (Part-time)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>Six Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>Eight Years (Part-time)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry*</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>One Year</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica*</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>Two Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley*</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>Seventeen Years (Part-time)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Navajo Nation</td>
<td>Yes; Yes</td>
<td>Four Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Sioux</td>
<td>Yes, partially</td>
<td>Five+ Years (Part-time)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Focus group participant*
The number of years that the participants have been attending SWNTCU ranged between first-year students to those who have been attending for eight years (part-time students) and one participant who has been attending off and on for seventeen years. More than half of the students reported being bilingual, while four of the participants reported not being bilingual. I collected consent forms prior to initiating every method of data collection (see Appendix B for a copy of the Consent Form).

**Photovoice/Visual Aid and Artist Statement**

Given that my study is focused on student perspective and their personal experiences, I wanted to provide the students an opportunity to express themselves through a form of visual art, photovoice as an option. Photovoice, a form of participatory action research, has been used by researchers to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of people from underrepresented and underserved populations (O’Malley & Munsell, 2020, p. 26). Further, photovoice uses reflective photography to:

1. enable people to record and reflect community strengths and concerns,
2. promote knowledge and critical dialogue about community issues and their impact on individuals through group discussion of images, and
3. reach and inform policy makers to bring about change. (Wang, 1999, p. 185)

I collected two student photos or art-based expression (drawing, story, symbolic artifact) that were representative of their values and/or that which constitutes cultural knowledge. I also asked for two additional photos or art-based expression of what the student perceived as institutional values and knowledge. Each photo came with an artist statement to explain their visual. The photos were also used to elicit student discussion for the individual interviews and focus group if they chose to participate.
Students used their personal cellphones to take their photos; however, if they needed a camera, then I opted to supply them with one. I provided guiding questions and students creatively answered through a visual narrative. I requested that students submit at least two pictures for each question. I also included ethical guidelines to protect all participants and subjects’ privacy and security (see Appendix C in the Photovoice Ethics Section).

Upon receiving notice of the students’ completion of this portion of the study, via email or phone call, I scheduled a date for their individual interview. I collected all visuals and artist statements at the end of the Individual student interviews and typed all statements into a single MS Word document for data analysis and coding.

**Individual Student Interview**

I also conducted a semi-structured individual interview with each participant lasting about 90 minutes. I started with some general demographic questions. During the early part of the interview, students also elaborated on their artist statements and experience with their photovoice submissions. The next set of questions focused on examining student’s culturally related values and knowledge through an Indigenous Wellness lens. I also included questions that probed student perception of institutional values through an Indigenous Wellness lens (see Appendix D for semi-structured interview protocol).

I digitally audio recorded the interviews for transcription. Half of the audio recordings were transcribed using the Microsoft Word Online transcription feature and the other half were transcribed by a service called Rev.Com. I also took detailed notes on
my observations of body language and other cues that may not have been evident in the audio recordings.

**Focus Group/Talking Circle**

Another form of qualitative research data collection involves focus groups, or if taking an Indigenous approach, a talking circle. I chose this method because it is understood that gaining perspective from participants is necessary “when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). This portion of the study focused on how students incorporate meaning and purpose with regards to their educational experience. A focus group allowed me to have leading questions to guide the conversation but also have some flexibility to let the participants lead the discussion in case they disclosed information that I did not think to ask (see Appendix E for focus group / talking circle protocol). This helped the conversation conform with what the participants were thinking. This approach helps in an Indigenous context because “for Native peoples, stories are a legitimate tool for relating with others, sharing knowledge across generations, analyzing life circumstances, and seeking solutions for the future” (Tachine, 2018, p. 64).

I digitally audio recorded the talking circle. Audio recordings were transcribed using a transcribing service called Rev.Com. I also took notes on visual cues and body language that may not have been apparent on a recording. I also noted other information about the level of interaction and engagement. I asked each student to rank the images in order of importance to them on a separate sheet of paper that they shared with me anonymously that I collected for analysis.
Data Analysis

There is a preference for simultaneous analysis and collection of data in a qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 197). For narrative inquiry, “there are no formulae or recipe for the ‘best’ way to analyze the stories we elicit and collect” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 80). Narrative methods focus on “four analytic methods for analyzing stories – thematic, structural, dialogic performance, and visual” (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016, p. 232). I analyzed my data utilizing In Vivo coding, manually to start and identifying emerging concepts, themes and categories. Utilizing this data analysis process allowed me to see patterns of emerging themes across all three forms of data collected. Tachine explained a similar process for searching out emerging themes in her research:

By using a story rug framework, I was able to process through the findings section and maintain the individuality of each of the student stories as well as gather students’ experience into collective ‘designs.’ And in this example the designs created the themes the students shared in common. (2018, p. 70)

To elaborate further on my coding process, I used concepts derived from grounded theory as described by Charmez, “coding means that we attach labels to segments of data that depict what each segment is about” (2014, p. 4). Utilizing the framework and methods described by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), I used an MS Excel spreadsheet to organize my coding phases for each individual interview into one workbook. I started my first phase of coding using provisional codes, also referred to as a priori codes. This approach begins with a “start list” of researcher-generated codes, based on what preparatory investigation suggests might appear in the data before they are
collected and analyzed (Miles et al., 2014, p. 68). I then went through a second cycle of this first phase of coding using In Vivo coding and descriptive coding. In Vivo coding uses words or short phrases from the participant’s own language in the data record as codes (Miles, et. al., 2014, p. 68). A descriptive code assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase - most often a noun - the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data (Miles et al., 2014, p. 68). I then moved onto my second phase of coding, which was a focused coding phase. I used a master list at the end of my MS Excel workbook of all the codes generated from each individual interview and organized them into related clusters. I then went back through my first cycle of coding and recoded the appropriate sections using my second-level codes.

I then moved onto my focus group transcripts and used the same process and phases of coding throughout, this time using an MS Word table for ease of coding and highlighting sections pertaining to each question.

For my photovoice coding, I used a combination of codes generated from the photos themselves, the artist statements, and the individual interview responses to the question as to why each student chose their photo for the prompt. The data most often analyzed in Photovoice are the transcribed text participants provide as they discuss their photographs (Chapman, Wu, & Zhu, 2016, p. 2). Using an MS Word document, I created a table in a Word document to house all focused codes generated for each photo, artist statement and the “why this photo” interview question transcripts, which allowed me to see all codes across all methods of collection on one document.

Finally, I searched for and identified emergent themes and patterns across all modes of data collected. Pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that
identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation (Miles et al., 2014, p. 78). Pattern codes usually consist of four, often interrelated, summarizers: categories or themes; causes/explanations; relationships among people; and theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2014, p. 79). After using data triangulation across all modes of data collection, I identified themes through the convergence of concepts. I was then inspired to utilize a mapping method to organize the emerging themes for each data set to address my overarching research questions more holistically. I used an adaptation of Clark’s description of situational analysis mapping (2005, p. 25). Maps are visual representations; “they helpfully rupture our normal ways of working and may provoke us to see things afresh… devices for making assemblages and connections – relational analyses” (Clark, 2005, p. 25).

The first visual that I created had two parts; Map 1: Cultural Values, which laid out the five emerging themes from the Cultural Values prompt via photovoice and their relations and Map 2: Institutional Values, which laid out the four emerging themes from the Institutional Values prompt via photovoice and their relations. Next was Map 3: Through the lens of an Indigenous Wellness Model, which laid out the emerging themes that were expressed through interview and photo elicitation; followed by Map 4: Education and Leadership, which laid out the themes of the meaning of an education and student’s perception of leadership that were expressed through interview and photo elicitation. Finally, I have Map 5: Relationships, which provides an overall picture of all topics for discussion. See figures listing for all five maps that were generated through my analysis. All five maps helped me to understand the students’ perceptions of the value of: cultural knowledge, well-being, an education, and how that impacts leadership overall.
Research Integrity/Rigor

Qualitative research requires that you are producing valid and reliable findings in an ethical manner. Triangulation is “probably the best-known strategy to shore up the internal validity of a study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 244). Utilizing multiple methods of data collection, which in my case would be photovoice, interview, and a focus group, allowed me to triangulate my emerging themes and increase “the credibility or internal validity” of this research project (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245).

Goodness “is a means of locating situatedness, trustworthiness and authenticity” (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 390). Locating situatedness is important to ensure that the study be conducted in the environment that will provide the best insight into the phenomenon that is being studied. As we work toward understanding the student perspective through a cultural lens, it is the students in this specific cultural context that will bring direct meaning to their experiences to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity to the study. This will ensure that the research project is authentic and that the sampling is a proper representation of the targeted population of students.

Transferability requires that we are able to use this study to better understand other categories of similar populations to draw inferences of their perspectives and experiences. My whole purpose for conducting this study is the hope of applying what I learned to similar populations, those beyond this region including other Indigenous populations.

Dependability is necessary to ensure that what we draw from the research project is as accurate as possible so that it will be deemed useful in other populations who might wish to duplicate a similar study.
Confirmability states that we must be able to draw out meaning from a particular dataset that aligns with what others might interpret from that same dataset. Having a clear dataset helps confirm that your interpretation is accurate and true.

Authenticity closely relates to goodness but also requires that the interviewee and interviewer both understand the shared information as the interviewee intends. This ensures that the message you are conveying is not misconstrued and is a true interpretation of the interview.

Credibility is ensuring that you are representing the interviewee in the most accurate way possible. It is important to always write your interpretation of interviewee responses without bias or added emphasis in any way.

The ethical foundation upon which I conducted my research corresponds to the 4 R’s as described by Wilson (2008), Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Rights and Regulations. This foundation ensured that I was operating within ethical boundaries and it added to the validity and reliability of my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Respect goes without saying and should be practiced in any type of research project. We must learn from our subjects and value their input on the direction of the research. Reciprocity is the exchange of services that benefit all parties involved. In exchange for the valuable knowledge that was shared, I will do my best to provide a service that could be of benefit to those that were involved. As the researcher, I have a responsibility to convey the message in a respectful manner and to find ways to make a positive change with the knowledge that is gained while fully understanding that I do not own the rights to this research but rather it is the property of the participants and should never be used in an
exploitive manner. These perspectives and philosophies helped me gain a greater understanding of the student experience while maintaining ethical boundaries.

Limitations

The limitations to this type of research depend not only on how much data one collects but also the quality of the data. The quality of the data collected closely relates to the clarity and specificity of my guiding questions across all forms of data collection. I had to ask the right questions to add value to my research and collect enough data and dialogue to be relevant to the study. Regional validity may be another limitation, while my work may be useful to our campus, other institutions may still have the potential for differing perceptions.

Summary

Through a qualitative study, I was able to explore how Indigenous students relate their own cultural values to their perceptions of the institution’s values and how that impacts their educational experience. Limiting my study to one site allowed for a richer discourse among participants about their perspectives of a shared experience. Utilizing a Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory approach interwoven with other Indigenous ontologies referencing Relationality and an Indigenous Wellness Model, I collected data through photovoice, an arts-based narrative, personal interviews, and a talking circle with participants. I analyzed my data by coding and identifying emerging themes. This multiple data collection approach provided triangulation methods to ensure rigor and trustworthiness.
Chapter 4

Research Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings to describe students’ perspectives on their educational journey through a cultural lens and expressed through photovoice, interviews and a focus group/talking circle. To situate these narratives within the context of an Indigenous paradigm, I offer an overview of the interweaving of the Tribal Critical Race Theory, Relationality, and an Indigenous Wellness Model (Braybody, 2006; Secatero, 2015; Wilson, 2008). Throughout the presentation of my findings, I invite you to consider the emphasis on the following tenets:

Tenet 1 – Colonization is endemic to society.

Tenet 5 - The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on a new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.

Tenet 7 – Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.

Tenet 8 – Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being. (Brayboy, 2006, pp. 429-430)

I begin with the presentation of the findings through photovoice, which focuses on cultural and institutional values. The emerging themes of these findings will be discussed through the relations that students have developed with each. The concepts or ideas are not as important as the relationships that went into forming them (Wilson, 2006,
I follow this with a discussion about the emerging themes of students’ description of well-being through an Indigenous Wellness Model as described by Secatero (2015). Lastly, I conclude this chapter by describing the students’ perception and meaning of their educational journey and the impact that it has on their conceptions of leadership.

**Cultural Values**

In this section, I describe the relationships that the participants depicted and later described as their inspiration for each photo that was submitted. There were 24 photos submitted for this portion of the photovoice task (see Appendix F for all photo submissions). Each student was asked to provide two photos to address the prompt as follows: What culturally related value, work ethic or knowledge did you learn that has been most useful to you and your educational journey? Drawing upon the work of Wilson (2008), I conceptualized the abstract yet integral relations that were derived from the most mentioned and emergent themes.

I start with the presentation of my findings through photovoice, which focuses on cultural values. The emerging themes of these finding as mentioned, will be discussed through the relationships that these students have developed with each. Map 1: Cultural Values, lays out the five emerging themes from the Cultural Values prompt via photovoice and their relations (see Figure 2). For example, we have Spirituality as an emergent theme and the relationships with spirituality include: Ceremony and Prayer, Spirituality as Strength and Spirituality and its role in Life and Education. I review each of these areas in greater depth throughout this section.
Figure 2

Map 1: Cultural Values

Relationships with Family

Every single photo that was submitted had a reference to family or held some meaning that tied back to family. Whether it was a direct reference to familial ties, family heirlooms, an expression of honoring those that went before us or conveyed notions of caring for others, it is evident that family holds profound value in the lives of the participants. This is congruent with the findings presented by Guillory and Wolverton where family was the most frequently (i.e., 21 out of 30 students) mentioned factor affecting persistence, serving as a motivational factor (2008, p. 74).

Ancestors, Grandparents, Parents and, Community

Many of the participants described the aforementioned as generational transferers of knowledge, in the form of, but not limited to, origin stories, parables, wisdom,
guidance, trade or craftsmanship. One example as explained by Sarah (pseudonym),
“…[first photo] I picked because I felt like, gardening and planting is really big in my family and based on the question, there’s a lot of knowledge and traditional values that were passed down from generation to generation.” She went on to explain that planting has instilled within her the value of hard work, “…all the work that I was putting into it was making everything grow more.” Throughout her interview, I quickly realized that although she was talking about the process of planting, she was also making an analogy to life and learning in general.

*Family as role models*

There were also multiple references to the concept of role models and how they are the driving force behind the students’ efforts to keep going. Timothy explained,

> It shows my passion for art and how much I really love doing art. I think I mainly got it from my late dad because he, too, was an artist and he was drawing Native American designs here and there. And I guess that’s what inspired me.

There were also those who participated in ceremony in hopes of following in the footsteps of another who has benefitted from similar practice. This was the case with Erica, who reflected on her image of a Tipi (see Figure 3) and her experiences of attending an NAC (Native American Church) ceremony:

> You also get a lot of cultural value teachings when you attend this kind of ceremony and seeing one of my, I consider her one of my sisters even though she’s not. I’ve seen her go and attend these ceremonies for herself regarding her education and I do believe that’s what helped her along the way in life because now she’s in Med school.
I also saw that some students were driven by the possibility of being the role models for their family members. Kelly explained:

I talked to a couple of my nieces and my nephews and I was asking them what they wanted to be when they grew up. And they said they wanted to be in the military or something that related to that, and for them they see me as, ummm, like how would you say it? Like someone who they can look up to because so far, I’m accomplishing my dreams. And, yeah, the children are important above all, they are the future of humanity. And yeah, that’s why I chose that [points at photo of herself in traditional attire and a quote about Diné women warriors].

Currently, this student aspires to go into the military but is working towards earning her associate degree first.

**Figure 3**

*Ceremonial Tipi*
**Family as Motivation**

In a similar context, many of the participants reported family as a huge motivating factor for their educational endeavors and the reason they “keep going” with their studies. Nora told the story of her grandparents and why she chose the photos of them for her prompt:

My grandparents are my greatest influence. To begin with, my grandparents never went to school. My grandfather did work on the railroad, that’s where he learned to speak both English and Spanish. Yes, he was raised on the reservation and he did herd sheep, but that’s not what he wanted to continue to do, so he worked. My grandmother never went to school, she never knew how to write. With those two in mind, and being the first grandchild of my grandparents, they’ve always encouraged me to go on to school. I did get accepted to NAU. I said, I can’t get my scholarship Grandma, I’m going to have to go until next fall or next spring. She says, No, you can’t, you’re going. I said, Grandma, I have no money. She says, I’m going to sell my sheep. I’m like, no you can’t do that. She says, I’m going to sell my livestock. I said, no Grandma, that’s your life. She says, no I’m telling you to go and you’re going.

As the participant was retelling her story, I could tell that this was a very emotional story for her and I could feel her pride and then her pain as she recalled the loss of her Grandmother while she was at NAU. She did not continue there [NAU], but moved home and eventually found her way to this campus. Nora admits, “I didn’t go back [NAU]. To this day, I feel that she’s [late Grandma] still on me about it, so I came back [to school].”
Family as Caregiver

Indigenous views on family have always placed great emphasis on caring for your elders, family members and even extending into caring for your neighbors and community. American Indian families have always been very family oriented and is evident through multigenerational homes where it is commonplace to see grandparents and adult children all living in the same home or in very close proximity to each other. A great demonstration of this is Rick’s pictures of a wood pile and coal pile, which evoked a long narration of the process of wood-hauling but more importantly, highlighting the act and kindness of helping family prepare for winter. Rick sat back and told his story about bringing wood for this brother:

We got the woods and so the way I see it is, how would you [speaks in Navajo and then returns to English] I mean, the way I would put it is brotherly love. Because I already did this for my mom, I brought in six loads of wood, this kind [points at photo]. So pretty much, I hope we’re going to have enough wood. So then one of the Chapter officials told me, she asked me to help the official to bring in the woods from Mount Taylor back to [community in Navajo] where we live, for the needy. Elders.

He continued to explain that he and his wife have been busy helping out their family members not only prepare for winter, but also help them around their house due to illness, health issues and elderly assistance.

Another participant, Kelly, read from a picture of her favorite quote [next to her self-portrait]:
The warrior, is not someone who fights, for no one has the right to take another life. The warrior for us, is the one who sacrifices himself for the good of the others. His task is to take care of the elderly. The defenseless, those who cannot provide for themselves.

I continue onto Donna’s photo of a Hogan, where she grew up, as another example of caring for family (see Figure 4). First caring for her siblings growing up and now taking care of her own kids, Donna explained,

Where I grew up with my younger sibling and with my parents has a lot of personal meaning to me. Just the hardships that we endured there with them. Growing up with no electricity, no running water. That really, I guess that, makes me appreciate what we have now and what I try to provide to my kids. So that’s my reasoning, I guess for selecting that photo, is what I went through, what I experienced and stuff, to get me where I’m at. And what I want to continue to accomplish going forward.

Figure 4

Home
As she reflected on her picture, there was a sense of pride but also a recognition that growing up on the reservation comes with many hardships and there is a desire to not have to live with those same struggles moving forward, especially for her kids.

Nora also reflects on her father’s ability to care for his family despite having very few resources:

He always made sure that we were well taken care of, my dad. My dad always, made sure there was food on the table, that we never had to go hungry. I always looked up to my dad. I was like, Wow. Who would do this? Someone like him. People, they just give up. I said, Am I going to give up? I had to ask myself that. That’s why I’m pushing myself. I know at times it gets hard.

In the Indigenous world, we refer to everyone as relatives; hence, caring for your relatives stretches beyond the bounds of one’s immediate nuclear family. As demonstrated through Katherine’s photo of a painting of her great-great-great Grandfather who was a chief of their band. Katherine shared:

My Grandfather, he in that picture is wearing two medals given to him by the federal government and they are Medals of Peace. Because he went with other chiefs, you know to Washington to have talks. To make decisions for the people in general, and with thoughts of not wanting to have war anymore, we want to survive. You know, he thought of his people and survival and knew that change was coming and having to move forward and accept the way that things are changing. For the survival of his people. You know, that’s pretty difficult. I think about that constantly, that’s always in the back of my head, like how? How do you adapt to things? I think of the way things were changing and how it affected
my family on my mom’s side. You know further like from my great-great-great
Grandfather to my Grandfather and then eventually my mom and how that has
affected me. So after that, after they had to assimilate, you know from there they
had to live on reservations and they had to, like, start going to boarding schools.
And all of that, I mean it’s not good, but you can think of it as resiliency.

Relationships with Spirituality

The next most referenced and illustrated topic was spirituality. Many expressed
that spirituality was a major part of their life and the reason for their ability to overcome
challenges. In observation, I also took note that speaking of this topic in this particular
setting seemed to accentuate the obvious disconnect of spirituality within this
institutional setting. The students reticently insinuate that while spirituality is very
important to them, they knew that this was separate from their campus life. In broader
American culture, there is a tendency to split the different aspects of human experience,
such as compartmentalizing spirituality as organized religion. In contrast, most American
Indian teachings describe these realms as totally integrated and inseparable in their
Wellness model (Secatero, 2015) reinforces the importance of spirituality and the
influence of spiritual forces in the balance of one’s life (Cross, 2002).

Ceremony and Prayer

While the participants had differing religious beliefs, it was clear that they were
all very strongly connected to their spirituality and have respect for all beliefs whether it
was traditional beliefs, NAC (Native American Church), Christianity, Catholicism or a
combination of those. Many of the participants spoke of participating in ceremonies and/or finding strength through prayer when things got tough. Karen told her story:

And I always remember my mom fanning herself [in the Tipi], and praying, and talking to her feathers, and really just getting everything that was bothering her out. And that’s why I chose the fan because in the Navajo way they always say the Eagle represents a guidance that takes your prayers up to the father sky, to Diyin, or God, and he would hear it, hear what you had to say (see Figure 5). So that’s one of the reasons why I chose feathers as my reference for the picture. And I always remember seeing that. And so now when I come up to my stressful moments, that’s the same route I’ve taken. It’s helped me get this far. A couple of times, I’ve thought of giving up.

**Figure 5**

*Prayer Fan*
As a Means of Strength

There were also many references to turning to one’s spirituality and finding strength through their beliefs. There are those who have experienced many hardships and lost loved ones and have found strength in their spirituality so that they can keep going with their life and schooling, such as this student who not only lost her Grandparents but also lost her dad and then her husband. Nora explained:

Obviously the first one [picture of Bible] is just my faith. I am a Christian. However, I do respect my own traditional belief. My faith is what I always rely back on, as a person. Losing your spouse is a whole different story. I’ve come across women who I’ve met who’ve told me that they’re taking it hard and they don’t know how to handle it. I know many times I’ve said, Lord just take me home. I’m ready to go. But he said, No, not your time. We all have a time in life. He just laid it out straight, said, No, you have a reason for this life. You’re going to help other women. That’s what I keep falling back on, is just my faith as a Christian and then know that I do know a little bit about my traditional Navajo beliefs. I do respect that and just try to remember what Grandma has taught me. That’s it.

Role in Life and Education

We move onto very specific ceremonies and prayers that have been utilized to bless one’s academic journey. These ceremonies have been described as very taxing and labor intensive, however they are meant to provide the student with all that is necessary to be successful in their academic journey. There is much planning and preparation that is required as Erica described:
This type of ceremony was done for me, for my education and I’ve had a couple of them done, but that was way back when I was like maybe seven or five. But it wasn’t for educational purposes, it’s just for like my whole well-being like just to grow up and do good things. And as I got to high school, it [ceremony for education] just kept getting postponed and postponed and postponed. We had to umm, every time we would schedule it, something would always pop up like, oh someone like a family member passed away or something additional happened where you can’t have it and it prevented that and always just kept wondering why, you know? Until two years ago, my sophomore year here [attending an affiliate high school situated on our campus]. Oh, how do I put this? It finally happened. My mom said, Ok, there’s a reason why we can’t get this done. So we got a prayer done for it just so we could have this ceremony and I was telling my mom once we finally had this, it was really spiritual for me. In this picture of the Tipi, it was that day.

She goes on to describe the events that transpired in the ceremonial Tipi and how difficult it was for her yet how meaningful and spiritual the experience was. Erica recalls, “I felt like I was going to faint, I just felt like giving up. But once I went back in [after a break] everything all got better, it was smooth from there.” Comparing her experience in the Tipi metaphorically with her educational journey, she explained:

Since this was for my education and the kind of field I want to go into, it’s going to be tough. Like it’s going to be so hard to the point where I’m going to want to give up, but then I’m going to get through it, like I’m going to graduate. That’s what I took from this, from my experience. So ever since then, that’s like really
driven me to what I really want to do [career], even though I’m kind of scared to take certain classes. But I know I have to, and I know that I have to work hard for it.

**Relationships with Traditional Knowledge and Identity**

There was also a strong representation of traditional and/or cultural knowledge expressed through various forms, to embody or illuminate one’s identity; all of which also incorporates the first two themes of family and spirituality. Cajete shared, “It begins with creating and sharing a group of stories, traditions and rituals that emerge from what the group holds in common: a vision of life, a history, a network of relationships, and a shared sense of responsibilities” (2015, p. 84). It is clear that this knowledge and identity instilled a sense of pride but also carried meanings and responsibilities associated with that status.

**Turquoise, Silver, and Jewelry**

American Indians of the Southwest have always been known for their authentic jewelry and many times, that jewelry would incorporate turquoise and silver in some form. What some may not know is that there is meaning beyond what may be thought of as just an adornment. Rick shared some of his insight on this topic, while the Navajo version of his story is rich with explanation, I will share in his own words what he shared in English:

I made this bracelet (see Figure 6). It’s got seven turquoise stones. It’s called Sleeping Beauty, and it’s made out of sterling silver. So this bracelet, I don’t make it, I mean, I make it but I don’t sell it. It’s for my own personal use. It represents turquoise [Navajo language]. Your mind goes into how it’s going to
come out, how it’s going to look, how it’s going to represent. Each of these stones, you’re going to have to give them names. But these names will have to stay here. Don’t give it out. My family, there’s five. Me, my wife and we have three kids. I have seven stones, so that represents my family, my parents (my mom and dad).

He continued to tell other stories in Navajo, one of which explains the meaning of a coral necklace and is traditionally worn by women. When a woman is wearing coral, it is her protection and she will be protected from any negative energy. Rick is an excellent storyteller and as I was interviewing him, I realized that he was not one to answer questions directly but rather, he told a story in Navajo and English, from which I had to extract the answer. But what was absolutely fascinating was that there was so much more than answers, his stories went beyond my inquiry and I really felt like at the end of what I thought was chitchat was a window into who he really was, a knowledge carrier and transferrer who wants younger generations to be successful. Rick proclaimed, “I have respect for these younger generation. I want to see all these younger generation to complete their school. Just like my instructor she’s a doctor, like what you’re going for, I respect that.”
Nora shared with me the value of her jewelry:

This is my Grandma’s ring and her beads. This is something she always carried, had with her. She never departed from it. I am her first grandchild, so I took it and her ring that she always wore. I’m sorry, but I miss them very much. My Grandfather, he gave me this for Christmas. Obviously that’s pretty much a lot. My Grandparents are my greatest influence. … [reflects on her first time going to college] Now I’ve got to register. Grandma says, I’ll go with you. We went and we walked into registration. I always remember that she was dressed up traditionally, and I thought, wow my own mother cannot do this for me. My Grandfather was very supportive. He said, “you do your best, you go to school. We didn’t go to school. We had to learn the hard way. I don’t want you to live that lifestyle that we have lived and trying to make ends meet.” Grandma always told me, you come back and work for your people, don’t forget us. Don’t forget your people. Don’t forget where you came from. I guess those are some of the
things, reasons, that’s why I hang on to these. When things get tough, I think about that.

Erica also related the story of turquoise that was told to her:

There are different stories that come with turquoise. And I was always told by one of my Grandpas that if you wear turquoise, the Gods will look down on you and say, that’s my child, so I try to keep that with me every day. I try to wear something revolving around that, and just makes me think of who I am and where I come from. I was always told that when you like, let’s say speak somewhere, at a big conference or something, to wear your jewelry and skirt, because that represents who you are and where you come from. And also, that people are going to pay attention to you.

**Origin Stories**

There are many ways to communicate lessons and stories that explain one’s origin or identity. The structures of myth and oral expression form the very basis of traditional Indigenous education (Cajete, 2015, p. 96) These stories come in all forms such as parables, allegorical references and metaphors, to name a few. Cajete explains, “Indigenous storying develops four basic disciplines of thinking, all which feed the creative learning process: attention, creative imagination, flexibility, and fluency of thinking” (2015, p. 96). Ashley shared her story:

The story my dad talked about, how our clan was originated. And using that story, this picture here [points at picture of sash belt and jewelry] represents the woman who overcame the Long Walk. How she overcame and broke free from that Long Walk. And she ran away and she survived. She survived coming back to the
reservation at night and during the day she would sleep. She was able to overcome all the obstacles that she came across and having to come across these animals and getting hit by a bear and the bear taking care of her and sleeping in the canyons. I think the impact it’s had on me is looking at the strongness of women. When I wear jewelry that was given to me by my Grandmas, it makes me feel powerful. I feel like I can do anything when I’m wearing those items. And so, I think that’s a really strong connection and represents family in a sense. So, I think that’s a powerful statement. The first picture I chose was the sash belt, the pin for the bun. And I chose those pictures because as Native women, we’re strong regardless of what we go through. And every time I see those and I see a Navajo woman wearing her traditional outfit, it just kind of makes you think of why we’re here, what we’re supposed to be doing as Native women. So that just kind of empowers me to think, “Hey, Ashley, you need to really step up your game. You have these women who from back in time, who struggled, who went through these... I still can’t find the word for it. But they struggled and they’ve gone through so much and to come to this point for our Navajo women in life, just seeing us still taking that stand to be strong. That’s how I see Native women. Every time I see those, it breaks my heart. But it makes me even stronger too. Even when there are times when I feel like I want to give up, you see these strong women before you. And it just makes you want to keep going.

**Status and Responsibilities**

Indigenous identity comes with responsibilities and a duty to represent not only yourself but your family and community. As such, it is critical to live your life as an
example to others, especially if you’ve been entrusted with a role or status that represents more than just yourself. Jerry explained his view:

In this photo, I’m very serious and I’m taking my dancing very serious as to the point where I feel like it’s something that’s sacred to me. When I was growing up, I was told to carry myself and represent myself in a kind manner and that’s what kept me going, no matter how challenging it can be. I try to remain humble throughout my journey as I was growing up. But there are times when I’m not [when things get hard] and I usually have to come back to my roots and I think about what my values were and how I can cope with it. I never see myself better than anybody else.

He commented on his self-photo:

I see him being outgoing, very sociable. He’s very humble, and he’s always dancing for the good of it, for his people, representing his nation and showcasing his style. He’s representing more than his culture and nation. He’s representing his family. With each piece that is beaded, with each fabric that has been sewn with the feathers that he has earned, the moccasins that are tied to his feet, all created by family, feeling like a bunch of family members entrusted him with it. And he’s carrying that on, showcasing it to the world. And that’s what he is carrying, and that’s what he’s going to be representing.

These ideas are also exemplified in Katherine’s reflection on her photos that are representative of her father and the roles that he had:

He always took the seven virtues very seriously, praying, respect for everybody, compassion for everybody, honesty and truth, generosity and caring, humility, and
wisdom. So, he tried to live with those seven virtues and took them very seriously because he did do Sundance. He did have a pipe, so he carried the pipe and he tried to do the best that he could every day to, like, embody those teachings. Even though he was an elder and he doesn’t Sundance anymore, he still had to carry himself that way. Once you do Sundance, that’s for life. Some people might say, you’re a religious person for life. Like you have to maintain these qualities for us in your life.

**Relationships with Place**

Aligning with the literature on place as integral in situating identity, place tends to hold strong connections to family and the concept of home. Cajete explains, “Homeland is an extension of the ‘great holy’ in the perceptions, heart, mind, and soul of the Indigenous People who have lived in it over generations” (2015, p. 29). While this is not always easy to explain, it is evident in the descriptions and value students put on the concept of place. Cajete further adds, “The Indigenous sense of identity as a People is so interwoven with the ecological fabric of a region that it is no stretch to say that the people and their land are one ecological organism” (2015, p. 18).

**Home**

Many of us have heard the phrase, home is where the heart is. I think that is true, but mostly I think it is the memories and the relations that we create that are central to our connection to home. The “symbiotic life” refers to how Indigenous communities have lived in reciprocal and interdependent relationships with the living communities in the natural environment that surrounds them (Cajete, 2015, p. 30). Veronica told me her story of home:
This tree [points at her photo of a tree] has been in my Cheii’s side of the family.
The home, the house that is our summer camp, is up in the mountains and that tree has always been there. So that’s why we call it the Earl tree. It’s a very big pine and it’s just always been there ever since I was little. We’re always playing on it and building swings on it. And my Grandpa use to put antennas on it to listen to the radio and stuff because it’s very rural where it’s at. Yeah, it reminds me of family. I grew up here in Gallup. So, the landscape, like the piñon trees and the rocks and the sagebrush is very comforting to me. It’s where I grew up. So, if I’m like having a hard time or whatever, I’ll just go outside and sit under a tree or something. It’s very comforting.

It was clear that there were many fond memories of her time that she spent with her Grandfather who she refers to in her Native language as Cheii. This physical place brought memories beyond just place. She reflects on what she remembers and explains that he’s a role model for her:

He built a house up there, like a log cabin and a Hogan, with no help from any machinery. He used to plant and he used to have a cornfield and the extra produce, he used to disperse it to his neighbors and whoever was in need. That’s what our family was known for, helping people and he never asked for anything in return. It was like a model for me and I looked up to that and he provided for his family and my Grandma too, is the same way, she had a lot of kids.

Timothy also expressed his thoughts on this topic:

This one [hold up his picture of a model Hogan] (see Figure 7). So this one, as you can see, it’s a pile of small pebbles stacked as a Hogan, which represents a
long time ago, how Navajos used to live before we started living in square houses and I wanted to represent the feeling of home and how much it means to all of us. And I built that for one of my art projects and I thought I would bring it out here because it represents my passion for art as well as the Navajo culture as well.

**Figure 7**

*Hogan Replica*

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**Reservation Hardships**

Many of the participants also reflected on skills learned to survive reservation life. It was clear that they were proud of their heritage and where they come from, however there was also an acknowledgement of the hardships that one might face; for example, “over 40 percent of Navajo Nation households do not have running water in their homes and must rely on hauling water to meet their daily needs” (Lively, 2021, p. 2). The picture of the woodpile was one of the photos that most participants felt a sense of
connection to and identified many lessons learned from their experiences with chopping wood. Nora reflected on her experience:

My mom, they had just moved back down, right before my father had passed in ‘17, back down to Nation (Pseudonym). That’s where I’m originally from. That’s where my grandparents used to live, no running water, no electricity. It was very challenging, especially after deciding to go back to school. I had to haul water. My father had already passed on in September of 2017. It was just my mom. I’m the only one up here. I have six other siblings. They’re all in Texas or either down in Arizona, in California. I’m the one that’s just nearby. I thought, wow. I had to haul water for her. I had to find ways to make things easy and try to understand, said, okay, you know this. Grandma taught you. Grandma did not raise no fool. No, dad did not raise no fool. I said. That was my thing. I said, we can figure this out. My brother would come back up. He’s probably the only one that really helped, my brother that’s right after me, because we work very well together. We’ll try to figure out things to make things easy for my mom. I had to haul wood for her. I had sleepless nights. I’d come home 3:00 in the morning, get two hours, and then I have to go to work and come to school. My father passed on, and it tore me apart too, because I know these three [Grandparents and father] are the ones who really encouraged me and had confidence in me. My dad always told me, ‘as a woman, you need to know these things as far as your vehicle.’ I went, ‘Dad, I’m just a woman.’ He says, ‘This vehicle does not only operate on gas. You need to know what you’re doing. You need to know.’ I’m like, ‘Dad.’ ‘You can do it,’ he said, ‘you know. One day I’m not going to be here.’ I’m like, ‘Okay.’
Earlier, I included Rick’s descriptions of his yearly preparations for winter, having to bring wood and coal for his family, and beyond that, for other community members as well when he could. Many households even today utilize coal and wood due to older home dwellings or high and rising prices for propane. Poverty on the reservation is still an issue, the Navajo Nation has a poverty rate of over 40 percent (Lively, 2021, p. 2). Ashley, for example, reflected on this:

When I was younger, I think just having to live, I wouldn’t say in poverty because back in the time when I was growing up with my siblings, we did struggle. It was financially. But for us Native people, it was just something that we were born to live with. And I like the fact that I was taught from my parents chopping woods, the survival skills that we needed. And today we still use that skill.

**Relationships with Aspirations and Goals**

In relation to the concept of aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005, p. 77), the participants also expressed their hopes for continuing with their education and had stories of their hopes and dreams for their future. I delved deeper into this topic in later sections, as more direct references to their aspirations and goals can be seen in the second set of photos.

**Accomplishing Dreams**

Some participants also recognized that American Indian students are underrepresented in the field of academia. The resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). The opportunities for an education are not always evident for some. Kelly explained:
So, this picture I chose [self-portrait in her traditional Dine Woman Attire] because I value myself as a Native American student (see Figure 8). You know, I want to accomplish my dreams and you know, look back at this and say, as a Native American I accomplished something. Which someone might have not thought of me as. And you know, it just empowers me to reach my goals as a Native American student because as Natives, we don’t really have that many opportunities. This is an inspiration tool of how to accomplish my goals.

Figure 8

Dine’ Asdzáá

Erica also revealed:

My grandparents and the people before me didn’t do the things they did for me, to not go to school and not do something for myself. Whenever I think about that it really drives me to go to school. And also, I want to be a good role model for a lot of my peers and younger kids who really don’t know what they want to do with their life. Like as of now, like the little ones in my family always tell me, ask me
what I’m doing in school, like the kind of classes I’m taking and I’ll tell them and they’re like, wow. OK, that sounds interesting, they’re like, I want to do that. That really makes me proud because they look up to me. For those kinds of things. And also for my people, not just my tribe, but a lot of other tribes, I think we’re pretty underrepresented. Is that the word, underrepresented and I want to be one of those people who stand out.

**Institutional Values**

In this section, I continue describing the relationships conveyed by the participants as their rationale for each photo that was submitted. There were 16 photos and one blank, to represent the absence of existence due to the pandemic, for this portion of the photovoice task (see Appendix F for all photo submissions). Each student was asked to provide two photos to address the prompt as follows: From your perspective, what values does the institution espouse? This prompt was described as being difficult to answer and thus did not generate as many photos, with some students only bringing in one. I mentioned that there were no right or wrong answers when some participants were reluctant to give me their photos. They expressed uncertainty as to how it relates to their prompt.

Next, I have the presentation of my findings through photovoice, which focused on institutional values. The emerging themes of these findings will again be discussed through the relationships that these students have developed. Map 2: Institutional Values, lays out the five emerging themes from the Cultural Values prompt via photovoice and their relations (see Figure 9). For example, we have relationships with landscape and
scenery as an emergent theme and the relationships include, scenic beauty as metaphor and Landscape. I will go over each of these areas in greater depth throughout this section.

Figure 9

*Map 2: Institutional Values*

**Relationships with Landscape and Scenery**

Many of the pictures that were presented were those of landscape or scenic views taken while on campus, whether it was a picture of the tree or a sunset while on campus, there was an expression of gratitude and appreciation of the beauty that the campus had to offer. Cajete expressed, “Reconnecting to the power of place, Indigenous culture and experience create a unique relationship with place: our Peoples have engaged the unique environments and economies in our homelands and have interacted with place over generations to develop a sense for the spirit of the place” (2015, p. 122).
Scenic Beauty as Metaphor

As I looked at the picture of a sunset and then a tree with its bright red leaves due to the turning of the seasons, I wondered what inspired these photos for this prompt.

Timothy explained:

Okay. So the one with the sunset, that one really captures the beauty of what the SWNTCU campus has to offer and I’m very thankful to be here at the moment, because I see that as, how do you say this? Like a bright future ahead of me because I’m here getting my education that I need. And then, so for this one (see Figure 10), this one reminded me of the SWNTCU colors, the red and the tree. So, I saw that as like a student, almost like the tree, as a student, and then like the tree is growing and growing like as a student. I wanted to capture that like almost.

Timothy was being very introspective with his pictures. What seemed like a simple scenic photo for Timothy represented more than that. He was thinking about his future and his growth as a student while on his educational journey.

Figure 10

Red Tree
Landscape

Any landscape designer would attest to the value of landscaping and the inspiration behind their design choice. The following participants clearly found some meaning and inspiration behind their choice of photo of the landscaping on the SWNTCU campus. Veronica shared:

I grew up here in Gallup. So, the landscape, like the piñon trees and the rocks and the sage brush is very comforting to me. It’s where I grew up. So, if I’m like having a hard time or whatever, I’ll just go outside and sit under a tree or something. Oh yes, it’s very comforting. It’s home.

She went on to express that it reminds her of her childhood when she did not have any worries and it calms her to think of those times.

Jerry selected the mascot statue on the campus. He explained:

And with the second photo is the mascot statue, which is in front of the SWNTCU Campus. When I see it, I think of students like us standing tall like the mascot. We try to make things work like back to my first photo. We have that drive. We have that hunger in order to, to succeed, and that’s how I see this mascot as it stands tall on top of a rock. That’s what most of these students here are doing.

Connections to Buildings and Physical Space

The second most prevalent representation in photos was buildings and spaces on campus. While some of them were explained literally, the participants followed up with a more meaningful interpretation of what it meant to them. Place is not just the physical location of their campus, or their homelands; it is the relationship between themselves
and that location, as well as the relationship to the others in the environment, and the
natural lands their campus and home inhabits (Keene, 2018, p. 54).

**Buildings and Structures as Manifestations of Hope**

The explanations were filled with not only the experiences of the students, but
also what they hoped to gain from these places. One example is from Katherine who
explained:

So, my picture is the buildings that they have. Building X and then Simple Hall,
so those buildings for me, just like, you know a lot of buildings in the United
States represent, um, different things for people. So Simple Hall represents the
place where you can go for an education and growth and learning. I just feel like
everything that you, that my family before me has done, or that I’ve done, we’ve
always had to go somewhere to do something. Like we’ve all had to leave our
families and for my dad it was leaving home and going to, like the military. And
then for my picture, My Grandfather was leaving his home and going to
Washington to speak, as you know, to talk about peace. And for school itself, you
have to go somewhere, too. To learn something in there, grow and so that’s
always kind of been my idea of college.

Katherine continued to explain what an education means to her and her impression of
what she thought college would be like as a child, which in today’s experience is a little
different than what she imagined. Nevertheless, she still understands the importance of
having an education to further her ability to move up in the world.
Spaces for Opportunity

There were also pictures of spaces that provide a specific service, opportunities for interactions, or that are representative of some notion. Jerry explained his photo and what it means to him:

Well, with my first photo, the one with students is integrity and diversity (see Figure 11). A lot of people that I met at the campus and I’ve talked to, they all came for their own reasons and a lot of their reasons, it’s much greater. It has more weight than mine at least or to others that I hear. A lot of them have it all on the line. I guess, I can say that they’re doing this for somebody other than themselves. That’s the integrity that they have. And the diversity, there’s a lot of it, there are many faces here and a lot of them I never got to witness before in my own community. I usually travel and I see a bunch of people, yes. But in the state of New Mexico, especially on the SWNTCU campus, it feels very, very warming that there’s so many different people here and I get to share my experiences and hear theirs as well.
Figure 11

*Thanksgiving Dinner*

Jerry is a part of the powwow circuit and travels quite frequently for his dancing exhibitions and is a very outgoing student. He explained that while he meets other Native Americans, he sees even more diversity here on this campus, such as Asians and Hispanics for example, that are not the usual folks he sees in his powwow circle. He really enjoys that opportunity to socialize with more people and to learn about their stories and motivations.

**Relationships with Student Support and Learning**

Other photos were images of logos or spaces of campus support programs or images that referenced concepts of learning in some fashion. The photos the participants selected revealed the association that students make with their education, learning and support.
Learning

When I asked what the institution espouses, a couple of students conveyed the concept of learning as their response. Sarah used her photo to reference learning and growth:

And then the second one [photo of a small plant] I do a lot of planting, so there’s a lot of growth and stuff like that. And I thought maybe it’s a good representation of the institution as a whole. Just because you know, as you go through school and stuff like that, it gradually grows and then you have to take care of it [your education and classes] and then you have to grow with the process while you’re in school.

Ashley also added her experiences with learning:

So, the picture there I took, was an art box my daughter made. She made that little monster. And books on reading, geology, exploration, the little... Magnifying class. Yeah, And the binoculars. And I think that the institution here supports a lot of the basic learnings that we need. On the other hand, being a former student of SWNTCU, I think we really need more groups like I mentioned here. Coming from a generation where we weren’t allowed to learn any of our culture and not knowing very much about our people, just only from our elders who would tell the stories about what had happened to them. And when I was a student here, I took weaving. Oh my god, that really touched my heart, Michelle. I think that was probably the best class I’ve ever taken because the way the instructor taught that class, she taught it with care and she taught it with a lot of... respect. Yeah, she taught it and I was like, oh my god, the majority of us who were in the class, we
were being very delicate. We were like, how do we do this? Is this... And she would look at us like you have to learn this. And it was a wake-up call for all of us. But I really enjoyed weaving class And I think that was one of the support classes that kind of made me want to continue my education. As well as Navajo, taking my Navajo language class to learn what I was not able to learn. Our instructor also showed us some videos that we never saw and just having to watch that on YouTube. And he’d be like, okay, the Navajo code talkers and all of that. And I was like, wow. I was like, I got to save this. I got to save this link and I got to show my kids. But I’m pretty sure my kids are already learning that because they’re like, Mom, we learned this today and we learned this in Navajo class. I’m like, that is so great to hear. I was like, that’s something that I wasn’t able to get, when I was growing up. But now just having the classes like I mentioned here, the history class, a lot of history there that I’ve learned. But I also wanted to know who the authors were too, because I was like, hey, I better make sure that this is the proper education that we’re receiving in history class. But the instructor was like, yeah, I did go to certain pueblos. I went to each Pueblo and I went on to the Navajo reservation and asked these elders about their past. And that’s how he was able to make that book. And we were freaking out and were like, Wow, you actually did that? But yeah, taking that history class, it was a lot. It’s meaningful. And that’s pretty much what helped me to continue my education because these are the things that we don’t learn on a daily basis, but then yeah. [clarification statement, do you mean a Native American Studies class?] Yeah, it was a Native American studies class. Yeah.
Support Programs

Participants made multiple references to student services and how they support the students, however there was also specific credit given to a campus program called Trio Student Support Services (SSS). The Trio SSS program is 100% federally funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. They target undergraduate students who are first-generation to college, low-income, and/or have a documented disability (SWNTCU Student Support Services, 2022). Karen discussed her first experience with registration:

My institutional picture of Trio is, when I first came to sign up for college I did the test, the… what is it called? [Accuplacer?] Yeah, the Accuplacer. I placed really low on the testing and I was scared. I was like, Oh no. And then they told me or got referred to Trio and they were the ones who helped me. I went in. I told them that I was low on my scores. And then, at the time Janelle (pseudonym) was the advisor, and she was the one who advised me to do Summer Academy, and she was the one who really helped me understand what I wanted to become. And I’ve always known that I wanted to be helping people. So whether it was medical or through counseling, I always knew that was my calling because I was really good at it naturally when I went into school. So, I went to high school and then Job Corps, and I’ve always had that natural calling to be able to help people. And Trio was my natural calling. Trio was the one that really paved my pathway to education with Summer Academy. They showed me how to do proper essays, they showed me how to use math, how to use the ARC study area. They really showed me what I needed to do to succeed. So that’s why I chose Trio as mine.
Kelly also focused on Trio:

That picture, it says Trio Works student support services. And I chose this picture because the Trio program, it supports students who are first-generation. And previously, in high school I was in the Upward Bound, which started back in 2017 and I was a part of that and so I heard that there is a sister program which is Trio, SSS and my advisor referred me to them, too, and that’s why I chose the Trio works picture. I think Trio works. Because I guess when learning and stuff, I go there to try to get everything together and work on my assignments and at the same time there’s people there that could help me and I could talk to them and basically get support. Trio works because you know it makes me ask for help more and people always come up to me. And you know, it’s just a nice support program that I can go to.

_Pandemic_

The pandemic has had a huge impact on education at every level. No conversation about institutional support would be complete without hearing about the effects of the pandemic on student learning. As the nation’s educational system went virtual back in the spring of 2020, students had to find ways to continue with their education as best as they could. Sixty percent of the Navajo Nation’s residents lack fixed internet access, the broadband access that does exist is sporadic with limited connectivity (Lively, 2021, p. 2). This was a hardship of new proportions for students from rural communities where technology and access to broadband was absolutely lacking. The students of SWNTCU were reliant on the WIFI and resources available on campus, such as the library, tutoring, and TRIO, as well as access to their professors for in-person help with assignments.
There was also the social aspect of education that many students professed to missing. They were missing the interactions with other students, professors, and staff. One such student brought a blank sheet of paper as her submission for the institutional prompt.

Nora declared:

There’s a void. That’s my fear. I just look to the college, and I’m like, I remember we would have to come in, all follow each other. We’d come to class. This parking lot would be full. Hard to find a spot. I was like, now you can park right up front, which I’m one of the last persons that’ll park up front. I park way further and I’ll walk. There’s nobody. It’s sad. It’s really sad. I guess as a student right now my motivation is looking at the campus and how we’ve adjusted over a year ago. March 2020 will be when we had to go online because of the pandemic. I think what I saw was, this is temporary, but when I heard another person say, who knows, we could be still dealing with this in two years. I’m like, two years? That’s too long. Now we’re almost there. I’m like, you’re kidding me. We don’t know if this is going to ever let up. When I do come here, I’m like, where’s everybody? It’s sad. I just went to the library coming over. I’m like, where are the students? Nobody’s here. I miss that. I really do. I miss that. With that, I would love to just be here all day if I can. I would love that. I’m the last person to be sitting in the library. Trying to do my homework at home, there’s no motivation there, because yeah, I’m tired of this pandemic. My home is my home, where I’m supposed to relax, not do my homework. I think I had spent more time on campus when I had those days off to be in class and everything. I was here and I enjoyed
it. Now it’s gone. It’s empty. It’s empty. I guess my fear is, are we going to really lose students. I haven’t seen any of my classmates. I was like, Wow. It’s scary.

Another student submitted a picture of a bottle of hand sanitizer (see Figure 12) from somewhere on campus. Rick clarified:

Well, number one, I would say this COVID thing. Every, every room where you go like down here in construction tech building. You know, we have to clean our hands. You know, like we have to wash our hands and use hand sanitation. They have those hand wipes. It’s all in the shop and yes, they care. They teach us, you know, the dos and the don’ts and they’re all on the wall. Yeah. That’s a good example. This one’s more of the like stuff to keep you safe. Say like here in this institution, you can’t just walk in. You know, you have to use this hand sanitation. There’s a reason, a purpose for it. Yes. I don’t know how long we’ll be living in it, with it. We went through what, three years now? Two and a half years. So, we were just hoping that we get out of it this past summer. When they reopened these, like these merchants or like cafes. Some, not all. A lot of places you could not dine in, had to carry out. No, it was hard.
He went on to explain how he felt that the campus cared about our health and safety, which is why they had all of these hand sanitizers across campus.

**Relationships with Goals and Aspirations**

Some pictures for this portion had references to participants’ goals and aspirations. Most envisioned the institution as the place that would help them to achieve those goals, whether it be acquiring new skills, or simply wanting to have a better life for themselves and their families.

**A Better Life**

There were many statements made about wanting to have a better life, one with fewer of the struggles they may have experienced growing up. Most referenced hardships
of reservation life, but others referenced perceived opportunities through education.

Donna acknowledged that she had trouble with this prompt:

With the institutional, that one I had some trouble with. But this picture I selected was when I traveled. Taking a picture from up above in, in the aircraft, and so I thought about it and just like continuing with my education with the school and everything, being high above. So, continuing my education from my associates degree to where I’m at now, I’m not saying I’m better than others and stuff. But it shows me, that’s how high I could be, I could come. Or there’s like, no limit. I guess in a way that if I keep pushing myself forward and everything with schooling. I put myself in a better position. And that opens more opportunities for me.

*Táá hwó’ aji t’éego [to do for self]*

Another student aspires to “do it for herself.” She shared a picture of a text from her mom with a Navajo language phrase, Táá hwó’ aji t’éego [to do for self] (see Figure 13). It means “you have to do it for yourself, and know no one is going to do it for you.” Veronica proclaimed:

Yeah. When I heard, I didn’t really know what it meant. People just, I used to see it on posters and I didn’t really know what it meant until I asked my mom and she said you have to do it for yourself. Nobody’s going to do it for you. So, with this younger generation seems like that’s all they want is somebody to do it for them, like register and apply for scholarships. I can do it for me. I always go back to that. Like if I want to, if I’m tired of being broke, then I have to do it for myself. I have to go find money or whatever.
The Indigenous Wellness Model (Secatero, 2015) has four areas of focus, spiritual, mental, physical, and social well-being. Maintaining and balancing all quadrants greatly improves your overall well-being, which in turn increases your chances at greater productivity. For this section, I used photo elicitation to engage students in critical thought and discussion through the lens of an Indigenous Wellness model. I first asked students to extract demonstrations or examples of what they thought represented physical well-being from their own pictures. The participants also had an opportunity to participate in the focus group, which had a similar task, but this time, extracting
representations of physical well-being from other participants’ photos, which I shared anonymously via MS Office PowerPoint. This process allowed me to see convergent themes across all data. I continued this process for all four quadrants of the Indigenous Wellness Model. Map 3 highlights all emerging themes from each quadrant (see Figure 14). All themes to be discussed in greater detail throughout this section.

**Figure 14**

*Map 3: Through the lens of an Indigenous Wellness Model*

![Map 3: Through the lens of an Indigenous Wellness Model](Photo-Elicitation via Interview and focus Group)

**Physical Well-being**

The predominant messaging for well-being that resonated for all participants was that being fit was “the way.” In other words, it’s primarily thought to be essential to practice physical fitness in all things. Physical fitness is required, even in ceremony and in the teachings of the old ways. Karen clarified:

So, when you go into these Peyote meetings, it’s usually a lot of squatting, so, you got to be able to hop up and hop down sometimes. And it requires you to stay up
all night. So, in a physical aspect, I would say it’s exhausting, but you have to work physically to be able to get up and down, and being able to sit for that long period of time, because you’re sitting there since 7:00 and then all the way up until 8:00 in the morning. And then at the restroom breaks, I’ve seen some people that struggle to get up, especially the elders. So, it’s always good to have someone there to help them up. And then when you’re taking down the teepee, it’s always the runners that get asked to help. Because when you are taking down the poles after the whole meeting is done, there’s the two kids. So, they’re usually your fastest runners, they run opposite of each other. And then they start taking down the rope on top where the teepee is held together, and then they run and they take all that off. And then the rope comes down and then you have to not take off the rope all the way because you still have to take the sticks out, so you’re just loosening it. And then you have to have people that are strong enough to pick up the teepee sticks and then start sliding them out and putting them away. And there’s usually a little trough thing to put the teepee sticks in. So, the physical aspect on a lot of the NAC [Native American Church] part is mainly before and after, and then staying up all night to hear the prayers and songs. So, it is physically grueling, but with NAC it’s always worth it in the end because you get your social bonding, you get everything that you needed out of it.

There are also teachings that have withstood the test of time and are still practiced to this day. I heard these teachings when I was young and hearing others talk about them was very interesting. These teachings are meant to teach younger kids physical endurance and discipline. Nora told me about her experience:
My grandmother used to always tell me in the mornings, she used to get me up early, 4:00. I’m like, Grandma, it’s only 4:00. Do you mind? She says, I need you to go run. She made me run. She always told me, Go run. Go run. Go run to the corral. Go get this. I’m like, why didn’t we get it last evening, grandma? I think she did it on purpose. She’d get me up at 4:00. I’m like, Grandma, please. Let me sleep! She had me run. I used to hate running. I was like, I don’t want to run.

Erica also reflected on her experience:

Part of my traditional culture is about my physical well-being, like take care of yourself and be healthy so you can live a long life. That’s what my grandmother always told me. Like an example would be getting up before the sun comes up and like doing a run and saying a prayer. And then just also exercising and working around outside. And that is part of our culture, to work hard. And I’d say that’s part of my physical well-being.

While reservation living can be beautiful and has its appeal in many different ways, there’s also a physical demand in order to survive. The following stories, demonstrate resilience and self-discipline. Donna reminisced:

The times we had to walk the three to four miles to get to the bus stop or to get to my mom. One of my mom’s, one of her, coworker’s house, and from there we would get a ride. So that part of it physically, it would be the walking. The walking that we did. Chopping woods, to bring woods back to the Hogan. That was a little ways from the Hogan. Hauling water.

The discussion on these topics started out slowly, but picked up momentum as the participants felt more comfortable with their responses. We next talked about Institutional
values, and what aspects of their pictures represented physical well-being. This was more difficult for the students to answer. Erica stated, “It really doesn’t. I’ve never really thought about it.” Karen also had difficulty and struggled to respond:

Physical well-being. With Trio, I think being able-bodied to ask because it takes a lot for a person to ask for help. And being able to, let’s see, there’s being able to ask for help and advocate for yourself. And then if there’s nobody that can help you with Trio, there’s just taking care of your body physically. With Trio, they help you if you should need that help. There’s the wellness center and I really don’t know how to answer that. [chuckles]

Finally, after taking some time to think about their answer, others were able to associate their photos with physical well-being, either as associations of how they use their physical fitness attributes while here on campus or examples of campus activities that require physical fitness. Timothy stated:

Okay. So for my physical well-being, I know that when I’m here at SWNTCU, I can move around. I go from class to class walking around and I know that I get the exercise I need. Because before when the pandemic was here, it was just on a laptop and I would just go back and forth in the house and just log in the class and just stay there and just sit there the whole time but here, in person, now that I can walk around and I can actually move my body around. So yeah, I think that’s good for my well-being.

Mental Well-being

Mental well-being impacts the performance of any person and their ability to perform at their best. If you have something weighing heavily on your mind, it is really
hard to think past that to complete other tasks successfully. The participants spoke about their experiences of mental-well-being, focusing on these major concepts, re-centering and grounding themselves, and self-determination, self-sufficiency, and determination.

The context within the discussion around mental well-being immediately referenced that of relieving stress, or ways one deals with stress as can be seen here in Erica’s response:

Tricky to answer. There’s a lot of things I could say. When I’m like feeling, let’s say frustrated or stressed due to like probably my education or something to do with classes, I’ll tell my mom and she’ll have something (traditionally) done for me and that really boosts up my mental health. Again, and it’s OK. And then also going into attending a ceremony, it’s also the same thing, it makes me think like, oh, OK, like I know what I’m doing and I’m on the right path. I can do this and yeah.

Karen further explained:

And then for the fireplace [points at her image of fire], that’s when sometimes we didn’t have a chance to go somewhere to pray, get wisdom and guidance. Sometimes we would just turn to a fireplace and just talk to the fire. And then that’s where tobacco and all that would come in and she [her mom] would just have her one on one with the fireplace. And I always remember seeing that. And so now when I come up to my stressful moments, that’s the same route I’ve taken. For my mental well-being. Again, a lot of that is the prayers and both of them represent a type of prayer. So, in both bits mentally, they both help me clear my mind. And then with the fireplace, it’s the main place that I turn to.
Veronica also explained how she uses her photo of the tree as her way of calming herself when things get a little overwhelming for her:

Mental well-being. Well, that tree, the pine tree is just, it’s strength. A pine tree’s big and it’s tall and it’s pretty. It’s served a lot of... well. Mentally, like I don’t know what you call that. It’s like an icon, I guess. When I see that, I usually have it, I have a poster of it. I sometimes put it as my background and my phone. It just reminds me of what I’m doing this for. Yeah. With overthinking everything and over all your classes and all of your assignments, and then you think of that. Then you’re like, okay. Yeah. Clarity. Because it represents more than, it’s not just a tree. Mental well-being. I think with the landscapes around here, it brings back a lot of childhood memories and who I was with and who I was surrounded by is mainly family, like cousins and stuff. It just brings back a time to where I didn’t have worry or I didn’t have bills to pay. It brings back like a reset. Yeah. Like a grounding.

In other interpretations of mental well-being, there’s an expression of a desire to be self-sufficient through self-discipline and determination, which in turn helps students to maintain a clear state of mind. In a sense, working hard equates with a less stressful life. Thinking about mentally preparing themselves to work hard for what they want, Erica expressed:

What I think about is self-discipline. Because if you want something for yourself, you have to do it yourself. No one else is going to make you do it. And if you want a goal for yourself, you have to achieve that yourself. As I said, no one’s going to make you do it. And growing up, my grandpa always told me, if you
want a good life, you want to go graduate school or just anything you want to do in life, it’s all in your hands. It’s up to you. He said, none of us is going to make you do it. And with that saying, I’ve heard a lot of elders say before.

Many participants found it challenging to respond to institutional values / support for mental well-being. However, one participant saw education as a way to perhaps change the narrative of some of those things about education that may have caused mental instability for many based on their experiences with boarding schools and the generational trauma that came with that. Katherine suggested:

For me it was very, I think difficult because it was a lot of like trauma I think and my mom, she’s had a lot of trauma. She’s been to boarding school and she did not have good memories of that at all. They also were, became Catholic and she did not have good memories of that either. And so that. I guess like that mental well-being. How would you explain that? Well, for me I always thought that you know, in order to do better for myself and to grow into a good person and be respected. And to help my family, you have to, you have to do something that you know is important, that is important. That has meaning, that you can, take that knowledge and use it to really do good and make an impact and be respected. Be respected in your community as a person. And I always thought that going to school and getting a degree was something that you had to do in order to obtain those things.

There was also a reference to mental well-being represented in terms of learning and growing. Timothy expanded on this:
Okay. So, for education, during the pandemic, like I said, adapting to Zoom and online classes and all that, it was hard because in your mind, you know that it’s better if you were to go in person that way you can analyze and discuss with other students so you can get your mind running. And then because if you don’t, then your mental well-being can’t grow and it’ll just stay the way it is. But here now going to SWNTCU it really puts your mental well-being in a good spot because it can help you interact and socialize with other students as well as professors. It helps you overcome assignments or math quizzes and all that. And you know that if you don’t do it and then you would get stuck and then it would make things hard for you. That’s why you overcome those challenges that you face in classes. So, the way it impacts my educational journey is that it’ll be good for my mental well-being because it’ll help me grow as a person. Because I know that I’ll be able to find other people that will have the same interests as I do. And I can probably learn a thing or two from them. And I think it’ll be a good thing as well because it’ll help me think of different possibilities of how I can overcome certain challenges of whatever courses I take. So, yeah.

**Social Well-being**

Social well-being was not a difficult topic to discuss in both the cultural values and institutional values context. When I asked about this topic, the general consensus revolved around socializing and meeting new people, as well as family. The pandemic was mentioned several times as having had an impact on everyone’s social well-being. Sarah reflected on her experiences with planting corn and squash:
So, for that one, socially it was kind of like a team project, my dad had to teach me how to do it and then I had to go back and reference him and then at the end of it, we all came together to like harvest everything and take it and start picking everything off. So, socially, it really just brought everybody together and it really was like a teaching for all of us in a sense.

Donna also reflected on the social aspects of her life and she feels that she did not have much social interaction growing up and today she tries to teach her kids the importance of social well-being. Donna explains:

Growing up I feel, and maybe even up to now, I’m not a very social person. I’m sure it relates back to how I grew up with just my parents and my younger sibling at that time. Um, just us. Um, we didn’t have other family near us. We didn’t have neighbors that were near us. So, like communicating with people on the outside wasn’t enough, I guess. I think more of that communication. Or being social with others was just during like school time. And up to now, it’s, I think it’s more family. I guess in a way I try to be more social. But I really encourage that to my kids. To ask questions, don’t be afraid to ask questions and participate in things. I guess things that I didn’t do growing up. I try to get them to do those things and with outside activities with school and stuff or even with sports. I’ve encouraged them and my oldest she did a lot of sports.

Others had quite a different experience growing up in social circles that encouraged socializing from an early age. Jerry responded:

One in the circle. I always met new faces every time I traveled. I see a bunch of new people. Got to meet amazing, amazing people when traveling and a lot of
them they share a lot of similar stories to me and a lot of them carry a lot of
wisdom. Some of the older generation as well. And when they come towards me
and ask me of various things or just want to talk, it makes me feel good. And
being the big personality that I am, finding friends is always like that sometimes.
But usually I try to keep myself away from the bad ones. But again, always
continuously meeting new people. That’s what I love to do. I love to meet new
people. It brings a sense of intrigue. I can’t say it. But you know what I mean.
Another participant felt that her social skills were attributed to participating in
ceremony and how she uses those skills in other settings, like for school. Erica explained:

For the culture part, um. It made me not afraid to be outspoken because you do
have to speak your mind. In a ceremony, a certain type of ceremony, and tell like
the medicine man or the road man like what you want and also the people what
you want so they can pray for you for that to happen. It taught me to be
outspoken. And it taught me to mingle a lot and definitely have public speaking
skills, so I’m not shy. That’s what my mom always told me growing up, she said
you first started public speaking when you were about five and this type of
ceremony helped you with that. So, when you go out into the real world, you’re
not scared to speak to other people or be shy and for the institution, when I first
came out of high school and came to college, it was kind of like a different thing
because I went to school on the reservation and there’s just your peers are all the
same as you. There’s really no diversity. Maybe, other than your teachers, but
until I came to college, I’ve got to meet a lot of people who come from different
cultures and backgrounds and then engaging with them socially, like in class, like
we have to do, a group project or just having to talk to them. Like if I needed help with an assignment or to clarify something. Or actually just being friends with them. It really taught me a lot and really opened my eyes for different things.

Social well-being in the academic world is part of the experiences of college life. Many students lost out on many of those experiences as we approach the two-year mark of this pandemic. Referencing a photo of a commons area within the college, one participant, Sarah remarked:

When I think about institutional, social well-being, and looking at this photo, I think back to COVID and how we took, in a sense, advantage of the opportunities and the different types of people that we could meet to help us, or if we needed help, to meet people that were involved in academics. So, when I see this photo, I see students taking full advantage of that opportunity that they missed being out of school and being fully online. So now that they have the opportunity, they do take full advantage of making friends, meeting new people, and then definitely finding people to help them with their academics or anything like that.

Katherine reflected on the importance of social interactions in terms of learning, explaining:

Yeah, I don’t think you learn anything just by yourself. You have to learn it socially in a group setting and it can’t just be one person talking. I don’t feel like that’s how I grew up, and I know, like in Native settings, you don’t just grow up learning things on your own. So, I think it’s very important to have a social circle. In order to learn. Can’t learn by yourself and the way, that I think, Native culture always taught the younger generation was in like a social circle and you did that
through storytelling. You did that through discussion, through showing, actual showing how to do things and by example so. Um, even when you look to your elders they don’t draw a whole picture or explain how to hunt or how to ride a horse. Right? They got out there and they showed you how to do it and you did it with them and they always like, led by example. And um…you have to have that social circle in order to, you know, learn and grow. Even with stories that they would tell, on how to be a good person or how to you know, to do the right things in life. You would sit around and be in a social circle and they would, you know, tell stories on how to be.

**Spiritual Well-being**

Spirituality is one of the most important parts of one’s well-being. Each of the participants expressed a deep connection to their spirituality and have accredited their progress to this point to spirituality. Timothy expressed it this way:

Okay. So, for my spiritual well-being, the first picture right here represents it. It represents how spiritually, our ancestors back then would praise, sing songs about us and all that and how it is good for us. Because if you don’t have that spiritual or cultural sense in you, you won’t be able to achieve what you want to do in life. And I feel like it’s very important for you to have that where you’re at the institution. So yeah. Well, it gives me a purpose in life. So that way I can achieve these goals in my life. And it’ll be good for my spiritual well-being as well as my cultural, because I know that my art that I will create will represent my people. And because I know that in life that if I don’t succeed, it won’t be good for my spiritual well-being. So, this is what gives me a purpose in life.
Many of the other entries were similar where participants described relying on prayer to get them through their challenges, to give them strength to continue on. One connection that is clearly missing in the responses for this section is the connection between institution and spirituality. The strong response was that there is no connection. For example, Sarah responded, “I’m not sure. If there is. Yeah, I don’t know.” Donna added, “I don’t think it evokes anything [spiritual].” Erica elaborated further:

Well, I think school and spiritual well-being is kind of different. Like I always hear, just comparing it to the culture part, always hear that balancing and especially like in the kind of world we live in today and being Indigenous and also being American, it’s hard to balance it out, so it’s kind of tough. Where you kind of feel like you live in two different worlds, like for example if we have something culturally done like a ceremony and then the next day you got to go to school, it’s a different, a whole different setting. I don’t really think anything spiritual about school. It’s just kind of like my mind focused on the classwork and the homework and. Just things like that. I see my classmates who are not Native, they have it totally different from me. Like they don’t seem like they have a hard time, I would say. Like they fit in I guess is what I’m trying to say, whereas for me it’s kind of hard. Kind of hard to relate to them as well. I wouldn’t say it has had an impact on my educational journey, yet maybe as I go further into my school, like more in the academia world, that probably will.

**Education and Leadership**

To understand the emerging themes of education and leadership, I utilized Map 4. Map 4 highlights the emerging thoughts and themes that emerged from how students
made meaning of their education, leadership and how they influence either perception (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15**

*Map 4: Education and Leadership*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning of an Education</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>How does Education influence or enhance your perception of leadership?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunity / Better Life</strong></td>
<td>• Helping others</td>
<td>• Gives me confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial Stability</td>
<td>• Peers</td>
<td>• Helping others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accomplish my goals / dreams</td>
<td>• Community</td>
<td>• Opens my eyes to bigger picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenge myself</strong></td>
<td>• Motivating others</td>
<td>• Socioeconomic issues and how to support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Better myself</td>
<td>• Family</td>
<td>• Balance Education and Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Overcome stereotypes</td>
<td>• Colleagues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be a role model</td>
<td>• Teaching and Supporting</td>
<td>• All, not just one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position to Help others</strong></td>
<td>• All, not just one</td>
<td>• Taking initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Advocacy</td>
<td>• Lead by example</td>
<td>• Role Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learning and teaching</td>
<td>• Balancing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td>• Role Model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-Identity; finding direction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Only one aspect of who you are</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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**The Meaning of an Education**

As I sought to understand the participants’ perceptions of education and leadership, I drew from the interviews and also from the focus group activity that used photo elicitation to identify aspects of leadership in a selection of photos. While many of these responses and perceptions were similar to those of other sections of my findings, it was a good indicator that the data collected across all methods had converging concepts that strengthened the findings. The meaning of an education for most students revolved around concepts of a better life and having more opportunities, challenging oneself, getting into a position to help others, and discovery that adds to their identity. We must also recognize however that, for education to change us for the better, education must be
rooted in critical thought and awareness of the dynamics that have brought us to where we are (Cajete, 2015, p. 68). Erica proclaimed:

Having a better life, makes one better able to help others. You know, like I want a good, I want a good life for myself, especially like with the kind of world we live in, things are definitely changing, especially like the economy, prices are going up and it’s a lot just to get groceries and get gas. And I want to be financially stable. So that’s one reason that drives me to go to school.

Others have the same purpose, to have a better life, but focus their efforts on their goals and dreams, which ultimately also leads to a better life. Kelly expressed it this way:

Building my education, too, and like learning more. And you know, chasing my dreams of becoming a mechanic in the army and it [education] helps build…um…relationships with others as well, in the shop and out of the shop. And you know, overall. I guess it’s just education helping me accomplish my dreams.

There were also those who said education for them was about challenging themselves through bettering themselves, overcoming stereotypes, and being a role model for others. Donna acknowledged that it makes her:

Want to continue my education. It makes me want to achieve more. It makes me value it and the importance of education because without it I feel like I wouldn’t be where I’m at. I’m able to accomplish more and to challenge myself to complete my education so it may open more and bigger opportunities for me.

Along that same line of thinking, Nora added:
Let me put it this way. First of all, I definitely do want to get my bachelor’s degree, my associate and then my bachelor’s degree. That’s just where I’m standing right now, because if I shift aside to retire and I’m seeing coworkers, former coworkers who retired, who went into depression, and they said they don’t know what to do with themselves. I guess that’s why I always told myself stay active, do stuff. Some of them just said their health went down, which is scary. Then I thought, Nora, are you going to be in that position? Then, now knowing that they [employers] do really ask for a bachelor’s degree, I said, hey, I could do something else if I still want to work. My goal is to retire from the Navajo Nation, and if I can, I would like to do something else, if I can, just knowing that I don’t have kids. If it means that I just have it, I have it. Knowing that I am paying out of my own pocket, which tells me, ‘You got to do this. Grandma got you started. You got to finish this. You got to finish this.’ I don’t know if that’s an answer. It could be something. Just to say – I have it.

Other participants are inspired by overcoming stereotypes and aspiring to be a role model for others. Erica feels that education is a pathway to achieve that goal. She asserted:

And I just want to show people that Natives aren’t, we’re not just a stereotype of what they think we are, like alcoholics and like we’re into drugs or we’re just bums. I want to change that kind of stereotype, so I think that’s also like another reason why I want to go to school and also for myself. And also, I want to be a good role model for a lot of my peers and younger kids who really don’t know what they want to do with their life.
There were also others who expressed a desire to position themselves so that they can help members of their family, or peers and or people in their community. Karen articulated:

My education means a lot to me. I know I’m always the one that tries to advocate for a lot of the younger kids. So, I work at the chapter house and that’s the first thing I’m telling them. Who’s all going or plans to go to college? And there’s only two people. And then I’m like, okay, so what do you other kids want to do? And they’re like, I don’t know. Are you going to work at McDonald’s? And then there’s another program that I always try to get out to the chapters, Job Corps. And the last time that I had Carmen [pseudonym] come out, the way she presented it, it wasn’t interesting. And then I’m like, okay, well I’m a former student myself and this is what we did. And I made it more interesting for them. And that’s when they were like, “I think I’m going to try it.”

Karen explained how the community listens to her because they know she’s a college student and they really appreciate her talking to them in Navajo, which she feels creates trust between herself and the community members. Karen continued:

So, in a way with this all coming together, how it works. For me, my education, it means a lot to me because I know I’m going somewhere and I know I’m climbing the ladder. It may take me a little longer, but I’m getting there. So, everything that I’ve done, I try to teach to others. So, I try to get other people interested in school. And that’s the way I use my education is to teach others and try to push them to be something, whether it’s small or big, but as long as they’re getting somewhere.
In a similar example, Veronica talked about how she uses her education to help others:

My education means to me, that I’ll be in a position to help people with communication and education. A lot of people lack those. But, yeah I would be put in a position to help people because I’m going into substance abuse counseling. Oh that’s very big here. And yeah I would be, right now it feels like just another person, but if I have a few years of education under my belt, I might be in a better position to help people.

There were participants who they themselves feel that what they are learning helps them learn about things they did not know about before. Ashley has gained knowledge that will be useful in making better decisions that could impact her family in the long term. She divulged:

Oh, my education means a lot to me. It helps just having that education, you get a better job. You know a lot of things that, for example, I have taken economics two semesters ago. And just knowing about our economy here in the United States and a little bit of internationally, I’m like, wow, I didn’t know that. There’s a percent here? There’s an interest? It’s like it kind of educates you on what you buy when you want to go purchase a car, the things that educational wise, I think that it kind of just gives you that, how would you say it, you’re educated. You know things that you wouldn’t have known before. So, yeah. So, I’m just glad to be going to school and knowing these things that I never knew before.
It was such a joy to listen to her excitement about all of subjects and topics that she is studying. I could tell that she really enjoys learning and makes an active effort toward applying the lessons that she learns.

Finally, we have those who felt that education was an opportunity to really reflect on their self-identity. Jerry expressed:

Education means opportunity. Without education, I have no opportunities or that’s how I see it from looking at it. People who do have education usually find something that they are interested in and what they want to do. Even if they don’t finish college in that sense, at least they have a class or two that helps them in life and it turns them onto that direction of what they want to do for the rest of their life. I see that even if those people who don’t finish college or who drop out and whatnot, they’ll have a better understanding of what they really want to do in life.

While Jerry feels that education is necessary to find direction in life, Katherine has a somewhat different perspective. She feels that while she understands the value of an education, it is also important to find a balance. She declared:

Then you come to learn that it’s just one small aspect of your life. It’s not the whole. It’s not the whole experience that you are getting. Let’s see. Because it has to be separated, instead of you going to school to learn everything that you need to learn as a person. You’re only learning one aspect of how to be a good person. So, if you really wanted to make your education really meaningful at this institution, this building here [points at photo], then it has to embody everything from your culture, your values. Um, everything. And you have to be able to learn how to navigate all of that and yeah, I feel like if the institution embodied more of
that, you would have a more full, meaningful experience for the student as a whole. Um, they would feel more accepted and needed and there’s a, um, I guess a place for them and place for them to be themselves. So, that would influence and make the meaning of an education more fulfilling. But I guess you know on the flipside, taking everything that I’ve learned, and from my past and my family and my pictures there and carrying that with me, this is just one step of my journey. What I’m learning and move on.

**Leadership**

Leadership can come in many different forms and styles. I think in varying situations and circumstances leadership can be adjusted to best fit the needs of a situation. What ideas did the participants have about leadership and what it means? Based on the answers provided through this study, there were five ideations of leadership that were mentioned most frequently, helping others, motivating others, teaching and supporting, taking initiative, and leading by example.

The most repeated sentiment focused on helping others, whether it be helping other students, family or one’s community. Timothy for example, voiced his perception of leadership this way:

Okay. So, leadership to me, I think is lifting other people up and being there for them whenever you can. So, a leader is somebody who would encourage, not just one, but everybody who was there with them to strive to be a better person of themselves, so they can have a good social impact in their lives. And so, I think, I’m not sure if I would make a leader on college campus, but I’m sure at home I will, because out of my siblings that live with me, my two younger ones, I’m the
oldest in house and my other siblings are out of the house. So, I think it kind of makes me a leader because of what I do. I take care of my grandparents mainly. So, there’s a sense of leadership there because like I... show leadership in my family. I know that I’m a leader because I’m educated. I know I’m there spiritually in my cultural side. So, whenever my family goes through something, they’ll sometimes come to me for advice and all that and, yeah, like I’ll try to give best advice.

Timothy and many others were quite confident about showing leadership qualities within their home environment but were not quite as sure they feel like a leader in other arenas such as here on campus.

There are those who feel that leadership should have a big focus on motivating others. Again, referring to family and colleagues, Nora shared her experience with both: I guess in a way my family, my siblings, they do look to me, any decisions, and just knowing that I’m the oldest. I know when my father passed, my mom says, ‘Nora, everything’s under Nora now.’ I’m like, ‘What do you mean by that?’ I have to look over and take care of or look after them, make sure they’re doing okay. Anything as far as motivational, I know they do look to me. I know that for sure, my family. I guess giving an example is, even just growing up when we did household chores, I said, ‘Come on guys, let’s do this. Let’s get this done so we can play. We can do this, we can go play basketball. You guys can go play with your friends.’ At first, they were like, ‘Do we have to clean?’ I said, ‘Come on guys, we can do this. Let’s get this done within less than an hour and we can get out of here. You guys can play all you want.’
She then continued, describing her current leadership role:

Now I’m overseeing three staff temporarily. I have to motivate them, say, ‘Come on ladies, let’s work together.’ All I want is communication. I’m just temporary right now. I said, I prefer myself still as a senior accountant. I’m still holding my own position, doing my workload, but I still have to oversee three staff. I said, ‘Come on guys, let’s work together. Let’s get this thing done. I don’t want to have to stand over you and treat you like kids and see where you are or what are you doing. We’re all adults, so let’s just motivate one another, help each other.’ I guess in a way I do see it and take the lead on stuff. I know the office there say, Go ask Nora. I’m like, ‘Why me?’ I was like, ‘Can’t you guys do it? It’s always, Go ask her, see what she says. I’m like, I’m not the decision maker. I’m just a senior accountant. The principal accountants, they should make the decision, not me.’ I guess as far as in school, if it’s in a classroom setting, if we’re going to be doing group stuff, I’ll say, ‘What do you guys think?’ I try to wait for others to talk, and sometimes going on five minutes, I’m like, ‘Okay guys, come on.’ I’m over here like, ‘Let’s get this thing going’. I’m one of those like, get the job done. Let’s not piddle around. No time to waste. Come on, let’s get this work done. I don’t know, that’s the way I see myself. I guess it’s because Grandma was that way. She says, ‘Let’s get this job done. We got to get this. We got to do this, this, this, throughout the day.’ I guess that’s why she used to get me up at 4:00. I’m like, ‘Grandma. Can I sleep?’

Leadership also entails teaching and supporting others. Donna told me:
Leadership to me is someone that takes charge. Someone that teaches. Someone that supports, encourages, whether it’s at home or whether it’s at work or school, that’s what I think leadership is. I think I’m a leader. I think I’m a leader in our department. I am. Try to share what I know. I teach what I can to my coworkers and to our student workers.

Erica explained:

To me, leadership is where you have people around you. Look up to you and they want to listen to you. I would say that’s what a leader is, and also help the people, like help guide them or give them advice. And I think I would consider myself a leader because I’m also part of like a youth council. And we’ve done a lot of like helping our peers with mental health, as in like suicide and drugs and alcohol and that’s one of the studies we had to do at main campus for the college population health for an internship. And then also, yeah, I would say that was considered like a leadership kind of job and it also helped me in this type of world because I know how to take on something like that. Like I know I’m capable of taking on the leadership role. Especially like among my family, because a lot of my cousins that are my age aren’t in school. And especially when we have like a big gathering and they don’t really want to help. Usually I’m the one to say, ‘OK, let’s get this done. Let’s do this.’ Let’s see, this is what they need help with. Like telling them what to do and they’ll do it. So, I would say that is kind of like a leadership role.
While leadership can be seen as a style or an expectation of duty, leadership can also mean taking initiative. Karen detailed her experience with helping the community during the onset of the pandemic:

In my community, yes. I think I’m one of the youngest in my community that really advocates for our elders and really takes the initiative to help the community. There was the COVID 19 that happened. I got laid off, but I took that initiative. I volunteered and helped give out food and whatever they were giving out. I was right there helping. And it takes a lot, and my mom’s always telling me I give too much, I have too much of a big heart, but who else is going to do it? For others, they lead by example, and show those aspects of leadership through their own actions or their own perceived leadership roles.

Rick declared:

Well, like they say about this leadership, you either lead or get out of the way. I believe in leadership. And then, like I just said [Navajo language]. He is the head of the household [Navajo language] as a leader [Navajo language]. I’ve seen a lot of young Navajos like that. They’re married. They have their children always with them all the time. That’s the way we brought up our kids. We never left our kids behind, had somebody babysit for us. But my wife, then she never did. And she always had her kids with us and then we would go. So, leadership here on campus, being a Navajo, you have to be very respectful, especially toward a woman [Navajo language], especially a woman. You had to be [Navajo language].
Rick spoke with such eloquence and wisdom in Navajo, his Native language. Many of the sentiments he shared have no translation but can only be summarized. The Navajo language has some words that carry so much meaning beyond just their literal translation. Jerry also expressed his thoughts on leading by example as he shared here:

They ask him [his Grandfather] what to do, what not to do and how to go about it. I picked that up from him. I learned how to lead by example like that and showcasing my personality and my culture and heritage. A lot of people can relate and a lot of people look up to me for that. And I can say that I inspired friends and peers, encouraged my peers and the people I’ve talked to, to keep going with stuff that they were doing, to bring them a sense of hope. Yeah, I’m a natural born leader, I guess, in many ways. It just shows that I am educated and I went to school. I faced that challenge because it’s not easy. It’s never easy. I mean, for someone with what I’m doing, dancing and going to college, once I finish and once I get that degree, it shows to my friends, and it shows to the people I grew up with in the pow wow circle, it shows to all the rez kids on the reservations, you can balance both education and culture.

**Perception of Education and Leadership**

One participant thought the question about how education enhances or influences their perception of leadership was a “loaded question.” There appeared to be a general consensus around two main thoughts, education gives them confidence and education opened their eyes to the bigger picture so that they could take on those leadership qualities or positions.
Veronica for example, talks about confidently helping the younger kids in her family and community; they’re always asking her for advice and questions. She felt that her education helps her answer their questions. She proclaimed, “Well, I just know a little bit more I guess. It [education] gives me confidence. Yes. There we go. Gives me a lot of confidence actually.” Ashley also revealed, “Taking educational, behavioral, and diversity studies. That’s pretty much learning a lot there. And just having to learn from that class, kind of makes me want to become even more of a leader.” Nora admitted that her writing wasn’t always the best, but education has helped her in her job and leadership roles; she exclaimed:

I guess in a way it does, in knowing that they do look up to me and say, ‘Hey, Nora, how do you do this? How do you do that?’ I’m like, ‘Hold on. I’m still learning, but I’ll help you.’ I’m willing to. I say, ‘Okay, let’s look at it together.’ They know I’m going to college and taking classes, and so they turn to me a lot, like, ‘Can you write this memo for me?’ I say, ‘Okay, Hold on.’ I was like, I’m not the greatest writer, but I’ll do what I can. I have noticed some changes compared to some memorandums I’ve written several years back. I’m like, ‘What was I thinking? That does not sound right.’ I think it’s working. My education is really working.

In addition to gaining more confidence to either undertake leadership roles, or exemplify leadership qualities, there is also this realization that leadership requires big picture thinking. There were a couple of participants who could see not only the possibilities, but already are using their education to really develop their leadership skills
to learn more about how to effectively tackle socioeconomic issues within their communities. Jerry stated:

So, the way that my education enhances my perception is, it helps me become a better person and helps me explore all these different subjects. Yeah. And it helps me to be open minded of how there’s a lot of possibilities out there, especially educational wise and cultural wise.

Jerry has a desire to show other American Indian students they could be themselves, “You could both be tuned in with your heritage and yet weave your way around this educational system.”

Karen also tells of how education influences her experiences with leadership, and allows her to be an effective advocate within the community. She explained:

So, with the human services classes that I’ve taken, it’s helped me be more confident on how to be more professional, and how to be more of an advocate for my community, and how to push people to get an education. And I want to show them that they can be something if they push and do things in a timely manner.

And it’s always good to just help people, so that’s what I try to do. There are some people that mentally can’t handle it, and I’ve seen it a couple of times, and just them breaking down and losing it. And I always tell them you need to talk to somebody and they want to start talking to me and I’m like, I am not a professional. I can’t give you advice.’ And I always tell them, I think that would be considered malpractice. But there are people who are there, willing to help you. And then physically, I’ve been the one that’s been physically challenged, but I don’t let it hold me back, and I try to do the best I can to take care of myself.
Sarah elaborated further on this topic:

I think it opened up my eyes to a bigger picture and that’s definitely trying to help people. Also staying within the same concept of making a change. But I think that change now for me as I get older is more of community impact or just trying to find a way to help my community in regards to like the bigger issues, substance abuse, alcohol abuse and stuff like that, or trauma or anything like that. So, I think from what I’ve learned out there and then what I’ve experienced myself, bring that back and then teach other people about it.

Summary

The students in this study clearly demonstrated a strong connection to family, spiritual and traditional teachings, and values. Their photo submissions included strong representation of historical mementos, meaningful heirlooms, learned crafts, and ceremony, all of which served as a reminder of purpose and motivation to persevere through difficult times as they journeyed through their education. In relation to institutional values and support, the students submitted photos that provided a sense of hope and possibilities, whether it was a metaphorical or existential reference to what the students wished to achieve, the campus provides a sense of opportunities yet to be discovered.

Extracting meaning through the lens of an Indigenous Wellness Model provided an opportunity for the students to reflect on their overall wellness in terms of physical, mental, social, and spiritual wellbeing and how each aspect plays a critical role in their educational journey and everyday lives. The participants’ reflections highlighted acquired
attributes such as an affinity for hard work and physical endurance, resiliency, and self-determination.

When reflecting on institutional support of wellness, the connections were not as distinct; however, they highlighted the pandemic as clearly having an impact on their educational journeys and wellness. Most notably, there was also an absence of any real connection between institution and spiritual well-being. This did not surprise me; however, it’s important to understand that students perceive spiritual wellness as a major part of their identity, right next to family.

Education and leadership have a complementary relationship, as reported by the student participants. Leadership entails helping others, motivating others, teaching and supporting others. Students in every response throughout the study demonstrated a strong desire to ‘do for others,’ in their families (past and present) and their communities. Their education provides them the opportunity to forge ahead toward that end. Education gives them confidence and makes them aware of the bigger picture so that they can help in the most impactful way.
Chapter 5

Discussion of Findings and Implications

The Southwest has long been inhabited by the Indigenous peoples of this geographical area. More than 20 percent of Native Americans in the United States live in this region, principally in the present-day states of Arizona and New Mexico (Pauls & Thompson, 2019). Native American students are among the most underrepresented groups in academe (McClellan, Tippeconnic Fox, & Low, 2005, p. 7). Understanding student experiences and motivation can provide insight into the type of support efforts that should be considered. I was guided by research questions that asked about cultural and institutional values. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to explore the value and meaning that first-generation American Indian students place on higher education.

To answer my research questions, I conducted a single-site, qualitative study at a Southwestern Non-Tribal Community University (SWNTCU). I collected the majority of the data over a span of ten days in the fall of 2021. Twelve American Indian undergraduates, all of whom are first-generation students and were raised on the reservation at some point during their childhood, participated in the photovoice project and an individual semi-structured interview. These sessions covered topics pertaining to cultural value and perceived institutional value. In addition, six of these students also participated in a talking circle / focus group where they collectively engaged in discourse on other students’ photos through the lens of an Indigenous Wellness Model and spoke to the topic of leadership and the meaning of an education.

My data analysis utilized multiple iterations of coding as described by Charmaz (2014). I used an additional method of coding for the photos that were also submitted
(Chapman et al., 2016). After several rounds of coding data from all sources, I began the process of reviewing my focused codes to search out emerging themes (Miles et al., 2014). I followed that up with an adaptation of the process of situational analysis mapping to organize my codes into a visual of the emerging themes to highlight overall relations (Clark, 2005). Guided by a combined theoretical framework of Tribal Critical Race Theory, Relationality, and an Indigenous Wellness Model (Brayboy, 2006; Secatero, 2015; Wilson, 2008), the most notable findings of this study derived from the emergent themes were: students’ connections to cultural wealth and knowledge carries substantial meaning that compels one to thrive (Yosso, 2005); education holds fundamental value in one’s pursuit for a better life and in doing so, developing one’s capacity for leadership and advocacy (Cajete, 2015).

In this concluding chapter, I combine all major findings to offer an overview of how they answer my overarching research questions. While this study was specifically focused on first-generation American Indians, this information can still be a useful tool for understanding students’ experiences for other subgroups of students in academia. I follow that with a synopsis of implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and end with the significance of this study during an unprecedented moment in education and politics.

**Discussion of Research Questions**

Growing up on the reservation brought about memories of the good times and the challenging times but through it all emerged powerful imagery and revelations of love, hope and boundless meaning for the students. For some, it was an emotional reflection of
missing those who have passed on and for others a reconnection with one’s cultural identity. I was honored to have had the opportunity to hear their stories.

**Cultural Wealth and Knowledge**

Students reflecting on their cultural wealth and knowledge most notably mentioned family as what is important to them, aligning with the literature on familial capital (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Yosso explained, “Familial refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (2005, p. 79). However, another significant attribute of cultural ties and knowledge was also closely bound to spirituality; for some, these are one and the same. Spirituality, unfortunately, had a very weak affiliation within the Institution; the values, attitudes, concepts of spirituality represent, in many cases, the clearest contrast and mark of difference between Indigenous peoples and the West (Smith, 2012, p. 78). From family interactions comes acquired traditional and cultural knowledge about one’s identity as an American Indian; knowledge about how to sustain and survive life and to appreciate how far they have come not only as family but as a people.

It is these interactions that give significance to the concept of place and home. In these stories, there were deep connections to a particular place. The power of place not only brought about the memories of past interactions with family and legacies that have been left for generations to come but also instilled a sense of grounding and calming, if not an overall sense of belonging to something greater.

This all contributes to the student’s overall sense of well-being. To maintain physical well-being, there is a strong emphasis on hard work and determination. While
mental well-being focused on seeking harmony and finding ways to overcome the stressors of life through efforts to re-center and ground oneself. There was also a strong desire to lead a life that contributes to self-sufficiency and a mentality to “do it for yourself” and helping others. Social well-being is maintained through bringing everyone together. There were multiple references to spending time with family, friends, and meeting new people. Meeting new people who are not within one’s immediate social circle raised curiosities about their cultures and faith, which accentuates the importance of identity and how it contributes to really getting to know one another. Living a good fulfilling life, overcoming hardship and persevering was primarily attributed to spiritual well-being. Spiritual well-being reconnects one to purpose of existence, whether it be through prayer or ceremony.

**Institutional Values and Navigation**

Students seemingly had some trouble with finding visuals for institutional values. Most photos demonstrated a metaphorical reference to some aspect of student experience or academic goals. In reference to institutional value, there were several mentions of reaching one’s goals and aspirations to better one’s self through your own volition, Táá hwó’ ají t’éego [to do for self], with the overall hope of positioning themselves to be able to help others such as family, community, tribe, peers, and colleagues. Bettering one’s self adds to the literature on a combination of Aspirational capital, which refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers, and Familial capital, which states this form of cultural wealth engages a commitment to community well-being and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).
There was a general consensus among the participants that the institution values them and wants them to succeed. Many students made comments about how the faculty give them the sense that they care about them. Support programs such as student affairs and the TRIO program were mentioned as being valuable assets for the students. However, the pandemic has also brought about unique challenges for the students that brought mixed feelings of having nowhere to turn for help with assignments and technical issues; in contrast the participants felt the institution cared about their safety and health.

There were also various photos of landscape and scenery to which students ascribed meanings of motivation and connectedness. The physical landscape upon which the campus is built gave students a sense of home; it is clearly indicative of the power of place and all that it represents (Cajete, 2015). One participant made an interesting comment that their picture of a tree surrounded by a concrete parking lot made her think of the Institution and uniformity. Despite all of this concrete, a tree thrives and grows, much like education and growing despite sometimes being surrounded by unfavorable conditions.

Within this Institution, there lies hope for a better life, spaces for opportunities for growth, learning and even finding new interests. There were many mentions of education being held in high esteem and a sense of responsibility to be successful because others are looking up to them. Older generations look to them for help in navigating a contemporary world that they do not understand and younger generations look up to them as an example.
Institution and well-being had loosely affiliated interpretations however were still present. In response to physical well-being, most referred to the pandemic and having to transition to an online format and how that was not ideal for physical fitness. These students also referenced mental health, the experiences of the pandemic, and how the stresses of this transition impacted and still affect mental well-being. Social well-being was also impacted by the pandemic and resulted in students missing opportunities to network and learn together. It is clear to see that the pandemic had significant impact on student well-being. For the most part, the students did not make connections between spiritual well-being and the institution.

**Overall Well-being**

Students recognized the necessity of well-being and the role it plays in performing to one’s best ability. However, I could see that students’ descriptions of their well-being and making those connections were still in the stages of discovery. I could see a visceral reaction of intrigue as the students extracted these concepts, which were organically integrated into nearly every experience. Recognizing each aspect of well-being in their experiences requires reflective and critical thought but it is well worth the practice. It inspired each participant to be more intentional about reconnecting with each quadrant of the Indigenous Wellness model (Secatero, 2015).

**Education and Leadership**

The students voiced perspectives on education that reverberated with a communal response of opportunity and a better life, to be better able to help others in the long term. Education was seen as a means to that end. On the other hand, the participants held varying perspectives on leadership, with some believing in their leadership capacity and
others only seeing it as something to aspire to. Their answers ranged from a very technical description of leadership to descriptions of characteristic traits held by a person.

Education is described as giving a person confidence to be able to lead. To that end, educational institutions could intentionally provide students with the resources needed to develop their leadership confidence. Resources are instrumental to leadership and success at all levels, resources can be identified as a mentor, a student support specialist, an Elder, community activities, a coach, or even a family member (Secatero, 2015, pp. 114-115). Others described education as opening their eyes to those issues that impact Indigenous communities. It is clear that the students desire to engage in transformative change. Education can play a vital role in defining where one might begin toward that effort.

**Relationships with Student Success**

I considered how these findings contribute and relate to the understanding of student success for first-generation American Indian students. Here again are the research questions that guided this study:

1) How do Indigenous students utilize cultural wealth and knowledge to navigate post-secondary education?

2) What are the relationships between institutional values, Indigenous students’ descriptions of their well-being, and the way Indigenous students make meaning of their educational journey?

Based on the findings, it is evident that students derive lessons and meanings from their learned and acquired cultural knowledge that help them to stay grounded and balanced, motivated and focused. It is not the literal exhibition of cultural wealth and
knowledge that is used to navigate post-secondary education but rather the acquired character traits and values that are derived from cultural wealth and knowledge. Through these experiences, students learn life skills that help them to persevere through challenging times. Yosso speaks to a similar type of cultural wealth that institutions should identify and document to empower students, “Navigational capital confers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind” (2005, p. 80).

As a frame of reference, I have utilized Map 5: Relations, to map out the relations of all data collected (see Figure 16).

**Figure 16**

*Map 5: Relationships*

What are the relationships between institutional values, Indigenous student’s descriptions of their well-being, and the way Indigenous students make meaning of their educational journey.

Students believe or have hopes for a better life and see the institution as a means to attain that goal. Students’ descriptions of their well-being and making those connections are still in the phase of discovery as mentioned previously, however there is a heightened
awareness of its necessity for success. The ways in which students make meaning of an education are closely tied to their hopes and dreams of a better life, to be their best selves, and to ultimately be able to help others. They all share a reciprocal relationship that can only thrive through a vested interest from both student and institution.

One significant outcome of my data collection process that does not relate to my research questions, but warrants mention, was the response to the experience of our sessions. For many, this experience proved to be an emotional one and inspired a strong desire for more sessions of this nature. One student remarked, “thank you for this, I feel really inspired, like I want to start a Native American student club or something.” Another student commented, “I didn’t know that I needed this, I feel like I can keep going now, I feel invigorated and just… so much pride in who I am.” Many students commented that they wish we could have a Native American center, because just in our little circle, there was so much knowledge and learning that happened. This opportunity provided students with an opportunity to learn together, which supports learning in communal ways that “provide spaces for communities to experience themselves as whole communities, and the communal spaces give people a chance to experience themselves as a greater whole” (Cajete, 2015, p. 84). Our focus group ended with such a powerful exchange of everyone thanking each other and telling each other how they were inspired and wanted to do more.

**Implications for Practice**

While the study was focused on one Southwestern Institution, institutions in the entire region could benefit from a greater understanding of the relationships that impact student success. Admissions and student affairs offices can play a vital role in this area.
Many institutions already collect demographic information on ethnicity; analyzing those data further by first-generation status can provide additional insight into the need or the extent of increased efforts for support. Disaggregating demographic information by ethnic group (e.g. Navajo, Zuni, and other Indigenous identities) may prove to be useful in understanding not only the variation in ethnic representation on campus but may also provide direction for outreach to potential tribal partnerships or liaisons. Given the political significance, identifying the tribal affiliation(s) of students is a necessary step toward supporting Native college students and demonstrates an institutions’ commitment to valuing tribal identity and the tribal communities students come from (Nelson & Tachine, 2018, p. 77).

This information can also assist staff and faculty in working more effectively with the Indigenous population on campus. Curricular content, presented in ways that resonate for the students, may be an area that could add value to the student experience. The connection between culturally based education and its positive impacts on self-efficacy, self-esteem, and community engagement are not new. But the ways in which these connections are constructed continue to underscore the need for education to learn more about the broad/structural and particular ways cultural connectivity is carried between home, community, and school are established, strengthened, and used as best practices (Wright, 2018, p. 20). Expanding the curricular presentation of these topics beyond Native American studies courses and applying them to other courses such as sociology, psychology, history and other disciplines not only provides a familiar reference but also recognizes the distinct experiences of the American Indian students. Doing so can also
provide students with guidance on how to apply those subject areas in matters beyond academics.

Another area that could benefit from understanding the student experience is student recruitment and admissions. Demographic shifts in recruitment and enrollment patterns may impact campus climate over time. It is imperative that the university make a conscious effort to research the effects of those demographic shifts with the creation of institutional initiatives related to student experience. Institutional diversity and inclusion offices or organizations on campus could also benefit from this information to provide relevant programs and support utilizing the concepts and terminology provided, emphasizing the integration of student values and needs.

One such “need” that has been voiced by the participants is the lack of a Native American center or multicultural center on this campus. Considerations for creating such a center could benefit not only the institution in terms of retention of their American Indian population, but also as a means for recruitment. Educational access “doesn’t just mean the opportunity to go to school or to college; it means that schooling welcomes you by honoring your tribal knowledge, your tribal relationships, and by recognizing the history and current circumstances that you bring to your educational experience” (Crazy Bull, 2015, p. 64). Students who may feel a sense of intimidation could see a Native American center as a natural extension of their home environment. Guillory and Wolverton (2008, p. 61) suggested that replicating the extended family structure within the college culture enhances an American Indian student’s sense of belonging and consequently leads to higher retention rates among American Indians. Also, adequate representation of institutional administrators, faculty and staff of their own identity
allows a student to imagine the possibilities and expands their identity exploration. The model of “Growing Our Own” places paramount importance on procuring Indigenous teachers, such teachers live permanently in the community, already have long-term kinship relationships with the school students, are in the unique position to maintain the transmission of Indigenous Knowledge and Language, and pertinently, fully understand the needs of students (Van Gelderen, 2017, p. 16). One possibility would be to establish a mentorship program for those students with faculty and staff who share the same background and identity to strengthen the prospects of success.

The SWNTCU is considered a feeder school to the flagship institution within this state as well as to other four-year institutions within the region. These four-year institutions reflect American Indian enrollment headcounts and transfer rates that could use a boost. Collaborative efforts across multiple institutions that provide focused programming for retention and eventually transfer could work together on ways to build community and excitement. Joint programs, conferences, and social events may be an option. Such collaboration would send a message that all institutions involved are truly invested in not only student success but also a positive student experience.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study’s focus on student perceptions of cultural and institutional values through the lens of an Indigenous Wellness model and how that relationship impacts the way students make meaning of an education adds to the literature on first-generation American Indian student success. The findings add to the work of scholars that research how to Indigenize the Institution for the empowerment of American Indian students (e.g., Minthorn & Chavez, 2015; Minthorn & Shotton, 2018; Waterman, Lowe & Shotton,
2018). Recommendations for future research are based on the study’s limitations but also expand the scope of the inquiry that may enhance the understanding of student success in higher education.

Researchers could benefit from an increased number of participants and multiple perspectives in addition to an expanded time frame for the study. This could include considerations for a more diverse sample including not only more student participants but also adding the perspective of other ethnic groups and staff and faculty perspectives on first-generation American Indian students. Future studies should intentionally recruit for multiple representations of ethnic groups from the region and include interviews with staff, faculty, and administrators to add institutional perspectives on institutional value and cultural wealth and knowledge and related topics.

Researchers could also expand their research to include family perspectives as well as engaging community involvement, which could include tribal perspectives. It would add depth to research seeking insight into the intersectionality of living in two worlds (living a traditional lifestyle at home and entering into mainstream America when on campus) as described by some participants of the study. Adding that layer of understanding of how family members make meaning of their student’s education could provide additional context for the students' narrative in an effort to explore if there is a convergence of understanding or expectations.

Similarly, the study could expand to multiple institutions within the general region, perhaps emphasizing on the differing approaches of cultural responsiveness that each institution embodies based on their categorical significance, for example, non-tribal college university, tribal college university, two-year community college, or four-year
college. Each institution could reciprocally benefit from information sharing on their area of expertise. For example, the mission of TCUs revolves around inserting Indigenous cultural values into all aspects of the institution. Students who attend TCUs will have access to traditional culture and language, which help strengthen their cultural identity and further strengthen their community (Sanders & Van Alstine, 2018, p. 55). This comparative study could broaden the scope of understanding the student experience based on each type of institution. Identifying the commonalities and differences could help to establish a reference of “best practices” for all regional institutions as we endeavor to improve the student experience across all sites.

Researchers could expand on this multiple institutional study by adding a measure of critical consciousness and perspectives on colonization with particular interest in the generational trauma experienced through settler colonialism. Indigenous Peoples’ forced loss of land, culture and community through colonization has led to poverty, disease, personal tragedies, dysfunctional behavior, and other forms of loss, these painful situations are direct and indirect manifestations of “historic trauma” (Cajete, 2015, p. 57). The government failed in its responsibility to protect tribal treaty rights, lands, assets, and resources, including healthcare and infrastructure development guarantees (Lively, 2021, p. 2). Lively further explained, “An ethical obligation exists to provide state or federally funded reparations or programs to remedy the inhumane living conditions resulting from settler colonialism (2021, p. 3). Providing a deeper understanding of the meaning of an education beyond the student may provide insight into the degree of influence the student’s social circle holds. This in turn could provide an opportunity for restorative efforts toward community healing.
Expanding research efforts to include others beyond first-generation American Indian students may ensure inclusive and equitable support for all students. Finding out what students value and their perspectives on institutional values could provide critical information about the collective convergence or differences in perspective. Cajete proclaimed, “Diversity also epitomizes the dynamics for healthy human communities: the greater the diversity, the more resources the community has to draw on” (2015, p. 114). This will help to provide effective support and awareness on the topic with an end goal of unifying the campus community.

Conclusion

As we navigate a new normal not only within our educational system, but on a macroscale of global proportions brought on by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic which intensified an already strained political landscape, I must reiterate that this is an opportune time to reevaluate and reconnect with what is important to our students. Understanding how students navigate difficult times has never been more relevant as we push our students to engage their innate capacity for resiliency. Education “may act as cultural workers, students, teachers, and cultural bridges, but whatever the role, our intention must always be to assist the community in developing a critical consciousness” (Cajete, 2015, p. 122). We must find ways to align and connect institutional values with the students’ narratives of the meaning of an education.

Education must expand beyond helping American Indian students with processing the meaning of an education to providing opportunities to develop leadership skills. It is through these leadership skills and opportunities that students can make meaningful contributions to their communities. As the participants shared, education opens their eyes
to the larger picture. What are the contemporary and historical social issues related to Indigenous communities? Where and how can I change the Indigenous narrative of health disparities or social injustices, for example? Cajete explained, “Developing an Indigenous leadership curriculum must build on solid research of the needs and expectations of a particular Indigenous society and community, since the curriculum is being created precisely to serve a People and to address their educational, societal, and cultural needs” (2015, p. 170).

Providing the students an opportunity to express their cultural values via photovoice reinforces the power of visual and oral communication for Indigenous students. Beyond the photos are the images that inspire critical thought and deep reflection. Reengaging cultural value and how it translates to student success was a very empowering experience for the students. Yosso describes this cultural capital as linguistic capital, “communication experiences in more than one language and/or style, linguistic capital also refers to the ability to communicate via visual art, music or poetry” (2005, p. 79). This methodology has proven to be useful for the students as they reconnected with their purpose and search for deeper meaning and understanding of their education.
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Appendix A – IRB Approval Letter

OFFICE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

DATE: October 13, 2021

IRB #: 14321
IRBNet ID & TITLE: [1812386-2] The Value of an Education: An Exploratory Study of the Relationship of Cultural and Institutional Values and First Generation Native American Student Success

PI OF RECORD: Allison Borden
SUBMISSION TYPE: Response/Follow-Up

BOARD DECISION: APPROVED
EFFECTIVE DATE: October 13, 2021
EXPIRATION DATE: None
RISK LEVEL: MINIMAL RISK
PROJECT STATUS: ACTIVE - OPEN TO ENROLLMENT

DOCUMENTS:
- Consent Form - Consent Form 10/12/21 (UPDATED: 10/12/2021)
- Letter - Response letter (UPDATED: 10/12/2021)

Thank you for your Response/Follow-Up submission. The IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an acceptable risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks to participants have been minimized. This project is not covered by a Federalwide Assurance (FWA) and will not receive federal funding.

The IRB has determined the following:

- Informed consent must be obtained and documentation is required for this project. To obtain and document consent, use only approved consent document(s).

This determination applies only to the activities described in the submission and does not apply should any changes be made to this research. If changes are being considered, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to submit an amendment to this project and receive IRB approval prior to implementing the changes. A change in the research may disqualify this research from the current review category. If federal funding will be sought for this project, an amendment must be submitted so that the project can be reviewed under relevant federal regulations.

All reportable events must be promptly reported to the IRB, including: UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to participants or others, SERIOUS or UNEXPECTED adverse events, NONCOMPLIANCE issues, and participant COMPLAINTS.

If an expiration date is noted above, a continuing review or closure submission is due no later than 30 days before the expiration date. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to apply for continuing review or closure and receive approval for the duration of this project. If the IRB approval for this project expires, all research related activities must stop and further action will be required by the IRB.

Please use the appropriate reporting forms and procedures to request amendments, continuing review, closure, and reporting of events for this project. Refer to the OIRB website for forms and guidance on submissions.
Appendix B – Consent Form

The Value of an Education – An Exploratory Study of the Relationship of Cultural and Institutional Values and First Generation Native American Student Success
Informed Consent for PhotoVoice Submission, Interview, and Focus Group
September 13, 2021

Dr. Allison M. Borden, principal investigator, and Michelle L. Lee, student investigator, from the Department of Teacher Education, Education Leadership & Policy are conducting a research project. The purpose of the research is to study the value of an education and culturally motivating factors through the lens of first generation American Indian students. You are being asked to participate because you are a first-generation American Indian student at a two-year community college. The maximum number of participants to be enrolled in this study is 25.

Your participation will involve picture submission, an interview, and a focus group discussion (talking circle). The photovoice/art submission will require you to submit four photos or art pieces with an artist statement. This portion is self-guided using guiding questions – time commitment will vary. The interview and focus group should each take about 60-90 minutes to complete. The interview and focus group include questions such as, “What aspects of your art submission represent your personal values in terms of physical well-being?” I will digitally audio record the interview and focus group. At the conclusion of the focus group session, you will receive a $15 gift card.

Your involvement in the research is voluntary. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time and your interview recording and other submitted materials will be destroyed. You can refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There are no names or identifying information associated with your responses. I will assign pseudonyms for use in my dissertation. There are no known risks in this research, but some individuals may experience discomfort when answering questions. I will store the recordings and transcripts in a secure location, and I will be the only person who has access to them. I will store digital audio files and electronic records in a password protected file on a password protected computer. I will store the audio recordings until I have completed and submitted my dissertation. I will delete/destroy the recordings prior to graduation. Your information collected for this project will NOT be used or shared for future research, even if we remove identifiable information like your name. Please see the attached protocol form with information regarding Covid-19 protocols and procedures I will observe during this research project.

The findings from this project will provide information on first generation American Indian student experiences. If published, results will be presented in summary form only. While you may not directly benefit from this study, the hope is to establish stronger support programs for first generation American Indian students in higher education.

The COVID-19 practices for data collection for this study will include: 1) participants and the student investigator will not participate in data collection if either have symptoms of COVID-19, have been directly exposed to COVID-19, or have recently tested positive for COVID-19; 2) The research participants and the student investigator will wear masks throughout the interview process; 3) the student investigator will provide personal protective equipment such as gloves, masks, hand sanitizer; 4) the student investigator will clean and disinfect the interview environment both prior to and after all data collection sessions; 5) Social distancing will be in place during all sessions; in the rare event such be direct hand to hand contact between a participant and the student researcher, hand sanitizing will take place immediately.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please feel free to call Dr. Allison M. Borden at 505-277-1285. 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 Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (505) 277-2644 or Office of the IRB (OIRB) at

By signing below you will be agreeing to participate in the above described research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Signature of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of Research Team Member</td>
<td>Signature of Research Team Member</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C - PhotoVoice or Arts-based Narration

Utilizing your creativity in expressing your cultural values, take at least two photos (or other means of arts-based medium) that best represents your answer to the following prompts.

Prompts:

1. What culturally related value or knowledge did you learn that has been most useful to you and your educational endeavor?
2. From your perspective, what values does the institution espouse?

Include an Artist statement for each submission:

An artist statement may provide context and/or an explanation of the relationship of the submission to the prompts.

Note: Photos utilizing your camera phone is acceptable however if you need a camera, one will be provided to you.

PhotoVoice Ethics (Mitchell, 2020, p.280):

- Avoid taking photographs of any activity that may bring harm or ill will to yourself or your subject
- Avoid taking pictures of illegal activities or “risky” situations
- Respect the privacy of others, if taking photographs of people, then obtain written consent from every identifiable person in the photograph
- Avoid taking photographs of things that are very personal or private, which included photographs of people, places, or things that are considered sacred to your tribe and should not be photographed or shared outside your tribal community
Appendix D - Interview Protocol

Photovoice or Arts-based submission
We will utilize your submissions as context to the following interview questions.

Individual Interview [~90 mins]

Demographic Questions:
1. Which Tribal Nation or Pueblo are you a member of?
2. Were you raised and do you now live on or off the reservation?
3. How many years have you been at this campus or how many years did you attend?
4. Are you Bilingual?

Critical Questions: (Semi-structured interview, these are guiding questions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Well-being (Body)</th>
<th>Mental Well-being (Mind)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. What aspects of your Art submission represent your personal values in terms of physical well-being?</td>
<td>8. What aspects of your Art submission represent your personal values in terms of Mental well-being?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What aspects of your submission of perceived institutional values represents physical well-being?</td>
<td>9. What aspects of your submission of perceived institutional values represents Mental well-being?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Do you think that this relationship impacts your educational journey and in what way?</td>
<td>10. Do you think that this relationship impacts your educational journey and in what way?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Well-being (Relation)</th>
<th>Spiritual Well-Being (Purpose)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. What aspects of your Art submission represent your personal values in terms of Social well-being?</td>
<td>14. What aspects of your Art submission represent your personal values in terms of spiritual or cultural well-being?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. What aspects of your submission of perceived institutional values represents Social well-being?</td>
<td>15. What aspects of your submission of perceived institutional values represents spiritual or cultural well-being?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Do you think that this relationship impacts your educational journey and in what way?</td>
<td>16. Do you think that this relationship impacts your educational journey and in what way?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Open-Ended Questions:
17. How do these relationships influence how you make meaning of your education?
18. Describe what you think leadership is? Do you perceive yourself as a leader and how does your education enhance or influence your perception?
19. Is there any additional information or statements you would like to share?
Appendix E - Focus Group Protocol

Introduction and Overview [10 mins]

Photovoice or Arts-based Exercise [20-30 mins]
Discuss the visual submissions as a group (I will choose a selected few for discussion from each “guiding questions” category; submissions will be anonymously shared)

1. What aspect of each photo demonstrates the perceived value of each photo?
2. Which one of these photos makes you feel the most comfortable or that you can relate to it and why?
3. Which photo inspires purpose and meaning in terms of your educational journey?

Discussion Questions [40-60 mins]

4. Did most people derive similar responses to each question? What made it easy or difficult to answer the questions?
5. How did your answers to questions number 1 & 2 influence your answer to Number 3?
6. How would you rate each photo (starting with the photo that holds the most value for you at the front?)
7. Do you feel that your values and the institutional values have impacted your educational experience and in what way?
Appendix F – PhotoVoice Submissions

ASHLEY

DONNA
KELLY

Warriors are not what you think of as warriors. The warrior is not someone who fights, for no one has the right to take another life. The warrior, for us, is the one who sacrifices himself for the good of others. His task is to take care of the elderly, the destitute, those who cannot provide for themselves, and above all, the children, the future of humanity.

NORA

[Image of various artifacts and photographs]