

Evaluating the factors that contribute to the educational success
and career choice of Native American students
in community college

by

Michelle Wilt

B.S., University of Minnesota, Mankato, 1994
M.H.A., University of Phoenix, 2008

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

Community colleges, as open access institutions, play a crucial role in providing educational opportunities for diverse student populations. Native American students represent a unique community college demographic whose cultural backgrounds shape their approaches to higher education. These unique cultural and life experiences can influence retention and degree completion. The theoretical framework for this study was Huffman's (2001) transculturation theory. The purpose of this research study was to evaluate the factors that contribute to the success of Native American students enrolled within a community college system in the Southwest United States. The purpose of this study was also to provide insight of the Native American community college student experience and their educational and career selection.

The study incorporated an explanatory sequential research design, which included a survey and interviews of enrolled Native American community college students. The survey was to learn about the factors that impact the Native American community college experience. The interview focused on how Native American community college students describe the influences of their cultural identity on their career selection and academic journey. This study found that Native American students can be successful in the community college environment, particularly when institutions recognize their unique experiences that influence their educational journey.

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Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Jennifer Spielvogel, Ph.D.

Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Margaretta Mathis, Ph.D.

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I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. Phillippians 4:13

Dedication

The dissertation is dedicated to my family, friends, and colleagues.

For Ryan, Jessica, Ethan, and Madigan - you are my world.

For the students who were willing to participate in this study, I greatly appreciate your willingness to share your stories of determination and strength. You are inspiring.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The academic achievement and persistence of community college students is an often-explored topic. The goal is for students to apply their education to future careers for personal, community, and worldly betterment. Community colleges offer a distinct learning environment where all who desire to learn are welcome, regardless of wealth, heritage, or previous academic experience (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2024). Access to community college is essential for students facing significant barriers to education (Beccaris-Pescatore, 2024). Brock and Slater (2021) contend community colleges can assist underserved populations achieve educational and career goals. As such, community colleges are open-access educational institutions that play a crucial role in providing educational opportunities for Native American students. “America’s community colleges enrich the lives of students by raising their lifetime earnings and helping them achieve their individual potential” (AACC, 2022, p. 7). According to Reyes and Shotton (2018) Native American student persistence in community colleges is a critical area of research that deserves attention in the exploration of student success.

Statement of the Problem

Community colleges play a vital role in educating Native American students as “nearly 55 % of Native people who enroll in higher education begin with community college” (Weaver, 2015, p. 455). Although community colleges serve as a gateway to higher education, Native American students remain underrepresented within them (Cirks, 2021; Keith et al., 2016; Lopez, 2018; Reyes & Shotten, 2018; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). Native American students are enrolling in and completing college degrees at rates significantly lower than the overall United States population (Reyes & Shotten, 2018). Beccaris-Pescatore (2024) found that community college students stop-out of college for a variety of reasons, including a lack of academic preparedness,

institutional frustrations, and socio-economic challenges. Zajacova and Lawrence (2018) posit there is a relationship between education and health, to the degree that “Education and health are central to individual and population well-being” (p. 283). There is a need to understand enrollment and completion patterns of Native American students (Don, 2022; Valentine et al., 2016). “Indigenous peoples have been largely left out of institutional data, research, and curricula and, thus, rendered virtually invisible” (Reyes & Shotton, 2018, p. 4). Lopez (2020) contends “When there are not enough data to pass policies, and when samples sizes are not large enough to find statistical significance, then visibility matters” (p. 750).

Background of the Problem

According to 2020 estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau, the Native American population in the United States “grew by 11.6% to 2,159,802” from 2010 – 2020, for those who classified their race as American Indian only (Sanchez-Rivera et al., 2023, National Findings section). For those who have more than one ethnicity to include Native American “the population size nearly doubled increasing to 6,363,796” (Sanchez-Rivera et al., 2023, National Findings section). According to population size, the five largest American Indian Reservations are all west of the Mississippi River (Sanchez-Rivera et al.). In Arizona, reservations account for 25% of Arizona’s land mass. Despite the increasing population of Native Americans, there does not appear to be an increase in Native American students attending and persisting in community colleges. The NCES projected a decrease in higher education enrollment for Native American students by 9% (138,000 versus 125,000) between 2017 – 2028 (Hussar & Bailey, 2020). de Brey et al. in their 2019 U.S. Department of Education report state “the 2016 total college enrollment rate for American Indian/Alaska Native young adults (19 percent) was not measurably different from their 2000 rate (16 percent)” (p. 117). Native Americans represent only 1% of the total number

of students enrolled in community college (AACC, 2024). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that undergraduate enrollment trends between fall 2010 and fall 2021 varied among the different racial and ethnic groups (2023). During this time, enrollment for American Indian/Alaska Native students dropped by 40 percent, decreasing from 179,100 to 107,000 students (NCES).

Recent studies indicate that “approximately 50% of Native Americans aged 25 and older have not been educated beyond high school” (Brock & Slater, 2021, p. 2). Brock and Slater (2021) also state that historically, workers with only a high school education are the most likely to experience unemployment. The Hunt Institute, an independent non-profit entity for educational policy, states issues such as high unemployment rates and low-wage jobs for Native Americans, are largely a result of their underrepresentation of Native American students in higher education (The Hunt Institute, 2022). Research has shown the persistence-to-graduation rates for Native American students in higher education is the lowest of any minority group (Lopez, 2018; The Hunt Institute, 2022). The consistent low graduation rates of Native American students highlight the necessity of investigating factors that influence student persistence (Lopez, 2018).

“Ensuring Native students successfully access and attain postsecondary degrees or credentials is necessary to ensure students reap their return on investment” (The Hunt Institute, 2022, p. 2). Community colleges with open-access admission policies have played a crucial role in providing higher education to a diverse student population, promoting upward social mobility to historically underrepresented groups (Lin et al., 2023). “Higher education institutions can provide students with an inclusive learning environment to increase their job skills for employability, which may help lower the Native American and general United States population

unemployment rates” (Bivens, 2024, p. 18). Students who do not persist to graduation are more likely to accumulate student loan debt and relinquish the benefits that come with a postsecondary degree (The Hunt Institute, 2022). Educational leaders can influence Native American student retention (Brown, 2015). Brown (2015) argues that educational leaders must recognize that the decisions they make on behalf of students can influence students' self-efficacy, academic performance, and their decision to persist in their education. Community college administrators must focus on the reasons why students leave college before earning a degree (Beccaris-Pescatore, 2024). “The demographic characteristics of the population have induced us to consider how our institutions can more effectively serve their students and hopefully retain more of them until degree completion” (Tinto, 1982, p. 687).

There continues to be a need to understand Native American student experiences in higher education highlighting the need for better data collection and analysis (Reyes & Shotten, 2018). “American Indian students are often overlooked in studies due to their lack of size in the sample population” (Cirks, 2021, p. 83). Oxendine (2025) contends much of the research on Native American students in higher education is qualitative, and there is a need for quantitative data. Lopez (2020) also contends there is a “lack of high-quality quantitative investigations of Indigenous education, which contributes to a limited literature base” (p. 751). Given the limited research on Native American students in community colleges this mixed methodology design creates a greater sociodemographic profile for the Native American community college student, while providing an opportunity for their voices to be meaningfully represented in the research. There is a gap in the literature concerning the factors that contribute to the success of the Native American community college students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to evaluate the factors that contribute to the success of Native American students enrolled within a community college system in the Southwest United States. The purpose of this study was also to provide insight of the Native American community college student experience and their educational and career selection.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are the factors that impact Native American students' community college experience?

Research Question 2: How do Native American community college students describe the influences of their cultural identity on their career selection and academic journey?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Huffman's (2001) transculturation theory. Huffman (2001) found that Native American students can persist academically while identifying with their culture. Additionally, Huffman contends that cultural identity should be encouraged by higher education, as Native American student cultural identity positively impacts higher education persistence. Transculturation theory differentiates itself as a theory because it "evolved as an attempt to examine the manner in which Native students encounter and engage mainstream-dominant educational settings" (Huffman, 2020, p. 88). Huffman states the theory is not intended to examine the "educational experiences of other minority groups" and apply it to the Native American student population (Huffman, 2020, p. 88). Another notable distinction of transculturation theory is the overview it provides of a positive academic experience (Huffman, 2020).

Conceptual Frameworks

The conceptual frameworks informing the study were Tinto's (1975) student retention theory and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1986). Tinto's theory proposes that various factors such as students' family backgrounds, personal characteristics including expectational and motivational attributes, pre-college experiences, and ethnicities are linked to college persistence and dropout rates. Although eradicating student dropout is not realistic, "institutions can act to reduce, within reason, dropout among certain groups of students in the general student population" (Tinto, 1982, p. 698). Tinto states there is a cost/benefit perception to college completion. The cost/benefit perspective "argues that a person will tend to withdraw from college when he perceives that an alternative form of investment of time, energies and resources will yield greater benefits" (Tinto, 1975, pp. 97-98). Tinto also contends there is a relationship between social and academic systems in colleges, which impact persistence and completion (1997). Bridging the gap between social involvement and academic involvement supports learning, impacting persistence and student success (Tinto, 1997). Faculty interactions and supportive classroom communities allow for both social and academic growth, which leads to persistence and completion of academic goals (Tinto, 1997).

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) evolved from the need to understand how personal characteristics, past experiences, and self-efficacy influence educational decisions such as setting educational goals, choosing a major of study, and selecting a future career (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Dabdoub et al., 2020; Lent et al., 1986; Lent & Brown, 2006). Specifically, SCCT "outlines the dynamic relationships among personal attributes, environments, and behavior" (Dabdoub et al., 2020, p. 463). Student retention theory and SCCT guided this study in exploring

the relationships between personal factors within student demographics, academic performance, and career choice for Native American community college students.

Methodology

The study incorporated an explanatory sequential research design. An explanatory sequential design is “completed in two phases in which the practitioner-scholar begins by collecting quantitative data and then concludes by collecting and analyzing qualitative data” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 218). The study utilized a survey for Research Question 1 (RQ1) focusing on the factors which impact the college experience, such as academic, financial, and social influence. The quantitative portion of the design allows for larger samples and greater amounts of data points. The qualitative phase of the study addressed Research Question 2 (RQ2). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to gain the Native American student perspective on how past experiences and cultural identity influenced their educational goals and career selection. Survey respondents indicated their interest in participating in the follow-up interviews.

Alignment Table

A table was developed to provide an overview of how the elements in this study align. The alignment table includes the literature findings, research questions, the conceptual frameworks, and research methodology. The alignment table can be found in Appendix A.

Delimitations and Assumptions

The study only addressed the Native American student population enrolled in the selected community college system. This study was delimited to Native American students enrolled during the designated research timeframe who have completed six hours of college credit. The data retrieved from the Student Information System (SIS) are assumed to be accurate. An

additional assumption was that the survey and interview participants would complete the survey and answer the interview questions accurately and honestly. The intent was to gain the Native American student's perspective about their programs, experiences, and career goals.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the potential to add to the body of research for an often overlooked and understudied student population. This research will provide insight into the supports that exist in higher education completion for Native American students in community colleges, informing higher education practices. Understanding Native American student success factors may lead to targeted interventions and support services that can effectively promote the recruitment, retention, and academic success of Native American students in community college.

Definition of Terms

Native American peoples are known by many names, including American Indians, Indigenous, and First Nation peoples (Jacob et al., 2015), all of which are terms which will be used interchangeably.

American Indian – the term that distinguishes the cultural and historical identities of Indigenous tribes within the continental United States (U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs, 2017).

Community College – refers to a two-year public college that awards associate degrees. Community colleges also offer certification courses and apprenticeship certificates (Brock & Slater, 2021).

Native American - the appropriate term that broadly refers to all Native or Indigenous peoples of the United States, Canada First Nations, Alaska Natives, Hawaiian Natives, and American Samoans (U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs, 2017).

Success – for this study student success is defined by retention and/or certificate/degree completion. Retention is defined as “staying in school until completion of a degree” (Hagedorn, 2006, p. 4) and is deemed an institutional measure.

Chapter Summary

The Native American population in the United States has grown, yet community colleges are not experiencing an increase in Native American student enrollment. Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study, including the problem statement, background information, purpose of the research, and the research questions. Chapter 1 also introduced the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, along with an alignment table and the research methodology. The chapter concluded by discussing the delimitations and assumptions of the study, its significance, and key terms.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provided an introduction and overview of the study. Chapter 2 will present a literature review that analyzes the research problem and identifies a gap in the literature the study is designed to address. Chapter 3 will outline the quantitative and qualitative methodology relevant to the research problem. Chapter 4 will provide an analysis of the collected data and present the study’s findings. Chapter 5 will summarize the study, discuss the implications related to the findings, offer recommendations for practice, and offer recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

There is a need to explore the academic achievement of Native American students in community colleges. There is limited research on the Native American student population at community colleges (Harvey, 2022). Understanding the factors contributing to Native American student success is vital to addressing educational disparities among this population (YellowBird-Steele, 2021).

This chapter provides an overview of research related to Native American community college students with an intentional focus on their cultural and demographic distinctiveness. This chapter begins with the overview of the literature search, which is followed by the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This literature review is then organized by common themes and subthemes surrounding Native Americans in higher education, including higher education trends, academic preparedness, financial barriers, cultural challenges, self-efficacy, mentorship, and the correlation of education and healthcare outcomes. Finally, this chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

Literature Search

The literature review chapter was conducted using sources from the Kansas State University library databases. The focus of the literature search was on Native American students in community colleges. The primary databases accessed for this review included EBSCOhost, ERIC, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and SAGE. The search terms included Native American, American Indian, Indigenous Americans, and community college. This chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature using dissertations, peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, and scholarly articles.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Huffman's transculturation theory (2001) was the theoretical framework used for this study. Transculturation theory was developed specifically for the Native American student population to better explain the educational experiences of Native American students, with a focus on the unique cultural challenges they face in navigating mainstream educational institutions (2001). The conceptual frameworks used were Tinto's student retention theory (1975) and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Lent et al., 1986). Tinto's theory suggests that factors such as students' family backgrounds, personal characteristics, such as educational expectations and motivation, pre-college experiences, and ethnicities are linked to college persistence and dropout rates (1975). SCCT also states there are multiple variables which impact goals and career choice (Lent et al., 1986). Expanding on Bandura's (1989) social cognitive theory, SCCT suggests learning experiences are not just automatic responses to past influences, but they are actively shaped and can influence important career decisions and outcomes (Lent & Brown, 2006). The theoretical and conceptual frameworks link college success to factors beyond just the academic factors or social factors and should not be evaluated as isolated entities.

Transculturation Theory

Transculturation theory resulted from a request to research how well Native American students persisted in a non-Native college (Huffman, 2020). In 2001, Terry Huffman sought to discover why some Native American college students did not succeed in their higher educational pursuits, while others seemed to overcome challenges and successfully complete their educational journey. What Huffman (2013) found for Native American students is that "a strong cultural identity proved the central factor in their success" (p. 24). Transculturation theory

proposes that Native American students can adapt to a new cultural environment while maintaining their tribal identity. Marroquín and McCoach (2014) in their study on cultural integrity incorporating transculturation theory, found that “the less transculturated students are, the more socially isolated these students feel on campus” (p. 23). This ability to navigate the new setting without fear of losing their cultural roots supports their persistence and academic success (Huffman, 2020). Simply stated, “transculturation is a process of learning how to learn a new and old culture” (Huffman, 2013, p. 24).

Huffman (2001) contends that reaching transculturation is a four-stage process (Figure 2.1). The first stage, alienation, is when the student feels intimidated, isolated, or lonely, yet they persevere, remain in school, and move to stage two. Stage two is self-discovery where the Native American student comes to the realization they did not lose their cultural identity and survived academically. In stage three, students implement practical changes in their personal, social, and academic lives. The final stage, stage four, is where the student settles into the routine of college and can interact in a Native American and Non-Native culture.

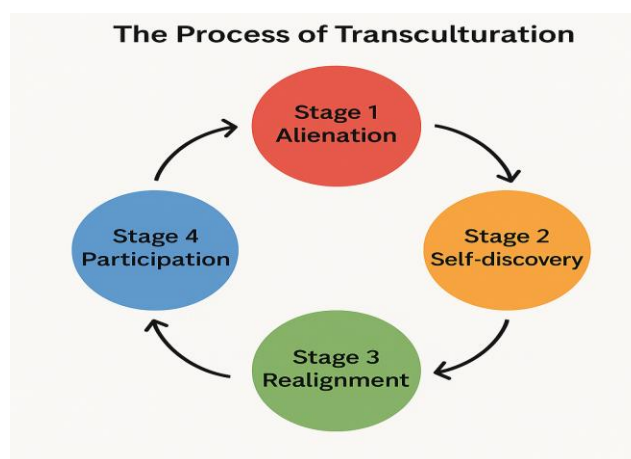


Figure 2.1 Transculturation Stages (Huffman, 2001)

Although other theories, such as discontinuity theory and tribal critical race theory have been utilized in researching Native American students in higher education, each theory contains different assumptions which will lead to different conclusions (Huffman, 2020). In evaluating cultural discontinuity theory, which states there is a disconnect in culture between home and the educational institution, the theory was not developed for Native Americans, but for minority students (Huffman, 2020). Tribal critical race theory, developed specifically for Native Americans, is often used to explore how race is a factor politically and socially, and how colonization has impacted the Native American society (Huffman, 2020). Although each theory has a different perspective, Huffman contends “they share in common the attempt to unravel the intricacies of educational outcomes for Native American students” (Huffman, 2020, p. 89). Transculturation theory, however, “attempts to give recognition to the resilience, integrity, and strength of tribal peoples” (Huffman, 2020, p. 98).

Tinto’s Model of Student Retention

In 1975, Vincent Tinto sought to better understand the reasons why college students decide to stop pursuing their educational attainment in college. Tinto acknowledged that, despite extensive prior research on the topic, earlier studies had overlooked the likelihood of multiple factors influencing a student’s decision to stop out (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) suggested that students enter college with diverse attributes, experiences, and expectations, and their likelihood of dropping out is linked to how well they integrate both academically and socially into the college environment. Becenti (2020) found that “students entered college with a variety of internal and external characteristics, which, combined with the college resources and support system, were related to student persistence and completion” (p. 71), supporting Tinto’s notion that persistence is influenced by multiple forces. Tinto (1982) highlighted the need for higher

education to gain a better understanding of student characteristics, such as age, gender, and race, suggesting that student dropout is not solely dependent on the student but rather influenced by multiple, varied factors. He argued that it is equally important to consider the role institutions play in influencing student retention.

In his later research specifically aimed at community college students, Tinto (1997) emphasized the close relationship between academic and social systems within colleges and how these interactions influence persistence and completion. St. Pierre's (2011) research aligned with Tinto's model, highlighting the vital role of college employees, both faculty and staff, in influencing student success. Bivens (2024) specifically found a positive correlation between supportive faculty behaviors and Native American student persistence. Tinto (1997) found that students in coordinated learning environments, much like cohorted healthcare programs, are better integrated into higher education academically and socially. Tinto recognized that community college students have a "multiplicity of obligations outside the college. For them, going to college is but one of a number of tasks to be completed during the course of a day" (Tinto, 1997, p. 614). Despite these challenges, Native American students can persevere in higher education (Keith et al., 2016).

Alternatively, Lopez (2018) contends recent theories on Native American persistence in postsecondary education highlight the limitations of earlier theoretical models. As a result, he states there remains a need for continued research to better understand Native American student persistence. According to Lopez (2018), although Tinto's theory is "somewhat relevant" (p. 794) to Native American student populations, older theories do not account for the variances of Native American experiences in higher education. "What is missing most from the theories is how to measure difficult constructs such as culture and desire of Native Americans to give back to their

community” (Lopez, 2018, p. 805). Tinto (1982) in his article about student attrition and theories, acknowledged the challenges and potential limitations with traditional theories recognizing the need to further expound and develop theories on student attrition.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1977) theorized that human motivation significantly influences the self-regulatory system, which is shaped by three core determinants: internal factors, behavioral patterns, and environmental influences. The interactions between these determinants determine how effectively individuals regulate their actions in pursuit of success. Internal factors are personal factors such as beliefs and self-efficacy, behavioral patterns are learned responses and habits, and environmental influences include family, social, cultural, and educational settings (Bandura, 1977, 1982).

In the 1980’s, Betz and Hackett (2006) wanted to understand the relationship of self-efficacy and the underrepresentation of women in scientific and technical careers. Realizing the importance of self-efficacy in relation to career development for women, Betz and Hackett (2006) borrowed Bandura’s social cognitive theory, and applied it specifically to college major selection and career choice. Much like Bandura, who theorized there are multiple variables influencing one’s motivation to succeed, Beck and Hackett (2006) found there are multiple variables influencing goals and career choice. The core constructs of SCCT are self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, interests, and contextual supports and barriers (Lent & Brown, 2006). These core constructs such as race and gender, marital and parental status, past experiences, perceptions of outcomes, and not only belief in one’s ability, but the source of self-efficacy, can impact educational major selection and career choice (Dabdoub, 2023). SCCT is unique in that it is “more concerned with relatively dynamic and situation-specific aspects of

people (e.g., self-views, future expectations) and their environments” (Lent & Brown, 2006, p. 13). SCCT is a specialized adaptation of Bandura's social cognitive theory, designed to enhance understanding and exploration of career development and decision-making (Betz & Hackett, 2006).

Building off of Bandura’s and Beck and Hackett’s work, Lent, Brown, and Larkin (1984) continued to research self-efficacy and its correlation to academic success and persistence towards educational and career goals. Lent et al. (1984) found “self-efficacy may be an important cognitive factor relative to the educational/vocational behavior of students” (p. 362). Lent et al. (1986) went on to further elaborate on self-efficacy and its influence on vocational interest stating, “efficacy beliefs may contribute to clients’ range of perceived career options” (p. 268). SCCT suggests that academic satisfaction is linked to goal progress as slow progress leads to dissatisfaction, while good progress increases satisfaction (Lent et al., 2007). To support student goal achievement, Lent et al. (2007) suggest students should set clear, specific, and challenging yet attainable goals, build self-efficacy in relevant skills, and access resources like mentoring and tutoring to overcome obstacles. Educational institutions need to monitor students’ academic goals and persistence towards those goals, evaluate what resources students have available and what are utilized, and assess self-efficacy beliefs attained during their educational path in relation to academic goal pursuit (Lent et al., 2007).

Native Americans and Higher Education

Access to higher education has increased opportunities for underrepresented populations and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Perna & Thomas, 2008). Native American students have historically been an underrepresented demographic in higher education institutions across the United States (The Hunt Institute, 2022; Washington, 2023). Low high school

graduation rates for Native American students have a direct correlation to the reduced representation of Native Americans in higher education (Reyes & Shotton, 2018; Tate & Schwartz, 1993; Washington, 2023). College enrollment rates among Native American students are significantly lower than those of other ethnic groups in the United States (Keith et al., 2016). Native American students tend to be older and are considered non-traditional aged students (Keith et al., 2016; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). Native American women are entering college at a higher rate than Native American men and make up 60% of the Native American student population (Reyes & Shotton, 2018). Native American college students are less likely to complete their degree than other student demographic groups (The Hunt Institute, 2022). Williams (2011) states, “The gap between the number of (Native American) students enrolled versus those who graduate is too large to ignore” (p. 67).

Native American students have varied higher education experiences; however studies indicate there are some common themes such as access issues, educational preparedness, and cultural influences (Reyes & Shotton, 2018).

Only 14% of Native Americans and Alaskan Natives who self-identify as single race have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Of the Native Americans and Alaskan Natives identifying as more than one race, 19% have completed a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to 30% for all other races. (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020, p. 91)

The underrepresentation of Native American students has consistently been and continues to be a significant issue in higher education (Reyes & Shotton, 2018; Washington, 2023). According to Brown (2015) gaining insight into the factors that affect the academic success of Native American students may help reduce dropout rates and improve retention rates within this student demographic. Understanding the factors influencing community college student decision-

making provides insights, especially given the decline in community college enrollment during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected marginalized students who often start their higher education at community colleges (Bobbitt et al., 2021). At the beginning of the pandemic academic year, the decline in persistence rates was primarily observed in community colleges, with the greatest demographic being racial and minority groups (Bobbitt et al., 2021).

Academic Preparedness

For those Native American students who want to pursue higher education, a barrier they often face is a lack of academic preparedness (Cirks, 2021; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). “Many American Indian and Alaskan Native students are underprepared for college and need additional preparatory coursework” (Keith et al., 2016, p. 702). Pre-college academic preparation has a direct correlation to higher education persistence (Lopez, 2018). Reyes and Shotton (2018) state there is a persistent gap in college readiness for Native American students. Addressing the issue of college preparedness for Native American students requires a multifaceted approach, including improving K-12 education quality (Reyes & Shotton, 2018). College preparedness is extremely varied, and there are “significant” (p. 13) differences in reading and math performance based on the type of school, reservation, non-reservation, highly populated or rural environment (Reyes & Shotton, 2018). It is important to realize that Native American students have diverse cultures, and Native American students’ pre-college experiences vary (The Hunt Institute, 2022). “Even if students enroll in higher education, the likelihood of survival is low due to the lack of academic preparedness” (Cirks, 2021, p. 16).

Megan Roberts in her 2022 research, *Student Experiences Leaving Health Profession Interest Areas*, stated that defining student success for higher education is meaningless if

students enroll with the desire to succeed but were not provided the pre-college academic preparation to do so. Reyes and Shotten (2018) found Native American students encounter a variety of factors which contribute to the lack of academic preparedness, including inadequate support from school counselors, poorly funded schools, and limited access to college preparatory courses and testing. Students from underrepresented populations may face challenges with standardized testing and pre-requisite requirements needed for healthcare program admission (Valentine et al., 2016). William's (2023) research found that although underrepresented student populations were successful in high school, the students felt underprepared for coursework. The Hunt Institute (2022) stated academic preparation for higher education is more than knowing how to navigate tough coursework, it is also knowing when, how, and where to seek help to succeed. "It is not elitist to recognize that not all those who enter (college) are equally equipped either in skills (academic, social, or otherwise) and/or intellectual capabilities to finish a given course of study" (Tinto, 1982, p. 696). However, vital to Native American student success, is treating each student as one who can (Keith et al., 2016).

The research highlights the barrier of academic preparedness for Native American students pursuing higher education. Native American students are falling behind academically as compared to other demographic populations in the United States (YellowBird-Steele, 2021). Studies emphasize that many Native American students enter college without the necessary academic foundation, contributing to lower persistence and completion rates (Cirks, 2021; Tate & Schwartz, 1993; Lopez, 2018; Reyes & Shotton, 2018).

Financial Barriers

Despite having access to community college higher education, Native American students often experience enrollment and admission challenges. Obstacles include but are not limited to

educational, financial, personal/family, cultural, and geographical (Don, 2022). The cost of college is one of the most significant factors influencing student enrollment and retention (Valentine et al., 2016). According to Valentine et al. (2016) in addition to rising tuition expenses, the additional cost of fees, textbooks, and supplies when family income has not increased often makes a degree unattainable (Valentine et al., 2016). Reyes and Shotten (2018) contend that seemingly small procedural changes for admission practices can have financial implications. Online efforts for educational institutions may seem like a best practice, however Native American students in rural areas may not have access to computers or even the internet, creating a financial and access barrier (Reyes & Shotten, 2018).

Often, Native American students face food, housing, and employment insecurities. Lopez (2018) notes the financial challenges many Native American students face is a result of coming from a low socio-economic status and having experienced living below the poverty line. “It is difficult to weigh long-term costs and benefits when the student has struggled to meet basic needs” (Beccaris-Pescatore, 2024, p. 77). Life challenges influence academic commitment (Keith et al., 2016). Cirks (2021) states that Native American students often use their financial aid to support their families, which challenges academic persistence. “The costs associated with attending a mainstream university is a leading reason for preventing students from attending and completing their course of study” (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020, p. 92; Tinto, 1982). However, Lopez’ (2018) research indicates there is a substantial amount of financial aid available from federal, state, and tribal resources, emphasizing the need to guide Native American students in seeking and applying for these funds. The Hunt Institute (2022) reports that federal funding and scholarships can help reduce the financial burden of education. However, they also report that federal funding and scholarships can produce additional barriers, such as difficulty assessing

educational costs or some scholarship requirements limit work opportunities which is needed to support family members (The Hunt Institute, 2022).

Geographically, Native American students often live in rural or remote communities. “Often Native American students must commute vast distances or move away from their supportive community to attend a mainstream university” (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020, p. 92). Kendrick (2023) found that Native American students faced financial barriers which included commuting to school, dealing with educational fees, and not knowing how or where to access scholarships. Beccaris-Pescatore (2024) agrees with Kendrick, finding that college students are often faced with the choice of working in order to pay for gas or continue in college. Tinto (1982) contends that college experiences correlate to financial burden. When student educational experiences are positive, they are willing to accept greater financial burdens, as opposed to negative experiences, where the financial burden justifies drop out (Tinto, 1982).

Financial constraints from geographic isolation, lack of internet, or family responsibilities can further complicate access (Reyes & Shotten, 2018). While financial aid is available, navigating these resources can be complex (Lopez, 2018; The Hunt Institute, 2022). Native American students may face multiple financial challenges with enrolling and persisting in community college necessitating the need to further investigate.

Cultural Identities

Native American students experience unique challenges based on their cultures. Despite generalizations, Native Americans are highly diverse, representing numerous tribes, cultures, and languages (Cirks, 2021; Dabdoub et al., 2022). “There are significant differences among tribes in cultural traditions, beliefs, and language. These are variables that affect educational outcomes” (Don, 2022, p. 17). Native American students refer to navigating between two cultural worlds,

Native and non-Native, in which expectations are sometimes contradictory (Keith et al., 2016). Native American students “reflect both rural and urban populations, embodying backgrounds and worldviews that range from traditional tribal-specific backgrounds and worldviews that range from traditional tribal-specific to urban pan-Indian” (Collins, 2013, p. 10). “While it is often assumed that Indigenous people exclusively reside within rural, reservation areas, Indigenous people populate different areas of the United States, including their original homelands, federally designated reservations, reservation border towns, rural communities, and urban areas” (Reyes & Shotton, 2018, p. 4). Native American students may possess complex, multifaceted identities, some of which may not align with how others perceive or define them (Dabdoub et al., 2022).

Community colleges not only face the challenge of recruiting underrepresented student populations but also to create a culturally sustaining environment to retain these students (Brock & Slater, 2021). “Because of expectations to fulfill their community responsibilities, Native American students face similar challenges as their non-Native American students who are less academically prepared and from less advantaged background” (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020, p. 92). Native American students carry the responsibility of family obligations, community participation/spiritual practices, and elder care, which often compete with educational responsibilities (Cirks, 2021; Harvey, 2022). It is important to preserve their ties to home which enables Native American students to uphold their cultural traditions and meet their obligations to family and community (Reyes & Shotton, 2018). Brock and Slater (2021) propose establishing and sustaining a culturally supportive environment involves continuous communication with students and community members to understand their interests and needs. Terry Cross (2020) suggests that there is a cultural competence continuum, where organizations can be in varied

stages of cultural competency, with the lowest level being cultural destructiveness with the goal of achieving advanced cultural competency.

A culturally competent system of care acknowledges and incorporates—at all levels—the importance of culture, the assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance towards the dynamics that result from cultural differences, the expansion of cultural knowledge, and the adaptation of services to meet culturally unique needs.” (Cross, 2020, p. 83)

“While it is important to study and understand the barriers facing Native American students, it is essential to focus on the successful students and identify their motivation and tools for success” (Keith et al, 2016). Reyes and Shotten (2018) contend that Native American students who continue their cultural practices and fulfill family responsibilities are “empowered” (p. 5) to persist. Native American students often pursue college to acquire the knowledge and skills for supporting their communities which fosters self-determination and becomes a source of strength and purpose (Reyes & Shotten, 2018). Additionally, Native American college students who set goals to give back to their communities demonstrated greater persistence from the first semester to the second semester and achieved higher GPAs (Lopez, 2018). However, recent research demonstrates familial responsibilities influence persistence in both positive and negative ways (Cirks, 2021; Lopez, 2018; Keith et al., 2016). As most studies demonstrate the positive effect, “conversely, the family can also interfere with persistence due to the family needing financial support or care” (Cirks, 2021, p. 14). The long-term benefit of higher education becomes difficult to justify, as “American Indian students may place loyalty to tribal obligations and family above school attendance and degree completion” (Cirks, 2021, p. 15). Some studies report that family obligations interfere with their academics as some find it difficult to prioritize the long-term benefits of education when their families need their immediate support (Lopez,

2018). Undeniably, culture is a key persistence factor for Native American students (Cirks, 2021).

“Giving back” is the concept of serving a greater community beyond oneself and is a motivator which positively impacts persistence among Native American students (Lopez, 2018, p. 802; Reyes & Shotton, 2018, p. 18). For Native American students, giving back to their community and improving the disadvantageous conditions of their tribes and communities is motivation for obtaining a higher educational degree (The Hunt Institute, 2022). Huffman’s research found that “higher education is a vehicle to help the American Indian people rather than a means for personal gain” (Huffman, 2011, p. 1). Lopez (2018, 2021) contends the relationship between a Native American student’s desire to give back to the community, cultural identity, and the institution’s support of the student giving back to the community, predicts persistence. If higher education takes the opportunity to focus “their efforts on supporting students’ desire to give back, higher educators may simultaneously increase the persistence of Native American students and meet the needs of tribal nations” (Lopez & Tachine, 2021, p. 617).

Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging

Bandura (1982) termed self-efficacy as “judgements of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with perspective situations” (p. 122). Bandura (1982) hypothesized that self-efficacy influences whether a person will initiate a task, how much effort they will invest, and their persistence in facing and overcoming obstacles and challenges. Furthermore, belief in one’s capabilities determines if:

individuals think in self-enhancing or self-debilitating ways; how well they motivate themselves and persevere in the face of difficulties; the quality of their emotional life, and

the choices they make at important decisional points which set the course of life paths.
(Bandura, 2002, pp. 270-271)

Bandura (2002) contends people's shared beliefs in their collective efficacy shape the futures they strive to achieve together. This sense of efficacy influences how individuals utilize resources, the level of effort they invest in group efforts, their persistence when faced with setbacks or resistance, and their resilience against discouragement when addressing challenging social issues (Bandura, 2002).

Native American student's perceptions of their capabilities to succeed and overcome obstacles impact their academic outcomes (Gloria & Kurpius, 2001; Keith et al., 2016; Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). Dabdoub et al. (2022) found that personal and contextual variables impact educational major selection for Native American students. Healthcare students in higher education often persist, despite challenges, for personal motivational reasons, the desire to help others, and make their families proud (Williams, 2023). Many Native American students encounter unique challenges in pursuing higher education, which affect their self-agency and confidence in handling demanding academic tasks and navigating difficult situations (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). "Students who had more positive perceptions of themselves and their abilities to complete college and degree-related tasks made fewer non-persistence decisions" (Gloria & Kurpius, 2001, p. 98). Native American students with strong self-efficacy can help bridge the college persistence achievement gap. Brown (2015) found a positive correlation between Native American students perceived self-efficacy and persistence, noting that self-efficacy strengthened as students navigated ongoing challenges in college. "The understanding of self-efficacy and persistence factors among American Indian college students provides data and insights that contribute to raising college retention and graduation rates, benefiting American Indian

Communities” (Brown, 2015, p. 4). These findings highlight the importance of conceptual frameworks in understanding student experiences, particularly in relation to self-efficacy, persistence, and academic success.

Chow-Garcia et al. (2022) found that self-efficacy is a key factor in Native American success in science fields. They found when Native American students left the science fields, it was due to a lack of belonging or the feeling that they must choose between their Native culture and their science identity. Higher self-efficacy broadens individuals' career options, increases their interest and dedication to preparing for diverse careers, and strengthens their persistence in challenging fields (Bandura, 2002). Bandura (2002) proposes people with lower self-efficacy tend to dismiss career paths they view as beyond their abilities, regardless of how appealing those paths might be. Lent et al. (1984, 1986) studied self-efficacy and college major and career choice and found there is a link between self-efficacy and educational and career goal persistence. Lent et al. (2006) contend that choosing an educational major and career is influenced not only by one's belief in their ability to perform tasks in a given field, but also by the sources of self-efficacy, such as personal accomplishments and observing successful behaviors in that field.

Faculty can positively or negatively contribute to a student's self-efficacy. Specifically, Gloria and Kurpius (2001) state that when exploring Native American non-persistence decisions, self-efficacy must be addressed. Faculty and classroom culture can foster a sense of belonging which contributes to Native American student learning and success (Harvey, 2022). Bandura (1977) reports that students who receive affirmation of their ability to manage difficult situations, as well as are given tools that guide actions will exert more effort to overcome challenges, than those students who only have access to the tools. Bandura (2002) stated “without a robust sense

of self, people are easily overwhelmed by adversities in attempts to change their lives for the better” (p. 277).

The campus experience, including access to faculty, impacts Native American students’ belief in their abilities (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2022). Student services play an important role in providing a sense of belonging outside the classroom, which also contributes to students’ perceptions of efficacy (Harvey, 2022). Dabdoub et al. (2022) found that personal and contextual variables impact educational major selection for Native American students. Kendrick (2023) recommends to tailor support services to the needs of Native American students which could “foster an environment of thriving instead of surviving” (p. 272). Harvey (2022) contends that the first semester experience is critical to a Native American student’s sense of belonging in higher education. “Sense of belonging is an important part of success” (Harvey, 2022, p. 138). According to Brown (2015), it is essential to evaluate the campus environment, as it influences students’ perceptions of their abilities. Lack of a supportive campus learning environment “will most likely lead to failures that discredit the persuaders and further undermine the recipients’ perceived self-efficacy” (Bandura, 1977, p. 198). As Betz and Hackett (2006) realized the need to investigate self-efficacy influences on academic and career choice, there is a need to investigate self-efficacy impacts on academic and career choice.

Mentorship

Faculty mentorship plays a critical role in the success of Native American students in higher education. “Mentoring can help nontraditional and underrepresented students overcome barriers” (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020, p. 2). Providing early support in a student’s educational career fosters connections with peers, support staff, and resources, creating a foundation for academic help and goal setting (Chelberg & Bosman). Gloria and Kurpius (2001) found that the

most powerful factor influencing Native American student persistence was social support, and in the academic setting, the authors state that faculty and staff mentorship is a vital social support. Native American student success is strengthened through faculty mentorship (Harvey, 2022). Harvey (2022) found that when students believe that faculty are there to support and encourage them, it enhances their sense of belonging. Native American college persistence and degree completion are fostered by welcoming and supportive environments shaped by faculty and staff engagement (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020). Faculty mentorship may bridge the gap between the students' cultural backgrounds and the higher education environment (Gloria & Kurpius, 2001; Harvey, 2022). It is important for Native American students to interact with faculty who appreciate the students' cultural values (Bivens, 2024; Roberts, 2022).

Chow-Garcia et al. (2022) state that having mentors that support Indigenous identities increase the sense of belonging for Native American students. Their findings report mentors can support Native American students simply by recognizing their potential and helping to nurture and develop it. Chelberg and Bosman (2020) also report faculty mentors provide essential social support that plays a key role in Native American students' academic persistence. Faculty mentoring offers Native American student academic advising and emotional support, with faculty mentors serving as professional role models within their field of study (Tate & Schwartz, 1993). "Higher education institutions that regard educational access and equitable faculty support as an organization initiative may positively impact the disparities underrepresented student communities have endured in society" (Bivens, 2024, p. 18). Tate and Schwartz (1993) also state, that although mentorship is a positive factor towards student success in higher education, often faculty have teaching and administrative priorities which prevent faculty from committing to the responsibility of mentoring students, which may negatively impact Native American

student success. Mentorship relationships create a sense of community for Native American students and provide a support system in what can be an isolating experience. Faculty mentorship considerably influences Native American students' decisions to remain in higher education (Lopez, 2018). Tinto states, "simply put, the more time faculty give to their students and students to each other, the more likely are students to complete their education" (1982, p. 697).

Education and Healthcare Outcomes

Higher education is intricately linked to improved health outcomes for underrepresented populations (Bivens, 2024; Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). A growing body of research connects lower life expectancy and a higher disease burden to social factors like low educational attainment, childhood poverty, and residence in resource-poor or high-risk neighborhoods (Braun & LaCounte, 2015). Zajacova and Lawrence (2018) propose that understanding the health benefits of education is essential for reducing health disparities and enhancing overall well-being. Educated individuals are more likely to access preventive healthcare services, understand health information, and make informed health choices, all of which contribute to overall wellness (Zajacova & Lawrence). The cycle of poor health perpetuates itself as poor educational outcomes are associated with poor health. "This means that fewer opportunities for education lead to fewer opportunities for living-wage jobs, which lead to lower family incomes, and so on across generations" (Braun & LaCounte, 2015, p. 65), continuing the cycle of healthcare disparity among the Native American population. Determining the factors that impact Native American enrollment in higher education can improve health disparities (Kendrick, 2023).

Dropping out of college has negative effects on health, including a potential financial burden as a result of student debt, perpetuating the negative impact (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). “Linking education and health to the broader social context brings to the forefront the ways in which we, as individuals and as a society, collectively produce and maintain health disparities” (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018, p. 282). Communities with higher education levels often see improved healthcare access, as an educated population can advocate for resources, create supportive environments, and address health disparities more effectively. College graduates experience improved health outcomes, as education provides professions with access to healthcare resources, including better living conditions and preventative healthcare services (Bivens, 2024; Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). Education fosters critical thinking and problem solving-skills, empowering graduates to navigate healthcare systems and make informed decisions regarding their own healthcare needs. Native American students understand that education enhances lives and provides opportunity (Harvey, 2022). “The connection between higher education and improved health may be a key factor for increased attention on the Native American college student experience” (Bivens, 2024, p. 19).

It is a federal legal mandate, as stipulated by historical treaties, to provide healthcare for members of federally recognized tribal nations (Kruse et al., 2022; Don, 2022). The Indian Health Service (IHS) is the federal system that manages public health and health services for more than two million Alaskan Natives and Native Americans (Kruse et al., 2022). Despite this obligation, Native Americans have higher rates of chronic diseases, poorer medical outcomes, and challenges to access. “Diseases of the heart, malignant neoplasm, unintentional injuries, and diabetes are leading causes of American Indian and Alaska Native deaths (2009-2011)” (IHS, 2019, p. 1).

Dabdoub et al. (2022) propose that increasing diversity in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, will lead to increased social mobility and balance the labor stratification in the workforce for underrepresented ethnic groups. Community colleges must attract and retain Native American adults in occupational programs that lead to good jobs (Brock, 2021). Chow-Garcia et al. (2022) argue that higher education focus on fostering Native American sense of belonging within the science community, which can boost the number of Native American students who persist in science and return to serve their Native communities.

Conclusion

The literature review reveals that the academic success of Native American students in community college is a topic that demands more attention. Evidence regarding the long-term effectiveness of professional programs in retaining and graduating students, is lacking (Snyder et al., 2018). Huffman's transculturation theory (2001) along with Tinto's student retention theory (1975) and social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1986) suggest that college success is influenced by a multitude of factors, including social integration and support systems, which are essential for understanding the complexities of student retention, particularly for underrepresented populations such as Native American students. There is limited research on the direct link between academic support systems, self-efficacy, and professional outcomes for Native American students in community colleges.

As community colleges' open access structure provides a gateway to higher education for Native American students, existing literature highlights the unique educational, cultural, financial, and geographical challenges that can impede college enrollment, persistence, and success of Native American students. Failure to address self-efficacy issues, lack of educational role models or mentors, and lack of academic and culturally identifiable student support services

“have a direct impact on graduation rates of underrepresented student populations” (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020, p. 92). Self-efficacy, or an individual's belief in their ability to succeed, is closely linked to college persistence and retention, particularly among Native American students who may face unique challenges in higher education (Bandura, 1977; Keith et al., 2016). There remains a gap in understanding how these factors interact to influence choosing a career field of study and subsequent persistence and success. Little is known about how these students navigate their academic journeys and what factors contribute most to their persistence.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodology for this study, beginning with a review of its purpose, research questions, and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This chapter discusses the rationale for the selected methodology and describes the research design, study setting, participants, and instrumentation. Details are presented on the types and sources of data, including data analysis methods. The chapter concludes with a discussion on study quality, ethical considerations, and limitations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to evaluate the factors that contribute to the success of Native American students enrolled within a community college system in the Southwest United States. The purpose of this study was also to provide insight of the Native American community college student experience and their educational and career selection.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are the factors that impact Native American students' community college experience?

Research Question 2: How do Native American community college students describe the influences of their cultural identity on their career selection and academic journey?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical framework for this study was Huffman's transculturation theory (2001), with the conceptual frameworks being Tinto's student retention theory (1975) and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Lent et al., 1986). Transculturation theory emerged from an effort to explore how Native American students persist in predominantly

non-Native college environments (Huffman, 2020). In 2001, Terry Huffman investigated why some Native American students struggled in higher education while others were able to overcome obstacles and succeed. His findings revealed that maintaining a strong cultural identity was key to student success (Huffman, 2013). The theory suggests that Native American students are capable of adapting to new cultural settings without abandoning their tribal identity (Huffman, 2013, 2020). Transculturation involves learning to function within both one's original and a new culture.

Tinto's (1975) student retention theory states that persistence in higher education is shaped by students' backgrounds, attributes, and experiences, as well as their academic and social integration into the college environment. Tinto's later work (1997) focused on community college students and highlighted the unique challenges faced by this demographic, such as balancing multiple obligations. The study's focus on identifying barriers and facilitators to student success aligned with Tinto's work on student retention.

SCCT is an expanded version of Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, with a focus on educational major and career choice. SCCT was developed with the core constructs being self-efficacy, sources of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, interests, and supports (Lent & Brown, 2006). Tinto's (1975) student retention theory and SCCT (Lent et al., 1984, 1986) provided frameworks for exploring the factors influencing Native American student success and career selection. Tinto's (1975) student retention theory aligned with the first research question, which sought to understand the academic, financial, and personal factors impacting Native American students' experience in college. SCCT (Lent et al., 1986) provided a framework for the second research question, which sought to understand how cultural identity influences educational goals and career choice. The emphasis by Lent et al. (1986) on self-efficacy

highlights the role of students' beliefs in their abilities and the influence of their cultural and social environments. These aspects are relevant to Native American students, whose educational experiences are often shaped by unique cultural dynamics.

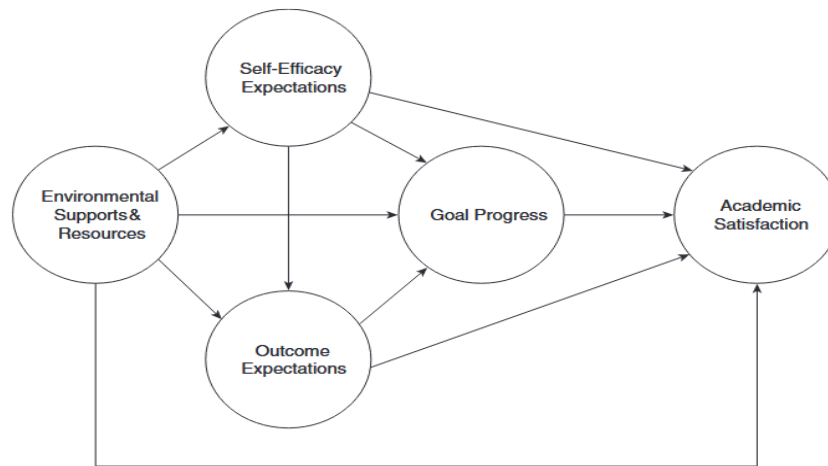


Figure 3.1. Lent et al. (2007) Social Cognitive Predictors of Academic Success

Tinto's (1975) framework and SCCT (Lent et al., 1986) complement each other by recognizing there are multiple factors influencing student success. These theories provided a lens through which to explore what successfully supports Native American student success and where there is opportunity for improvement. The survey questions helped identify how well Native American students were academically prepared, their perceived level of self-efficacy, and their feelings about their educational pursuit and career decision. Lent et al. (2007) believed students are more likely to be satisfied with their academic experiences when they feel they are progressing toward their educational goals, when they have strong self-efficacy, when they maintain confidence in their career choices, and when they receive sufficient social support (Figure 3.1). The interview questions aimed to identify how culture influences the educational and career goals of Native American students. Aligning the survey and interview questions with

these conceptual frameworks, ensured a thorough examination of the factors influencing Native American student success in community college.

Research Design

Johnson (2001) contends that “nonexperimental quantitative research is an important area of research for educators because there are so many important but nonmanipulable independent variables needing further study in the field of education” (p. 3). The benefit of quantitative research is that it is scientific in nature, it is objective, and it is replicable, whereas with qualitative approaches, due to the subjectivity, results can vary (Daniel, 2016). The absence of high-quality quantitative data on Native American students in education limits researchers’ ability to conduct thorough studies, resulting in a scarce body of literature (Lopez, 2020).

Qualitative research “focuses on human experience as it occurs in social life” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 93). Qualitative research is a holistic approach to capturing human insight and perspective (Daniel, 2016). Reyes and Shotten (2018) state just as Native American culture is varied, so is the Native American experience in higher education, therefore reinforcing the need to capture the Native American student perspective through qualitative research.

The researcher utilized an explanatory sequential research design. A mixed-methods study uses both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to better understand the research study (Johnson & Christensen, 2024). Johnson and Christensen (2024) contend that mixed-methods research values and utilizes the strengths of what a quantitative and qualitative study can offer. The data collection process began with distributing the survey to students, followed by conducting interviews in the next phase and concluded by evaluating and analyzing the data. For Research Question 1 (RQ1) the researcher distributed a survey to enrolled Native American community college students (see Appendix B). Following the quantitative phase of the survey,

the qualitative phase involved interviews with Native American students to investigate Research Question 2 (RQ2) (see Appendix C).

Site Selection

The research study was conducted at a community college system in the Southwestern United States. The site was chosen for its multi-college infrastructure, as well as its geographic proximity to Native American communities. This community college system serves a diverse student population and offers a variety of certificate, associate degree, and bachelor's degree programs further justifying its selection for this study.

Study Participants

The student information system (SIS) for the community college system maintains student record data including demographic and ethnicity data. All students in the community college system complete an admissions application requiring mandatory completion of information in certain data fields, such as ethnicity. The study population consisted of all Native American community college students, as identified through self-reported ethnicity. SIS provided the names and email information of all Native American students currently enrolled within the system. The list was generated from real-time enrollment data from the date of the request, and although the student may have registered at more than one college, the list provided was deduplicated.

According to 2024 – 2025 published data at the study site, there were 1,778 Native American students enrolled. The sample size for this study was 90 survey respondents. The survey was distributed to 1,126 enrolled Native American students who met the study criteria. To participate in the survey, students must have completed at least six credit hours and could not be first-time college enrollees, ensuring they had prior college experience. This criterion allowed for

the inclusion of students who had engaged in campus life and had relevant opinions for the survey. The interview sample size was 15 Native American students from those who indicated on the survey a willingness to participate. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to focus on the Native American student demographic.

Instrumentation

This mixed-methods study utilized a survey for the quantitative phase and one-on-one interviews for the qualitative phase. A web-based survey served as the data collection instrument for RQ1. Surveys are flexible tools that capture the perspectives of participants with the intent of standardizing the information (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The survey captured demographic information, including the participants' gender, age, and tribal affiliation. The remainder of the survey included modified versions of the survey questions from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) tribal supplement (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2019), and Scale of Native Americans Giving Back (SNAG; Lopez, 2020). The survey was also informed by the College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ; Davidson et al., 2009). The survey was designed to align with Tinto's (1975) student retention theory and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1986) and collected data related to internal, behavioral, and environmental factors influencing Native American students' experiences. The surveys were modified to exclude questions that did not align with the study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks, as they were not relevant to the research purpose or supportive of the research questions.

The modified version of the tribal supplemental questions from CCSSE, which was distributed in 2017 by the CCCSE (2019), was used to record the experience of the Native American student and their sense of belonging in higher education. The CPQ informed the study

with its persistence focus based on academic integration, social integration, support services, degree commitment, institutional commitment, and academic conscientiousness (Davidson et al., 2009). Finally, the survey incorporated SNAG (Lopez, 2020) to evaluate the Native American student's cultural ties, perceived tribal family support, and the student's desire to give back to their tribal community. Aside from the demographic information, the survey used 5-point Likert scale ratings and concluded with three open-ended questions pertaining to career choice. "In exploratory research, optimal scale points for measuring attitudes often favor shorter scales, typically five to seven points, to facilitate respondent engagement and reduce cognitive load" (Rokeman, 2024, p. 83). The survey was designed to take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey can be found in Appendix B.

In the qualitative phase, the researcher served as the primary instrument as "qualitative research presumes that the researcher is the research instrument" (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 93). Follow-up interviews were conducted with student participants who volunteered after completing the survey, using questions informed by the study's conceptual frameworks. The interviews provided insight into the Native American student's educational journey and career selection. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interview was designed to take approximately 45 minutes of student time. The interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Data Collection and Data Sources

The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for all the colleges within the community college system, prior to conducting research. Before distributing the survey and conducting interviews, the survey instrument and interview protocol were piloted with a group of recent graduates from the community college system. The pilot participants

completed the survey and were interviewed, providing input to clarify wording and confirm the time required to complete the survey and interview process. Lochmiller and Lester (2017) state piloting can benefit the researcher by allowing refinement of the instruments through determining correct organization, correct wording, and by determining timing. The tools can be adjusted based on pilot participation feedback prior to mass distribution.

The data derived for RQ1 was collected from a web-based survey distributed to all Native American community college students over the age of 18 years old, who have completed a minimum of six credit hours. Surveys allow the researcher to collect views, perceptions, and experiences from the survey participants (Brown, 2015; Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The survey (see Appendix B) link was distributed to potential study participants via an invitation email which included the consent to participate (see Appendix D) in the fall of 2025. Given that the survey link was distributed towards the end of the semester, the survey link (see Appendix B) was also sent to leaders within the community college system who work with Native American students in classes and clubs. Additionally, the survey link (see Appendix B) was sent to various faculty and staff within the district who distributed the email invite (see Appendix D) with the link or posted the survey link in their learning management system.

A reminder email to complete the survey was sent to the students prior to semester break (see Appendix E), and a welcome-back email (see Appendix F) with a link to the survey was sent at the beginning of the next semester, spring 2026. When the number of survey responses became stagnant, a few weeks into the beginning of the spring semester, another email reminder was sent (see Appendix G), as well as follow up emails to leaders, faculty, and staff who work with Native American students. Of the 1,126 emails that were distributed with the survey link

multiple times, a total of 90 students completed the survey. Survey participants were placed into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card.

The researcher also conducted individual qualitative interviews (see Appendix C). The survey asked the respondents to indicate if they were interested in participating in the follow-up qualitative interview process. The interviews were recorded using Zoom. Thirteen students initially volunteered to be interviewed at the beginning of the survey distribution. Additionally, an email was sent to those who signed up for a gift card, stating that an opportunity to interview was still available. Between the additional email requests specifically for interviews, and the follow up emails for the survey completion, an additional 17 students signed up for a potential interview. Of the 30 students who stated a willingness to volunteer, a total of 15 students responded to the request to schedule a meeting and ultimately participated in the follow-up interview.

The recorded interview sessions were transcribed and then coded to identify themes. The interviews provided the data for RQ2. Interview participants received a \$25 gift card. All data pertaining to this research study are digitally secured within encrypted storage according to IRB regulations.

Data Analysis

Daniel (2016) suggests that data analysis bias is removed using quantitative methods, as the researcher's objectivity is uncompromised. All collected responses were analyzed and presented. This approach ensured that the data reflected the accurate reality of the respondents (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). RQ1 survey data was analyzed using the Qualtrics software platform. The data analyzation for RQ1 utilized descriptive statistics. Burke (2001) states descriptive statistics use the data to describe the phenomena and document its characteristics.

Descriptive statistics show the frequency of the responses, including mean, median and mode, as well as the variability (range and standard deviation) of survey responses (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The data were analyzed to identify and summarize survey responses to describe the impact of internal, behavioral, and environmental factors on students' experiences and educational success, aligning with Tinto's student retention theory (1975) and SCCT (Lent et al., 1986). Tables were utilized as visible representations of the data.

RQ2 was investigated through individual interviews with Native American students. Using thematic inductive analysis as described by Percy et al. (2015) the researcher set aside preconceptions and analyzed each participant's data individually. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview data by developing themes based on the voices of the student participant. Lochmiller and Lester (2017) describe thematic analysis as a method for narrowing a broad understanding of data to identify patterns and themes. The recorded interviews were transcribed, responses coded, then organized by themes. Common patterns and themes were synthesized across the survey participants within the community college system to interpret the meanings of their experience. An example of the coding process is illustrated through the theme *Family as an Influence: The Positives and the Negatives*. Participant phrases such as "oldest able-bodied male," "my kids, trying to build a better future for them," and "that's my drive now...I have family members," were coded under motivation. The responses were further organized into the subset of family role, leading to the sub-theme of family responsibility as a motivation.

When two phases of data collection exist, the researcher typically reports the data collection process in two phases. The report may also include an analysis of each phase of data separately and the integration of information in the discussion or conclusion section of a study. (Creswell et al., 2003, p. 172)

Alignment Table

A table was developed to provide an overview of how the elements in this study align. The alignment table includes the literature findings, research questions, the conceptual frameworks, and research methodology. The table demonstrates the alignment of the survey and interview questions to the research questions. The alignment table can be found in Appendix A.

Limitations

The research was limited to Native American students within the selected community college system. Data collection, recording and maintenance was conducted in an accurate and ethical manner. Missing or incomplete data was a limitation of the study, as incomplete responses reduce the overall sample size. Participation in the web-based survey was voluntary, and only students who completed the survey were included in the study. Interview participation was also voluntary. The generalizability of the quantitative findings from this mixed-methods research study is limited to the Native American student population within community colleges.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher adhered to professional and ethical standards throughout the study, obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Kansas State University and the community college system prior to data collection. Transparency was maintained by explaining the research process, including an informed consent process, and by providing contact information for addressing questions regarding the study. The consent can be found in Appendix D. Any data provided by the system's research department was modified to remove identifying information. Survey respondents remained anonymous. All information collected during the study was digitally secured within encrypted storage. The data will be kept for five years from the date of collection and then destroyed according to IRB regulations.

Reflexivity Statement

As a faculty member who has taught Native American students within a community college system, the researcher brings professional knowledge and a vested interest in student success. While this role offers valuable insights, the researcher strives to maintain objectivity throughout the study.

Study Quality

Quantitative analysis is considered scientific, generalizable, and allows findings to be replicated by other researchers (Daniel, 2016). Lochmiller and Lester (2017) define generalizability as the assumption that a sample's data represents the larger population, allowing quantitative researchers to extend their results to a broader context.

The researcher ensured trustworthiness by focusing on validity and reliability through the consistent cleaning of the data and the distribution of identical survey questions to all student study participants for the quantitative phase. Johnson and Christensen (2024) highlight the necessity of methodological rigor in quantitative research, stressing the importance of transparency in data collection and statistical procedures to minimize bias.

Reliability is the consistency of measurement, with the ability to be replicated when readministered, with validity being the scores or results represent the results (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Hyatt and Roberts (2022) emphasize the importance of establishing construct validity by using well-established instruments that align with theoretical frameworks and have been validated in prior studies. The researcher ensured reliability and validity by using reliable and validated surveys, standardized instruments, consistent data collection and data analysis. The Tribal supplement from CCSSE (2019), CPQ (Davidson et al., 2009), and the SNAG (Lopez, 2020) tool are all survey instruments used in prior research studies.

Quality in qualitative research, as guided by Tracy's (2010) Big-tent criteria "is marked by worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence" (p. 839). In qualitative research, credibility refers to the extent to which the study's findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and perspectives. Jones et al. (2019) define credibility "trust and confidence in the research findings" (p. 76). The researcher practiced credibility and transferability by asking all of the same questions and recording and transcribing the interviews for the qualitative phase.

Summary

This mixed-methods study evaluated the factors that contribute to Native American student success within a Southwestern United States community college system. The study aimed to provide insight into the Native American student community college experience, as well as explore what influences educational and career aspirations. The chapter reviewed the purpose of the study, the research questions, and discussed the selection of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used. The chapter included the review of the research design, the site and participant selection, instrumentation, data collection and data analysis. The chapter concluded with the study limitations, ethical considerations, and discussion on study quality. The data analysis and findings from the study are presented in Chapter 4, with Chapter 5 offering a discussion and reflection on the findings, with future research recommendations.

Chapter 4 - Research Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the data and findings from the explanatory sequential research study. It begins with a description of the participants, followed by the quantitative and qualitative findings and analysis used to answer the research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Study Participants

In the first phase of this mixed-methods study, the qualifying survey participants were of Native American descent, over the age of 18 years old, and had six credit hours of prior college experience. An anonymous survey link was created and sent to qualifying students, as provided by the community college system's research department. Ninety responses were collected from the 1,126 emails sent.

Quantitative Participant Demographics

The survey was developed to examine the factors that shape the community college experience for Native American students. The survey included demographic questions about the Native American student participant. The demographics included gender, age, tribal affiliation, time to course of study completion, community description growing up, employment status and field of study. The mean age of participants was 32, with the median age of participants being 30 years, and the most frequently reported age (mode) was 19 years. A total of 89 students reported their age. Nearly half of the participants (48%) were between 18 and 29 years old, 30% were between 30 and 39 years old, and 21% were between 40 and 60 years old. Of the 86 respondents who recorded their dependent care responsibilities, 73 (85%) had some dependent care responsibilities and only 13 (15%) recorded zero dependent care responsibilities. The travel time to campus varied. There were 89 responses and 66 (74%) reported a travel time of 30 minutes or

less to a college campus. Of the 15 tribes represented, the Native American students in this study were more likely to be of Navajo Tribal affiliation (56.5%), female (81%), and in the field of STEM (55.6%). Although the community college system in this study is located in a metropolitan area, about 75% of the Native American students reported growing up on the reservation at some point in their childhood. The results are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. *Descriptive Demographics of the Survey Participants*

Characteristic	N = 90		
<u>Age (years) n=89</u>			
Mean		32	
Median		30	
Mode (8)		19	
Characteristic	N = 90	n	%
<u>Gender</u>			
Female		73	81.0
Male		17	19.0
<u>Tribal Affiliation (n = 85)</u>			
Navajo		48	56.5
Salt River Pima Maricopa		12	14.1
Gila River		6	7.1
Pascua Yaqui		3	3.5
White Mountain Apache		3	3.5
Sioux		2	2.4
Taino		2	2.4
Pueblo Laguna		2	2.4
Coushatta		1	1.2
Hopi		1	1.2
Washoe		1	1.2
Crow		1	1.2
Ft. McDowell Yavapai		1	1.2

Characteristic	N = 90	
Cherokee	1	1.2
San Carlos Apache	1	1.2

<u>Program Status</u>		
First semester	14	15.6
Completed some coursework	44	48.9
Nearing completion/graduation	32	35.6

<u>Community Growing Up (n = 89)</u>		
Reservation	45	50.6
Urban	16	18.0
Non-reservation Tribal Community	3	3.4
Rural	3	3.4
Other (lived on/off reservation)	22	24.7

<u>Employment Status</u>		
Not working	36	40.0
Employed full-time	34	37.8
Employed part-time	20	22.2

<u>Field of Study</u>	N = 90		n	%
STEM Fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, Health, Forensic)	50	55.6		
Business & Management	13	14.4		
Behavioral & Human Services	9	10.0		
Social Sciences & Law (Non-STEM)	7	7.8		
Education	6	6.7		
Arts & Humanities	5	5.6		

Quantitative Findings

The following quantitative findings present the data collected to analyze what factors impact the Native American student's community college experience. In addition to demographic questions, students were asked to respond to items across four categories: their college experience, their academic and personal responsibilities, factors influencing their persistence, and their academic and career decisions. A five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) was utilized.

The College Experience

The first section in the survey was to better understand the Native American student's community college experience, such as feeling academically prepared for college and the intent to re-enroll or graduate, as shown in Table 4.2. Students acknowledged their thinking and interests have expanded since enrolling in college ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.69$), and they are interested in the topics being presented in class ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .89$). Students also reported a high level of confidence that they will earn a college degree or certificate ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.83$) or are planning to re-enroll for the next semester ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.84$). These three items all had a 90% or better positive response rate (agree/strongly agree), see Table 4.6. An item with higher variability in this section addressed whether professors respect students' views as a Native American in course discussions ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.90$). The lowest score within the college experience section was about academic preparedness. Responses indicated variability among the 90 students, with a mean score of 3.42 and a standard deviation of 1.20. The overall mean for the seven items in this section was 4.14, the highest of all four survey sections.

Table 4.2 *Factors Related to the College Experience*

Question	M	SD	n
My thinking has developed and my interests have expanded since enrolling in college	4.47	0.69	89
I am confident that I will earn a college degree or certificate	4.33	0.83	90
I am interested in the topics and ideas that are being presented during class	4.33	0.62	89
I am graduating this semester or planning to re-enroll for next semester	4.29	0.84	90
My professors respect my views as a Native American in course discussions	4.07	0.90	89
This college helps me keep on track toward reaching my educational goals by providing supports such as advising, alerts, and a way for me to monitor my own progress	4.04	0.87	90
I felt prepared for college-level coursework when I first began college	3.42	1.20	90
Overall Mean	4.14		

Note: A 5-point Likert scale from 1 Strongly disagree to 5 Strongly agree was used.

Academic and Personal Responsibilities

The next set of survey questions yielded lower mean scores when students were asked about their academic and personal responsibilities (Table 4.3), indicating a moderate influence on the college experience. Despite the slightly lower scores overall, students have high levels of self-efficacy in completing college coursework even when facing adversity ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.89$). When asked about participating in tribal ceremonies, data indicate cultural engagement varies ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.26$). Nineteen students, or 21%, stated they disagree/strongly disagree with this item (see Table 4.6). Additionally the perspective that college is developing the student's ability to interact with their tribe demonstrates a mean of 3.32 with a standard deviation of 1.11, which was the lowest scoring question in this section. Table 4.6 demonstrates that for

this item 22 student respondents (24%) answered disagree/strongly disagree, while 31 students (34%) responded neutrally, and 37 students (41%) responded agree/strongly agree. The overall mean for the nine items was 3.68.

Table 4.3 *Factors Related to Academic and Personal Responsibilities*

Question	M	SD
I believe in my ability to successfully complete my college coursework, even when faced with challenges related to my cultural and personal responsibilities	4.11	0.89
My experiences at this college are developing my ability to understand, communicate, and interact with people from other cultures	3.91	1.01
I have a close relationship with my tribal relatives	3.80	1.19
Within a class or through another experience at this college, I have felt a sense of belonging	3.79	0.89
I participated in tribal ceremonies prior to attending college	3.77	1.26
When reflecting on my social life in college, such as friendships and college organization involvement, I am satisfied with my experiences	3.71	0.99
Within a class or through another experience at this college, I feel that this college is helping me develop my Native American identity and values	3.41	1.05
I have much in common with other students here	3.33	0.96
My experiences at this college are developing my ability to understand, communicate, and effectively interact with my tribe	3.32	1.11
Overall Mean	3.68	

Note: A 5-point Likert scale from 1 Strongly disagree to 5 Strongly agree was used. (N = 90)

What Influences the Decision to Stay in School

Students indicate a high degree of family support in attending college when asked about what influences them to remain in school ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.78$) (Table 4.4). A total of 82 students (91%) (Table 4.6) responded positively (agree/strongly agree) on this item. Student respondents stated that their family talk to them about college ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.11$). Students also report positive interactions with faculty ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.78$). A total of 73 students responded agree/strongly agree on this item, equating to an 82% positive response rate. Student respondents also report high levels of support from their professors when needing to attend a cultural or family event ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.02$). When asked about friends attending college within the district, the mean was 2.62 with a standard deviation of 1.30. Only 26 students stated their close friends attend college within the district (Table 4.6). If deciding to stop out, the amount of student support would vary, as the mean was 3.22 with a standard deviation of 1.15. Forty percent of student respondents stated they would feel supported (agree/strongly agree), while 34% were neutral, and 26% of respondents stated they would not feel supported (disagree/strongly disagree) (Table 4.6). The overall mean was 3.52 for the nine items.

Table 4.4 *Factors related to What Influences the Decision to Stay in School*

Question	M	SD	n
My family supports my decision to attend college	4.52	0.78	90
My interactions with faculty outside the classroom are positive	4.17	0.78	90
My family talks about college with me	3.92	1.11	90
My professors support me if I need to attend a cultural or family event (for example a ceremony, funeral) during class time	3.81	1.02	90

Having limited access to a computer or electronic device at home would cause me to withdraw from college	3.39	1.39	90
The lack of reliable transportation would cause me to withdraw from college	3.35	1.38	89
When I think about the people who matter most in my life, like close friends and family, they would support my decision if I decided to quit school	3.22	1.15	90
I miss class for reasons unrelated to illness or official school activities	2.68	1.28	90
Many of my closest friends attend college within this community college district	2.62	1.30	90
Overall mean	3.52		

Note: A 5-point Likert scale from 1 Strongly disagree to 5 Strongly agree was used. N=90

Academic Majors and Career Decisions

Students report high levels of satisfaction with what they are learning in relation to their potential career path ($M = 4.26$, $SD = .71$) as demonstrated in Table 4.5. There were no students who disagreed/strongly disagreed with this item (Table 4.6). Students indicate they plan to use their education to help their cultural community ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.87$). As shown in Table 4.6, 73 students (81%) responded agree/strongly agree for this item. When responding to if interactions and relationships with other students influence intellectual growth, students responded positively ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.90$). When asked if tribal traditions, culture, and community needs influenced the direction of their education and career path, there is some variability, as the mean score was 3.77 with a standard deviation of 1.16. The mean score was positive when asked if students would pick the same field of study again if given the opportunity ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.04$). Of the 64 student respondents, 71% answered agree/strongly agree and

eight students disagreed/strongly disagreed with this statement (Table 4.6). Students' answers vary relative to "tribal members (other than family) ask about my academic progress in college," with a mean score of 3.2 and a standard deviation of 1.31. Less than half, 41 students (46%) stated they agree/strongly agree with this item (Table 4.6). The overall mean for the eight items related to academic majors and career decisions was 3.9 (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5 *Factors Related to Academic Majors and Career Decisions*

Question	M	SD
I plan to use my education to help my cultural community	4.27	0.87
I am satisfied with the connection between what I am learning and my potential career path	4.26	0.71
My interactions and relationships with other students influence my intellectual growth and interest in new ideas	4.00	0.90
My family has high expectations for me	3.94	1.03
If given the choice to have my college experience and choice of educational study again, I would choose the same field	3.94	1.04
My tribal community is proud of me for enrolling in college	3.81	0.90
My tribal culture, traditions, and community needs influenced my academic major and future career	3.77	1.16
Tribal members (other than family) ask about my academic progress in college	3.20	1.31
Overall Mean	3.90	

Note: A 5-point Likert scale from 1 Strongly disagree to 5 Strongly agree was used. N=90

Table 4.6 *Frequency Distribution of Survey Responses Across All Items*

Factors Related to the College Experience						
Survey Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	% Agree Strongly Agree
I am interested in the topics and ideas presented during class	0	0	7	46	36	92
My thinking has developed and my interests have expanded since enrolling in college	0	1	7	30	51	91
I am confident that I will earn a college degree or certificate	2	1	6	37	44	90
I am graduating this semester or planning to re-enroll next semester	1	2	10	34	43	86
The college helps me stay on track toward reaching my educational goals by providing supports such as advising, alerts, and a way for me to monitor my own progress	2	4	8	50	26	84
My professors respect my views as a Native American in course discussions	0	4	21	29	35	72
I felt prepared for college-level coursework when I first began college	8	15	12	41	14	61

Factors Related to Academic and Personal Responsibilities

Survey Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	% Agree Strongly Agree
I believe in my ability to successfully complete my college coursework even when faced with cultural and personal responsibilities	0	7	10	39	34	81
I have a close relationship with my tribal relatives	3	15	11	29	32	68
My experiences at this college are developing my ability to understand, communicate and effectively interact with people from other cultures	1	8	20	30	31	68
Within a class or through another experience at this college, I have felt a sense of belonging	1	6	23	41	19	67
I participated in tribal ceremonies prior to attending college	5	14	12	25	34	66

Survey Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	% Agree Strongly Agree
When reflecting on my social life in college, such as friendships and college organization involvement, I am satisfied with my experiences	1	12	18	40	19	66
My experiences at this college are developing my ability to understand, communicate, and effectively interact with my tribe	3	19	31	20	17	41
I have much in common with other students here	1	16	37	24	12	40
Within a class or through another experience this college is helping me develop my Native American identity and values	2	13	40	16	19	39

Factors Related to What Influences the Decision to Stay in School

Survey Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	% Agree Strongly Agree
My family supports my decision to attend college	0	4	4	23	59	91
My interactions with faculty outside the classroom are positive	0	2	15	39	34	81
My family talks about college with me	2	13	8	34	33	75
My professors support me if I need to attend a cultural or family event during class time	1	6	32	21	30	57
The lack of reliable transportation would cause me to withdraw from college	12	16	12	27	22	55
Having limited access to a computer or electronic device would cause me to withdraw from college	11	16	16	21	26	52
When I think about the people who matter most in my life, like close friends and family, they would support my decision if I decided to quit school	7	16	31	22	14	40
I miss class for reasons unrelated to illness or official school activities	21	23	16	24	6	33

Survey Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	% Agree Strongly Agree
Many of my closest friends attend college within this community college district	21	27	16	17	9	29

Factors Related to Academic Major and Career Decisions

Survey Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	% Agree Strongly Agree
I plan to use my education to help my cultural community	0	4	13	28	45	81
I am satisfied with the connection between what I am learning and my future potential path	0	0	14	39	37	76
My interactions and relationships with other students influence my intellectual growth and interest in new ideas	0	5	21	33	31	71
My family has high expectations for me	2	7	17	32	32	71
If given the choice to have my college experience and choice of educational study again, I would choose the same field	3	5	18	32	32	71
My tribal culture, traditions, and community needs influenced my academic major and future career	5	7	22	26	30	62
My tribal community is proud of me for enrolling in college	1	3	31	32	23	61
Tribal members (other than family) ask about my academic progress in college	12	16	21	24	17	45

Note: Response options ranged from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. (N = 90)

Table 4.7 combines the factors in all four sections of the survey, demonstrating the rank of the questions from highest to lowest mean score. Across all survey items, the highest mean scores reflected strong family support and positive academic engagement among participants. Students indicate they feel academically engaged, “my thinking has developed and my interests

have expanded since enrolling in college” (M = 4.47) and confident in their ability to complete their educational goals, “I am confident that I will earn a college degree or certificate” (M = 4.33). Items related to cultural and community contributions, such as using education to help their cultural community (M = 4.27), also received high ratings. When the data were disaggregated by age, employment status, upbringing (e.g., reservation, urban, etc.), STEM versus non-STEM course of study, and progress in their academic journey, no statistically significant differences were observed among the groups.

Table 4.7 *Factors Ranked from Highest to Lowest Mean Score*

Question	M	SD	n
My family supports my decision to attend college	4.52	0.78	90
My thinking has developed and my interests have expanded since enrolling in college	4.47	0.69	89
I am confident that I will earn a college degree or certificate	4.33	0.83	90
I am interested in the topics and ideas that are being presented during class	4.33	0.62	89
I am graduating this semester or planning to re-enroll for next semester	4.29	0.84	90
I plan to use my education to help my cultural community	4.27	0.87	90
I am satisfied with the connection between what I am learning and my potential career path	4.26	0.71	90
My interactions with faculty outside the classroom are positive	4.17	0.78	90
I believe in my ability to successfully complete my college coursework, even when faced with challenges related to my cultural and personal responsibilities	4.11	0.89	90
My professors respect my views as a Native American in course discussions	4.07	0.90	89
The college helps me keep on track toward reaching my educational goals by providing supports such as advising, alerts, and a way for me to monitor my own progress	4.04	0.87	90
My interactions and relationships with other students influence my intellectual growth and interest in new ideas	4.00	0.90	90
My family has high expectations for me	3.94	1.03	90
If given the choice to have my college experience and choice of educational study again, I would choose the same field	3.94	1.04	90
My family talks about college with me	3.92	1.11	90

Question	M	SD	n
My experiences at this college are developing my ability to understand, communicate, and interact with people from other cultures	3.91	1.01	90
My professors support me if I need to attend a cultural or family event during class time	3.81	1.02	90
My tribal community is proud of me for enrolling in college	3.81	0.90	90
I have a close relationship with my tribal relatives	3.80	1.19	90
Within a class or through another experience at this college, I have felt a sense of belonging	3.79	0.89	90
My tribal culture, traditions, and community needs influenced my academic major and future career	3.77	1.16	90
I participated in tribal ceremonies prior to attending college	3.77	1.26	90
When reflecting on my social life in college, such as friendships and organization involvement, I am satisfied with my experiences	3.71	0.99	90
I felt prepared for college-level coursework when I first began college	3.42	1.20	90
Within a class or through another experience at this college, I feel that this college is helping me develop my Native American identity and values	3.41	1.05	90
Having limited access to a computer or electronic device at home would cause me to withdraw from college	3.39	1.39	90
The lack of reliable transportation would cause me to withdraw from college	3.35	1.38	89
I have much in common with other students here	3.33	0.96	90
My experiences at this college are developing my ability to understand, communicate, and effectively interact with my tribe	3.32	1.11	90
When I think about the people who matter most in my life, they would support my decision if I decided to quit school	3.22	1.15	90
Tribal members (other than family) ask about my academic progress in college	3.20	1.31	90
I miss class for reasons unrelated to illness or official school activities	2.68	1.28	90
Many of my closest friends attend college within this community college district	2.62	1.30	90

Note: A 5-point Likert scale from 1 Strongly disagree to 5 Strongly agree was used. (N = 90)

Survey Open-ended Questions

The anonymous survey included three open-ended questions. The questions geared toward the college experience were: How has your Native American culture influenced your educational

and career pursuits? Do you have someone you consider a mentor who has helped you navigate your college experience? If yes, what makes them important to your success? The question geared toward future career goals was: What are your career and life goals after you graduate from college?

Cultural identity was a finding that arose from the first open ended question about Native American students' educational or career pursuits. Nearly all students, 74 of the 88 responses revealed that cultural identity influenced career pursuits, whereas 14 students indicated their culture did not influence their decisions. For those who stated culture did not influence their decisions they explained they did not grow up immersed in their culture or noted that education was not a topic of conversation within their communities. The remaining comments reflected a strong sense of cultural influence, including the desire to give back to the tribal community. One student shared their desire to return to the tribal community to "go back and change things." Others stated, "giving back to my tribal community as a nurse keeps me focused," "I know I will be returning to my community; I think my pursuits will help them," and "education is not only a personal achievement but a way to give back to my people and preserve our traditions." Another student similarly shared "As a student, being Native American has encouraged me to pursue a career that can have an impact on my own community, as well as be a role model to my family and peers to pursue these types of careers."

Additionally, the cultural identity finding was demonstrated by the sense of pride and the desire to pass on the Native American culture to future Native Americans. Students shared Native American culture has influenced their education because it "helped me take more pride in my community and identity," "I understand that when one of us rises we all rise" and "I went back to school as an elder because I believe we need to record our histories in book form. As a

fiction writer, I need experience in non-fiction, so our stories are left behind for future generations.”

The second open ended question specifically asked about mentorship. When asked about mentorship, less than half of the students, 37 out of 88, stated they had someone they consider a mentor. The contributions to student success, for those who had a mentor, included: college guidance/academic direction, support, encouragement, and motivation.

Students also reported receiving valuable academic advice and direction from their mentors, particularly because many identified as first-generation college students or expressed needing guidance “to navigate such strange waters.” Mentors frequently assisted with educational planning, career decision-making, and identifying work-study and scholarship opportunities. Participants expressed deep appreciation for their mentors’ support, with many specifically naming individuals to acknowledge their meaningful impact.

A consistent finding throughout the responses was the powerful impact of mentors who “genuinely believed” in the students’ potential. Many participants described mentors who encouraged them to push beyond their comfort zones, reassured them during moments of doubt, and reminded them that they were capable of achieving more than they initially imagined. Students shared, “my mentor is a faculty member at the college who has always taken the time to listen, provide guidance, and encourage me to push beyond my comfort zone,” another shared the mentor would “encourage me as a student to not be afraid to seek opportunities, whether it be academically or career-wise.”

The final open-ended question on the survey was about career and life goals after college. Some students shared uncertainty of the future, stating they did not know or are “still searching.” Many wanted to continue with their educational journey by pursuing bachelor’s, master’s, and

doctoral degrees. Many just wanted to work in their field of study to provide for their family and to give back to their community, articulated as “my life goal is to be financially stable, to be able to live the life I’ve always wanted, and being able to provide for my family.” One student stated their goal was to “work in industry, create a company and use that company to give back to indigenous communities.” Another student shared they want to “be able to work within my career field and am hopeful I will help in my community with positive influences and positive outcomes.”

My career goal is to become a nurse, gain experience in the city before going back to my homeland to help my tribal members to be healthier, and use what experiences I have learned. My life goal is being with my family and providing for them.

(Anonymous Survey Respondent)

Quantitative Summary

Data indicated several factors positively influence the Native American community college experience. The item stating, “my family supports my decision to attend college” ($M = 4.52$), had the highest mean for the survey, suggesting that family support plays a significant role in students’ educational experience. Culture and community influences also appear to shape Native American students’ experiences. Many students indicated that they plan to use their education to help their cultural community ($M = 4.27$). Support for this finding was also evident in the open-ended survey responses regarding cultural influences, where a dominant finding emerged across the majority of student responses about how culture has influenced their educational pursuit and future career as well as influence career and life goals. A student’s belief in their ability to complete coursework despite personal or cultural responsibilities ($M = 4.11$) demonstrates resiliency, while positive interactions with faculty ($M = 4.17$) highlight the

importance of supportive academic environments. This too was supported by the positive comments about mentors in the open-ended questions.

Qualitative Participant Demographics

Individual interviews were conducted with 15 students who volunteered to participate in the follow-up phase of the research. To ensure the confidentiality of the 15 participants, individuals were symbolically coded. These codes were used when presenting the research findings and when students are quoted. Table 4.8 provides the codes and demographic characteristics of each of the student participants.

Table 4.8 *Descriptive Demographics of Interview Participants*

Student Code	Tribal Affiliation	Gender	Academic Timeline	Area of Study
Nav1m	Navajo	Male	End	Histotechnology (completed); prerequisites for Biochemistry
Nav2	Navajo	—	End	Biological Science
Nav3	Navajo	—	Middle	Social Work
Nav4	Navajo/Sioux	—	End	Computer Science
Nav5	Navajo	—	End	Dental Hygiene
Nav6	Navajo	—	End	Surgical Technology
Nav7	Navajo	—	Beginning	Biomedical Equipment Technology
GR1m	Gila River	Male	End	Engineering
GR2	Gila River	—	Middle	Business
SPRM1	Salt River Pima Maricopa	—	End	Biological Sciences
SRPM2	Salt River Pima Maricopa/White Earth	—	Middle	Forensic Science
Apal1m	Apache	Male	Beginning	Manufacturing Production Technology
Lak	Lakota	—	End	Paralegal Certificate
PbL	Pueblo Laguna	—	Middle	Business Management (Bachelor's)

Student Code	Tribal Affiliation	Gender	Academic Timeline	Area of Study
Tai	Taino	—	Beginning	Behavioral Health

Note. Academic timeline categories reflect participants' self-reported stage in their educational journey (Beginning, Middle, End). Tribal affiliation counts: Navajo (n = 7), Gila River (n = 2), Salt River Pima Maricopa (n = 2), Apache (n = 1), Lakota (n = 1), Pueblo Laguna (n = 1), Taino (n = 1).

Qualitative Findings

The following qualitative findings reflect the interview data collected to analyze the influences of Native American community college students' cultural identity on their career selection and academic journey. Native American students often follow non-linear pathways to community college, rely on financial access and stability to enroll, benefit from holistic institutional support, demonstrate strong personal drive toward persistence, and draw motivation and grounding from their families and cultural identities. The three themes that emerged from the 15 student interviews were: personal experiences, motivations, and evolving beliefs influence the path to community college; family as an influence—the positives and the negatives; and Native American identity and culture: a source of comfort, a source of conflict.

Personal Experiences, Motivations and Evolving Beliefs Influence the Path to Community College

Within the first theme, personal experiences, motivations, and evolving beliefs influence the path to community college, students placed themselves at the center, identifying a number of personal factors, beliefs, and experiences as influences on career selection and persistence in community college. Students described non-linear pathways to community college and a personal drive to continue their education despite challenges. Under the theme of personal drive, three sub-themes emerged. Students shared three types of personal realizations: the moment the student realized they had to do something different in their life, or an “aha” moment; having

feelings of self-doubt; and a maturity in overcoming self-doubt and gaining self-confidence in their academic abilities, “I can do it.”

Non-Linear Pathway to Community College

Of the 15 students that were interviewed, only two students entered community college directly from high school and remained enrolled from their initial start date. Rather than a straight pathway to community college, the remaining students described stop-out and return patterns or delayed enrollment. Nav4 stated, “I had to financially support myself, so education took a backseat until I could figure out what exactly I wanted to do.” One student entered the military before entering community college, three students initially enrolled in community college directly after high school, but ended up stopping out before returning, and the remaining nine spent time in the workforce or were domestic caregivers before enrolling. GR1m shared, “when I left high school (during COVID pandemic), part of my journey was that I just really couldn't see myself, what I viewed at the time, was paying somebody for me to be self-taught.”

Nav3 stated, “After high school, I had no desire to pursue my education.” Similarly, SRPM2 shared “I’ve just been working, and I had kids, a family.” Nav5 began her higher education journey at a university; however, she later left, completed a certificate program, and transitioned into the workforce. Nav5 subsequently returned to community college to pursue a different career pathway, explaining, “I realized it’s not my passion.” PBL lost her parents at an early age and did not have the opportunity to go to college. Working for the Tribal office on the reservation, she had the opportunity to go to school and eventually got a degree that was geared toward her daily responsibilities. “After years of working and being a mom, I told myself I am going to go for the degree I initially wanted to go for, which is art.” Nav6 had a unique journey to community college. After graduating from high school early, she earned scholarships, but

because she was not 18 years old, her family did not want her to leave. She explained, “I ended up having to give up those scholarships and those college placements.” She later enrolled in community college, stopped out for a time, entered the military, eventually returning to continue her education. GR1m shared “Native American students go in with the best of intentions, they work towards a goal, but something prevents them from moving forward.” Nav1 nicely summarizes the non-linear pathway to community college, declaring “my path to community college was not direct” but “life is not straight.”

Personal Drive

Personal drive to obtain a goal was a unifying theme, even when conditions were not optimal. “I know what I want, I’m going to go for it “(SRPM2). TAI stated, “it’s time to focus on me.” Students noted they had drive in order to better a family situation, drive to strive toward a career goal, and drive to break a negative cycle. Additionally, most noted personal drive to prove to themselves they can be successful in school.

I was nervous at first, because I was like what if I can’t do it, what if I’m not smart enough for this, but I just forced myself to sign up. I’m like well, now I have to do this, I’m signed up. I can’t turn back, or fail, or quit. It’s almost like my Hail Mary pass.
(APA1m)

Nav5 stated that many Native Americans do not finish high school. She stated her freshman class on the reservation was around 300 students, and she graduated with 120-130 classmates. By furthering her education she is trying to be a “role model” for her family. LAK stated she has to be successful. Being on the reservation growing up, “there’s not a lot of good influences, I faced homelessness, poverty, etc. and when you have those struggles you never want to face them again. That pushes me to be better, you can be a resource.” Nav4 says the

drive comes from knowing her education is “something that is going to pay off, it makes me excited for my future.”

AHA Moments – I Had to Do Something Different

A student’s personal drive to community college was often influenced by a significant moment in their life where they recognized a need for a change. SRPM2 stated “I’ve gotten older, had my kids, and I’m like well, I need to do something. I always in the back of my head knew I needed to do something.” GR1m shared his worries in providing for his family realizing “I knew I needed to do something different.”

I was getting depressed, I had kids, in bad relationships, I felt like I wasted my years. I was pregnant and for my kids, I had to do something. I’m on the computer and my last stop was to search community college. I found something interesting, I looked into it and I made an appointment. (Nav3)

Community college is a resource when students feel that continuing on the same life path is no longer viable. Many described self- realizations or “aha” moments in making the deliberate choice to enroll in community college. It was a necessity to break a cycle of struggle, to build family income, and provide stability.

Self-doubt, Am I an Imposter?

Self-doubt was a significant obstacle to overcome for those entering college from high school, and even more pronounced for those that had been away from the educational system for a time. Thirteen of the 15 students described a positive shift in self-belief since enrolling in college. GR1m stated “I feel like I have imposter syndrome, I don’t know if I am supposed to be here. I don’t know if this is necessarily right.” SRPM1 shared that in her early studies she experienced imposter feelings stating, “I’m an imposter...I’m not good enough.” Similarly

Nav1m acknowledged “there were a lot of doubts, trials and tribulations that I had to overcome.”

Nav2 said her high school experience impacted her belief in herself and education, “I had a horrible high school experience, and I did not want to continue with school. My parents dragged me out of the house and said you’re going to school. I cried all the way.”

Maturity and experience impacts belief – “I can do it”

Importantly, belief in self, matured over time rather than simply increasing. As confidence grew, students began to view themselves as role models, uplifting others. SRPM1 shared her confidence has increased and now she uplifts others too, “I want to make homemade pom-poms just to cheer everyone on. If I could do it, then you could do it as well.” APA1m simply stated “I know I can do it now.” Nav3’s confidence levels changed her sense of belonging “I don’t feel like an outcast anymore.” Nav5 has been growing on a personal level, and building confidence through school accomplishments where she says, “I’m ready to actually speak and share my voice.” Lak shared her belief in her abilities have “changed a lot, because it shows you what type of person you are when you face challenges...it showed me that I was resilient, I found a way no matter what.” GR2 says she can now “believe in myself to do bigger than what I thought I could do.”

Family as an Influence – The Positives and the Negatives

Family as an influence – the positives and the negatives was a consistent theme from students. Students referred to their family as a positive source of support, but at times a negative source. Cultural guilt, family financial challenges and supports, and family responsibility as motivation all contributed to both the positive and negative perspectives. Students described the influence of family encouragement, family responsibilities, and life experiences in shaping career and educational choices. Students expressed a sense of responsibility in improving

family's circumstances and viewed furthering their education as a means to break the cycle of poverty or instability. Family was found to be an influence in a student's educational journey and career selection.

Family Guilt

Nav6 shared about a lack of educational support from her "Native family." Although her immediate family supports her educational quest and encourages her to keep going, she deals with the "negativity or the shame of leaving my culture." Nav6 shared her culture is worried about losing their heritage, voice and traditions. She shared other Native Americans sometimes made her feel guilty for being away from the community for long periods, expressing concern that pursuing education might cause her to lose touch with her culture. Nav4 shared she felt obligated to pursue a course of study because of her family's wishes, and ended up stopping out of college for a time. "I'm like, I should do this. I should do health care, I should want to help my people, and I do, but I'm also a person" (Nav4). "Native Americans don't really want you to go anywhere. They want you to succeed but they want you to stay where you are within a certain inclusion" (Nav6).

GR2 had similar comments about being aware of family dynamics and family being the hurdle to education, but also was grateful for her support system, who she credits for keeping her in school.

I think being successful in college, a really big part of it is just family. It just gets harder from high school, the complexities of life every single day something new is happening, every week or month things change in an instant. Having someone there to help you out and prioritize your education is really, really important. The schools try to help with

resources, sometimes it's just not enough. You have to have someone there who can save you when you are at that spot debating whether or not to withdraw or stay in. (Nav5)

Family Financial Challenges and Supports

Financial stability and financial access emerged as a theme in a Native American student's journey to community college. Ten students specifically referenced that financial support in some aspect allowed them to stay enrolled and continue their education. Nav1m stated his mom was a big support and a reason behind his success because she would "push me to register and to apply for scholarships." Students were appreciative of Tribal support and scholarships from their Tribal Nation and/or community college. They indicated it was a factor when enrolling and staying enrolled. SRPM1 stated "There was no way I could do it without, I was like oh yes, I definitely had to come here." APA1m shared monetary incentives keep him enrolled. When his work found out he was going back to school to get additional training, they ended up giving him a raise when he started school, he would get an additional raise when he completes his studies, and they helped pay for his books. GR1m found out from a fellow tribal member that the tribe would help with school finances. "So I was like, you know what, I'm going to take advantage of that, and I decided to throw my hat into the ring. The next semester I applied" (GR1m).

Conversely, when students delayed enrollment to enter the workforce or be a caregiver, the financial challenges can be a hurdle to future enrollment and persistence. Financial challenges associated with attending community college extend beyond the cost of tuition and textbooks, including issues of basic needs security such as housing, food, transportation, and utilities. "My family was struggling financially...throughout high school, I had to hold several jobs, just to provide for myself" (Nav5). Another student, Lak, stated, "I dropped out of school

when I was in 8th grade. I got my GED and got a job at 14 because my parents couldn't afford to feed us." GR2 shared, "I had to quit school [community college] to come and live back here [the reservation], because there was no one else to maintain it [the family's home]. I had to take off school to help maintain the bills." Nav6 stated education was her only option, "I was without water, without food, without heat, without electricity, my only way out was going to school, but then my only way out was continuing to go to school."

Family Responsibility as Motivation

A subtheme that surfaced within the family theme was that student persistence is also attributed to family responsibilities, especially children. These students want to break the cycle of poverty and struggle, and they see education as a means to secure a better future. Nav7 stated her son keeps her motivated to continue in school. Nav5 states she realizes the statistics are against her, however, her motivation to stay enrolled is her children.

A lot of people on the reservation get stuck in a cycle of poverty. I feel if I don't get out, I'm going to put all the pressure on my kids to try and get out. Who knows what could happen, like addiction or suicide. I think of things like that. (Nav5)

PBL described needing reliable Wi-Fi to complete an exam, which was unavailable on the reservation. To ensure access, she drove to a motel and paid to use the guest computers, leaving immediately after finishing the exam.

That's the way it goes if you are wanting your education so bad. You know you have to do it to take care of your family, you know you have to do it to take care of your people, you know you have to do it to help your job. So that's what you end up doing. (PBL)

Native American Identity and Culture: A Source of Comfort, A Source of Conflict

Another theme as identified by the interviews was Native American identity and culture: a source of comfort, a source of conflict. During the interview process students shared their cultural pride, their family influence and a career spark connection, how their culture and career path intersect, a feeling of responsibility to give back, and the importance of institutional cultural support. Findings indicated there is a pride in tribal affiliations, and many were intentional in the reasoning behind their academic major and career selection, while some felt their academic environment and cultural identity did not always align. Students are motivated to give back to their tribal community through their educational and professional pursuits.

Cultural Pride

Every student interviewed demonstrated a pride for their culture and a pride for their educational pursuit. When asked about tribal affiliation and importance, they described their affiliation as a sense of identity and belonging. Knowing family lineage, clans, and relations to sister tribes provides a foundation to understanding themselves as well as how they relate to others. “The blood that is running through your veins is the blood of your ancestors that was running through their veins. It’s important to know that because it is a part of your identity” (Lak). Nav3 shared “I think it’s really important...I don’t want our culture to die.” There was a divergence of thought when asked if they had to navigate differently between their cultural and educational environment. Eight students felt their Native American culture did not impact their student identity in higher education as two of those students stated they did not intentionally express their culture in their educational environment, so it was not something they recognized. Seven students felt they conscientiously had to navigate between the two worlds.

Some students unquestionably felt an opposing force between education and culture. PBL shared she navigates her cultural and educational world differently, but “it’s always been like that.” Nav6 also acknowledged navigating two worlds, “One hundred percent, all the time.” Nav1m and Nav2 shared that growing up urban, exposure to non-Native traditions causes internal conflict, such as learning about Christianity. Nav2 stated she grew up in the city “very Christian” but remembers “being with her grandparents and going to ceremonies and honoring our Native American traditions” which is a source of internal conflict. SRPM1 shared she understands the two world concepts, as going to school off the reservation she was “city-orientated” to fit in with the students, and then returning to the reservation, she was a different version of herself, “I don’t want to say more Native, but a different persona.”

Urban Natives are completely different than reservation Natives, and they battle amongst themselves of what you are and what you are supposed to be doing, it’s kind of like a thin line, it’s a very thin line you have to walk. It’s a lot of pressure. (PBL)

Family Influence – Career Spark

Family influence was a factor in both educational pursuit and career pathways, noting career aspirations were not dictated by family members. Instead, students stated they were influenced by a love of learning that was passed on through everyday experiences, such as hearing their Native language spoken, learning about holistic medicines, and observing family members who valued education. Nav5 shared she is thankful her grandmother got her interested in learning through books. “Nobody really pushed me in a certain direction or told me what to be or do...I think just having things like that around helps you figure out your interests” (Nav5).

Many specifically remembered a situation that “sparked” their educational or career path. Through his grandmother, Nav1 saw the natural side of medicine with roots, plants and

herbs, but he also saw she would use antibiotics, so he wanted to learn about both aspects in medicine. Nav2 was exposed to anatomy in the Navajo language from her grandfather. “My grandfather loved school, education was really, really, really important to him” (Nav2). Nav3 wants to help older Natives who speak their Native language, “the older generation has no one to talk to...it just sparked something in me, I can learn Navajo and be a social worker.” SRPM2 wants to be a botanist. What “sparked” her interest was an article that said some traditional plants her tribe uses for basket making were getting harder to find and of poor quality. These baskets are significant representations of her culture. Her concern caused her to research more and gear her education towards botany. SRPM1 stated, “I want to get into the plant scene on a scientific level, be that bridge between the tribal part, and the academic and scientific community.”

Culture and Career Path Intersection

“If anything, I am the difference between both of those [two worlds]. I am what’s going to connect them, and I am going to be the one that’s going to integrate my culture” (Nav4). Students who stated they were not navigating their educational and cultural worlds differently and were actively promoting their culture, want to lead the way for others. Lak stated if she ever felt she could not express her cultural in her educational setting she would “find a way and would also create a pathway for other people to also feel included.” Nav3 reiterated that with her career field, “that’s kind of the goal, to help everybody.” GR1m wants to “change the culture, not erase what was there, but to enhance the future. It’s navigating how you inject and breathe new life into the culture.” Nav4 encouraged students to “go back to your roots, look at yourself and what you like to do, it’s hard.” An anonymous survey respondent stated, “my career goals are

guided by a desire to blend traditional wisdom with modern knowledge so I can help address challenges like access to education, health equity, and cultural preservation.”

Those who had the biggest struggle between their cultural and educational worlds were those students in biological or healthcare fields. Nav1m stated he had his personal beliefs, his religious background, his cultural background, and is trying to “find his niche in the world of education” in the healthcare field. He stated there is a respect between him and his elders for pursuing healthcare education. Nav7 said in the world of biology there are many educational practices, such as dissection, that she has to be aware of from a cultural perspective. Many experiences in biology labs or healthcare are seen as taboo for Native American traditions requiring the Native American student to have special ceremonies or special prayers. Although students living off their tribal reservation said going back to the reservation for every ceremony can be difficult to manage consistently. Nav6 said after being deployed with the government and then wanting to go into the medical field “I’m still not through the end of it, getting all of my ceremonies done” and also said “if I was to choose being an accountant, I wouldn’t have as many issues.” Nav6 shared “our heritage has shaped us to select the careers that we are going into, I feel support now, but it was here's all of our traditions to help avert you from that career.”

A Responsibility to Give Back

In addition to being guided by family members and culture, Native American students pursue specific careers to “give back” to their tribe. “I want to work for the tribe. There’s not many tribal members that have degrees or certifications” (GR2). Lak similarly wants to help fellow Native Americans with better access to legal help. “I wanted to go to school to get a better job, get a better job to make money so I wasn’t homeless anymore, but one of my biggest things is advocacy” (Lak).

I plan to pursue an education within the field of tribal law, inspired by my parents who are active members within the community, as they dedicate their careers to fellow tribal members, going about their days, keeping in mind the beliefs and traditions of our culture. (Anonymous Survey Respondent)

Healthcare students often shared the desire to give back to their Native communities. This finding surfaced from the open-ended questions on the survey and the interviews. Nav6 is taking advantage of her healthcare experiences now so she can “take a pay cut and move back to the reservation...teach others, bring my education back to them, so that way I can help out.”

Growing up in the reservation, I grew with only one physician for a town of 1-3k people. Some may not think that was manageable, but it was a gentleman. There were no females unless I traveled for an hour to the nearest hospital. Even then it was minimal providers and the quality of care unable to keep up with today’s standard of care. I chose the medical field because I wanted to have the next little girl see that we can provide too.

(Anonymous Survey respondent)

Similarly, survey and interview respondents shared the desire to give back because of a lack of culturally responsive services. One anonymous survey respondent shared “there are many health problems in my reservation, and some elders are far away from hospitals. I want to be able to be of help to my people.” Likewise, another student shared in the open-ended question survey response,

There’s always been health problems. Lots of family have gotten diabetes, liver problems, addictions whether it were drugs or alcohol. I’m sure we are in that group of statistics. It’s sad and it’s part of the reason why I chose to be a nurse. I want to make a difference in the Native American community. (Anonymous Survey respondent)

SRPM2 wants to use her education to open an Indigenous-operated and owned funeral home.

Right now they use a third-party funeral home when elders pass away, nothing against them, but I think it would be good for someone who is from the reservation, operating a funeral home and hiring Native Americans to work at the funeral home, so we are taking care of our people in traditional ways. (SRPM2)

PBL shared that her tribe is supportive of education and the concept of giving back, stating there is a Laguna song that talks about “go away my child, go get an education, and then come back and help your family.” Giving back was framed not as an obligation imposed by others, but as a purposeful motivation and a commitment to improving conditions for those who follow.

Institutional Cultural Support

Students’ perceptions of community college cultural support varied and were closely tied to the availability of Native-centered structures, including cultural centers, student organizations, and supportive faculty. Seven students specifically reported faculty and staff support. APA1m shared, “I have awesome instructors” and when he needed help together they would “figure it out.” Land acknowledgements and syllabus language encouraging students to discuss cultural considerations with faculty were perceived as meaningful by students. Indian orientation, Native American counselors, and Native American clubs also evoked positive responses. SRPM2 stated her college “makes you feel wanted and needed, and that you matter and your cultural sense also matters.” “Obligation to the family is very strong” GR1m. Nav5 feels supported in that her professor accommodates extensions but feels bad for asking for help and the support.

I have a feeling deep down like it’s not a good enough excuse. We are expected to do things for our family, we can’t say I can’t do that right now because I have class or I have to do an assignment. Nav5

Nav1m and Nav3 reported they did not feel supported specifically as a Native American student. Nav1m shared community college is “first come, first serve” and being on-line, although convenient, was a bit isolating. Whereas GR2 stated “I guess I haven’t really put that on them or elaborated I’m Native American. As a person, if I have issues, they are willing to accommodate me.”

Community college support included academic assistance, such as tutoring centers. Nav7 stated she persists because “the tutoring center is a definite [reason].” Nav2 stated everyone on her campus was supportive, including academic advising, veteran services, and student life. Students noted limited guidance in high school, for both those who attended high school on the reservation and for those who were off the reservation, therefore institutional supports at the community college level are crucial for success. Several students highlighted faculty encouragement as a success factor, noting that instructors actively advocated for them, created opportunities, and reassured them of their capabilities. SRPM1 stated the faculty contributed to her success “giving me opportunities that I didn’t honestly think I could ever get. They’re like really pushing me and cheering me on.” Nav2 stated “the campus felt like family.”

My teachers were super; they were great teachers. I love that one of them was really happy and joking, and I went from a negative environment to a positive environment. They really helped even though it was virtual. I remember the teachers would see my baby in the camera and would ask me if I needed diapers, and to let them know. They told us all about the resources at the college. It made me feel not alone. Nav3

Student community was particularly stressed in supporting Native American students. Lak stated a sense of community helped her as an older adult, as she found somewhere to belong

while at school. SRPM1 agreed, “having Native clubs, centers, helps so much. It can’t be understated because it feels like a second home...other people wouldn’t understand.”

Native American students often follow non-linear pathways to community college, rely on financial access and stability to enroll, demonstrate strong personal drive toward persistence, draw motivation and grounding from their families and cultural identities, and benefit from holistic institutional support. These themes had impact on the student in pursuing higher education, persisting, and choosing a career path.

Summary

This chapter presented the data from the quantitative and qualitative phases of this mixed methods research study on examining the factors that impact a Native American student’s community college experience, including the role of cultural influences on their academic journey and career selection. The quantitative research identified the Native American’s perception of the community college experience, their responsibilities outside the educational setting, factors contributing to their persistence, and influences guiding their educational and career pathways. The qualitative research allowed the researcher to capture the stories behind the Native American student’s decision when choosing a course of study and future career path. A summary of the study, discussion of the findings, and recommendations for future research will be presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter reviews the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. It includes the discussion of the findings related to the research questions, to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and as related to the literature. Chapter 5 concludes with the implications for practice, future research recommendations, and a final conclusion of the research.

Statement of the Problem

Community college is an important gateway to Native American students wanting to pursue higher education. Despite an increasing population nationally, Native American students remain underrepresented in community colleges. What is known is that Native American students enroll in and complete college degrees at significantly lower rates than the overall United States population (Reyes & Shotten, 2018). Native American students are frequently overlooked in institutional data and research (Lopez, 2020; Cirks, 2021), emphasizing the need for greater understanding of the factors that support their successful college completion. Educational practitioners have the responsibility to further explore, understand, acknowledge, and address the challenges Native American students face.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to evaluate the factors that contribute to the success of Native American students enrolled within a community college system in the Southwest United States. The purpose of this study was also to provide insight of the Native American community college student experience and their educational and career selection.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are the factors that impact Native American students' community college experience?

Research Question 2: How do Native American community college students describe the influences of their cultural identity on their career selection and academic journey?

Discussion of Findings Related to the Research Questions

The following section discusses the findings in relation to the research questions.

RQ1: What are the factors that impact Native American students' community college experience?

The researcher used a quantitative survey to determine the factors that impact the community college experience for Native American students. In reviewing the survey data, family plays an integral role in the Native American student experience. As collected in the survey, 85% of the 86 respondents reported dependent care responsibilities, indicating a balance between their academic and caregiving roles. One of the strongest survey findings reported by students was the level of family support. The survey item, "my family supports my decision to attend college" received the highest mean score, 4.52 with a standard deviation of 0.78. Students who feel supported may be more likely to stay committed to their education when challenges arise. These results indicate that family responsibility and family support can be an important factor influencing a student's educational experience.

Additionally, relationships established at the college also impact the Native American student's community college experience. These findings emphasize the importance of faculty/staff relationships, addressing Research Question 1, while also aligning with the study's conceptual frameworks. Positive interactions with faculty outside of the classroom was a strong survey item ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.78$). The open-ended questions on the survey additionally

supported the positive influences of mentor relationships as, “the faculty all contributed to a positive college experience”, “my academic advisor pushed me to be my best and reach my goals,” and a mentor “helped me when I needed it the most either with classes, scholarships, or even checking in at times.” Students feel their Native American views are respected by the professors in class ($M = 4.07$), providing a sense of belonging and an opportunity for intellectual involvement during discussions.

The findings of this study indicate that students maintain strong expectations for their own academic success. Students demonstrated high levels of determination to succeed academically. Students are confident they will earn a degree ($M = 4.33$), graduate or re-enroll ($M = 4.29$), and can overcome challenges to complete coursework ($M = 4.11$). Students are motivated when coursework is connected to their future career, indicating a potential motivator for persistence and success. For Native American students, higher education can be personally meaningful, but also culturally purposeful, with the intent to use their education to help their cultural community ($M = 4.27$). For Native American students who often balance cultural, family and community responsibilities, these findings indicate that personal determination and self-efficacy impact the Native American student experience. By understanding and addressing these factors, community colleges play a pivotal role in improving the educational attainment and subsequent professional opportunities for Native American students.

RQ2: How do Native American community college students describe the influences of cultural identity on their career selection and academic journey?

The researcher used quantitative interviews and open-ended questions on the survey to determine how Native American community college students describe the influences of cultural identity on their career selection and academic journey. Nav6 shared her heritage definitely

influences her course of study as, “my Native American background has either encouraged me or deterred me from choosing the career I’m trying to go into.” Culture often influences career direction from multiple vantage points. The Native American population is a diverse people, and Native American students may have complex identities that do not always match how others perceive them (Dabdoub et al., 2022). Native American students often attend college to gain the knowledge and skills needed to support their communities, which strengthens their sense of purpose and self-determination (Reyes & Shotten, 2018). GR2 was motivated because for her future career in accounting, “I feel like it would also be a good contribution to the tribe.” People from Nav1m’s tribe were asking him medical questions, as they were afraid to go to the doctor “and get some bad news” so he decided, “why don’t I just become one?”

Many students acknowledge financial struggles, but moreover basic need challenges. Lopez (2018) notes that many Native American students face financial challenges due to low socioeconomic status and experiences. These results acknowledge that students’ academic pathways are often shaped by broader social and economic contexts. “Barriers to Native American student success must be understood in a manner consistent with the diversity of challenges that Native American and Alaska Native students face in their pursuit of a postsecondary education” (Collins, 2013, p. ix). One student on the survey responded as to how culture has influenced their career and educational path by, “I want to beat the odds of alcoholism and poverty.” Challenges such as these may affect persistence and decision-making.

The influence of family was a theme that developed from the student interviews. While the quantitative findings suggest family support is generally a positive influence in a student’s educational journey, the qualitative interviews revealed that family can serve as a source of support and motivation, but at times, a barrier to success. Literature demonstrates family can

influence persistence in both positive and negative ways (Cirks, 2021; Lopez, 2018; Keith et al., 2016). GR2 shared sometimes it is “the kid’s own families are preventing them from doing successful things.” Nav5 shared “we put a lot of value on our family relationships....Culture off the reservation doesn’t really understand.” For the Native American student, family can add a complexity to a student’s academic journey and career path, as family can be a source of encouragement and support or at times a complex navigational challenge.

Discussion of Findings Related to the Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The following section discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

Huffman’s (2001) transculturation theory was used to inform the research study. Transculturation theory states that Native American students can persist academically and identify with their culture (Huffman, 2001). The theory is distinct for the Native American student population and approaches the academic experience from a positive lens. Transculturation theory was the overarching worldview on Native American student culture and its relationship to academic success and career selection.

The findings from the quantitative survey and the individual interviews align with the theoretical framework of transculturation theory. The students in this study were at various stages of Huffman’s four-stage process (Figure 2.1). As the theory relates to the Native American student experience, the mean for the college experience section was 4.14 on a 5-point Likert scale. This indicates the colleges in this community college system are providing a positive experience for the Native American student demographic. Students have expanded their

thinking and have interest in what is being taught. Students feel their Native American perspective is supported. The responses to the open-ended question about mentors on the survey, corroborated the feeling of support as all spoke of mentors in a positive light. Many students shared in the interview that they feel supported maintaining their cultural identity while pursuing their education, where Nav4 stated her professor, “opened my eyes to culture, and she’s an advocate of voicing my opinion.”

Conceptual Frameworks

The conceptual frameworks used in this study were Tinto’s (1975) student retention theory and Lent et al.’s (1986) social cognitive career theory (SCCT). Tinto (1975) contends there are multiple factors that impact student retention, such as family backgrounds, expectations, motivation, and pre-college experiences. Tinto (1997) suggests that students weigh the perceived costs and benefits of completing college, and when the benefits are not clearly recognized, they may choose to stop out. SCCT also attributes a multi-factorial attributes when selecting a course of educational study and career path. SCCT is unique as it is dynamic and situation specific (Lent et al., 1986). The core constructs of SCCT are self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, interests, and contextual supports and barriers (Lent & Brown, 2006).

Tinto (1975) correlates student persistence to perceived return on investment. The quantitative results indicate a strong perception of return on educational investment. Students reported high levels of satisfaction with the connection between what they are learning in school and their potential career paths ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.71$). The qualitative findings offered similar results, with the notation that the value of education was not always a consideration at the end of their high school journey, but something realized thereafter. Nav3 shared community college was not something she considered after high school. GR1m in speaking to his path to community

college, did not enroll in college after high school. GR1m decided to go into the workforce as, “I looked at the numbers, and I was like, you know, graduates are going to make X by the time they get out, and if I work really hard, I’ll be at the same level.” GR1m is now enrolled in community college as he now realizes the important of an education and the future, especially with having a family. APA1m decisively shared his motivation to succeed is the “monetary” incentive from his career field. Nav1 shared he is making more money with his associates degree, then he would be earning with his bachelor’s degree. These statements support that persistence and success is a perceived, and sometimes literal, return on investment, which align with Tinto’s (1975) student retention theory.

Tinto’s (1975) multi-faceted retention model also emphasizes the importance of relationships, both social and academic. Quantitative analysis revealed strong scores on positive interactions with faculty outside the classroom ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.78$), professors respect Native American views in course discussions ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.90$), and interactions and relationships with other students influences intellectual growth ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.90$). These relationship-based items highlight the necessity of ensuring Native American students have social and academic relationships in college. Responses to the open-ended survey question about mentors also revealed the importance of faculty student relationships, further aligning with Tinto’s (1975) theory. One student shared, “my mentor is a faculty member at the college who has always taken the time to listen, provide guidance, and encourage me to push beyond my comfort zone.” Another shared, “they consistently remind me that my background and culture are sources of strength, and they’ve helped me find balance between academic challenges and personal responsibilities. Their support has motivated me to stay focused and confident, even during difficult times.”

SRPM1 stated, “I was alone.” During the qualitative interview, she reflected on how she felt before establishing relationships through the resources provided by the Native Center. During the qualitative interview phase, many students spoke to the importance of relationships at community college, again lining up with Tinto’s (1975) student retention theory. Nav3 shared that her desire to persist was supported by interactions with classmates and instructors, explaining that it helped to be “around classmates who wanted the same thing” and that “my teachers were super—they are great teachers.” Nav2 stated because she has “not come across another Native at my college” she got involved through the Veterans center and Phi Theta Kappa, connecting her to other Native students within the district. She stated, “I’m still in contact with those people too, it’s really cool to see people from outside (her college).”

A significant core construct behind Lent et al’s (1986) social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is self-efficacy. The quantitative analysis demonstrates students in this community college system possess a belief in their ability to be successful. Students expressed confidence that they would earn a college degree or certificate ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.83$). Additionally, the results demonstrated a strong confidence in their ability to complete coursework when faced with challenges related to cultural and personal responsibilities ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.89$). The qualitative findings supported the students’ belief in their abilities. When asked during the interview whether their belief in themselves had changed, the majority of students reported that it had improved in a positive way. SRPM1 and SRPM2 both said their confidence levels have increased. GR1m corroborated the sentiment stating, “over time, I’ve been able to be more confident.” Nav6 spoke to a realization of maturity.

I would say my belief has changed and matured. I guess in a way, becoming more grounded. It’s been really hard coming to school not on the reservation because it was

what the reservation has taught you...I've learned that there's not just my teaching, my elder's teaching, and the people around me teaching, it comes back to the native root of we are all still connected as one, no matter how much the story changes. I've changed in my belief that the person standing next to me is similar. (Nav6)

SCCT also suggests that goal progress is linked to academic satisfaction. Students reported high interest in the topics and ideas presented in class ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.62$), as well as high satisfaction in the support the college provides to reach educational goals ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.87$). These findings align with SCCT, when Native American students feel supported in progression toward career goals, they are satisfied with their educational and career path. Interview comments also indicate a satisfaction in career path. Nav2 changed her major several times before landing on her biology major which makes her excited for the future. PBL enjoys her classes, which keeps her motivated, "I really enjoy it." Nav4 began her educational journey with a health focus and ended up stopping out for some time. She shared "I no longer felt aligned with healthcare, so I changed my degree." Nav4 has a renewed energy in her current field of computer science, and was accepted into a university to continue her studies. Her advice "look at yourself and what you like to do. I know it's hard. You should do what you are passionate about." These findings align with the principles of SCCT, suggesting that students' educational satisfaction and persistence are shaped by their experiences, which is particularly evident when a student stops out because of course of study, but then returns and is successful.

Summary of Findings Related to Frameworks

The findings from this study support the theoretical framework of transculturation theory (Huffman, 2001). The quantitative and qualitative data reflected a Native American student can be successful in community college while maintaining their cultural identify. Similarly the study

supported the conceptual frameworks by Tinto (1975) and Lent et al. (1986). These findings highlight the necessity for community colleges to understand that being able to maintain their cultural identity in a supportive environment contributes to the success of the Native American student in community college.

Discussion of Findings Related to the Literature

The study investigated the factors that impact a Native American student's community college experience as well as how culture influences their career selection and academic journey. The quantitative survey results and the qualitative themes are discussed in relation to existing literature on Native American college students. Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative interviews, which was then divided into themes. The resulting themes were related to personal experiences and beliefs, the positive and the negative family influences, and culture as a source of comfort and conflict.

Academic Preparedness

Quantitative analysis revealed that some students felt quite prepared academically when first entering college, while others may have felt ill prepared ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.2$). These numbers indicate the variability in this response, as reflected by the standard deviation. Overall, 26% of the 90 student respondents, responded negatively. GR1m admitted he wasn't successful academically when first transitioning into community college stating, "I found out that I didn't have some of the skills." SRPM2 always had an interest in her now educational major, but stated "when I was in high school, I just didn't have the right guidance to get me there." Nav7 went into the military after high school and doubted in her abilities when entering community college. She thought school was going to be hard and fearing failure, reached out for help through the tutoring center, which was admittedly not something she would normally do. She soon realized

she could be successful with tutoring help and attributes tutoring resources as contributing to her success. These sentiments are consistent with what is reflected in literature. Cirks (2021) and Lopez (2018) both report that Native American students often face a challenge of being inadequately prepared academically when entering college. The Hunt Institute (2022) defines academic preparation as not only being to navigate classes successfully, but also realizing how to seek resources to help succeed.

Financial Barriers

Students spoke about the financial aspects of an education on many fronts, which aligns with current literature. Students also spoke about the literal cost of attending college as a barrier. Although appreciative of Tribal support to attend college, sometimes the assistance is not enough with the accumulation of other life expenses, even more so when these students have family responsibilities. Many students felt they had to be financially ready to attend college. Nav4 shared “two years out of high school, I am still figuring out what I want to do, I had to financially support myself, so it [college] took a backseat.” Additionally, as Lopez (2018) contends there are financial resources available, as many are first generation college students, they lacked the experience to guide them to these available monies. One student on the survey responded, “I am a first-generation student, so I did not have many to ask about college.”

Access to the internet can also be a financial barrier (Reyes & Shotten, 2018). There was a variance on the survey with a mean score of 3.38 and a standard deviation of 1.39 when asked about whether computer and internet access affect persistence. Fifty-two percent of the 90 responses stated lack of computer and internet access may cause them to withdraw. Although this result could be attributed to where the student physically resides, urban living versus reservation living, it is a significant finding as the reality is students are assumed to have

electronic access. Students shared during the interview process that internet access is not consistent on the reservation, and they often need to make contingencies when needed for school purposes. Nav4 stated she checked out a laptop at her college. This study reinforces prior literature indicating that Native American students face a myriad of financial barriers when attending community college.

Cultural Identities

Native American cultures are highly diverse with different tribes, beliefs, languages, geographical locations, and cultures (Don, 2022). Although the study was conducted in the southwestern United States, the research reflects the experiences of a highly diverse Native American student population. There were 15 different tribes represented in this research, and although the community college district resides in an urban location, more than half of the respondents live on the reservation. Cultural identity emerged as an important influence for several participants, particularly through the significance of clan systems and family lineage, which help individuals understand their heritage and sense of belonging. Overall students feel supported in maintaining their cultural identity while attending community college, although the specific supports for Native American students vary depending on the college within the district.

When interview participants were asked specifically about navigating between two cultural worlds (Keith et al., 2016), the students were split in their response, eight students reported that they did not experience this challenge, while seven students indicated that they did. Participants who stated they did not feel the need to navigate between two cultural worlds explained that their field of study does not conflict with their cultural beliefs, that they feel supported by their college, or that they feel grounded in their cultural identity. For students who reported being cognizant of their culture within the higher education setting, they explained that

this awareness often stemmed from their field of study. For example, students with a biology focus noted that laboratory activities may conflict with aspects of their cultural upbringing, while those in healthcare fields described encountering cultural “taboos.” Native American students feel a guilt in missing classes or late assignments due to cultural responsibilities. It is important to note that Native American students living in urban settings continue to have cultural responsibilities. AP1m was born and raised in an urban setting but acknowledged his responsibility to his culture and tribal reservation, “I’m always back, back and forth for our ceremonies, like the sunrise dances. We go back, help build the campground. All of my nieces and sisters had sunrise dances we are constantly involved in.” These findings support existing literature in the importance of the importance of students preserving ties to their Native American community and upholding cultural traditions (Reyes & Shotton, 2018).

Lopez (2018, 2021) argues that Native American student persistence is closely linked to the interaction between cultural identity, the motivation to give back to one’s community. The concept of pursuing an education to “give back” to the tribal community was an overwhelming theme, both from the quantitative survey ($M = 4.27$) and the qualitative interviews. The survey comments for future career goals included, “helping my community,” “giving back to indigenous communities,” “finding a job that allows me to be involved with my community,” “I will help in my community with positive influences and positive outcomes,” and “assist in the preservation of our culture.” One comment shared was, “my educational pursuit is built upon a foundational desire of native advocacy which fuels my life goal to be a community leader, mentor, and advocate.” Likewise the interviews produced similar comments. Nav4 wants to “go back and help”, Lak wants to “be an advocate”, SRPM1 wants to “be the bridge” between her tribal community the scientific community, while SRPM2 wants to open an indigenous owned funeral

home. The findings from this study support the concept of giving back (Huffman, 2011; Lopez, 2018; Reyes & Shotton, 2018).

There is a link between education level and population health (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). The Native American population has higher rates of chronic diseases, poor medical outcomes, and access challenges (HIS, 2019). This study supports existing literature indicating that Native American students who pursue careers in healthcare are often motivated by a desire to increase access to care, provide culturally responsive services, and address ongoing healthcare disparities within their communities. Nav6 shared she often translates for Navajo patients at her clinical education site. She often has to explain elder traditions to other healthcare professionals. Nav6 also understands that providers often take a pay cut to work in “minority regions” and having family members who struggle with healthcare is her “drive” to help out her community. A student from the anonymous survey shared, “growing up, death was just around every corner, and it's a lot for a child to experience death once a month.” Native American students understand that education can improve quality of life and expand opportunities (Harvey, 2022). This concept is supported with comments such as, “choosing this field allows me to influence change on reservations to gain easier access to healthcare.”

Self-Efficacy/Sense of Belonging

Bandura (2002) notes that self-efficacy affects how individuals utilize resources, contribute effort toward shared goals, persist through setbacks, and remain resilient when facing challenges. Native American students have the desire to succeed. The survey demonstrated the students’ confidence in obtaining and degree and re-enrolling or graduating. This aligns with Brown (2015) who found self-efficacy increases retention and graduation rates. The survey findings also demonstrated Native American students have a high degree of resiliency. As

revealed in the qualitative interviews, sometimes Native American students paths to community college are not linear, however, a realization and a determination moves the student forward.

Harvey (2022) found Native American students resiliency “was strengthened while they attended school” (p. 133). This finding was echoed during the interviews where Lak shared her educational success demonstrates her “resilience.”

Establishing a sense of community, creates that sense of belonging and reinforces the potential in each Native American student. Research suggests that the campus experience, particularly access to faculty, plays an important role in shaping Native American students’ confidence in their academic abilities (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2022). This research corresponds to literature from both the acknowledgement the college is providing a good experience for the Native American student, as well as the positive comments about mentors, and the responses about faculty and institutional support from the interviews. Both Gloria and Kurpius (2001) and Harvey (2022) describe mentorship as an opportunity to bridge the cultural gap. The students who reported they experienced some sort of mentorship collaborate the importance of mentors in the Native American student’s educational journey.

Implications for Practice

The experiences of the Native American community college student are essential to understand given their unique cultural and academic challenges that can lead to successful college completion. It is essential for community college leaders to be aware of the unique needs of this student demographic and address these needs. Failing to do so not only creates a disservice to Native American students but also undermines the broader mission of community colleges to support all students effectively. Community college is often a first step into the higher education experience, and for some students, a final opportunity to change the trajectory of their

lives. One of the primary missions of community colleges is to expand access to higher education and support opportunities for economic advancement through the completion of a degree (Beccaris-Pescatore, 2024). The impact of the community college experience should not be underestimated across the educational spectrum, from first experience to last hope. Providing culturally-responsive resources, such as Native American student centers, culturally-informed advising, and retaining faculty who incorporate and respect Native perspectives, can foster a supportive environment that promotes persistence and student success. Mentors are particularly important for Native American students in providing guidance for academics and future career goals.

The Native American student demographic is diverse and unique and there are cultural differences within this population. Students' connections to traditions and willingness to share their Native American identity may vary. The findings from this study demonstrate that some students reported feeling distanced from aspects of their Native American culture. For example, Nav3 although proud and educationally motivated by her culture wants to "blend in" when referring to her traditional culture and modern-day experiences in the educational setting. Similarly GR2 states she does not outwardly express her Native American heritage in the educational setting, while other students are intentionally charting a course for those Native American students following in their footsteps. Despite these differences, students still expressed a sense of pride in acknowledging their heritage.

Holistic Support

It is important for community colleges to recognize that Native American students' academic experiences are closely connected to their cultural identity, family relationships, and community responsibilities. The findings of this study suggest that Native American students

often draw motivation from their cultural background, their desire to support their communities, and their commitment to family relationships while pursuing higher education. Institutions that acknowledge these interconnected influences can better support Native American students by creating environments that respect cultural identity, encourage meaningful relationships with faculty and peers, and provide resources that address both academic and personal needs. Students reported that some colleges within this system, lacked identified cultural or student organizations. When such resources are not readily available, students may experience additional difficulty in finding a sense of belonging. This is especially detrimental to Native American student success, when community colleges realize this student demographic may be less likely to seek assistance directly. By identifying these influences, institutions can incorporate culturally responsive support systems that acknowledge the complex role of culture, family, and life experiences in shaping Native American students' educational journeys. The findings of this study can help inform institutional practices aimed at improving recruitment, retention, and degree completion for this student population. Understanding the factors that influence Native American student success may enable institutions to develop targeted interventions, culturally responsive support services, and policies that better meet the needs of Native American students in community colleges.

The Challenge

This research study demonstrated that the Native American student demographic, although similar to other community college students, is also unique, not only within their Native American culture, but also within their tribal traditions. The students in this study were forthcoming and transparent in acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects of their culture. The predominant underlying theme among students was the pride they evoked when

sharing their heritage and the pride in their academic and career pursuits. Colleges must recognize the non-linear pathways to higher education, as students often navigate educational interruptions and competing responsibilities. By understanding the uniqueness of Native American students, perhaps the challenge for community colleges is to acknowledge those transformative self-realizations or “aha” moments, in order to better support these students’ community college experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

Native American students describe their culture as an important part of their identity, shaped by traditional practices. Students recognize their culture, although often blanketed by the term Native American, is diverse with each tribe holding to unique languages, traditions and beliefs. Some important areas for future research include further exploration of the influences of cultural identity on career selection. Future studies could also capture the experiences of Native American students enrolled in a different geographic location of the United States, or at community colleges located in rural communities. As this study was conducted in an urban setting of the Southwest, gathering data from a different geographical demographic may provide additional or different results.

Additionally future studies to examine interventions at the high school level that support college readiness. Due to the diversity of the Native America culture, Native American students may not have been exposed to technologies of that of an urban student. Nav2 shared her cousins on the reservation would not know how to use Google sheets. GR1m stated some Native American students do not know how to behave in a classroom.

Another potential area of research would be to investigate Native American students enrolled in healthcare programs. As several students in this study had culturally motivated career

goals, they shared the polarity of their decision when navigating healthcare while respecting cultural traditions. A deeper understanding (narrative inquiry) would provide valuable insight into the supports and barriers to persistence for students in the healthcare field.

Further research would benefit from following Native American students who have successfully completed community college. A study exploring the workforce outcomes among community college graduates would assess the influence of giving back. Alternatively, studying community college graduates who transferred to four-year institutions could provide insight into their post-completion experiences.

Conclusion

Community colleges have an obligation to educate students while working to reduce barriers that may prevent their success. The findings in this study demonstrate that Native American students can be successful in the higher educational environment, and propel their success when institutions recognize their unique experiences that influence their educational journey. Native American students described strong cultural ties, family connections, and cultural responsibilities. The Native American culture acts as a powerful motivator, including the desire to give back to their tribal community.

The voices of the Native American students in this study highlight the utmost importance of understanding their life experiences and higher education perspectives. Their stories reflect a high level of resilience navigating their cultural responsibilities and striving toward their educational and career goals. By listening and valuing these voices, community colleges can better identify ways to support Native American student success.

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Appendix A - Alignment Table

Problem Based on Literature Findings	Research Questions	Conceptual Frameworks	Research Methodology	Survey Questions
1. Academic challenges (Keith et al., 2016; Lopez, 2018) 2. Financial challenges (Cirks, 2021; Lopez, 2018) 3. Mentorship (Bivens, 2024; Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020; Chelberg & Bosman, 2020; Chow-Garcia, 2022; Gloria & Kurpius, 2001; Roberts, 2022) 4. Self-Efficacy (Gloria & Kurpius, 2001; Keith et al., 2016; Chelberg & Bosman, 2020) 5. Cultural/student identities - family obligations, community participation/spiritual practices, elder care (Cirks, 2021; Harvey, 2022; Lopez, 2018).	Research Question 1: What are the factors that impact Native American students' community college experience?	Student Retention Theory (Tinto, 1975)	RQ1: Quantitative -Web-based survey, to include participant demographics, 5-point Likert Scale, descriptive statistics	Survey Questions: Demographic questions and 5 Point Likert scale Strongly Disagree = 1 Strongly Agree = 5 4 Survey Sections: College Experience, Academic and Personal Responsibilities, Influences on Enrollment, and Academic Major and Career Decisions
Problem Based on Literature Findings	Research Questions	Conceptual Frameworks	Research Methodology	Survey and Interview Questions
1. Cultural/student identities - family obligations, community participation/spiritual practices, elder care (Cirks, 2021; Harvey, 2022; Lopez, 2018). 2. Self-Efficacy (Gloria & Kurpius, 2001; Keith et al., 2016, Chelberg & Bosman, 2020) 3. Desire to give back (The Hunt Institute, 2022; Lopez, 2018; Reyes & Shotton, 2018)	Research Question 2: How do Native American community college students describe the influences of their cultural identity on their career selection and academic journey?	Student Retention Theory (Tinto, 1975) Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1986)	RQ2: Qualitative - Semi-structured interviews	Survey: 3 Open-ended questions 10 Interview questions for the qualitative interviews

Appendix B - Community College Native American Student Survey

Community College Native American Student Survey

As stated in the email, I consent to participate in this study and understand I may stop participating at any time: Yes / No

The following survey should take approximately 15 minutes.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) by the studied Community College District and Kansas State University.

Note: Items with an asterisk used with permission from CCCSE, ‘Preserving Culture and Planning for the Future’ Methods Supplement, 2018 Cohort, The University of Texas at Austin

Please answer each question based on your personal experiences.

Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with the statement on a scale of
1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree)

Part A

- The following questions are about your college experience.

	1 – Strongly Disagree	2 - Disagree	3 - Neutral	4 - Agree	5 – Strongly Agree
1. I felt prepared for college-level coursework when I first began college					
2. *This college helps me keep on track toward reaching my educational goals by providing supports such as advising, alerts, and a way for me to monitor my own progress					
3. I am confident that I will earn a college degree or certificate					
4. I am graduating this semester or planning to re-enroll for next semester					

5. I am interested in the topics and ideas that are being presented during class					
6. My thinking has developed, and my interests have expanded since enrolling in college					
7. My professors respect my views as a Native American in course discussions					

Part B

- The following questions are about your academic and personal responsibilities.

	1 – Strongly Disagree	2 - Disagree	3 - Neutral	4 - Agree	5 – Strongly Agree
1. *Within a class or through another experience at this college, I feel that this college is helping me develop my Native American identity and values					
2. *Within a class or through another experience at this college, I have felt a sense of belonging					
3. I have much in common with other students here					
4. I have a close relationship with my tribal relatives					
5. I participated in tribal ceremonies prior to attending college					
6. *My experiences at this college are developing my ability to understand, communicate and effectively interact with my tribe					
7. *My experiences at this college are developing my ability to					

understand, communicate and effectively interact with people from other cultures					
8. I believe in my ability to successfully complete my college coursework, even when faced with challenges related to my cultural and personal responsibilities					
9. When reflecting on my social life in college, such as friendships and college organization involvement, I am satisfied with my experiences					

Part C

- The following questions are about what influences your decision to remain enrolled in college

	1 – Strongly Disagree	2 - Disagree	3 - Neutral	4 - Agree	5 – Strongly Agree
1. My family supports my decision to attend college					
2. My family talks about college with me					
3. When I think about the people who matter most in my life, like close friends & family, they would support my decision if I decided to quit school					
4. Many of my closest friends attend college within this community college district					
5. *Having limited access to a computer or electronic device at home would cause me to withdraw from college					

6. *The lack of reliable transportation would cause me to withdraw from college					
7. I miss class for reasons unrelated to illness or official school activities					
8. My professors support me if I need to attend a cultural or family event (e.g., ceremony, funeral) during class time					
9. My interactions with faculty outside of the classroom are positive					

Part D

- The following questions are about your academic major and career decisions

	1 – Strongly Disagree	2 - Disagree	3 - Neutral	4 - Agree	5 – Strongly Agree
1. I am satisfied with the connection between what I am learning and my potential career path					
2. My interactions and relationships with other students influences my intellectual growth and interest in new ideas					
3. My family has high expectations for me					
4. My tribal community is proud of me for enrolling in college					
5. Tribal members (other than family) ask about my academic progress in college					
6. I plan to use my education to help my cultural community					

7. My tribal culture, traditions, and community needs influenced my academic major and future career					
8. If given the choice to have my college experience and choice of educational study again, I would choose the same field					

Part E

- Please answer the following questions with your own thoughts.
1. How has your Native American culture influenced your educational and career pursuits?
 2. Often times, interactions with faculty influence your college experience. Do you have someone you consider a mentor who has helped you navigate your college experience?

If yes, what makes them important to your success?
 3. What are your career and life goals after you graduate from college?

Final Questions

Part F

1. What is your gender?
 - a) Male
 - b) Female
 - c) Prefer not to answer
2. What is your current age? _____
3. What is your Tribal Affiliation? _____
4. How long does it take you to travel from your home to your college campus for classes (in minutes)? _____
5. What is your degree/course of study (major)? _____
6. How many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week providing care for dependents you live with (parents, spouse, children, etc.)? _____

7. Where are you in your program of study?

- a) This is my first semester in my program
- b) I have completed some coursework, but I am not close to finishing
- c) I am nearing completion/graduation

8. What is your current employment status?

- a) Employed Full-Time
- b) Employed Part-Time
- c) Not working

9. Which of the following best describes your community growing up?

- a) Non-reservation Tribal Community
 - b) Reservation
 - c) Rural
 - d) Urban
 - e) Other; please describe (for example: spent summers on the reservation/tribal community)
-

10. Are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview via Zoom with the researcher?

(All students selected for an interview will receive a \$25 gift card).

- a) Yes
- b) No

Please use the following link to provide your contact information:

Link to Google Form: XXXXXXXXXXXXX

Full Name & Contact Information:

(Email or cell phone)

Thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded. To enter into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card please use the following link to enter your email address.

Your responses are anonymous and are not tied to your email.

Link to Google Form: XXXXXXXXXXXXX

Appendix C - Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to let me record this interview and write down some notes.

Background/Introduction

1. What is your tribal affiliation?
2. Where are you at (timeline) in your educational journey and what is your educational major?

Interview Questions

1. A student's path to community college differs. Describe your academic transition into community college and what contributed to the success of your transition?
2. What factors have helped you stay enrolled and continue your education at college? Does your culture or the culture of the college play a role?
3. How has your belief in yourself and your abilities changed since you enrolled in college? Please explain in what way.
4. Do you ever feel you are navigating between two worlds, between your educational environment and your cultural background? Explain
5. Have you felt supported in maintaining your cultural identity while pursuing your education and career goals? Please explain in what way (why/why not).
6. Tell me about how your cultural values or community expectations influence your career aspirations?
7. Being specific about your tribal affiliation – how important is that to you?
8. Is there anything I haven't asked, but that you feel is important to understanding the success of students like you at community college?

Appendix D - Student Survey Consent

Dear Community College Students,

My name is Michelle Wilt, and I am a doctoral student in the Community College Leadership Program at Kansas State University. I am currently conducting research via a survey as part of my dissertation work. The purpose of this survey is to better understand the experiences of Native American students attending community colleges. Your participation would be greatly appreciated.

The survey is designed to take less than 15 minutes to complete. Participants will be placed into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. At the end of the survey, you will have the option to volunteer for a follow-up individual virtual interview, which would take approximately 45 - 60 minutes. Interviews will be audio and video recorded for accuracy. Follow-up interview participants will receive a \$25 gift card.

To participate, you must meet the following criteria: (1) be 18 years of age or older; (2) be of Native American descent; and (3) have completed at least six college credit hours. Some personal information such as gender, age, tribal affiliation, course of study, and employment questions will be asked. You may skip any question you prefer not to answer or exit the survey at any time. While the potential risks are minimal, they could include unforeseen data breaches. Individual identities will be kept confidential and interview participants will be assigned aliases. All information collected during the study will be digitally secured on a password protected drive. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of research participants of the studied Community College District.

The findings from this study will be published as part of my dissertation at Kansas State University and may also be used in future research without the need for additional consent. Your insights can contribute to improving how Native American students are supported in higher education.

Please understand this project is research, and that your participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate in this study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which you may otherwise be entitled.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, mwilt@ksu.edu, my supervising Chair, Dr. Jennifer Spielvogel, at drjspielvogel@gmail.com, or Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, Lisa Rubin at rubin@ksu.edu.

Thank you for considering participating in this important research! Michelle Wilt

To access the survey, please click the following link: [XXXXXXXXXX]

Appendix E - Reminder Email

Hello - I'm reaching out again before the holidays - hoping you will help me with my research! I need your voice. The survey is still open and only takes a few minutes! The purpose of this survey is to better understand the experiences of Native American students attending community colleges - I need your help. Your participation would be greatly, greatly appreciated.

If you have already completed it, thank you!!!

Make sure to fill out the Google form for a gift card drawing!!!

I also need some interview volunteers!

Thank you for your time!

Michelle

To access the survey, please click the following link: [XXXXXXXXXX]

Appendix F - Welcome Back Reminder

Happy New Year! Welcome Back!

Happy New Year! I still need your help in collecting your thoughts.

For those of you who completed my survey - Thank you!!!

If I could get a healthy dose of new responses - you would make my New Year's wish come true
(and don't forget to fill out the form for a gift card drawing).

I also need 10 - 15 volunteers for a brief interview (I promise it takes only about 30 minutes)
and you will receive a \$25 electronic gift card for your time.

To access the survey, please click the following link: [XXXXXXXXXX]

Thank you so much for helping me with my research!!

Michelle

Appendix G - Spring Semester Email

Happy Spring Semester!

Michelle from Kansas State here.

I still need students to complete a brief survey! Please help get me to the end!! Pretty please!!!!

The purpose of this survey is to better understand the experiences of Native American students attending community colleges.

Thank you to everyone who has already completed the survey—I truly appreciate your time and input!

If you haven't yet participated, I invite you to take a few minutes to complete it (literally 5-10 minutes). By sharing your experiences, you'll help highlight what contributes to being a successful community college student and support future students along the way.

Your answers are anonymous.

As a thank-you, all participants who complete the survey will be entered into a drawing.

Your voice matters, and this is a great opportunity to tell your story.

Thanks!!!

Michelle

Survey Link: [XXXXXXXXX]

Appendix H - Letter Requesting Permission to Use an Existing Survey

Michelle Wilt
mwilt@ksu.edu

May 29, 2025

Mr. K. Lovseth & Mr. M. Bohlig
Center for Community College Student Engagement
lovseth@cccse.org; bohlig@cccse.org

Dear Mr. Lovseth and Mr. Bohlig,

I am a student at Kansas State University working on my dissertation to obtain a Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. I am writing to express my interest in the CCSSE tribal supplement questionnaire you administered. I was pointed in your direction from a cohort coordinator in the Kansas State Doctoral program, Dr. Evelyn Waiwaiole.

My dissertation is a mixed-methods study utilizing a survey in which I will examine the factors that contribute to the success of Native American students within a community college system. I appreciate the instrument investigates sense of belonging based on the Native American culture.

As a part of the data collection, I will be inviting all Native American students who are enrolled to participate in the study. The participants will complete a survey with a Likert-type rating scale to measure self-efficacy, career motivation, and the desire to give back. The research study participant data will be kept private and confidential. Would you grant me permission to use portions of the CCSSE Tribal supplement in order to study the Native American student demographic in community college? I will give credit and cite all sources in accordance with APA writing guidelines and citations.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,
Michelle Wilt
Kansas State University

Appendix I - Letter Requesting Permission to Use an Existing Survey

Michelle Wilt
mwilt@ksu.edu
mwilted@gmail.com

May 25, 2025

Dr. J.D. Lopez
University of Arizona
jamesondlopez@arizona.edu

Dear Dr. Lopez,

I am a student at Kansas State University working on my dissertation to obtain a Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. I am writing to express my interest in the SNAG instrument (Scale of Native Americans Giving Back).

My dissertation will be a quantitative-leading research study, utilizing a survey tool, in which I will examine the factors that contribute to the success of Native American students within a community college system. I am interested in how and if - culture influences educational and career choices. I appreciate that the SNAG instrument investigates sense of belonging based on the Native American culture, and the desire to give back to one's tribal community. I also intend to conduct interviews following the survey distribution.

As a part of the data collection, I will be inviting all Native American students who are enrolled in community college, to participate in the research study. The participants will complete a survey with a Likert-type rating scale to measure self-efficacy, career motivation, and the desire to give back. There will also be some open-ended questions about their academic journey. The research study participant's data will be kept private and confidential. Would you grant me permission to use portions of SNAG in order to study the Native American student demographic in a community college system? I will give credit to you and cite all sources in accordance with APA writing guidelines and citations.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

Michelle Wilt
Kansas State University