

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA  
GRADUATE COLLEGE

COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCES OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of  
DOCTOR PHILOSOPHY

By

CANDACE BYRD  
Norman, Oklahoma  
2021

COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCES OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Rockey Robbins, Chair

Dr. Crag Hill

Dr. Delini Fernando

Dr. Howard Michael Crowson

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This dissertation is dedicated to the participants of this study who trusted me with their stories.

## **Acknowledgments**

I am immensely grateful to my advisor and mentor, Dr. Rockey Robbins, without whom this dissertation would not have been possible. Rockey, thank you for your unwavering support throughout the years. You have been a constant voice of encouragement amidst the chaos of life. Thank you for believing in me and investing in me, not only as a clinician but also as a person.

To Josh, thank you for all the ways you helped me see this dissertation through to completion. I could not ask for a better partner in this life. Thank you for always cheering me on.

To Pablo and Charlotte, you have been the greatest source of joy and the most powerful motivation. Thank you for the sweet smiles and cuddle breaks that helped me make it through this process. I am forever grateful to be your momma.

To the participants of this study, thank you for your time and participation. I enjoyed learning from each of you, and I am extremely honored that you shared your stories with me.

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study examined the views of Native American students regarding their collegiate experiences. Native Americans who were enrolled members of their tribe and who had engaged in some level of collegiate study were included in this research study. Participants reported membership to Cherokee, Kiowa, Pawnee, and Ponca tribes. Participants were interviewed in two separate groups using a three-interview series to elicit comments about their collegiate experiences. After conducting interviews with participants, data was analyzed for themes reflecting their various experiences. The study identified six themes (Prejudice, Surveillance, Acculturation Stress, Ontological Death, Survivance, and Proximity) related to the participants' experiences.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### The Problem

There is a lack of psychological research that considers Native American perspectives, especially in the areas of education and Native American student identity. The American educational system has been one of the most violent tools of oppression and assimilation against Native Americans, beginning with compulsory attendance at mission and government boarding schools and continuing with various forms of racism in our current educational institutions (American Indian Education Foundation, n.d.; Barrerio, 2000; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Duran & Duran, 1995; Hoerig, 2002; Pewewardy, 1998; 2002; Reyhner & Eder, 2017; Robbins et al., 2020; Sanchez & Stuckey, 1999; Styron & Wood, n.d.; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999; Webster, 1997). The uncritical acceptance of White dominant norms and privileges as the underpinnings of educational systems perpetuates the violence that Native Americans have been endured for the past several centuries. The history of Native American education throughout colonization has been well-documented by historians, theorists, and researchers. However, this research been conducted from a non-Native perspective using research practices that have ignored the extreme educative violence experience by Native Americans and yielded results with questionable validity (Fixico, 2003). There is a profound need for critical reflection and culturally responsive approaches to education reform. This study will begin to address the scarcity of research on Native American student experiences in settings. Via interviews with Native American students, their own voices will document their lived experiences as students within American higher education institutions. This study is of particular importance and relevance to the primary researcher as a clinician and educator who is Latinx with Indigenous Mexican heritage and works with a large number of Native American students in rural Oklahoma.



## **Background**

Schooling in the United States has long been an instrument of power and oppression against Native Americans. The European settlers of the Americas adopted harmful practices that were later instituted into schools and used to erase indigenous cultures. Instead of schools providing genuine opportunities for Native Americans to express their unique cultural/tribal identities, they sought to erase Native American languages, identities, and cultures and made it difficult for Native American to achieve success in White academic settings (Lyons, 2010). Settlers' attempts to eradicate Indigenous peoples could not erase their cultures completely, but the consequences were and are still devastating. Their overt attempts to "civilize" Native Americans by forcing them to abandon their spiritual ways, become Christians, and to adopt European ways and world views was severely damaging and continues to have lasting effects (Lyons, 2010).

Bilingualism was initially encouraged in some of the first schools established for Native Americans, though the schools' missionaries still tried to convert Native Americans to Christianity (Crawford, 1989). However, even small concessions shifted in the mid-1800s, and public schools became the "the institutions to create a unified conforming citizenry... [and] to organize the linguistic and cultural knowledge and behavior of U.S. citizens" (Heath & Mandabach, 1978, p. 17). In 1868, the Indian Peace Commission mandated the cultural and linguistic genocide of Native Americans through schooling (Crawford, 1989).

Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) outlined the differences between education and schooling: education is "passing along discrete knowledges *and* the cultural definition of what counts as useful" while schooling concerns how education "coincides with schools' content and practices" (p. 83). White settlers deemed Native American knowledges as unscientific, which

laid the framework of the devaluation, marginalization, and criminalization of persons who continued to practice the “old” ways (Deloria et al., 2018). Lomawaima and McCarty (2002) described the history of Native American education as “a grand experiment in standardization” (p. 282) to ensure that Native American peoples assimilated into the dominant culture. They stated that while boarding schools proved to be ineffective as a tool for assimilation, they weakened the students’ connections to their languages and cultures (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002).

Despite a series of federal legislation to end assimilatory education efforts, assimilation in American education continues today, denying Native American peoples their rights to sovereignty and self-determination. The effects manifest themselves in several ways including racism within school systems. Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) have summarized the racism that students face to include “paternalism, prejudice, harmful assumptions, low expectations, stereotypes, violence, and biased curricular materials...[and] the use of euphemisms” (p. 950). Other researchers have noted that both texts and educational tools are deeply ingrained with biases, stereotypes, and superficiality (Ashley and Jarratt-Ziemski, 1999; Forbes, 2000, Pewewardy, 1998, 2002). Elitism, racism, and prejudice have long run rampant in education, while tools such as standardized tests simply ignore the existence of peoples who differ from Euro-Western Caucasian men. Pewewardy (1998, 2002) coined the term “dysconscious racism” to refer to the perspectives and assumptions of Euro-Western educational instructors that accept White dominant norms and privileges without any critical reflection.

### **Significance**

This study proposes to understand Native American student views concerning their collegiate experiences and their interactions with the institutions they attend(ed). Contributions

from Native American students will allow researchers to critically evaluate the impact American educational institutions have had on the academic, social, and cultural development of Native American students. Given the covert and overt socio-psychological implications of colonization, oppression, assimilation, acculturation, marginalization, and genocide, it is imperative for researchers to critically evaluate the role of American educational institutions and their impact on the academic, social, and cultural development of Native American students.

Until there is a thorough investigation of the effects of the curriculums, pedagogies, and environments in American institutions, we cannot fully understand the intricacies of the genocide of Native American cultures. Only by developing an understanding of how historical and continued assimilation practices manifest themselves in our educational systems, can we initiate more effective projects to empower our Native American students to appreciate their rich heritages and build a better future. While some have argued that education is foundational to advancing the opportunities of Native people (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008) and is central to obtaining civil rights for marginalized populations (Deloria, 2003), it is important to note that the researchers of this present study do not presume that higher education is important or necessary for Native Americans. Rather, it is hoped that meaning will emerge from participants sharing their own experiences to highlight how educators and institutions can begin to address systemic inequities in education. Above all else, the goal of this study is to privilege Native American perspectives.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand Native American student views on their experiences in the collegiate setting. Research questions are as follows:

- What are Native American participants' views regarding their collegiate experiences?
- How do participants conceptualize their Native American student identities?
- How do participants think their tribal culture influences their views and interpretations of their experiences in college?

It is the hope of the primary researcher that by asking Native American participants to answer questions developed to elicit responses congruent with the above goals of this study, professionals in the fields of psychology and education will be better informed about collegiate experiences of Native American students. This study utilizes research methods that allow Native American participants to describe their experiences in their own words. In this way, the researcher privileges and amplifies Native voices. Traditional Western research methods, including standardized psychological assessment measures, have not sufficiently represented minority populations (Helms, 2007). Native Americans have unique beliefs and experiences that are pathologized by assessments such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory, and Wechsler intelligence tests (Davis, Hoffman, & Nelson, 1990). Further, it has been found that conflicting epistemological assumptions contribute to significant differences in scores on instruments such as the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised (Robbins, Stoltenberg, Robbins, & Ross, 2002) and the MMPI-2 (Pace, Robbins, Hill, & Choney, 2006).

Lomawaima and McCarty (2002) have advocated for decolonizing educational approaches to research and educational practices. They have argued that: tribal sovereignty be acknowledged; Native American ontologies and epistemologies be foregrounded; power relations within our educational systems be critiqued; and that equitable relationships be

established with tribal community members. In summary, they have advocated for a disruption of the assimilation of Native Americans into White society through schooling practices and call for practices that connect and integrate cultural, recreational, and academic knowledges. By allowing participants to speak with their own voices, professionals in the field can begin to better understand the unique experiences of Native American students and to consider the need for culturally responsive educational approaches that may help to transform current educational systems in a positive way for Native Americans. This study also has the potential to inform clinicians working in the collegiate setting to better recognize student distress and the impact of the collegiate environment on Native American students.

This study begins with questions about the beliefs, values, and attitudes Native American students have concerning their collegiate experiences. It seeks to develop an understanding of their views concerning their Native American student identity and their interactions with the institutions they attend(ed). The researchers in this study attempt to make interpretations that are culturally sensitive and take into account Native American historical experiences. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the literature and a discussion on the history of settler Colonialism and its effect on Native American peoples and schools in the United States. Chapter 3 provides the methodological approach and theoretical framework that is used in this study. Chapters 4 and 5 explore the findings and provide interpretations.

### **Definitions and Terminology**

Horse (2005) has addressed Native American monikers and has stated that nomenclature can be an important factor in identity. While some individuals prefer to be called Native American, American Indian, Indian, Indigenous, Native or First Peoples, others prefer to be identified by their specific tribe. For the purposes of this study, the researcher will primarily use

the terminology “Native American,” both because it is an acceptable term for most of the of the first people of the Western continent and because the majority of psychological journals prefer this term. Participants in this study were permitted to self-identify according to their preferred nomenclature; however, specific tribal names will be kept confidential to protect the identity of participants.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Since Columbus's arrival, Native Americans have experienced compounding historical trauma through genocide, forced assimilation, and systematic oppression (Hartmann et al., 2019). Demographer Russell Thornton (1987) referred to the decimation of the Native American population as the "American Indian Holocaust," which was accomplished primarily through the introduction of new diseases, guns, and starvation from loss of game and fertile land (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). As the Native American population began to dwindle, both the government and Christian missionaries sought to assimilate and "civilize" those who remained. Schooling became the main tool to achieve these goals and destroy tribal life. However, missions and boarding schools largely resulted in cultural disintegration as students were not able to fully assimilate into Euro-Western mainstream life nor were they equipped to resume tribal life.

The loss of Native languages and cultures led to a rise in suicide, substance abuse, gang membership, and domestic violence among Native Americans (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). In addition to loss of language and culture, White (2006) identified additional risk factors including family disintegration, lack of community support, lack of teacher support and peer pressure at school, lack of discipline from parents, uncles, and elders, and the availability of drugs and alcohol. These risk factors are often correlated with historical trauma and are lasting wounds of Colonialism (Jacob, 2012). Further, Brave Heart (2003) has indicated historical trauma leads to depressive symptoms, substance use disorders, fixation on trauma, and chronic pain.

Native Americans currently experience higher rates of mental health issues, physical health ailments, disabilities, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and poverty than the majority culture (Gone, 2003; 2012; Keane, Marshall, & Taft, 2008; Thompson, 1988). Additionally, the 2014 Native Youth Report issued by the White House indicated more than one third of Native American children live in poverty. It listed suicide as the second leading cause of death in Native

Youth from ages 15-24 and stated that the rate of suicide among Native youth is 2.5 times the national rate. An examination of these problems faced by Native Americans must acknowledge the effects of the historical trauma associated with colonization and the possibility that distressing psychological symptoms and traits are exacerbated by compounding trauma rather than the failures or shortcomings of Native Americans (Myhra, 2011).

### **History of Native American Education**

Between 1830 and 1850, the United States government began the forced relocation of approximately 100,000 Native Americans in what is now referred to as “ethnic cleansing” when the Cherokees and other southeastern tribes were forced to walk the “Trail of Tears” (Anderson, 2014). Once relocated to Indian Territory in Oklahoma, they reestablished tribal self-government and started their own schools. However, this was short-lived as the government mandated that schools should be state-operated public schools (Reyhner & Eder, 2017).

Since their inception, schools for Native American students have had a history of being poorly managed and inflicting grave abuses on their students. Colonists misappropriated funds from England that were designated for Native American children and instead used them to educate white children. Later, the Office of Indian Affairs ran rampant with corruption and diverted money to contractors. Only a few generations after tribes were removed from their ancestral homelands and relocated to new territories, children were taken away from their families to be educated by strangers (Gere, 2005). Inside the schools, students’ cultures were stripped away, and they were forbidden to speak their languages. Their tribal identities were erased, and they were given new names. Studies following the Civil Rights movements found that these schools were destroying the identity of Native children (Reyhner & Eder, 2017).



Inequities persisted in the twenty-first century as publishers pushed curriculum, textbooks, and assessments that were geared toward white, middle-class students (Grunwald, 2006). History taught in American schools continues to be white-washed with stories about friendly pilgrims and the glorification of land runs. Elementary age children are taught to appropriate Native culture as they are led in activities such as making “Indian” vests out of paper grocery bags and creating their own “Native American” symbols. They dress up as settlers and run races to stake their claims with flags, trying to beat other students to an imaginary plot of land. Too many teachers fail to teach their students that the Americas were stolen from tribal people. This white-washing of history erases the horrors experienced by Native Americans at the hands of colonists, settlers, missionaries, and educators. Indigenous history is erased, the White perspective becomes the only perspective, and Native Americans continue to be marginalized and disempowered.

Further, schools continue to use mascots and logos that are dehumanizing in their misappropriation of Native culture. The American Psychological Association (2005) called for the discontinuation of Native American mascots, symbols, images, and personalities, stating that they are detrimental to Native American students’ social identity development and self-esteem. The APA noted that the use of these mascots creates a hostile learning environment and teaches non-Native American students “that it’s acceptable to participate in culturally abusive behavior and perpetuate inaccurate misconceptions about American Indian culture.”

Educators and policy makers must be aware of how education has harmed Native American students as well as understand the history of Native American resistance to schooling (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) point out that Indigenous education and colonial schooling are different concepts that value different types of knowledge. Colonial

schooling that includes lectures, classrooms, and standardized testing has been described as formal, organized, and systematic, while Indigenous education has been characterized as informal and undirected (Brayboy and Lomawaima, 2018). The Native American way of education acknowledges that there are many types of knowledge and ways of knowing. Children learn through ceremonies, storytelling, and apprenticeship (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). They also learn through pretend play, carrying out the duties they would later assume as adults. Native scholars have emphasized that education includes learning values and transferring knowledge across generations. In this way, education adapts to time, place, and context (Okakok, 1989). Scholars emphasize that US schooling has destroyed Native education practices that pass down heritage, language, and culture.

### **Mission Schools**

Missionaries were the first European teachers of Native Americans, and their primary goals were to “Christianize, civilize, and assimilate” Native Americans into Euro Christian culture (Reynher & Eder, 2017, p. 18). Missionaries did not understand Native American culture or their way of life. They were shocked and appalled by Native American child-rearing practices and the extent in which children were revered and honored by tribal people. In their book “American Indian Education, A History,” Reynher and Eder (2017) provided several examples of the reactions of missionaries to Native American treatment of children, including observations and opinions of the Jesuit father Paul Le Jeune and the Jesuit Priest Joseph Jovency. In 1634, Paul Le Jeune wrote, “These Barbarians cannot bear to have any of their children punished, nor even scolded, not being able to refuse anything to a crying child. They carry this to such an extent that upon the slightest pretext they would take them away from us before they were educated.” In 1639, he wrote that “the Savages love their Children above all things.” In 1710,

Joseph Jovency wrote, “They treat their children with wonderful affection, but they preserve no discipline, for they neither themselves correct them or allow others to do so. Hence the impudence and savageness of the boys, which, after they have reached a vigorous age, breaks forth in all sorts of wickedness” (Reyhner & Eder, 2017, p.18).

The solution for missionaries was to begin separating children from their families and instead place them in boarding schools. In the late 1800’s, the government began a contract school system that provided support to mission schools, which resulted in religious groups competing for government funds and Native American students to fill their schools (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). These schools sought to stamp out the unique culture and spirituality of Native Americans in an attempt to convert them to Christianity. Part of this process including giving students new, Christian names. Tribal traditions were ridiculed, and students were often punished for speaking their language. Reyhner and Eder (2017) stated that Catholic nuns effectively directed their students to throw stones at their elders and referred to native languages as “the devil’s tongue.”

### **Government Boarding Schools**

After eliminating financial support for mission schools, the federal government began to start its own boarding schools. They were sometimes located in old forts and had a military-like structure. The first all-Native American, off-reservation government boarding school was started by Richard Henry Pratt who had a military background. In the army, he had commanded “buffalo soldiers” as well as “Indian scouts” (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). He had also overseen Native American prisoners and lobbied for education of Native Americans alongside freed slaves. Pratt started the Carlisle Indian Industrial School with the intent of assimilating Native

American students by erasing their tribal cultures and incorporating them into the dominant culture as citizens. The purpose was to “take the Indian” out of the students. Pratt did not see any positive aspects of Native American culture and famously stated that his goal was to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Pratt, 1973, p. 261).

Historians have found varying narratives and experiences of boarding school life including students who reported happiness and those who reported suffering (Child, 2014). Some parents sent their children to school voluntarily while others were forced. The schools provided poor nutrition and sanitation while living quarters were often crowded and lacked adequate heat. The shock of transition from one’s Native home to boarding schools has been likened to leaving a “warm womb” and going “to a strange, cold place” (Fire & Erdoes, 1972). Discipline was harsh and students were often forbidden from speaking their own languages. Academics were typically secondary to maintenance of the facility and chores necessary to keep the schools running. Boys performed hard manual labor and girls completed grueling domestic tasks (Hoerig, 2002). After returning from these schools as adults, Native Americans struggled to readjust to life within their tribes and many suffered from lasting psychological harm.

### **Native American Identity**

Tribal heritage provides the basis for Native American identity. While the modern Euro Western world emphasizes individualism, materialism, and capitalism, Native American values center around respect for others, humility, cooperation, and responsibility to the tribe. Members are taught to respect their elders, families, and children. They learn the importance of spirituality, nature, and hard work (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). Prior to the arrival of European colonists, tribes actively educated their children about tribal traditions and values (Chavez, Ke, & Herrera, 2012). Individual and collective identities were forged through the caring circles of extended families as

tribal values, symbols, history, practices, and languages were shared. Many Native Americans identify their connections with their family as defining their individual identities (Kenyon & Carter, 2011). When children were removed from their families and placed in boarding schools, it began to reshape Native American identity. Mankiller (2004) stated, “Colonization teaches us to hate ourselves. We are told we are nothing until we adopt the ways of the colonizer, till we become the colonizer” (p. 62). Thus, students internalize White values as a means of protection and self-preservation (Colmant et al., 2004; Robbins et al., 2006).

Urban relocation has further affected Native American identity and has had a devastating effect on Native American families. Children who are reared in urban areas often come to view themselves separately from their tribe, not having inherited the unique rituals, customs, and ways (Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004). Reyhner & Eder (2017) assert that many indigenous people feel that the most critical issue they face is the loss of their language. They state that this loss can lead to a breakdown in intergenerational communication between children and their grandparents and can sever ties between Native American people and their heritage. They explain that tribal heritage provides a sense of belonging and group membership in a modern society that is otherwise individualistic and materialistic (Reyhner & Eder, 2017).

Another complicating factor related to Native American identity is the issue of blood quantum. In the nineteenth century, the government began requiring a certain amount of blood quantum in order to be identified with a tribal community. (Reyhner, 2012). This is another example of how the government has shaped the identity of Native Americans without their consent. In the 1960’s the Bureau of Indian Affairs allowed tribes to self-determine who could claim membership (Usner, 1992), and tribes now use different methods to allow individuals to claim membership and benefits. For example, the Comanche Nation requires a minimum blood

quantum while the Cherokee Nation requires that individuals be descended from members listed on the Dawes Rolls.

The issue of blood quantum affects intertribal relationships due to differing ideas on what is required to be considered Native American. Further, it can cause conflict within the tribe related to voting rights and other privileges. There are limited government resources, and the idea that those with a higher blood quantum should receive more benefits can be a point of contention. This leads to strife and alienation between tribal members (Pewewardy, 2002). Additionally, revenue generated from casinos can result in large payouts for a tribe with smaller membership, but the trade-off may be a decline in tribal legacy due to smaller numbers.

In addition to separate tribal identities, Native Americans have come to experience a sense of shared culture (Deloria, 2003). This is largely in response to the collective experience of Colonialism and how the Euro-Western world has lumped Native Americans into the same category. According to Horne and Macbeth (1998), Native American students began developing this “pan-Indian” identity in boarding schools. Horne reported, “We students nurtured a sense of community among ourselves, and we learned so much from one another. Traditional values, such as sharing and cooperation, helped us to survive culturally, even though the schools were designed to erase our Indian culture, values, and identities” (Horne & MacBeth, 1998, p. 33).

## **Resilience**

Despite continued oppression and marginalization, Native Americans have shown extraordinary resilience in recovering from historic, intergenerational trauma. Researchers have found that strong traditional beliefs and practices in Native Americans are associated with resilience against violence rates (Greenfield & Smith, 1999), suicide (Olson & Wahab, 2006), and substance abuse (SAMHSA, 2010). By teaching adaptation strategies and utilizing

traditional practices, Native Americans have been able to promote resilience in the next generation while also preserving their cultures (Brokenleg, 2012). This has been accomplished through commitment to spirituality, family, and community. These three concepts are deeply intertwined. The notion of family from a Native American perspective incorporates identification beyond the nuclear family to include identification as part of a larger tribal community while also involving a kinship with the elements that spans across time and space to include a relationship with the spiritual world (Robbins, Hong, & Jennings, 2012).

Resilience is promoted by honoring relationships (Bigfoot & Funderburk, 2011) and passing on strong spiritual values (Hibbard, 2005). The core beliefs of Native American spiritualities include interconnectedness, harmony, respect, humility, and bravery. These are the beliefs hold Native American families and community together. Harmony and interconnectedness are built by “giveaways” during which gifts are presented to honor others. Honoring ceremonies allow youth and elders to demonstrate respect for one another. Dances are another act of honor meant to pay tribute to the past, present, and future of the tribe. Other spiritual practices include sun dances, scratching, purification ceremonies, and vision questions. Sweating has also been incorporated as a form of spiritual expression and includes preparatory ritual and prayer (Hibbard, 2005). Each tribe, and sometimes clans within the tribe, has their own set of specific protocols for their own rituals.

Extended family relationships play an important role in the education of Native American youth. As previously discussed, education is different from schooling in that it passes down discrete knowledges and the cultural definition of what counts as useful (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018). Native Americans have long relied on extended family to nurture, train and educate their children (Chavez, Ke, & Herrera, 2012). Often called “walking the red road,”

elders take on the responsibility of passing on tribal wisdom to the younger generation so that they can experience healthy living and continue tribal traditions (Benally, 1999; Gone, 2012; Thompson, et al., 2013).

### **Current Issues with Schooling**

Similar to other minority groups, Native Americans experience poor academic performance and low rates of school success (Ledlow, 1992). The 2014 Native Youth Report issued by the White House reported the lowest high school graduation rate of any racial or ethnic group at 67 percent. The Navajo Area Dropout Study (Brandt, 1992) found that both students and administrators reported dropout rates were due to student boredom and disinterest. The study reported that 37 percent of Native students who planned to drop out of school were doing so because they were “bored”, and 24 percent of administrators reported that students dropped out because they were uninterested in education. Academic failure accounted for only 8 percent of the reasons for dropouts. Two possible explanations proposed by researchers are that Native American students resist “colonial” education instead of viewing it as a path to success (Ogbu, 1995), and that poor performance is due to cultural differences between home and school (Reyhner, 1992).

Additional research on dropouts of Native American students indicate that students do not persist in school because they do not see the relevance of what is being taught and they perceive their teachers to be uncaring. The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force reported that Native American students are faced with an “unfriendly school climate that fails to promote appropriate academic, social, cultural, and spiritual development among many Native students (INAR, 1991, p. 7). The task force recommended that teachers of Native students should have



special training and stated, “Schools that respect and support a student’s language and culture are significantly more successful in educating those students (INAR, 1991, p 16).

Reyhner and Eder (2017) have suggested that teachers must overcome their students’ resistance to education and master the art of intercultural communication to be successful educators. Factors that can improve outcomes include cultural and linguistic incorporation, community involvement, experiential and interactive teaching (Cummins, 1992). Successful educators should learn as much as they can about the tribal customs and beliefs of the students they teach while being culturally sensitive and respectful (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Fedullo, 1992).

Educational practices such as utilizing outcomes assessment and incorporating state and national standards can be detrimental to Native American students. As previously discussed, traditional Western research methods and standardized tests do not sufficiently represent minority populations (Helms, 2007). Underhill and Beatty noted that “standardized tests of intelligence are not measures of Native ability but of cultural experience” (1944, p. 2). If students perform poorly, they risk being held back a grade, being placed into non-college bound classes, or prevented from graduating.

There currently exists two attitudes toward schooling in Native communities – the rejection of schooling because it destroys culture and the view that schooling is the only way Native Americans can protect their lands, communities, and traditions (Prakash & Esteva, 1998; Enos, 2002). Kincheloe & Steinberg (2008) have argued that schooling is foundational to advancing the opportunities of Native American populations while Deloria (2003) has indicated schooling is central to obtaining civil rights (2003). Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) have suggested that education and schooling be braided together to help build and sustain the well-

being of Indigenous students, families, and nations. Instead of best practices, they presented the notion of promising practices that “honor language and culture within the schooling practice; explicitly state the possibility and necessity of achieving successful schooling practices without sacrificing ties to language and culture; set high expectations in both schooling and education; believe in the possibilities for the student; and remain committed to justice” (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018, p. 91). Reyhner and Eder (2017) have tasked educators with advocating for students and incorporating teaching methods that promote place, community, and culture. Educators should protect Native students from culturally insensitive material including textbooks, curricula, and tests while incorporating methods and curricula that promote Native knowledge (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

### **Native American Higher Education**

There is a significant lack of research on the Native American experience in higher education, and historical literature has focused on the boarding school experience. According to Tippeconic, Lowe, and McClellan (2005), this historical and contemporary lack of focus on Native American students in higher education further marginalizes them within academia and results in the perpetuation of underrepresentation in the literature. In the limited research that has been conducted on Native American students, the main theme that has emerged is that they are the “least successful” group in higher education settings (Saggio, 2004).

Reyhner and Eder (2017) have noted that obtaining higher education can be too traumatic and expensive for Native American students as it requires them to leave their close-knit, Native American communities for large, impersonal colleges and universities. Additionally, students may be unprepared for the coursework. Many students are unsuccessful in their high school studies and are not encouraged by their teachers to pursue higher education. Regarding college

preparation, Deyhle quoted one student as saying, “It was just like they [teachers] put us aside, us Indians. They didn’t tell us nothing about careers or things to do after high school. They didn’t encourage us to go to college. They just took care of the white students. They just wanted to get rid of the Indians” (1992, 24-25).

Researchers have found that Native Americans students often feel isolated on college campuses and that the overall structure of higher education institutions is of a “White campus” that is hostile toward Native American students (Benjamin et al., 1993, p. 13; Jackson et al., 2003). This may result in Native American students being wary of disclosing their cultural identity due to fear of surveillance. Brayboy (2004) stated that Native American students attempt to avoid surveillance by using strategies to make themselves less visible in order to minimize oppression. Surveillance can be conscious or unconscious actions of the dominant group to control the actions of the non-dominant group (Brayboy, 2004). Examples of surveillance in higher education can be assuming Native American students leverage their tribal identity for financial gain, placing the student in the position to educate their peers about their tribe or Native American issues, or ignoring the student’s cultural heritage altogether. These actions further alienate Native American students and reinforce the power of the dominant group.

### **Tribal Critical Race Theory**

In this theoretical section, the researcher will attempt to enumerate many of the problems inherent in the relationship between the White educational system and Native American students. The researcher can also provide an insider perspective having witnessed many of these problems both as an Indigenous Mexican American student, and as an educator in a higher education institution teaching Native American students. Tribal Critical Race Theory provides an excellent basis for understanding many Native American students’ psychological experience in post-

secondary education. The theory focuses on epistemological and ontological issues that Native Americans are confronted with when interacting with White institutions (Brayboy, 2005). For Native Americans, the structural relationship between White institutions and tribal people is best conceptualized by the Settler/Savage Theory (Deloria, 1969; Hartmann et al., 2019). This theory has been used to delineate subtle and profound forms of violence enacted upon Native Americans. It posits that the settler/savage relationship is a non-relationship because Native Americans are not given the respect of their cultural capital (Deloria, 1969). Euro-White society oppresses and tears away the peoplehood of Native Americans, recreating them as “savages.” This means that Native American students are expected to “become White” in order to assimilate into the White institution (Pewewardy et al., 2018). Relationship is critical to the success of counseling yet, according to Tribal Critical Race Theory, the relationship is near impossible to achieve between a white person and Native American (Robbins, 2002). This is because Native American students must speak in English, must accept Euro-Western epistemological approaches such as quantitative research as superior to other ways of knowing, must navigate an alienated relationship from their land, and must accept a White meritorious perspective concerning success (Cross et al., 2019).

There is a paradigm struggle between those who do and do not subscribe to Eurocentric assumptions that drive Western conceptions of knowledge. Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) have stated that colonization within American society subverts the right of Native Americans to autonomy, sovereignty, self-determination, and self-identity. They have described that racism and white supremacy continue to be normalized within American society and that colonization of Native American communities and their cultures, languages, and identities continues in present times through modern-day “civilizing” efforts. They have argued that imperialistic and

capitalistic legislation, in the name of Manifest Destiny, stole land from Native American communities, dispossessed them of life sustaining crops, and their spiritualities (Brayboy and Lomawaima, 2018).

Tribal Critical Race Theory seeks to reclaim and assert tribal rights to sovereignty through self-identification, self-determination, and autonomy. It aims to challenge Euro Western concepts of power, culture, and knowledge by examining them through a Native American lens. Decolonization must occur by challenging the basic assumptions of societal structure, knowledge base, and power dynamics (Robbins et al., 2020). This includes challenging social institutions that are imbued with racism, oppression, and white supremacy.

Tribal Critical Race Theory attempts to balance cultural knowledge and academic knowledge for survival. Power emerges from these knowledges as Native American individuals and communities achieve sovereignty in order to define for themselves their place in the world and their traditions (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018). Tribal Critical Race Theory critiques assimilatory education practices and promotes culturally responsive schooling practices which maintain Native American cultural integrity. It is of particular importance to this research study that Native American experiences are delineated from those of other minority groups to maintain cultural integrity. While other groups experience racism and exclusion, they have separate ontological identities. For example, Wilderson (2006) explains that slavery is ontological and an inseparable element of Black identity, just as genocide is essential to the ontology of Native Americans. Generalizations do not allow for reporting of data in a way that is meaningful or truthful. Further, making generalizations between minority cultures perpetuates identity erasure and ontological death.

Settler Colonialism privileges Western epistemologies and ontologies at the expense of Native American knowledges, languages, and identities. Schools became the tools through which Native American youth were assimilated into Western culture. Current American education policies perpetuate assimilatory schooling practices and a deficit model of schooling for Native American students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Native American youth are often prevented from participating fully in many school-based extra-curricular activities, and their cultural knowledges are often neglected. Therefore, the development of their unique cultural and literate identities is inhibited (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002). Many Native American scholars and their allies have argued that Native American languages, knowledges, and ways of knowing should be valued by and integrated into the Western systems of education.

Native American youth are often forced to abandon their cultures and identities in the classroom to have the opportunity to be considered academically successful. This is because American education policies favor practices of the dominant culture over Native American practices. McCarty and Lee (2014) have stated that American Educational systems often “privilege a single monolingual and monocultural standard” (p. 119). Because their world views often do not align with those considered to be standard, Native American youth do not have an equal opportunity to attain skills at the same level as their white peers (McCarty & Lee, 2014).

Educational reform movements have failed to subvert assimilation practices because they require all students to achieve proficiency in Western academics. Deyhle and Swisher (1997) have stated that insisting that Native American youth assimilate into Western culture was the foundation of the boarding school system and that the instruction associated with these schools “required becoming ‘White’” (p. 115). Additionally, they have argued that these assimilatory educational practices are “still evident in teachers’ beliefs, pedagogy, and curricula” (Deyhle &

Swisher, 1997, p. 116). Requiring Native American students to become White and then separating them from their cultures, their languages and ways of knowing, and their identities has had a devastating effect on individuals as well as Native cultures and communities.

Because Native American knowledges were deemed inferior, colonizers tried to eradicate Native American knowledges through assimilatory practices and to replace them with dominant mainstream culture. Forcibly alienating Native American youth from their languages and cultures decimated their identities and communities (Deloria et al., 2018; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018.) Language reclamation and revitalization, as well as culturally responsive literacy instruction, must be at the forefront of Native American youth education. They must be allowed and encouraged to reconnect with their heritages and traditions to secure a relevant and equitable education (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014).

McCarty and Lee (2014) have argued that “promising practices” require “educators...to make a conscious decision to nurture Native American knowledge, dignity, identity, and integrity by making a direct change in school philosophy, pedagogy, and practice” (p.22). Implementing promising practices hopes to promote equality and diversity in education for Native American students. It challenges and revises schooling practices which maintain the colonizer’s institutionalized racist and discriminatory agenda. Promising approaches highlight the need for an intimate comprehension of and connection between in-school and out-of-school literacies and literacy practices so that Native American students can develop their cultural identities.

## **Chapter 3: Methods**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Dominant research approaches and paradigms have been tied to Colonialism and are insensitive and unresponsive to indigenous knowledge. The best practices for research with Native American students should include analysis and interpretation of the data that occurs within the context of Native American culture. The research should inform and support without further damaging and stigmatizing (Herron, et al., 2021). This study is grounded in a phenomenological epistemological framework and assumes “truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Thus, this research study is conducted and interpreted with the belief that an individual’s mind creates and constructs meaning from its surrounding and that “there is no meaning without the mind” (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8-9). It is assumed that every individual holds a unique view of the world based on their own personal lived experiences. It is further assumed that that no two individuals can share the same view, even when sharing the same experience, as each person’s view is influenced by a number of factors. It is not the goal of the research to find an absolute reality; rather it is to allow participants to discuss their lived experiences and subjective perceptions. A phenomenological approach allows subjective meanings to emerge and focuses on the unique conceptualizations held by the participants.

In an attempt to analyze the data as objectively as possible, the primary researcher was attentive to her own subjective impressions while respecting the subjective expressions of the participants. In this way, the researcher employed “subjective-objectivity.” This study is partly heuristic in nature as there is a shared experience with other participants. Because the researcher has the personal experience of being an educator in a university setting, she has an intense interest in the experience associated with the phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2009).



To address a lack of focus that can occur in phenomenological research as a result of participants' divergent views, the researcher searched for relevant and appropriate similarities and contrasts between the participant's responses. To achieve this, the researcher carefully reviewed the data for themes and subthemes. To allow for greater objectivity, the primary researcher then triangulated coding with a secondary researcher.

This study is conducted based on three philosophical assumptions of phenomenological qualitative research. First, it is assumed that participants consciously perceive and experience the relevant phenomena (Van Manen, 1999). Second, it is assumed that the researcher will describe and interpret the lived experiences related to the relevant phenomena rather than analyze and explain these experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Third, it is assumed that each participant will uniquely construe their own realities and experiences, formulating and fostering an interpretivist-constructivistic paradigm. Finally, it is assumed that the researcher will create complex and meaningful data through her efforts to understand and describe the lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2012).

### **Indigenous Methodology Framework**

Because the focus of this study is the lived experience of Native American students, the Indigenous Methodology Framework is used to ensure that the research is culturally sensitive and privileges an Indigenous perspective. Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchison, and Sookraj (2009) have described this framework as rejecting research on Indigenous communities that employs "positivistic, reductionist, and objectivist research rationales" and instead focuses on the indigenous experience. They have suggested the need for fusion between Indigenous Methodology, Participatory Action Research and White Studies. Participant Action Research complements Indigenous Methodology by providing a framework that challenges the historical

privileging of Western science that emphasizes objectivity and instead emphasizes social construction of knowledge and multiple ways of knowing (Evans et al., 2009). Similarly, White Studies have highlighted that whiteness has served as the hidden “way of life” by which other cultures are measured. With this in mind, the primary researcher chose to use a qualitative research design that would allow participants their own voice in describing their experiences instead of relying on flawed questionnaires that are often not normed with Native American participants. These Western approaches to research, including standardized assessment tools, use a distorted process to define knowledge and truth (Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Kincheloe & Stienberg, 2008). It is important to note that this methodology is not intended to reject Western research methods or conventional notions of psychology, but rather provide a basis from which meaning can be derived outside of traditional constructs. By using constructed knowledge from Native American participants, this study can better elicit new and unique perspectives of a psychological phenomenon than using traditional Western methodologies (Anderson & Braud, 1998).

### **Research Design**

This is a qualitative research study with the purpose of exploring, understanding, and describing the experiences of Native American students. The design and development of studies on Native Americans should be culturally informed by Native American values and epistemologies, and data collection should be conducted in culturally relevant ways (Wallerstein, 2019). The researcher chose qualitative methodology because it is culturally relevant to this study and allows deeper understanding and insight into the lived experiences of individuals by relying on the individual’s subjective report of those experiences (Kelly, 2009). Further, this methodology

allows the researcher to explore the individual perspectives and worldviews of the participants being studied (Merriam, 1998).

In qualitative research, researchers use interpretive techniques designed to describe, decode, translate, and identify meaningful themes described by individual interviewees. The goal is to identify and examine the meanings of naturally occurring phenomena in the social world with the assumption that meaning is constructed by individuals as they engage with and interpret their world.

This study involves the collection, organization, and analysis of data using a general qualitative design. The design of this study adheres to the following steps: 1) The researcher explores the available literature about a specific topic and identify a problem, 2) The researcher identifies a gap in the literature and provide a justification for why the study is important with a rationale for the current study, 3) The researcher considers the how, what, and why questions regarding the topic in order to specify a purpose for the study, 4) The researcher identifies a small number of participants who might offer information related to the study, 5) While analyzing and interpreting the data, the researcher attempts to consider information provided by the interview in an objective fashion without imposing meaning, and 6) The researcher engages in reflexivity to counter natural biases when writing the report and providing an evaluation of the work (Crotty, 1998).

Data collected from participant interviews was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Data was then coded to reflect significant statements and beliefs related to the topic of the collegiate experience. Coded data was grouped into larger categories based on common elements, forming themes through which the results of this study is organized and presented.

### **Data Sources**

Data was collected from group interviews. The researcher chose a group modality because it is considered the most advantageous form of interviewing when the interactions among participants will likely yield the best information, when participants are similar and cooperative with one another, and when participants might be hesitant to provide information in a one-on-one interview (Creswell, 2013; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1988; Steward & Shamdasain, 1990). It is also culturally relevant to this study as tribal values emphasize collectivism and the interdependence of all living things. Robbins et. al (2021) have argued that individuality does not exist in a collectivist culture, rather individuals are defined by their participation with others.

The researcher used the three-interview series model developed by Erving Seidman (2006). Three separate interviews were conducted with two groups of participants. The groups contained 3 female participants per group. Each interview was conducted in person by the primary researcher. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The purpose of the first interview was to establish the context of the participants' experiences. They were encouraged to discuss their experiences as a Native American student in a collegiate setting and to "narrate the context of their lives" (Seidman, 2006). The second interview focused on the "details of experience." At this time, participants were encouraged to relate detailed narrative events about their experiences. Finally, the third interview focused on the "meaning of experiences." This interview was based on the descriptions of context and delineated details discussed in the first two meetings. Its main purpose was to help participants frame and make meaning of their experiences.

A structured interview protocol was used with questions designed to solicit participants' thoughts and experiences (See Appendix C). The aim of qualitative interviewing was to uncover a particular type of data that provides depth and understanding concerning a particular lived

experience relevant to the current research. A semi-structured interview approach was utilized with the goal of gathering highly descriptive material with as much detail as possible. The researcher used open-ended interview questions to guide the interviews and to begin a discussion. It was anticipated that the open-ended nature of the questions would allow participants to respond in their own way (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2012).

Participant experiences were explored by the researcher asking clarifying or probing questions as the need presented (i.e., “could you say more about that” or “could you tell me what you mean by...”). This particular approach is concerned with obtaining as much illumination as possible about the meaning of the experience for the participants. These probing and rephrasing techniques were used to promote participant elaboration and to clarify responses (Bodgan & Biklen, 1992). Additionally non-directive probing techniques were used, including simple acknowledgements, minimal encouragers, and neutral follow-up questions when needed (Lincoln, 1985; Robbins et al, 2012).

The interviewer attempted to avoid “why” questions and instead utilized “what” or “how” questions to allow for a richer, fuller description of the experience. Interviewees were afforded the opportunity to volunteer additional information if they wished. It was hoped that the results of the interview process would reveal what is meaningful to the person, and that the researcher could characterize the meanings into themes that provide a representative description of the phenomenon.

The primary researcher used memo-writing throughout the interview process. Interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed by the primary researcher. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, they were assigned a number and identified as

“Participant” followed by their respective number. Data was stored on a password-protected flash drive. Interviewee information was deleted upon completion of the study.

To ensure informed consent, the interviewees were informed that the principal researcher is attempting to develop an understanding of Native American student identities and experiences by eliciting and analyzing 1) how they view their collegiate experiences, 2) how they conceptualize their Native American student identity, and 3) how culture influences participants’ views. Participants were given information for free counseling services available in their area.

The structure of the interview worked well and allowed for unique contributions from each participant. Within the two groups, the participants were well acquainted with each other. This allowed the interviews to flow like a discussion between friends. Participants seemed comfortable disclosing in front of their peers and engaged in turn-taking without much direction from the researcher. They were encouraging towards one another and reacted with empathy and supportive comments and gestures. The level of familiarity between the participants seemed to enhance the depth of their responses. In several instances, participants prompted each other and reminded other participants of a personal experience that might be relevant to share. It is likely that this level of trust and openness would have been difficult or impossible to achieve in one-on-one interviews, especially given the historical distrust of researchers and Westernized research methods. In fact, participants spoke openly of concerns with surveillance within educational institutions. It is possible that individual interviews may have triggered feelings of surveillance, especially if participants viewed the questioning as an interrogation. The researcher emphasized that the participants did not have to disclose beyond their comfort level. While it was not possible to keep each interview session’s focus from extending into other sessions, the first two sessions built a foundation for the last session where meaning was developed and discussed.

## **Participants**

Participants in this study were Native Americans who had engaged in some level of collegiate study. There was no requirement of degree completion so as not to limit participation in the study. It was potentially important to the study that the researcher did not create a selection bias of “successful” students. Allowing the participation of students who did not obtain a degree could possibly lead to the uncovering of important and relevant data.

Every participant was an enrolled member of their tribe; however, the participants are not identified by tribal membership in an effort to protect anonymity. This is to serve as a protective measure to prevent any retaliation that could result from their participation in the study.

Participants reported being members of the Cherokee, Kiowa, Pawnee, and Ponca tribes. All participants were female between the ages of 29 to 39. Education attained varied from “some college” at a 2-year institution to the completion of a graduate program. Institutions attended included Northern Oklahoma College, Northeastern State University, Northwestern Oklahoma State University, Rogers State University, and the University of Oklahoma.

To protect the confidentiality of the participants, they were assigned a number and identified as “Participant” followed by their respective number. Because research with Native Americans should be conducted in a culturally sensitive manner (Wallerstein, 2019), this method of identification was intentionally chosen over the use of pseudonyms. The use of a participant number eschews the harmful past practice of choosing new, “Christian” names for Native Americans that often took place in assimilatory boarding schools and resulted in identity erasure. Further, the use of traditional tribal names as pseudonyms would violate participant confidentiality by linking their responses to their respective tribes.

This study utilized purposeful and snowball sampling to obtain the necessary number of participants. The individuals were recruited from the primary researcher's existing social networks and through snowball sampling. It was hoped that snowball sampling and word-of-mouth recruitment would promote trust between the participants and researcher. This is particularly important when working with Native American participants due to historical distrust of Westernized research methods.

Participants in this study were given a consent form, which was reviewed with the interviewees and signed prior to beginning the interviews. Approval for this study was obtained from the University of Oklahoma's Institutional Review Board.

### **Data Management**

Data was collected using a digital voice recorder and stored on a password protected flash drive in a locked cabinet located in a locked office. Data transferred between researchers required a password to grant access and was only accessed on password protected computers. Printed materials and researcher memos were kept in a locked cabinet.

The primary researcher used memo-writing throughout the interview process. Interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed by the primary researcher. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, they were assigned a number and identified as "Participant" followed by their respective number. Data was stored on a password-protected flash drive. Interviewee information was deleted upon completion of the study.

### **Researchers**

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) have asserted that the researcher exists as a part of the world he or she studies. This notion is particularly salient in this research study as both researchers are educators and are invested in research with various Native American tribes. As



this is a qualitative methodological study that is partly heuristic in nature, it is important to review the backgrounds and perspectives of the researchers completing the data collection and analysis. This study used one primary researcher to gather data and a secondary researcher to assist in analyzing data and minimizing researcher bias. In this way, the researchers are the primary instruments in the collection of data.

The primary researcher is a doctoral student in a counseling psychology program and has also been a professor of psychology at a regional university. She is dedicated to research that promotes positive educational experiences for Native American students. The primary researcher has worked for the Muskogee Creek Nation to collect data for a SAMSHA-funded grant and has also provided psychological services to Native American clients in various settings. The primary researcher is Latinx with indigenous ancestry. She identifies as an Indigenous Mexican American female.

The secondary researcher is a member of the Cherokee Nation who identifies as a Cherokee/Choctaw male. He is a professor of psychology at a state university and an active member of his tribe. Throughout his life, he has actively participated in the ceremonies of his own tribe as well as other tribes. He has been a part of a large number of research projects involving Native American cultures and has added substantially to this body of literature. The secondary researcher's cultural background places him in an invested role, which could result in a more subjective view of the data gathered from Native American people.

Because the researchers' invested roles can pose a threat of interfering with the interpretation of the data, the researchers used bracketing as a means to address such potential interference. Bracketing consisted of consultation between the primary and secondary researcher to minimize any possibility that qualities are assigned to the data based on researcher bias. This

process is intended to avoid interjecting the qualities seen out of a desired inference rather than due to an objective identification of the phenomena (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Researcher bias was also counteracted by providing quotes to allow the participants to describe experiences in their own words. A statement regarding subjectivity can be found in Appendix A.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers used a generic thematic analysis to reduce the individual interview transcripts into themes that reflect the context of the transcripts (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The transcripts of the interviews were read and examined independently by each researcher. The researchers coded specific remarks in the transcripts that included significant statements, meanings, themes, and descriptions. The researchers met for debriefing sessions to corroborate findings and combine independently formed themes. A high level of agreement between researchers was needed to continue data analysis. This investigator triangulation was used to establish the trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity of the study.

Refined codes were then compared, contrasted, and combined into similar patterns, which created broad and more abstract categories. Categories were formulated into meanings and the meanings were developed into themes. When the researchers reached a point where new information no longer provided further insight, the categories and themes were deemed saturated. These categories and themes are presented in the results and discussion of this report.

## Chapter 4: Results

After analyzing the transcripts, the researchers triangulated the data and agreed upon six primary themes. These themes were identified as Prejudice, Surveillance, Acculturation Stress, Ontological Death, Survivance, and Proximity. The comments below illuminate how the participants interacted with the educational system. They provide insight into the unique challenges experienced by Native American students, as well as how they were able to survive in institutions that were difficult to navigate and oftentimes outright hostile. Responses are reported in numerical order according to the assigned number of the participant unless it is otherwise noted that the supporting data is reported in conversation format.

### **Prejudice**

One common theme was the experience of prejudice in educational settings. Participants described an awareness that the American education system is steeped in white supremacy and lacks concern for Native American students. Pettifor (2001) indicates that most professional academicians are unintentionally racist and lack awareness of diversity and their own cultural bias. This is consistent with the results of this study as participants recounted instances of blatant prejudice and subtle microaggressions. Regardless of intent, the effect of these interactions was the same. Participants felt silenced and dehumanized. They entered into a ghostly existence that matched the erasure they experience.

Participants reported prejudice in the form of stereotyping, microaggressions, and discrimination. They discussed being misidentified or being asked “what are you?” or “where are you from?” These interactions were dehumanizing for the participants. They described feeling that others talked about them as if they did not exist because they were difficult to classify.

**Participant 1:** *I've been asked like, "what are you?" ...There was a girl down the hall, and she said, "so what is [she]? Is she black? Is she white? Mexican? I don't understand." And I just like closed my door. I'm pretty shy and quiet. So, I just shut my door and went and sat on my bed and was like "okay. That was awkward." I was very sheltered here. I grew up here and [it's] a lot more diverse and so it was just people would openly say things and it was just kinda, I don't know. I'd just keep it to myself. I didn't really think much about it. Just think it was awkward and go along with my day. But looking back, yeah, it's uncomfortable... I just I mean I don't I don't even know to myself what I look more like native or Mexican or something. But I know when I walk into a room like... I'm bigger and taller and brown and so you know people wonder. It comes up sometimes and it's just... I don't know it's kind of frustrating whenever... why that is a topic. You know like, "what are you?" Well, what does it matter? Like I'm proud to be Native American, but I don't like, you know, wear a headdress and go down the streets about it. But it's just, I'm proud of that but I don't know why that's always like the topic. What you are.*

**Participant 4:** *I had someone come up to me, and be like, "what are you?" and I'm like, "what do you mean, what am I?" And they're like, "you look exotic." And I was like, "ooooh, I'm exotic now!" I'm like, "I'm not exotic. I'm from here. I'm like the opposite of exotic." I just look at them like, "okay." They didn't know any better, I guess.*

Participants also described being required to educate their peers on Native American issues. They discussed that professors often think they are honoring the student and offering other students special information from an expert. In these cases, it is presumed the professor has good intentions; however, this is a common microaggression perpetuated against Native American students. Participants discussed that these conversations often lead to a focus on

prejudicial “facts” about Native American students that promote stereotypes. The following conversation occurred between participants in the second interview group:

**Participant 6:** *Sometimes we are put into this expert role. I think that's pretty common. I mean, I can remember classes we've been in because I've heard [another participant] share about her, you know, about Native American something. But that's very different than my tribe. You know, and so people do ask us about certain things. But it's just kind of like everything else, it varies. You know, her beliefs aren't the same as my beliefs or traditions or whatever... It's just hard to say, you know, to have that conversation when traditions are very different. You know, like if I say something, I'm just careful the way I say it. Like, “in my tribe... rather than saying ‘as a Native American’ ...” Because we can't speak for everyone. It's just not that simple. Because everyone has their own ways.*

**Participant 4:** *It's like a spokesperson for all native people, but I think a lot of it has to do with like lack of education. Maybe lack of exposure. Like, we can't speak for all natives because we're all different. So, it's like we might be one ethnicity but we're all different traditions and cultures. So, you have to educate people that it's not like only one Native American way.*

**Participant 6:** *Yeah, and oftentimes when they are talking about Native Americans, then it's not really multiculturalism. It's about statistics and alcoholism. And that's not something I personally deal with. So that's kind of hard to hear too... I'm not saying alcoholism isn't a problem. But you know, oftentimes, that would be the WHOLE conversation about Native issues. It automatically goes to alcoholism.*

**Participant 4:** *Not only that, but how true are their statistics? Because as Native people, we were not taught to talk to people that weren't Native. So how are they getting their statistics?*

*You know? Are you just getting like 1 tribe's 100 people out of so many? Or are you grabbing from different tribes? Different areas?*

One participant, who had initially sought a degree in theater, experienced prejudicial treatment during an audition because of her skin color. The participant explained that the play was set in rural Oklahoma, presumably around the time of White settlement. As a result of this interaction, she withdrew from the theater program and changed academic majors.

**Participant 3:** *I wanted to be an actress. So, my freshman year, like I just got there. And this girl's doing like her senior play, and we all were doing these read throughs, and like, I did good. Okay. And I knew I was going to get this part and my speech coach was there and was like "oh yeah, you got this. You got this." And so, they pull us all in there and they tell us who all got these roles and she pulled me aside and was like, "I'm sorry. I couldn't give you this part. You just don't look the part." And so, I was like super dark at this time because I was a lifeguard, I was always outside. You know? It was this country, Oklahoma-like play, and I was so mad, and I was so heartbroken. I was like, I have never experienced discrimination are you kidding me? Because I don't look this part? Because I don't look like the rest of this family? Like you're not going to cast me? Like, I did the best read-through. And that's why I quit the program. I was like screw this. I'm over it. Like, so, yeah, I was upset.*

Another participant expressed feelings of powerlessness and isolation when a professor taught false information about Native American students that promoted prejudice and stereotypes. In this instance, she was forced into silent submission or risked being seen as a disruptive "savage" for challenging authority figures. She also disclosed an instance when a teacher belittled her in elementary school.

**Participant 4:** *I had a professor... he was very negative and just that same stereotype of, “oh you're Native so your tribe paid for your whole schooling, and you get free health care and free this and free that.” And I was like, “not really.” It was just kind of like a negative-type attitude towards Natives and how they get free assistance from the government. Which is not the case at all... He [said] it in front of the class. In front of everybody, and it wasn't with me. It was something to do with whatever he was talking about with history or something... He was saying in front of the class, like “Oh, you Natives just get free education and free health care and free this and that.” ... I was the only Native in there... I remember another time I got singled out by a teacher. I remember that she kept calling on me and asking me things, and I was really shy. I was embarrassed I guess, and I didn't know the answer to one of the questions that she asked me, and she like belittled me in front of the class. She stood over me at my desk and yelled at me until I was crying and after that I just kind of... this is the thing that a lot of people think about like, whenever you're a Native American student like what happens is kids will shut down. We talk about it a lot; how Native American students will shut down after they've been discriminated against. They'll shut down and they won't participate, they won't talk, and that's kind of what I did. You're viewed as, the teachers look at you like you're lazy. You weren't going to do your work. I don't know, it was like they just didn't think you were going to be smart enough.*

### **Surveillance**

Surveillance occurs when a dominant group attempts to control the actions of a non-dominant group (Brayboy, 2004). Participants described an awareness of surveillance on their college campuses and disclosed that there was significant risk to speaking their truth about being Native American. They reported feeling that they would have been policed if they affirmed their cultural differences or spoke out about prejudice. In these instances, oppressive practices went

unchecked because the participants were paralyzed into silence. Just as described in the literature, Native American students are forced to die to their Native selves and “become White” in order to assimilate into White educational systems (Pewewardy et al., 2018). They are faced with the dilemma of being stripped of their valuable cultural capital or else be looked upon as “savages.”

**Participant 1:** *I was over there by myself. Didn't know anyone. I was kind of just thrown over there, so I didn't trust anybody.*

**Participant 2:** *I would not have felt that comfortable [talking about prejudice]. It's too small of a campus.*

**Participant 4:** *We still kind of get some discriminatory stuff that happens to us. So, I think maybe in my 18-year-old-self in school, I wouldn't have said anything, 'cause with that incident that I had with that teacher... I didn't say anything. I just totally, well he lost all my respect, and I didn't wanna go to school there anymore. So, I didn't feel like there was anybody there that I could really go to because it was such a little school... so, I didn't say anything then.*

Participants also discussed minimizing parts of themselves to avoid negative experiences associated with their Native American identity. As Brayboy (2004) noted, Native American students attempt to avoid surveillance by making themselves less visible. In some instances, participants engaged in code-switching to survive and thrive in White structures, including educational institutions. They maintained dual identities and would change their speech, mannerisms, expressions, and even their attire because they did not feel safe to portray their real selves while interacting within the White education system. This was at the expense of their true cultural identities. Once they returned home, they attempted to switch back the best they could to re-embodiment their Native identities.



**Participant 4:** *As a more, like, identifiable Native American... you kind of get used to that. You kind of get used to your issues or whatever your family went through, or you've went through is always kind of pushed to the side. It's something that, I mean, that's what I've dealt with growing up even around here. It's just your issues don't matter, 'cause you're one person compared to all these others. So, you're, you know, your issues isn't the same. It's different and a lot of people don't know how to respond to it. The way that my grandma used to tell us whenever we were growing up is that we had to live in two worlds. We had to live in the more dominate Caucasian, where we had to act think and do as they do. And then we have our culture, our world, that we keep at home. And that's what we are, truly. That's who we are but we must act a certain way to get somewhere in life. That's what was explained to me... I would say it's two identities. You gotta live in the White world, and you need to live in the Native world. Sometimes they collide and you have to be able to... Figure it out. Yeah, it's always adjusting.*

One participant shared that her name holds great personal, familial, and tribal meaning to her. However, when she presents it in the non-Native world, it becomes problematic because there are alternate ways of pronouncing it in English. She must explain the pronunciation when meeting new professors and during class introductions. In these instances, she experiences pressure to assimilate and allow the English pronunciation because she feels it would be easier for everyone. While she is immensely proud of her name, she is embarrassed to repeatedly have this interaction in front of her peers. She described feeling both jealous of her peers who are not burdened with a long explanation for their name and guilty for taking up others' time explaining her name and her identity.

**Participant 3:** *I couldn't keep [my Native American identity] hidden because of my name... They're like, "I don't wanna butcher your name. So, what is it?" ... I mean, I just I don't want to*

*take up a whole lot of time. Like, I don't feel like it's that important. Like, "Just, whichever. Just pick one. Please don't make me pick one." Like, "I don't care. Whatever you feel comfortable with" ... I'm kind of jealous [of other students]. Like, oh my gosh, why do I have to go through all of this? But I just try to get through it really fast, so I don't take up too much time. Like, "Ugh, this again? I know you guys have already heard it. Sorry."*

### **Acculturation Stress**

Reynher and Eder (2017) have noted that it can be traumatic for Native American students to leave their families and communities to obtain higher education. The experience can feel isolating as the structure of higher education institutions is of a "White campus" that is hostile toward Native American students (Benjamin et al., 1993, p. 13; Jackson et al., 2003). Participant responses conveyed that they were acutely aware of the small number of Native American students on campus. They described feeling that they did not matter enough to be taken seriously, and they lacked the power to challenge a White system that excludes them. Participants vividly expressed experiencing acculturation stress as they attempted to navigate the education system, encountered difficulty accessing necessary resources, and struggled with adjusting to the college environment.

**Participant 2:** *That's kind of difficult to do, too. Like, it's hard to get everything. Like, in \*town\*, where everybody is. Regular students, just like in elementary school, they get vouchers and get like their school clothes paid for and other stuff paid for. But like out here, we're enough removed that we really don't connect with them, but they don't have anywhere special for us here. So, there's no easy way to connect. It might be easier now with technology, but I never found it easy to do.*

**Participant 3:** *Well, like, financial aid was [a barrier] ... And people told me, just like go on the website and check and apply for things myself. But they weren't helping you.*

Participants also described experiencing culture shock as a result of loss of place. This was true even for Native Americans who were not raised with their tribal traditions and ceremonies. Even though they did not grow up on their tribal lands, their families recreated communal settings which were in stark contrast to the college environment. Participants described experiencing isolation and despair when separated from their homes. This echoes the sentiments of Native Americans who were sent to boarding schools and described the experiences as leaving a “warm womb” and going “to a strange, cold place” (Fire & Erdoes, 1972).

**Participant 1:** *I had a hard time kinda being thrown out in the world. I was very shy and quiet at that time. I struggled a lot. And so, I just kept a lot of things, just kinda down inside.*

In one instance, a participant found that her family and community had no understanding of college environments and expectations. As Reyhner (1992) pointed out, cultural differences between home and school can cause poor performance and college attrition for Native American students. The participant described experiencing the feelings of isolation and despair that often result in Native American students leaving college.

**Participant 2:** *We have a big family, and we're all really close in age. All of us first cousins. There's like 13 of us and we just grew up like siblings... Our grandparents managed the apartments and we all lived in the apartments. So, like we all lived right there... we would do anything for each other. And being close enough to do that is what's important to me... but I don't think [my family] could really grasp or understand what the struggle was necessarily, but they wanted to be supportive. And it was just kinda this, “you've got this, go get em.” You know?*

*And they were trying. They didn't really understand what is happening exactly and I think that was the reason.*

### **Ontological Death**

Participants described flagrant instances of forced ontological deaths beginning in elementary school and occurring until their very last moments in college. This occurred when their Native American identities were ignored or erased entirely. The participants described feeling unseen and experiencing feelings of shame due to an assimilation for which they were not responsible. They were required to participate in Thanksgiving events as pilgrims and in land run reenactments as settlers. In these instances, participants were expected to lose their identities and become their oppressors. At their college graduation ceremonies, many participants were not permitted to wear their tribal regalia to showcase their Native American identity. They were forced to die to their Native selves in order to assimilate into the White culture of their institutions.

In one instance, a participant described experiencing an ontological death when her identity was not recognized. Her sports team acknowledged and celebrated a fellow teammate's Native American heritage, but not hers. She described that her teammate was active in her tribal culture, and this made it easy for the team to acknowledge her. However, the team did not acknowledge the participant's Native American identity even though she was othered regularly for having brown skin. Throughout the interviews, this participant considered that she was not as connected to her tribal culture. She suggested she did not know enough of her heritage for it to stand out and be acknowledged, unlike her teammate who participated in tribal traditions. She described that she would have felt supported had her team or college acknowledged her heritage.

**Participant 1:** *We had a girl that was very active in her tribal things, and she would tribal dress and she dance, and I don't remember what it was because it was so long ago. But like in the gym, they had the drums, and they did like a ceremony type of thing. I remember that and she was in it, so all of the basketball team had to go and support her. That kind of thing. I think they embraced it some over there... I was part of it because I was a teammate. I wasn't involved in anything. I wasn't made aware of anything.*

Similarly, other participants discussed that their educational institutions did not support or acknowledge their Native American identity. These institutions would not allow Native American regalia during graduation ceremonies. During a time of celebration, these participants were forced to die to their Native American identities.

**Participant 6:** *I guess I would say that they don't [support Native American identity]. I know that a lot of schools don't allow like regalia on the cap and gown...some schools won't let you put anything on your hat, on your cap.*

Participants reported another type of ontological death when their Native American identities were erased altogether. They described this happening often, across all levels of the educational system. They discussed being forced to play the role of pilgrims at Thanksgiving and settlers in land run reenactments, an event where land was stolen from Native Americans who had been relocated to Oklahoma. In these instances, participants were required to accept a white-washed version of history and become the oppressors.

**Participant 2:** *I think we all had to be [settlers]... It's pretty whitewashed... Even in college they don't really touch on it. I never heard about it any of my history classes. It's kind of ignored or if it's mention at all, it's brushed over... It's like the Trail of Tears. It started here. It went here. It's this many miles. Like, you know? It's not really, you really don't learn from it at all.*

**Participant 3:** *Doing the land run, it seemed like so much fun. Like, my dad helped me build this wagon and I wore this Pilgrim outfit. I was a settler... Yeah everybody had to be settlers... But reflecting on that as an adult with more awareness of Native American identity and the historical context, dude it sucked... And looking at how much land [Native Americans] were actually given, and this is so crappy. They keep taking it away or they'll promise them this land, and then they'll like build pipelines on it. And I just get so discouraged by it because the government has made so many promises, and they just keep breaking them and, in our schools, in our elementary school, we're still telling kids that it's OK to stake your claim on other people's lands. Yeah, they don't teach us our history like if we want to know our history we have to go out and seek it out. If it's not passed down through your family... And white students don't learn about that, problematic behaviors, so then they think there is no problems which kind of leads to perceiving Native Americans as these leather clad individuals on horses playing you know like Cowboys and Indians, instead of like a real-life people who currently exist in our modern world.*

**Participant 4:** *I don't feel like they let it be known, I guess, about Native Americans at the school. It's not like they're like, oh we got so much Native American population. I don't remember hearing anything like that or having any clubs or anything to do with Native Americans... I thought it was funny now that I look back at it. I remember in first grade when we were learning about the pilgrims and Indians and stuff around Thanksgiving. I wanted to be an Indian so bad and they would not give me the Indian hat. They gave me the Pilgrim hat. I remember that now, and I'm like and I had to wear the stupid Pilgrim hat. I remember as a little girl, like why couldn't I be native? Like, I'm native already! And I'm wondering if they did that on purpose just to like not MAKE me the native, because I am Native. These things in school like glamorize a white-washed view of Natives, but I'm like a real living breathing Native person but*

*they're making me a pilgrim. And I try to always give them the benefit of the doubt. Like, maybe they just didn't want me to be singled out. Maybe they didn't want to be like, "Oh, you're the Indian so you're gonna wear the Indian stuff." It could have been that or it could have been, you know, in their colonized minds – "we're going to make her White." 'Cause I was the only native kid in school.*

One participant described being raised without tradition but connecting with tribal practices as an adult. Another participant experienced identity erasure because her mom was adopted outside of her Native American family and tribe. She disclosed feeling regret that she was not raised with her tribal traditions. She reported that she has now reconnected with her Native American family and has since participated in her tribal traditions.

**Participant 4:** *My mom and them grew up around the tradition and knew some of the language but they're not fluent speakers and they were never put in powwow. Which my grandma's sisters didn't think very highly of that, just because that was something that we did. And my grandma just didn't for whatever reason. She just didn't put us in there. And then with me and my cousins, we don't know language. I mean we know some of the words, like if somebody's talking, like there's words that we can pick out just from being around it. But just nothing that we would feel to speak fluently or anything. And then we didn't do any powwows or anything, but that's something that I have been learning on my own. Just doing different things 'cause I work with the tribe now, so I've been learning that.*

**Participant 5:** *To be honest I don't know a whole lot about my tribe just because my mom was adopted, and she didn't find her birth family until about maybe 12 or 13 years ago and I've only met them in person one time. I went to their powwow, and it was about probably 10 years ago, but I'm friends with all of them like on Facebook and stuff. They helped me get enrolled and you*

*know registered with the tribe. They're like really great people but when I went to the pow wow that was really like my first experience with like the Native American culture and like the food and the music. And, you know, I've never been to a powwow before, so I don't have a whole lot of experience with them, and I didn't grow up in the culture or anything like that.*

While feelings of identity loss resulted from a variety of experiences within the educational system, it was especially painful for participants when they felt disconnected from other Native Americans. Some participants described feeling different from other Native Americans because they have lighter skin and eyes. In these instances, participants described experiencing horizontal oppression. This occurs when Native Americans are ostracized or punished for not appearing Native “enough.” These participants described existing in an in-between state where they are not fully accepted by because they are not easily recognized as being Native American. One participant expressed wishing she looked more like her grandpa and sister. Another participant disclosed that her mother was shunned for having a relationship with her father, a white man. These participants experience ontological death because others, even Native Americans, may not acknowledge their Native American identity.

**Participant 2:** *I think I was always kind of jealous I didn't look more like them... I think we just got used to growing up here like we said earlier. Like we're all cousins and, you know, everybody just knows who you are 'cause like this is such a tiny town and like everybody does know everybody. But I remember when I met [my sister's friend's] family. I walked in and they're all staring at me, and I was like why are they looking at me. And they're like, you didn't tell us she was white.*



**Participant 5:** *I don't think I'm really viewed as Native. My mom, she was she was put up for adoption because her mother had an affair with a white man. And so, she was kind of shunned and her mom was like kind of forced to give her up for adoption.*

**Participant 6:** *I do have colored eyes. I guess I don't think about that a lot. Some people don't even know that I'm Native. They think that I'm white. My husband looks Native American, and people always talk Spanish to him.*

### **Survivance**

A common theme in the participants' responses was that of survivance to avoid victimry. This concept was first introduced by Gerald Vizenor (1999), an Anishinaabe cultural theorist. He explained that "survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry." The term is deliberately imprecise but is often used to describe an act of survival that actively resists oppression (Vizenor, 2008).

In some instances, participants internalized White values and rationalized overt acts of oppression. Despite noting several instances of prejudicial and hostile treatment by their educators and fellow peers, participants minimized their struggles and expressed internalized notions that prejudice and discrimination can be explained in socio-economic terms. Participants commented that they didn't have it "as bad" as other people, and they described feeling guilty when disclosing struggles they experienced.

**Participant 1:** *I just feel like some of my stuff is just so not a big deal... Some people have like really bad issues, really bad situations. And mine just seems so minimal. It really shouldn't even bother me. It's not a big deal...*

**Participant 3:** *I don't think I experience historical trauma as severe as other people do. I had a pretty decent upbringing. Like, we never needed for anything. Our family was all very supportive, and I wouldn't, I've never gone to counseling for that... 'cause I did have it pretty easy too... when you compare it to other people.*

Some participants described instances in which they actively resisted oppressive and prejudicial treatment, including the use of silence as described by the participant who refused to participate after being belittled by her teacher. Another participant recalled a time she was called racial slurs by her friends. She explained that the friends attempted to rationalize the behavior because her cousin did not care when they called her the same names. Additionally, her cousin rationalized the behavior as “just joking.” Despite these rationalizations, the participant engaged in a courageous act of resistance against racism and sexism.

**Participant 1:** *I know the boys would tease and would say stuff to [my cousin] about being a dirty Indian or just call her spick and that kind of thing. And she was she was fine with it. She's like, “oh they're just joking” but they wouldn't really do it to me... but then one time they directed it towards me, and I was just like, “what?!” It's like, “you don't talk to me like that.” And they're like, “well [she] lets us do that with her,” and I'm like, “I don't like that. Why would you say that to me? That's how you look at me?” And I was very just... it shocked me really. That they would even say some of those words and that they're saying [she] was fine with it. 'Cause she had a lot of guy friends, and I was not fine with it... I was very uncomfortable and then I was shocked that they like looked at me like that or even categorized me like that. Like, “That's how you see me? I thought I was just one of y'all.”*

Participants also discussed acts of survivance in their families. One participant's grandmother attended Chilocco Indian School and spoke her language even though it was not

allowed. Her family also continues to keep a tribal tradition secret which aids in its survival and vitality.

**Participant 4:** *My grandma... she did go to Chilocco Indian school. She learned, actually while she was there, she learned how to speak [two other tribal languages] even though they were beat during the time, if they did anything Native at the time, they were beat. But she did learn [two other tribal languages] while she was there. She said that it was from her two friends and then she taught them [our language] too. My grandma was a fluent speaker. They did a lot of beadwork and they did a lot of quilts. My family is known for doing star quilts, and it's a certain technique that's learned through the family that's passed down. And in our tribe, nobody else is allowed to use it unless you get permission from those people. My aunt still does them, but she hasn't taught any of us to do them yet, but she still does them. She makes them for all of the new babies that come in.*

Another participant demonstrated survivance by overcoming the negative inscription of being seen as a drug and alcohol user. She described being able to transcend this stereotype with the help of a caring family member and a scholarship from her tribe.

**Participant 5:** *I was the first one who ever, you know, went to college and got as far as I did. Everybody was really skeptical at first because I have a really bad past. I was a drug addict for a long time and so when I got clean, I decided I wanted to help people who struggle with addiction too. I was really bad and so nobody really believed in me or thought that I could do it... I didn't have a lot of encouragement at first. But I did get a little bit of help from my tribe 'cause I think I got on the rolls in like 2009 or 2011 or something somewhere around there. And I actually got like a like a scholarship from them. I had to write in and just talk to them, but my aunt she works*

*for the tribe. And so, she kind of she helped me, kind of guided me into what to do, so that was pretty helpful like for starting out.*

Participants also described participating in public acts of resistance. For example, they discussed re-costuming White education to make it more relevant and significant to Native Americans. In these instances, participants wore their regalia to graduation ceremonies and participated in Native American celebrations with other students.

**Participant 4:** *Yeah, at my graduation... it was a good ceremony because my grandma's dad was, I don't know what you would call it. But he had made a song, and a lot of the guys would make songs that were theirs. And that's another thing that's passed down in family and that nobody can use that unless they have permission. Or unless it becomes a song that everybody could use. Like, if they let people use it. And they played one of the songs that my grandpa had composed there at the ceremony. And my grandma was like super excited and super happy... and just graduating again and just being able to actually wear my cap that was beaded and, you know, my plume that's traditional.*

**Participant 6:** *I had my cap beaded...we wore beaded caps and feathers and stuff like that.*

### **Proximity**

Participants considered the importance of proximity to both Native people and places. They discussed the impact of having Native American mentors and role models in the education system. As Deloria (2003) noted, Native Americans have come to experience a sense of shared culture, largely in response to the collective experience of Colonialism and oppression by the Euro-Western world. Horne and Macbeth (1988) recounted experiences from boarding schools that included a sense of community and the ability to survive culturally by banding together. Similarly, participants in this study discussed the importance of their relationships with other

Native American people in the education system. One participant recalled a time she was called a racial slur in class. She described how meaningful it was that her teacher, who is also Native American, stood up for her.

**Participant 1:** *He called me a dirty Indian. "You're just a dirty Indian." Part of the project or something he didn't like what I was doing or something. I mean she stood up real quick and said, "That's a racial slur. You don't say that." And she sent him to the office. It was immediate. She was not OK she says, "I'm part Cherokee. You don't call people that." ...she was one of my favorite teachers. She really was. Yeah, I liked her a lot. That was definitely one of the moments I was like, wow. Somebody is sticking up for me. I like it. But she was just really, she was one of those that were really strict and really hard but like you just respect the heck out of them and just how she handled everything and the way she taught and just everything. I just really enjoyed and liked her. To this day, I just yeah, she's a really respectable lady.*

Participants also discussed the lack of Native American role models and the impact it had on their experiences. Many participants were first generation college students and did not have Native American role models with higher education. In such cases, opportunities were not visible as participants lacked the knowledge and resources that was so easily accessible to their white peers.

**Participant 2:** *I didn't have any [teachers] that were open about being Native. I didn't have any professors that were open about their identity at all. I think you just looked at them and just assumed they were white.*

**Participant 4:** *So, none of my family had any type of degree except my grandma had her LPN. And I wasn't really pushed to go to school either. It was just kind of like you either do or you don't. Whatever it's your decision. They never told me that I couldn't go or anything like that. I*

*made my decision I think whenever I was probably a sophomore, maybe junior. I can't really remember but before I didn't think that I could go to college... My dad barely graduated with like D's and my mom, she had some learning disabilities and like math and something else. So, she never went to college. She ended up being a teenage mom, so she didn't further hers. She just got her high school diploma and that was it. My brother dropped out of school when he was in 11th grade so there was like nobody, like for me to look at... And nobody told me how to fill out a college application. Nobody told me what to expect or anything. I just sat down at the computer and just did it one day and didn't put a lot of thought into it, or effort or anything. And I got it in, and I was like, what the heck? I didn't expect that but OK. So, I had to make a decision on what I was gonna do. I didn't know what bachelor's I wanted to do, so I just did Native American studies. I mean, that's got to be easy enough. So, I did it and whenever I was there, I think I got really inspired by my professor...He's Native... and he was awesome. He's one of the professors that you'd walk by his office, and he would yell at you, and you have to stop and turn around and go in there. And you would leave with homework, like he would give you articles and be like, "read this come, back to me on Thursday, and tell me what you think." And so, he did that all the time.*

Participants also shared a common connection to place. They placed great emphasis on geographical genesis and discussed that their identities are defined by where they grew up. This focus on place or geographical genesis is consistent with Native American values that emphasize interconnectedness with the land. Many Native American cultures maintain a distinct connection with the earth and specific geographical locations. Connection to a homeland is a primary source of cultural traditions and knowledge (Cajete, 2000). Even historically nomadic tribes have sacred

places that hold meaning. Similarly, participants describe losing cultural capital when they left home to obtain higher education.

**Participant 6:** *I'm enrolled in [my] tribe. I grew up [on tribal land]. And my family is very traditional. My mom moved around a lot so I wouldn't say that I'm as traditional as my cousins that stuck together in the area, but my family speaks [our language]. We all are Native American church. I danced at powwows when I was younger then, kind of, I think probably just moved away from it, just over the years and being gone and moving. But my family is very rich in culture still. My first cousins and aunts and uncles, a lot of them work for the tribe. And so, they're heavily involved in teaching those ways to other tribal members and they do a really good job at doing that.*

**Participant 4:** *I was raised around all my tribal people... My grandma went to Chilocco boarding school all of her life and she's one of 12 and she grew up on reservation. We have a family homestead. We have a big family. My dad is Mexican, but he was raised [with our tribal traditions]. He knows a lot about like the Men's tradition 'cause in our tribe we have like a women's side and a men's side, and they spoke the same language, but they had words that were different. So, some of the words were men words and some of them were women words and so they kind of taught my dad more of [the tribal] ways just because he was raised in it. All his cousins were [raised in tradition] and then my grandma's side. Her dad and her mom, they were a lot older when she was born. She had sisters that were like old enough to be her mom, so her cousins or her nieces and nephews would sometimes be the same age as her. And my grandma's dad was, I believe he was four whenever he was moved from \*state\* to here, and my grandma's mom, she was two whenever she was moved from \*state\* to Oklahoma. And we traced all of our family back basically to \*state\*, when they were there.*

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This study set out to understand Native American student views about their collegiate experiences and their interactions with the institutions they attend(ed). The results demonstrate a clear impact on the academic, social, and cultural development of Native American students, as well as an impact on their well-being. Participant responses convey extensive prejudicial treatment in academic settings and an urgent need for educators and clinicians to critically evaluate their role in perpetuating violence against Native American students that ultimately leads to ontological death.

Participants emphasized that they experienced prejudicial treatment across educational settings, beginning in elementary school and occurring up to their final moments as college students when they were participating in graduation ceremonies. In many instances, participants described the dynamics of the settler/savage relationship. This occurred when their professors and peers “othered” them and excluded them from fully participating in life’s interactions in ways that honored their respective cultural capital.

Participants spoke of feeling isolated and powerless when educators taught false information about Native Americans. They were forced into silent submission or risked being seen as a disruptive “savage” for challenging authority figures. When participants described acknowledgment of their Native American identities, it was during times they were forced into expert roles and asked to educate their classmates. Some participants disclosed feeling guilty for discussing these experiences because they believed the professors had “good intentions.” It is important for educators to know that this is a harmful microaggression that is distressing for students. Good intentions do not negate the impact this behavior has on students. One Native



American student cannot be the spokesperson for all Native Americans, and it is unfair to require a member of a marginalized group to play the role of educator.

Positive experiences reported by the participants centered around connecting with other Native American people, both educators and peers. As suggested in the literature, participants acknowledged a sense of a shared culture based on traditional values and the collective experience of oppression and Colonialism (Deloria, 2003). Historically, Native Americans have banded together in acts of survivance, sometimes creating a “pan-Indian” identity (Horne & Macbeth, 1998). In these relationships they do not have to justify, explain, or minimize parts of themselves. They are emboldened to express more of their true cultural selves. Additionally, participants described their Native American educators as instrumental in maintaining their Native American identity. Participants were inspired and empowered by these models. They described feeling seen and as if they were worth knowing.

### **Implications**

Relationships are key in counseling and educational settings; however, the results of this study demonstrate that there are significant barriers to real connection with Native American students. Clinicians and educators must consider if it is possible to overcome the settler/savage dynamic to connect in genuine relationship. While it may never be possible to fully restore the cultural capital erased by centuries of genocide and abuse, there are meaningful steps that can be taken to work towards relationship.

There is a clear need for clinicians and educators to expand their knowledge of Native American issues, including the oppressive role of the White education system. Relationships begin with knowing and respecting another person. There has been a recent push for trauma-informed practices in therapy, as well as trauma-informed classrooms in educational settings.

Culturally sensitive engagement demands an understanding of the cumulative complex trauma from psychological, emotional wounding occurring across generations and over the lifespan resulting from massive group trauma experiences (Brave Heart, 2003). Counselors and educators must acknowledge the effects of historical trauma associated with colonization and the possibility that distressing psychological symptoms and barriers to achievement are exacerbated by compounding trauma rather than the failures or shortcomings of Native American students (Myhra, 2011).

Robbins, Harrist, and Stare (2021) recently defined historical trauma as trauma that is experienced by a specific cultural, racial, or ethnic group and spans multiple generations. Counselors and educators must balance psychological discourse about historical trauma with attention to socioeconomic, cultural, and structural factors (Gone, 2014). In both fields of education and psychology, there is a long history of pathologizing and stigmatizing Native Americans. Professionals have neglected to consider the historical trauma experienced by Native Americans and have ignored oppressive practices that began with colonial-settler violence and continue in the form of paternalism, prejudice, harmful assumptions, low expectations, stereotypes, and biased curriculum (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018).

### **Recommendations for Counselors**

In the counseling setting, clinicians must gain a deeper understanding of their Native American clients while also being aware of the settler/savage dynamics and their own privilege. Counseling services have historically been underutilized by minority groups due to mistrusts, perceived irrelevance, and insensitivity to their cultural norms (Nelson-Jones, 2002). Counselors must not only focus on the individual identities of their Native American clients, but also their tribal identities and how they navigate both the Native and White worlds.

It is important that counselors do not force an ontological death by promoting individualist goals that do not align with a client's Native American identity. Therapeutic services should integrate a cultural assessment of the client that takes into account historical trauma. Brave Heart (2003) indicates historical trauma leads to depressive symptoms, substance use disorders, fixation on trauma, and chronic pain. By carefully considering the impact of historical trauma, clinicians can work towards providing culturally competent services. It may also be helpful for counselors to learn techniques to deconstruct aspects of White culture that are accepted as universal truths or ideals.

Counselors within educational institutions can advocate for incorporating Native spaces and work to amplify the voices of Native American students. Native American therapists, Robins and Robins, have emphasized the importance of communal healing, including the use of stories and ceremony (2019). A group modality may prove beneficial when working with Native American students. This might be a therapy group or a support group depending on the needs of the students.

Both therapists and educators should be aware of their communication style and use of questioning with Native American students. Many Native Americans describe feeling surveilled when they are questioned. As one participant shared, she utilized silence when she was questioned by a teacher. Educators may interpret silence as a sign of ignorance and a lack of intellect; however, silence is often used as a powerful form of resistance by Native Americans who feel they are being shamed. In the case of the participant, she described shutting down when she was expected to offer an answer and explanation. Silence can also be used in Native American families when they are verbally attacked or when being questioned by law enforcement.

## **Recommendations for Educators**

American education shapes identity through various reinforcements and punishments. This power over Native Americans is often a violent attack on their Native American identities. Participants in this study described a lack of support and even suppression of their Native American identity. Successfully reclaiming and retaining Native American identity necessitates that Native Americans are given the space to directly challenge White imperialism. Current narratives must be re-written and current discourse must prominently include and promote Native American voices. The education system may furnish the most ideal location for this to occur, provided it undergoes enough re-structuring so its focus shifts to integrating the voices which have long been silenced.

The first place for institutions to start is the recruitment of diverse faculty and staff. Native American professors are invaluable assets to the institution who can serve as mentors and role models while ensuring culturally competent educational practices. Participants who had Native American role models at their institutions reported positive experiences. When the teacher stood up for the participant who was called a racial slur, the participant felt empowered. The participant who had a Native American professor spoke of him as a positive role model and someone who challenged her in a way she appreciated. These experiences were vital in reinforcing participants' self-worth and validating their Native American identity. Participants who lacked Native American role models expressed that they would have felt more valued and supported by their institution if they had had Native American professors. In some cases, the participants were willing to settle for a non-Native ally as a liaison for students. This demonstrates the desperate need to have someone available to provide support.

Another way to positively impact students and bolster persistence is by creating a sense of community. Native American students can greatly benefit from a cohort model that connects them to other Native peers. While students may have different tribal backgrounds, they share many of the same experiences of Colonization and prejudicial treatment. This is consistent with the available research that shows Native American have come to experience a sense of shared culture (Deloria, 2003). Every participant in this study described the significance of forming relationships with other Native Americans, and in all these instances, these friendships occurred with a member of a different tribe.

It's important to emphasize that while Native American students can benefit from a "pan-Indian" identity (Horne & MacBeth, 1998), educators must not employ generalizations that represent all Native Americans as the same. Similarly, educators should not force students into the role of expert on Native American issues. Rather it would be more appropriate to invite students to share their unique cultures if they wish to do so. One way to approach this might be to put an invitation in the syllabus so as not call attention to minority students in a way that is othering. If a professor does wish to have an expert, they might consider approaching tribal elders with a request to speak to their classes.

Educators should engage in critical reflection about their own privilege and how it influences their teaching practices. As McCarty and Lee (2014) have pointed out, promising practices in education require educators to make a conscious decision to nurture Native American knowledge, dignity, identity, and integrity. Steps should be taken to actively challenge dysconscious racism and to critically evaluate the acceptance of dominant cultural norms in education. Educators are in a prime position to enact social change and address systemic racial

inequality if they commit themselves to justice and begin to incorporate teaching methods that promote place, community, and culture (Eder, 2017).

Finally, Native American students should be viewed as ontological assets to the institution. Their identity should not only be acknowledged on campus but celebrated at every possible moment. Participants spoke of how meaningful it was to be “allowed” to wear Native American regalia to their graduation ceremonies. Native American students should not be forced to die to their Native selves in order to walk across the stage. They should be able to fully participate in educational experiences with their identities intact. It is also important that students not be treated as tokens or paraded around for the benefit of the institution. Native American students are not commodities or photo opportunities. They are not fungible objects to be used and then discarded. Institutions must make an earnest effort to acknowledge, support, and nurture Native American identities without expecting to use them as advertisement and recruitment material.

### **Limitations**

The information presented in this study must be viewed within the context of its limitations. This study consisted of a small sample size representing a small number of tribes. With over 500 tribes in the United States, it is not possible to generalize these results to all other Native Americans. Additionally, this study was limited to the geographical region of Northwestern Oklahoma. It is possible that members of the same tribe may have vastly different experiences at institutions across the United States.

### **Future Research**

Due to limited existing research and this study’s focus on qualitative methods, there are many possibilities for future research. The purpose of this study was to begin to understand the

experiences of Native American students in academia. This study may serve to inform in part or act as a model for similar studies with other minority cultural groups. Further exploration of Native American experiences is necessary and could include carrying out a similar study in other areas of the United States and with members of different Native American tribes. It may also be helpful to look at each education level separately. For example, researchers may focus on the undergraduate or graduate experience. Additionally, it may be of particular interest to differentiate between the academic setting such as community colleges, state universities, and private institutions.

More qualitative research is necessary to amplify Native American voices and develop a better understanding of their unique experiences. However, the use of quantitative exploration may be beneficial provided that research measurement tools are considered with proper attention to matters of cultural safety. One important area of future research is the development of specific assessment tools to be used with Native Americans. These tools should be informed by Native American perspectives and should include Native American professionals in the development. At the institution level, it may be helpful to develop a program evaluation with Native American students identified as the primary stakeholders.

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## **Appendix A: Subjectivity Statement**

This study examines Native American student experiences in a collegiate setting. Because this is a qualitative methodological study that uses the researchers as the instrument for data collection, it is important to review the backgrounds of the researchers. The primary researcher is an Indigenous Mexican American woman. Despite her Mexican heritage, the primary researcher appears phenotypically white and therefore has “passing privilege.” This privilege allows the primary researcher to operate in the world as a white woman without the bias, prejudice, and racism experienced by people of color. As it relates to this research study, there may be positive and negative outcomes related to the researcher’s appearance and lived experience of a white woman. It is possible that this researcher’s experiences will allow her to be more objective when examining data. However, it is likely that some participants may be less willing to disclose information to the researcher because she appears white, and a historical mistrust of white people exists within Native communities due to a long history of abuse. This negative impact is likely countered by the second researcher, a Cherokee/Choctaw man, and the use of the three-interview series model. It is anticipated that the small group size and repeated interviews will allow the researcher to build rapport and trust with the participants. Additionally, the primary researcher has worked for a Native American tribe in a research capacity and has experience interviewing and building rapport in the research setting. The primary researcher has also worked with Native American individuals of various tribes providing psychological services in various settings and has taught Native American students at the undergraduate and graduate level.

**Appendix B: Demographic Information Form**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Birthplace: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Current City: \_\_\_\_\_

Income (circle one):      Below \$20,000      \$20,000-39,999      \$40,000-59,999      \$60,000-79,999  
80,000+

Level of education (circle one):

- Some College
- College Graduate
- Some Graduate/Professional school
- Graduate/Professional degree completed

Type of Institution(s) Attended:

- 2-year College
- 4-year University
- Graduate College

Location of Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

Field(s) of Study: \_\_\_\_\_

Primary language spoken in the home: \_\_\_\_\_

Other languages spoken in the home in which you were raised: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you speak or understand your tribal language?

- I am fluent
- I know/understand a few words
- I do not know my tribal language

Primary Identified Ethnic/Cultural descent (circle one\*): Euro-American or Native American

If you answered Native American, please indicate your tribe(s): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Are you an enrolled member of the tribe(s) listed above? Y or N

Did you or any of member of your family attend a boarding school? Y or N

If yes, who attended? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

1. To what extent do you feel like your college or university acknowledges, nurtures, and supports your Native American identity?
2. How comfortable would you feel talking with a counselor at your college or university about any prejudice you may have felt on your campus?
3. How understanding do you think a counselor at your college or university might be if you discussed your own experiences in relation to the historical trauma experienced by your tribe?
4. What barriers or challenges have you faced as a Native American student at your college or university?
  - Within the classroom (e.g., with an instructor)
  - Within the institution (e.g., with an advisor, with a policy)
  - With other students
  -
5. When things get tough at your college or university, how do you cope and who do you feel comfortable talking to?
6. Describe your most positive experience at your college or university and what made it so enjoyable.