

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CHOCTAW NATION OF  
OKLAHOMA MEMBERS IN THE FERGUSON  
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

By

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OKLAHOMA MEMBERS IN THE FERGUSON  
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Abstract: Native Americans represent one of the smallest populations in Higher Education. Native American tribal nations have supported members attending higher education since the enactment of forced removal treaties. Although student numbers continue to increase, Native Americans still only represent 1% of the total Higher Education population. This study explored the lived experience of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students enrolled in the Ferguson College of Agriculture at Oklahoma State University. To fully understand the lived experiences of Oklahoma State University undergraduate and graduate students who are Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members, a phenomenological study using in-depth personal interviews was chosen. Eleven interviews were conducted in Edmond Low Library. Interviews were coded using in-vivo coding. Five themes emerged from the data: (a) support systems in the Ferguson College of Agriculture; (b) (in)visible heritage and assimilation; (c) the collective pursuit and legacy of higher education; (d) the FCA as a means to their end; and (e) their journey to an agricultural college. Throughout these five themes, five conclusions and implications were derived: (a) the cultural value of a collective system of support was important for these Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members to succeed at OSU and in the FCA; (b) these Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members came to college with a limited connection to their heritage and might not be cognizant of assimilation; (c) the role of family was a value and motivating factor derivative of tribal culture for these members; (d) these Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members were focused on their career path, not necessarily belongingness through their tribal heritage in their academic experience; (e) these Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members did not intentionally choose the Ferguson College of Agriculture. Overall, these students felt supported in the Ferguson College of Agriculture. However, these participants might not be looking for a sense of belongingness through their tribal heritage. Due to this perceived detachment, participants simultaneously perceived that their Native American heritage was both visible and invisible around the campus of OSU and in the FCA.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the study, which explored the lived experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members in the Ferguson College of Agriculture (FCA) at Oklahoma State University (OSU). Background information, statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, guiding questions, the significance of the study, the scope, the limitations, the assumptions, and key terms are discussed.

#### **Background**

Native Americans have been involved in American education since the 1800s. The relationship started with primary and secondary boarding schools in 1800s and remains active in the 2020s, now through post-secondary education. Recently, steady incline has occurred in the percentage of Native Americans attending higher education institutions. In 1932, less than 400 Native Americans enrolled in higher education (Fish & Syed, 2018). Since then, Native American enrollment has increased and held strong at 1% of the total population of higher education graduates (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). However, Native Americans remain one of the lowest percentages of underrepresented groups to attend higher education institutions (PNPI, 2021). The U.S. Census (2020) released the following statistics regarding the total number of American citizens that have a bachelor's degree: "From 2010 to 2019, the percentage of people ages 25 and older

with a bachelor's degree or higher jumped from 29.9% to 36.0%" (para. 6). During the same period, "the percentage of Blacks aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher rose from 19.8% to 26.1%; Asians from 52.4% to 58.1%; and Hispanics from 13.9% to 18.8%" (U.S. Census, 2020, para. 8). Native Americans comprise less than 1% of the total student population at non-tribal universities in the United States (Gervais et al., 2017; PNPI, 2019). 9.3% of Native Americans attend Tribal Colleges and Universities (Synder, 2016). These statistics imply most Native American students who attend higher education institutions are enrolled at Predominately White Institutions (PWI), which are those with an enrollment of 50% or more White students (Lomotey, 2010).

Oklahoma State University-Main Campus is a PWI with 65.81% ( $N = 14,833$ ) of the student body identifying as White (Oklahoma State University, 2022). The state of Oklahoma is the only state with a land-grant institution for each land-grant act enacted (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2022). The three land-grant institutions in Oklahoma include an 1862 land-grant institution, Oklahoma State University, (OSU), the 1890 land-grant institution Langston University (LU), and the 1994 land-grant institution the College of Muskogee Nations (CMN) (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2022). OSU is the leading land-grant university for Native American students (OSU, 2023). However, Native Americans remain one of the smallest populations at OSU, making up 4.23% ( $n = 957$ ) of the total student population (OSU, 2022).

When the Morrill Act of 1862 was enacted, its purpose was to establish institutions focused on mechanical arts and agriculture while attending publicly owned institutions (National Research Council, 1995). Today land-grant institutions have a

tripartite mission of education, research, and extension (National Archives, 2022). As I examined the experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members at OSU and the Ferguson College of Agriculture (FCA), the teaching mission of FCA was my focus.

Native American tribes see an advantage of having members obtain higher education degrees (Gervias et al., 2017). However, due to such a small sample size, Native Americans are often left out of higher education reports (Lopez, 2020). Native Americans can also feel their invisibility in many research studies. Willmott et al. (2015) conducted a 20-year study to see how many populations in the top higher education journal discussed Native Americans in higher education. Willmott et al. (2015) found 36 articles out of 2,683 (1.34%) discussed Native Americans in higher education.

Native American is “a person who is of some degree Indian blood and is recognized by a Tribe and/or the United States” (The Department of Justice, 2014, para. 1). Many studies considered Native Americans as one population. However, many different tribes and nations across the United States of America come together to create the term Native America population (Fleming, 2006). Each tribe and nation are sovereign from another. To be a member of a sovereign tribe or nation in the United States, the tribe or nation must be federally recognized.

A federally recognized tribe is an American Indian or Alaska Native tribal entity that is recognized as having a government-to-government relationship with the United States, with the responsibilities, powers, limitations, and obligations attached to that designation, and is eligible for funding and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. (U.S. Department of Interior, 2020, para. 1)

As of 2022, the United States federally recognized 574 tribes within the 48 contiguous states and Alaska (USAgov, 2022, para. 1). Of these 574 tribes, 39 reside in Oklahoma (NCAI, 2017). The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is one federally recognized tribe in Oklahoma with a population of 223,279 registered members; 84,670 members reside in the southeast corner of Oklahoma (NCAI, 2017).

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma was one of the five civilized tribes who traveled the Trail of Tears to Indian Country (Oklahoma History Press, 2013). The Choctaw Nation has been involved in education since the signing of the forced resettlement treaty, the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek (Crum, 2007). Part of the resettlement agreement stated the United States would give the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma funding to educate youth. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek states: “That for the benefit and advantage of the Choctaw people, and to improve their condition, there shall be educated under the direction of the President, and at the expense of the United States, forty Choctaw youths, for twenty years” (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 1830, Article 20). Today, 193 years after The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek was signed, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma still prides themselves regarding its members achieving higher education, having specific scholarships and programs to help their members obtain higher education degrees. One program that provides scholarships is the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Higher Education Program, started in 1984, which has helped more than 16,000 members pursue higher education degrees (Kirvan, 2021).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Native Americans continue to be a population with one of the lowest percentages of members pursuing higher education (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). The percentage of Native Americans obtaining a higher education degree is so low it is often left out of research on higher education in the United States (Willmott et al., 2015). Due to being absent from educational statistics and research, Native American students can develop a feeling of invisibility in higher education, both on campus and in literature (Lopez, 2020). Native American people are people of the land, for the land (Akins & Bauner, 2021), including the product of land through agriculture and stewardship of natural resources. However, the FCA enrolls the second smallest population of Native Americans among OSU's undergraduate academic colleges (OSU, 2022). Due to the limited studies and related literature regarding Native Americans, and more specifically Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members, pursuing post-secondary education in colleges of agriculture science and natural resources, the reason behind the small population remains unclear, which warranted this investigation.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in the FCA at OSU. The aim of the study was to understand how the FCA may strengthen its services and the cultural environment for students, with a focus on Native Americans, including members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. In addition, the findings of this study assist in filling a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members in higher education pursuing degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources.

## **Guiding Questions**

Below are the three questions that guided this study:

1. What influenced Choctaw Nation students to pursue degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources in the FCA at OSU?
2. How did Choctaw Nation students describe their experiences in the FCA at OSU?
3. How did Choctaw Nation students perceive inclusion of their native identity in the FCA at OSU?

## **Significance of the Study**

With the ever-changing cultural climate of higher education, it is imperative higher education institutions and colleges of agriculture understand the experiences of underrepresented populations. Understanding the experiences of underrepresented students could impact recruitment materials and retention plans to benefit the university and the tribal nation in both student and faculty populations. This study will add to the body of literature regarding the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and agricultural sciences and natural resources colleges and related workplaces.

## **Scope**

The scope of this study was very specific. Participants of this study were graduate or undergraduate students at Oklahoma State University during the Fall 2022 semester. These students were also enrolled in a major or program within the FCA curriculum and had an issued Tribal Membership Card with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

## **Limitations**

Due to the specific scope of the study, limitations existed. Transferability, the application of findings to a different population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002), of this study may only be determined by the readers. Even though transferability may be found, the findings from the study should not be generalized to the general population of Native Americans in higher education. The potential for personal bias by the researcher is also of concern. I am a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Not only did I graduate from OSU with a Bachelor of Science degree in Spring 2021 from the FCA, but I also chose to stay and pursue a graduate degree at OSU in the FCA. However, throughout the study, I identified and monitored my biases to ensure they would not affect the outcomes of this study. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic also served as a limitation. Due to personal, health, or safety reasons, some students may not have responded to recruitment for interviews because of their unwillingness to meet in person. OSU's student statistics demographics do not indicate how many tribal nations, or their members are represented on campus; therefore, this study was unable to identify Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students for targeted recruitment strategies. Only Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members who were enrolled in FCA at OSU and self-identified could participate in this study. Other Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members attending colleges of agriculture at a different institution were not included in this study. Because I wanted to ensure heritage and asked for participants' Tribal Membership Card, individuals who have Choctaw Nation descendants but are not a registered member could not participate in this study. This could have also affected students who have tribal heritage in multiple different tribal nations. Due to needed to show their Tribal Membership Card, students



who did not have immediate access to their card might have missed the opportunity to participate in this study. An electronic message was sent to a sample of FCA students, as approved by OSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) to recruit participants. This message, however, may not have reached all FCA students who are Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members. Lastly, four participants in this study were first-year students at Oklahoma State University. At the time of the study, they had only been on campus for a few weeks. More time on campus could change their perspective in the future.

### **Assumptions**

With the scope and limitations of this study, assumptions were made. First, it was assumed participants were in good academic standing with OSU. Second, I assumed participants were truthful and willing to share their lived experiences in the FCA at OSU during the interviews. Finally, it was assumed each participant in this study was classified as Native American according to OSU.

### **Key Terms**

- Assimilation: “to absorb into the cultural tradition of a population or group” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023); “the absorbing of one cultural group into harmony with another” (Oklahoma History Press, 2013).
- Belongingness: “a close or intimate relationship” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). In this study, belongingness was looked at through the lens of a college student’s sense of belonging, as defined by Strayhorn (2018):

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the

experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

- Choctaws: Three bands of Choctaws are federally recognized bands of Choctaws (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). This study focuses on the band of Choctaws residing in Oklahoma. However, Choctaws was the term used when describing this population before the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma became a federally recognized tribe.
- Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma: A federally recognized tribal nation with 84,670 members residing in the southeast corner of Oklahoma while having a total membership of 223,279 (NCAI, 2015).
- Cultural integrity: “Rooted in the hypothesis of transculturation theory (Huffman, 1990), which contextualizes experiences for Native Americans in a post-secondary education environment, based on factors such as (a) utilizing one’s ethnic identity as an emotional anchor; (b) constructing a cultural threshold; (c) engaging in two cultural settings; and (d) cultural learning” (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014, p. 4). Cultural integrity was the conceptual lens for this study.
- Culture: “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations” (Merriam-Webster, 2023, para. 4).
- Federally Recognized Tribes: “An American Indian or Alaska Native tribal entity that is recognized as having a government-to-government relationship with the United States, with the responsibilities, powers, limitations, and obligations

attached to that designation, and is eligible for funding and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.” (U.S. Department of Interior, 2020, para. 1)

- Heritage: “something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor” (Merriam-Webster, 2023, para. 2). This study examined the word and its meaning in relation to the participants’ Native American history, traditions, and culture.
- Lived Experiences: “The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The experiences the participants have gone through and have described through this study will be referred to as their lived experiences.
- Native Americans: “A member of any of the indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America, especially those indigenous to what is now the continental US” (Dictionary, 2023, para. 2, Native American). For this study, Native Americans will be the main term used to identify American Indians, First People, Natives, Alaskan Natives, and Indians. Although none of the terms are perfectly exact or precise when identifying indigenous people groups, this study will use Native American, which is the same term used by the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma when referencing tribal heritage.
- OSU Center for Sovereign Nations: A student service center at OSU founded in 2015 with a lead investment by the Chickasaw Nation and later investments by the Choctaw Nation and the Cherokee Nation. The Center collaborates with many tribal nations and serves all native students and their friends (Oklahoma State University, 2023, para. 1).

- Predominately White Institutions (PWI): Institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or more of the student enrollment (Lomotey, 1995).
- Transculturation: “a process of cultural transformation marked by the influx of new cultural elements and the loss or alteration of existing ones” (Merriam-Webster, 2023, para. 1). Huffman (1990) is credited for conceptualizing transculturation theory as a way to examine Native Americans’ experiences in education. This theory also explains how some Native American students persist through education and others do not.
- Tribal Critical Race Theory: “TribalCrit [Tribal Critical Race Theory] emerges from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and is rooted in the multiple, nuanced, and historically- and geographically-located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 427). Brayboy (2005) conceptualized nine tenets within TribalCrit Theory. This theory gives a lens to explain the perseverance of Native Americans within the broader, white-dominated society.
- Values: “relative worth, utility, or importance” (Merriam-Webster, 2023, para. 2). Daft (2008) defined values as “fundamental beliefs that an individual considers to be important, that are relatively stable over time, and that have an impact on attitudes and behaviors” (p. 107).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to gain knowledge from the literature related to this study. As a reference, the purpose of study and guiding questions will be restated. Native American history in the United States, tribal history in Oklahoma, federally recognized tribes, forced resettlement, the Native American experience in education, assimilation and whiteness, Native Americans in higher education, and belongingness are the major bodies of literature discussed in this chapter. The conceptual frameworks of cultural integrity, transculturation, and tribal critical race theory will also be explored.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma graduate and undergraduate students enrolled the Ferguson College of Agriculture (FCA) at Oklahoma State University (OSU). The aim of the study was to understand how the FCA may strengthen its services and the cultural environment for students, with a focus on Native Americans, including members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. In addition, the findings of this study assist in filling a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members in higher education pursuing degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources

## **Guiding Questions**

Below are the three questions that guided this study:

1. What influenced Choctaw Nation students to pursue degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources in the FCA at OSU?
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3. How did Choctaw Nation students perceive inclusion of their native identity in the FCA at OSU?

## **Native American History in the United States**

Native Americans occupied the United States long before the nation was founded (Pritzker, 2000). The United States of America was founded in 1776 (USA.gov, 2017). However, Native Americans are first mentioned in history books since explorers found the land that is now the United States of America (Pritzker, 2000). Stories of the first Thanksgiving have been celebrated and told many times throughout the U.S. history (Smith, 2003). In recent years, it has been made clear the first Thanksgiving did not occur in the way history books explain (Tachine et al., 2017). The mythological depiction of the first thanksgiving notwithstanding, Native Americans have been no stranger to genocide, assimilation, and forced resettlement (Au et al. 2016; Child, 2007).

## **Agricultural Ancestry**

Native Americans are people of the land, for the land (Akins & Bauner, 2021). During the early days, women would stay close to the homeland, caring for the family and the land, while the men would hunt (Jensen, 1977). Before western settlement, Native Americans were

involved in tilling the soil, planting seeds, and harvesting the produce from those seeds (Hunt, 1987; Jensen, 1977). Warren (1994) explained that Native American farming before western settlement had five important characteristics:

Land was to be used to sustain the economic and spiritual life of a community. Large tracts of land were required by a community to maintain its practice of farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering of wild foods. Land tenure and use was controlled by groups, usually a community, that could sanction individuals whose practices broke social norms. Individuals or lineages had the right to use land for farming and other subsistence. (p. 38)

Warren (1994) mentioned the five important characteristics were to ensure the land would remain sustainable. Many practices Native Americans used to sustain the land are still in practice today (Cook-Patten et al., 2014). Once settlement, forced resettlement, and allotment occurred, many Native Americans started living on reservations (Child, 2000). In 1987, the Intertribal Agriculture Council was founded to increase agricultural practices and programs on reservations (Intertribal Agriculture Council, 2022).

### **Forced Resettlement History**

In 1818, the Choctaws signed the Treaty of Doak's Stand which gave five-million acres of their land in Mississippi to the U.S. Government for land in what is now known as eastern Oklahoma and parts of western Arkansas (Fixico, 2008; Oklahoma History Press, 2013). With the Treaty of Doak's Stand, Choctaws received financial assistance with moving as well as yearly payments there after (Oklahoma History Press, 2013). When the Choctaws made this agreement, they were unaware of the White settlers already living on the land in present-day Oklahoma (Fixico, 2008; Oklahoma History Press, 2013). Due to this, the Choctaws and the

United States of America stayed in negotiations until the Indian Removal Act eight years later (Au et al., 2016). By 1830, Andrew Jackson had been elected as President of the United States (Library of Congress, 2020). On December 6, 1830, President Jackson informed Congress of what the Indian Removal process would entail (National Archives, 2022). The Library of Congress (2022) explained:

The Indian Removal Act was signed into law by President Andrew Jackson on May 28, 1830, authorizing the president to grant unsettled lands west of the Mississippi in exchange for Indian lands within existing state borders. A few tribes went peacefully, but many resisted the relocation policy. (Para. 2)

Through this act, government officials could not forcefully remove Native Americans from their lands, however, many tribes felt the pressure to leave (Oklahoma History Press, 2013).

The next treaty the Choctaws signed was the Treaty of Dancing Creek (Oklahoma History Press, 2013). The Treaty of Dancing Creek gave the United State of America lands in Mississippi and moved the Choctaws west (the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). The treaty had 11 provisions:

1. Choctaw would surrender 10,423,130 acres in Mississippi.
2. They would receive a similar amount of acreage in Indian Territory.
3. Removal would take place over a three-year period, removing approximately one-third of the tribe each year.
4. The government would pay all expenses of removal, furnish transportation and supplies, and provide subsistence in the new land for one year.
5. Choctaw lands would be protected against intruders in Indian Territory.



6. The government would provide a \$20,000 annuity for 20 years, as well as a continuation of all past annuities.
7. The government would provide funds to educate 40 Choctaw children per year for 20 years; \$2,500 would be provided for the hiring of three teachers for Choctaw schools each year as well.
8. The government would make available \$10,000 for the erection of necessary public buildings in Indian Territory.
9. Each Choctaw family would receive personal, domestic, and farm articles they need for beginning a new life in the West.
10. Land gifts would be made to chiefs.
11. Choctaws who wished to remain in Mississippi would be given land allotments there and made citizens of the state. (Oklahoma History Press, 2013, pp. 70-71)

Forced Resettlement for Choctaws occurred in three waves: (a) 1831-1833, (b) 1845-1854, and (c) 1902-1903 (Oklahoma Social Studies Standards, 2014). At the time of the first resettlement wave, the Choctaws included 18,635 members (Oklahoma History Press, 2013). “Thousands—nearly one-third of the Choctaw Nation—die[d] of starvation, exposure, and disease on the more than 500-mile journey. Disease, early death, and ill health plague[d] the Choctaw for many generations after removal” (National Library of Medicine, n.d., para. 1). The provisions of Treaty of Dancing Creek were not all received once the Choctaws relocated to Oklahoma (Oklahoma Social Studies Standards, 2014).

### **Tribal History in Oklahoma**

Before, during, and after forced resettlement, the Choctaws tried to maintain a respectful relationship with the U.S. Government (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023; Oklahoma History Press, 2013). However, the relationship had begun to sour by the time of the American Civil War (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). During the Civil War, each of the Five Civilized Tribes (i.e., Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles) sided with the Confederate States of America (National Archives, 2022; Oklahoma History Press, 2013). Due to this, new treaties between the tribes and the United States needed to be signed after the war ended (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). In 1887, the United States passed the General Allotment Act (National Archives, 2022) also referred to as the Dawes Act (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023), forming the Dawes Commission, which

...To create rolls of tribal citizens who would be provided allotments of land. Once all land was allocated to the Native Americans on these rolls, the United States [sold] the remaining lands to American settlers who wanted land in Indian Territory. (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023, para. 11)

At this time, rolls of tribal citizens, often referred to as the Dawes roll, listed over 100,000 people (National Achieve, 2016). It was believed the General Allotment Act was a ruling to benefit the U.S. Government more than the Native American tribes (Au et al., 2016) “The construction of tribal rolls in Indian Territory during the allotment period was a process rife with racism, from the use of notions of blood in determining tribal membership to the racially segregated hearings and rolls” (Osburn, 2010). Each tribal nation involved in the General Allotment Act was a federally recognized tribe by the U.S. Government.

### **Federally Recognized Tribes**

The National Congress of American Indians (2023) reports 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States of America. Federally recognized tribes started with the Indian Tribe List Act, 25<sup>th</sup> title, part 83 of the Code of Federal Recognition (National Archives, 2023). This code states the registration and requirements of becoming a federally recognized tribe (U.S. Department of Interior – Indian Affairs, 2023). Federally recognized tribes have a working government-to-government relationship with the United States of America (Davis, 2013). Each tribe is sovereign from one another and from the United States Government (NCAI, 2023). “Sovereignty for tribes includes the right to establish their own form of government, determine membership requirements, enact legislation and establish law enforcement and court systems” (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013, para. 1).

### **Native American Experience in American Education**

A vital part of Native American history is the relationship with American education. Native Americans have not had the best experiences when it comes to education. President Andrew Jackson “believed that if Indians were educated according to the White ways, they would realize that removal was the best thing for them, especially as they became more ‘civilized’” (Oklahoma History Press, 2013, p. 68). Boarding schools were the first experience Native Americans had regarding American education. Child (2000) stated: “[R]emov[ing] young children from their tribal environment, would ‘civilize’ and prepare Indians for citizenship while providing them with a practical, vocational education” (p. 13). Native American boarding schools are a vital part of Native American History but largely ignored by U.S. historians (Child, 2000). In Child’s (2000) book, *Boarding School Seasons*, she addressed what Native American Boarding Schools were like through an analysis of letters left by Native Americans from 1900-1940. While at boarding schools, Native American child could not visit their family, their names

were changed, and their hair was cut, pulling them away from their heritage with every act (Child, 2000). The youth of tribes were the target of the boarding schools due to the belief that “native elders could not be civilized but the young could be ‘saved’ and civilized” (Au et al, 2016). When Native American students returned home from boarding schools, they felt disconnected from their tribes (Davis, 2001). These students felt too Native at school and not Native enough on the reservation (Child, 2000). It is expected that Native American families still struggle with boarding school post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] (Gone, 2009).

### **Assimilation and Whiteness**

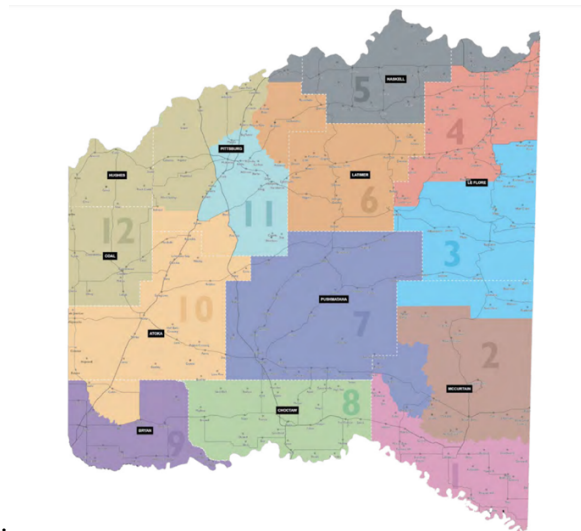
Through boarding schools, Native American students were assimilated or transitioned into White-settlers culture (Au et al., 2016). Au et al., 2016, goes on to explain this assimilation was both beneficial and detrimental to Native American families. Assimilation is having one group or culture absorb another group or culture (Oklahoma History Press, 2013). Au et al. (2016) expressed assimilation as a major theme when educating Native American in the early years of education. Many history books in education give a misleading or misrepresented view of this history (Steward-Ambo, 2021). Native Americans are often tasked with trying to educate non-Natives on issues that should have been taught in educational books (Masta, 2018). “For those who face cultural conflicts the options are seemingly few: withdraw from the institution in an attempt to preserve one’s ‘Indianness,’ or adopt non-Indian ways and pursue assimilation” (Huffman, 1990, p. 2). The goal of the boarding schools was to take Native Americans out of their culture and push them into White-settler culture (Child, 2000).

### **Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma**

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is one of 38 federally recognized tribes in the state of Oklahoma (NCAI, 2023). The Choctaw Nation’s land is divided into 12 districts (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). Figure 1 is a visible representation of the districts (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023).

**Figure 1.**

*Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Tribal Reservation Map, 2023*



*Note.* The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Reservation. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. (2023) (<https://www.choctawnation.com/about/reservation/>)

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is the third largest Native American nation in the United States of America (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). The nation has a population of 223,279 registered members, with 84,670 members residing in the 12 districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma (NCAI, 2017). The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is a self-governed tribal nation with the vision of “living out the Chahta spirit of faith, family, and culture” (The Choctaw

Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). Chahta is one of the brothers told in an oral history story explaining how the Choctaws came to be (Oklahoma Social Studies Standards, 2014):

Near the end of their journey, the two brothers argued, and as a result Chikasha and his less numerous supporters separated from the main body of the people. Chahta and his people became known as the Choctaw Tribe while Chikasha and his people became known as the Chickasaw Tribe. (Oklahoma Social Student Standard, 2014, p. 1)

## **Membership**

Tribal membership cards are used as a form of identification by federally recognized tribes (U.S. Department of Interior, n.d.). Members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma receive their Tribal Membership Card when they reach 18 years of age. Before then, members have a Certification of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). The tribal membership card is a double-sided card with one side being tribal membership and one side being CDIB, see Image 2 and Image 3. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma approves the tribal member status while the Bureau of Indian Affairs approves CBIDs (Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.). To be a registered member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, a Certificate Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) is required (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). The requirements to receive a CDIB include:

Applicant must provide proof of biological, direct lineage to an original enrollee of the Final Rolls. The enrollee must have had a blood quantum, rolled number and lived during the years 1899-1906. Please provide both maiden and married names for female enrollees listed on the application. (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023, p. 1)

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma side of the card has a spot for a photo in the upper left-hand corner. If the photo is there, this card can be used as an identification card. The seal of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is placed in the upper right-hand corner. This seal is circular and has two layers. The inner layer is yellow and has an unstrung bow, with three arrows and a pipe hatchet that is smoking. The outer layer is blue with the words, *The great seal of the Choctaw Nation*, within it. Right below the seal in red lettering are the words *Choctaw Nation – Faith, Family, Culture*, which is the vision of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. In the upper middle of the card, the words *Tribal Membership Card* can be found. Below those words, the address of the main Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma offices is provided. In the lower left-hand corner, it explains who the card owner is, their address, membership number, date of birth, and gender. In the lower middle of the card, the approved date and expiration date are shown. In the lower right-hand corner, the signature of the director of the Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) and Tribal Members and the signature of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma chief can be found. See Figure 2 for a visual representation of the tribal membership card.

**Figure 2**

*Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Tribal Membership Card*



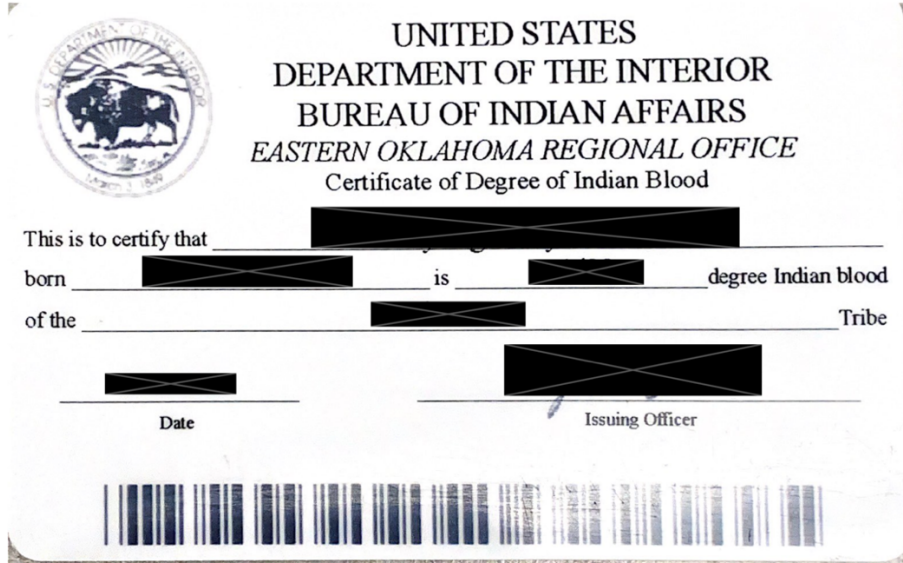
*Note.* Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Tribal Membership Card

The other side of the card is quite different, including the Bureau of Indian Affairs Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB). In the upper left corner, the U.S. Department of Interior logo can be found. This logo is black and white but has two layers similar to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma seal. The inner layer has a buffalo in front of a sunset. The outer layer has the words “*U.S. Department of Interior, March 3, 1849*”. In the upper middle of the card is the explanation of what the card is: *United State Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Eastern Oklahoma Regional Office, Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood*. In the middle of the card, one sentence appears with four blanks to be filled out person to person: *This is to certify that BLANK born BLANK is BLANK degree Indian blood of the BLANK tribe*. Below is a spot for the print date and the signature of the issuing officer. See Figure 3 to see a visual representation of the CDIB.



**Figure 3**

***Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood***



*Note.* Bureau of Indian Affairs Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB)

**Agricultural Heritage of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma**

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has been involved in agriculture for centuries (Oklahoma History Press, 2013). After their forced resettlement to what is now Oklahoma, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma focused on agricultural practices (Morrison, 1959). As time progressed, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members became sharecroppers (Oklahoma Social Studies Standards, 2014). Today, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has natural resource programs to help members develop their land (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). These programs include agriculture demonstration centers, a forestry program, an invasive species program, a land management program, land title and records, real estate appraisals, real property management,

recycling centers, and a tribal conservation district [TCD] (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023).

### **Higher Education and Career Support**

The Choctaw Nation has supported their members attending higher education institutions since the signing of the Treaty of Dancing Creek (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). The nation saw there was a benefit to having leaders who were highly educated (Crum, 2007). The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has programs for natural resources and agriculture, and programs supporting higher education. One is its Higher Education Program (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). “The Higher Education Program began in 1984, but in the past three years alone, the program has served over 16,000 students looking to obtain a college degree” (Kirvan, 2021, para. 2). Very similar to the Higher Education Program is the Career Development Program which “provides financial assistance for training along with a comprehensive array of career guidance services, workforce skills development and academic skills enhancement” (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). Through these programs, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has become the leading tribal nation at Oklahoma State University regarding scholarships for their members (Oklahoma State University, 2023).

### **Native Americans in Higher Education**

Native American tribes have been supporting their members with high education funding since the enactment of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in 1975 (Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.). However, Native American students have felt detrimental effects to their culture in the form of invisibleness, misrepresentation, isolation, and invalidation in higher education (Masta, 2018; Steward-Ambo, 2020; Tachine et. al., 2016). Masta (2018)

found many of her study's participants perceived themselves as invisible in notation to the non-Native students around them. Many non-Native students believed Native people were now extinct or in the process of disappearing (Masta, 2018). Through this feeling of invisibility, a sense of undervalue and classroom hostility may arise among native students (Steward-Ambo, 2020). In another study, native students felt as if "higher education systems were not built for underrepresented students" (Steward-Ambo, 2021, p. 508). These two factors may also play a role in Native students feeling isolated. Steward-Ambo (2021) also found to explain that Native students felt singled out or that they had to educate their fellow non-Native students at their universities. However, many Native American students perceived that non-Native students did not want to learn what is not was history books (Masta, 2018). However, when Native American students feel a sense of belonging, they may have higher levels of motivation toward their education (Shotton, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017).

### **Belongingness and Motivation**

For many native students, finding their place of belonging in higher education is difficult. In the context of this study, sense of belonging describes how students feel regarding their experience, if they felt cared for, accepted, valued, and supported on campus (Strayhorn, 2018). Tachine et al. (2017) explained that Native American students have ongoing conflict between the higher education culture and their native heritage. Shotton (2018) shares that higher education is individualistic, which contradicts the way of being as understood by most Native Americans. Native Americans have a collectivist way of thinking i.e., what can be done for the group more than themselves (Dvorakova, 2019). For Native Americans, families and communities provide a sense of belonging. Steward-Ambo (2021) and Tachine et al. (2017) found Native students discover a sense of belonging in college while being around other native students. Steward-

Ambo (2021) found most students discovered a place of belonging and comfort in their university's Native student center. One student from Tachine et al. (2017) study explained, "[T]he Native center provided a place where other Native students could congregate, and through being together, there was a shared language and understanding on such things as joke" (p. 798). For the students in Steward-Ambo's (2021) study, they felt a place of belonging in the American Indian and Alaskan Native, (AIAN) organizations on campus. "Participants unanimously shared that Native organizations offered them an on-campus family and community among their Native peers" (Steward-Ambo, 2021, p. 510). When students feel a sense of belonging, their motivation increases (Walton et al., 2012).

Motivation plays a vital role in the Native Americans continuation of their education.

Numerous studies of Native American students who attend mainstream colleges and universities suggest that factors such as precollege academic preparation, family support, supportive and involved faculty, institutional commitment, and maintaining an active presence in home communities and cultural ceremonies are crucial elements that impact these students' ability and/or desire to persist in college. (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 58)

For the native women in Shotton's (2018) study, their motivation to pursue post-secondary education was their tribe and families. "For these women, receiving a doctoral degree was not just for personal gain; it meant accepting that with their degree they had a responsibility to give back to their tribes, communities, families, and other Native people" (Shotton, 2018, p. 502). The native students in Stewart-Ambo's (2021) study knew that obtaining a higher education degree meant stability for themselves and their future families (2021). Cech et al. (2017) explained that "attaining an SE&H [science, engineering and health] degree is a tool for

them to be able to give back in the ways they wish to” (p. 758). Students in Cech’s et al. (2017) study planned to return to their community after obtaining their science, engineering, or health degrees. Having a sense of belonging and motivation is vital for Native American students. Not only does this help students feel cared for and supported, but native students are more likely to continue and complete their degree, thereby, increasing the retention and graduation rates of Native Americans of higher education institutions (Strayhorn, 2018).

### **Morrill Acts**

Oklahoma State University is the 1862 land-grant university for the state of Oklahoma (Oklahoma State University, 2023). The land-grant system was created when the Morrill Act was enacted on July 2, 1862, to support the creation of publicly funded universities in each state (National Archives, 2022, para. 1). Land-grant universities were started with the mission to educate students in agriculture and the mechanical arts (National Archives, 2022). Today, the land-grant system has a three-part mission: research, education, and extension (Settle & Telg, 2013; United States Department of Agriculture, 2023). The act is named after Senator Justin S. Morrill of Vermont, who was discouraged from receiving his own formal education and sought to increase and establish better places of education around the country (United State Senate, n.d.). The first Morrill Act was passed and enacted in 1862 establishing the original land-grant universities but a third act was passed and enacted in 1994 to establish Tribal Colleges and Universities [TCUs] (Halvorson, 2016). The United States Department of Agriculture (2023) explained that 36 TCUs exist to improve the career opportunities and lives of native students. TCUs were created for Native Americans, however only 9.3% of Native Americans attend such institutions (Synder, 2016). The U.S. department of education, n.d., explains Native Americans comprise “78% of the combined total enrollment of these institutions (para. 2).

Many studies credit Native American student centers on the campuses of non-1994 land-grant universities in keeping Native Americans connected to their cultures and their nations (Tachine et al., 2017). OSU founded their Native American student center, the Center for Sovereign Nations, in 2015 to serve all Native students and connect them to their tribes (Oklahoma State University, 2023). Oklahoma State University is the leading land-grant university for Native American students (Oklahoma State University, 2023). However, recently many land-grant universities have started to acknowledge the land the universities were built on were taken from Native American tribes (McCoy et al., 2021). OSU is in the process of paying their land acknowledgement statement, which is stated below:

We acknowledge that the land granted to Oklahoma State University (OSU) was originally inhabited and cared for by Native Americans. We also recognize and acknowledge that OSU resides and operates upon the territorial lands currently inhabited and preserved by citizens of the 39 sovereign Tribal Governments within Oklahoma. As a land-grant institution, OSU is committed to engaging in university and community efforts to represent and honor the proud cultural heritage and history of Native citizens throughout the state and nation, including our students, faculty, staff, and alumni. OSU continues to respect and serve the sovereignty of the original Native American owners and protectors of these lands by cultivating and strengthening our institutional collaborations with sovereign Tribal Nations and their citizens. (Oklahoma State University, 2022, para. 1)

This land acknowledgement was passed by OSU's faculty council, provost, and legal as of April 2022.

## ***Demographics of Oklahoma State University***

During the 2022 academic year, OSU had a student body 22,622 students (OSU, 2022). Self-identified Native Americans attending OSU 957 (4.23%), (OSU, 2022). In 2021, OSU had 1,587 faculty members across campus. Of these faculty members, 1.64%, (n = 26), self-identified as Native American (OSU, 2021). OSU's main campus includes 3,873 staff members, of which 153 (3.95%) identified as Native American (OSU, 2021). OSU reported the FCA enrolled 13.58%, (n = 3,176), of Oklahoma State University-Main Campus's student population. Within the college itself, Native Americans represented 4.57%, (n = 145), of the FCA enrollment. OSU (2021) reported 238 (15%) faculty members in FCA, but only three (1.26%) Native American faculty members.

## **Summary of Literature**

Native Americans endured forced resettlement, genocide, boarding schools, and assimilation throughout their relationship with Western settlers and the U.S. Government (Au et al., 2016; Child, 2000; Oklahoma History Press, 2013). However, Native Americans chose to continue to make education a priority (Crum, 2007). The Choctaws kept education as a priority as they were relocated to what is now Oklahoma (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 1830; Oklahoma History Press, 2013). However, even with tribal nations prioritizing education, Native Americans remain one of the lowest represented groups in higher education (Fish & Syed, 2018; Oklahoma State University, 2022; Steward-Ambo, 2021). Finding a sense of belonging within higher education can help motivate and impact the retention and graduation of native students (Cech et al., 2017; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Shotton, 2018, Tachine et al., 2017). Gaps exist

in the literature related to the experience of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students in higher education and colleges of agriculture, which warranted the current study.

### **Conceptual Lenses**

A theoretical or conceptual lens “is a guided perspective or ideology that provides structure for advocacy for groups or individuals in the written report” (Creswell, 2012, p. 505). Throughout this study, Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Transculturation (Huffman, 1990), and Cultural Integrity (Oxendine & Taub, 2021) were used as conceptual lenses for guiding and framing the inquiry.

### **Tribal Critical Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) was first used in the legal sector (George, 2021). The American Bar Association (2021) described CRT as “not a noun, but a verb” (para. 2).

It cannot be confined to a static and narrow definition but is an evolving and malleable practice. It critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tiers. CRT also recognizes that race intersects with other identities, including sexuality, gender identity, and others. (George, 2021, para. 2)

Many subcategories of CRT have emerged throughout the years (Crenshaw, 2011). Crenshaw (2011) saw this in her work as she began studying Fem-Crits. For this study, the subcategory of CRT used is Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit). TribalCrit is a continuation of CRT focusing on CRT in tribal nations (Haynes Writer, 2009). Brayboy (2005), who is known for developing TribalCrit, outlined nine tenets within the theory:



1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. (pp. 429-430)

For this study, tenants 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7 served as a conceptual lens. These tenants helped to explain the lived experiences of the participants in this study. [Tenet] 1 me to explicate into the history of Native Americans and see how much colonization may have affected the participants overtime. [Tenet 2] gave this study a lens to address policies and assimilation. [Tenet] 4 helped to justify the need to study a specific tribal nation i.e., the Choctaw Nation of

Oklahoma. [Tenet 5] helped me to understand the perceptions of culture, knowledge, and power within higher education through the lens of the study’s participants. [Tenet] 6 allowed me to look critically at how the higher education experiences of the participants may have contributed to further assimilation. [Tenet] 7 helped me understand the participants’ connection to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Along with these tenets, transculturation theory and cultural integrity were also used to bring meaning to the participants’ lived experiences.

**Transculturation Theory**

Transculturation theory is based on transculturation (Huffman, 1990). Transculturation is explained as people from one culture who can interact with another culture without losing their own cultural identity (Huffman, 2008). Huffman (1990) derived this theory while studying Native Americans in Higher Education. “[T]ransculturation theory evolved as an attempt to examine the manner in which Native students encounter and engage mainstream-dominant educational settings. Second, transculturation theory attempts to explain why Native American students persist and succeed rather than why they do not” (Huffman, 2020, p. 88). Table 1 is a visual representation of how Huffman (1990) saw transculturation unfolding.

**Table 1**

***Transculturation Model***

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Initial Alienation	Self – Discovery	Realignment	Participant
Lack of belongingness	Rediscovery of native heritage	Relating to both worlds	Use of heritage as a positive

*Note.* Adapted from Huffman’s (1990) Transculturation Model.

As adapted from Huffman (1990), this model shows the stages of transculturation. Stage 1 involves around the initial interaction across cultures and how a sense of belonging might be missing. Stage 2 is when the individual begins to discover themselves and their tribal heritage.

Individuals begin aligning with their native heritage and outside cultures during stage 3. By stage 4, the individual has positive experiences with their heritage. Huffman (2013) investigated the assumption of Native students are always learning and engaged in culture. To be able to maintain one's culture according to this model, they must have strength and confidence in their own culture (Oxendine & Taub, 2021). “[For M] any students the retention of traditional cultural identity and heritage is crucial for greater academic achievement and success” (Huffman, 1990, p. 7).

### ***Cultural Integrity***

Marroquin and McCoach (2014) credit Huffman (2011) with the defining cultural integrity:

[C]ultural integrity is rooted in the hypothesis of transculturation theory, which contextualizes experiences for Native Americans in a post-secondary education environment, based on factors such as 1) utilizing one's ethnic identity as an emotional anchor; 2) constructing a cultural threshold; 3) engaging in two cultural settings; and 4) cultural learning (p. 4).

Due to civilization and assimilation, many Native Americans struggle to maintain their cultural integrity (Wright, 1991). Throughout this study, TribalCrit, Transculturation, and Cultural Integrity serve as conceptual lens to investigate and interpret the meanings of the lived experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members while students in the FCA at OSU. Through these lenses, this study considered the role of Native American history, sovereignty, culture, and identity.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the rationale for the study's methodology. This chapter will explain the epistemological perspective and methodology were used in this study. The rationale for the methodology, research questions, context of the study, interview questions, descriptions of the participants, explanation of the instrument used, data collection, and data analysis are explained. An explanation of the coding process, including codes, categories, and themes development will be outlined.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma graduate and undergraduate students enrolled the Ferguson College of Agriculture (FCA) at Oklahoma State University (OSU). The aim of the study was to understand how the FCA may strengthen its services and the cultural environment for students, with a focus on Native Americans, including members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. In addition, the findings of this study assist in filling a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members in higher education pursuing degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources.

#### **Guiding Questions**

Below are the three questions that guided this study.

1. What influenced Choctaw Nation students to pursue degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources in the FCA at OSU?
2. How did Choctaw Nation students describe their experiences in the FCA at OSU?
3. How did Choctaw Nation students perceive inclusion of their native identity in the FCA at OSU?

### **Institutional Review Board**

In the summer of 2022, I proposed my study to my thesis committee. This proposal included a review of literature, justification for the study, methodology, interview protocol, limitations, and assumptions of the study. After receiving committee approval, I submitted my protocol to the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (OSU-IRB) and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board (CNO-IRB). The OSU-IRB and CNO-IRB reviewed the interview questions, recruitment materials, research questions, and consent form for this study. After the protocols were submitted, I met virtually with the CNO-IRB committee and presented the study. The CNO-IRB committee approved the study on August 22, 2023 (see Appendix A). Upon approval from the CNO-IRB, the OSU-IRB approved the study protocol on August 24, 2022 (see Appendix B).

### **Rationale for Methodology**

This study focused on the lived experiences of an underrepresented group of people. To fully understand the lived experiences of Oklahoma State University undergraduate and graduate students who are Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members, I chose to complete a qualitative study using in-depth personal interviews. In-depth interviews gave the participants a conformable

space to share their experiences, feelings, thoughts, and perspectives (Glense, 2016). Interviews are a way for researchers to uncover information they likely could not observe or gain from quantitative data (Patton 2002). Interviews were used instead of focus groups due to the sensitivity of the subject matter (Westate et al., 2010). However, disadvantages to interviews can arise such as being time consuming, flexibility of the researcher and the participants, and difficulty maintaining the volume of data (Westate et al., 2010). Westate et al. (2010) explained that interviews yield rich data, give opportunity to explore the topic in depth, and questions can explain and clarified during the interview. To best address my guiding questions, I felt as though the advantages of interviews outweighed any of the disadvantages and were most appropriate for my study's purpose.

Throughout qualitative inquiries, there are different theoretical perspectives. This study aligns with the theoretical perspective of constructivism. Constructivism is the perspective that humans give objects meaning (Patton, 2002). This perspective gives precedence to the view, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions of the participants (Creswell, 2019). The participants gave meaning to their experiences at a land-grant university and in a college of agriculture. While using the theoretical perspective of constructivism, I chose to follow the methodology of a phenomenological qualitative study. Mohajan (2018) explained that phenomenology is useful when “the study is about the life experiences of a concept or phenomenon experienced by one or more individuals” (p. 29). Through a phenomenological lens, I looked for themes and experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma undergraduate and graduate students in the FCA at OSU. Moustakas, 1994, describes phenomenological as

A return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience. (p. 12).

The experiences, or phenomenon, of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students can help to better understand what this underrepresented population had experienced, and the meaning of their experiences, in the FCA, or a collective group. For the purpose of this study, the experiences the participants explain was described as their lived experience. Lived experiences can be explained as how an individual can find meaning and describe an experience (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Population of the Study**

To be considered for this study, participants had to be a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma who were current undergraduates and graduate students in the FCA at OSU in Stillwater, Oklahoma. OSU is the 1862 land-grant university in Oklahoma and is comprised of 10 colleges: Arts and Sciences, Education and Human Science, Engineering, Architecture and Technology, Global Studies and Partnerships, Ferguson College of Agriculture, Graduate College, Spears School of Business, Honors College, Veterinary Medicine, and University College. This study focused on Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma undergraduate and graduate students in the Ferguson College of Agriculture. Native Americans have cultivated the lands of the United States since before European settlement. However, Native Americans pursue postsecondary degrees in agriculture at low rates (Fish & Syed, 2018). This study examined the experiences of the members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma who were pursuing degrees in the FCA.

### **Choctaw Nation Membership**

According to the Department of Justice, 2022, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is one of 38 federally recognized tribes in the state of Oklahoma. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), 2017, states there are 39 federally recognized tribes in Oklahoma. For the purpose of this study, 39 was the number of federally recognized tribes in Oklahoma. For inclusion in this study, participants had to be members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. However, participants did not have to grow up in the Choctaw Nation tribal land or in Oklahoma. Before the interview started, each participant was asked to show their tribal membership card, refer to Chapter 2 for an explanation of tribal membership cards.

Though I could see blood quantum on the participant's tribal membership cards, I chose to not give significance to this information. Adding significance to blood quantum would have made this study's population more specific and smaller. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma does not require members to have a specific blood quantum to be considered a member. The Choctaw Nation only requires members to be able to show the lineage from which the blood quantum was derived.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

On September 6, 2022, an electronic message was sent to 3,175 students in the Ferguson College of Agriculture, including undergraduate and graduate students. The list of electron addresses was provided by the OSU-IRB and Institutional Research offices. The messages included current students in the FCA. Only addresses of students were provided.

In 2021, OSU had 957 Native Americans students enrolled at its main campus (OSU, 2022). In 2022, Native Americans represented 4.23% of the OSU student body. OSU records did not provide the tribal memberships of the 957 students. Further recruitment was done through



one posting on the Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership social media platforms (i.e., Instagram and Facebook), and tabling in three different buildings on OSU's campus where FCA's classes were held during the first two weeks of the semester. Students interested in participating scanned a QR code that led them to a Google Form to sign up for an interview time (see Appendix C). Reminder messages were not sent using the addresses provided by OSU-IRB. However, five follow-up messages were sent to five participants who self-identified themselves through the Google Form but did not follow through in scheduling an interview time. Reminder messages were concluded on December 2, 2022. With initial interest garnered from the original electron message, I felt confident this study would reach data saturation without a reminder email to the initial respondents. Saturation in qualitative research occurs when no new findings are presented in additional interviews (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I determined saturation was met when I did not feel any new information would be gleaned in additional interviews.

Through these recruitment techniques, 16 individuals self-identified themselves through the Google Form attached to the recruitment flyer. I messaged the self-identified students with a time and a location for their respective interviews. Interviews were held in the Edmon Low Library's study rooms. To ensure trustworthiness and inclusion in the study, participants were asked to show their Tribal Membership Card at the beginning of the interview. After verification of tribal membership, participants were given an IRB-approved consent form (see Appendix E). The consent form was signed before the interviews were conducted. I did not start recording the interview until the consent form was signed. Throughout the interview, the participants had the right to stop at any point or to skip any question they did not want to answer. To de-identify students and maintain participant confidentiality, each interview was given a number

corresponding with the order in which it was conducted after transcription. Overall, 11 Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma undergraduate and graduate students participated in this study.

### **The Participants**

Select personal characteristics questions were asked at the end of each interview. Eight participants (72.72%) presented as females. Three participants (27.28%) presented as males. Three participants called the 12 districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma home; two lived in district three and one in district 7. Eight participants (72.72%) grew up outside of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma districts. Nine participants were Oklahoma residents (81.82%), while two participants (18.18 %) grew up outside of Oklahoma, one participant lived in Virginia, and one moved to a new state every four years. Four participants (36.36%) were first-year students, six participants (54.54%) were transfer students, and one participant (9.10%) was a senior who started at Oklahoma State University as a freshman. Agribusiness, agricultural communication, agricultural education, agronomy, animal science, entomology, and natural resource ecology and management were the participants' majors. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 26 years old. Even though the study was open to Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma graduate and undergraduate students, the 11 participants were pursuing an undergraduate degree.

A description of the 11 participants is provided in Table 2. The descriptions only contain information needed to gain a sense of understanding about each participant. Any possible identifying information and descriptions about the participants were not included to maintain confidentiality.

**Table 2***Description of Participants*

Participants	Descriptions
Participant 1	A female, transfer student majoring in natural resources and ecology management who grew up in the twelve districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.
Participant 2	A male, transfer student majoring in natural resources ecology and management and entomology who grew up outside of the twelve districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.
Participant 3	A female, transfer student majoring in agricultural communication and agribusiness who was an out-of-state student.
Participant 4	A female, transfer student majoring in environmental sciences who grew up outside of the twelve districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.
Participant 5	A female, first-year student majoring in agricultural communications and agribusiness whose home is not within the twelve districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.
Participant 6	A male, first-year student majoring in agribusiness who was an out-of-state student.
Participant 7	A female, transfer student who was majoring in agricultural education and did not grow up in the twelve districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.
Participant 8	A male student who was in their fourth year at Oklahoma State University majoring in natural resource and environmental sciences whose home is within the twelve districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.
Participant 9	A female, student transfer student majoring in agronomy whose hometown is within the twelve districts of the Choctaw Nation.
Participant 10	A female, first-year student majoring in animal science with a pre-veterinarian option who did not grow up in the twelve districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.
Participant 11	A female, first-year student majoring in animal science with a biotechnology option who grew up outside of the twelve districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection began during September of 2023 with in-person, semi-structured interviews, which occurred in the Edmon Low Library on the Oklahoma State University, Stillwater campus. Study rooms were reserved for each interview. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. Before the interviews started each participant read and signed a copy of the CNO-IRB and the OSU-IRB approved consent forms (see Appendix A & Appendix B). After the consent form was signed, I asked each participant to show me their Tribal Membership Card to confirm their tribal membership and inclusion in the study. After the participants' membership were confirmed, I began the interview.

Zoom© was utilized as an audio recording device during the interviews. The main features used were audio recording and automated transcription. The recording of the interview started after the consent forms were signed and tribal membership confirmed. The camera feature was not used for this study.

## **Interview Protocol**

In the review of literature supporting this study, I could not find much about Native American students pursuing post-secondary degrees within colleges of agriculture. As I limited my study population to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students in colleges of agriculture, relevant literature became even more scarce. Yet, I did find studies that suggested underrepresented groups should be asked about their experiences. Based on interactions with my committee chair and members, eight interview questions about participants' experience as a Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma member in the FCA and six questions regarding personal characteristics emerged as the study's semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured

interviews are interviews when the researcher has a list of questions but may also develop questions on the spot during the interview. (Glesne, 2016). This protocol was approved by the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma IRB and Oklahoma State University IRB.

Before any interviews were conducted, a pilot interview was completed. The pilot interview was to ensure the interview protocol was appropriate (Glense, 2016). The pilot interview took place in Edmon Low Library on Oklahoma State University's main campus. This interview was not recorded or transcribed. The information the pilot participant gave in the interview were not included in the data analysis. The participant of the pilot interview was a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma who was a current graduate student at Oklahoma State University. This participant also did her undergraduate degree work at Oklahoma State University. However, she was not a student in the Ferguson College of Agriculture. She grew up outside of the 12 districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. After this interview, I changed how I presented myself in the interview. I recognized that I was adding too much of my own thoughts and biases into the conversation. From the pilot interview, I learned to ask the questions and let the participant lead the discussion.

Interview questions played a vital role in the data collected. Creswell (2019) explained that qualitative inquiries utilize interviews and observation to explore and understand a specific phenomenon. Because I wanted this study to add to the body of literature on Choctaw Nation students in higher education and be a steppingstone to other studies, the questions I asked aimed to illuminate the experiences of the participants. Throughout the interviews, I wanted participants to feel safe and welcome to share their stories. The semi-structured interview protocol can be found in Table 2 and Table 3.

**Table 3***Interview Questions*

<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Questions</i>
1.	Tell me about your Choctaw Nation heritage.
2.	What Influenced your decision to pursue a higher education degree?
3.	Describe to me what led you to attend Oklahoma State University.
4.	What influenced your decision to major within the Ferguson College of Agriculture?
5.	Tell me about a time you saw the college represent your heritage.
6.	Describe a time when you did not feel your heritage was being supported by the college.
7.	Tell me about a faculty member that has positively affected your college experience.
8.	Describe what career path you would pursue if you had not chosen a major/degree in the college of agriculture.

**Table 4***Select Questions about Participants' Personal Characteristics*

<i>Number</i>	<i>Question</i>
1.	What year in school are you?
2.	How old are you?
3.	Is your hometown within the 12 districts of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma? If so, which district?
4.	Which department in the Ferguson College of Agriculture are you in?
5.	What are your plans upon graduation?
6.	Do you plan to work in any of the 12 districts?

At the end of the interviews, I saved the recording to a Microsoft OneDrive folder that required a two-way authorization log-in to ensure the security of the data. Interviews were auto transcribed by Zoom©. I verified the transcriptions by listening to the recordings and editing accordingly to represent what the participants said accurately. After reviewing and editing the transcriptions, they were member-checked (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I emailed each participant their respective transcription and asked them to review the transcription, make changes, or delete anything they wished to not be used in data analysis. Each participant was given seven days to

make changes. After seven days passed, I confirmed the interview transcription and began coding. Each transcription was saved as a Microsoft Word document in a Microsoft OneDrive folder requiring two-way authorization for access. Line numbers were added to the transcription documents to aid in the data analysis process and maintain an accurate coding audit.

### **Data Analysis**

After member checking of transcriptions concluded, I re-read the transcription and added *in-process memos*. Creswell (2019) explained in-process memos as “notes that the researcher writes throughout the research process to elaborate on ideas about the data and the coded categories” (p. 450). I completed one transcript at a time, adding in-process memos and then initial codes. The coding process selected for this study was in-vivo coding. Saldaña (2013) described in-vivo coding as “verbatim coding” (p. 91). Through this process, I went line by line with each transcript and underlined specific words or phrases that caught my attention. Each line had a specific line number to ensure an audit trail (Cope, 2014) (see Appendix G). Categories began to form from these codes. I did this for each transcript. After the 11 transcriptions were coded and categorized, I looked over the categories to see what patterns had emerged. Through this process, 282 in-vivo codes emerged, and were then combined into 12 patterns during second round coding. The 12 patterns were: (a) campus culture; (b) campus involvement; (c) connection to the tribe; (d) family; (e) involvement in agriculture; (f) long-term; (g) outside of the college; (h) representation; (i) resources; (j) support; (k) the Center of Sovereign Nations; and (l) transfer. The third and final round of coding resulted in five emergent themes (Saldana, 2013). The five themes were: (a) support systems in the Ferguson College of Agriculture; (b) (in)visible heritage and assimilation; (c) the collective pursuit and legacy of higher education; (d) the Ferguson College of Agriculture as a means to their end; and (e) journey to an agricultural college.

## Credibility and Trustworthiness

Due to the nature of this study's qualitative and phenomenological methodology, I, as the researcher, was considered the research instrument. I took steps to ensure this study is credible and so the findings would be trustworthy. Credibility in qualitative research is the truth of the data and the participants' stories (Cope, 2014). Lincoln & Guba (1985) found trustworthiness can be accomplished by establishing four criteria: (a) credibility; (b) transferability; (c) dependability; and (d) confirmability. Credibility refers to the how believable the findings are. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that member checking is a way to increase credibility. Member checking is when the researcher asks the participant to check the accuracy of their data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this, I sent each participant the transcript of their interview and asked them to review it. They were able to make edits and retract anything they wished. Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) next criteria to establish trustworthiness is transferability. Transferability can be provided by thick, rich descriptions (Cope, 2014). Adding descriptions gives readers the ability to transfer or apply the study in different areas (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability was the third criteria explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Dependability is how stable the study is (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure dependability, I used peers and advisors within the same or related field of research to approve my interview protocol, discuss findings and conclusions, and review the study for biases (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019). To establish confirmability, which is a way to ensure personal bias did not affect the study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), line numbers were added to each transcription to ensure an audit trail. An audit trail is a process in the documents that allows readers understand the process, decisions, and assumptions of the researcher (Cope, 2014). Another tactic used to ensure



trustworthiness and credibility is using direct quotes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through this study's findings, direct quotes from participant interviews demonstrate how the themes emerged.

### **Statement of Subjectivity**

Subjectivity, also referred to as reflexivity, is when the researcher calls to attention their experiences and possible source of bias (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Glesne, 2016;).

“Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspectives and voices of the one interviews and those to whom one reports” (Patton, 2002, p. 65). Throughout this section, I will reflect on my experiences and background that may have influenced interpretation of my study’s findings.

I am a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and lived in the tribal lands from age four until leaving home for college at 18. I was born in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma hospital in Talihina, Oklahoma. My Certification of Indian Blood (CDIB) was approved on August 29, 2000. My great, great, maternal grandmother was one of the first Choctaw Nation members to sign the Dawes Rolls of Choctaw Nation in 1906. My lineage can be found under roll number m947 of the Dawes Rolls of the Choctaw Nation. As a family, we attended the Labor Day Festivities in Tuskahoma, Oklahoma every year. The Labor Day Festivities is a yearly tradition to celebrate Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma history, culture, and family (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). While at these festivities and other Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, I felt like an outsider. As an individual with a very pale complexion and other physical features that do not show my tribal heritage, I have been asked on multiple occasions if

I was “really Indian.” Through these experiences, I learned more about my tribal heritage and identify to ensure no one could take it away from me.

In addition to my membership in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, my connection to agriculture is also relevant to my subjectivity. My involvement in agriculture started when I was in third grade. I grew up on a small cow-calf operation most of my life. However, the third grade was the first time I became involved in 4-H by showing Boer goats and participating in speech contests. My time showing Boer goats lasted for approximately four years before I started showing cattle. I exhibited cattle around Oklahoma from the seventh grade until high school graduation. During this time, I was also heavily involved in the National FFA Organization at the local and state levels. It was during this time that I started seeing myself as pursuing a career in agriculture.

The FCA was where I grew into the person and scholar I am today during my undergraduate and graduate careers. I stepped foot onto OSU's campus at 16 during our homecoming celebration and knew this was where I wanted to attend college. During my first year, I was able to live in the living learning program supported by the college and it was then FCA felt like home.

During my time at OSU, I did not observe the university or FCA represent my tribal heritage. At the same time, I did not see the university or FCA disrespect or discredit my tribal heritage. As a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, I felt as though my heritage was invisible during my college experience.

## Summary of Chapter

This study focuses on the essences of lived experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members in the FCA at OSU. To grasp these essences, a qualitative approach was used. In-person interviews were held using an OSU IRB and Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma IBA semi-structured approved protocol. Participants in this study had to self-identify themselves to schedule an interview. 11 members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma participated in this study. These members were all undergraduate students in the FCA at OSU in the fall semester of 2022. Steps were taken to ensure creditability and trustworthiness.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to explicate the findings and experiences of Choctaw Nation undergraduate students in the Ferguson College of Agriculture (FCA) at Oklahoma State University (OSU). Five themes emerged from the qualitative interview data and will be explored throughout this chapter. Appendix G includes a table with examples of the codes and categories that led to the emergence of each theme.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma graduate and undergraduate students enrolled the FCA at OSU. The aim of the study was to understand how the FCA may strengthen its services and the cultural environment for students, with a focus on Native Americans, including members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. In addition, the findings of this study assist in filling a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members in higher education pursuing degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources.

#### **Guiding Questions**

Below are the three questions that guided this study:

1. What influenced Choctaw Nation students to pursue degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources in the FCA at OSU?
2. How did Choctaw Nation students describe their experiences in the FCA at OSU?
3. How did Choctaw Nation students perceive inclusion of their native identity in the FCA at OSU?

### **Themes**

Five themes emerged from the qualitative interview data:

1. Support systems in the Ferguson College of Agriculture;
2. (In)visible heritage and assimilation;
3. The collective pursuit and legacy of higher education;
4. The Ferguson College of Agriculture as a means to an end; and
5. Journey to an agricultural college

#### **Theme 1: Support Systems in the Ferguson College of Agriculture**

Participants perceived being cared for as a person and a student in the FCA. This support came from professors and faculty advisors in the college. Many participants felt a sense of gratitude for this support system. Participants saw support in the classroom, in their journey to graduation, and through faculty members taking participants under their watch. Although many participants felt supported in the FCA, one participant did not. This participant's aberrant perspective could be beneficial for the faculty and staff of FCA to consider when are serving non-traditional students.

#### ***Cared for as a Person and Not Just a Student***

Participants perceived they had a support system within the FCA. All participants mentioned at least one faculty or staff member who had positively affected their college experience. The faculty, who also serve as advisors in the college, were the main source of support for many participants. Many of these students felt professors saw and cared for them as people and not just students.

Participants 1, 2, and 6 mentioned a specific faculty members and their faculty advisors when describing their personal support system in the college. Participant 6 thought of three professors in the FCA who positively affected her college experience. Participant 4 identified two faculty members who helped her during a summer internship, and one who served as an instructor for a class. Participant 4 had this to say about the two faculty members: “Those two ladies have really worked to make sure I was taken care of” (Interview 4, L185-186). Participant 2 said this about their professor:

I was looking to get into entomology, and I took this kind of like intro class in entomology, and he then sat down with me. [He was] super inviting, very easy to work with. which made me feel like I was very much supposed to be an entomology and plant pathology major. (Interview 2, Line 125-128)

One faculty member in the FCA was mentioned by name. Participant 6 and 11 both explained they love going to that individual’s class. Participant 6 shared:

I look forward to going to that class. She has, like, actually, a decent lecture and I was so happy I had her the fall semester my first year. And I will say she definitely puts a smile on my face every Monday, Wednesday, Friday. (Interview 6, Line 131-133)

Participant 6 went on to explain “It’s a nice bond, we have” (Interview 6, Line 138-139) when this person called on him to give the class a song to listen to before class started. He expressed he felt supported but also comfortable around this faculty member. This participant was a first-year student, and this was one of the first courses he was enrolled in at OSU. Participant 11 had a very similar interaction with this faculty member. Participant 11 explained that they made sure students were okay mentally. Participant 11 said:

Just, like, when you go to her class, she will ask how everyone is doing every day. She goes around to make sure everyone says something. Yeah, she keeps it light and makes sure she knows what things happen on campus. (Interview 11, Lines 80-82)

Participant 11 was also a first-year student at Oklahoma State University. As first-semester students, Participant 6 and Participant 11 found that having faculty members who took the time to check on students and cultivating conformable classroom helped to support them and kept students interested in the course.

### ***Gratitude for Faculty Advisor***

Many participants noted supported due to their faculty advisor keeping them on track to graduation, which was especially relevant for transfer students. Three of these four participants who expressed this were transfer students. Participants 1 and 2 credited their advisors to as the reason they would be able to graduate on time. Participant 1 said:

He mapped out my entire schedule, from now to when I’m a senior [be]cause [sic] I had some classes I got behind on because I wasn't going to the university. Yeah,

so he, mapped out, like, ‘you can switch this there if you want to take this.’ There he had, like, a whole block paper just mapped out. (Interview 1, Line 252-255)

Participant 2 had a similar experience with his advisor. Participant 2’s advisor helped him determine the courses he needed to take:

[My advisor] has always helped me with everything that I've needed, and she is pretty awesome when it comes to knowing what classes you need to kind of like work around because I'm a transfer student. Yeah, it is very difficult to get the system to kind of work for you. It always seems like it is pushing against you. (Interview 2, Line 128-131)

Participant 3 was very thankful for her faculty advisor. She expressed that her faculty advisor had made the transition to Stillwater easier:

And she is just very caring, like, I was living here alone at my apartment, and to begin with. But now I have a roommate that I am really thankful to have, but it was just, kind of, like, scary, you know, like living on your own, like, completely alone as a girl for the first time. So, she she is, like, leaving town one day, and she just text me she is, like, ‘hey, checking on you if you need anything like I'm leaving town. But if you need anything, please let me know.’ (Interview 3, Lines 224-229)

For these transfer students, their faculty advisors served as a supportive transitional piece to their experience. These students felt gratitude toward their advisors for welcoming them into the college and for keeping them on track to graduation.



### *Some is Not All*

While most participants perceived their heritage was represented and supported on campus, one participant expressed she did not feel supported on campus:

I do not [feel supported], just to be honest, I mean. But I know I am one of those people that, I do not really look for it, or seeking out [*sic*], I should say which I know I should be better at that, but yeah [I am not]. (Interview 7, Line 88-89)

As Participant 7 talked through her experience, it was evident she was uncomfortable talking about it. She sensed it was her fault when she did not feel supported on campus. Even though the participant had a professor with who she could talk, she did not have the same experience as other participants.

### **Theme 2: (In)visible Heritage and Assimilation**

Representation around the university can be a source of support for students who are members of underrepresented groups. When discussing the representation of their heritage on campus, participants knew about the Native American clubs on campus. However, very few were involved in these clubs and organizations. Only Participant 8 was involved in one of the on-campus Native American clubs. Participant 8 was also the only participant who was knowledgeable about OSU's Center for Sovereign Nations. Being involved in the Center for Sovereign Nations allowed Participant 8 to hold a leadership position in it. Participant 8's involvement in the Center started with a celebration:

So, [the Center of Sovereign Nation does] this birthday celebration every year celebrating like, when they first open[ed], I guess. And my friend was, like, ‘we should go this. ...we've met officers for the Native American Student Association, NASA, and so then another one called the Native American Association. That’s how ... we first actually, got connected to the Center. (Interview 8, Lines 225-230)

Some participants felt the clubs and organizations for Native Americans were not sufficiently visible enough to encourage students to get involved. Participant 3 explained that she was very active during her first few weeks at OSU. While she was looking for places and groups with which to be involved, Participant 3 did not find clubs representing her heritage:

I feel, like, there were a lot of like tents around ... They had clubs or, like, sign up for OSU jobs, or do this, or do that, and I never really saw one for like any sort of, like, heritage. Which in my opinion, I feel like here it is a big deal, because there is so many people in Oklahoma that definitely have Indians here, like, native American heritage in their blood. (Interview 3, Line 197-201)

Many participants expressed that they checked the box when they applied letting the university know they identified as Native American. Some went as far as to explain the electronic messages they received from the Native American clubs and organizations: “I get emails from them all the time. They are always inviting me to do stuff with them” (Interview 2, Lines 77-78). Participant 3 had the same experience regarding the electron message:

I have really seen our heritage, like, really be kind of shown is whenever I first got here. I signed up for some kind of ,like, ‘what club would you possibly be interested in?’ and I think I just happened to select Indian heritage, or like, something Native American heritage, something regarding that. And that is to be honest with you all I have really seen. I get a few emails, like, here and there about like the meetings, but I have not gone to one yet. (Lines 164-169)

Participant 8 became involved by going to one event. Other participants had not yet been involved with the Center of Sovereign Nations or Native American clubs or organizations. Many participants expressed they did not have the time to get involved with such organizations. Some participants, however, were involved across the OSU campus.

#### ***An Experience Too Bad to Share***

Participant 4 shared a time when the college did not represent her heritage. However, she did not want to go into detail regarding the experience. When asked the question, she took a minute, and said: “[I] don’t [want] end the interview but I don’t want to answer that one” (Line 172). Participant 4 chose to continue with the interview after this but was adamant she did not want to talk about this experience. This encounter did not appear to affect the participant’s mood or body language as she explained other portions of her experience during the remainder of the interview.

#### ***Member or Card Holder***

Participants 4, 6, 7, and 11 expressed that they did not know much more about their heritage other than having a membership card. Participant 6 received his tribal membership card only two years prior to the interview. These four participants expressed

interest in wanting to know more about their heritage and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Two participants said that they signed up for this interview to learn more about their heritage. Participant 6 explained:

[B]ut, like, I did not know me and my little brother qualified until this last year. So, it is all very like fresh and new to me, which is kind of why I did this interview. I wanted to learn more about it. (Interview 6, Lines 17-19)

Participant 4 said: “We are not super attached to our heritage. We know that we are on the Dawes rolls,” (Interview 4, Lines 18-19). Participant 7 had a similar experience when explaining what her heritage meant to her: “I didn't really get to learn a lot about it. So, I do not know a lot, but I mean, I am proud to have that” (Interview 7, Lines 17-18). And Participant 11 shared:

I'm not really, like, super big in Choctaw. Well, like, the whole heritage thing. it goes back to my dad's family, so we do not know a whole lot other than who it directly goes back to like [an identifiable relative]. And so, we do not talk about it a whole lot, it's just kind of there. (Interview 11, Lines 6-8)

These four participants grew up outside of the 12 districts of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. When they mentioned their lack of connection and knowledge to the nation, their body language did not reveal any ill feelings or unease. Participant 10's first thought was to explain she was a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma even though she claimed she did not look like it: “I am definitely really proud to be Choctaw. You see me and you're not necessarily gonna [*sic*] think I'm Choctaw. I do not really look the part” (Interview 10, Lines 26-27).

Many participants felt their heritage was represented within the college and university. However, when asked to give an example, they were unable to identify visible representation on campus. For them, representation was defined by the working relationship between the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and the Oklahoma State University Bursar Office. As we talked about resources on campus and within the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, participants were very knowledgeable about tribal resources but were not as knowledgeable about on-campus resources or their tribal heritage. The resources participants were most knowledgeable about were Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's Higher Education Program and Career Development Program. These two programs are the most well-known scholarship programs provided by the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Most participants explained they perceived their heritage was represented on campus by how well the university worked with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma to get their scholarship money.

### **Theme 3: The Collective Pursuit and Legacy of Higher Education**

Family was a major attribute of support for many of the participants. Participant 6 explained his mom and dad are his best friends. Participant 3 expressed her family is a major foundation in her life. Not only are many participants close with their families, but they were also the reason they chose to pursue higher education. Participant 2 explained:

So, my wife was going to college for veterinary medicine, so we were living in Stillwater, and [it] only made sense that this was kind of where I would go. All of my family has gone to Oklahoma State at some point. (Interview 2, Lines 54-56)

These family members served as a support system when the participants chose to continue their education. Many participants had family members who supported their decisions to attend Oklahoma State University and pursue a degree in an agricultural discipline. However, none of these participants explained that their family legacy was in the college of agriculture.

### ***Family Legacy at Oklahoma State University***

Participants 3,4, 5 and 11 had family members who graduated from OSU.

Participant 3 also had family members currently attending OSU:

I actually have three cousins that have gone or go or graduated from Oklahoma State. Two of them have already graduated, and the middle one was actually the President at [fraternity]. So, like just very big, like within, like fraternity story stuff. My cousin [name removed] just got into [sorority] here, she's a freshman, so it's just really nice, like, knowing that you know they were so happy here. And then also I have family here with me like I'm not alone. (Lines 148- 153)

For participant 11, her family's legacy was one of the main factors in choosing to attend Oklahoma State University. "I'm a third-generation student here. So, it was just kind of a no brainer" (Interview 11, Lines 15-16). Participant 4 also had Oklahoma State graduates in her family:

My granddad had graduated from OSU, and it was always the big divider of our family like, if you're on OU versus OSU and so that had always been a thing. I was not too big interested until my brother went to Rose State College to get his basics and then transferred. So, I followed him, and that's cause [*sic*] he had

already made the way. So then, like, having gone to a 2-year degree first everything was really easy to transfer over, and not having to go live in the dorms and stuff like that. (Interview 4, Lines 48-53).

### ***Family as the Cornerstone of their Agricultural Experience***

For these individuals, family were a huge factor in support but also regarding where they chose to attend college. Family was also how many of them got involved in agriculture. Their family was involved in agriculture in some way, either owning and operating a farm or being involved in agriculture companies. This had led these students to see a future career in the agricultural industry. Participant 3 explained:

I have always loved Ag. I mean my family always had cattle. My boyfriend is huge into Ag and to cattle. They farm cotton and wheat and stuff like that. So eventually I just kind of saw me going into some sort of, like, agribusiness. (Lines 128-131)

Participant 6 did not grow up heavily involved in agriculture but saw a way into the industry by his dad's job with Syngenta™:

My dad, like, we would it kind of started with younger, I guess ... He would invite me golfing like from sophomore year up and it involved his team members and stuff. So that is how I kinda [*sic*] got to meet them and then they would always talk about their work. (Interview 6, Lines 70-72)

Family was important to these participants and to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Family helped these participants find their passion and their university. Many of these

participants also credited their family as a source of support and encouragement when they first started to consider at pursuing higher education.

***Theme 4: The Ferguson College of Agriculture is a Means to an End***

Most participants in this study saw a future in the agricultural industry. Participant 1 found a passion for the agricultural industry through FFA activities. She began forestry related activities while in high school and saw a way to make a career out of it:

I mean I've been around it. I know what I'm doing, but a more research side and so, ever since like I started doing it you have to do there is the tree ID, tool ID, so long, and pulp wood and competence and basing which is like, basically all the forestry elements tied together. (Lines 138-143)

Participant 7 found the agricultural industry through social media. She participated in the Oklahoma Cattleman's Association course before starting classes at OSU. "Honestly, I am in the Oklahoma Cattleman's class right now, and then, just learning through that I found out more information and you know, I just I wanted to further that so I can actually get more involved" (Interview 7, Lines 47-49). Through this experience, she found a passion for Extension education. Participant 11 found her interest in her major by exhibiting livestock:

I started showing cattle, and, like, my most, the thing that interests me the most is really like the genetics, and how it all plays out in real life. So about [my] junior [year] in high school I was like 'it's pretty interesting', and then [when] you learn more about, like, all the new technologies they have like cloning or like, embryo transfers, it just kind of, like, peaked my interest. (Lines 38-41)



These individuals found the FCA by means of their desired career paths. No participant expressed the culture of the college being the reason they wanted to pursue a major in FCA. Even though they felt supported by faculty and staff, no sense of belonging was mentioned when expressing why they chose a major in the FCA or to remain in a major in the college.

### ***To Continue with Higher Education***

Some participants expressed interest in the pursuit of education past a bachelor's degree. Participants 2, 8, 10, and 11 all explained that graduate or veterinary school was in their future. They appeared excited about their next steps. Participants 2 and 11 planned to attend graduate school at Oklahoma State University and remain in the FCA. Participant 10 planned to attend Oklahoma State University's College of Veterinarian Medicine. While Participant 8 also expressed interest in continuing his education, he was the only participant who did not plan to stay in the agricultural industry. He, however, plans to pursue a doctoral degree in Native American philosophy to become a Native American scholar. "I am interested in teaching Native American philosophy, which is why I think [about]doing that, the Ph.D. ..." (Interview 8, Lines 386-387). Participant 8 not only seemed to be the most involved participant on campus, but also the most involved participant with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma:

So, I grew up in the Choctaw Nation district. And so, because of that I was able to benefit from all of their educational programs growing up. So, for me, it's more about, like, the resources, and benefiting [from] I guess, like, [what] I've been in. (Interview 8, Lines 32-35)

It became evident throughout the interviews that participants' reasons for being in the Ferguson College of Agriculture was a result of their chosen major being in the college, not because they intentionally chose the college itself. Overall, it seemed the FCA was simply a means to their end career goal. FCA was how the participants took steps to reach their future career. Participants were more focused on their career than finding a sense of belonging in the college.

### **Theme 5: Journey to an Agricultural College**

Many participants had a legacy in the agricultural industry and OSU which led them to pursue a degree in the FCA. However, some participants' journeys to FCA and OSU started after they had already been involved in higher education at different institutions. Five participants did not start their collegiate career at OSU. Participants 1, 2, and 4 obtained their associate degrees before transferring to the institution. Participant 1 attended a community college outside of the 12 Districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. She did not anticipate attending Oklahoma State University until after she obtained her associate degree:

I found out you have to have a bachelor's degree [to get] a job in forestry and so that's why I am here. I applied in July, a week later, or so got accepted, got an apartment, and then now we were here. So, it was like ... bang, bang. We were not expecting that. (Interview 1, Lines 110-114)

Participant 1 further explained that she had not planned to continue her education after her associate's degree:

But then again, I wasn't going to school here till [*sic*] I found out you had to have a bachelor's to get a job in the Forest Department... . So, I got backwards in some classes. He [then advised] mapped out my entire schedule, from now to [when] I'm a senior [be]cause I had some classes on this, because I wasn't going to the university. (Interview 1, Lines 250-253)

Participant 3's path to OSU was different than the other participants who were transfer students. Participant 3 is a student-athlete and was pursued by an athletic coach to transfer to OSU. "I played college [sport] at [university], and I ended up transferring in Oklahoma State to play so obviously [sport] is kind of like my big priority" (Interview 3, Lines 70-71). Participant 3 explained that even without athletics she would have pursued a higher education degree. She also described her plan was to move to Oklahoma after graduating college, she was just able to make this move two years earlier:

I don't know it's just, it's always felt like home, and I know that eventually I would have moved back to Oklahoma probably like after like I graduated from college, but I just kind of got lucky enough to come here two years earlier than what I planned on ... (Interview 3, Lines 105-108)

Participant 3 also shared that she would have pursued a higher education degree even without playing sports. These five participants transferred to Oklahoma State University from another higher education institution.

### ***Engineering to Agriculture***

Two participants had changed their majors from engineering to a major in the FCA. Both expressed the change happened when they realized how much math was

required for the engineering degree. Participant 4 explained: “I started off with looking for a biosystem engineering major here, but the calculus did not work” (Lines 225-225). She shared that she had attempted calculus multiple times and ultimately decided to change her major. Participant 4 was shocked when she found out her major, environmental science, was within the FCA:

... like when I first heard that it was under Ag I was like, ‘excuse me?’ Now, that I’ve been in agriculture, like, it wasn't too far of a stretch because I grew up on a ranch ... (Lines 95- 97)

Participant 7 expressed: “I was originally gonna [*sic*] try and do engineering through another school, but then everyone had told me how not good at math I am. I know. So, I was like scratch that, we we’re gonna [*sic*] transfer” (Line 69-71). Whether students transferred from a different higher education institution or from another academic college within OSU, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members were able to find a major that supported their career path at OSU in the FCA.

### **Chapter Summary**

The findings of this study showed an overall positive lived experience in the FCA at OSU by the participants. Understanding these experiences in this context is the main goal of a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). The participants in this study were able to give meaning to their experience in FCA and OSU. Participants felt supported by faculty and staff during their time in the college and at the university. They perceived the college and university was inclusive of their heritage, but most shared a personal disconnect with their Native identity prior to coming to campus. Many participants

expressed their heritage was supported on OSU's campus, however, they perceived detachment with their tribal identity. Due to this perceived detachment, participants simultaneously perceived that their Native American heritage was both visible and invisible around the campus of OSU and in the FCA. Participants chose to pursue a higher education degree to better themselves and their future and expressed strong support from their families. Participants foresaw future careers in the agriculture industry. Due to this, participants found themselves in the FCA because of this career path, without communicating a perceived sense of belonging in the college. Participants also felt supported by the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma thanks to their programs encouraging members to pursue higher education.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions, implications, and recommendations will be explained in this chapter. The recommendations made will detail appropriate for future research and practice regarding the phenomenon.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma graduate and undergraduate students enrolled the FCA at OSU. The aim of the study was to understand how the FCA may strengthen its services and the cultural environment for students, with a focus on Native Americans, including members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. In addition, the findings of this study assist in filling a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members in higher education pursuing degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources.

#### **Guiding Questions**

Below are the three questions that guided this study:

1. What influenced Choctaw Nation students to pursue degrees in agricultural sciences and natural resources in the FCA at OSU?
2. How did Choctaw Nation students describe their experiences in the FCA at OSU?

3. How did Choctaw Nation students perceive inclusion of their native identity in the FCA at OSU?

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Five themes emerged in this study to describe the experiences of undergraduate Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students in the Ferguson College of Agriculture (FCA). The five themes are (a) support systems in the FCA, (b) (in)visible heritage and assimilation, (c) the collective pursuit and legacy of higher education, (d) the FCA as a means to their end, and (e) their journey to an agricultural college.

Throughout the literature, belongingness (Strayhorn 2018), assimilation (Au et al., 2016), and collectivism (Dvorakova, 2019) emerged to help develop a deeper understanding of what the participants experienced in the FCA at OSU. When looking through the conceptual lenses of TribalCrit Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Transculturation (Huffman, 1990), and cultural integrity (Marroquin & McCoach, 2014), I was also able to find profound meaning in the emergent themes representing the lived experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma undergraduate students in the FCA. Below are the conclusions derived from the findings of this qualitative study.

**Conclusion 1: The cultural value of a collective system of support was important for these Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members to succeed at OSU and in the FCA.**

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members felt supported by faculty and staff during their college experience in the FCA at OSU. Students expressed that they felt supported as a person and not just as a student and were able to identify at least one faculty member or advisor who positively affected their college experience. Transfer students were

extremely grateful that their advisors kept them on track for graduation. This study showed that a collective system of support was imperative for the interviewed Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members success, not just academically, but in the entirety of their college experience. TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) explained that a Native American lens may give a different perspective on culture and philosophies. Through the lens of TribalCrit, it was evident that a collective support system is very important for Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members to succeed in their academic endeavors. Native Americans are known for having a collectivist and interdependent way of thinking (Dvorakova, 2019). Due to Native Americans having a way of thinking that is not individualistic, these students' needs reflected a group of people who have a collective way of life.

One of the students who did not intentionally choose the college saw a time where the college did not represent her heritage in a positive light. This poses the question of what can be improved to limit the number of students who share the same experience. This shared experience might imply an implicitly perceived power dynamic between OSU and Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members. Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members might feel afraid to share their negative experiences, and university officials should consider why that is. FCA may need investigate to how they support and empower Native American students. FCA and OSU needs to ensure other Native American students with negative experiences are not afraid to share their experience and seek supportive resources on campus.

Support for Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students is a factor in their journey in colleges of agriculture and higher education overall. The investments faculty and staff make in Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members' lives is something for which the college



and university should continue to strive. Personal investments have the potential to increase the retention of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students as well as graduation rates for a population with a very low graduation rate.

**Conclusion 2: These Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members came to college with a limited connection to their heritage and might not be cognizant of assimilation.**

Many Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members felt as if their tribal heritage was represented on campus. However, most viewed their connections to their tribal heritage as resources received from the tribe, not through the cultural lens of their heritage with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Participants explained how well OSU worked with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma to receive their scholarships through programs such as Higher Education and Career Development. When members described their heritage, their responses explained the programs and scholarships the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma offers more than the culture of the Nation. Huffman (2020) discussed that academic success can benefit from individuals having a strong identity to their tribal nation and heritage. Many participants wanted to know more about their tribal heritage but appeared to not to fully emerge themselves into the beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions that are central to understanding the Native American way of life (Brayboy, 2005). Native Americans have a collectivist way of life and look to groups to find meaning and purpose (Dvorakova, 2019). Many students were knowledgeable about tribal clubs and organizations on campus but very few were involved in such. OSU's tribal center, the Center of Sovereign Nations, is in the middle of the campus (Center of Sovereign Nation, 2023). Literature shows tribal students have greater retention and a sense of belonging when active in tribal student centers and in Native American clubs

and organizations (Steward-Ambo, 2021; Tachine et al., 2017;). However, in this study, only one participant was actively involved in the center and the associated Native American club. This participant was also strong in their cultural integrity. This might imply students who do not have a strong connection with their tribal heritage might not looking for belongingness within Native American centers or clubs. These Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members were not involved with Native American clubs and organizations on campus, but attributions to assimilation were likely affecting their experience, perhaps without their realization.

Au et al. (2016) found that Native Americans experience assimilation in traditional American education settings. This study defined assimilation in chapter I as one culture or group absorbing another culture (Oklahoma History Press, 2013). As participants expressed their heritage, it seemed as though they had assimilated with White culture, more than their tribal heritage. Participants knew about Native American clubs and organization but were not active. Their experience with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma leaned more to individualism, *what can the tribe do for me*, point of view. On the other hand, Dvorakova (2019) expressed Native American culture has a collectivism approach, *what can I do for the tribe and people around me*, view point. The more assimilation that seemed to have happened, whether realized or not, the weaker the participants' cultural integrity was evinced. As cultural integrity decreases, there could be a loss in cultural values, traditions, language, and potential for the loss of the entire culture.

**Conclusion 3: The role of family was a value and motivating factor derivative of tribal culture for these members.**

Family serves as a very vital role in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members' lives. The family members of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members actively supported the participants in their pursuit of higher education. Many of the family members completed their own higher education at OSU. Family is one of three main concepts in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's vision statement (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2023). The participants were finding value and motivation in what their family members had achieved. Familial stories are very important in Native Americans lives, as they serve as oral history and foundation of value and principles in many instances (Brayboy, 2005). Having family members as college alumni can be an important factor in Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members pursuit of higher education. Family investment and legacies are impactful recruitment tools for increasing the number of Native American students pursuing higher education at OSU and in the FCA.

**Conclusion 4: These Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members were focused on their career path, not necessarily belongingness through their tribal heritage in their academic experience.**

It was evident the participants in this study planned to pursue a career in the agriculture industry; the FCA was a means to accomplish this goal. Participants, however, did not express a sense of belonging within the college of agriculture. Even though Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members interviewed felt supported by faculty and staff, no explanations or stories were affected regarding what their time in the FCA had meant to them. Literature explains that a sense of belonging for Native American students is expressed when around other native students (Steward-Ambro 2021; Tachine et al., 2017). A sense of belonging came from their future careers more than culture and

academic college for most participants. Many participants had thoughts or even plans to work for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma at some point in their careers. This may be explained as a way to give back to the nation (Cech et al., 2017). Due to this, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members might be skipping past the experiences which occur during higher education to get to their careers and future lives. Members of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma might not be looking for a sense or feeling of belonging during their higher education experience.

**Conclusion 5: These Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members did not intentionally choose the Ferguson College of Agriculture.**

OSU and the majors within the FCA were not every participant's first choice. Many of them attended a smaller university before transferring to OSU to finish their education. Participants who transferred to OSU found a their place once they arrived on campus. Some participants already had obtained their associate's degree while others transferred to OSU and FCA for personal reasons. These participants were extremely grateful for their faculty advisor's at OSU.

A few participants wanted to pursue engineering majors before taking difficult math courses or finding their career and determining what degree it would take to get there. Some students may need more math readiness before entering higher education. Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma may want to talk with their members more regarding perspective college majors and potential career paths. Through these conversations, stronger connections can be made between the student and a representative of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Talking through the different college majors and

associated career paths with students could help them better define their life goals before beginning higher education.

### **Recommendations**

This study serves as a first step in understanding the experiences of these Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members while students in the FCA at OSU.

Recommendations for future practices for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and for the Ferguson College of Agriculture follow.

#### **Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma**

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members in this study struggled to find their culture, heritage, and history. Many participants had no connection or knowledge of their heritage besides being a card holder of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. As a member and a researcher, I recommend the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma add reflection questions to their scholarship application to prompt members to think and connect with their tribal heritage. This reflection exercise could be a question or two requiring at least 250 words reflecting on what the Nation means to them as well as how the scholarship can help them in their future careers and lives. With the reflective questions, I also propose the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma require service learning experiences and field trips to historical tribal areas such as Tuskahoma, Oklahoma, to walk through the capitol of the Nation, for members to increase their culture integrity and feeling of belongingness to the tribe. These experiences could be in collaboration with the Center of Sovereign Nations to increase the knowledge and involvement of the members.

#### **Ferguson College of Agriculture**

While participants sensed belongingness at OSU, they did not clearly communicate a sense of belonging when it came to their enrollment in the FCA; instead, they seemed to view FCA as a means to an end (i.e., their career goals). I recommend the college invest in more clubs and organizations celebrating the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma culture. The FCA could also recruit more Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members to be involved with the current clubs and organizations in the college. As clubs or organizations are created, I suggest collaboration with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and the Center of Sovereign Nations at OSU. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has a natural resource department. The college could use this as a connection with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members. As Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members ask the college for more connection to their tribe or ways to gain scholarships, the FCA may also increase their relationship with the Center of Sovereign Nations. This relationship could be a full-time employee that works for the college and the center, who could help members in finding a sense of belonging in the college and the tribe.

The FCA should also find ways to incorporate the participants' families into their college experience. Also, it would be beneficial to have Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members involved in clubs and organizations early in their college experience. The Ferguson College of Agriculture has a living-learning program that could be very beneficial in which Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members to get involved. I am unaware if Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members are active in the living-learning program and was unable to obtain archival data for student demographics. Due to this, representation of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma in the program is unknown. This

involvement may increase their sense of belonging and increase the retention of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members at OSU.

The experience of one non-traditional student who did not feel supported by anyone on campus should not be dismissed. The FCA should be diligent in making all students feel supported and valued on campus. I encourage the college to proactively reach out to non-traditional Native students to help them get involved in clubs, organizations, and research. I also suggest pairing non-traditional students faculty advisors who might have also had a non-traditional background, either in their education or in the agricultural industry. This may help facilitate a better understanding and increase feelings of belongingness by the students.

### **Oklahoma State University**

Current recruitment efforts might not be effective when recruiting Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members to OSU. An area of collaboration between OSU and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma could be to create recruitment strategies in which both OSU and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma benefit. I recommend OSU and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma collaborate to offer a college fair for Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma prospective students. This would give members the chance to see what OSU has to offer as well as interact with Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members who attended OSU. Having OSU alumni who are also Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members attend such an event would provide an opportunity for collaboration and mentorship among generations of past and future students.

### **Future Research**

The findings of this study serve as a steppingstone for further research.

Researchers should explore the variety of experiences Choctaw Nations of Oklahoma members have in higher education. Suggestions for further research related to tribal students, and Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students specifically, in higher education follows:

- A mixed-method inquiry studying why Native Americans chose to attend PWIs instead of TCUs. A survey using a Likert-type scale asking questions regarding if they thought about attending a TCU, if they knew the college they chose to attend was a PWI, if they feel their heritage is represented at their PWI, and other questions similar to these would be beneficial. Once responses are gathered, researchers should interview the participants that were outliers. The interviews would be used to provide more meaning to the quantitative data.
- This study found cultural integrity was lacking among many Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members who were interviewed. I suggest cultivating a qualitative study focusing on the cultural integrity of the members of federally recognized tribes in Oklahoma. As this state is rich with Native American history, it would be informative to know whether member of other Nations are also disconnected from their heritage, as well. This study would focus on generation Z members, i.e., members born from 1997 to 2013.
- As I reflect on the small scope of this study, what would be the results if it were broadened? A researcher could extend this study to all Native American students in the FCA. Other researchers could keep the population of the study of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members but extend it to all academic colleges across OSU's



campus. Finally, this study could be extended regarding population and setting, examining the lived experiences of Native Americans at OSU.

- The participant in this study with the closest relationship to the nation and their heritage was entering a career path focusing on Native Americans. I would be interested to learn whether the connection to the tribe affected his desire to stay close to his heritage. A study could be conducted with students studying Native American philosophy and history, and their connections to their respective Nations.
- Participants in this study were not interested in finding a sense of belonging within Native American clubs and organizations. These participants also did not have a strong connection with their tribal heritage. It would be interesting to see where but also how these members are finding a sense of belonging while pursuing higher education.
- Participants who lived within the 12 districts of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma seemed to be more aware and knowledgeable about their tribal heritage. I would recommend a qualitative study looking into the lived experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members who live in the district to those who live outside of the district, both in and out of the state of Oklahoma.
- As mentioned in the limitations of this study, individuals with multiple tribal descended might have been left out of this study. I would be interesting to see if those individuals have a different experience, both in higher education and their tribal nation, than the participants in this study. I recommend a qualitative study

comparing the lived experiences of individuals with only one tribal affiliation to those with multiple.

- Assimilation is a major factor in these members lives. However, determining if the assimilation was beneficial or detrimental was inconclusive. A study investigating how Native Americans feel about assimilation would be interesting. It would also be interesting to see if Native Americans used assimilation as a survival tactic.
- Many participants in this study benefited from the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma higher education program. A study should be completed on how Native American tribes feel about members who are more interested in the benefits than the heritage of the nation. Is there something tribes can do help these individuals become members instead of card holders?

### **Discussion**

This study gives light to the lived experiences of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma undergraduate students in the FCA at OSU. Overall, the students' experiences were positive in nature. Participants credited their positive experiences to resources provided by the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. They also credited their experience to their family's support, as well as support from faculty and staff of Oklahoma State University.

However, these Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members struggled to articulate their own cultural integrity regarding their tribal heritage. Due to this, the participants had difficulty describing the tribe's heritage, visibility, and connections across OSU's campus. While in college, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma students who were interviewed should continue to grow in their knowledge of their tribal heritage, as well as their academic

growth of knowledge in agriculture. A need evident, as a found in this study, is for Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members to have the opportunity to better understand their tribal culture from a younger age, before their pursuit of higher education. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma should take steps to educate members on the tribe's history, heritage, culture, and values. By empowering tribal members with a stronger sense of their cultural identity and integrity before arriving on campus, FCA and OSU may be able to develop more intentional and effective strategies to support the needs of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members, resulting in increased higher education retention and graduation rates. FCA and OSU should examine the lived experiences of other underrepresented groups of students. Support from the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, faculty members, and family members are major factors in these Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma members lives and their success in higher education.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma IRB Approval



#### Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

##### Institutional Review Board

OHRP FWA Number: 00001128

OHRP IRB Number: 00004293

One Choctaw Way • Tallihina, OK 74571  
(918) 567-7000, Ext. 6014

Gary Batton  
Chief

Jack Austin, Jr.  
Assistant Chief

08/22/2022

Kyleigh Hilburn

RE: Perceptions of Choctaw Nation student in the Ferguson College of Agriculture  
CNO IRB Protocol Number: 2022-009  
Protocol Approval Date: 08/22/2022  
Dates Covered by this Approval: 09/01/2022 through 08/31/2023

Dear Kyleigh Hilburn:

The Choctaw Nation Institutional Review Board (CNO IRB) has reviewed the above referenced research study and granted approval of the research on 08/17/2022. This study meets the criteria of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, following the guidelines set forth in 45 CFR 46, and the principles of the Belmont Report, for the protection of human research participants. It is the judgment of the CNO IRB that the rights and protection of the individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected; and the proposed research, including the informed consent process, will be conducted in a manner consistent with the requirements of 45 CFR 46 or 21 CFR 50 & 56 as amended. The research will also be conducted in a manner that insures no more than minimal risk to participants as outlined in the submitted research proposal.

As principal investigator of this protocol, it is your responsibility to ensure this study is conducted as approved. Any modifications to the protocol or consent process will require prior approval by the CNO IRB. All research study related records, including copies of signed consent forms, need to be retained in a manner consistent with the intent of the Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), for a minimum of three (3) years following the termination date of the research project.

Approval from the CNO IRB requires that you *promptly* report to the CNO IRB any unanticipated adverse events experienced by participants during the course of this research study, whether or not these events are directly related to the research study protocol. For multi-site protocols, the CNO IRB must be informed of serious adverse events at any and all sites, not only the Choctaw Nation sites.

*Failure to promptly report any unanticipated adverse events, or any legal or ethical issues encountered, may jeopardize, not only your research protocol, but any and all protocols supported by your sponsoring institution, and active with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board.*

#### Protecting Our People and Our Heritage

John Jones  
Community Co-Chair

David Wharton  
Scientific Co-Chair

Teresa Jackson  
Federal-Wide Assurance  
Institutional Officer

This initial approval granted by the CNO IRB expires on 08/31/2023. In order to maintain this protocol in an active status beyond that date, you will be required to provide the CNO IRB with a Request for Continuing Review, which will include a Progress Report summarizing research study results for the year. You are ultimately responsible, as the Principal Investigator, to submit a Request for Continuing Review, or Protocol Closure (if the research project is complete), no later than the 5<sup>th</sup> of the month of expiration.

The CNO IRB reserves the right for editorial review and comment on any material to be published, or presentations given to individuals not affiliated with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. The CNO IRB should be notified well in advance of any intent to publish material related to this research. It is your responsibility to allow the CNO IRB at least 15 business days for this review, and approval must be obtained prior to final submission of the material for publication or presentation.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to insure that you and your institution are covered by professional liability insurance appropriate to this research study's activities. In the event your sponsoring organization's IRB takes any action to modify or suspend this research protocol, the CNO IRB must be notified in writing (e-mail is acceptable) within 10 business days for modifications or 3 business days for suspension. Notification must include the action taken and the rationale for the action.

If you have questions concerning these procedures or need any additional assistance from the CNO IRB, please contact me at 580-286-4724 or [dfwharton@cnhsa.com](mailto:dfwharton@cnhsa.com); or Carey Fuller, CNO IRB Administrative Director at 918-567-7000 Ext. 6014 or [cmfuller@cnhsa.com](mailto:cmfuller@cnhsa.com).

Sincerely,



John Jones, CNO IRB Co-Chair  
Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board

***Protecting Our People and Our Heritage***

**John Jones**  
*Community Co-Chair*

**David Wharton**  
*Scientific Co-Chair*

**Teresa Jackson**  
*Federal-Wide Assurance  
Institutional Officer*

## APPENDIX B: Oklahoma State IRB Approval



### Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Application Number: IRB-22-328  
Proposal Title: Perspectives of Choctaw Nation students in the Ferguson College of Agriculture

Principal Investigator: Kyleigh Hilburn  
Co-Investigator(s):  
Faculty Adviser: Lauren Cline  
Project Coordinator:  
Research Assistant(s):

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved**

Study Review Level: Exempt  
Modification Approval Date: 08/25/2022

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The modification of the IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46. The original expiration date of the protocol has not changed.

Modifications Approved:

Modifications Approved: Edit an approved Consent/Assent/Parent/Guardian Permission Form: The Choctaw Nation IRB requested revisions to researchers application.

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved.
2. Submit a status report to the IRB when requested
3. Promptly report to the IRB any harm experienced by a participant that is both unanticipated and related per IRB policy.
4. Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the OSU IRB and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
5. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Sincerely,

Oklahoma State University IRB  
223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078  
Website: <https://irb.okstate.edu/>  
Ph: 405-744-3377 | Fax: 405-744-4335 | [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu)

## APPENDIX C: Participant Recruitment Flyer



# PERSPECTIVES OF CHOCTAW NATION STUDENTS NEEDED

### ARE YOU:

- **AT LEAST 18 YEARS OLD**
- **STUDYING WITHIN THE FERGUSON COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE**
- **AN ENROLLED MEMBER OF THE CHOCTAW NATION OF OKLAHOMA**

**IF SO, PLEASE SCAN THE QR CODE BELOW TO PARTICIPATE IN A  
ONE-HOUR LONG IN-PERSON INTERVIEW.**

Participants will be asked to show their Tribal Membership Card at the beginning of the interview.

Each participant will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card.



Kyleigh Hilburn

kyleigh.caybe.hilburn-walker@okstate.edu

Department of Agricultural Education, Communications and Leadership

## APPENDIX D: Participant Recruitment Email

To: [sampled OSU email addresses]

From: [kyleigh.caybe.hilburn-walker@okstate.edu](mailto:kyleigh.caybe.hilburn-walker@okstate.edu)

Subject: Choctaw Nation student interviews

Hello!

**Are you an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and a student in the Ferguson College of Agriculture? If so, I would love to talk with you!**

I am Kyleigh Hilburn and am an enrolled tribal member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and an Agriculture Education and Leadership master student at Oklahoma State University. I am interested in bringing light to the experience of Choctaw Nation students within the Ferguson College of Agriculture. I would like to talk with you about your experiences by setting up an interview. All participants will receive an Amazon gift card in thanks for their time and your participation will be confidential.

If interested, please click the link below to provide your name and email address so I can reach out to you to set up an interview. Information about this study is also provided at the link.

You are eligible to participate in an interview if you are: 1) an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2) at least 18-years-old, and 3) are currently enrolled at Oklahoma State University – Stillwater in the Ferguson College of Agriculture.

Please email me at [kyleigh.caybe.hilburn-walker@okstate.edu](mailto:kyleigh.caybe.hilburn-walker@okstate.edu) if you have any questions. I look forward to talking with you soon!

Sincerely,

Kyleigh Hilburn

## APPENDIX E: IRB Approved Consent Form



Leadership

Department of Agricultural Education, Communication and

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### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Perceptions of Choctaw Nation students in the Ferguson College of Agriculture

#### **Background Information**

You are invited to be in a research study of the experiences of Choctaw Nation members who are current students in the Ferguson College of Agriculture. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time. You can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable and can stop the interview/survey at any time.

**This study is being conducted by:** Kyleigh Hilburn, Agricultural Education, Communication and Leadership at Oklahoma State University, under the direction of Dr. Lauren Cline, Agricultural Education, Communication and Leadership.

#### **Procedures**

**If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:** A one-hour long in-person interview. This interview will be audiotaped. After the interview has transcribed the interview, you will be asked to check out the transcription. You will have seven days to make any edits you deem necessary.

**Participation in the study involves the following time commitment:** One one-hour long in-person interview. Once this interview is conducted and transcribed, the transcription will be emailed to the interviewee. The interviewee will have approximately seven days to suggest any edits or changes.

#### **Compensation**

You will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card as compensation for your participation. You will receive payment by email after all data has been conducted by the researcher. Payments should be issued by January 1, 2023.

#### **Risks**

There is a potential risk of breach of confidentiality which is minimized by storing data on an OSU OneDrive.

#### **Confidentiality**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number/pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

We will collect your information through interviews and audio recordings. This information will be stored in a restricted access folder on OSU OneDrive. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the code list linking names to study numbers will be destroyed. This is expected to occur no later than May 2023. The audio/video recording will be transcribed. The recording will be deleted after the transcription is complete and verified.

#### **Contacts and Questions**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Oklahoma State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at (918)-413-1941, [kyleigh.caybe.hilburn-walker@okstate.edu](mailto:kyleigh.caybe.hilburn-walker@okstate.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about concerns regarding this study, please contact the IRB at (405) 744-3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu). All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential. *If you believe your rights have been violated, please contact David F. Wharton, CNO Human Research Protector, [DFWharton@cnhsa.com](mailto:DFWharton@cnhsa.com), (580) 286-4724.*



Approved:  
Protocol #: IRB-22-328

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have my questions answered. I consent to participate in the study.

Indicate Yes or No:

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.

Yes  No

I give consent to be contacted for follow-up in this study:

Yes  No

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



Approved:  
Protocol #: IRB-22-328

## **APPENDIX F: Interview Protocol**

Hello, my name is Kyleigh Hilburn. I am currently a second-year graduate student at Oklahoma State University pursuing a Master of Science in Agriculture Education and Leadership. Throughout the next hour, we will be going through a series of questions to help gain an understanding of the lived experiences Choctaw Nation members have while studying within the Ferguson College of Agriculture at Oklahoma State University. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability and as thoroughly as possible. Please do not be afraid to ask to have a question repeated if needed. Know that your answers will stay anonymous.

Before we get started, do you have any questions? Great, let's begin.

1. Tell me about your Choctaw Nation heritage.
2. What influenced your decision to pursue a higher education degree?
3. Describe to me what led you to attend Oklahoma State University.
4. What influences your decision to major within the Ferguson College of Agriculture?
5. Tell me about a time you saw the college represent your heritage.
6. Describe a time where you did not feel your heritage was being supported by the college.
7. Tell me about a faculty member that has positively affected your college experience.
8. Describe what career path you would pursue if you had not chosen a major/degree in the college of agriculture.

Wonderful, thank you! Next, let's get to know a little about you. Again, please remember your name will not be added to these answers.

1. What year in school are you?
2. How old are you?
3. Is your hometown within the 12 districts of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma? If so, which district?
4. Which department in the Ferguson College of Agriculture are you in?
5. What are your plans upon graduation?

Do you plan to work in any of the 12 districts?



## APPENDIX G: Coding Audit Trail

In-vivo Codes (Line numbers) (Interview number)	Categories	Number of Codes
“Homecoming activities” (L158) (In1) “Leading on the design” (L151) (In1) “Now I am here” (L111) (In1) “Met new people” (L118) (In1) “Graduated from forestry” (L119) (In1) “Knew my way around” (L120) (In1) “Involved” (L138) (In1) “Stick with just one” (L139) (In1) “Smaller colleges don’t have that” (L140) (In1) “Involved in like so much more areas” (L141) (In1) “Haven’t been here very long” (L52) (In11) “I wasn’t too big interested” (L50) (In4) “Not having to go live in the dorms” (L53) (In4) “I don’t think I have been here long enough” (L94) (In6) Greek Life) (L108) (In6) “homecoming” (L116) (In6)	Campus Involvement	16

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“Stuck with it” (L110)  
(In1)

Long term

19

“Hire a bunch of  
people” (L154) (In1)

“Worked in the private  
sector” (L32) (in2)

“I did not enjoy it”  
(L44) (In2)

“draining” (L45) (In2)

“Possible go to grad  
school” (L192) (In2)

“Hoping to get a job  
with the tribe” (L200)  
(In2)

“Kind of the dream”  
(L201) (In2)

“I will probably stay in  
Oklahoma” (L47)  
(In11)

“I would not operate my  
own” (L48) (In11)

“Have to go to grad  
school” (L105-106)  
(In11)

“Going to college give  
you a really good  
opportunity” (L74)  
(In3)

“Thought about  
pursuing like a job with  
the tribe” (L297) (In3)

“US corps for  
engineers” (L117) (In4)

“haven’t really tried to  
look into Choctaw  
Tribes” (L124) (In4)

“US Army Core of  
Engineers” (L303) (In4)

“Sam Noble Research  
Facility down in  
Ardmore” (L305) (In4)

“Choctaw Nation jobs”  
(L307) (In4)

“Something with  
business and something  
outside” (L48) (In6)

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“Going to be a teacher”  
(L24) (In7)

“Ag kid” (L136) (In1)  
“Agricultural areas”  
(L137) (In1)  
“In FFA” (L78) (In1)  
“FFA, Career  
development events”  
(L100) (In1)  
“Forestry” (L102) (In1)  
“We have a cow-calf  
operation” (L104) (In1)  
“I’ve been around it”  
(L106) (In1)  
“Research side” (L107)  
(In1)  
“My speech when I was  
in high school” (L255)  
(In1)  
“Different aspects of  
research” (L256) (In1)  
“Research aspect”  
(L87) (In1)  
“Fire lines” (L88) (In1)  
“Internship” (L89) (In1)  
“Forestry” (L77) (In1)  
“Our population of  
deer” (L254) (In1)  
“Big into hunting and  
fishing like I’m an  
outdoors kid” (L252)  
(In1)  
“So many different  
areas” (L225) (In1)  
“Different aspects of  
forestry” (L224) (In1)  
“All the forestry kids”  
(L229) (In1)  
“State nursery” (L90)  
(In1)  
“Breed the flowers”  
(L92) (In1)  
“Across the state of  
Oklahoma” (L93) (In1)

Involvement in Agriculture

58

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“Research side” (L94)  
(In1)  
“Things going on in the  
environment and  
nature” (L22) (In 2)  
“Been investigating  
now like entomology”  
(L23) (In2)  
“Working with the  
surroundings that we  
have and being a part of  
it” (L25) (In2)  
“Take care of what we  
have, our natural  
resources” (L35) (In2)  
“Also working in  
entomology” (L37)  
(In2)  
“Possibly working with  
fish” (L213) (In2)  
“I started showing  
cattle” (L38) (In11)  
“The genetics and how  
it all plays out like in  
real life” (L39) (In11)  
“I have always loved  
ag” (L128) (In3)  
“My family has cattle”  
(L129) (In3)  
“Environmental  
Sciences Natural  
Resources” (L65) (In4)  
“Been a nature nut”  
(L70) (In4)  
“I love growing plants”  
(L71) (In4)  
“Something grounding  
about hold the rock”  
(L72) (In4)  
“We take so much away  
from it” (L73) (In4)  
“Environmental stuff in  
high school” (L74)  
(In4)  
“Science fair projects  
over it” (L76) (In4)

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“Working at EPA”  
(L77) (In4)  
“International science  
fair twice” (L78) (In4)  
“I was second place in  
the regional” (L85)  
(In4)  
“Under ag I was like,  
excuse me” (L96) (In4)  
“Agriculture like wasn’t  
too far off” (L97) (In4)  
“To help farmers” (L98)  
(In4)  
“My dad works for  
Syngenta” (L28) (In6)  
“Obviously I wanted to  
go to a good ag school”  
(L64) (In6)  
“Creek County  
Extension Office” (L28)  
(In7)  
“Super active in the  
community” (L29) (In7)  
“Agricultural base”  
(L31) (In7)  
“Oklahoma Cattleman’s  
class” (L47) (In7)  
“I wanted to further  
that” (L48) (In7)  
“More involved” (L49)  
(In7)  
“Better your program”  
(L52) (In7)  
“What resources are out  
there” (L54) (In7)  
“High demand for like  
AI technicians” (L64)  
(In7)

“Native American  
chapter” (L166) (In1)  
“Not been like not  
represented” (L193)  
(In1)  
“Ever not been  
supported” (L190) (In1)

Representation

19

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“Represented here like  
say different nations”

(L91) (In1)

“More cultural aspects”

(L192) (In1)

“Ask are you an Indian”

(L165) (In1)

“Even though you’re  
Indian” (L67) (In1)

“Not just singled out”

(L168) (In1)

“I get emails from them  
all the time” (L77) (In2)

“there’s a whole office,  
it’s just Choctaw  
nation” (L78) (In2)

“they’re representing  
what’s going on” (L78-  
79) (In2)

“Yeah, like animal  
science in general”

(L55) (In11)

“Our heritage be shown  
was whenever I first got  
here” (L164) (In3)

“I get a few emails like  
here and there” (L168)

(In3)

“I haven’t gone to one”  
(L168) (In3)

“I never really saw one  
for like any sort of like  
heritage” (L199) (In3)

“I see the emails they  
send out” (L95) (In6)

“Like there’s clubs”

(L96) (In6)

“I definitely have  
friends that go to them”

(L97) (In6)

“The Labor Day” (L50)  
(In1)

“As kids” (L55) (In1)

“Throughout schooling,  
it helped” (L60) (In1)

Connection to tribe

36

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“Out in the natural world” (L20) (In2)  
“Because I am a tribal member, I just feel like I’m more entune” (L21) (In2)  
“I kind of connect on the tribal level” (L24) (In2)  
“At Rose state, they had a club, and I would go every now and then.” (L97-98) (In2)  
“Like come and find you if you didn’t show” (L99) (In2)  
“Not really super big in Choctaw” (L6) (In11)  
“My dad’s family” (L7) (In11)  
“Don’t talk about it a while lot” (L8) (In11)  
“Known my entire life” (L11) (In11)  
“We got our cards” (L11) (In11)  
“a 16<sup>th</sup> like listed in the books” (L26) (In3)  
“Her dad was full blood” (L27) (In3)  
“I haven’t dug deep enough” (L28) (In3)  
“I don’t give off like the total, like look” (L29) (In3)  
“But also, very aware of like the heritage” (L32) (In3)  
“Helps me be more aware” (L34) (In3)  
“I enjoy learning like the history of it” (L36) (In3)  
“More like the full story” (L51) (In3)

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“Where we came from”

(L58) (In3)

“Through my dad’s

stuff” (L18) (In4)

“Not super attached”

(L18) (In4)

“Help with the tribes”

(L21) (In4)

“The Choctaw Nation

had paid a lot of my

way” (L42) (In4)

“Blame my heritage”

(L69) (In4)

“i love taking care if

like what I can” (L70)

(In4)

“I wanna be able to give

back to what they have

been me” (L124) (In4)

“Didn’t know me and

my little brother

qualified until this last

year” (L18) (In6)

“I wanted to know more

about it” (L19) (In6)

“I grew up always like

being outside” (L161)

(In6)

“If that correlates than

definitely” (L163) (In6)

“I knew I was

Choctaw” (L17) (In7)

“I’m proud to have

that” (L18) (In7)

“Grandpa, he worked  
for Oklahoma State  
Forestry” (L105) (In1)

“Both sides are  
Choctaw” (L49) (In1)

“Both of my families  
are Choctaw” (L47)

(In1)

“My wife was going to  
college for veterinary  
medicine” (L53) (In2)

Family

22



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“All my family’s gone  
to Oklahoma State at  
some point” (L55-56)  
(In2)

“I’m like a third-  
generation student here”  
(L15) (In11)

“My mom and dad went  
here” (L25) (In11)

“Family is definitely  
like a big foundation”  
(L146) (In3)

“My mom and I are  
super close” (L147-148)  
(In3)

“Family is definitely a  
big impact in my life for  
sure” (L156) (In3)

“My parents were very  
advocation for it” (l31)  
(In4)

“Wanted their kids to  
have a better education”  
(L32) (In4)

“My granddad  
graduated from OSU”  
(L48) (In4)

“My family just moved  
around” (15) (In6)

“it’s just my dad’s  
family” (L16) (In6)

“Lived near the  
Choctaw hospital”  
(L20) (In6)

“Why I am the way I  
am” (L36) (In6)

“We’re all very close”  
(L39) (In6)

“I consider my mom  
and dad my best  
friends” (L40) (In6)

“My dad mainly, that’s  
kind of why I chose ag  
business” (L44) (In6)

“I have all my  
grandparents and

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cousins live out here”  
(L66) (In6)  
“A little bit of family  
around” (L84) (In6)

“Oklahoma’s Promise”  
(L117) (In1)  
“Always helped me in  
school” (L53) (In1)  
“Clothing allowance,  
grade allowance” (L54)  
(In1)  
“Insurance health”  
(L61) (In1)  
“Indian Clinics” (L51)  
(In1)  
“Higher education”  
(L163) (In1)  
“Presented  
scholarships” (L164)  
(In1)  
“Higher ed” (L59) (In1)  
“Higher ed” (L71) (In1)  
“I cannot think of  
anything off the top”  
(L72) (In1)  
“Except through higher  
ed” (L73) (In1)  
“College administrator  
that I have been talking  
to” (L84-85) (In2)  
“Career development  
person that has helped  
me a lot” (L126) (In4)  
“Career development  
program” (L131) (In4)  
“Application for  
scholarships” (L132)  
(In4)  
“Whole time I have  
been in school” (L133)  
(In4)  
“she’s been the one  
that’s coordinated with  
me” (L134) (In4)

Resources

20

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“Get a graduation check” (L138) (In4)  
“jobs this year for me to have” (L39) (In4)  
“Gave me a scholarship” (L177) (In4)  
“Wow like they do all this” (L243) (In1)  
“From Montana, New Mexico, all the places” (L231) (In1)  
“Good forestry program” (L116) (In1)  
“It blew my mind” “I was like I’m going to go here to get my degree” (L245) (In1)  
“Best trips I’ve ever been on” (L241) (In1)  
“Boards like its most students” (L238) (In1)  
“My youth pastor was actually on one of those boards” (L239) (In1)  
“They went to Montana” (L242) (In1)  
“It’s all different aspects” (L203-204) (In1)  
“Different aspects” (L202) (In1)  
“So different compared to like how we are here in Oklahoma” (L201) (In1)  
“Hallway of Ag Hall in the basement” (L230) (In1)  
“Different aspects” (L200) (In1)  
“From Alaska, there’s like Oregon” (L199) (In1)

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“Very good natural resource department” (L57) (In2)  
“I feel pretty comfortable” (L31-32) (In11)  
“it’s pretty comfortable in there” (L73) (In11)  
“It felt the most like home” (L91-92) (In3)  
“You’re famous here” (L240) (In1)  
“Choctaw had your back” (L82) (In1)  
“It helped a lot” (L83) (In1)  
“He was here for probably almost 50 years” (L226) (In1)  
“Big forestry professor” (L227) (In1)  
“He talked about to us” (L244) (In1)  
“Probably Dr. Kuzmic and Dr. Will” (L215) (In1)  
“He is really nig in forestry and is a professor here” (L156) (In1)  
“Whole block paper” (L222) (In1)  
“2019” (L223) (In1)  
“I cannot think of the time” (L110) (In2)  
“Always looking for tribal members to be a part of what we’re doing” (L111-112) (In2)  
“Super inviting, very easy to work with” (L127) (In2)  
“Helped me with everything I needed” (L129) (In2)

Support

31

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“Not acknowledged that  
I’ve noticed at least”  
(L59-60) (In11)

“Talk to people that  
know exactly what  
you’re going through”  
(L69) (In11)

“She lightens the mood”  
(L77) (In11)

“Checks in on  
everyone” (L78) (In11)

“She has been  
absolutely great”  
(L218-1219) (In3)

“Helped me figure out  
like what credits would  
transfer” (L221) (In3)

“Positively impacted  
my life” (L224) (In3)

“Checking on you, if  
you need anything”  
(L228) (In3)

“I never had that ever at  
Virginia Tech” (L230-  
231) (In3)

“Just need to vent”  
(L143) (In4)

“She set to listen to me”  
(L144) (In4)

“I loved working with  
her” (L180) (In4)

“Those 2 ladies have  
really worked to make  
sure I was taken care  
of” (L185-186) (In4)

“I think, 3 of my 6  
classes are with him”  
(L106-107) (In6)

“My advisor” (L122)  
(In6)

“Knowing the history of  
me” (L123) (In6)

“she’s great honestly”  
(L129) (In6)

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<p>“Wanted to help mostly children in cyber space” (L43) (In2)</p> <p>Future for law enforcement in agriculture (L165) (In2)</p> <p>“I was really considering like an engineering major” (L85) (In11)</p> <p>“Kind of worked that way” (L86) (In11)</p> <p>“I leaned away from engineering as soon as I found the interest” (L93) (In11)</p> <p>“Being like a real estate agent” (L243) (In3)</p> <p>“Like a business degree” (L244) (In3)</p> <p>“Started off biosystems engineer here” (L224) (In4)</p> <p>“Something less mentally taxing like” (L227) (In4)</p> <p>“struggling with the engineering courses” (L248-249) (In4)</p> <p>“Other business degree” (L154) (In6)</p> <p>“Doing engineering through another school” (L70) (In7)</p>	<p>Outside of the college</p>	<p>12</p>
<p>“I haven’t been” (L83) (In2)</p> <p>“No, I haven’t heard about it” (L178) (In3)</p>	<p>Center for sovereign nations</p>	<p>2</p>

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## APPENDIX H: Theme Audit Trail

Categories	Themes
Campus involvement Campus culture Support	1. Support systems in the Ferguson College of Agriculture
Representation Connection to the tribe Resources Center for Sovereign Nations	2. (In)visible heritage and assimilation
Family Support	3. The collective pursuit and legacy of higher education
Long term Involvement in agriculture	4. The Ferguson College of Agriculture as a means to their end
Transfer Outside of the college	5. Journey to an agricultural college

VITA

Kyleigh C Hilburn

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CHOCTAW NATION OF OKLAHOMA  
MEMBERS IN THE FERGUSON COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Major Field: Agricultural Education and Leadership

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Agricultural Education and Leadership at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2023.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Animal Science at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in 2021.