

THE FRESHMAN SEMINAR AS CEREMONY  
THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE NATIVE AMERICAN PERSISTERS IN A  
RETENTION-ORIENTED FRESHMAN SEMINAR COURSE IN THE NORTHWEST  
UNITED STATES

A Record of Study

by

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## ABSTRACT

Acknowledging the many barriers facing Native American students across their educational trajectories and specifically those linked with decreased retention among Native American college students, a small group of professors at Hope University redesigned their freshman seminar course to enhance persistence among its predominantly Native American and Latinx student population. To evaluate the impact of these efforts among Native American students, this study utilized a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of five female Native American persisters who successfully completed the revised freshman seminar course and were still enrolled two years later. A review of the coursework portfolios of these Native American persisters revealed five themes characterizing their experiences with the revised course: culture, community, family, vocation, and connectedness. Four of these themes—culture, community, family, and vocation—characterized the students’ academic experiences, while the last theme, connectedness, characterized the students’ personal experiences. These findings support existing theories of Native American persistence, particularly HeavyRunner and DeCelles’ family education model, Brayboy and colleagues’ nation building theory, and Lopez’ millennium falcon persistence model, as well as the existing literature on the experiences of Native American women in higher education. However, I offer an alternative interpretation that illuminates the complexity of these female persisters’ experiences while highlighting the problems associated with classifying those experiences as personal or academic, or attempting to distinguish between culture,

community, family, and vocation. Specifically, I suggest that these persisters' experiences with Hope University's revised freshman seminar course were a form a ceremony—a process that builds relationships and bridges distances between ideas, places, people and ourselves. Both theoretical and practical implications of these findings are explored.

## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

### **Contributors**

This work was supervised by a record of study committee consisting of Professor Valerie Hill-Jackson, Professor Sharon Matthews, and Professor Monica Neshyba of the Department of Teaching, Learning and Culture, and Professor Elizabeth Roumell of the Department of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development.

All other work conducted for this record of study was completed by the student independently.

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# CHAPTER I

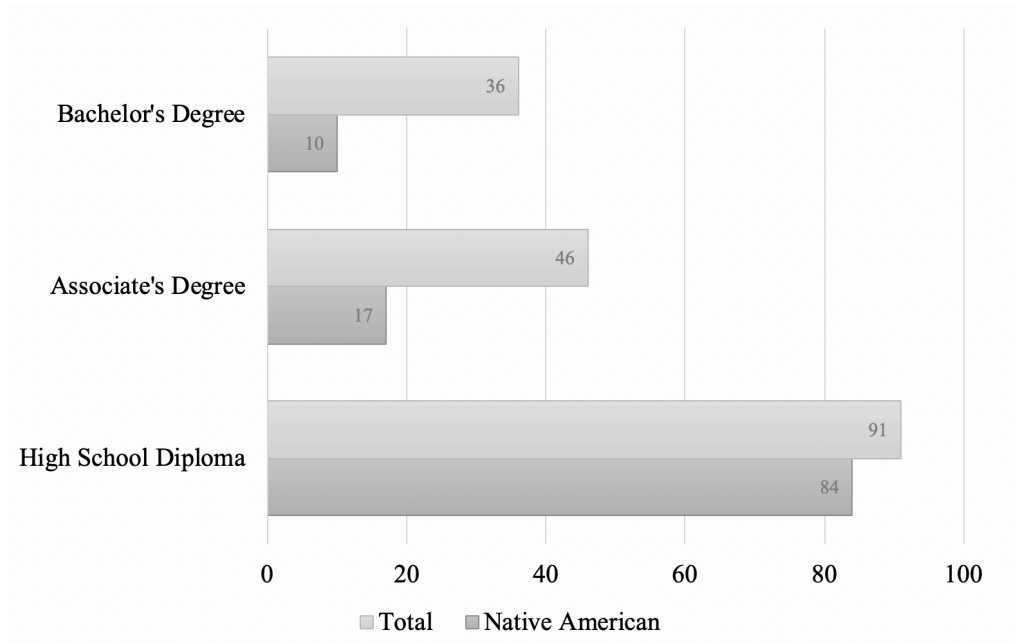
## INTRODUCTION

### **Background to the Study**

Native American students continue to be the lost children of the US educational system, as educational enrollment, retention, and graduation rates remain lower for Native Americans than for any other student group (Harrington & Harrington, 2011). While Native students face unique barriers that limit their opportunities for success, state measures of achievement continue to demonstrate that the US school system is failing to effectively support Native students in overcoming these barriers. In elementary and middle school, reading and math proficiency rates for Native American students lag far behind those of their peers, and the gap continues to widen between Native and White achievement even as the Black-White and Latinx-White gaps are narrowing (EdTrust, 2013). In high school, Native American students are placed in special education classes at rates double those of their non-Native peers (Ross et al., 2012), and Native Americans are less likely than Asian, White, African American, and Latinx students to attend high schools that offers AP coursework (EdTrust, 2013). Not surprisingly, Native Americans continue to have the highest dropout and lowest completion rates of any US ethnic group (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), and those who do graduate are far less likely than their non-Native peers to be college ready (ACT, 2015).

## **Native American College Completion in the US**

At the collegiate level, university enrollment, retention, and graduation rates continue to be lower for Native American students than for any other ethnic group in the United States (Hunt & Harrington, 2010). Only one in three Native students enrolls in postsecondary education, a rate half that of their non-Native peers (Tierney, 1992), and in 2015, only 23% of Native Americans youth aged 18 to 24 were enrolled in postsecondary education, a rate lower than any other US ethnic group (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Moreover, once in college, Native American students have the lowest six-year completion rate (41%) of any US ethnic group (NCES, 2016a) and are the least likely to earn a bachelor's degree in their lifetime (NCES, 2016b). The situation may be even more dire for students raised on reservations, as they face additional barriers to success (Huffman, 2003; Keith, Stastny, & Brunt, 2016). Figure 1.1 highlights the educational attainment gap between Native American students and all students as it widens from high school through college completion.



*Figure 1.1.* Percentage of all 25- to 29-year olds and Native American 25- to 29-year olds who have obtained a high school diploma, associate’s degree, and bachelor’s degree. The gap between Native American students and all students widens substantially as the level of education increases (NCES, 2018).

### **Native American College Completion in Washington State**

Home to 29 federally recognized Indian tribes and nearly 200,000 Native American residents, Washington State serves nearly twice as many Native American students (1.3%) as the national average (.7%; Washington Student Achievement Council, 2013). However, similar to their national counterparts, schools and universities in Washington State are failing their Native American students, as evidenced by state achievement data from across the educational continuum. In elementary and middle school, achievement scores in reading, writing, and math are consistently lower for Native American students than for White students (The People, 2008). Furthermore,

while 76% of all Washington students achieve on-time high school graduation (Higgins, 2015), only 57% of Native students do; this rate is lower than the rate for Asian American students (84%), non-Hispanic Whites (80%), African Americans and Latinx students (67%), and Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (65%; Washington Student Achievement Council, 2013). Moreover, while 62% of all Washington high school graduates enroll in university within a year of leaving high school, only 44% of Native American students do (Washington Student Achievement Council, 2013).

Once in college, Native American students see different outcomes based on the type of university attended (Chronicle of Higher Education, nd). At Washington State's public universities, where approximately three-quarters of Native American students enroll, Native students are out-performing their national peers in terms of college completion. At these schools, 29% of Native students graduate in four years and 53% graduate within six years; nationally, those numbers are 19% and 39%, respectively. Unfortunately, these trends are not matched at private, not-for-profit universities, where Native students graduate at rates slightly lower than the national average.

However, while many Native students in Washington are completing college at rates higher than their national peers, completion rates for these students continue to lag far behind those of Washington's non-Native population (Chronicle of Higher Education, nd). This trend is particularly evident at the state's private, not-for-profit universities, where Native students graduate at rates lower than those of any other ethnic group. While 73% of Asian and White students, 59% of Latinx students, and 57% of Black students graduate in six years, only 44% of Native American students do the

same. However, as Table 1.1 illustrates, Native graduation rates are not uniform across institutions. In fact, at four institutions, Native American students are graduating at or above the state average for all students. However, at three institutions, the Native American graduation rate stands at zero.

Table 1.1

*Native Enrollment and Six-Year Graduation Rates at Four-Year, Not-for-Profit Universities in Washington State*

<b>University</b>	<b>Native Student Enrollment</b>	<b>6-year Native Graduation Rate</b>
St. Martin’s University	4	75%
Whitworth University	4	75%
Gonzaga University	7	71%
Seattle Pacific University	7	71%
Walla Walla University	3	67%
University of Puget Sound	8	63%
Seattle University	7	57%
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>44%</b>
Whitman College	5	40%
Pacific Lutheran University	10	20%
Cornish College of the Arts	1	0%
Hope University	12	0%
Northwest University	2	0%

## **Hope University**

Hope University is one of twelve private, not-for-profit, four-year universities in Washington State that serve Native American students. However, while Hope serves more Native students than any other private university, its six-year completion rate for these students is the lowest (Chronicle of Higher Education, nd). At zero percent, the six-year completion rate for Native American students at Hope University falls well below state (44%) and national (48%) averages for this population (see Table 1.2). Moreover, this rate lags well behind the university's overall completion rate (15%) and the completion rates for the school's White (20%) and Latinx (18%) student populations. However, while Hope falls well behind its national and state peers in terms of Native American completion rates, the university's unique history, location, and student population make direct comparisons difficult.

Housed on the Yakama Nation Indian Reservation, Hope University was incorporated as Hope College in 1981 under the impetus of Martha B. Yallup and Violet Lumley Rau, two Yakama women seeking to fill the gap in higher education opportunities facing residents of the lower Yakima Valley. As the only non-tribal university located on a Native reservation in the nation, Hope University is unique among its peers in Washington's higher education landscape. Moreover, while Hope is a liberal arts institution, it is the only independent university in Washington that does not offer residential living. Furthermore, since its inception, Hope has served the diverse population surrounding the university, which includes members of the Yakama Nation;

third- and fourth-generation Dutch, German, and French-Canadian immigrant families; and more recently arrived Mexican immigrants and their descendants.

Table 1.2

*Six-Year Graduation Rates for First-Time, Full-Time Students Enrolled in Private, Not-for-Profit Four-Year Institutions*

	<b>Nation</b>	<b>Washington State</b>	<b>Hope University</b>
<b>All Students</b>	65%	71%	15%
<b>Native American Students</b>	48%	44%	0%

Today, Hope University serves 801 undergraduate and 297 graduate students on five campuses, the majority of whom (678 undergraduates and 199 graduates) attend at the main campus in Toppenish (Hope University, 2016a). Of Hope’s undergraduate student population, 27% are male and 73% are female, with 64% of students reporting Hispanic or Latinx heritage, 10% reporting Native heritage, and 20% classifying themselves as White (Hope University, 2016b). As the university offers no residential living, all of Hope’s students are commuters, and almost all of Hope’s students are employed outside the university, with nearly half working full time in addition to taking a full load of courses (Ross, 2016). Moreover, approximately 85% of Hope undergraduates identify themselves as the first in their families to attend college, while more than 90% of new undergraduates qualify for the Pell Grant, a federal subsidy designed to help low-income students afford college (Ross, 2016). Nationally, these numbers are 33% (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018) and 32% (College Board, 2017),

respectively. As Kathleen Ross (2016) summarizes, “Hope University’s typical student is a commuter from a low-income family, having stopped out for at least one term along the way, holding down an outside job, and aspiring to be the first in the family to earn a four-year degree” (p. 19).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Hope’s unique student population faces specific challenges in the areas of retention and completion. However, measures of student success indicate that Hope is not successfully supporting its students in meeting these challenges, as 85% of students fail to complete a degree within six years. The situation is most dire for the university’s Native American students, who are graduating at rates far lower than their state and national Native and non-Native peers.

A closer look at student progress data indicates that many Hope students begin to fall behind in their first year of studies. Among the 2014-2015 cohort of first-time, full-time freshman, only 17% of students had achieved sophomore standing by their second year. Similarly, only 5% of the 2013-2014 first-time, full-time freshman cohort had achieved junior standing by their third year of studies.

Given the critical nature of the freshman year in ensuring completion to graduation, a cross-disciplinary group of Hope faculty formed a collaborative to redesign the University 101 freshman seminar course. Building upon earlier retention efforts (Hope University, 2015; Janis, 2015; Ross, 2016; Valdez, 2016) and incorporating the ideas of Kuh (2008a, 2008b) and Tinto (2012), the collaborative designed a course emphasizing the development of a learning community, critical exploration of diverse



viewpoints, collaboration, and community-based learning. Since of the Fall of 2016, 311 first-year students have enrolled in 20 sections of the course. However, the course's impact on student retention, and specifically on Native student retention, is unknown.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Despite the many barriers facing Native students as they navigate the US educational system, many Native students *do* persist and successfully earn a four-year degree. This record of study explores the experiences of five Native American student persisters as they navigate the revised University 101 course. This effort not only gives voice to student success (Keith, Stastny, Agnew, & Brunt, 2017), but helps interpret the University 101 experience in the context of Native American student persistence, thus providing guidance to the Hope University instructors tasked with shaping their practices in support of student retention.

### **Research Question**

This record of study intends to answer the following overarching research question: How do female Native American student persisters experience a retention-oriented freshman seminar in a Northwest University in the United States? To answer this question, this study explores the following sub-questions:

1. How do female Native American student persisters experience a retention-oriented freshman seminar course in a Northwest University in the United States, personally?

2. How do female Native American student persisters experience a retention-oriented freshman seminar course in a Northwest University in the United States, academically?

### **Significance of the Study**

The primary significance of this study lies in its potential to benefit the Native American students of Hope University. Hope students represent the new majority—low-income, first generation, Native American and Latinx college students—and while they arrive with dreams of completing a degree, most fail to do so. By providing the dedicated professionals of the University 101 collaborative with insight into how Native student persisters are experiencing the redesigned course, this study will enhance the conversation on student persistence and the university’s role in increasing retention.

Moreover, although Hope is unique in size, location, and demographics, insight into the effectiveness of the University 101 course can be used by other institutions who are also searching for effective methods to support the success of their Native American students. This insight is especially needed given the increasing importance of a college degree. Over the past several decades, the availability of middle-skill, middle-wage white collar and blue-collar jobs has declined dramatically, while both low-skill, low-wage and high-skill, high-wage job opportunities have grown. This polarization of the labor market has been especially detrimental to the earnings and employment opportunities of those who don’t hold a four-year degree (Autor, 2010). In this increasingly polarized context, earning a college degree provides for a more stable career and a higher income (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), with the typical college graduate

earning 66% more than the typical high school graduate across his or her lifetime (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010). In addition, college graduates are more likely to experience job satisfaction, more likely to enjoy employer-sponsored health benefits, and less likely to experience unemployment or poverty (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010). Moreover, attainment of a college degree is associated with a number of health benefits. In comparison with people possessing a high school diploma, college graduates are more likely to exercise, less likely to smoke, and less likely to experience obesity (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010). Given that Native American students are more likely to come from low-income families, and that education is one of the surest ways to increase one's social and economic status (Swail, 2000), unequal completion rates by our Native American students are especially concerning.

### **Definition of Terms**

Several terms will be used throughout the study and merit definition:

1. Ceremony: The term ceremony refers to a series of actions intended to “build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves” (Wilson, 2008, p. 11).
2. Completion: The term completion refers to an individual student's ability to persist until a college degree is obtained (Tinto, 2012).
3. Dominant: The term dominant is used to describe “the culture of European-descended and Eurocentric, Christian, heterosexist, male-dominated” populations (Wilson, 2008, p. 35).

4. Engagement: The term engagement refers to the extent to which a student is involved socially and academically with his or her peers, staff, and faculty.
5. Indigenous: The term Indigenous refers generally to “people and peoples who identify their ancestry with the original inhabitants of Australia, Canada, and other countries worldwide” (Wilson, 2008, p. 34), and is used to emphasize the unity of the worldwide Indigenous population when reference to specific Indigenous peoples (e.g., Native American, Australian aboriginals, First Nations, Yakama) is not intended.
6. Latinx: The term Latinx replaces the gendered terms Latino and Latina and is used in defiance of the Spanish-language grammatical rule that calls for the use of the masculine term when describing a mixed-gender group.
7. Minoritized: The term minority refers to a group that is smaller in number than the majority. In this manuscript, the term minoritized is used to challenge this notion while acknowledging that the condition of being minoritized is tied to one’s lack of access to systems of power and privilege and not to the size of the group to which one belongs.
8. Native American: The term Native American is used to refer to individuals who identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native. The term is used interchangeably with American Indian and Indigenous and, where applicable, the specific term used reflects the preference of the author or person to which the manuscript is referring.

9. Persistence: The term persistence refers to an individual student's ability to continue and eventually complete their education (Tinto, 2012).
10. Retention: The term retention refers to an institution's ability to keep and graduate students (Tinto, 2012).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Conceptual Framework**

Acknowledging the ubiquitous influence of racism and colonization on the Native American student experience and the ethical imperative for educators and researchers to act in the face of injustices exercised upon Indigenous peoples, the conceptual framework presented here integrates tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) and equity literacy in an effort to clarify the experiences of Native American students and the roles of students, teachers, and researchers in advancing social justice. Combined, TribalCrit and equity literacy highlight the societal and organizational structures and practices that limit Native American student persistence while disallowing the damaging individual deficit models that often frame studies of minoritized student persistence. Moreover, the combined framework presented here builds upon a conceptual understanding of colonization and racism to provide educators and researchers with the practical skills they need to confront manifestations of racism and colonialism when they emerge in our classrooms, universities, communities, and society. Specifically, TribalCrit and equity literacy frame student persistence within the context of colonialism and place the impetus on educators to ensure retention, thus allowing for a culturally-relevant exploration of this study's overarching research question: How do female Native American student persisters experience the revised University 101 course?

## **Tribal Critical Race Theory**

“Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) offer the possibility of unmasking, exposing, and confronting continued colonization within educational contexts and societal structures, thus transforming those contexts and structures for Indigenous Peoples.” (Writer, 2008, p. 1)

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the mid-1970s as a response to critical legal studies and has been increasingly utilized as a framework for understanding educational inequity since Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) seminal article was published in the mid-1990s (Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015). At its core, CRT is an analytical frame that highlights the intersection of race and property to further our understanding of educational inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to Solorzano (1997), five themes shape CRT perspectives, methods, and pedagogy: 1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; 2) the challenge to dominant ideologies such as objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity; 3) a commitment to social justice; 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and 5) an interdisciplinary perspective. CRT has been instrumental in challenging traditional paradigms, methods, discourses, and texts to reveal the way social constructs affect minoritized people of color (Yosso, 2005), and when applied to student persistence, CRT helps shift the focus from individual deficit models to the structural barriers within the university that prevent students from persisting to graduation (Cerezo & McWhirter, 2012).

Tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) is an offshoot of CRT rooted in the unique legal, historical, political, and social status of Indigenous people (Abercrombie-Donahue, 2017). According to the Lumbee scholar Bryan Brayboy (2005), CRT fails to address the specific needs of tribal peoples, particularly those related to the complicated relationship between Native Americans and the federal government, the legal and political liminality of tribal people resulting from that relationship, and the ongoing process of colonization and its debilitating influence on Indigenous peoples. Thus, while CRT is rooted in the notion that racism is endemic to US society, TribalCrit is built upon the premise that colonization is endemic to society, as evidenced in the dominance of European thought, knowledge, and power structures as well as in continued efforts to change Indians to be more like White people (Brayboy, 2005). Essentially, TribalCrit places racism and colonialism at the center of explorations of Native American educational experiences and outcomes while contextualizing research within the ongoing legacies of colonialism and racism (Abercrombie-Donahue, 2017).

### **Equity Literacy**

Over the past few decades, scholars have used CRT to explore the experiences of students of color and challenge deficit language and thinking associated with marginalized groups (Lee, 2018). Similarly, TribalCrit has been utilized by a number of scholars to explore the social and historical contexts that shape schools and universities and the experiences of students within (see Abercrombie-Donahue, 2017; Castagno, 2012; Desai & Abeita, 2017; Masta, 2018; and Padgett, 2015). However, CRT and TribalCrit have been criticized for failing to provide practitioners with a race-conscious



vision of what an ideal university would look like or with frameworks for understanding how to maximize the success of minoritized students of color within the current educational system (Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015).

Consequently, several approaches have emerged to provide guidance in how to combat the systemic racism and inequity that shape the university experience, including the campus climate for diversity framework, the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model, the institutional diversity framework, and the equity scorecard (Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015). Of particular interest to this study is Gorski's (2013) equity literacy approach, which, although developed to frame the experiences of students living in poverty, can be equally useful in framing our work with minoritized students of color. Similar to adherents of CRT, Gorski argues that disparities in educational results are not rooted in individual or cultural deficits, but rather in inequitable systems. However, Gorski argues that challenging these inequitable systems requires the development of equity-literate educators who cultivate four interrelated skills: 1) the ability to recognize both subtle and not-so-subtle biases in the classroom, school, and society while acknowledging how those biases affect students; 2) the ability to respond to biases and inequities in the immediate term, particularly when they become evident in schools and classrooms; 3) the ability to redress biases and inequities in the longer term; and 4) the ability to create and sustain a bias-free and equitable learning environment for all students (Gorski, 2013, p. 21). Essentially, Gorski's equity literacy approach places the onus on educators to actively challenge the institutional and

individual barriers that limit the educational opportunities of minoritized students of color and students living in poverty.

Combined, TribalCrit and equity literacy shift our focus away from individual deficit models towards a structural perspective that frames the retention of Native American students in higher education within the contexts of racism and colonialism while providing us with an understanding of the practical skills we need to confront manifestations of racism and colonialism when they emerge in our classrooms, universities, communities, and society. Moreover, CRT and TribalCrit offer an approach to research that prioritizes experiential knowledge, community voice, and storytelling, while reminding us that education is activist in nature and must center upon a commitment to social justice.

### **The Native American Experience**

#### **The Native American Educational Experience**

The “Indian problem” is not a problem of children and families but rather, first and foremost, a problem that has been consciously and historically produced by and through a system of colonization: a multidimensional force underwritten by Western Christianity, defined by white supremacy, and fueled by global capitalism. (Grande, 2015, p. 23)

Although Native American education has existed on the North American continent for nearly 15,000 years, the Native American experience of education changed dramatically with the arrival of European settlers (Gaither, 2014). Prior to colonization, Native Americans across the continent practiced sophisticated forms of landscape

learning rooted in a profound knowledge of the environment; animal habitats, migratory patterns, and nutritional value; and plant species and processing techniques. The mobility of pre-colonial Native American peoples made landscape learning especially important and also explains a number of Indigenous beliefs and practices that run counter to dominant European ideologies, such as a disinterest in accumulating goods, a lack of respect for property boundaries, a respect for elders (who had accumulated and could pass on valued knowledge), and a tendency toward tribal decision-making (which allows for the pooling of everyone's knowledge). Given the deep integration of traditional Native American education into everyday life experience, it is not surprising that most Native languages do not have a specific word for education as do the languages of Western cultures (Cajete, 2000).

“The miseducation of American Indians” began with the establishment of the first mission school by French Jesuits in 1611 (Grande, 2015, p. 15). Spanish and British mission schools followed, as did the establishment of universities such as Harvard, Dartmouth, and the College of William and Mary, all founded with the expressed intent of civilizing and Christianizing Native Americans. In 1830, the passage of the Indian Removal Act initiated a period of government-dominated Indian education, which was initially characterized by a focus on vocational training designed to assimilate recently-removed Native Americans into industrial society. By the 1870s, however, the federal government had initiated more intense education efforts designed to “kill the Indian and save the man” (Adams, 1995, p. 52). During this time, policies designed to inculcate in Native Americans an appreciation for private property (e.g., allotment) were combined

with the development of the boarding school system, which called for Indian children to be removed from their homes, often forcibly, and sent to residential schools, first on their reservations and later at locations intentionally distant from their communities and families. At the boarding schools, Indian culture and language were forbidden, Indian names were changed, and children were subjected to an English-only, Eurocentric curriculum designed to foster their assimilation into American society. Moreover, Indian children at the boarding schools were exposed to infectious disease; subjected to overcrowded living conditions and manual labor; and often made victims of physical and sexual abuse (Adams, 1995). Similar conditions have been documented at the Yakama Boarding School at Fort Simcoe, a reservation boarding school located just twenty-five miles west of Hope University's campus (Smith, n.d.).

Although boarding schools began to lose favor in the early 20th century as the majority of Indian students began transitioning into public schools, the legacy of the boarding school experience and the related cultural and physical genocide of Indian communities continue to have a devastating effect on Native American peoples and their relationships with formal schooling (Adams, 1995; Patterson, Butler-Barnes, & Van Zile-Tamsen, 2015). Brave Heart and colleagues (2011) characterize this “cumulative psychological and emotional wounding across generations” as historical trauma (p. 283), while Duran (2006) refers to it as the soul wound, emphasizing the Native understanding that trauma occurs in the soul or spirit.

A growing body of literature demonstrates that historical trauma continues to impact Native American educational, social, mental and physical health outcomes

(Aschenbrener & Johnson, 2017; Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2011; Dick, Manson, & Beals, 1993), and has been shown to contribute to negative attitudes towards the school system (Mooridian, Cross, & Stutzky, 2006) and negative education outcomes (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2011). As Duran (2006) emphasizes, understanding the historical context of contemporary Native American issues and recognizing the ongoing impact of historical trauma on Native American communities and individuals is an essential prerequisite to successful work with Native American populations.

### **Native American Values and Culture**

Despite facing nearly four hundred years of efforts aimed at destroying their culture, Native Americans continue to be resilient in working to maintain their cultural ways. In fact, many of the characteristics of Native students highlighted in today's literature, such as the drive to contribute to their community and the central importance of family (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008) reflect Gaither's (2014) description of pre-colonial Native culture, illustrating that much of the essence of Native culture remains despite centuries of efforts to destroy it. Moreover, in many tribes, active efforts are underway to bridge cultural knowledge gaps created by colonial violence to ensure younger generations have access to cultural teachings (Jacob, 2013). On the Yakama Nation, for example, Ichishkiin language and Yakama culture classes have been implemented in local schools while school-business collaborations are organizing summer language programs for youth.

With over five million representatives from over 500 tribes speaking 175 languages and living in urban settings as well as on over 300 reservations, Native

Americans have been described as “comprising fifty percent of the diversity” in this country (Hodgkinson, 1990). However, while it is important to recognize this vast cultural diversity, acknowledging the similarities across these distinct nations can deepen our understanding of Native culture and values (Duran, 2002) while counteracting “one of the most powerful colonial strategies inflicted on Native Peoples... convincing us that we are so different from one another” (Duran, 2006, p. 7). Moreover, it is possible to identify similarities in values that transcend tribal differences, including living in harmony with nature; focusing on the present guided by traditional ways; consciously submitting to the needs of the collective; maintaining anonymity and humility; relying on one’s extended family; and tending to keep to oneself (Heinrich, Corbine, & Thomas, 1990). As Duran (2002) notes, deepening our understanding of these traditional Native American values and how they may conflict with the non-Indian values that frame our institutions and practices is essential for those who work with Indigenous peoples. Of particular interest to the study of Native Americans in higher education is an understanding of the collectivist worldview and the role of family and community in Indigenous cultures.

**Worldview.** Framing the transcendent Indian values highlighted above is a collectivist worldview that contrasts sharply with the individualism that shapes the dominant culture’s institutions and practices (Hain-Jamall, 2013). At the root of this difference is the placement of value on the group’s well-being over that of the individual. This holistic, collective perspective is reflected both in thought and behavior. People from collectivist cultures, for example, tend to prioritize context over logic, and

thus seek patterns and connections between subjects and topics rather than logical progressions. Moreover, people from collectivist societies tend to view the world subjectively, recognizing that no two people experience the same truth. This space for ambiguity contrasts sharply with the dominant culture's emphasis on logic and objectivity, and is evidenced in the classroom setting as a tendency to prefer experiential and group work over individual work, and assignments that emphasize contextualized experience over those rooted in abstract analysis.

**Family and community.** The concept of belonging is fundamental to Native American cultures (Morrison, Fox, Cross, & Paul, 2010), and the importance of family and community in Indigenous American society has been evident since well before Europeans arrived on the continent (Gaither, 2014). Rooted in their collectivist worldview, Native Americans place much value on the well-being of the group and derive a great deal of motivation and satisfaction from their ability to contribute to the group's well-being (Hain-Jamall, 2013). As HeavyRunner and colleagues (2003) note,

One of the great strengths of Native American society is that the individual and the tribe are intimately intertwined. In this relationship, the individual does not stand apart from the larger group, but is fundamentally defined by membership in the group. (p. 2)

In this environment, the tribal community is seen as a source of support, resources, and skills, as "tribal social structures weave a web of supportive and interdependent relationships around their members with family, extended family, clan, community, nation, and spiritual connections" (Morrison et al., 2010, p. 104). In this context, both

family and the opportunity to give back to one's community serve as significant motivators for educational persistence and success (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

### **Yakama History and Culture**

Yakama Nation elder and preeminent Ichishkíin linguist Virginia Beavert (2017) offers clear guidance for non-Native researchers working in tribal communities. In addition to exercising respect for tribal language and culture, collaborating with Native allies within the community, and gaining the permission from tribal council to conduct one's study, Beavert contends that non-Native academic researchers must gain an understanding of a particular tribe's culture and history prior to engaging with the community. Specifically, Beavert suggests non-Native researchers explore the tribe's history, mores, traditions, language, population, geography, and experiences with treaties (Beavert, 2017, pp. 163-164).

Since time immemorial, the Yakama people have inhabited their ancestral homeland along the Yakima river in southern Washington State. However, the Treaty of 1855 forced the Yakama and their Indigenous neighbors to cede 90% of their ancestral lands to the US government and confine themselves to a reservation established for the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, which include the Yakama along with the Palouse, Piquouse, Wenatshapam, Klikatat, Klinquit, Wishram, Walla Walla, and other Indian nations. Once inhabiting land covering nearly a third of what is now Washington State, the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation today occupy 2,186 square miles, a land area roughly the size of the Delaware.



The people of the Yakama Nation first encountered White settlers in 1805 when members of the Lewis and Clark expedition arrived in central Washington State, and remained on friendly terms until the 1850s when Governor Stevens violated the Treaty of 1855 by declaring Indian lands open for settlement a mere twelve days after signing, a move made in complete disregard of the two-year resettlement period previously agreed upon. The Yakama Wars ensued, led by Yakama Chief Kamiakin. The Yakama were eventually defeated by the US government and most were settled on the Yakama Indian Reservation. Colonization continued to exert a harmful influence with the Dawes Act of 1887, which divided Yakama Nation land into 80-acre parcels to be distributed among the Yakama people. Many Yakama, some of whom had turned to drink after the devastating loss of their ancestral homelands, sold their parcels to non-Natives for “\$50 and a case of beer,” further weakening the Nation (Silma, 2017). Additional damage was inflicted on the Yakama people with the damming of the Columbia at Bonneville in 1938, Grand Coulee in 1942, and Celilo in 1957, effectively destroying the Yakama’s sacred meeting place and limiting their ability to exercise traditional fishing rights (Woody, 2014).

Today, there are nearly 11,000 enrolled members of the Yakama Nation, and cultural revitalization efforts aimed at healing the wounds of colonization are well underway (Jacob, 2013). Ichishkíin, the Yakama language, is being taught in local schools and universities including Hope, and traditional Yakama spiritual practices such as Waashat (Longhouse) and Tschadam (Shaker) continue to be practiced (Waldman,

2006). In addition, traditional practices such as hunting, fishing, and root digging continue to be exercised by youth and elders alike.

Moreover, the collectivist worldview continues to shape Yakama culture, as does the importance of family and community. These values are codified in the Yakama language, Ichishkiin, which names 40 distinct types of relatives (Hunn, 2001). As Hunn (2001) explains,

In Columbia River Indian society children not only have “mothers” (pca) and “fathers” (psit), but also four kinds of “grandparents,” six basic kinds of siblings, six categories each of “uncles” and “aunts” and of “nephews” and “nieces” and nine types of in-laws. (p. 201)

These extended families continue to play a role in child rearing, as illustrated by Virginia Beavert’s (2017) own story: “My great-grandmother raised me and my yaya (older brother Oscar) when my mother divorced my father.... We were full brother and sister. When grandmother went to town for groceries, yayanimnash inakwuukshaxana (yaya looked after me) while she was gone” (p. 16). Perhaps the strength of the Yakama people and the sense of intergenerational unity is best captured in Beavert’s introduction to her recently published Ichishkiin Dictionary:

My message to the Yakama people is that learning to read and write your own language is very important. It is the only way to save your native language and culture for future generations. We are losing our elders every day as they depart to a better place. My purpose in developing this dictionary has not been to benefit myself, but to encourage the younger generation to pursue an education, learn the

language, teach their children to speak, read and write Sahaptin, and do their part to help preserve the native language and culture of the Sahaptin people. (Beavert & Hargus, 2009, xvii)

### **Indigenous Research Methods**

It is only relatively recently that Indigenous scholars have had access to the academy (Kovach, 2009), and in the United States, Native Americans continue to comprise less than one percent of full-time faculty at degree-granting post-secondary institutions (NCES, 2018b). However, since Indigenous scholars began to enter mainstream educational institutions in the middle of the last century, Indigenous epistemologies have played an increasingly more significant role in shaping research done by and with Indigenous peoples (Wilson, 2008). Steinhauer (2001, as cited in Wilson, 2008) describes the development of Indigenous research as spanning four stages, beginning with the Indigenous adoption of Western paradigms and culminating in the emergence of uniquely Indigenous paradigms.

During the first stage, Indigenous scholars situated their work solidly within the dominant paradigm, and while some utilized the dominant paradigm as a platform for criticism, most maintained a decidedly dominant systems perspective. It was during the second stage of development that the idea of a distinct Indigenous paradigm emerged. However, researchers of this period continued to struggle to be accepted within the academy and thus tended to work primarily within the confines of dominant paradigms. A focus on decolonization emerged during the third stage of development, as Indigenous researchers began to challenge dominant methods and initiated the process of

Indigenizing western methodologies. Third-stage Indigenous research is perhaps best reflected in the work of Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Wilson, 2008).

Smith (2012) joins other Indigenous (Battiste, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2001; Wilson, 2008) and non-Indigenous (Patel, 2016) scholars in rooting her critique of dominant systems methods in an understanding of research as a colonizing and imperialistic endeavor. As these scholars note, not only is scientific research “implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism” (Smith, 2012, p. 1), but the Western practice of educational research continuous to play a “deleterious role in perpetuating and refreshing colonial relationships among people, practices and land” (Patel, 2016, p. 12). Even commonly accepted practices such as reviewing the existing literature, identifying distinct variables and causal relationships, and analyzing experience to identify constituent parts all function to validate colonizing knowledges of the world and Indigenous peoples (Patel, 2016). This framing of dominant systems research as a practice that continues to perpetuate colonial relationships challenges the mythologizing of colonial violence as something that occurred in the past, a framing Tuck and Yang (2012) characterize as a “move to innocence” designed to relieve settler guilt without addressing the on-going and detrimental effects of colonization on Indigenous peoples.

Research conducted within this third phase of development challenges Western methods without articulating a uniquely Indigenous paradigm (Wilson, 2008). Often, third-phase Indigenous research adopts qualitative methods, particularly those framed by the transformative, emancipatory approaches articulated by critical and feminist theorists (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008b; Kovach, 2009). As Denzin and Lincoln (2008a) explain,

“because of their liberatory, emancipatory commitments... critical methodologists can, in concert with Indigenous methodologists, speak to oppressed, colonized persons living in postcolonial situations of injustice” (p. x). This reliance on critical qualitative methods to advance an Indigenous research agenda can be seen as a strategic concession given the newness of Indigenous methodologies to the academy (Kovach, 2009).

A key feature of third-phase Indigenous research is an “awareness of colonization, and the firm belief that Indigenous peoples have their own worldviews” (Wilson, 2008, p. 53). The emergence of this awareness was essential in paving the way for the fourth phase in the development of Indigenous methods, that in which Indigenous scholars have moved away from the process of Indigenizing dominant paradigms and towards the articulation of their own paradigms, approaches to research, and methods for collecting, analyzing, and presenting data. In describing this transition, Wilson (2001) explains,

Now as Indigenous researchers we need to move beyond these [dominant research paradigms], beyond merely assuming an Indigenous perspective on these non-Indigenous paradigms.... We need to go beyond this Indigenous perspective to a full Indigenous paradigm. Our ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology are fundamentally different. (p. 176)

One such Indigenous paradigm is Wilson’s (2008) own model of research as ceremony. This model is explored below to illustrate the unique and decolonizing nature of research conducted within an Indigenous paradigm.

## **An Indigenous Paradigm: Research as Ceremony**

In exploring the characteristics and contexts of emerging Indigenous research paradigms, Kovach (2009) cites the internal, personal, and experiential nature of Indigenous knowledge in acknowledging the impossibility of creating one standard Indigenous research paradigm. However, she does suggest that Indigenous scholars articulate similar paradigmatic elements, including the cultural knowledges that guide their research choices, their research methods, and their approaches to interpreting knowledge “so as to give it back in a purposeful, relevant, and helpful manner” (p. 44). Clarifying these elements, Kovach argues, will facilitate the acceptance of Indigenous paradigms in dominant systems academia.

Reflecting Kovach’s (2009) guidelines, Wilson (2001, 2008) offers an Indigenous research paradigm composed of an Indigenous ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. This paradigm is rooted in the concepts of relationality and relational accountability, which can be put into practice through one’s choice of research topic, methods of data collection and analysis, and presentation of data. In conducting research through the lenses of relationality and relational accountability, researchers perform a ceremony of sorts by narrowing the gaps between themselves, their research participants, ideas, and the cosmos. As Wilson (2008) summarizes,

Indigenous epistemology and ontology are based upon relationality. Our axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining relational accountability. With a deeper understanding of these concepts, I hope that you will come to see that research is ceremony. The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger

relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves.

The research that we do as Indigenous people is a ceremony that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world. (p. 11)

**Relationality.** While ontology refers to our beliefs about the nature of reality, epistemology refers to how we come to have knowledge about that reality. Within an Indigenous paradigm, both reality and knowledge are relational, and thus an Indigenous ontology and epistemology are equivalent (Wilson, 2008). To clarify, an Indigenous ontology recognizes multiple realities that exist in the relationship that one has with the truth (Wilson, 2008). There is no one reality, but rather different sets of relationships that make up an infinite number of realities. Thus, within an Indigenous ontology, an object is less important than one's relationship to it. This is reflected in Indigenous epistemology, whereby our knowledge of an object or idea is inherently tied to our relationship with that object or idea. As Wilson (2008) explains, "We could not be without being in relationship with everything that surrounds us and is within us. Our reality, our ontology is the relationships" (p. 76). Furthermore, "we must use relationality to find out more about the universe around us" (p. 95).

**Relational accountability.** While the shared aspect of Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality, the shared aspect of Indigenous axiology and methodology is relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). Relational accountability involves fulfilling one's obligations in the research relationship—that is, being accountable to one's relations (p. 77). As Wilson notes, relational accountability is put into practice in four ways: through the selection of a research topic, through the methods chosen to explore

those topics, through the analysis of what one is learning, and through the presentation of research outcomes.

**Topic.** To uphold relational accountability when selecting a research topic, it is essential to allow the community to decide what should be researched, as allowing for community input and leadership demonstrates respect for relationships and can foster the further development of those relationships (Wilson, 2008). In addition, topic selection should contribute to shifting the focus of Indigenous research from one emphasizing epidemiology and illness towards one focused on harmony and the positive in Indigenous communities. Finally, topic selection must consider the potential for contributing to positive change in the community. Taken together, these elements highlight the Indigenous axiology (or ethics) underlying Wilson's (2008) paradigm: reciprocity. In order to uphold relational accountability, the researcher must practice reciprocity with the community and her co-researchers.

**Methods.** Within Wilson's (2008) framework, methods—or the tools we use to gather data—are seen as a means to an end (i.e., the researcher's methodology). A researcher's methodology is her theory of how knowledge is gained. Within an Indigenous paradigm, methodology is shaped by the imperative to uphold relational accountability by forming reciprocal and respectful relationships within the community where she is conducting research (Wilson, 2008). A researcher's methods, therefore, should facilitate the formation of those reciprocal and respectful relationships. Furthermore, a researcher's methods are dictated by the specific research question, the context of the study, and available resources, and can change as research progresses. It is



important to note that there are no uniquely Indigenous methods; rather, methods can be borrowed from other suitable research paradigms as long as they reflect the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of the Indigenous paradigm. That said, some methods may be more attractive in an Indigenous paradigm due to their reliance on relationships and their ability to enhance relational accountability.

Kovach (2009) describes Indigenous methods as spanning a continuum from those focused on personal, internal knowledges to those geared toward external knowledges gained from others. Methods for gaining external knowledge that enhance relational accountability tend to be more elastic than traditional methods and may include conversation (rather than structured interview) and sharing circles (rather than focus groups). As both method and meaning, story is also considered a culturally nuanced way of knowing within the Indigenous paradigm (Kovach, 2009, p. 94). Wilson (2008) explains how storytelling as method reflects relationality and relational accountability:

When you're relating a personal narrative, then you're getting into a relationship with someone. You're telling their side of the story and then you're analyzing it. So you're looking at the relationship that develops between the person telling the story and the person analyzing the story; it becomes a strong relationship. (p. 115)

Within an Indigenous paradigm, internal knowledges are deemed equally important as external knowledges (Kovach, 2009), and a reliance on both is essential to upholding relational accountability and fulfilling one's obligations to the community

(Wilson, 2008). These internal knowledges often emerge through fasts, ceremonies, dreams, meditation, silence, prayer, or when walking in nature (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Wilson (2008) describes these internal knowledges as extra-intellectual:

Because of our epistemology, our methods need to be extra-intellectual. That is, our data, our knowledge and relationships are based upon empirical data that is observable by the five senses, just like mainstream or linear research is, but it also includes other forms of non-empirical data. We are in a research ceremony. We gain knowledge and power from the universe around us in various ways. (p. 111)

***Analysis.*** In comparing Indigenous methods to traditional qualitative approaches, Kovach (2009) differentiates between analysis and interpretation. Analysis, she explains, involves reducing a whole to its parts, while interpretation involves the subjective accounting of a social phenomenon. Kovach goes on to explain that analysis, while common in dominant systems research, runs counter to Indigenous epistemologies that are non-fragmentary and holistic in nature (p. 130). Wilson (2008) further highlights the disconnect between traditional analysis and the Indigenous approach:

Analysis from a western perspective breaks everything down to look at it. So you are breaking down into its smallest pieces and then looking at those small pieces. And if we are saying that an Indigenous methodology includes all of these relationships, if you are breaking things down into their smallest pieces, you are destroying all of the relationships around it. (p. 119)

In contrast, analysis within an Indigenous paradigm involves non-linear interpretation that centers on synthesis and the building of relationships between ideas. As Wilson (2008) describes, “All the pieces go in, until eventually the new idea comes out. You build relationships with the idea in various and multiple ways, until you reach a new understanding or higher state of awareness regarding whatever it is you are studying” (pp. 116-117). Analysis within this paradigm is a highly intuitive process that often involves connecting to the deep information of the subconscious through dreamwork, and may be marked by sudden insights that seem unconnected to a linear progression of ideas (Wilson, 2008).

It is important to note that analysis within an Indigenous paradigm is a collaborative process that involves continuous feedback and the opportunity for research participants to interpret the ideas of others (Wilson, 2008). This process is rooted in the Indigenous ontological understanding that all ideas are encircled within an entire set of relationships, making input from all research participants necessary to help ensure that the ideas are properly encircled. Within an Indigenous paradigm, accuracy becomes less important than describing the set of relationships, and traditional concepts of reliability and validity lose meaning. Rather, the researcher’s ethic is to ensure that the knowledge she interprets is respectful of and helps to build the relationships that have been established through the research process (Wilson, 2008, p. 77). As Wilson (2018) clarifies,

Rather than the goals of validity and reliability, research from an Indigenous paradigm should aim to be authentic or credible. By that I mean that the research

must accurately reflect and build upon the relationships between the ideas and participants. The analysis must be true to the voices of all the participants and reflect an understanding of the topic that is shared by the researcher and participants alike. In other words, it has to hold to relational accountability. (pp. 101-102)

**Presentation.** As with the selection of data collection and analysis methods, the notion of relational accountability provides guidance as to how the researcher should present new ideas within an Indigenous paradigm. To start, the researcher must consider her relationship with the reader, and the relationship the reader has with the ideas in question. These relationships are complicated by a number of factors. For one, it is impossible for one person to know all of the relationships another person has with a concept or idea (let alone the myriad relationships a potentially infinite number of unknown readers may have with the ideas). This complexity is further enhanced by the mere process of presenting one's ideas in writing. As Wilson (2018) explains, "Writing ideas down fixes them as objects that can be taken out of context of time and relationship. As fixed objects, ideas lose the ability to grow and change, as those who hold relations with the ideas grow and change themselves. They lose their relational accountability" (p. 123).

Given the complexities of upholding relational accountability within the dominant academic system, the presentation of ideas within an Indigenous paradigm often involves the use of story coupled with an exploration of the connections the researcher has made with the ideas and peoples encircled in the research relationship.

Each of these elements strengthens the relational accountability that is weakened by the process of recording one's ideas on paper. As Wilson (2018) notes, "When you use a story, your own or others', it's claiming a voice and establishing a relationship" (p. 125). Moreover, presenting one's own developing understanding respects the reader's own relationships with the ideas and allows her to arrive at her own conclusions. As Wilson (2018) clarifies, one person cannot "attempt to make conclusions for someone else, but only to make new connections to ideas. It is incumbent upon the other person to come to their own decisions on the shape that the new ideas will take and to make their own conclusions" (p. 94).

In addition to upholding relational accountability with the reader, the presentation of ideas within an Indigenous paradigm should also foster accountability within the researcher's relationship with herself. This accountability involves writing explicitly about the lessons one has learned from the research ceremony and how one has changed through the process. This process illustrates the interdependent components of the Indigenous paradigm: The Indigenous ontology that we are our relationships, the Indigenous epistemology that knowledge is relationships, the Indigenous methodology that we learn through the building of relationships, and the Indigenous axiology that we must maintain accountability to our relationships. As Wilson (2018) emphasizes, "If research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right" (p. 135).

### **College Retention and Persistence**

To fully appreciate contemporary approaches to Native American student persistence and retention, it is useful to understand how these concepts have evolved

over the past centuries of higher education in the United States. The history of higher education in the United States dates back to the founding of the nation's first university, Harvard College, in 1636. However, for the vast majority of this nearly 400-year history, institutions of higher education were focused on survival, and this survival focus, combined with the reality that the majority of students didn't earn degrees, precluded a focus on retention (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012). A turning point was reached in 1862 with the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act, which called for the establishment of at least one college in each state. This dramatically increased the number of US universities while making college more accessible to students who couldn't afford to attend elite private institutions. This expansion of US higher education coincided with increased industrialization and urbanization, which augmented the demand for workers with managerial and professional expertise. As a college degree became more valuable, the first junior colleges were established along with a number of institutions founded to serve populations not welcome at traditional universities. This increased diversity of institutions and student bodies led to more selective admissions at elite institutions, which began to see some attrition as a hallmark of institutional success. Moreover, as institutional diversity increased, so did differences in completion rates between institutions, prompting the emergence of the first studies of student mortality in the 1930s.

Citing the need for a more general understanding of student departure as well as a need for a better understanding of differences in student mortality between institutions, McNeely (1938) conducted a four-year study of the 1931 freshman classes at 25

universities to determine the extent to which students leave college and the factors responsible for their withdrawal. According to McNeely, 62 of every 100 students left their initial university without a degree during the four-year study. However, 17 of those returned to higher education, leaving a net mortality of 45 of every 100 students. Moreover, McNeely identified a number of factors related to this mortality, including the student's sex, age at entrance, involvement in extracurricular activities, academic achievement, and credit accumulation. In addition, McNeely determined that attrition was highest during the freshman year and found that the nature of the university (e.g., public or private) influenced attrition. Finally, McNeely differentiated between causes of dismissal, finding that academic dismissal and financial difficulties played the biggest roles.

This initial focus on retention exemplified by McNeely's study faded as the nation shifted its attention to the Great Depression and World War II. However, the 1950s witnessed a dramatic expansion in university enrollment prompted by Depression-era and post-WWII governmental policies. Expanded college funding available to youth through the National Youth Administration and to veterans via the GI Bill prompted growth in college enrollments, while the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 encouraged college attendance by providing financial support and promoting education as necessary for national security. In addition, the growth in community colleges made a university education more accessible to the masses.

Combined, these trends produced an increasingly diverse student body with more diverse needs. Expanded access to higher education meant increasing numbers of underprepared students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds were pursuing a higher education. However, many campuses found themselves unable or unwilling to support these students, and many students failed to earn degrees. Moreover, the student protest and unrest of the 1960s highlighted the idea that student satisfaction and retention were not merely issues of academic fit. It was in this context that the first systematic studies of retention emerged.

### **Foundational Studies**

While individual campuses began to monitor retention in the 1950s, systematic study did not emerge until the early 1960s. Most of these early studies were conducted through a psychological lens and focused on personality traits as the main reasons for student departure, with some researchers studying the influence of the social context as well (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012). However, while these studies marked an advancement in the retention literature, most were “limited to descriptive statements of how various individual and/or institutional characteristics relate[d] to dropout” (Tinto, 1975, p. 90) and few attempted to “explain the interrelationship among factors believed to affect the attrition process” (Spady, 1970, p. 38). In the 1970s, researchers built upon these foundational studies to formulate the first comprehensive theories of student retention.

**Social and academic integration.** In 1970, William Spady synthesized existing research into the first widely-recognized retention model. Building upon Durkheim’s



theory of suicide, Spady (1970) posited that dropout was less likely (and thus retention more probable) if students were able to successfully integrate into both the social and academic systems of university life. According to Spady, successful integration resulted from the interplay of academic potential, grade performance, intellectual development, friendship support, and student-institution compatibility (i.e., normative congruence). Successful integration increased satisfaction which promoted commitment to the institution and thus mitigated drop-out.

After analyzing the expression of these factors among 683 first-year students at the University of Chicago, Spady (1971) determined that relationships with faculty and peers positively influenced student integration, satisfaction, and commitment to the institution. However, he also found that these factors had little bearing on a student's decision to drop out. Rather, Spady determined that initial academic performance most distinguished students who completed a degree from those who didn't. However, he also identified the factors that exerted the greatest influence in the student's first year, and determined that these elements differed by sex. Among men, extrinsic factors predominated, and grade performance exerted the greatest influence on their decision to drop out both in the first year as well as throughout their university career. In contrast, intrinsic factors most affected women's first-year departure, with interpersonal needs dominating their decision-making process. These initial differences aside, Spady concluded that formal academic performance had the strongest influence in a student's decision to drop out prior to completion.

**Goal and institutional commitment.** Building upon Spady's (1970, 1971) work, Tinto (1975) developed a theory of dropout that integrated three levels of variables from previous studies (individual, interactional, and institutional) into a comprehensive model that accounted for both the nature of the dropout process and different forms of dropout behavior. However, Tinto switched his primary focus from social and academic integration to goal and institutional commitment, incorporating Spady's additional variables as factors related to integration and thus, to the student's original level of commitment to her goals and to the institution. As Tinto explained, students begin college with certain levels of commitment to the institution and to the goal of attaining a degree. They then experience differing levels of social and academic integration based on their grade performance, intellectual development, and interactions with their peers and faculty. The greater a student's academic integration, the greater her commitment to the goal of obtaining a degree, while the greater a student's social integration, the greater her commitment to the institution. Dropout, Tinto argued, is a function of the student's commitment to obtaining a degree at that institution. Moreover, Tinto argued that a distinction needed to be made between voluntary withdrawal and academic dismissal as they involve different types of people and different patterns of interaction with the institution.

Tinto continues to add to the professional literature on retention, with his more recent contributions prioritizing students' views of their university experience and emphasizing the importance of persisting as opposed to being retained (2012, 2017a, 2017b). In addition, Tinto (2012) has proposed a revised model that includes support,

assessment, and feedback as conditions for student success in addition to academic and social integration (characterized as involvement) and commitment (reconceptualized as expectations). Moreover, Tinto (2017a) argues that self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and seeing value in the curriculum enhance a student's ability to persist, and encourages universities to ask themselves what they can do to lead students to want and have the ability to persist. Today, Tinto remains the best known and most cited theorist in student retention (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012; Morrison & Silverman, 2012).

**Interpersonal, academic, and athletic involvement.** Alexander Astin (1977) proposed a developmental model of retention emphasizing the importance of involvement for student success. According to Astin, students enroll in universities more or less inclined to become involved. At one extreme, students from educated and relatively affluent families, students that have a positive history of academic achievement, and students with higher initial aspirations are more likely to become involved. In contrast, students who are less likely to become involved tend to come from less educated families, have less academic preparation, commute to school, hold a job, attend less selective institutions, and hold lower aspirations. However, despite initial predispositions, students develop throughout their college experiences, with successful students becoming involved in one of three ways: interpersonally, academically, and athletically. The simplicity of Astin's model made it appealing to university practitioners, many of whom used it as the basis for their campus interventions (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012).

In the decades following the publication of Spady's, Tinto's, and Astin's foundational studies on retention, both practical and theoretical advances were made in the field of retention studies. On the practical side, enrollment management emerged as university campuses began to focus on practical interventions that could be implemented to enhance student retention. This trend coincided with an increased focus on the retention of specific student subgroups, such as first-generation students, non-traditional students, and minoritized students. Also during this time, retention and persistence began to emerge as distinct concepts, with retention referring to the institution's ability to keep and graduate students and persistence referring to the individual student's ability to continue and eventually complete their degree (Tinto, 2012). Additionally, the past few decades have witnessed an increased questioning of an assumption that dominates much of the retention literature—that students must adapt to the dominant norms to succeed. Consequently, more recent retention literature has been characterized by an emerging focus on validating the experiences and knowledge of students of color.

### **Theories of Native American Persistence**

Although there is a general dearth of research on the Native American experience in higher education (Larimore & McClellan, 2005), there exists a growing body of research exploring Native American persistence and retention. Some theorists have explored Native American persistence through the application of general retention theories. Tinto's work in particular has framed much of this work (Larimore & McClellan, 2005; Lopez, 2018). HeavyRunner, Murray, and Shanley (2003), for example, refer to three of Tinto's eight factors as being particularly relevant when

framing Native American student departure: lack of integration and community membership, incongruence, and isolation. Belgarde and Lore (2003) also build upon Tinto's theory by exploring the role of student support services in promoting Native American retention at the University of New Mexico. However, some authors have criticized this application of general retention theories to Native student populations for being assimilationist (Tierney, 1999) and for failing to control for the influence of family (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

Other scholars have offered persistence theories specific to Native American student populations. The family education model developed by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) emphasizes the importance of family, community, and culture in promoting Native American retention. According to the family education model, universities can promote retention by acting as advocates for social and health services, developing strong students support systems, and engaging students' family members in the college community. Waterman (2012) built upon this theory by arguing that returning home while in college increases persistence while reinforcing Native students' commitment to their communities. Similarly, Guillory (2009) offers a Native-centric retention model that emphasizes the importance of family and community connection, support for single parents, and culturally-sensitive remediation. In addition, Guillory contends that a student's desire to give back to their community is also a factor in their ability to persist to graduation. Brayboy and colleagues' (2012) nation building theory offers a similar perspective, arguing that Native American persistence is positively impacted by a desire to serve one's community combined with the university's support

for that desire. Windchief and Joseph (2015) offer an alternative perspective, positing that Native student persistence is enhanced when students are able to claim postsecondary education as an Indigenous space using curriculum, American Indian student services, and digital media. Finally, in reviewing the literature on Native American persistence, Lopez (2018) offers the millennium falcon persistence model, which frames retention as a result of the interplay between family support, institutional support, the tribal community, and academic performance.

### **Factors Affecting Native American Persistence**

Although there are a growing number of theories on Native American persistence and retention, much uncertainty remains as to the actual factors that influence Native American college students' ability to persist through graduation (Harrington & Harrington, 2011; Larimore & McClellan, 2005). However, Lopez' (2018) review of Native American retention literature highlights four themes common to this emerging body of research: family support, institutional support, tribal community support, and academic performance.

**Family support.** According to Lopez (2018), family support is the most frequently reported factor contributing to Native American student persistence. This support often comes in the form of motivation and encouragement, but is also reflected in Native American students' desire to make their parents proud, be role models, and create better lives for their children. According to Guillory and Wolverton (2008), this drive is rooted in the Indigenous philosophy of putting the community before the individual and thus provides Native American students with the strength to overcome a

number of difficult situations, including unwelcoming university environments, lacking academic preparation, and inadequate financial aid. One student clearly illustrates the importance of family in understanding Native American persistence: “Mine [motivation] is my family back home.... We have a close-knit family, extended family... and they’re, like, pushing us real bad.... My greatest fear is to let them down right now” (as cited in Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 74). However, despite the unparalleled influence family seems to play in promoting Native American persistence, it is important to note that family responsibilities, single parenthood, and the expectation of providing financial and emotional support for family members have all been highlighted as barriers to college completion (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

**Institutional support.** In addition to family support, institutional support has been found to positively impact Native American student retention (Lopez, 2018). Guillory and Wolverton (2008) emphasize the importance of faculty and peer social support in promoting Native American student persistence. As they highlight, Native American students who persist until graduation often report positive relationships with their professors and peers, both Native and non-Native. These students describe peers who openly collaborate on projects and faculty who express a genuine interest in their lives. This peer and faculty social support creates a sense of community and belonging consistent with the cultural values of Native American students (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). In addition, institutional support in the form of mentoring, Indigenous cultural activities, and adequate financial aid have been shown to increase Native American student persistence (Lopez, 2018). In general, institutional efforts to create an inclusive

environment and foster connections among Native students have been shown to positively impact Native students' persistence intentions (Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, & Nitzarim, 2013).

**Tribal community support.** A connection to one's tribal community has been shown to be a great motivator for persistence among Native American students (Lopez, 2018). This connection often manifests itself in a desire to give back to one's community. According to Guillory and Wolverton (2008), Native students often view education as more than an opportunity for career advancement; in their eyes, education offers the possibility of positively impacting the negative conditions facing their home communities. As one student in Guillory and Wolverton's (2008) study noted, "I want to go back to my reservation and help my Indian people" (p. 75). This desire to complete a university degree in order to give back to one's community is consistent with the Indigenous placement of value on the group's well-being over that of the individual. Additional components of tribal community support that have been shown to positively impact Native American student persistence include a connection to one's tribal community, access to one's tribal community, and the availability of activities on campus that reflect one's tribal culture (Lopez, 2018).

**Academic performance.** A final factor impacting Native American student persistence is academic performance. According to Lopez (2018), academic performance is impacted both by students' preparation for college as well as by the skills they possess once in college. Often, Native American students arrive at college less prepared academically than their peers, which can negatively affect self-confidence (Guillory &



Wolverton, 2008) and persistence (Lopez, 2018). Moreover, Native American students often express being unprepared to participate in class discussions, which can also negatively affect their academic performance and persistence (Lopez, 2018). Finally, Lopez (2018) notes that Native American students have often yet to develop the skills necessary for academic success and persistence, including effective study skills and the skill of asking faculty for help when needed.

### **Native American Women in Higher Education**

While few studies explore the university experiences of Native American women (Evans; 1994; Waterman & Lindley, 2013), the growing body of literature does highlight the influence of the Indigenous worldview and the importance placed on family and community by Native women pursuing a higher education. Key to Native women's desire to pursue a higher education is their drive to honor their Indigenous cultures and communities by acting as role models and choosing careers paths that will help them give back to their tribes and nations (Bingham, Adolpho, Jackson, & Alexitch, 2014; Evans, 1994; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Rooted in their "synthetic ability" to connect new information to their cultural worlds (Evans, 1994), Native women express a desire "to give back to their communities; they [do] not pursue education as a means to escape the reservation, but as a vehicle to strengthen their nations" (Waterman & Lindley, 2013, p. 155).

For Native American women in higher education, a desire to strengthen one's family cannot be separated from a desire to strengthen one's nation, as strengthening the family by being a role model necessarily strengthens the nation (Waterman &

Lindley, 2013). Consequently, Native women in the university settings tend to place a strong emphasis on family relationships (Bingham et al., 2014; Bowker, 1992; Waterman & Lindley, 2013), and tend to be successful when they receive support from both their immediate and extended families (Bowker, 1992). Moreover, family is often seen as a primary motivation for continuing one's education, as Native American students focus on the collective over their individual needs:

Women knew their culture and community would benefit from their obtaining an education, including their own families. Women considered children a reason to go to college or to finish a college degree to be able to provide for their children and be role models. (Waterman & Lindley, 2013, p. 152)

Finally, Indigenous values are also reflected in Native American women's experiences in university classrooms. Reflecting a culture that values collectivism, Native American women in higher education tend to thrive when cooperation and community are emphasized (Evans, 1994).

### **First-Year Seminars**

Given that the largest proportion of students who leave college prior to completion do so during the first year (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005), first-year interventions are critical to ensuring student retention and persistence (Harrington & Harrington, 2011; Rogerson & Pooch, 2013). First-year seminars are one such intervention and have come to be one of the most researched innovations in higher education (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Tobolowsky, Cox, & Wagner, 2005). In essence, first-year seminars are small, discussion-based courses designed to provide students with the knowledge, skills,

and abilities necessary to overcome the challenges associated with the first year of college (Permezadian & Crede, 2016). Typically, first-year seminars place a strong emphasis on developing community while facilitating learning about a subject or combination of subjects, the institution, diversity, and oneself (Hunter & Linder, 2005).

While first-year seminars have been around in some form since the 1870s (Gordon, 1989), the modern concept of the first-year seminar was introduced in 1972 when John Gardner advocated for a course designed to increase student academic performance and retention (Reid, Reynolds, & Perkins-Auman, 2014). While there are a number of first-year seminar designs and formats, most fall into one of four categories: extended orientation seminars, academic seminars, professional and discipline-linked seminars, and basic study skills seminars, all of which are aimed at supporting student academic and social development as they transition to college (Hunter & Linder, 2005). As Hunter and Linder (2005) note, effective first-year seminars are offered for academic credit, are centered in the curriculum, involve both faculty and staff in program design and implementation, incorporate instructor development, compensate or reward instructors for teaching the course, involve upper-level students in delivery, and include methods for assessing effectiveness (p. 277). As of 2002, 90% of US colleges and universities offered some form of a first-year seminar (Reid, Reynolds, & Perkins-Auman, 2014).

The overwhelming majority of research on the effectiveness of first-year seminars has shown that these courses produce a number of positive outcomes including increased student retention (Hunter & Linder, 2005). In fact, first-year seminars have

been shown to be one of the most powerful predictors of persistence into the sophomore year (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005), with those students participating in first-year seminars earning higher average grades, avoiding academic probation at higher rates, participating in campus activities more often, and reporting more out-of-class interaction with faculty members (Porter & Swing, 2006). Moreover, completing a first-year seminar is associated with increased odds of persisting even when relevant background and prior academic performance characteristics are controlled for (Jenkins-Guarnieri, Horne, Wallis, Rings, & Vaughan, 2015).

Porter and Swing (2006) argue that, while there does exist much research demonstrating the effectiveness of first-year seminar courses in increasing retention, there is a lack of research that disaggregates the different components of these courses and their impact on persistence. However, some emerging literature has explored these components within the context of the first-year seminar. In attempting to identify the moderating factors that influence the effect of first-year seminar courses on student persistence, Permzadian and Crede (2016) found that first-year seminars are most effective at increasing retention when they are of the extended orientation design rather than academic or hybrid, taught by faculty or staff rather than by students, inclusive of all incoming freshman rather than simply those who are deemed academically unprepared, and offered as a stand-alone course rather than as a part of a learning community. Moreover, first-year seminars that focus on imparting study skills and promoting academic engagement (Porter & Swing, 2006) and those that are populated with students of the same major, with students who share an advisor, or with students

who share both (Rogerson & Poock, 2013) have been shown to have the greatest impact on students' intentions to persist.

Additional research explores the effectiveness of the components of first-year seminars within the more general context of the first-year experience. Four such components are advising, student-faculty relationships, experiences with diversity, and service learning. According to Kuh (2005), high-quality academic advising is one of the most important things effective institutions do to support student persistence. As King and Kerr (2005) explain, academic advising is most effective when course selection and registration are seen as a developmental process that takes place within the broader context of the student's life and career plan. This type of academic advising may be easier within the context of a first-year seminar than it would be otherwise. Another component of the first-year experience integral to many first-year seminars is positive faculty-student interactions, and as Kuh (2005) highlights, there is much research demonstrating the importance of positive student-faculty interaction in promoting student success and retention. Experiences with diversity have also been shown to promote positive outcomes in a number of areas, including student retention (Kuh, 2005). As Jones (2005) has noted, when students are left to interact on their own, they tend to do so with people who share their gender, ethnicity, or cultural background. Thus, to be successful, programs for first-year students such as the first-year seminar should be purposefully designed to enhance students' awareness of diversity. This is especially important when working to support the success of diverse student bodies. A final aspect of the first-year experience that can enhance retention within the context of a

first-year seminar is a service-learning component. To effectively enhance persistence, service-learning experiences should be located within the curriculum, related to course objectives, designed to enhance students' sense of civic responsibility, and built upon the understanding that learning goes beyond mere technical or professional mastery (Zlotkowski, 2005).

While some researchers have studied the components of the first-year seminar that enhance persistence, others have looked at aspects of teaching that do the same. According to Hrabowski (2005), providing frequent feedback, particularly early in the semester, is especially important for the success and retention of first-year students. Additional in-class techniques have also been shown to support the retention of first-year students; these include small-group discussion, project groups, short writing-to-learn activities, highlighting both the concrete and abstract, providing case studies and scenarios, and structuring problem-based and experiential learning (Erickson & Strommer, 2005). Moreover, Erickson and Strommer (2005) have found that instructors who effectively enhance the success of their first-year students consistently do a number of things, such as explain the why, provide structure and practice, ground learning in the concrete, and employ a variety of approaches and techniques.

### **Native American First-Year Students**

There is little research on Native American students' experiences during their first year of a college (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017), which is especially concerning given that first-year retention rates for Native students are substantially lower than rates among White and Black students (Consortium for Student Retention Data

Exchange, 2015). However, research on first-year minoritized students, much of which considers the Native experience, does highlight aspects of the first-year experience that can be particularly effective in supporting the retention of first-year minoritized students. In general, minoritized students tend to do better when they receive support from faculty, when they're working with faculty that have been shown to work well with minoritized students, and when they are provided with a family-like social and academic support system (Hrabowski, 2005). In addition, service learning has been shown to be especially effective in promoting the success and retention of minoritized students (Hrabowski, 2005; Jones, 2005) as has the experience of positive intercultural interactions (Hrabowski, 2005). As Hrabowski (2005) notes, substantive interaction among students from different ethnic and racial backgrounds can greatly contribute to the general climate on campus, which is particularly important for the success and retention of underrepresented minoritized students.

For Native American students in particular, establishing a connection to the university community is critical to a successful first-year experience (Harrington & Harrington, 2011) and maintaining a connection to their culture, family, and spirituality is essential to developing a sense of belonging on campus (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017). According to Tachine and colleagues (2017), this sense of belonging is contingent on support and validation of Native American students' peoplehood, which is often challenged on college campuses in the form of interpersonal and structural peoplehood invalidations. As a response, Native students often develop a sense of belonging and validation through their family or involvement in a Native student center.

However, these sources of belonging and validation are only necessary to the extent that the university doesn't reflect Indigenous cultures. Thus, incorporating Indigenous culture into the first-year experience—and specifically into the first-year seminar experience—can serve as a source of validation and promote the development of the sense of belonging that is necessary for the success and retention of first-year Native students. This finding is supported by Mosholder, Waite, Larsen, and Goslin (2016), who found that Native American student persistence is positively impacted when students feel they and their cultures are welcomed on campus.

### **Hope University Freshman Seminar**

#### **Foundational Efforts**

In recent years, Hope University students and faculty have made a number of attempts to maximize student retention and completion. While some of these attempts involved university-wide initiatives, others represented individual efforts to better understand and enhance student retention to graduation. In addition, recent protests have highlighted students' understanding of the issues surrounding retention and graduation. Combined, these efforts provide the context and foundation for the current iteration of University 101, a freshman seminar class designed to enhance student engagement and increase retention.

**Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation (ERG) team.** The Hope University Enrollment, Graduation, and Retention (ERG) team was initiated by the Office of the President in 2014 and began work under the direction of the associate vice president of enrollment management and the assistant vice president of student affairs in the fall of



that year. The team consisted of eight directors and student affairs leaders along with two faculty members who were selected for their role supporting colleagues who served as advisors to undergraduate majors in their departments. As described in their 2015 report, the team did not prioritize creating and establishing new initiatives; rather, they focused their efforts on using a systematic lens to understand student needs and the barriers that impede enrollment, retention, and graduation (Hope University, 2015).

At the close of their first year of the work, the ERG identified several accomplishments related to data and coding, supporting success with math coursework, and expanding mental health resources. To start, the ERG supported the establishment of a dashboard that allowed faculty and educators to access student data in real time and more easily answer questions about student academic progress and financial aid status. This, in turn, allowed TRIO student support staff to identify students who were struggling at midterm and provide needed assistance at this critical juncture. The team also facilitated the adoption of additional coding options for course withdrawal and stop out. These additional codes were designed to provide faculty and educators with additional information related to departing students' reasons for leaving, information that could be later used to identify students who had stopped out for reasons like pregnancy and financial hardship and had intentions to return. Additionally, the team prompted the math department's use of data as a tool to identify and support at-risk students. Prior to the start of classes, students who had previously demonstrated a slower rate of math learning were referred to tutoring, and students who missed an excessive number of classes once the term started were referred to an academic counseling session with the

vice president of student affairs. The team also prompted a math audit to identify students with more than 55 earned credits who had not completed their required math course. Thirty students were identified, twelve of whom were eligible to graduate during the 2014-2015 school year provided they passed the math course. Math plans were developed for these twelve students, and three of the twelve graduated as a result. Finally, the team facilitated the hiring of a half-time support person to help connect students with mental health issues to local resources and social services.

The idea of using University 101 as a retention tool was also born of the Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation team. The team describes the impetus for this initiative in their 2015 report:

As our discussion unfolded, it became apparent University 101 courses may not be meeting the needs of our current student population. We concluded that the curriculum, as it exists now, predominantly reflects western values and does little to create a space for meaningful dialogue about student identity and culture.

(Hope University, 2015, p. 4)

The team sent a proposal to the curriculum committee to reduce the course to one semester and two credits, and initiated content discussions focused on reshaping the course around student identity, culture, and success.

In addition to facilitating several advances related to data and coding, math coursework, access to mental health resources, and culturally responsive freshman curriculum, the ERG also offered several suggestions for future work. These included the establishment of a comprehensive peer mentoring program and the development of a

pre-college learning academy to support students who are not yet college ready as they develop the academic and non-cognitive skills needed to be successful in college. In addition, the team proposed the establishment of a student engagement taskforce to support students' meaningful engagement in activities that enhance their personal growth and college experience while identifying ways to emphasize the importance of college success. Finally, the ERG advocated for enhanced Native American retention and recruitment efforts.

The team concluded their report by offering five recommendations: 1) continue the ERG, 2) explore and commit to a deeper analysis of the key issues effecting student success, 3) develop an accurate predictive model designed to project retention, graduation, and long-term success, 4) create a faculty committee for admissions and financial aid, and 5) continue to develop a plan to address the sensitive issue of serving the university's Native American students.

***Native American student enrollment, retention, and graduation.*** Maxine Janis, member of the ERG and the president's liaison for Native American affairs, authored an addendum to the university's 2015 ERG report. In her report, Janis (2015) highlighted Native American enrollment numbers (82 students in the Fall of 2014 and 64 in the Spring of 2015), summarized factors related to Native American student success in higher education, and proposed a Native American cultural support plan to "promote personal resilience while Native American students are at HU" in order to "impact retention to graduation rates of Native American students" (p. 29). Two Indigenous models for enhancing student resilience formed the basis of Janis' proposal: the family

education model for student retention (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002) and the Diné educational model (Garrison, 2007). Based on these models, Janis proposed a system of culturally relevant supports that integrates family, culture, community, and college to promote an intentional focus on decreasing dependency on student loans; reducing time to graduation; eliminating excessive remedial coursework; providing supplemental services focused on resilience, soft skills, and cultural identity; crafting of new models for the delivery of instruction; and reimagining student and faculty induction programs in an effort to “reshape the culture to one that tells the Hope University story and recognizes the value in having everyone understand tribal sovereignty status and its historical importance to our mission” (p. 28). Janis argued that these changes would not only increase student retention, but would also increase appreciation of cultural differences, enhance academic competence, and build students’ technology skills.

**Exploring the faculty’s role in promoting retention.** Supplementing university-wide retention efforts, two faculty members have explored the role of student-teacher relationships in promoting student success and retention. Founding President Kathleen Ross (2016) explored the role of classroom experiences and relationships with faculty in supporting the success of students of color, immigrant students, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (whom she refers to as "New Majority" students). Similarly, Ricardo Valdez (2016) explored the dynamics and nature of relationships between university faculty and first-generation college students, noting the benefits those relationships have for both students and faculty.

***Classroom strategies for "New Majority" students.*** Addressing a lack of information about classroom strategies that are effective with "New Majority" students, Ross (2016) utilized student research assistants to conduct anonymous, informal oral interviews in a quest to identify specific strategies that students themselves identify as significant to their success. Questions asked of participants included "Have you had a professor who went 'above and beyond' to help you succeed in a class? What did he or she do?" and "In what class have you learned the most since you came to Hope University? What was it about this class that helped you learn so much?" (p. 9). After more than one hundred interviews at Hope University and focus groups conducted with students at two additional colleges, Ross identified a list of faculty that had been identified by several student participants. She then conducted in-depth interviews with those faculty members to further clarify the strategies they were using to promote student success. Ross' interviews yielded eleven strategies organized under four sections corresponding to the four essentials critical for promoting the success of "New Majority" students: engagement, belonging, confidence, and vision. Later, she conducted a statistical analysis and determined that students enrolled in different sections of the same course were twice as likely to fail if their professor was unfamiliar with the strategies than if their professor utilized one or more of the strategies in class, a statistically significant result that held up across a number of disciplines. The eleven strategies Ross identified are summarized in Figure 2.1 below.

***Student-teacher relationships.*** Citing the lack of depth of existing research on first-generation college students and the demonstrated impact of positive student-faculty

relationships on student success, Valdez (2016) conducted a single bounded case study of Hope University in an effort to describe the specific experiences that lead to the development of positive student-faculty relationships. Valdez’ study involved six faculty and staff along with ten upper-division, first-generation students, defined by the researcher as having no parent who had attended a two- or four-year institution. Six of these students were male (5 Latinx and 1 Native American) and four were female (2 Latinx and 2 Native American). While students were randomly selected to participate, faculty and staff were invited based on having been identified by students as playing a major role in their time on campus.

<b>Strategies for Engagement</b>
Engaging students through effective feedback
Helping students ask questions
Engaging students with analogies
<b>Strategies to Promote a Sense of Belonging</b>
Welcoming students with first-day activities
Relating to students’ life situations
Reframing the classroom as community
<b>Strategies that Engender Confidence</b>
Helping students create confidence
Journaling for confidence and deeper thinking
Developing students’ own academic ideas
<b>Strategies to Build a Vision for the Future</b>
Helping students envision an academic identity
Building professional identities to counter stereotypes

*Figure 2.1.* Breakthrough strategies for "New Majority" students (Ross, 2016).

Valdez (2016) gathered data using semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, document analysis, and field notes. Questions asked of students included “Tell me about a time when you were faced with a difficult situation at school. What did you do? Who, if anyone, helped you through it?” and “Describe your ideal professor. What characteristics do you feel are important to you?” Of faculty, Valdez asked questions such as “Tell me about a time, if any, you felt you went above and beyond in helping a student. Explain why you did this. How did it make you feel?” and “Explain a conversation outside of class with a student(s). What do you generally talk about? Who initiated the contact and how and where did it happen?” (p. 68).

In analyzing the data, Valdez (2016) identified ten findings categorized into six themes, including validation, lived experiences, size and location of the institution, cultural capital, and reciprocal opportunities and personal rewards. These findings include the following:

1. First generation college students felt more willing to open up when faculty initiated the conversation.
2. Verbal and social persuasion by faculty during the relationship phase positively affected students’ perception of self-efficacy.
3. Relationships between faculty and students were enhanced when lived experiences were openly expressed between both parties.
4. First-generation college students were intimidated by the perceived higher-class faculty, which lead to a lack of communication and relationships.

5. Interactions between faculty and students at this particular university were more relational rather than contractual.
6. Quality of interaction was perceived as better at this particular small university setting.
7. As faculty and first-generation college students developed relationships, the cultural capital deficit of first-generation college students was reduced.
8. Social capital was strengthened by developing faculty-student relationships.
9. Students became cognizant of the rewards and opportunities associated with relationships with faculty later in their college career.
10. Faculty at this particular university took an abundance of pride from student success through formed relationships. (pp. 84-85)

Summarizing his findings, Valdez (2016) concluded that relationship initiation by faculty was crucial in the development of positive student-faculty relationships, and that the sharing of lived experiences by both parties coupled with validation by faculty increased student self-efficacy and minimized both the cultural capital deficit and the college intimidation factor among first-generation college students. Based on these findings, Valdez offered five practical recommendations:

1. Establish intentional institutional structures that allow for the early development of faculty-student relationships outside of class.
2. Create social spaces on campus that increase the accessibility of faculty and promote student-faculty interaction.
3. Intentionally recruit approachable and compassionate full-time faculty.



4. Incorporate curriculum into first-year courses that increases student awareness of the benefits and opportunities associated with student-faculty interaction.
5. Nurture and advance self-efficacy and validation strategies.

**Student protests.** In the Fall of 2016, the Hope Student Government Association (SGA) expressed to university administration a number of concerns, including two that centered on issues related to retention until graduation: major credit requirements and funding for the Writing and Academic Skills Center (WASC) on campus. In regard to the WASC, SGA leadership highlighted the center's reliance on grant funding, explaining that the WASC is "one of the main student resources that is needed for student success"; however, due to unreliable funding, the center was unable to provide the hours or levels of service students requested (personal communication, SGA, 16 November 2016). The students also described what they viewed as excessive graduation requirements, arguing that major credit requirements should be lowered to within 10% of the programs of the Independent Colleges of Washington (ICW). After receiving an unacceptable response from the administration, the SGA organized several protests, including one involving t-shirts that mocked Hope's "Students First" mantra while protesting that "96% of incoming freshman at Hope University will not graduate within 4 years and your administration is okay with it!" (see Figure 2.2 below).



Figure 2.2. SGA t-shirts.

While concerns over excessive graduation requirements had been voiced as early as 2015 by the both faculty and administration, following the SGA protest, a number of department chairs worked to reduce the number of credit hours required to earn a degree. In total, 11 programs reduced their credit requirements and today, only three BA programs (17%) and six BS degrees (60%) require more than 120 credit hours in coursework: BA in Visual Arts (K-12 Credential), BA in Interdisciplinary Studies in Science, BA in Science Education (Biology 5-12), BS in Biological Science, BS in Biomedical Sciences, BS in Combined Science, BS in Environmental Science, BS in Medical Laboratory Science, and BSN in Nursing. However, the high number of sequential courses required in some majors, combined with inconsistent course scheduling, continue to pose barriers for student progress in some majors even if overall credit requirements are 120.

**Student Journey Task Force.** The Student Journey Task Force was initiated by the Office of the President following the student protests of the Fall of 2016. Characterized by the president as an “oversight body” (J. Bassett, personal communication, 13 February 2017), the Task Force included a number of high-level

officials, including three board members, the university president and its five vice presidents, the current and incoming chief financial officers, the dean of the college of education, the financial controller, the director of institutional accountability, and the director of business services. In addition, three faculty members served on the Task Force, one appointed by the president and two elected by their colleagues. Finally, the president appointed a student to the Task Force as well as a number of student service professionals, including the assistant vice president of student services, the president's liaison for Native American affairs, the head of advising, the registrar, the director of financial aid, the director of admissions, and the director of student accounts and collections.

The Task Force met six times during the 2016-2017 academic year, beginning in late October. Early in the process, a subcommittee known as the technical working group was established. This group—comprised of the head of advising, the registrar, the director of admissions, the director of financial aid, and the director of student accounts and collections—was tasked with exploring the technical aspects of integrating and aligning student service processes to better serve Hope students. In addition to meeting formally, the technical working group established a weekly huddle, during which they shared their current priorities to ensure student services were aligned and effectively collaborating. In the Spring of 2017, under the leadership of the director of financial aid, the technical working group began distributing weekly advisor retention reports containing valuable information on student registration, graduation, financial aid, and

hold status. These reports allowed faculty to work strategically with students to increase retention by promoting continued enrollment in the Fall of 2017.

While several ideas and proposals were discussed during the six Student Journey Task Force meetings, the president elected to maintain the advisory nature of the group while providing space for the technical working group to suggest operational changes under the guidance of the chief financial officer. The president did, however, act in response to a board member's suggestion that Hope expand the university's internship opportunities as a means of strengthening the student journey, creating and filling the position of director of corporate and community relations in February of 2017. The group held its last meeting in April of 2017, and while student services leaders continue to meet in a weekly huddle, the advisor retention reports were discontinued soon after the director of financial aid left for a nearby institution.

### **Development**

The current iteration of Hope University's University 101 course evolved from a communications course initially offered in the Spring of 2012 and was built upon the foundation of each of the previous retention efforts discussed above. Communications 105: Hope Core was a three-credit course designed to help first-year students successfully transition to college by supporting the acquisition of university success skills while providing exposure to experiential learning in cross-cultural communication. The assigned text for the course, *On Course: Strategies for Creating Success in College and in Life* (Downing, 2011), covers topics such as understanding the culture of higher education, creating inner motivation, and developing self-discipline. Similarly, course

assignments focused on the development of “exemplary academic and professional skills” (Hope University, 2012, p. 5), and extra credit was available for campus involvement and career exploration. In the Fall of 2014, Communications 105: Hope Core was retitled University 101: Foundations for Success, but no substantial changes were made to the course’s content.

Prompted in part by the 2015 ERG report, the University 101 collaborative was formed in the fall of that year and began working actively on the course’s redesign. The design team was coordinated by the chair of humanities in collaboration with the University’s professor of sociology, and included the author of the 2015 ERG report (the assistant vice president of student affairs) as well as the author of the report’s Addendum on Native American Retention (the president’s liaison for Native American affairs), the two faculty members who would later be elected to the Student Journey Task Force, and eight additional faculty members representing the College of Education, the Department of Social Work, and the English Department. In line with Valdez’ (2016) recommendations, all faculty members were chosen for their approachability, compassion, and demonstrated ability to develop positive relationships with Hope students. Ultimately, this faculty design team developed a cohort-based curriculum that incorporated six of the ten high-impact practices identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) to be beneficial for college students from a variety of backgrounds: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, collaborative assignments and projects, diversity and global learning, and community-based learning (Kuh, 2008b). In addition, the course

incorporated an adapted Experiential Learning Module (ELM) that had been piloted in the Fall of 2014 and the Spring of 2015.

**The ELM.** The Experiential Learning Module (ELM) forms the foundation of the revised University 101 course. Initially designed by the university's professor of sociology and piloted with the support of the assistant vice president of student affairs, the ELM involves two days of intensive activities using experiential learning and problem-solving strategies. On the first day, students participate in on-campus activities focused on three topics: immigration, the multiple dimensions of diversity, and the doctrine of discovery as it relates to Indigenous identity in the context of the Yakama Nation Indian Reservation. On the second day, students travel to one of two local farms to explore the concept of environmental stewardship in the context of the Yakama Nation. Throughout the two-day ELM experience, students work with their University 101 cohort and faculty member, providing nine hours of interaction with faculty and peers outside the traditional classroom.

An initial analysis of the ELM's impact was conducted following its Fall 2016 implementation by University 101 collaborative faculty. Forty-six percent of incoming students (75) participated in day one of the ELM and 53% of those students (40, 25% of all incoming freshman) returned for the second day's activities. Participants wrote reflections following each of the four modules, and coding of these reflections revealed evidence of impact related to four of the AACU's highly effective practices: common learning experiences, community-based learning, diversity and global learning, and the formation of learning communities (Augustine, 2016). Evidence of common learning

experiences emerged from the modules on the doctrine of discovery and environmental stewardship, as 49% of students expressed a deeper understanding of structural violence and 42% of students reflected on the importance of environmental stewardship. Evidence of community-based learning also emerged from the environmental stewardship model, as 38% of respondents discussed the connection between the land and the community. Moreover, the impact of diversity and global learning was evidenced following the immigration and doctrine of discovery modules, with 33% and 20% of students, respectively, indicating they had developed a deeper understanding of others. However, the most important and robust findings were related to the formation of learning communities, with participants expressing an understanding that they share commonalities with classmates, that they are “not alone,” and that they have begun forming relationships with peers (Augustine, 2016, p. 2). These finding emerged from three modules, with 28% of students expressing they know they are not alone following the immigration module and 22% expressing the same sentiment following the doctrine of discovery module. Connection, contact, and bonding with peers was also mentioned by 51% of students following the diversity module.

### **Rationale**

In redesigning the University 101 course, the collaborative intentionally built upon previous retention efforts while incorporating six of Kuh’s (2008b) high-impact practices and four practices identified by Tinto (2012) as influential in increasing the retention of first-generation students, including advising that provides clear guidelines to graduation; institutional academic, social, and personal support; clear and frequent

feedback; and involving students with peers, faculty, and staff. The course itself was reimagined as a first-year seminar of no more than 18 students meeting twice weekly with their faculty and cohort group. To foster the development of a learning community, the course centered around one key question: How can I contribute to a more just society? This question was woven throughout course readings, discussions, and assignments, and formed the foundation of the course's four units: environmental stewardship, the Indigenous experience, the immigrant experience, and gender and sexuality. The development of these four units in relation to the course question created a common intellectual experience rooted in diversity and global learning. As such, the course allowed students to explore cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own while combining broad themes under an essential, unifying question.

In line with the essential course question, the collaborative selected texts and readings that explore a variety of diverse experiences while prompting students to contemplate both the universality of those experiences and their own roles in creating a more just society. The first course text, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), explores the Indigenous experience from the perspective of a Native American teenager growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in northeast Washington, about 200 miles from the Yakama Nation. The second course text, *Gabi: A Girl in Pieces* (Quintero, 2014), explores a variety of issues related to gender and sexuality as experienced by a young Mexican teenage girl, her friends, and their traditional families. Additional course readings were also selected for their depictions of diverse experiences and their connections to the course content. These include pieces



such as “Enrique’s Journey” (Nazario, 2002) and “The Contempt that Poisoned Flint’s Water” (Davidson, 2016).

Similarly, the collaborative designed the course assignments with Kuh’s (2008b) recommendations in mind. The first key assignment, the critical paper, requires students to adopt a local perspective to explore a social problem discussed in class. Students are encouraged to research the problem using local sources and experts, thus integrating the diverse perspectives explored in readings and discussions with their own community-based experiences. Similarly, the second key assignment, the change project, asks students to collaborate with their peers to identify a local social problem and take one public step to address it. Combined, these assignments allow students to analyze and solve problems in the community and involve not only an understanding of diverse perspectives, but collaboration and community-based learning as well. Additional collaboration is required as students work with a small group to lead a discussion during one of the course’s four units.

Course reflections are also an integral part of the course design. Twelve times across the semester, students reflect upon their learning by commenting on the course readings, exploring how they can contribute to a more just society, and relating their learnings to their personal vocations. These reflections not only require students to explore “‘difficult differences’ such as racial, ethnic, and gender inequality” (Kuh, 2008a, para. 9), but also connect these ideas to the big questions, “How can I contribute to a more just society” and “What’s my purpose in life?” Moreover, these reflections prompt students to continuously focus on their vocation, fostering the development of an

academic and professional identity, strategies shown to be particularly effective with "New Majority" students (Ross, 2016). As a culminating activity, a final course reflection prompts students to look back over the entire semester and explore their personal development, their team's learning dynamics, and their understanding of the four course themes.

A final focus of the course redesign included advising meetings, course scheduling, and the academic and financial plan. In collaboration with the Offices of Student Services and University Advising, the collaborative decided that faculty instructors would serve as academic advisors for first-year students until they declared a major, at which point they would be advised by their department. To facilitate advising, students meet individually with their instructor outside of class towards the start and end of the semester. During the first meeting, advisors, guided by individual College Student Inventory (CSI) data, explore students' adjustment to college and university coursework, their backgrounds, and their potential vocations. One goal of these meetings, in line with Valdez's (2016) and Ross' (2016) findings, is to create a faculty-initiated space where lived experiences can be openly expressed by both parties, allowing faculty to relate to students' life situations. During the second advising meeting, students are prompted to further explore their vocations and potential majors, declaring a major if appropriate and registering for the next semester if necessary. To promote awareness of graduation requirements and understanding of financial aid allowances and limitations, an academic and financial plan is also completed by each student. Following a presentation by the director of financial aid and the assistant vice president of student services, students

record their current and planned courses to estimate when they will graduate. In addition, they document their current financial aid awards and predict how long each award will last given state and federal limits. This collaboration with Student Services and Financial Aid allows for the integration of academic and support services during the critical first year of college.

### **Implementation**

The reimagined University 101 course was first implemented in the Fall of 2016. That semester, ten sections of the course were offered serving 142 students. Full-time faculty taught eight of the sections, and two sections were taught by adjuncts. Nine of the ten instructors had participated in the course design. In the Spring of 2017, two additional sections were offered to serve transfer students, students who had not passed the course in the fall, and eight high school students participating in the University's New Horizons program. In total, 34 students participated in the Spring of 2017 in collaboration with two instructors, both full-time faculty members and one who had taught the course the previous semester. An additional eight sections of the course were offered in the Fall of 2017 serving 135 first-year students. Seven of the eight sections were taught by full-time faculty and one by an adjunct. However, the adjunct faculty member had taught the class during both prior semesters as a full-time faculty member and was a member of the collaborative who had designed the course. After discussing the implementation of the course in the Spring of 2017, the collaborative decided not to offer the course in the Spring of 2018. Table 2.1 summarizes the implementation of the redesigned University 101 course.

Table 2.1

*Summary of Student Retention Efforts and University 101 Courses Taught, by Faculty Member*

Faculty Member	Involvement with Student Retention Efforts, 2014-2017					Semesters as Seminar Instructor		
	ERG	Native American Addendum to ERG Report	Student-teacher Relationship Research	Student Journey Task Force	University 101 Collaborative	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Fall 2017
A					x	x		
B					x	x		
C					x	x		x
D								(xx) <sup>1</sup>
E					x			x
F					x	x		
G					x	x		
H	x			x	x	x		
I	x	x		x				xx
J						(x)		
K				x		(x)		
L					x	x		
M <sup>2</sup>				x	x	x	x	(x)
N			x				x	x
<b>Students Served</b>	-	-	-	-	-	<b>142</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>135</b>

<sup>1</sup> Parentheses around the x indicate the course was taught by an adjunct. Two x's indicate two sections were taught.

<sup>2</sup> Faculty member M is the researcher.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Conducting Indigenous Research**

There is a long history of harmful research conducted in and on Native American communities (Masta, 2018). Acknowledging this history, Riddell and colleagues (2017) reviewed existing frameworks on Indigenous research to identify practical guidelines aimed at limiting the use of extractive research, which is characterized by Santos (2008) as research involving the extraction of information from a community without reciprocity or feedback. Specifically, Riddell and colleagues (2017) assert that all research with Indigenous communities must benefit and support the community, with the community emerging as a co-owner of the data. Masta (2018) adds that a crucial element of culturally appropriate research with Native American communities is gaining permission from the tribe prior to initiating research. In respect of these guidelines, this research proposal was presented to the Yakama Nation Loan, Extension, Education, and Housing (LEEHE) Committee, who considered it in light of its potential to benefit the Yakama community and granted permission to proceed on December 29, 2017. In respect of the Nation's right to the data, all findings were presented to the LEEHE Committee, and feedback was received, prior to publication.

Acknowledging the natural alliance between qualitative methods and Indigenous epistemologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008b; Kovach, 2009), this study employed a critical qualitative approach to answer the question, "How do female Native American student

persisters experience a retention-oriented freshman seminar in a Northwest University in the United States?” Research within the qualitative paradigm embraces the idea of multiple realities, recognizes that knowledge emerges from the subjective experiences of individual people, and centers research within the context it occurs (Creswell, 2013). This approach melds nicely with tribal critical race theory, which emphasizes the importance of context-embedded, multiple realities while proposing that culture, knowledge, and power take on different meanings when interpreted through an Indigenous lens (Brayboy, 2005). In addition, the qualitative paradigm allows researchers to “openly bring their shoulds and oughts” into the study, as they take a critical stance towards organizations and institutions in order to advance social justice (Charmaz, 2014, p. 326), a key imperative of tribal critical race theory (Brayboy, 2005).

Conducting research within an Indigenous framework requires a fundamental shift in perspective from one rooted in Western notions of knowledge and science to one rooted in the Indigenous notions of interconnectedness and holism (Kovach, 2009; Patel, 2015; Wilson, 2008). This shift affects every aspect of the research project (Wilson, 2008) and directly challenges colonizing knowledges, practices, and methodologies, including those associated with the traditional dissertation experience (Patel, 2016). As Patel (2016) explains, even commonly accepted practices such as reviewing the existing literature, identifying distinct variables and causal relationships, and analyzing experience to identify constituent parts all function to validate colonizing knowledges of the world and Indigenous peoples. Highlighting this inherently colonizing nature, Smith (2012) asserts, “... the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and

colonialism. The word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (p. 1).

Given the incompatibility between the traditional research process and the nature of research conducted within an Indigenous paradigm, this study is situated within Steinhauer’s (2001) third phase of Indigenous research. According to Steinhauer (2001), research conducted within this phase intends to decolonize and Indigenize Western methodologies, a necessary step towards the articulation of uniquely Indigenous paradigms (Wilson, 2008). As Kovach (2009) notes, research within this phase “acknowledges the significance of relationships with others in the research community, starting where there are natural alliances, such as qualitative research” (p. 13).

Specifically, this study responds to Denzin and Lincoln’s (2008a) call to connect Indigenous epistemologies to emancipatory, critical discourses by adopting a qualitative approach rooted in tribal critical race theory and its imperative to unmask, expose, and confront continued colonization within educational contexts to transform those contexts for Indigenous Peoples (Writer, 2008, p. 1). The decision to situate this study within the third phase in the development of an Indigenous paradigm—to conduct a dominant systems qualitative study while “transparently indicating that it is not an Indigenous epistemological approach to data analysis,”—is a necessary “strategic concession” given the newness of Indigenous methodologies to the academy (Kovach, 2009, p. 35).

## **Participants**

Study participants included five female Native American students who completed the University 101 course in the Fall of 2016 and were still enrolled in the Fall of 2018. Of those five, all identified both their ethnicity and race to be Native American or Alaskan Native, and three identified their tribal affiliation, one being Nez Perce and two being Yakama. Two of the participants were mothers, one was raised in foster care, and one was a military veteran. None of the participants were married and all were classified as independent. Four participants had incomes low enough to make them Pell eligible, and three had incomes low enough to warrant a \$0 EFC (expected family contribution), meaning they weren't expected to contribute towards funding their education. All were first-time college students, and two were enrolled in remedial coursework. It is important to note that two male students also persisted between the Fall of 2016 and the Fall of 2018. However, they were excluded from the study due to the lack of coursework found in their portfolios; one had only completed one of seven assignments, and the second had only completed two. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 3.1 below.



Table 3.1

*Summary of Participant Characteristics*

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Number (Percentage) of Participants</b>
Female	5 (100%)
Native American	5 (100%)
Yakama	2 (40%)
Nez Perce	1 (20%)
Mother	2 (40%)
Raised in Foster Care	1 (20%)
Veteran	1 (20%)
Low Income	4 (80%)
Pell Eligible	4 (80%)
\$0 EFC	3 (60%)

**Setting**

Key to effectively conducting Indigenous research is framing one’s study within the context of the data source (Drawson, Toombs, & Mushquash, 2017). Data for this study was collected from first-year Native American students who participated in the University 101 course at Hope University in the Fall of 2016. Hope University is a small, not-for-profit university located in the heart of the Yakama Nation in south central Washington State. Hope was founded in 1981 in collaboration with two Native American women dedicated to ensuring local access to higher education. More than thirty-five years later, Hope continues to be guided by a localized mission of service and social justice:

Hope University empowers a multi-cultural and inclusive student body to overcome the social, cultural, economic and geographic barriers that limit access to higher education. Rooted in the homeland of the Yakama Nation, we embrace transformational student-centered education that cultivates leadership and a commitment to the promotion of a more just society. (Hope University, n.d.)

With 70% of its students identifying as Latinx and 11% identifying as Native American (Hope University, 2016b), Hope was designated a Native American Serving Institution in 2008 (US Department of Education, 2015) and is Washington State's only designated Hispanic Serving Institution (Hope University, 2016b).

Today, Hope serves 778 undergraduate students (Hope University, 2016b), all of whom enroll in University 101 in their freshman year. University 101 is a first-year seminar course intentionally designed to promote retention by facilitating positive social and academic engagement while integrating academics and advising. Positive social engagement is encouraged through daily interactive instruction, a group presentation project, and an end-of-course group change project. Positive academic engagement is encouraged through the exploration of four, locally-relevant course themes—the Indigenous experience, environmental stewardship, the immigrant experience, and gender and sexuality—as well as through a consistent focus on vocation, local change, and social justice. University 101 course instructors also serve as faculty advisors and meet with each student twice during the semester.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

A qualitative approach was selected for this study due to the general lack of research on the impact of first-year seminars on Native American students (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017) and the complete absence of research on the effectiveness of the revised University 101 course on the retention of Native American students at Hope University. Moreover, as qualitative methods are designed to “answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant” (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & deLacey, 2016), they align nicely with the question under study: How do female Native American student persisters experience the revised University 101 course?

Data for this study consisted of 55 pages of submitted University 101 coursework (including unit reflections, course reflections, critical papers, and change project assignments) as well as university transcripts. The amount of data collected for each participant ranged from five pages to 13 pages, with an average of 11 pages collected per participant. Each data source was selected for its potential to provide insight into the Native American student persisters’ experiences with the revised University 101 course. With the assistance of the registrar and the University 101 coordinator, data was collected from student files and from each student’s electronic coursework portfolio. Each data source and its relationship to the University 101 course projection is summarized in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2

*Summary of Data Sources*

<b>Assignment</b> (percent of final grade)	<b>Description</b>
<b>Reflection 1</b> (1.25%)	In class, students reflect on the content of course readings and discussions from the <b>environmental stewardship unit</b> , applying that content to their personal process of vocational discernment and using the course question as a guide ( <i>How can I contribute to a just society?</i> ).
<b>Reflection 2</b> (1.25%)	In class, students reflect on the content of course readings and discussions from the <b>Indigenous experience unit</b> , applying that content to their personal process of vocational discernment and using the course question as a guide ( <i>How can I contribute to a just society?</i> ).
<b>Critical Paper</b> (30%)	Students write a critical paper that is 900-1000 words in length and explores a social problem that interests them from the first two units.
<b>Reflection 3</b> (1.25%)	In class, students reflect on the content of course readings and discussions from the <b>immigrant experience unit</b> , applying that content to their personal process of vocational discernment and using the course question as a guide ( <i>How can I contribute to a just society?</i> ).
<b>Reflection 4</b> (1.25%)	In class, students reflect on the content of course readings and discussions from the <b>gender and sexuality unit</b> , applying that content to their personal process of vocational discernment and using the course question as a guide ( <i>How can I contribute to a just society?</i> ).
<b>Change Project</b> (30%)	In small groups, students identify a local social problem and take one public step to address it. They also explain the next steps they or others in their community could take to carry on this work. They must produce one form of visual media and present a 15-minute oral presentation. They must prepare an outline of their presentation and hand it in as the written portion of the assignment.
<b>Final Reflection</b> (5%)	At home, students write an essay that is 500 words in length explaining their personal progress in the class. Students explain the depth of their understanding of the four main themes discussed in class (the environment, Indigenous identity, immigration and gender). In addition, they explain the contributions they made to their learning groups, and how meeting with their group and working together on their change project and other activities expanded their understanding of course themes, themselves and others. They also explain how their group changed over time, and how this impacted their learning. Students explore their sense of vocation, or the role they plan to work toward in the context of their community.

Data was analyzed using basic coding techniques, described by Creswell (2013) as a form of analysis that involves aggregating information into categories. The collection of each persister’s work was closely read twice through, and key ideas and experiences were hand-noted in the margins. From these notes, initial codes were

identified and a re-reading was done to test the codes. Once tested, the codes were classified into themes representing the persisters' experiences.

It is important to note that two key concepts from tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) framed the above-described analysis of the data. First is the idea that the lived realities of Native American students must be understood within the context of tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future (Brayboy, 2005). This understanding consciously framed the identification of codes, which were later analyzed within the context of existing data on Native American student retention. The second concept that framed this analysis was the understanding that the elimination of assimilationist practices is critical to the success of Native American students (Brayboy, 2005). As Masta (2018) asserts, TribalCrit rejects theories that place the blame on Native Americans for not assimilating and shifts the focus towards institutions' role in fostering assimilationist policies (Masta, 2018). Again, this concept formed the backdrop against which codes were identified and tested. Together, these ideas formed the analytical lens that framed this interpretation of the student persisters' experience of the University 101 first-year seminar course.

### **Reliability and Validity**

There has been much debate about the roles of reliability and validity in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle 2001). While some theorists choose to apply quantitative notions of reliability and validity to qualitative research, others argue that alternative terms better reflect the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions of the paradigm (Creswell, 2013). Noting the

incompatibility of the concepts of reliability and validity with the underlying tenets of qualitative research, Whitemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) synthesize existing perspectives to propose an alternative validity framework for qualitative research. According to Whitemore and colleagues (2001), essential to all qualitative studies are the primary criteria of credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity. Secondary criteria such as explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity are more flexible and should be applied as they pertain to specific research studies. Each of Whitemore, Chase, and Mandle's (2001) primary criteria, the secondary criteria that most pertain to this study, and the methods employed to assure these validity criteria are summarized in Table 3.3 below.

Given the context of the study, the history of harmful research conducted on Indigenous peoples (Masta, 2018), and the non-Native background of the researcher, the use of cultural member checking was vital to ensuring the validity of the study's results. According to Brayboy and Deyhle (2000), when non-Native researchers are working in Native communities, the involvement of Indigenous people is essential to getting, analyzing, and reporting quality data. For that reason, the researcher solicited feedback from Yakama citizens and elders at various points throughout the study process to ensure that her characterizations of the Yakama culture and her interpretation of results reflected the emic perspective of the Yakama people. As Brayboy and Deyle (2000) highlight, this practice respects the cooperative nature of work and knowledge development in Indigenous communities.



Table 3.3

*Summary of Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle's (2001) Primary and Secondary Validity Criteria and Associated Techniques Used in This Study to Ensure Validity*

	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Techniques</b>
<b>Primary Criteria</b>	<b>Credibility</b>	The extent to which the research accurately interprets the experience of the participants in a believable way	<b>Design Consideration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sampling adequacy</li> <li>• Triangulation</li> <li>• Sharing perquisites of privilege</li> <li>• Expressing issues of oppressed groups</li> </ul> <b>Data Generating</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulating data collection decisions</li> <li>• Demonstrating prolonged engagement</li> <li>• Providing verbatim transcription</li> </ul> <b>Analytic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulating data analysis decisions</li> <li>• Cultural member checking</li> <li>• Exploring rival explanations</li> <li>• Performing a literature review</li> </ul> <b>Presentation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing an audit trail</li> <li>• Providing evidence to support interpretations</li> <li>• Acknowledging the researcher perspective</li> <li>• Providing thick description</li> </ul>
	<b>Authenticity</b>	The extent to which the presentation of the emic perspective exhibits an awareness of the subtle differences of the voices of all participants while accounting for the investigator's perspective	
	<b>Criticality</b>	The extent to which the research process demonstrates critical appraisal (e.g., the search for alternative hypotheses, the exploration of negative instances, the examination of biases, and the checking of findings)	
	<b>Integrity</b>	The extent to which the research reflects recursive and repetitive checks of validity as well as a humble presentation of findings	
<b>Secondary Criteria</b>	<b>Explicitness</b>	The extent to which methodological decisions, interpretations, and investigator biases have been addressed	
	<b>Vividness</b>	The extent to which thick and faithful descriptions of the data have been portrayed with artfulness and clarity	
	<b>Thoroughness</b>	The extent to which the findings convincingly address the questions posed through completeness and saturation	
	<b>Sensitivity</b>	The extent to which the investigation has been implemented in ways that are sensitive to the nature of human, cultural, and social contexts	

### **Data Quality and Limitations**

Limitations of this study stem from two main areas: the chosen methodology and the data collected. By nature, the qualitative paradigm accepts the existence of multiple realities and acknowledges the knowledge, experience, and biases a researcher brings to a study. As Creswell (2013) notes, it can be challenging for a researcher to set aside his

or her own notions and allow for ideas to truly emerge from the data. The use of multiple coders and the seeking of intercoder agreement can partially address this concern and enhance a study's reliability (Creswell, 2013), but is not relevant to a study conducted by one investigator. For that reason, it is possible that different investigators would have unearthed different findings.

An additional limitation is related to the data collected. Although the data collected represent individual student work samples from a course designed to increase retention and enhance social and academic engagement, they are at best indirect representations of the students' experiences with the course. While it was the course designers' hope that these work samples would reflect the engagement the course was designed to produce, it is possible that a variety of factors unrelated to a student's actual engagement may have influenced the quality or depth of her work. For that reason, work samples may be a weak representation of the student experience. The inclusion of more direct data sources, such as participant interviews, may have strengthened the analysis.

### **Qualifications and Positionality of the Researcher**

Researcher positionality refers to the idea that one's interaction with research is shaped by one's life experiences, values, and personal biographies; that no research is purely objective; and that one's background and relationship to the research project itself influence all aspects of the research endeavor (Dean et al., 2018). An exploration of one's positionality is an essential element of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Critical race theory, in particular, calls on researchers to acknowledge their own power



(Creswell, 2013), recognizing there are dangers that can emerge if researchers do not pay close attention to their own and others' racialized and cultural realities (Milner, 2007).

I, the researcher, am a White, middle-class female who has been academically and professionally successful within the boundaries established by the dominant system. I am aware of the many unearned privileges I have, and recognize that my privileged, educated position has allowed me access to professional and research opportunities denied to others. Currently, I work as a community coordinator in White Swan, the Yakima Valley community with the highest percentage of Indigenous residents, as well as for the community programs office of a local school district where the majority of students are Native American. Each of these professional and academic endeavors is guided by my belief that those with privilege have the responsibility to use that privilege to advocate as allies alongside those who are denied that privilege by the dominant system, and I am aware that my ability to act as an advocate and ally is a privilege in and of itself.

I am also a member of the University 101 collaborative and the only professor who has taught the seminar each semester it has been offered since its revision. I have personally worked with three of the students represented in this study, one within the context of the University 101 course, and two as an instructor of sociology or social work. I also consider myself to be a friend of most of the other course instructors. I am personally invested in the success of all of the students at Hope University as well as in the role of the University 101 seminar in fostering that success.

My educational and employment background have prepared me to conduct this study. I have earned a BA in Sociology and Political Science from the University of California, Riverside; an MA in Curriculum and Instruction from California State University, San Bernardino; and MA in Intercultural Youth and Family Development from the University of Montana; and have completed my coursework and passed my comprehensive exams in pursuit of an EdD in Curriculum and Instruction from Texas A&M University. In addition, I have an extensive history working as an educator, ally, and social justice advocate in diverse communities, including six years as a social studies teacher in a Southern California high school; eight years as an elementary teacher and principal in Honduras; and two years as an education faculty member at Hope University. For the past nineteen months, I have worked as a community coordinator in the Yakama Nation community of White Swan, where I am tasked with building relationships and developing partnerships in order to prevent suicide and underage substance abuse among the community's youth.

## CHAPTER IV

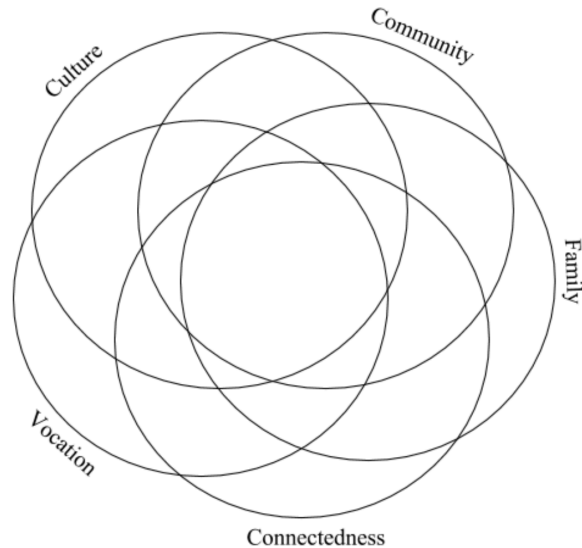
### PRESENTATION OF DATA

A qualitative analysis of the collected work samples of five female Native American student persisters illuminated five overlapping themes that characterized their experiences with the revised University 101 course: culture, community, family, vocation, and connectedness (see Figure 4.1). Below, I explore each of these themes; frame them within the context of the existing literature on persistence, retention, and the female Native American university experience; and offer a preliminary response to the central question of this study: How do female Native American student persisters experience a retention-oriented freshman seminar in a Northwest University in the United States?

#### **Female Persisters' Experiences of the Freshman Seminar Course**

Five key themes emerged to illustrate the female persisters' experiences with the revised University 101 course: culture, community, connectedness, family, and purpose. Four of these themes—culture, community, family, and purpose—characterized the persisters' academic experiences, while the remaining theme, connectedness, characterized the persisters' personal experiences. While each of these themes was evident in all five persisters' work, each was prominent in the work of at least three. Moreover, these themes did not emerge as distinct entities, but rather as overlapping and intertwined experiences, as illustrated in Figure 4.1 below. Below, I explore each theme

separately, offering illustrative quotes from the persisters' work samples in an effort to convey their academic and personal experiences with the revised University 101 course.



*Figure 4.1.* Visual representation of the interrelated nature of the five themes characterizing female student persisters' experiences in the University 101 course.

### **Academic Experiences**

As the female persisters engaged with the academic content of the revised University 101 course, they repeatedly made connections to four key themes: culture, community, family, and vocation. Below, I explore each of these themes as they emerged from the participants' work, highlighting participant voice to illustrate each.

**Culture.** The female student persisters consistently made strong connections between their cultures and the course content and discussions. Sidni illustrated this trend in her first reflection, written after our discussion of the flooding of Celilo Falls:

When I was young I had no idea what the Army Corp of Engineers had done to my people. They put up dams that destroyed our ecosystems and our way of

living. The dams wiped much of the fish population and destroyed Celilo Falls. My ancestors fished there, my grandmother, my grandfather, my uncles and aunties, my father all have had the opportunity to travel to Celilo Falls to fish. (Sidni, first reflection)

As with several of the female persisters, Sindi extended this connection beyond her culture and our class content to encircle her vocation. She continued, “I am a member of the Nez Perce Tribe and we refer to ourselves as the ‘Salmon People.’ My tribe is working to restore the fish and wildlife in the Pacific Northwest and I want to help them.” In her final reflection, Alicia made a similar connection between her culture and her educational goals, commenting, “I chose a major in History and a minor in English... to better my community through historical knowledge. I wish to help the Pacific Northwest Plateau tribes more specifically because I am deeply rooted within those communities” (final reflection). Perhaps Lillian best captured these persisters’ voices in her critical paper: “The more Native people can merge education with traditions and history the stronger we will be in mind and spirit.”

Interestingly, two of the five persisters began the class critical of their cultures and seemed to develop stronger connections as the course progressed. In her second reflection, Leilani described being both ashamed of her culture and not feeling fully accepted by her community:

I have also felt embarrassed of my race because of some of the ways Native Americans are portrayed. There have also been times when I have felt that I was not enough of my own nationality to do things.... I felt that if certain people

knew I was Native American they would be quick to judge me. Although I never denied my nationality I never really told anyone unless they asked. (Leilani, second reflection)

Hailey rooted her strained relationship with her culture in her experience in foster care:

I accepted the fact that I was Native American and there was no way to change that because it will always be a part of me.... Being in the foster care system I never got the chance of learning my background because my parents were not Native Americans, so that's something I missed out when I grew up as a child.

(Hailey, third reflection)

Moreover, unlike Sidni, Alicia, and Lilian, who had made intimate connections between their cultures and their educational and vocational goals, Hailey's vision of her educational success was presented as incompatible with her culture. This is evident in a comment from her second reflection: "Like everyone in my family, I wouldn't have made it very far unless I left my tribe...."

However, by the time we had finished our units on the environment and the Indigenous experience, both Leilani and Hailey had chosen to write their critical papers on local Native issues. In her paper, Hailey focused on the importance of learning about Native history and culture, concluding, "Society as a whole should understand the history of Native Americans by teaching it in schools, give Native Americans classes about their culture, and integrate the Native culture and people into society." While her language continued to refer to Native Americans as others, her tone toward her culture seemed to have developed into a more appreciative, positive one. Similarly, Leilani

chose to focus her critical paper on the Yakama, astutely arguing against state and federal laws detrimental to her community and in favor of tribal sovereignty. For both of these persisters, the University 101 course seems to have facilitated a stronger connection to and appreciation of their cultures. This connection and appreciation reflect that expressed by Sidni, Alicia, and Lilian throughout the course.

These five persisters' tendency to connect the academic content to their cultural heritages reflects both the existing literature on Native American women in higher education and the literature on Native student retention. Specifically, these women's experiences support Evans' (1994) concept of "synthetic ability," which refers to Native women's capacity to relate new information learned in the university environment to their cultural worlds. Moreover, these persisters' experiences illustrate the fundamental concept underlying HeavyRunner and DeCelles' (2002) family education model, namely that community and culture play important roles in Native post-secondary persistence.

**Community.** In addition to making strong connections to culture, the female persisters frequently commented on the importance of community. At times, these connections were interrelated to the persisters' own families and cultures, as with Sidni's expression of her desire to give back by working at the local tribal school. In her second reflection, Sidni commented, "I would possibly work at a tribal school to help other indigenous students achieve their goals and help us rise together." In her final reflection, Lilian also connected her vocation to her community:

I truly believe that by earning a bachelor's degree I will be contributing to a better more just society. Business is day to day on the Yakama Reservation and it

being properly run by people who are educated and knowledgeable will benefit the community as a whole. I firmly believe that the more I share what I have learned throughout my college career the more I might inspire and motivate those around me to do the same. (Lilian, final reflection)

In a few cases, these community connections extended beyond the persister's own culture to encircle other area cultures and identities. Lilian illustrated this in her third reflection:

I believe that having a better understanding of immigration will still benefit me as a Yakama Nation tribal member working in a business-related field for the tribe. A lot of Yakama tribal members are not full-blooded Yakama—many Yakama enrolled members are half Mexican, half Caucasian, half Asian, half Black etc. And to understand all the different types of people in the community is beneficial to good business. (Lilian, third reflection)

Leilani was also able to build on the course content to make connections between her own culture and other cultures represented in the community. In her first reflection, she commented,

In our culture as Native Americans and Hispanics as I have witnessed, our elders are the ones we care for, the ones that come first before anyone else.... We are very respectful to them and care for them as they once cared for us. Same goes with the land. Our land has taken so much care of us for over thousands of years that we should be caring for it in the same way. (Leilani, first reflection)



For her part, Alicia was able to reflect upon culture beyond that defined by race and ethnicity. In her fourth reflection, she wrote,

With a major in history and a minor in English maybe I could inform and talk about gender/sexuality. Bringing awareness to the community about issues gay people face. I am not sure of the future but I do have a concern for the LGBTQ community that's within my community and see that it is ignored. This will not be easily done because I know how traditional my community can be especially towards the idea of a man being with a woman, not a man with a man, or women with a woman. (Alicia, fourth reflection)

As these quotes illustrate, a key experience of the University 101 course for these persisters involved connecting the academic content to their communities, a trend highlighted both in the existing literature on Native American student persistence and in the literature on Native American women in higher education. Not only do the findings presented here support Waterman and Lindley's (2013) assertion that community lies at the core of Native American women's experiences in higher education, but they reinforce Lopez' (2018) finding that Native American persistence is enhanced by tribal community support, which he roots in Native students' deep connection to their communities and their desire to give back. In addition, these persisters' emphasis on their communities provides support for both the family education and nation building models, which assert that the community functions to support student retention and persistence (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002), and that persistence is enhanced when the

pursuit of a degree is guided by a desire to serve one's community rather than oneself (Brayboy et al., 2012).

**Vocation.** Reflecting the literature on Native American women in higher education (Bingham et al., 2014; Evans, 1994; Waterman & Lindley, 2013) and findings by Lopez (2018) and Brayboy and colleagues (2012) on the relationship between Native American student persistence and the desire to serve one's community, four of the five persisters in the present study expressed a strong sense of vocation connected to their community, culture, or family. In Sidni's case, a desire to work in environmental science was linked to her cultural traditions. In her second reflection, she explained, "In the future I would like to become an environmental scientist and I particularly wish to help restore the fish populations in the Pacific Northwest. I do not want my culture's traditions to die." Alicia made similar connections to culture when describing her choice of major: "I chose a major in History and a minor in English. To better my community through historical knowledge. I wish to help the Pacific Northwest Plateau tribes more specifically because I am deeply rooted within those communities" (final reflection). Lilian also framed her vocation in the context of her culture and community. In her first reflection, she commented,

I truly believe that by earning a bachelor's degree I will be contributing to a better more just society. Business is day to day on the Yakama Reservation and it being properly run by people who are educated and knowledgeable will benefit the community as a whole. I firmly believe that the more I share what I have

learned throughout my college career the more I might inspire and motivate those around me to do the same. (Lilian, first reflection)

For two persisters, the experience of the University 101 course seemed to help clarify their vocations. As Alicia explained in her final reflection,

At the beginning I didn't declare a major but exploring some of the themes in class helped me decide which direction I wanted to take. Because it made me want to dig deeper into the social, political, cultural, and environmental issues that surround our community and abroad. (Alicia, final reflection)

Sidni expressed a similar sentiment in her second reflection, commenting, "At first I thought I wanted a business degree. However, after taking some University 101 classes I reconsidered my major and switched to an environmental science major." In her final reflection, she summarized her process: "As can be seen, I have grown a lot throughout this semester and University 101 has helped me find my purpose."

**Family.** For the two persisters who identified as mothers, the importance of family was strongly linked to purpose and vocation. For both Sidni and Leilani, their children were their motivation to pursue a higher education. As Sidni explained, "My children are my motivation to get through school.... After getting my GED, I applied to Hope University so I would have a brighter future for my family" (fourth reflection). In another reflection, she linked her family with her vocation, explaining,

I enrolled at Hope University for hope. I knew I needed to do something for myself and my children's future.... I wish to protect the environment and species

of this planet. I want to protect my children's safety and health as well as the future generations to come. (Sidni, second reflection)

Leilani shared a similar motivation, commenting in her second reflection, "I knew I wanted a better life for myself and my kids and I knew that I would be the only one that could make this happen." Later, she elaborated on the importance of family in her critical paper:

As a mother of six I know the great importance of family. I myself have taken in two of my nieces due to the neglect of their mother.... When a child is with family at least they know there is still hope. (Leilani, critical paper)

These persisters' expressions of their vocations—or life's callings—as connected to their cultures, communities, and families reinforce the existing literatures on Native American retention and the experiences of Native American women in higher education. Specifically, these findings support Brayboy and colleagues' (2012) assertion that persistence is enhanced when Native American students are motivated by a desire to give back to their communities, a finding also highlighted by Waterman and Lindley (2013), who assert that Native American women view the pursuit of a higher education as a means of strengthening their nations. Moreover, the motivation expressed by the two mothers included in the study—to pursue an education in service to their children—reflects similar findings evident in the growing body of research on the experiences of Native American women in higher education (Bingham et al., 2014; Bowker, 1992; Waterman & Lindley, 2013).

## **Personal Experiences**

One key theme characterized the female persisters' personal experiences of the course: connectedness. For these persisters, a sense of community was developed within the class as connections were made with other students, faculty, and other campus personnel. One student persister expressed this connectedness as feeling accepted by her classmates, none of whom were Native. In her final reflection, Sidni commented,

I have always had a very hard time talking to people, my throat and stomach tightens, I turn red, my voice changes, but this class helped me break out of my shell. I felt safe and accepted in this class. (Sidni, final reflection)

In her reflections, Lilian also commented on the development of a sense of unity among classmates of different cultures. As she described, her classmates had accepted Native issues as their own while she had developed a greater understanding of non-Native issues. In her second reflection, Lilian commented, "It was good to see that my classmates were in just as much disgust with the Dakota access pipeline as Indian Country was. We weren't alone." In her final reflection, she empathized with and expressed admiration for an immigrant classmate:

I remember being really touched by one of my classmate's stories about her own family coming from Mexico with nothing and how difficult things were when they arrived. That took courage for her to share those painful memories with us. (Lilian, final reflection)

For other persisters, connectedness was developed through work on collaborative projects. In her final reflection, Lilian commented, "So throughout the process of having

a group and group projects I had a few loyal group members and their names are Shawna and Ty.... It was beneficial to have group members that were easy to work with.” Hailey expressed a similar sentiment early in the course when she described the impact of in-class group activities: “When we did some group activities that is where I also gained the knowledge that I know to help me write the final reflection paper” (first reflection). Later, she commented on how these relationships extended beyond the classroom. In describing her group’s work on their change project, Hailey said, “What we did was gather at my place with a couple of people from another University group and baked the day away because of how much was ordered. It was both fun and tiring.”

Finally, two student persisters described making connections with campus faculty and staff. In Sidni’s case, a connection with her instructor was expressed in her final reflection, where she concluded, “Thank you, Elizabeth, for everything. You are a wonderful professor!” Alternatively, Leilani’s experience with the course allowed her to develop connections that extended beyond the classroom. In describing her work on her change project, she explained her interactions with Angela from Hope University’s marketing department, noting,

So far, Gary, Karen, and I have meet with the marketing department to discuss the process it takes to ask businesses for donations in a fashionable manner. Us three have also met with Angela and have gotten the flyers approved and printed.... (Leilani, change project)

For each of these persisters, the University 101 course experience facilitated the development of connections among students and university staff and faculty.

The importance of connectedness expressed in these persisters' stories supports findings in the traditional literature on student retention as well as findings emerging from the literature on Native American women's experiences in higher education. Specifically, the importance these persisters placed on making connections with their classmates and university faculty support existing literature describing social and academic integration (Tinto, 1975), belonging (Tinto, 2017a), collaboration and positive student-faculty relationships (Kuh, 2005; Kuh, 2008a) as essential factors contributing to student persistence. Moreover, the present findings on connectedness support Evans' (1994) assertion that Native American women are most successful in university environments characterized by collaboration and a sense of community. Each major theme is presented with related codes, definitions, and illustrative examples in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1

*Codebook Highlighting Themes, Codes, Definitions, Key Words, Examples, and Code*

*Counts*

Code	Definition	Key Words	Example	Count
<b>Culture</b>				
Connecting Content to Culture	Persister discusses course content in relation to her own cultural background	(my/our) people, (my/our) ancestors, (my/our) tribe, (my/our) culture, (my/our) elders, (my/our) land, (my/our) traditions	"When I was young I had no idea what the Army Corp of Engineers had done to my people. They put up dams that destroy our ecosystems and our way of living. The dams wiped much of the fish population and destroyed Celilo Falls. My ancestors fished there, my grandmother, my grandfather, my uncles and aunts, my father all have had the opportunity to travel to Celilo Falls to fish. I am a member of the Nez Perce Tribe and we refer to ourselves as the 'Salmon People.' My tribe is working to restore the fish and wildlife in the Pacific Northwest and I want to help them" (Sidni, first reflection).	17
Expressing Cultural Distance	Persister directly criticizes her own culture or expresses distance from culture through othering language (e.g., "their culture" as opposed to "our culture")	their (culture, people, etc.), them, of Native Americans (history of, culture of, etc.), embarrassed	"I accepted the fact that I was Native American and there was no way to change that because it will always be a part of me. The only thing that I was upset with when it came to me being Native American was I was upset over the history of Native Americans. How they were so easily trapped in the cycle of alcohol after they were introduced, causing the label of drunks and alcoholics to be forever following Native Americans" (Hailey, third reflection).	9
Developing Appreciation for Culture	Persister who had previously expressed distance from her own culture expresses appreciation for culture through positive framing or inclusive language (e.g., "our culture" as opposed to "their culture")	my/our (people, culture, etc.), should (understand, integrate, etc.)	"Society as a whole should understand the history of Native Americans by teaching it in schools, give Native Americans classes about their culture, and integrate the Native culture and people into society" (Hailey, critical paper).	4
Connecting Vocation to Culture	Persister discusses her vocation in relation to her culture	help, become, future, benefit, contribute, purpose  people, tribe, culture, land, traditions	"In the future I would like to become an environmental scientist and I particularly wish to help restore the fish populations in the Pacific Northwest. I do not want my culture's traditions to die" (Sidni, second reflection).	9
<b>Community</b>				
Connecting Content to Community	Persister discusses course content in relation to her own community	community, Yakama Reservation, Pacific Northwest, others	"Bringing awareness to the community about issues gay people face. I am not sure of the future but I do have a concern for the LGBTQ community that's within my community and see that it is ignored. This will not be easily done because I know how traditional my community can be especially towards the idea of a man being with a woman, not a man with a man, or women with a woman" (Alicia, fourth reflection).	13
Connecting Vocation to Community	Persister discusses her vocation in relation to her community	help, become, future, benefit, contribute, purpose  community, Yakama Reservation, Pacific Northwest	"I believe that having a better understanding of immigration will still benefit me as a Yakama Nation tribal member working in a business related field for the tribe. A lot of Yakama tribal members are not full-blooded Yakama - many Yakama enrolled members are half Mexican, half Caucasian, half Asian, half Black etc. And to understand all the different types of people in the community is beneficial to good business" (Lilian, third reflection).	13



Table 4.1 continued

Code	Definition	Key Words	Example	Count
<b>Family</b>				
Expressing Children as Motivation for Studies	Persister mentions her children as her motivation for pursuing a higher education	kids, children, better life, motivation	"I knew I wanted a better life for myself and my kids and I knew that I would be the only one that could make this happen" (Leilani, second reflection).	7
Connecting Vocation to Family	Persister discusses her vocation in relation to her family	help, become, future, benefit, contribute, purpose, protect  family, future generations	"I want to protect my children's safety and health as well as the future generations to come" (Sidni, second reflection).	3
<b>Vocation</b>				
Connecting Vocation to Culture	Persister discusses her vocation in relation to her culture	help, become, future, benefit, contribute, purpose  people, tribe, culture, land, traditions	"In the future I would like to become an environmental scientist and I particularly wish to help restore the fish populations in the Pacific Northwest. I do not want my culture's traditions to die" (Sidni, second reflection).	9
Connecting Vocation to Community	Persister discusses her vocation in relation to her community	help, become, future, benefit, contribute, purpose  community, Yakama Reservation, Pacific Northwest	"I believe that having a better understanding of immigration will still benefit me as a Yakama Nation tribal member working in a business related field for the tribe. A lot of Yakama tribal members are not full-blooded Yakama - many Yakama enrolled members are half Mexican, half Caucasian, half Asian, half Black etc. And to understand all the different types of people in the community is beneficial to good business" (Lilian, third reflection).	13
Connecting Vocation to Family	Persister discusses her vocation in relation to her family	help, become, future, benefit, contribute, purpose  kids, children, family, future generations	"I want to protect my children's safety and health as well as the future generations to come" (Sidni, second reflection).	3
Developing Vocation	Persister expresses a new or different vocation in relation to course learning	reconsider, decide, direction	"I have not necessarily declared a major yet. I can say that it encourages me more to pursue a degree in Native American studies, more specifically in government and law after reading some of the material for this class" (Alicia, second reflection).	5
<b>Connectedness</b>				
Feeling Accepted by Classmates	Persister describes feeling accepted by classmates or expresses appreciation of diverse classmates and their experiences	safe, accepted, knows me, not alone, share	"I have always had a very hard time talking to people, my throat and stomach tightens, I turn red, my voice changes, but this class helped me break out of my shell. I felt safe and accepted in this class" (Sidni, final reflection).	6
Developing Connections to Classmates	Persister describes spending time with classmates outside of class	gather, meet	"During the change project, what we did was gather at my place with a couple of people from another University group and baked the day away because of how much was ordered. It was both fun and tiring" (Hailey, change project).	4
Expressing the Value of Groupwork	Persister discusses group work as a positive experience, contributing to her learning or social development	group activity, group project, group members, beneficial	"It was beneficial to have group members that were easy to work with" (Lilian, final reflection).	4

## Discussion

### Native American Women in Higher Education

The five themes emerging from this study support the literature framing the experiences of Native American women in higher education. A key theme of this body

of work centers on Native women's desire to use their university experiences as a means of honoring their Indigenous cultures and communities (Bingham et al., 2014; Evans, 1994; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). As Waterman and Lindley (2013) explain, "The women wanted to give back to their communities; they did not pursue education as a means to escape the reservation, but as a vehicle to strengthen their nations" (p. 155). Bingham and colleagues (2014) elaborate, explaining that Native university women view their educational experiences as a means of honoring culture and community through acting as role models and choosing careers designed to give back. Evans (1994) attributes this tendency to Native women's synthetic ability to relate new information learned in the university environment to their cultural world, thus incorporating it into their own experiences. These tendencies are clearly reflected in the findings presented here related to the themes of culture, community, and vocation, as illustrated in Lilian's justification for choosing to pursue a career in business, described in her final reflection:

I truly believe that by earning a bachelor's degree I will be contributing to a better more just society. Business is day to day on the Yakama Reservation and it being properly run by people who are educated and knowledgeable will benefit the community as a whole. I firmly believe that the more I share what I have learned throughout my college career the more I might inspire and motivate those around me to do the same. (Lilian, final reflection)

Relatedly, the body of work on Native women's university experiences highlights the priority Native women place on their families (Bingham et al., 2014; Bowker, 1992; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Not only does immediate and extended

family support enhance the university experience for Native women (Bowker, 1992), but family is often seen as a primary motivation for continuing one's education (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). As Bingham and colleagues (2014) note, Native university women prioritize both their families and communities, and their college lives are greatly influenced by a combination of cultural and family factors. Waterman and Lindley (2013) refer to this influence as familial cultural capital. For female university students, they argue, the focus is on the collective, not the individual:

Women knew their culture and community would benefit from their obtaining an education, including their own families. Women considered children a reason to go to college or to finish a college degree to be able to provide for their children and be role models. (p. 152)

For Native American women in higher education, a desire to strengthen one's family cannot be separated from a desire to strengthen one's nation, as strengthening the family by being a role model necessarily strengthens the nation (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). This complex interplay between family, culture, and community is illustrated by Sidni's explanation of why she chose to pursue a higher education:

I enrolled at Hope University for hope. I knew I needed to do something for myself and my children's future.... I wish to protect the environment and species of this planet. I want to protect my children's safety and health as well as the future generations to come. (Sidni, second reflection)

Findings related to the Native women's personal experience of connectedness also reflect the existing literature on Native American women's experiences in higher

education. According to Evans (1994), Native American female students thrive when the Indigenous ethos of cooperation and community are transported into the classroom. This is clearly reflected by the four persisters studied here who described relationships with classmates and faculty as key to their experiences with the revised University 101 course.

### **Retention and Persistence**

**General literature.** Overall, the findings presented here offer little support for the traditional literature on retention and persistence. However, findings related to the personal experience of connectedness do support elements of the existing, traditional literature. Specifically, evidence highlighting the importance of connectedness reflects the concepts of social and academic integration (Tinto, 1975), belonging (Tinto, 2017a), and the importance of collaboration and positive student-faculty relationships (Kuh, 2005; Kuh, 2008a). That said, findings related to the academic experiences of connecting content to culture, community, family, and vocation were not supported in the traditional literature on retention and persistence.

**Native American literature.** The collective findings presented here reinforce the salience of the four factors identified in Lopez' (2018) review of the literature as positively contributing to Native American persistence: family support, institutional support, tribal community support, and academic performance. As Lopez explains, family support is often reflected in Native American students' desire to make their parents proud, be role models, and create better lives for their children. This motivation was clearly and repeatedly reflected in both Sidni's and Leilani's desire to create better

lives for their children's future as well as in Lilian's desire to act as a role model for her community, as expressed in her final reflection: "I firmly believe that the more I share what I have learned throughout my college career the more I might inspire and motivate those around me to do the same."

Institutional support was also deeply prevalent in these student persisters' stories. According to Gillory and Wolverton (2008), institutional support is often reflected in positive relationships with professors and peers, both Native and non-Native, and in relationships with peers who openly collaborate on projects and faculty who express a genuine interest in students' lives. In the present study, this phenomenon was described as connectedness, and was interlaced in the experiences of four of the five persisters.

The third factor identified by Lopez (2018), tribal community support, was also deeply intertwined in our persisters' stories. As Lopez explains, tribal community support has been repeatedly shown to be a great motivator for Native American student persistence, and often manifests itself as a desire to give back to one's community. In the present study, tribal community support was expressed in the experiences of four of the five persisters.

Although not discussed here, the significance of the fourth element identified by Lopez (2018) as contributing to Native American student persistence, academic performance, was also reinforced. Each of our female student persisters passed the University 101 course with an A and had cumulative term grade point averages ranging from 3.3 to 4.0. Moreover, both persisters enrolled in remedial math passed those courses, and two of the three persisters enrolled in college-level math courses earned

passing grades. Overall, four of the five student persisters passed all of their courses, indicating that academic performance may also play a role in Native American student persistence.

Each of these elements was incorporated by Lopez (2018) into his millennium falcon persistence model, which posits that retention and persistence are enhanced by family support, institutional support, the tribal community, and academic performance. This model was strongly supported by the present findings on both Native American persisters' academic and personal experiences with the University 101 course, as persisters expressed a desire to be good role models and create better lives for their children (family support); developed positive, collaborative relationships with students and faculty (institutional support); expressed a desire to give back to their community (tribal community); and demonstrated strong academic performance.

Together, the experiences of these five persisters also reinforced the premises of two additional models of Native American student persistence: HeavyRunner and DeCelles' (2002) family education model and Brayboy and colleagues' (2012) nation building theory. According to the family education model, the tribe, family, college, and community function interconnectedly to support Native American student persistence (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). This concept is reflected in the present study, as persisters repeatedly connected the academic content to their cultures (tribes), communities, and families, and developed personally through relationships with faculty, staff, and classmates. Brayboy and colleagues' (2012) nation building theory, which posits that Native American persistence is positively impacted by a desire to serve one's

community, was also supported by the emerging academic themes of culture, community, family, and vocation. Moreover, these findings support the existing literature on Native American women in higher education, which collectively emphasizes the integration of culture, community, family, connectedness, and vocation into the female Indigenous university experience (Bingham et al., 2014; Bowker, 2012; Evans, 1994; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Connections between the present findings, the research on Native American women in higher education, and these existing models of Native American persistence are highlighted in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2

*Relationship Between Current Findings, the Literature on Native American Women in Higher Education, and Existing Theories of Native American Persistence*

Existing Theory of Native American Persistence & Retention		Connection to Present Findings	Connections to Literature on Native American Women in Higher Education
<b>Family Education Model</b> (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002)	The family, tribe, college, and community function interconnectedly to support student retention and persistence	Persisters repeatedly connected the <b>academic</b> content to their <u>cultures</u> (tribes), <u>communities</u> , and <u>families</u> , and developed <b>personally</b> through <u>connectedness</u> (relationships with faculty, staff, and classmates)	Native American women use their university experience as a means of honoring their Indigenous <u>culture</u> and <u>community</u> through being role models and choosing careers ( <u>vocation</u> ) that give back (Bingham et al., 2014; Evans, 1994; Waterman & Lindley, 2014)
<b>Nation Building Theory</b> (Brayboy et al., 2012)	Native American persistence is positively impacted by a desire to serve one's community and the university's support for that desire	Persisters expressed and developed a sense of <u>vocation</u> related to their desire to serve their <u>families</u> , <u>communities</u> , and <u>cultures</u> ( <b>academic experience</b> )	Native American women prioritize their <u>family</u> throughout the educational process (Bingham et al, 2014; Bowker, 1992; Waterman & Lindley, 2013)
<b>Millennium Falcon Persistence Model</b> (Lopez, 2018)	Retention and persistence are enhanced by family support, institutional support, the tribal community, and academic performance	Academically, persisters expressed a desire to be good role models and create better lives for their children ( <u>family</u> ) and expressed a desire to give back to their community ( <u>vocation</u> , <u>culture</u> , <u>community</u> ); <b>personally</b> , persisters developed <u>connectedness</u> through positive, collaborative relationships with students and faculty	Native American women thrive in <u>connectedness</u> , when the Indigenous ethos of cooperation and community are transported into the classroom (Evans, 1994)

### The Freshman Seminar as Ceremony

As discussed above, the findings presented here offer strong support for both the existing literature on Native American student persistence and Native American women's experiences in the university setting. However, the findings also allude to a key



issue highlighted in the literature on the female Native American university experience: the difficulty of distinguishing between the academic and the personal, and between the interconnected experiences of community, culture, family, and vocation. Perhaps this complex interplay is best illustrated by the following quote from Sidni's first reflection:

When I was young I had no idea what the Army Corp of Engineers had done to my people (culture). They put up dams that destroy our ecosystems and our way of living (community, culture). The dams wiped much of the fish population and destroyed Celilo Falls. My ancestors fished there, my grandmother, my grandfather, my uncles and aunties, my father all have had the opportunity to travel to Celilo Falls to fish (family). I am a member of the Nez Perce Tribe and we refer to ourselves as the "Salmon People" (community, culture). My tribe is working to restore the fish and wildlife in the Pacific Northwest and I want to help them (culture, vocation). (Sidni, first reflection)

Acknowledging this complexity, I propose an alternative interpretative framework that is by nature holistic and challenges any reductive analysis that seeks to delineate specific and isolated factors that promote Native American student persistence. Rooted in Indigenous ontology, this framework depicts Native American persistence as facilitated by the experience of the freshman seminar course as ceremony, a process by which stronger relationships are developed between ourselves and the various elements of the realities that define us (Wilson, 2008). In the case of these persisters, those elements included their families, communities, cultures, vocations, and university colleagues.

The proposed model of the freshman seminar as ceremony exemplifies the concept of relationality as embedded in Indigenous ontology and epistemology. According to Indigenous ontology, reality does not exist “out there” as an external entity; rather, it exists in our relationships and in the process of our relationships (Wilson, 2008, p. 73). In striving to make meaning from these students’ experiences, it is essential to recognize that their experiences of the course—their realities—consisted of the relationships they developed with the ideas, content, people, and places encircled by the course. Their experience of the course and their understanding of that experience were defined by the relationships they developed within and between themselves, their peers, their instructors, the university, the concepts and ideas explored in class, and their visions for their own, their families’, their communities’, and their cultures’ futures.

Moreover, as they moved through the course, their relationships continued to develop as new connections were made between the ideas and people connected to the course and their cultures, communities, families, and vocations. Eventually, those collective and intertwined connections were strong enough to form an on-going reality defined not only by their relationships with their family, culture, community, dreams and goals, but by their relationships with the ideas, people, and places of Hope University as well. In helping to close the gaps between and among the ideas, values, and people they brought with them upon enrolling in Hope and the ideas, people, and places of Hope University itself, the University 101 course facilitated the emergence of a new reality (i.e., a new set of relationships) in which Hope University was an integral part. It is no

surprise, then, that these students persisted into their second year of studies and continue to be enrolled today.

In essence, the University 101 course acted as a form of ceremony for these persisters. As Wilson (2008) explains, “The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves” (p. 137). For these persisters, this ceremony involved a closing of the gaps between the various and interrelated ideas, concepts, and people composing their realities as a student, including their intertwined relationships with their families, communities, cultures, peers, and instructors; their goals and vocations; and the ideas, concepts, and values explored in the course.

Figure 4.2 below offers a visual representation of this ceremonial process. Although simplified, imagine that Figure 4.2a represents all of the interrelated relationships that form a student’s reality when she enters university, with each circle representing a different aspect of the student’s life that defines that reality. For different students, these circles may be more or less overlapping. For example, Sidni entered the course with a strong sense of connection between her family and culture, while Hailey, who was raised by a White family in foster care, did not. Thus, Sidni’s image might initially show a stronger overlap between family and culture than would Hailey’s. Figure 4.2b illustrates how the experience of the University 101 course tightens the relationships among people and ideas (i.e., the persister’s reality) essentially creating a new (and constantly changing) reality.

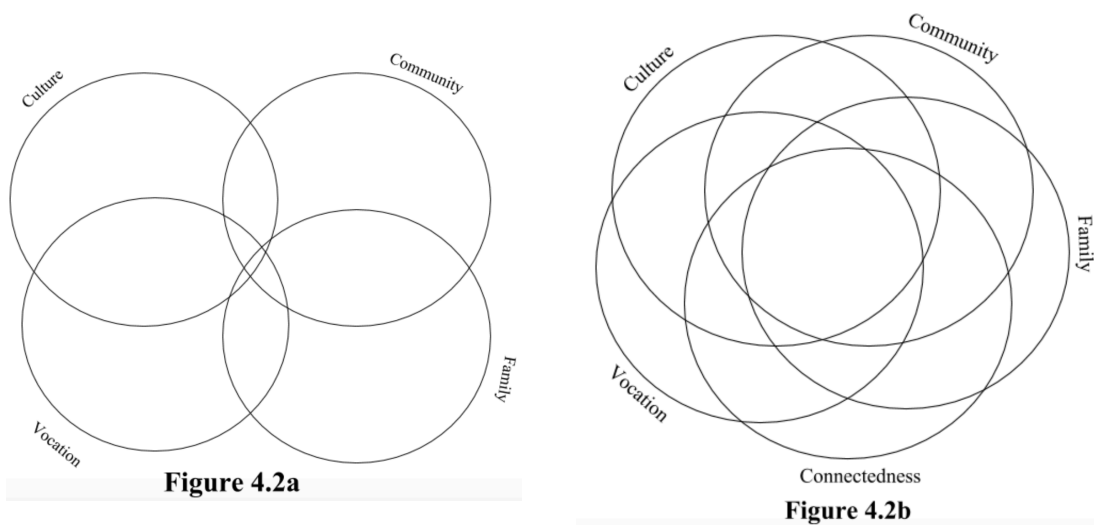


Figure 4.2. Visual representation of the freshman seminar as ceremony.

This building of relationships, this closing of the gaps, this ceremony, is a holistic process that begs for interpretation while defying simple analysis. In dominant systems qualitative research, analysis consists of “preparing and organizing the data... then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2013, p. 180). As Kovach (2009) explains, this form of analysis involves reducing a whole to the sum of its parts, an approach that contrasts sharply with Indigenous epistemologies which are, by definition, holistic and non-fragmentary. Wilson (2008) elaborates:

Analysis from a western perspective breaks everything down to look at it. So you are breaking it down to its smallest pieces and then looking at those pieces. And if we are saying that an Indigenous methodology includes all of these

relationships, if you are breaking things down into their smallest pieces, you are destroying all of the relationships around it. (p. 119)

The challenge associated with separating these Native American student persisters' experiences into discrete themes is illustrated in Table 4.3 below. In this table, an "x" indicates that at least one persister integrated the two themes in her commentary. Table 4.4 further illustrates the challenge of separating these Native American student persisters' experiences into discrete themes by providing an illustrative quote for each theme and then indicating the additional themes integrated into that quote.

Table 4.3

*Basic Representation of Theme Integration with the Number of Participants Who Expressed Each Theme Indicated in Parentheses*

	<b>Culture (5)</b>	<b>Community (4)</b>	<b>Family (2)</b>	<b>Vocation (4)</b>	<b>Connectedness (4)</b>
<b>Culture (5)</b>	-	X	X	X	X
<b>Community (4)</b>	X	-	X	X	X
<b>Family (2)</b>	X	X	-	X	
<b>Vocation (4)</b>	X	X	X	-	
<b>Connectedness (4)</b>	X	X			-

Table 4.4

*Illustrative Quotes Highlighting Theme Integration*

	Illustrative Quote	Other Themes Integrated				
		Culture	Community	Family	Vocation	Connectedness
<b>Culture</b>	<p>“When I was young I had no idea what the Army Corp of Engineers had done to my people. They put up dams that destroy our ecosystems and our way of living. The dams wiped much of the fish population and destroyed Celilo Falls. My ancestors fished there, my grandmother, my grandfather, my uncles and aunties, my father all have had the opportunity to travel to Celilo Falls to fish. I am a member of the Nez Perce Tribe and we refer to ourselves as the “Salmon People.” My tribe is working to restore the fish and wildlife in the Pacific Northwest and I want to help them” (Sidni, first reflection).</p>	-	X	X	X	
<b>Community</b>	<p>“I believe that having a better understanding of immigration will still benefit me as a Yakama Nation tribal member working in a business related field for the tribe. A lot of Yakama tribal members are not full-blooded Yakama - many Yakama enrolled members are half Mexican, half Caucasian, half Asian, half Black etc. And to understand all the different types of people in the community is beneficial to good business” (Lilian, third reflection).</p>	X	-		X	



Table 4.4 continued

	Illustrative Quote	Other Themes Integrated				
		Culture	Community	Family	Vocation	Connectedness
<b>Family</b>	“The environment is important and I want to help find solutions to environmental issues to improve my family’s and my community’s way of life to create a better future for ourselves and the generations to come” (Sidni, third reflection).	X	X	-	X	
<b>Vocation</b>	“With a major in history and a minor in English maybe I could inform and talk about gender/sexuality. Bringing awareness to the community about issues gay people face. I am not sure of the future but I do have a concern for the LGBTQ community that’s within my community and see that it is ignored. This will not be easily done because I know how traditional my community can be especially towards the idea of a man being with a woman, not a man with a man, or women with a woman” (Alicia, fourth reflection).	X	X		-	X
<b>Connectedness</b>	“It was good to see that my classmates were in just as much disgust with the Dakota access pipeline as Indian Country was. We weren’t alone. . . . I remember being really touched by one of my classmate’s stories about her own family coming from Mexico with nothing and how difficult things were when they arrived. That took courage for her to share those painful memories with us” (Lilian, final reflection).	X	X			-



In summary, these persisters' experiences of the University 101 course are perhaps best depicted as the development of an increasingly complex set of relationships—essentially, a closing of the gaps between the various and interrelated ideas, concepts, and people composing their realities as students, including their intertwined relationships with their families, communities, cultures, peers, and instructors; their goals and vocations; and the ideas, concepts, and values explored in the course. As such, the ceremony of the University 101 freshman seminar didn't just involve building relationships among and between the concepts, ideas, and people involved in the University 101 course, but encircled these persisters' families, cultures, communities, and histories as well.

When the experience of University 101 bridges the distance between ourselves and the cosmos, when the experience of University 101 allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world, it is ceremony. And through enacting this ceremony, we strengthen connections between ourselves, our students, our cultures, our families, our communities, our dreams, and our goals. When this ceremony simultaneously acts to strengthen connections between a student and the people, ideas, and values of the university, it can be seen as a ceremony in service of persistence.

For these persisters, the experience of the University 101 course was a ceremony that built an overlapping web of relationships complex enough to encircle their families, cultures, communities, dreams, and the people, places, and ideas of Hope University. This ceremony effectively integrated their academic goals with their families, communities, cultures, histories, beliefs, and the new relationships they developed with

the people and ideas of Hope University. Within this new reality created by the ceremony of the freshman seminar, these students' on-going persistence honors all of these intimately intertwined relationships. It is not surprising, then, that each of the five is still enrolled at Hope University and continues to work toward her degree.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

Native American students in the United States face unparalleled challenges across the educational spectrum (ACT, 2015; EdTrust, 2013; Harrington & Harrington, 2011; Hunt & Harrington, 2010; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2012; Tierney, 1992; NCES 2016a; NCES 2016e), and these challenges are reflected in the experiences of Native American college students in Washington State, many of whom fail to obtain their four-year degree (Chronical of Higher Education, nd). Acknowledging these challenges, a dedicated group of professors at Hope University, a small four-year institution located on the Yakama Nation in south central Washington State, redesigned the university's freshman seminar course in an attempt to increase retention among its predominantly Latinx and Native American student population. In light of Hope University's unique commitment to serve the students of the Yakama Nation, in an effort to illuminate voices of Native success, and in honor of the many Native students who *do* persist and earn a four-year degree, this study explored the impact of the redesigned freshman seminar course by answering the following question: How do female Native American student persisters experience a retention-oriented freshman seminar in a Northwest University in the United States?

#### **Summary of Findings**

A qualitative approach was used to analyze the coursework portfolios of the five female Native American students who had completed the University 101 course in the

Fall of 2016 and were still enrolled in the Fall of 2018. Although two male persisters had similar trajectories, their portfolios did not contain enough work to allow for analysis. Utilizing basic qualitative coding techniques described by Creswell (2013), analysis of the five persisters' coursework indicated that five thematic elements characterized their experiences with the revised University 101 course: culture, community, family, connectedness, and vocation. Four of these elements—culture, community, family, and vocation—characterized the students' academic experiences, while the final element, connectedness, characterized the students' personal experiences. Moreover, it was found that these thematic elements did not exist as distinct entities, but rather were interrelated and intertwined among the students' experiences throughout the course.

One of the themes highlighted here—connectedness—supports findings from the traditional literature on persistence and retention. Specifically, findings related to the personal experience of connectedness support the existing literature on the importance of social and academic integration (Tinto, 1975), belonging (Tinto, 2017a), and collaboration and positive student-faculty relationships (Kuh, 2005; Kuh, 2008a).

More importantly, the collective findings support several existing Native American theories of student persistence including HeavyRunner and DeCelles' (2002) family education model, Brayboy and colleagues' (2012) nation building theory, and Lopez' (2018) millennium falcon persistence model as well as the growing body of literature on Native American women's experiences in higher education (Bingham et al., 2014; Bowker, 1992; Evans, 1994; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). However, the findings also allude to a key issue highlighted in the literature on the female Native American

student experience in the university setting: the difficulty of distinguishing between academic and personal experiences and between community, culture, family, and vocation. Acknowledging this complexity, I propose an alternative interpretation that builds upon the existing literature while highlighting the interconnected nature of the thematic elements that characterized these persisters' experiences with the University 101 course: the freshman seminar as ceremony.

The concept of ceremony is rooted in Indigenous ontology and epistemology, whereby we are not *in* relationships, but *are* relationships (Wilson, 2008). As such, ceremony involves maintaining and restoring balance, the cultivation of relationships (Cajete, 2000), and the bridging of distance between different aspects of the cosmos and ourselves (Wilson, 2008, p. 11). As the persisters studied here moved through the revised University 101 course, relationships continually developed as new connections were made between themselves; their cultures, families, communities, and goals; and the people, ideas, and values of Hope University. Ultimately, this process facilitated the emergence of a new reality in which Hope University was an integral part. In essence, the University 101 course acted as a form of ceremony for these persisters.

### **Practical Implications**

Several practical implications emerge from the results of this study. First, given this study's support for Indigenous models of persistence, faculty involved with Native American student persistence efforts would benefit from extending their understanding of persistence to include those rooted in the Indigenous worldview and experience. Admittedly, traditional models may explain some elements of the Native American

persistence experience. However, these individual elements do not account for the interrelated influences of culture, community, and family. Moreover, these individual elements are insufficient to provide a true understanding of the experiences that promote Native American persistence—experiences that, by definition, are rooted in a relational Indigenous worldview (Wilson, 2008) that values collectivism (Hain-Jamall, 2013), family and community (Gaither, 2014).

Relatedly, faculty involved with Native American student persistence efforts would benefit from framing their understandings of Native American persistence as a holistic experience, rather than as an experience that can be analyzed into individual elements. As the findings presented here demonstrate, Native American student persisters experience the revised University 101 course as a ceremony that bridges the gaps between themselves; their families, communities, cultures, and goals; and the ideas and people of Hope University. No one factor or element can explain these students' experiences, nor can these factors be isolated and analyzed individually. Acknowledging this, faculty involved with designing and implementing programs aimed at promoting Native American persistence—including freshman seminar courses—would benefit from developing a deeper understanding of Indigenous ontology and epistemology, and applying that understanding to their efforts.

Finally, faculty involved with designing and implementing retention-focused freshman seminar courses aimed at promoting Native American student persistence would benefit from maintaining a focus on relationships—both with the content and among students and faculty—rather than on other elements commonly incorporated

into freshman seminar courses, such as basic study skills and academic orientation (Hunter & Linder, 2005). This is not to say that these elements should be abandoned; rather, they should be incorporated to the extent that they promote the development of relationships. Thus, while existing evidence supports the incorporation of study skills (Porter & Swing, 2006), academic advising (King & Kerr, 2005; Kuh, 2005), experiences with diversity (Jones, 2005; Kuh, 2005), service learning (Zlotkowski, 2005), and specific instructional strategies such as frequent feedback (Hrabowski, 2005), and small-group discussion, group projects, and experiential learning (Erickson & Strommer, 2005), these elements should be incorporated only to the extent that they bridge the gaps between the student and the various interconnected elements of the university. In other words, they should be incorporated to the extent that they facilitate the experience of the freshman seminar course as ceremony.

Each of these recommendations calls for a fundamental shift in perspective from one rooted in a dominant systems view of Native American persistence to one rooted in Indigenous ontology and epistemology. Thus, adopting these recommendations will honor the notions of tribal critical race theory (Brayboy, 2005) by contributing to the decolonization of the educational space while advancing the work of equity literate faculty (Gorski, 2013) dedicated to actively challenging the institutional and individual barriers that limit the educational opportunities of minoritized students of color.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study offers additional support for the idea that Native American student persistence is best explained by Indigenous models and theory. While the findings

presented here offer limited support for traditional models of student persistence, they strongly reflect the four themes identified by Lopez (2018) as common to the body of literature surrounding Native American persistence: family support, institutional support, tribal community support, and academic support. Moreover, the present findings reinforce the importance of engaging family and nourishing a commitment to one's community, key elements of HeavyRunner and DeCelles' (2002) family education model and Brayboy and colleagues' (2012) nation building model of Native American persistence. Thus, researchers interested in further exploring the field of Native American student persistence may be best served by rooting themselves in Native American ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology.

Moreover, the findings presented here extend our theoretical understanding of Native American student persistence by providing a model of the individual student persister's experience within a specific course. While the family education model focuses on institutional practices, and the nation building and millennium falcon models describe individual factors that contribute to Native American student persistence, the proposed concept of the freshman seminar as ceremony describes a *process* by which individual factors interact within an institutional context to create a personal and academic experience that promotes persistence. As described here, this process takes place within a specific course designed to enhance retention. Framing the individual student's experience as ceremony provides us with an enhanced theoretical understanding of Native American student persistence, thus expanding both



the lens through which we understand persistence as well as the toolbox from which we work to promote the retention of our Indigenous students.

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

A foundational way this study could be improved would be by approaching the research question from within an Indigenous research paradigm rather than from within a dominant systems qualitative paradigm. As Wilson (2001) explains,

Now as Indigenous researchers we need to move beyond these [dominant research paradigms], beyond merely assuming an Indigenous perspective on these non-Indigenous paradigms.... We need to go beyond this Indigenous perspective to a full Indigenous paradigm. Our ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology are fundamentally different. (p. 176)

While the present study attempts to advance an Indigenous perspective, its methods lack the relationality and relational accountability inherent to Indigenous paradigms.

Moreover, the present study's focus on empirical knowledge necessarily discounts the many other ways of knowing valued within Indigenous epistemology (Wilson, 2008). To address these weaknesses, this study should be replicated using an Indigenous, rather than dominant systems, methodology.

An additional recommendation for improvement centers on the data collected for the study, which included individual student work samples from a course designed to increase retention. At best, these data are indirect representations of students' experiences with the course, and the study could be improved greatly if additional data, such as observations, field notes, and interviews, were utilized as well. Moreover, the

incorporation of interview data would better reflect Indigenous methodologies emphasizing relationality, which call for research to strengthen the relationship between researcher and participant (Wilson, 2008).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

While this study advances our understanding of female Native American student persistence, the absence of data on male student persisters is troubling. Existing non-Indigenous research (Astin, 1975; Burrus et al., 2013; D’Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014; Spady, 1971) indicates that male and female persistence may reflect distinct experiences. However, data collected here were insufficient to characterize the male Native American persistence experience, let alone make comparisons between the male and female experiences. Additional research is needed to clarify the experiences of male Native American persisters and to determine if the concept of ceremony presented here is equally applicable to their journeys.

Moreover, future research should replicate this study both at Hope University and at other institutions dedicated to promoting Native American student persistence. At Hope University, this study should be replicated with a larger sample as more Native American students complete the revised University 101 course and persist towards earning their degrees. Replication at other institutions can clarify the applicability of the concepts presented here not only to larger student populations, but to Native American students persisting in different cultures, communities, and educational contexts. Furthermore, additional sources of data, such as observations, field notes, and interviews, should be included to deepen the researchers’

understanding of the Native American persistence experience and better align the research with the Indigenous relational imperative.

An additional area of future research centers on the applicability of the concept of ceremony to other areas of the Native student journey, particularly to those courses that traditionally function as barriers to student persistence, such as remedial coursework and math classes (Complete College America, 2014). It may be that these experiences could also promote retention if they, too, were performed as ceremonies. However, additional research is needed to make this determination.

Finally, additional research guided by the needs highlighted above should be conducted from within an Indigenous research paradigm. As Wilson (2008) argues, an Indigenous perspective is not sufficient. “Indigenous research must leave behind dominant paradigms and follow an Indigenous research paradigm” (p. 38). To truly understand the Indigenous experience and the experiences of Native American student persisters, we must fundamentally shift our thinking and begin to work from within the Indigenous worldview.

### **Conclusion**

Although Native American students face a number of barriers throughout their educational careers, many *do* successfully persist to earn a college degree. Focusing on these persisters’ stories of success, it becomes clear that freshman seminar courses do have the potential to promote retention, particularly if they function as ceremonial experiences that narrow the gaps between students; their cultures, communities, families, and goals; and the ideas, people, and values of the university. It is now our responsibility

as equity literate educators dedicated to decolonizing the educational space to ensure this ceremonial experience is available to every Native American student pursuing a higher education.

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