BEST PRACTICES FOR TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TO ACHIEVE ACADEMIC SUCCESS WITH FIRST-GENERATION NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

A Scholarly Research Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

Native American students face significant challenges in higher education, including lower enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates compared to other ethnic groups. Many of these students are first-generation and non-traditional learners, often balancing work and family responsibilities while navigating systemic barriers rooted in historical trauma, financial instability, and cultural dissonance within mainstream academic institutions. Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) play a crucial role in addressing these disparities by providing culturally relevant support systems that foster student success.

This mixed-methods study explored best practices for TCUs to enhance academic success among first-generation Native American students. Through surveys with faculty, staff, and students at three TCUs, the research identifies key strategies that improve retention and completion rates. These include holistic student support services, culturally embedded curricula, mentoring programs, and streamlined institutional processes like one-stop support centers. Findings suggest that strengthening students' sense of belonging, incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, and addressing financial and logistical barriers are critical to increasing academic success.

The study's conclusions offer practical recommendations for TCUs to develop policies and programs that align with the unique needs of Native students. By implementing culturally responsive strategies, institutions can not only improve individual student outcomes but also contribute to the long-term empowerment of Native communities.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my incredible family and to the journey that brought me here, a journey I never imagined possible.

To my husband, David, your unwavering support, patience, and love have been my anchor. You have carried me through the hardest moments, believed in me when I struggled to believe in myself, and stood beside me as I chased a dream I once thought was out of reach.

To my five beautiful children, Tyrell, Aaliyah, Adalynn, Maya, and Maverick, you are my heart and my greatest inspiration. Every sacrifice, every late night, and every moment of doubt was fueled by my desire to show you that no obstacle is too great, no dream too distant. I hope you always believe in your own strength and the limitless possibilities ahead of you.

To the first-generation students who never imagined college was within their reach, I was you. To those who have battled through abuse, anxiety, depression, and trauma, I see you. This achievement is proof that our past does not define us, that healing and growth are possible, and that education can be a path to transformation.

To every working mother juggling career, family, and education, this is for you. You are seen, you are capable, and you are enough.

With love and gratitude,

Dr. Kayla Diamond

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Minorities in higher education make up a small population of the total student body; however, Native American students have a significantly lower college enrollment rate than other ethnic groups in the United States, and their dropout rates continue to rise. Native Americans continue to be one of the least represented demographics in college settings. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2021), 17% of Native American students continue their education after high school compared to 60% of the U.S. population. Completion rates for Native American students differ from other ethnicities as well showing that 23% of first-time, full-time Native American students attending four-year institutions beginning in 2008 graduated within four years compared to 44% for white students. In addition, 41% of Native American bachelor's degree-seeking students graduated within six years, compared to 63% of white students. In that same study, in 2019, 25% of Native Americans over the age of twenty-five had an associate degree or higher, compared to 42% of other ethnicities over the age of twenty-five.

Many Native American college students are also non-traditional and first-generation college students, making it even more difficult to achieve academic success. The typical student is often described as a single mother in her early 30s (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2012). It is estimated that over half of the enrollment is from single parent students. Most enrolled are from the first-generation in their family to go to college (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2012). Research from the Institute for Higher Education Policy for the American Indian College Fund (2006) has found significant differences in enrollment, degree attainment, and finances between first-generation students compared to continuing-generation students. Many first-generation students are also at greater risk of not persisting in or

not completing credential programs because of academic unpreparedness, having children of their own, and working full time while enrolled (Chen, 2005). In addition, first-generation students often possess other demographic and enrollment characteristics such as low socioeconomic status and lower enrollment intensity, among others, which are associated with dropping out. All these factors and interactions among them increase first-generation students' risk of failing to persist in postsecondary education relative to many of their continuing-generation peers (Choy, 2002).

Pavel et al. (1998) found that non-traditional Native Americans entering postsecondary education possessed a substantially higher number of risk factors threatening their ability to succeed in college. Thirty-five percent had four or more risk factors compared to 22% of the overall undergraduate population. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2021), nearly half of non-traditional Native American students leave community colleges after three years without a degree. At four-year colleges, they complete at a rate of 15%. In addition, most non-traditional students are pursuing an associate degree as opposed to a bachelor's degree (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021).

This study will explore supportive academic strategies for Native American students in higher education at Tribal Colleges to improve student outcomes and develop innovative approaches to promote an increase in graduation rates in first-generation Native American students. The expectation of this study is that the data and information gathered from this study will be used at other Tribal Colleges and Universities to analyze and potentially adjust their current policies, procedures, and programs to optimize the academic success of Native American students. Academic success at Tribal Colleges and Universities should not just serve as a goal but a responsibility. An article from the Tribal College Journal (2021), *Of Community and*

Culture: A Snapshot of Tribal College Alumni, mentioned that when Native American students achieve academic success, it has a positive impact on their community and future generations (Tribal College Journal, 2021).

Background Information

An important aspect of understanding Native Americans in post-secondary education is understanding the role that the United States Government has played in Native American education. On March 3, 1819, the U.S. Congress enacted the Indian Civilization Fund Act. The Indian Civilization Act of 1819 was enacted for the purpose of providing against the further decline and final extinction of the Indian tribes and resulted in the establishment of residential Indian boarding schools across the United States that brought mental and emotional suffering, physical illness, immediate decline of indigenous culture and languages, crimes against young children, and early death to many Native American children due to abuse (Pember, 2019). The act directly spurred the creation of boarding schools by putting forward the notion that Native culture and language were to blame for what was deemed the country's "Indian problem." (Pember, 2019 p.1) From the sixteenth century onward race and gender divided humans into three categories: owning property, becoming property less, and being property (Stein, 2022) and Native American's became a part of the becoming property less and being property category. By the nineteenth century, eighty-five percent of Indigenous children were enrolled in boarding schools (Adams, 1988), who described boarding schools as undertaking "an all-out assault on the child's "otherness'. Waged uncompromisingly on every aspect of the child's being" (p.14). (Stein, 2022)

The boarding school system was the first education system that Native Americans were introduced to in which they were forcibly removed from their homes to attend and were stripped

of their culture (Glenn, 2015). For many Native Americans in Canada and the United States, the nightmare of boarding schools will never be forgotten, causing long-lasting trauma. This historical trauma that Native Americans went through contributes to the reason that many Native Americans have a negative attitude toward education (Pember, 2019). A negative attitude towards education can be one of the reasons for the issues that we are seeing within post-secondary education with Native Americans.

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) evolved during the 1970s in response to the unsuccessful experiences of Native American students enrolled at Predominately White Institutions. Today, TCUs play a critical role in American Indian communities. As the primary postsecondary institutions in Indian Country, TCUs served nearly 20,000 college students and over 47,000 community members in 2010 (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2012). According to AIHEC (2012) since the establishment of Navajo Community College as the first tribal college in 1968, TCUs have sought to develop their own institutional systems that incorporate culturally based leadership to serve local and regional American Indian communities. Tribal Colleges were created in response to the higher education needs of Native Americans and serve the geographically isolated populations that have no other means of accessing education beyond the high school level. In recognition that many American Indian students were not being adequately served by mainstream institutions, tribal leaders came together and established institutions of higher education that were grounded in traditional ways of knowing and culturally sensitive pedagogy (Jones et al., 2015).

One of the most important qualities of Tribal Colleges and Universities is their focus on serving American Indian communities by providing the opportunity to attain a degree in a supportive and culturally relevant environment (American Indian Higher Education Consortium,

2012). TCUs are mostly located on or near American Indian reservations and serve students who previously would have had little or no access to higher education. Many individuals think TCUs are just for Native American students, however they serve students of all ethnicities. TCUs serve many non-traditional students such as those who are older, those who work while attending school, and those who are responsible for the care of dependent family members. These students must overcome the many challenges associated with being a non-traditional student, as well as face historical barriers that have developed over centuries of cultural conflict between Native American and Western societies (Institute for Higher Education Policy for the American Indian College Fund, 2006). Raphael Guillory (2010) mentions that Indigenous students do everything for the betterment of their tribal society. His study shows that the Native student's persistence is geared toward improving life for their families and communities. "It is a reflection of an Indigenous philosophy of putting community before individualism," stated Guillory (Guillory, 2010, p. 18). This is just one prime example of how important post-secondary education is for Native American students.

The first Tribal College, Navajo Nation Community College (today known as Diné College), was established in 1968 by the Navajo Nation which spans Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2012). The college was created to encourage Navajo youth to become contributing members of the Navajo Nation and the world society and was accredited by the North Central Association Commission on Institutions of Higher Education in 1976 (Huaman et al., 2019). There are currently 37 Tribal Colleges and Universities across the United States, with 86% of the total Tribal College student population being American Indian students, and there are over 100,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students in attendance, representing over 250 different nations (Huaman et al., 2019).

Research Problem

There is a lack of literature and research on Native American students, often leaving them to be considered the forgotten group in higher education. Native Americans (both American Indians and Alaska Natives) comprise only 1% of the U.S. undergraduate population and less than 1% of the graduate population, resulting in Native American's being left out of postsecondary research and data reporting due to small sample size (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). With being left out of postsecondary research, it makes it extremely difficult to determine what is wrong and how it can be fixed. In addition to the ethnic group being left out of research, Tribal Colleges and Universities are rarely discussed in mainstream higher education literature. Yet, these institutions center and serve Native communities, with most located on Native territories (AIHEC, n.d.).

With the lack of research and literature on Native American students in higher education and Tribal Colleges and Universities, it makes it difficult to determine and understand what barriers are negatively affecting their academic success. If staff and faculty at Tribal Colleges and Universities do not understand and address the barriers that Native American students face, retention and graduation rates among Native students are predicted by this researcher to continue to decline.

This study aims to help Tribal Colleges and Universities determine, understand, and address the barriers that Native American students face in higher education resulting in low academic success and graduation rates.

Research Purpose and Questions

This research study explores supportive academic strategies for Native American students in higher education at Tribal Colleges to improve student outcomes and develop innovative approaches to promote an increase in graduation rates.

The following research questions were addressed in this study.

1. What strategies are used by Tribal Colleges and Universities to achieve student success with Native American students?
2. What are challenges Native American students face that may have an impact on their retention and graduation rates?
3. What are the major causes of early academic failure and poor retention for Native American students?

Assumptions of the Study

It is assumed that participants in this study represent the target population and will be honest and truthful in their responses to the questions asked in surveys. It is also assumed that the data collected from the participants come from their own observations and experiences when working with first-generation Native American students in higher education. The assumption of cultural factors given the principal researcher is a member of the demographic in this student is higher based on the principal researchers inside perspective, lived experiences, and understanding of the research topic.

This study is going to use a mixed methods approach to understand the barriers faced by Native American students in higher education and how it relates to their academic success. It will consist of anonymous surveys. Participants will be current staff and faculty at Tribal Colleges and Universities that have first-hand experience with first-generation Native American students.

The primary type of data collected will be as follows: opinions on policies, procedures, and programs that either contribute to or hinder academic success of Native American Students; disclosures of past and current behaviors of Native American students in higher education; sensitive information regarding the demographics of the institutions student population; and protected student records to analyze students' academic performance.

The three institutions chosen for this study are Tribal Colleges in the United States. To keep the privacy of the institutions and those involved I will use pseudonyms for the three colleges chosen. Indigenous methodologies will be used to understand the experiences that Native American students face as described by staff and faculty. These methodologies are forms of research by and for Indigenous peoples, using techniques and methods drawn from the tradition of those people (Simonds et al., 2013).

Definition of Terms

Academic Advising-a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities, and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and time frames (Gordon et al. 2008, p. 524).

Academic Advisor-The individual who helps students become more self-aware of their distinctive interests, talents, values, and priorities; who enables students to see the 'connection' between their present academic experience and their future life plans; who helps students discover their potential, purpose, and passion; who broadens students' perspectives with respect to their personal life choices, and sharpens their cognitive skills for making these choices, such as effective problem- solving, critical thinking, and reflective decision-making" (Cuseo,2003)

Academic Success/ Student Success- Academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post college performance (York et al., 2015).

Academic Support-A functional expense category that includes expenses of activities and services that support the institution's primary missions of instruction, research, and public service. It includes the retention, preservation, and display of educational materials (for example, libraries, museums, and galleries); organized activities that provide support services to the academic functions of the institution (such as a demonstration school associated with a college of education or veterinary and dental clinics if their primary purpose is to support the instructional program); media such as audiovisual services; academic administration (including academic deans but not department chairpersons); and formally organized and separately budgeted academic personnel development and course and curriculum development expenses. Also included are information technology expenses related to academic support activities; if an institution does not separately budget and expense information technology resources, the costs associated with the three primary programs will be applied to this function and the remainder to institutional support. Institutions include actual or allocated costs for operation and maintenance of plant, interest, and depreciation (IPEDS Data Collection System, 2022).

American Indian or Alaska Native- A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community attachment (IPEDS Data Collection System, 2022).

Equity Gap- Another alternative to “achievement gap” that evokes the notion that institutions have a responsibility to create equity for students (IPEDS Data Collection System, 2022).

First-generation Student- A student who has no prior postsecondary experience attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. This includes students enrolled in academic or occupational programs. It also includes students enrolled in the fall term who attended college for the first time in the prior summer session, and students who entered with advanced standing (IPEDS Data Collection System, 2022).

Land Grant Institution- A land-grant college or university is an institution that has been designated by its state legislature or Congress to receive the benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. The original mission of these institutions, as set forth in the first Morrill Act, was to teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanic arts as well as classical studies so that members of the working classes could obtain a liberal, practical education (IPEDS Data Collection System, 2022).

Minoritized Students-Identities students hold that were not considered when the systems and institutions of higher education in the U.S. were originally designed. Sometimes the term "underrepresented" is used to define these student groups. Examples include but are not limited to first-generation; low-income; adult students; students of color; marginalized orientations, gender identities, and intersex students; students with multiple-language backgrounds; undocumented students; veterans; students with disabilities; students with dependents; foster care youth; and justice- involved students (IPEDS Data Collection System, 2022).

Non-Traditional Student- Most often age (especially being over the age of 24) has been the defining characteristic for this population. Age acts as a surrogate variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives. Other variables typically used to characterize nontraditional students are associated

with their background (race and gender), residence (i.e., not on campus), level of employment (especially working full time), and being enrolled in non-degree occupational programs (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Persistence- Successful completion of students' individual higher education career upon graduation, irrespective of whether they have switched institutions (St. John et al. 2001).

Retention- A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall (IPEDS Data Collection System, 2022).

Traditional Student: Generally defined as a student who enrolls in college immediately after high school, attends full-time, is financially dependent on their parents, and does not have significant work or family obligations. These students typically fall within the age range of 18-24 years old. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "traditional students are those who enroll in postsecondary education as full-time students immediately after finishing high school and who depend on their parents for financial support" (NCES, 2015).

Trauma- An event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social or emotional, or spiritual well-being (The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

Tribal College and University (TCU)- An institutional classification developed by the Andrew W. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Tribal Colleges and Universities,

with few exceptions, are tribally controlled and located on reservations. They are all members of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (IPEDS Data Collection System, 2022).

Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1 presented an introduction to the problem that Tribal Colleges and Universities face with having low retention, academic success, and graduation rates among Native American students. This introductory chapter also notes the lack of literature and research on Tribal Colleges and Universities and Native American students. In addition, chapter 1 discussed the generational trauma and barriers that Native American students face that potentially have a negative effect on their academic success in postsecondary education. Lastly, this introductory chapter addresses the statement of the problem and purpose of the study along with research questions and the research design that will aid in exploring supportive academic strategies for Native American students in higher education at Tribal Colleges and Universities to improve student academic success outcomes and develop innovative approaches to promote an increase in graduation rates.

The next chapter will introduce the reader to a literature review on Native Americans within the higher educational system. It will help the reader gain a better understanding of the barriers first-generation Native American students face. The following chapter will also introduce the reader to potential strategies to improve academic success with first-generation Native American students.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Introduction

The focus of this literature review is to gain a better understanding on academic success as it pertains to non-traditional and first-generation Native American students in higher education. The thorough review of the literature review guided the research questions that will be addressed in this study:

1. What strategies are used by Tribal Colleges and Universities to achieve student success with Native American students?
2. What are challenges Native American students face that may have an impact on their retention and graduation rates?
3. What are the major causes of early academic failure and poor retention for Native American students?

This chapter will be outlined by dividing the chapter into three sections with the first being the most common barriers of Native American students. This section will explore many of the common barriers that most first-generation and non-traditional students in higher education face such as lack of resources but will also include barriers specific to Native American students like generational trauma and decolonization. The second section of the literature review will be exploring the enrollment, persistence, retention, and completion rates of Native American students and comparing that to different ethnicities. It will provide insight into where the problems are in each area and the decline over the years. The last section will then highlight current strategies taking place that contribute to the academic success of Native American students at institutions. This part of the literature review will guide me in my research project to

gather information and data on those practices explored in the literature review to determine if they are successful or what may need to be changed.

According to McDonough's (2005) report on college counseling in America's high schools, parents in lower socioeconomic status (SES) areas (including American Indian reservations) often lack a postsecondary education and the knowledge necessary to assist their children in accessing resources and preparing for college. With the lack of resources and knowledge from their parents, Native American students are at a disadvantage in their academic success from the very beginning leading to failing or dropping out.

Barriers of Native American Students

The pathway to college is not the same for every student. The first major section of this literature review discusses in greater detail the barriers that Native American students in higher education face that may differ than students of other races and ethnicities. Native American students face many of the same barriers as other first-generation and non-traditional students such as lack of college readiness, financial stability, family support, and self-esteem (Espinosa, 2029), however there are more specific barriers that Native American students face that may not be common for other ethnicities such as generational trauma and decolonization. It is important in understanding these barriers for first-generation Native American to be successful. Keith et al., (2016), mentions that overcoming barriers for the achievement of an advanced education takes commitment, hard work, and dedication on behalf of the educational institution as well as the student (Keith et al., 2016). This section will not only explore barriers to obtaining a higher education for Native American students, but it will also explore how institutions can help in addressing and providing support for those barriers.

Lack of College Readiness

College readiness is defined as the academic and practical knowledge needed to be successful in higher education (Pitre et al., 2009). Many first-generation Native American students are not prepared to attend college academically. College readiness is a national policy priority in the United States, yet relatively little is known from large national samples about the factors and experiences that determine college readiness for historically underrepresented minorities (Turner et al., 2018). In 2015 14,711 American Indian High schools took the ACT, standardized test used for college admissions in the United States (The Condition of College & Career Readiness, 2015). Those results reflected that most Native American students are not academically ready for college due to the percentage of students meeting the benchmark in all four subjects, English, reading, mathematics, and science, was 11 percent compared to 28 percent for other ethnicities (The Condition of College & Career Readiness, 2015).

First-generation

Starting college can be a challenging time for any first-time first-year student as they navigate the admissions and enrollment process; however, this time can be even more challenging to first-generation college students that have no one with post-secondary experience to guide them. Having less exposure to the college-going culture causes difficulty in assimilating into the college setting both academically and socially. First-generation students are more likely to struggle to find their place and may feel left out (Stephens et al., 2014). Stephens et al. (2014) also mentioned that college students who do not have parents with a four-year degree earn lower grades and encounter more obstacles to success than continuing generation students. Not only do first-generation Native American students have lack of support and role models, but the role models and experiences they do have are often negative and often cause conflict with their education. A study done by Schmidt

et al., (2011) who interviewed faculty at Tribal Colleges who work with Native American students revealed that faculty felt that parents/ family often need the student at home to help and see this role more important than attending college and being put in that situation creates conflict for students.

In a study done by Covarrubias et al., (2015) a first-generation Native American participant mentioned that her parents have greatly suffered in the course of time and because of the connection she had with her family, she felt much guilt coming to the university leaving her with a luxury and independence feeling while they were at home suffering every day (Covarrubias, 2018). Covarrubias (2018) mentions that thoughts like these leave Native American students wanting to drop out of college and start working full-time to support their family. In that same study, it is also mentioned that some Native American students experience guilt, not only in college but in high school as well as their parents did not finish high school allowing them the opportunity to go onto college (Covarrubias, 2018). It has been difficult because there are many times when I have no one to relate to what I am going through." (First-generation college student, 18 years old) (Covarrubias et al., 2015, p. 1). The participants in this study expressed the guilt they felt by continuing their education, which is a feeling many have in their post-secondary education.

It is not a surprise that first-generation students experience many obstacles that can make obtaining a degree more challenging than some of their peers who are able to attend post-secondary education with little to no obstacles. Some of the obstacles first-generation students face range from working while going to school to raising a family, however despite the challenges that come with being a first-generation student in higher education, there are also many motivation factors for first-generation Native American students. A recent study completed by Blackwell et al., (2014) revealed that first-generation college students were not encouraged by family to attend

college but their inner drive to attend college to achieve a better way of life for themselves led to them being the first in their families to attend and to graduate from college. Another study done by Clark (2012) mentions that students saw the completion of school as a personal triumph and a way to disprove negative stereotypes and provided them with degree attainment and greater career choices. Those students that are also non-traditional students with children of their own, saw achieving a higher education to provide their children with motivation to obtain one themselves (Clark, 2012).

Historical Trauma

The primary feature of historical trauma is that the trauma is transferred to subsequent generations through biological, psychological, environmental, and social means, resulting in a cross-generational cycle of trauma (Sotero, 2006). Witnessing traumatic events, experiencing trauma to loved ones, and being victimized by physical attacks are experienced at higher rates in Native American youth than in the overall US population (Manson et al., 1996). Being a part of those traumatic events can make it extremely difficult for students to make higher education a priority. The trauma that Native Americans have faced not only make it difficult to make higher education a priority, but it also led to a generalized distrust of the U.S. education system by going through experiences like ethnic cleansing, genocide, and use of the educational system itself as a systematic tool of coerced acculturation (Martin et al., 2013). In addition to the distrust in the U.S. education system, many parents failed to push higher education for their college-age children due to fears associated with their children potentially losing cultural identity (Vermillion, 2012).

The readers of this study will need to understand how Native American history is a potential barrier in a Native American students' higher education journey. At the beginning of the 20th Century there was a widely held belief that Native Americans were very much a people of

the past. At that time, education was expected to train Indians for life in mainstream society and Native American culture was purposefully ignored and languages were suppressed (Mosholder et al., 2013). Native Americans have struggled to protect their right to live with their cultural traditions that characterize their heritage and the Tribal life. Native American history shows that there were many failed attempts by colonists to understand the Native American culture and it led to many believing that Native Americans could not be educated, which in return led to the boarding school system (Grande, 2008). Waterman (2007) states that the boarding school era started in the 1880s and continued into the 1950s despite some school closings in the 1920s and describes that boarding schools were many Native American's first "school" experience, and it was not a good one. Waterman (2007) states one of the main reasons for the dislike in boarding schools is because Native Americans were stripped from their culture, from being punished for speaking their language to children being forced to cut their long hair, which is a Native American tradition.

Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania is just one of the many boarding schools where Native Americans experienced trauma that has been passed down to future generations for decades. Between 1,500 and 1,800 Native American students from Oklahoma attended the school and some never made it back home (Emery, 2017). In the book *Recovering Native American Writings in the Boarding School Press,* one of the many students who tried to run away from Riverside but was always sent back, shares her story about how she was loaded into a cattle car and shipped by train in the dead of winter to Phoenix, where she stayed until she was 19. She remembers huddling together in the car with other children to keep warm and some did not survive the journey (Emery, 2017). Another student who experienced abuse mentioned that they cut the children's long hair, make them eat soap and get beat for speaking their language (Emery, 2017). These are just a few examples of the thousands of Native Americans that have

experienced trauma from boarding schools, having a negative impact on the U.S. educational system.

Low Income

Pitre et al. (2019) mentions that a barrier for Native American students is low income and having a lack of financials leads to making it difficult to attend college, afford reliable internet, childcare, and transportation, or even making it difficult to afford the basic living necessities such as food and shelter. Historically, postsecondary education opportunities have been limited for certain ethnic and racial populations and for those of lower socioeconomic status (Pitre et al., 2009). It is important to explore the impact of poverty among Native Americans and how that contributes to the lack of resources, a barrier to their higher educational journey.

The cost of obtaining a higher education degree has been increasing at a rate that makes it difficult for the average household income to keep up with. Between 1980–1981 and 2009–2010, college tuition and living expenses in public 4-year colleges increased by 135% and in public 2-year schools by 52%. Tuition for private 4-year institutions climbed by 134% and for private 2-year institutions by 127%; meanwhile, household income has only increased by 13% (Levine, 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the average tuition and fees were higher in the academic year 2020–21 than in the academic year 2010–11 for first-time, full-time undergraduate students at public and private institutions. Along with that, at public 4-year institutions tuition increased by 10 percent from 2010-2011, bringing the average cost to $9,400. At private nonprofit 4-year institutions, tuition increased by 19 percent, bringing the average cost to $37,600. At private for-profit institutions, tuition rose about 1 percent, bringing the average price to $18,200. The cost of higher education rising is a huge barrier to Native

Americans as the median income of American Indian and Alaska Native households was $43,825 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Living in poverty not only makes it difficult for Native Americans to afford college, but it also contributes to not being able to afford the other resources discussed above such as reliable transportation, childcare, internet, housing, and food costs. The Condition of Education 2020 report showed that in 2018, 80% of Native American students were without home internet access, which was one of the lowest percentages among other ethnicities. In 2020, 34 percent of Native American households had no high-speed internet access at home, and almost 16 percent had no computer (Hussar, 2020). Many Native American students, particularly those attending community college, face a daily struggle to pay for food, housing, childcare, health care, and transportation along with tuition and fees. These “indirect costs” amount to 60-80 percent of the total cost to attend college (Kelchen, 2016).

Based on the data from the 2018 US Census cited by Poverty USA, Native Americans have the highest poverty rate among all minority groups. The national poverty rate for Native Americans was 25.4% (Asante Muhammad, 2018). With low income and high poverty rates, continuing their education after high school is typically not considered, or even an option. As mentioned above, many Native American students are first-generation students, so they are unaware of the assistance available for them to attend college such as grants and scholarships or do not know how to even begin the process. According to Saunders (2011) the process, policies, and procedures of applying for financial aid can be extremely overwhelming causing students to give up before completing the process making them ineligible for funding. In addition, many first-generation Native American students are also working full-time jobs outside the classroom while going to school to offset financial burdens (Saunders, 2011). This requires additional time

outside of the classroom that might detract from time that could be devoted to studying or engaging with their peers (Pratt et al., 2017)

Enrollment, Persistence, Retention and Graduation Rates of Native American Students

The second part of the literature review explores enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of Native American college students in higher education. It is difficult to find isolated statistics specific only to Native American students in higher education with them often excluded from postsecondary data and research due to their small sample size and are included in the "other" sample of category. Despite the limited research and statistics on Native American students, it is not unknown that Native American enrollment, retention, persistence, and completion rates are some of the lowest. National Center for Education Statistics reveals that 24% of 18–24-year-old Native American students are enrolled in college compared to 41% of the overall U.S. population (Facts about American Indian Education, 2010). The same study also showed that undergraduate enrollment among Native Americans aged 18 to 24 decreased from 128,600 in 2016–17 to 116,400 in 2019–20. Post-baccalaureate enrollment decreased from 13,700 in 2016–17 to 13,400 in 2019–20 (Facts about American Indian Education, 2010). Those numbers are extremely concerning because the knowledge and experiences that Native American students can bring to the classroom from their own culture and relate it back to the curriculum, can be life changing to their peers and instructors.

Graduation rates of Native American students in higher education are also overly concerning. According to US Census data (2015) only 30% of Native Americans who graduate high school enter higher education of those Native American students that do enter higher education, the completion rates are extremely low. A more in-depth study done by the National Center for Education Statistics reveals that 41% of first-time, full-time Native American students

attending four-year institutions beginning in 2013 graduated within six years, compared to 63% for all students (Facts about American Indian Education, 2010). That same study showed that in 2019, 25% of Native Americans over the age of twenty-five had an associate degree or higher, compared to 42% of all those over the age of 25 (Facts about American Indian Education, 2010). Completion rates among Native American students have been increasing, from 2010 to 2019, the percentage of Native Americans over the age of twenty-five who had attained at least an associate degree increased from 21% to 25%, however that is still nowhere near the national average of other ethnic groups (Facts about American Indian Education, 2010).

TCU's can help tremendously with Native American students obtaining a college degree. Native American students at TCUs, where the college itself is controlled by Native American tribes and the members of the tribe, have higher retention rates in comparison to Native American students at PWIs (Larrimore et al., 2005). Higher persistence, retention, and completion rates for Native American students at TCUs versus PWIs can occur for many reasons. Many TCUs offer additional and more customized support for Native American students. They are unique institutions that blend the traditional community college goals of local economic development, workforce training, and preparation for continuing education with a combination of supplemental student support, cultural preservation and enhancement, and community outreach programs (Cunningham et al., 1998).

Strategies for Native American Academic Success

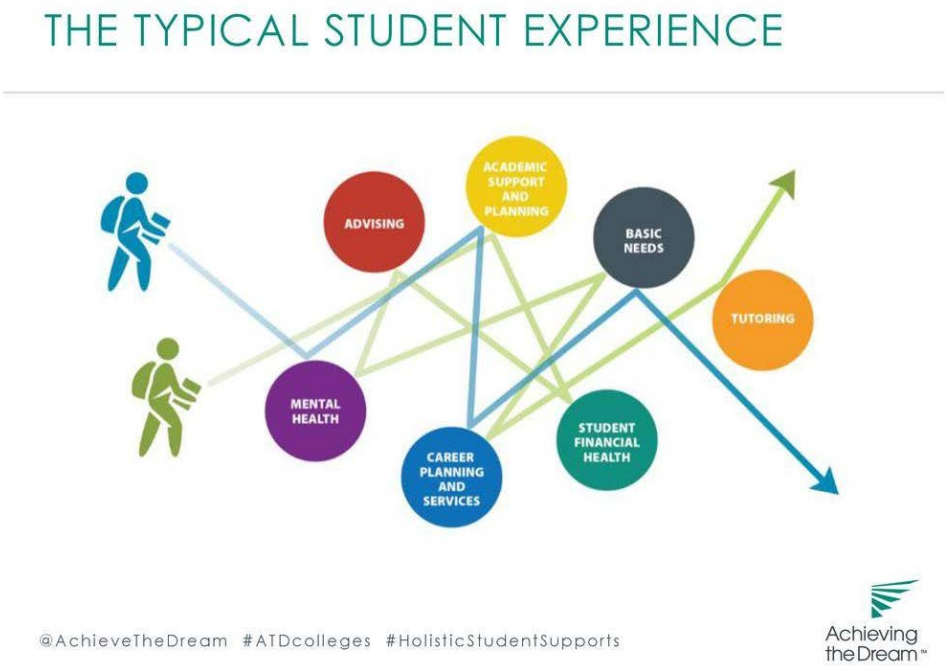
Every student is unique and the services they need will differ from their peers. For each of the strategies listed below it is important that higher education professionals work with their students to determine what their purpose and plan is, allowing them to get that early momentum in achieving their higher education goals. Although this section of the literature review provides

insight into different strategies for Native American academic success, it is also important to remember that every student is different. Knowing your students and their background is key in providing the right resources for them to be successful (Kuh et al., 2006).

Holistic Student Support

Holistic student support provides all students with the types and intensities of information, services, and resources they need to identify, select, and progress on the best pathway to achieve their educational and career goals (Karp et al., 2021). Holistic student support meets students where they are developmentally, addresses their individual needs, leverages their strengths, and focuses on student learning and development (Karp et al., 2021). This is important when working with Native American students in higher education because every student is different, they are all at different spots when entering post-secondary education and they all have a different life outside of school in addition to the traumas they may be overcoming from their childhood. As mentioned above, some are raising families and working full-time hours outside of school, so the services they need to be successful can be drastically different to those of a twenty-year-old with no children and working part-time. In 2020, Achieving the Dream created a model to reflect the difference between typical student support versus holistic student support. Achieving the Dream is a national non-profit organization with an initiative to close achievement gaps and accelerate student success among diverse student populations, particularly low-income and students of color (Karp et al., 2021). The model is shown in figure 1 below which reflects student support where the student is bounced around from services not in any specific order and can get lost throughout the process. Whereas figure 2 shows the holistic student support approach where the student is met exactly where they are and what services are needed for them to be successful.

Figure 1



Note: From Implementing a Holistic Student Supports Approach: Four Case Studies. (2018). In Achieving the Dream. *Achieving the Dream.*

Figure 2

Note: From Implementing a Holistic Student Supports Approach: Four Case Studies. (2018). In Achieving the Dream. *Achieving the Dream.*

The overall design of holistic student supports is to balance academic knowledge with other areas of knowledge, including a heightened sense of community and mental and emotional well-being, higher education can cultivate students who apply their skills with reduced stress, a sense of belonging, and freedom of expression (Crutchfield, 2020) Implementing a holistic student support system is not something that can happen instantly, it takes a lot of research on what your students need and looking at current policies and procedures that need to be changed. A college that is a great example of redesigning their services to fit a holistic student services approach is North Arkansas College (Northark), located in one of the poorest areas of the state and serving students with an average age of 27, nearly 70 % of whom have family incomes that qualify them for Pell grants. Most work, have families, or carry financial burdens that make being in college part of a juggling act (Implementing a Holistic Student Supports Approach: Four Case Studies, 2018). Northark made many changes to the way they were doing things such as implementing a guided pathways program, implementing a “Go-To Person” program that assigned students to certain staff or faculty based on their needs assessment that would be the person responsible for the main communication with the student, and implementing an on campus food pantry that provided over $10,000 worth of food to hundreds of students of their families within the first year (Implementing a Holistic Student Supports Approach: Four Case Studies, 2018). The changes that Northark made had a positive impact on the institution by having a ten-percentage point increase in student retention over the two years of implementation (Implementing a Holistic Student Supports Approach: Four Case Studies, 2018).

Native American students gain significant benefits from participating in holistic student support programs in higher education because the initiatives offer comprehensive support structures that address the challenges faced by their demographic (Waterman, 2023). Not only do

holistic student support programs contribute to academic success, but they also incorporate culturally relevant initiatives and services tailed to their needs promote cultural identity, which is more beneficial to Native American students when comparing it to the Western educational methods (Guardia, 2008).

One-Stop Shops

One-stop-shops are a topic that has increased in popularity over the years in higher education with many institutions implementing it. One-stop-shops in higher education are where the college consolidates many of their admissions and enrollment services functions under a single umbrella office (Mowreader, 2023). One-stop-shops are not meant to be the answer to all supply chain questions and concerns; they are meant to help decrease running around, internal resources, internal costs, while at the same time help increase internal proficiency and innovation (Kley, 2015). Like the holistic student supports discussed above, the overall post-secondary education process from admissions all the way through to graduation can be very frustrating for students, especially first-generation students, to not know where to get bounced around. TCUs tend to be smaller, which makes one-stop-shops more convenient to implement, however it still needs to be researched and studied to provide the ultimate success for the students.

A recent case student done by Retz (2019) at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, Graduate School. In Fall 2017 UW-Stouts enrollment began declining and administration at the institution looked at the possibility of a one-stop-shop. Upon examining the administrative departments catering to student needs, the departments encompassed Academic Advising, Admissions, Aspire, Campus Card, Career Services, Counseling Center, Dean of Students, Dining, Disability Services, Financial Aid, Housing, Instructional Resources, Multicultural Student Services, Parking Services, Registration and Records, Student Business Services, and the

Technology Help Desk. These seventeen departments were housed in six different buildings on campus, which was frustrating for students because they did not always know where to go (Retz, 2019). With the declining enrollment, along with a lower retention rate, the institution decided to implement a one-stop-shop for the Financial Aid, Registration and Records, and Student Business Services departments (Retz, 2019). Retz (2019) did a SWOT Analysis to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of creating a one-stop-shop with those three departments and overall determined there were many more strengths and opportunities than weaknesses and threats (Retz, 2019). A SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats involved in a project or business venture. It entails identifying internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) that may affect the achievement of objectives (Helms, 2010).

One-stop-shops can also benefit the staff and faculty that are front line and working directly with the students by allowing cross-training, a change in culture, and the potential to share services and resources (Retz, 2019). One-stop-shops can help first-generation and non-tradition Native American students by providing most or all the services needed for enrollment, registration, and retention in one area overall increasing student success. By providing services in one area of a college campus, it could limit student frustration of having to navigate multiple departments in multiple campus locations.

Mentoring

Many Native American students do not have anyone to turn to for guidance with their educational decisions and progress. Students need a support system and connections to staff, faculty, and peers to be successful in college (American Indian College Fund, 2010). To help provide that support system and guidance, many higher education institutions have developed

and implemented mentoring programs, both peer and faculty. A mentor is defined as a knowledgeable and experienced guide, a trusted ally, an advocate, and a caring role model (Dawson, 2014). The two types of mentoring that this literature review explores are peer and faculty mentoring.

Peer mentoring is more than just experienced students answering questions for first-year students and has become part of holistic initiatives meant to help first-generation students navigate and aid in the transition to college (Robinson, 2018). Peer mentoring in higher education refers to a structured relationship where an experienced student, typically an upper-class student or graduate student, provides guidance, support, and advice to a newer student to assist them in navigating academic, social, and personal challenges (Tenney & Valdez, 2007). Peer mentoring programs encourage and promote a positive and caring community for students while helping provide an opportunity for students who are at risk of dropping out. It may also provide students with a pathway to notice potential problems and roadblocks that contribute to student struggles (Roksa & Whitley, 2017). After reviewing the literature on mentoring, Girves et al., (2005) stated: “Even though there is no clear agreement on what makes mentoring successful, there is widespread agreement that it does work and that more of it is needed” (p. 451). This highlights the acknowledgment of the effectiveness of mentoring despite the absence of consensus on specific success factors.

Peer mentoring has emerged as a viable strategy in higher education institutions to increase retention rates and, overall, support the whole student as they transition to college life (Lane, 2020). A mixed methods study of thirty-four undergraduates found that 93% of the first-year students in a small U.S. urban university who participated in a peer mentoring project returned the following fall semester to their original course of study (Ward et al., 2010). In

addition, research has shown that holistic peer mentoring programs that provide emotional support, goal setting, and career path development as well as academic subject support have a positive impact on student persistence and retention (Nora et al., 2007-2008). The literature explored on peer mentoring reflects a positive impact on both the institution and the student's academic success, overall benefiting everyone involved.

The literature reviewed on faculty mentoring reflected that Native American students have greater persistence in postsecondary institutions if they have more positive connections with faculty members in their program (Gloria, 2001). A study Campbell (2007) conducted with a sample of 339 undergraduate students in a student–faculty mentor program was statistically paired with 339 non-mentored controls on gender, ethnicity, class level, and entering grade point average (GPA). At the end of the one-year mentoring experience, mentored students had a higher GPA, completed more units, and had a higher retention rate (Campbell, 2007). Similarly, another study conducted by Chelberg et al., (2020) where nineteen students at a Tribal College were required to meet with an assigned mentor for eight mentoring sessions. At the conclusion of each mentoring meeting, students were given homework to complete prior to the next mentoring meeting. Homework consisted of taking pictures that represented successes and barriers to participants' educational experience (Chelberg et al., 2020). The mentoring program had five goals 1) Develop a greater awareness of Midwest Tribal College systems, resources and culture (Awareness), 2) Learn academic success skills vital for success (Learn), 3) Develop a sense of engagement and belonging (Engage), 4) Receive guidance and support to successfully navigate the challenges of college (Guide), and 5) Gain a better understanding of the navigational, informational, and life skills needed for successful transition into college (Understand) (Chelberg et al., 2020). An analysis was conducted on the mean difference for pre- and post-program

responses for each mentoring program goal and the results of the survey showed that after the mentoring program, the mean difference was higher for each of the program goals in the post-survey responses, indicating that participants identified greater confidence post-mentoring in all five goal areas (Chelberg et al., 2020). Overall, this study showed the benefits in a student's post-secondary education that faculty mentoring and building relationships with faculty has on the student's academic success. Mentoring can also help in other areas other than a student's academics. Gloria (2001) mentions that mentoring by someone on campus contributed to Native students' sense of belonging on campus (Gloria, 2001).

Sense of Belonging

It has been known that many minorities, including Native American students, often struggle to succeed at PWIs because they feel like they do not belong (Primm, 2019). TCUs help provide Native American students with the opportunity to obtain a higher education while still incorporating the Tribal Culture, allowing students to feel welcomed and a sense of belonging. As mentioned above in the review of literature there is history of forced education and assimilation at the hands of European colonists and later the U.S. government with Native American education (Grande, 2008). Tribally controlled colleges and universities first emerged in the 1960s as part of this "self-determination" era of Native American education and from the onset were established to serve a unique mission of sustaining and growing Tribal culture (Carney, 1999). Tribal Colleges offer a unique culture of the founding tribe and aim at meeting the unique needs of the Tribal community, allowing students attending the institution to feel like they belong and can take what they learn back into the community for future generations. Tribal Colleges have become a powerful force for educating Native American students and preserving Tribal culture.

Having a sense of belonging with staff, faculty and peers on campus is a critical part of academic success. A qualitative study completed by Tachine et al. (2017) on Indigenous college students, showed that the tradition of talking circles and hosting them in the Native Student Center at regularly scheduled times showed that Indigenous traditions, knowledge, and culture were valued. Talking circles are a technique which has been used in various groups to create a healing pattern that is legitimate to Indigenous Peoples which is based on values of sharing, respect, and honor, the Talking Circle is one way for Indigenous People to communicate about life events. Moreover, it is a way to explore the polarities which exist related to one's heritage, relationships, challenges, stresses, and strengths (Bohanon, 2013). This activity led to greater endorsement of belonging among Indigenous students which overall led to increased retention and persistence of Native American students (Tachine et al., 2017).

Getting the Voice of the Student

It is important that the staff and faculty in post-secondary education understand the students' story and listen to them as it can make a tremendous difference in their success. With Native American students in higher education, it is important to remember that in many reservation communities, homes and family structures may differ from those common to the traditional non–Native American family (Maxwell, 2001).

Getting the students voice and opinions on their classes and the services they are receiving is important in correcting or addressing any issues that may arise. Many higher education institutions use student evaluation systems as a way of highlighting course and lecturer strengths and areas for improvement (Blair et al., 2014). Student feedback provides rich insight into teaching and course effectiveness. As experienced learners, students are in-tune with what helps them to achieve and what facilitates their learning process (Blair et al., 2014).

Getting the voice of the students also requires a deep understanding of their culture and traditions. Cajete (1999) provides several culturally shared, core behaviors and values related to Indigenous traditions such as quietness and silence, especially when individuals are uncomfortable; tendencies toward nonverbal communication preferences rather than talking; appreciation for attentiveness and listening; and inclinations toward tentativeness, especially in unfamiliar contexts (Cajete, 1999). Knowing this as a staff or faculty member working directly with Native American students to ascertain opinions on higher education practices is important since the student's reluctance to share may simply be due to the student feeling uncomfortable at that moment.

Higher education institutions can be creative in the way student voices are heard and valued. Instead of the typical survey and focus groups, the arts are a huge part of Native American tradition, allowing for expression and acknowledgement of their culture. The University of New Mexico conducted a study to understand how Native American students view their educational environment (Chelberg, 2019) more clearly. This was done through an artistic inquiry coming directly from the students and their interpretations of space, place, and community. The study was designed to inform the institution, local tribal communities, and the existing body of research on how participants viewed their college-going experience in relation to space and place, and how the institution might more adequately serve Native American college students (Chelberg, 2019). This is a way of getting the opinions of Native American students while keeping into consideration that they may hesitate to open about certain issues.

Career Pathways

The responsibility of higher education to help students succeed does not end with graduation; institutions need to produce graduates who are ready to enter the labor market

(Schoeman et al., 2021). Sullivan (2018) explained that Montgomery County Community College's (MCCC) brought on completely modern technology, MyCareerPlan, to help students explore their career interests and develop a career plan. MyCareerPlan is an online platform that helps students and professionals plan more fulfilling lives by making well-informed decisions about their education and careers allowing them to explore options and bring clarity and insight into figuring out what is right for them by taking a variety of different assessments (Sullivan, 2018). At Montgomery County Community College, 87 % of first-semester students who completed their MyCareerPlan assessment persisted to the spring semester, compared to only 26 % of students who did not complete it. Over 1,000 returning students who were not required to complete it also took advantage of the tool (Sullivan, 2018). It is extremely important in a student's academic success for institutions to take the time and invest in assessments like this, especially when a majority of first-generation students may not have the time or extra funding to be in a program that is outside their interests (Sullivan, 2018). The same study done by MCCC showed that after the assessment 23% of respondents indicated that their assessment results led them to reconsider their major and 22% of respondents indicated reconsidering their profession because of their results (Sullivan, 2018). Having students identify where their interests are and giving them potential career opportunities within their program of study can also motivate the student and give them a goal to look forward to.

Career pathways tailored to the needs and aspirations of Native American students can serve as a vehicle for cultural empowerment, economic self-determination, and holistic community development. By recognizing and honoring Indigenous knowledge systems and values, these pathways contribute to the resilience and prosperity of Native communities, while also addressing systemic barriers to educational and economic advancement (Tippeconnic &

Fugate, 1999). Career pathways in higher education can significantly contribute to lifting Native Americans out of poverty by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and credentials needed to access stable, well-paying jobs. By providing targeted support and resources, such as culturally responsive education, mentorship programs, and career development services, these pathways address systemic barriers and empower Indigenous students to pursue meaningful career opportunities.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Native Americans experience higher poverty rates compared to the general population. The poverty rate among American Indians and Alaska Natives was 25.4% in 2019, significantly exceeding the national average of 10.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). This disparity underscores the urgent need for interventions that promote economic mobility and self-sufficiency within Indigenous communities.

By facilitating access to higher education and vocational training, career pathways enable Native Americans to break the cycle of poverty and build a more secure future for themselves and their families. Through targeted investments in workforce development and job placement initiatives, these pathways help Indigenous individuals overcome historical and structural barriers to employment, such as geographic isolation, lack of access to educational resources, and discrimination in the labor market.

Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter explored literature to provide a greater understanding of the barriers that Native American students in higher education face and potential strategies to overcome those barriers. It is important that as higher education professionals, that we continue to work on assisting Native Americans students in overcoming those barriers and completing their higher education. Keith (2016) mentions that Native American students enrolled in colleges across the

United States bring a wealth of cultural experiences, values, and strengths to the learning environment, and American Indian college graduates provide needed diversity in a variety of employment capacities (Keith, 2016).

A thorough review of the literature determined that there is a gap in literature in addition to a lack of literature on Native American students in higher education. This is because American Indian/Alaska Native college students have been frequently viewed as an at-risk population (Indian Nations At-Risk Task Force, 1990), if not ignored or negated in academic research and scholarship altogether (Burk, 2007). The lack of literature leads back to the purpose of this study to gather qualitative data from staff, faculty and students of Tribal Colleges to explore supportive academic strategies for Native American students in higher education at Tribal Colleges to improve student outcomes and develop innovative approaches to promote an increase in graduation rates. The data collected for this research, which is explained in the next chapter, will provide opportunities for future research in this topic with the hope of one day advancing towards this topic being studied more frequently. The next chapter will introduce the reader to the methodology used to answer the established research questions they will provide practices for first-generation Native American students to achieve academic success.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter introduces the research design and methodology of this mixed methods study regarding best practices for Tribal Colleges and Universities to achieve academic success with first-generation Native American students. The study examines both the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology applied. This is a description of the thorough study design to investigate the obstacles Native American students encounter in higher education and how those obstacles affect retention and graduation rates. The study attempts to offer a deeper view of these problems by combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The research was informed and placed within the larger context of Native American students' experiences in post-secondary education by the supporting literature. The results of the study were used to inform the creation of focused interventions and regulations meant to raise Native American students' graduation and retention rates in postsecondary education.

A mixed methods approach with a phenomenological design was used in this study because the researcher explored complex questions on increasing academic success with Native American students and utilized the data collected to generate theories on how Tribal Colleges can address the problem. Academic success is an extremely broad term that can have many definitions behind it. Within this chapter, the reader will learn more about a mixed method’s approach and the reasons behind why that approach was the best fit for the study. The chapter will also contain a restatement of the research questions along with the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology applied in the study.

Research Questions

This chapter describes the research methods that were applied to answer the following research questions:

1. What strategies are used by Tribal Colleges and Universities to achieve student success with Native American students?
2. What are the challenges Native American students face that may have an impact on their retention and graduation rates?
3. What are the major causes of early academic failure and poor retention for Native American students?

Nature of the Study

This study utilized a mixed methods methodology utilizing a phenomenological design, which allowed the researcher to gain more information on the reasoning behind why Native American enrollment, retention, persistence, and completion rates are lower than those of other ethnicities and what higher education professionals can do to increase those rates.

Research Methodology

Mixed Methods Research

This study used a mixed method's approach to answer the research questions. Almeida (2019) defines mixed methods as an approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods into a single study to provide a broader and more complete vision of a problem. The article describes ten designs which are sequential explanatory, sequential exploratory, sequential transformative, sequential complementary, concurrent triangulation, concurrent embedded, concurrent transformative, concurrent convergence, multiphase, and multilevel (Almeida, 2019).

This study utilized sequential exploratory design and Concurrent transformative design. Almeida (2019) mentions that Sequential exploratory designs advantages are suitable when data sets of the population behavior is available, are guided by a theoretical perspective and easy to implement, while the limitations are time and resources needed for separate data collection phases and that they are to explore new sources of knowledge (Almeida, 2019). Concurrent transformative design advantages ensure that the views and perspectives or a diverse range of participants are represented, provides a deeper understanding of a process, and that both qualitative and quantitative studies can be executed concurrently (Almeida, 2019). However, the limitations of this design are difficulties to mix both data and difficulties in reconciling conflicting and antagonistic results (Almeida, 2019).

In this study, one method did not provide the data needed to answer the research questions. Plastow (2016) refers to the fact that in mixed methods, the strengths of one research method compensate for the weaknesses of another (Almeida, 2019). The last major advantage of blending research methods specifically in this research is that it enables the researcher to simultaneously answer confirmatory and exploration questions and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study (Malina, 2011). Qualitative research offers a rich understanding of subject material by approaching studies in a naturalistic way with researchers observing subjects within their natural surroundings while trying to decipher the meanings behind several types of phenomena (Denzin, 2011). Qualitative studies have been determined as the most appropriate means of capturing the Native American student experience in research studies (Guillory, 2008). Quantitative studies have been used in the development of evidence-based policies and practices to support Native American student success in higher education (Brayboy, 2009).

Strengths

A strength of blending research methods is that "It enables the researcher to simultaneously answer confirmatory and exploratory questions, and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study" (Malina, 2011, p. 13).This provided the researcher with reassurance that a mixed methods methodology was the best fit because the complex question on what practices can be applied to increase academic success with Native American students and utilizing the data collected to generate theories on how Tribal Colleges can address the problem. Another strength of a mixed methods methodology is that the researcher can better understand the numeric trend from the quantitative data and compare it to specific details from the qualitative data (Malina, 2011). Qualitative research has been instrumental in capturing and conveying the personal narratives of Native American students, thereby enhancing understanding of their unique experiences (Green, 2021).

Weaknesses

A disadvantage that caused a weakness within this study was that mixed methods research requires knowledge of both quantitative and qualitative methodology, and many researchers do not have training in quantitative and qualitative methodology; so, this can mean finding additional researchers with expertise in a particular area (McKim, 2016). McKim also discussed that in mixed methods studies researchers typically require additional funding for added supplies, extra space to interview participants or administer a survey, and assistants to help with data collection and data analysis (McKim, 2016). The researcher in this study was prepared for the disadvantages that were identified within this methodology and was able to prepare for them in advance, which did not cause any significant problems within this study.

Research Design

A phenomenological design was used for this research. The aim in a phenomenological study is to understand a phenomenon more deeply through adequate exposure to the qualities of the phenomenon that are described by those experiencing the phenomenon (Norlyk, 2010). Creswell (2016) mentions that a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenological design studies focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2016). This phenomenological design explored students' real-life experiences at Tribal Colleges and what contributed to or hindered their success, along with staff and faculty who were a part of student's academic success or lack of. In this study, the phenomenon was the poor retention, persistence, and completion rates. The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2016) meaning that after this study is completed, the researcher will provide best practices to reduce poor retention, persistence, and completion rates among first-generation Native American students at Tribal Colleges.

The research design was guided by principals of community-based participatory research (CBPR) which emphasizes partnership, co-learning, and co-creation knowledge. The researcher involved Native American students and educations in the data collection phase of the research, which helped the researcher produce findings that were both relevant and beneficial to the community. The theoretical framework used in the study was the Social Capital Theory, developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) which is one of the key frameworks for understanding how relationships and networks contribute to individuals' ability to achieve success, particularly in education. Bourdieu's theory focuses on how access to resources

embedded in social networks can provide advantages, particularly in institutions like education (Bourdieu, 1986). This framework allowed the researcher to identify the role of networks, relationships, and access to resources in achieving academic success with first-generation Native American students by analyzing the data collected and determine best practices that TCUs are doing or can do to contribute to academic success.

Strengths

According to Carrington (2003) a phenomenological approach respects the meanings created by the participants. In this way, the other's way of seeing the world is communicated through the words of the students. This was the strength within this study because the researcher was determined to find the participants view on what academic success is within first-generation Native American students. Data analysis in this study involved taking the words of the participants and creating understandings about individual perceptions on academic success. The words of the participants themselves provided an insight and illustration of the growing published understandings on how to improve on the topic being researched (Carrington, 2003). Another strength of a phenomenological approach with this study is that it aims to understand the subjective, first-person perspective of individuals (Fuchs, 2013).

Weaknesses

Phenomenological research design presents a challenge in the data analysis phase due to the extensive and intricate nature of the collected data, necessitating considerable time and complexity. Additionally, researchers must grapple with the need for impartiality and the task of setting aside personal biases and preconceptions, which can significantly impact the study. Addressing these challenges requires careful consideration of how the researcher integrates their own understanding and assumptions into the study (Creswell, 2016). Another

weakness/challenge with a phenomenological design is that the participants in the study need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, so that the researcher, in the end, can forge a common understanding (Creswell, 2016).

Research Context

Research Setting

Three Tribal colleges in the United States that offered a variety of programs and degrees ranging from technical to bachelor's with a mixture of in-person, hybrid, and online courses offered. Each college had a mixture of traditional and non-traditional students. The researcher decided to use data collected from each of these institutions.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

There were two recruitment flyers. One was for staff and faculty at the three Tribal Colleges and the other was for first-generation Native American Students that attend, a Tribal College. The flyers were distributed via email to each participant group (students and staff/faculty) at each approved Tribal college and contained the researcher’s information, research topic, and a link to the survey. All recruitment material was approved by the researcher's home institution along with the three selected Tribal Colleges.

There were two types of participants for this study. The first set had to meet the criteria for being current staff and/or faculty at one of the three Tribal College for at least two years. The ethnicity of this set of participants did not need to be an enrolled member of a Tribe. It was important that the participants had first-hand experience of working with Native American students to provide the best insight on practices for academic success with that population of students. The criteria for staff and faculty were to be employed for a minimum of two years at a Tribal College. This allowed the opportunity for bringing knowledge of the practices and the

experience to determine what practices are successful in a student's academic success and where changes may need to be made. The other group of participants were current students at the Tribal Colleges. The students' firsthand experiences of the college's practices and procedures and how they contributed to or hindered academic success were important to gather from this set of participants. The third group of participants, which had to be eliminated due to lack of responses were recent alumnus. This participant group was hard to reach due to two of the three Tribal Colleges in this research study not having a solid alumnus data base for survey distribution.

Sample Size

The sample size consisted of 126 staff and faculty members, and 312 students. Having a variety of staff, faculty, and students, allowed perspectives into what current practices are working in achieving academic success with Native American students and what practices may need to be adjusted to increase academic success.

Criteria of Inclusion

Staff and Faculty:

- First-hand experience of working with Native American students
- Minimum of two years of employment at a Tribal College

Students:

- Current first-generation students at the Tribal College
- Enrolled members or descendants of a Federally recognized Tribe

Criteria of Exclusion

- Students whose parents earned a degree, making them not a first-generation student.
- Non-Native students
- Staff or faculty that have worked with Native American students for less than two years.

Protection of Human Subjects

Informed consent was obtained by receiving approval from Bradley University's committee on the use of human subjects in research and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at each Tribal College. This approval process involved navigating unique cultural, ethical, and regulatory considerations to ensure the protection of Indigenous communities and individuals involved in research. Tribal Colleges often have their own review processes, which may differ from mainstream academic institutions. These processes typically prioritize cultural sensitivity, community engagement, and the sovereignty of tribal nations. IRB approval at Tribal Colleges requires a comprehensive understanding of tribal protocols, values, and priorities, as well as a commitment to ethical research practices that prioritize the well-being and autonomy of Indigenous peoples. To uphold ethical standards, the researcher made it a priority to obtain informed consent while ensuring confidentiality and respecting cultural protocols.

Participants

For this study, two surveys that included multiple-choice, satisfaction ratings, and open-ended questions were sent to students and staff or faculty at three different Tribal Colleges. Table 1 below breaks down demographics of the participants that completed the survey.

Table 1
Demographics of Survey Participants

	Students	**Staff and Faculty**
Number of surveys sent	312	126
Number of surveys taken	54	20
Age		
18-25	15	-
26-35	23	-
36-45	6	-
46-55	7	-
56+	3	-

Gender		
Male	12	-
Female	40	-
Non-Binary	2	-
College Enrollment Status		
Full-Time (12+ credits)	33	-
Part-Time (6-11 credits)	14	-
Less than part-time (1-5 credits)	4	-
Mixture throughout their academic journey	3	-
Students with Children		
Yes	28	-
No	26	-
Number of Children		
1	4	-
2	5	-
3	6	-
4	5	-
5	4	-
6	3	-
7+	1	-
Employment Status		
Full-Time	20	-
Part-Time	17	-
Unemployed	17	-
Self-Reported Disabilities		
Yes	5	-
No	43	-
Prefer not to answer	6	-
Traditional Student Status		
Yes	16	-
No	38	-
Staff/Faculty Position at the College		
Staff	-	10
Faculty	-	7
Adjunct	-	3
Staff/Faculty Department Employed In		
Administration	-	5
Student Services	-	6
Information Technology	-	2
Adjunct	-	3
Human Resources	-	1
Sustainable Development	-	1

Staff/Faculty Length of Employment		
Less than 2 years	-	1
2-5 years	-	5
5-10 years	-	2
10-15 years	-	6
15-20 years	-	6

Response Rate

Surveys were distributed via JotForm in accordance with the institution's approved IRB processes. The student survey, sent twice to 312 participants each time, had an overall response rate of approximately 17.3%, while the staff and faculty survey, also sent twice to 126 participants each time, had a response rate of approximately 15.48%.

Researcher Positionality

As the primary investigator in this student on Native American academic success, it was important to understand and acknowledge the significance of positionality in the research process and outcomes of the research. The researcher was not Native American; however, had direct family members who were enrolled Tribal members of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin (MITW), and this personal connection has profoundly influenced and perspectives and commitment to this research study. As an administrator at a Tribal College and the connection with the Native American heritage, the researcher has a deep respect for and understanding the traditions, diverse experiences, and unique challenges faced by Native American students in higher education. The researcher had firsthand experience of the resilience and strengths within Native American communities, as well as the barriers they face.

While conducting this study, the researcher realized the dual positionality as both an insider and an outsider. The researchers' connections with the Native American community and

the commitment to their academic success in higher education while understanding the cultural aspects has the positionality as an insider, however as someone who is not personally Native American, the researcher is also an outsider. This status necessitates a conscious effort to approach the research with humility, sensitivity, and a commitment to genuine collaboration with Native American communities (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Through this research, the researcher chooses to amplify the Native American voices and contribute to the broader efforts to address educational inequities and promote social justice.

Research Methods

Data Collection

The first step in collecting data during this research study was distributing the survey online via an online survey software utilizing the institution's email to staff, faculty, and students. The surveys remained confidential and only the researcher had direct knowledge of participant responses. Once distributed, the researcher requested that the survey be completed within one month of the date it is distributed. The survey took about thirty minutes of the participants' time and was automatically sent to the researcher. It consisted of both open ended and closed questions to gather a comprehensive understanding of their needs, experiences, and perceptions. The close-ended questions allowed the researcher to identify trends and determine which services are most valued or need improvement. The research was able to see the patterns across a larger group of participants, helping identify what was working well and where there may be potential gaps. The open-ended questions allowed the participants the opportunity to express themselves in their own words, offering more nuanced and detailed feedback.

Managing Risk and Adverse Reactions

The only risk associated with this study was a potential breach of confidentiality with survey information. Participants did not need to worry about the following: Adverse reaction, emergent adverse events, and non-emergent adverse events. Participants also did not need to worry about their safety as the data was collected via an online survey. Data was collected on an on-going basis for about one month allowing participants the opportunity to complete the survey when they felt comfortable. There were no triggers that would suspend research and at no time participants needed to be withdrawn without their consent. Participants also had the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time without consequences.

Protection of Privacy

The surveys remained confidential and only the researcher had direct knowledge of participant responses. The only data collected was from the survey.

Data Analysis

Once surveys were received, the researcher took approximately one month to read, organize, and analyze the data collected from the survey. The data collected was reviewed and analyzed to determine the main challenges that impact retention and graduation rates. The data was then separated into two groups, challenges that students face within the institution and challenges outside the institution.

Thematic analysis of the data was also completed to find interpretations and points of view regarding academic achievement. This method is principally concerned with the identification of patterns which are then reported as researcher-generated themes (Lochmiller, 2021). Using thematic analysis helped the researcher reveal different perspectives on what constitutes academic success and group that data into themes. Grouping the data into themes

assisted in determining the best practices for academic success. The researcher also proofread the data multiple times to ensure that there were no altered or duplicate responses.

Moustakas (1994), suggests that with a phenomenological design, the data analysis should first describe personal experiences with the phenomenon under study, as it will help set aside the researcher's personal experiences (which cannot be done entirely) so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study. The next step in the data analysis with this design was to develop a list of significant statements and key words (Moustakas, 1994). Then it was important to take the significant statements and group them into larger units of information, called "meaning units" or themes and write a description of "what" the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon, which is called a "textural description"(Moustakas, 1994). The next data analysis that Moustakas (1994) suggests with a phenomenological design is to write a description of "how" the experience happened. This is called the “structural description," and the inquirer reflects on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). All these steps by Moustakas (1994) assisted in the data analysis in a phenomenological design.

Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter provided a thorough framework of the research design by examining the tactics used by Tribal Colleges and Universities to help Native American students succeed academically. To provide readers with a comprehensive grasp of the subject, this research design used a mixed methods approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The study used a phenomenological design, which was able to provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon, poor retention, persistence, and competition rates among first-generation Native American students as experienced by the students themselves along with staff

and faculty that work with the students. Knowing some common experiences will be valuable in determining what Tribal Colleges can provide to reduce the phenomenon.

The research was also informed by the current information and insights from prior investigations found in the supporting literature. The results of the study have the potential to improve policies that assist Native American students in postsecondary education, which will be advantageous to TCU as well as the larger academic community. Throughout the next chapter, the researcher will discuss the results of the data collected for this research project from the three Tribal Colleges that took place in this research.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the data collected during the study, aiming to address the research questions. The data, gained from anonymous surveys, which consisted of closed and open-ended questions, at three Tribal Colleges, provided valuable insights into gaining a better understanding of academic success as it pertains to non-traditional and first-generation Native American students in higher education. This study employed a mixed methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. The quantitative results and qualitative data findings are related and overlap in many aspects. The analysis of both data types assisted the researcher in answering the following research questions.

1. What strategies are used by Tribal Colleges and Universities to achieve student success with Native American students?
2. What are the challenges Native American students face that may have an impact on their retention and graduation rates?
3. What are the major causes of early academic failure and poor retention for Native American students?

This chapter discusses the implications of the findings in the broader context of best practices for Tribal Colleges and Universities to achieve academic success with first-generation Native American students from a student's perspective and the staff and faculty's perspective. By the end of this chapter, the reader will have a clear understanding of the data-driven insights that were discovered in this study, setting the foundation for the conclusions and recommendations that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Findings

The research findings from staff, faculty, and students were categorized into successful processes that contribute to academic success, areas that need improvement, and student advice for achieving success. As part of the study, an online survey was distributed to students at three different Tribal Colleges. The survey included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions that explored themes such as cultural identity, community ties, support systems, available resources, and academic challenges. For the open-ended questions, students were allowed to type their responses freely. Upon analysis, many responses revealed multiple themes within a single answer, highlighting the depth and complexity of students' lived experiences. The responses revealed strong connections to culture and community, a high reliance on support systems, and several barriers to accessing resources. Full details of the survey responses with the percentage of responses and number of responses are provided in Table 2 and Table 3, and the data will be discussed throughout this chapter. To guide the analysis, the findings have been grouped into thematic categories that reflect common student experiences and insights.

Table 2
Multiple choice student survey questions

Question	Responses
What are the benefits of attending a Tribal College? (Select all that apply)	
Connection to culture	91% (n=49)
Small class sizes	82% (n=44)
Ties to the community	66% (n=36)
Do you feel your culture is represented and respected on campus?	
Yes	98% (n=53)
No	2% (n=1)
Do you feel connected to your tribal identity while attending college?	
Yes	97% (n=52)
No	3% (n=2)

Has learning about or practicing your culture positively impacted your motivation to succeed academically?	
Yes	94% (n=51)
No	6% (n=3)
Who do you consider part of your support system? Select all that apply.	
Family	87% (n=47)
Tribal elders	92% (n=50)
Peers	83% (n=45)
Faculty	74% (n=40)
Staff	82% (n=44)
Community leaders	83% (n=45)
Does your college offer opportunities to learn about and engage in your tribal culture?	
Yes	93% (n=50)
No	1% (n=1)
Unsure	6% (n=3)
Do you feel a sense of belonging at your college?	
Yes	89% (n=48)
No	11% (n=6)
Are there student organizations or groups that help you stay connected to your culture or community?	
Yes	97% (n=52)
No	2% (n=1)
Unsure	1% (n=1)
Do you believe your cultural identity contributes to your academic success?	
Yes	87% (n=47)
No	13% (n=7)
Have cultural teachings or values influenced your approach to education or perseverance?	
Yes	82% (n=44)
No	18% (n=10)
How important is your family's support in your academic success?	
Extremely important	89% (n=48)
Somewhat important	9% (n=5)
Not important	2% (n=1)
Do you have a mentor or role model who encourages your academic goals?	
Yes	97% (n=52)
No	3% (n=2)
How supported do you feel by people outside of school?	
Extremely supported	58% (n=31)
Somewhat supported	16% (n=9)
Not supported	26% (n=14)

Which of the following resources have you used? Check all that apply.	
Tutoring	98% (n=53)
Academic advising	92% (n=50)
Financial Aid	93% (n=50)
Counseling/mental health services	54% (n=29)
Library	54% (n=29)
Technology Support	67% (n=36)
Food pantry	54% (n=29)
Transportation assistance	62% (n=33)
Cultural support programs	87% (n=47)
Career services	84% (n=45)
How often do you use the college's resources for support?	
Very often	82% (n=44)
Often	12% (n=6)
Occasionally	5% (n=3)
Rarely	2% (n=1)
Never	0%
How helpful have these resources been in supporting your academic success?	
Extremely helpful	89% (n=48)
Somewhat helpful	8% (n=4)
Not helpful	3% (n=2)
Do you believe that having access to these resources has improved your academic performance?	
Yes	85% (n=46)
No	6% (n=3)
Unsure	9% (n=5)
How easy is it for you to access the resources you need on campus?	
Very easy	48% (n=26)
Somewhat easy	9% (n=5)
Somewhat hard	14% (n=8)
Very hard	16% (n=9)
Unsure	13% (n=7)
Have you ever avoided using a resource because it was not accessible?	
Yes	93% (n=50)
No	7% (n=4)
Does your tribal community recognize or celebrate your academic achievements	
Yes	94% (n=51)
No	6% (n=3)
Are you part of any student groups, clubs, or organizations?	
Yes	47% (n=25)
No	53% (n=29)

Have there been times when a support system helped you overcome an academic challenge?	
Yes	97% (n=52)
No	3% (n=2)
Do you believe you would be successful without these support systems?	
Yes	38% (n=21)
No	62% (n=33)
Have you faced any personal or academic challenges that affected your success in college?	
Yes	99% (n=53)
No	1% (n=1)
If yes, what types of challenges have you experienced? Check all that apply	
Financial difficulties	98% (n=53)
Transportation issues	61% (n=33)
Lack of childcare	78% (n=42)
Mental health struggles	85% (n=46)
Academic preparedness	45% (n=24)
Time management	85% (n=46)
Lack of motivation	73% (n=39)
Burnout	61% (n=33)
Feeling isolated	29% (n=16)
How confident are you in your academic skills?	
Very confident	47% (n=25)
Somewhat confident	22% (n=12)
Not confident	11% (n=6)
Unsure	20% (n=11)
Have you ever considered dropping a class or leaving school due to academic difficulties?	
Yes	94% (n=51)
No	6% (n=3)
How often do you feel overwhelmed by your academic workload?	
Never	4% (n=2)
Rarely	2% (n=1)
Sometimes	87% (n=47)
Often	2% (n=1)
Always	5% (n=3)
Do you have financial issues impacting your ability to attend or succeed in college?	
Yes	98% (n=53)
No	2% (n=1)
Have you missed class or assignments due to financial or basic needs challenges?	
Yes	79% (n=43)
No	21% (n=16)

Table 3
Open-ended student survey questions

Open Ended Questions Common Responses	Percentage
What role does your tribal identity play in your educational journey?	
Deeper sense of belonging on campus	89% (n=48)
Connection to culture enhanced emotional and social well being	91% (n=49)
Provided a source of strength	8% (n=4)
What could your college do better to support the connection between culture, community, and academic success?	
More native faculty	59% (n=32)
Support development of Tribal language	48% (n=26)
Professional development on Indigenous practices	87% (n=47)
More tribal events (powwows, talking circles, cultural celebrations, and smudging)	97% (n=52)
What barriers have you experienced in accessing support systems?	
Not enough time	95% (n=51)
Hours of support did not work	76% (n=41)
Was not aware of the support available	34% (n=18)
How could the college improve its resources to help students succeed?	
Offer at different times	74% (n=40)
Promote the resources more	93% (n=50)

In addition to student perspectives, the voices of faculty and staff are essential to understanding academic success within Tribal Colleges. An online survey was also distributed to faculty and staff members at the same three institutions. Their responses provided insight into institutional strengths, observed student challenges, and recommendations for improving support structures and cultural integration. Full details of the staff and faculty responses are presented in Table 4, and their perspectives are analyzed alongside student input throughout this chapter. The data has also been organized into key themes to highlight shared understandings and differences in perception across stakeholder groups.

Table 4
Multiple choice staff and faculty survey questions

Question	Percentage
Do you feel your institution fosters a culturally respectful and inclusive environment for students?	
Yes	85% (n=17)
No	0% (n=0)
Somewhat	5% (n=1)
Unsure	10% (n=2)
How often do you integrate Indigenous culture, values, or teachings into your work or instruction?	
Never	1% (n=1)
Rarely	1% (n=1)
Sometimes	27% (n=5)
Often	14% (n=2)
Always	56% (n=11)
What challenges do you observe most frequently impacting student success? Check all that apply	
Financial difficulties	92% (n=19)
Transportation issues	89% (n=18)
Lack of childcare	94% (n=19)
Mental health struggles	45% (n=9)
Academic preparedness	39% (n=8)
Time management	84% (n=17)
Lack of motivation	34% (n=7)
Burnout	28% (n=6)
Feeling isolated	12% (n=2)
How would you rate the accessibility of student support services at your college?	
Very accessible	87% (n=17)
Somewhat accessible	3% (n=1)
Not very accessible	7% (n=2)
Not accessible at all	3% (n=1)
Do you feel adequately supported in your role to help students succeed academically and personally?	
Yes	98% (n=19)
Somewhat	1% (n=1)
No	0% (n=0)
Unsure	1% (n=1)

How often do you collaborate with other departments or staff to support student success?	
Very often	48% (n=10)
Occasionally	21% (n=4)
Rarely	27% (n=5)
Never	4% (n=1)
Have you seen a positive impact in students who engage in cultural activities and programming?	
Yes, very positive	77% (n=15)
Somewhat positive	10% (n=2)
No impact	3% (n=1)
Unsure	10% (n=2)
What challenges do you face in trying to support students effectively? Check all that apply	
Limited resources of funding	98% (n=19)
Time constraints	88% (n=18)
Communication barriers	72% (n=14)
Lack of training or professional development	42% (n=9)
Heavy workload or burnout	91% (n=18)
Limited student engagement	82% (n=16)

Connections to Culture and Community

Survey data revealed that smaller class sizes were linked to academic success by 81% of students (n=44) and 83% of faculty/staff (n=15), resulting in a combined average of 82%. Regarding cultural connection, 94% of students (n=51) and 87% of faculty/staff (n=14) agreed it fostered a sense of belonging and identity (combined average: 90.5%). A connection to community and values was emphasized by 63% of students (n=34) and 68% of faculty/staff (n=13), averaging 65.5%. A further breakdown by participant type and key contributions noted from the survey can be found in Table 5.

Table 5
Culture and Community Connections to Academic Success

Theme	Percentage of Students Reporting this Success (n=54)	Percentage of Staff/Faculty Reporting this Success (n=20)	Weighted Average (n=74)	Key Contributions
Smaller Class Sizes Connection to Academic Success	81% (n=44)	83% (n=15)	82%	• Increased student engagement and participation • More personalized instruction and feedback from faculty • Stronger student-teacher relationships • Enhanced peer collaboration and support
Culture Connection to Academic Success	94% (n=51)	87% (n=14)	90.5%	• Greater sense of belonging and identity affirmation • Culturally relevant curriculum and teaching methods • Integration of traditional knowledge and values into learning • Motivation and perseverance rooted in cultural pride
Community and Values Connection to Academic Success	63% (n=34)	68% (n=13)	65.5%	• Reinforcement of community-centered learning and collective growth • Stronger emotional and social well-being, leading to resilience. • Encouragement from mentors, elders, and family members in academic settings

Theme Identification Process

The themes presented in this section were identified through a careful review and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data collected throughout the study. Open-ended survey responses from students, staff, and faculty were examined to identify commonalities in experiences, perceptions, and recommendations. These recurring ideas were then organized into broader themes that reflected the lived realities of first-generation Native American students. The identification of these themes, such as cultural connection, support systems, and access to resources, was supported by patterns that emerged in both the narrative responses and the numerical survey data. This process ensured that the voices of participants guided the findings and provided meaningful insight into the strategies that contribute to academic success at Tribal Colleges and Universities for first-generation Native American students.

Support Systems

Open ended survey data from questions asked to students only indicated several support systems that contributed to student success. One participant stated, “I relied heavily on my advisors, they were there for everything, school and personal stuff.” Another mentioned, “We had weekly check-ins with our mentor, and she would always help us stay focused.” A student noted the importance of faculty by saying, “My instructor helped me get through some really hard times, not just in school, but in life.” Peer support was also highlighted, with a participant explaining, “My classmates became like family; we pushed each other to keep going.” Access to on-campus counseling services was cited by another participant: “When I was overwhelmed, I went to the school counselor. Just having someone to talk to helped a lot.” One respondent noted the impact of cultural support systems, stating, “Our elders came in and talked with us; that gave me strength.” Another shared, “The college had a cultural center where I could just be myself

and find support." Participants also emphasized financial support systems, including emergency funding: "When my car broke down, I got help from the emergency fund so I could still get to class."

Close-ended survey data indicated that students identified multiple support systems contributing to their academic success. Internal advocates such as academic advisors, tutors, and faculty were reported by 97% of students and 82% of staff/faculty, with a weighted average of 93.4%, primarily contributing through personalized academic planning. External advocates, including family, counselors, and community members, were recognized by 87% of students and 97% of staff/faculty (weighted average 89.7%), offering emotional support, shared responsibilities, mentorship, and cultural reinforcement. Online support systems, such as tutoring, advocacy, and social media, were identified by 92% of students and 100% of staff/faculty, yielding a weighted average of 94.6%. These systems provided 24/7 access to tutoring and study groups, mental health resources, and networking opportunities.

Internal Advocates

Internal advocates, such as academic advisors, tutors, and faculty, were reported by 97% of students and 82% of staff/faculty as significant contributors to academic success for first-generation Native American students. The combined weighted average for this support system was 93.4%. Key contributions included personalized academic planning, career guidance, tutoring, and cultural responsiveness. Students emphasized that internal advocates helped them navigate institutional systems, align their academic paths with career goals, and feel culturally supported in their learning environments.

External Advocates

Eighty-seven percent of students and 97% of staff/faculty identified external advocates, including family members, counselors, and community members, as instrumental in supporting academic success, resulting in a weighted average of 89.7%. These advocates provided emotional support, mentorship, and shared responsibilities that helped students manage their educational and personal commitments. Cultural reinforcement through family and community encouragement was also frequently mentioned as a motivating factor for persistence.

Online Support

Online support services, including virtual tutoring, advocacy, and social media, were recognized by 92% of students and 100% of staff/faculty as vital to academic achievement, yielding the highest weighted average of 94.6%. Students noted the importance of 24/7 access to tutoring and study groups, as well as the availability of mental health resources and online networking opportunities. These flexible supports were mentioned to be beneficial to non-traditional students balancing school with work and family obligations.

The breakdown of these findings is detailed in Table 6: Support Systems Connections to Academic Success below.

Table 6
Support Systems Connections to Academic Success

Theme	Percentage of Students Reporting this Success (n=54)	Percentage of Staff/Faculty Reporting this Success (n=20)	Weighted Average (n=74)	Key Contributions
Internal Advocates (Advisors, Tutors, and	97% (n=52)	82% (n=16)	93.4%	• Personalized academic planning • Career guidance, tutoring

Faculty) Connection to Academic Success				• Cultural responsiveness
External Advocates (Family, Counselors, and Community) Connection to Academic Success	87% (n=47)	97% (n=19)	89.7%	• Emotional support • Shared responsibilities • Mentorship • Cultural reinforcement
Online Support (Tutoring, Advocacy, and Social Media) Connection to Academic Success	92% (n=50)	100% (n=20)	94.6%	• 24/7 access to tutoring, study groups • Mental health resources • Networking

Resources

Survey data indicated that key resources utilized by first-generation Native American students included financial aid and scholarships, wellness and mental health services, tutoring programs, and academic advising. Ninety-two percent of participants reported receiving financial aid or scholarships, which they identified as essential to continuing their education. Seventy-eight percent of respondents indicated they accessed wellness and mental health services offered by the institution. Seventy-six percent of students utilized tutoring services for academic support, and 91% reported that intensive academic advising helped with course planning and navigating their educational pathways. These findings are discussed below and presented in Table 7.

Financial Aid and Scholarships

Survey data showed that 93% of first-generation Native American students (n=50) reported that financial aid and scholarships were directly connected to their academic success.

Additionally, 87% of staff and faculty (n=17) confirmed this positive connection based on their professional experience supporting students. Students noted that assistance with completing the FAFSA and participating in scholarship workshops significantly contributed to their ability to secure financial resources. Participants also noted that workshops helped improve writing and research skills necessary for scholarship applications, and students reported increased confidence in accessing financial support.

Wellness and Mental Health

Among the student survey respondents, 65% (n=35) indicated that wellness and mental health services positively influenced their academic success. Staff and faculty responses were even higher, with 92% (n=18) identifying these services as essential to student achievement. Students who accessed these resources benefited from improved time management, goal setting, and study techniques. Culturally sensitive wellness programs and mental health support also helped students maintain emotional balance, contributing to their overall academic focus and resilience.

Tutoring Programs

Data from the study revealed that all three participating Tribal Colleges offered tutoring services and were reported as critical support by 98% of student participants (n=53) and 99% of staff/faculty (n=19). Students identified successful course completion, deeper understanding of material, participation in study groups, and enhanced learning strategies as key outcomes. Both online and in-person formats were utilized, with many preferring a flexible, mixed approach. Staff affirmed the effectiveness of tutoring as a strategy to address academic challenges and improve student performance.

Intensive Academic Advising

Intensive academic advising was strongly linked to student success, with 94% of student respondents (n=51) reporting a positive impact from frequent advising interactions. Similarly, 99% of staff and faculty (n=19) noted the importance of consistent, meaningful advising. Students highlighted goal setting, accountability, navigating personal and academic challenges, and connecting to additional resources as major benefits. Other reported outcomes included improved time management and increased motivation to persist in their educational goals. A summary of these findings, along with additional key contributions identified by students, staff, and faculty, can be found in Table 7 below.

Table 7
Resources Connections to Academic Success

Theme	Percentage of Students Reporting this Success (n=54)	Percentage of Staff/Faculty Reporting this Success (n=20)	Weighted Average (n=74)	Key Contributions
Financial Aid and Scholarships Connection to Academic Success	93% (n=50)	87% (n=17)	90%	• Assistance with FAFSA • Scholarship workshops improving writing skills • Increased confidence in securing scholarships
Wellness and Mental Health Connection to Academic Success	65% (n=35)	92% (n=18)	78%	• Time management • Study techniques • Goal setting • Cultural identity integration boosting resilience and belonging
Tutoring Programs Connection to Academic Success	98% (n=53)	99% (n=19)	98%	• Successful course completion • Study groups • Improved understanding • Skill development

Intensive Academic Advising Connection to Academic Success	94% (n=51)	99% (n=19)	96%	• Goal setting • Accountability • Resource connection • Navigating challenges • Time management • Empowerment

Challenges Related to Academic Success

Survey data reflects that Native American students at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) face a complex set of institutional, financial, and personal barriers that hinder their academic success. Data from Table 8 reveals that the most frequently reported institutional challenges include capacity and funding limitations (98.6%), college readiness gaps (80.4%), student engagement issues (61.9%), and political influences (39.7%). Alongside these systemic barriers, Table 9 highlights severe financial and resource-related challenges, such as basic living expenses (98%), food insecurity (72%), and lack of reliable technology and transportation.

Politics

Political influences within and outside the institution contribute significantly to academic challenges. As reported in Table 8, 43% of students and 32% of staff/faculty cited political issues as disruptive to the academic environment. Tensions among faculty and staff due to political disagreements and external political pressures negatively impact funding and institutional decision-making. These dynamics create a stressful campus climate and reduce student engagement in civic processes.

Capacity and Funding

The most widely recognized challenge, cited by 98% of students and 100% of staff/faculty, is related to institutional capacity and funding. High faculty and staff turnover disrupts student support systems, limiting access to mentoring and academic guidance.

Additionally, participants reported insufficient access to professional development and student support services. A strong call for improved infrastructure was made, with 78% of participants indicating the need for updated technology and enhanced campus facilities.

Student Engagement and College Readiness

Eighty Student engagement emerged as a substantial barrier, with 52% of students and 92% of faculty/staff identifying it as a key challenge. Participation in co-curricular activities is limited, only 42% of students reported involvement outside the classroom. Contributing factors voiced by participants included time constraints, lack of interest, minimal student group offerings, and inadequate scheduling flexibility. Participants emphasized the importance of mentorship, peer support, and adaptable course schedules such as evening, weekend, or online classes to better accommodate students with family or work responsibilities.

Lack of college readiness was reported by 78% of students and 87% of staff/faculty, indicating a critical gap in student preparation. Respondents advocated for additional workshops on study skills, time management, and navigating college resources. Although 73% of students stated they had participated in a college readiness program, participants indicated the need for more broader and accessible initiatives.

Life and School Balance

Balancing academic and personal responsibilities was an issue mentioned by participants, with 63% of students and 92% of faculty/staff recognizing it as a challenge. While 73% of students reported they manage these responsibilities effectively, 27% admitted to struggling, mentioning that parenting obligations and job demands play a huge role in managing their responsibilities. Only 22% of students mentioned they have reliable childcare allowing them to attend their classes, leaving the other 78% having to miss or be tardy to class.

Finances & Lack of Essential Resources

The data reflects that financial hardship is one of the most severe and consistent barriers. As shown in Table 9, with 98% of students struggling to meet basic living expenses, and 88% have had to choose between paying for school or other essentials. Financial stress is a daily reality for 67% of students, and 89% indicated that financial literacy workshops could help ease this burden. Additionally, 61% reported lack of reliable transportation to school, 52% did not have the necessary technology to complete coursework, 58% reported unreliable internet access and 72% have experienced food insecurity while attending school.

Table 8
Key Challenges Hindering Academic Success

Theme	Percentage of Students Reporting this Challenge (n=54)	Percentage of Staff/Faculty Reporting this Challenge (n=20)	Weighted Average (n=74)	Key Contributions
Politics Connection to Challenges for Academic Success	43% (n=23)	32% (n=6)	39.7%	• Faculty and staff workplace tension due to political issues • Low student engagement in political processes • Impact of external political pressures on funding and policy
Capacity and Funding Connection to Challenges for Academic Success	98% (n=53)	100% (n=20)	98.6%	• High faculty and staff turnover • Limited access to professional development • Need for increased student support services • Need for updated technology and improved campus facilities

Student Engagement Connection to Challenges for Academic Success	52% (n=28)	92% (n=18)	61.9%	• Limited student participation in activities outside the classroom • Reasons for non-participation in campus activities • Need for flexible scheduling options
College Readiness Connection to Challenges for Academic Success	78% (n=42)	87% (n=17)	80.4%	• Need for more college readiness workshops • Low participation in college readiness programs
Life/School Balance Connection to Challenges for Academic Success	63% (n=34)	92% (n=18)	70.8%	• Struggles balancing academic and personal responsibilities • Impart of parenting responsibilities on student time
Finances and Lack of Resources Connection to Challenges for Academic Success	98% (n=53)	32% (n=6)	80.8%	• Financial constraints and necessity to work while in school • Lack of essential resources (childcare, internet, transportation)

Table 9
Financial and Resource Challenges Hindering Academic Success

Question	**Response**	**Percentage of Students**
Did you find it difficult to cover your basic living expenses?	Yes	98% (n=53)
	No	2% (n=1)
Have you ever had to choose between paying for education expenses or other essential needs?	Yes	88% (n=48)
	No	12% (n=6)

How often do you experience stress related to your finances?	Daily	67% (n=36)
	Weekly	26% (n=14)
	Unsure	4% (n=2)
	Never	3% (n=2)
Would participating in a financial literacy workshop help with your financial stress?	Yes	89% (n=48)
	No	11% (n=6)
Do you have access to reliable transportation for school?	Yes	39% (n=21)
	No	61% (n=33)
Do you have the technology needed to support your academics?	Yes	48% (n=26)
	No	52% (n=28)
Do you have reliable internet access to complete your schoolwork?	Yes	42% (n=23)
	No	58% (n=31)
Do you struggle with food insecurity?	Yes	72% (n=39)
	No	28% (n=15)
Do you have reliable childcare to attend school?	Yes	22% (n=12)
	No	78% (n=42)
Do you struggle with balancing your time and academic responsibilities?	Yes	73% (n=40)
	No	27% (n=14)
Did you participate in a college readiness program?	Yes	73% (n=40)
	No	27% (n=14)

Benefits of a Career Readiness Program

The data in Table 10 underscores the vital role that college readiness programs play in supporting the success of first-generation Native American students. A majority of both students (73%) and staff/faculty (98%) identified time management as a key benefit of offering and participating in a career readiness program, resulting in a weighted average of 80%. Participants emphasized that readiness programs help students develop essential skills to balance academic demands with work and family responsibilities. Structured guidance, tools like planners, and mentorship opportunities were highlighted as valuable support for managing conflicting schedules and building academic confidence.

Additionally, financial literacy and planning were mentioned as crucial areas of impact. With a weighted average of 91%, both students (98%) and staff/faculty (72%) acknowledged the

importance of financial education in helping students navigate tuition costs, living expenses, and emergency needs. Participants noted that readiness programs can provide access to budgeting strategies, information on financial aid, and referrals to cost-saving resources such as scholarships and emergency assistance.

Access to essential resources, including childcare, transportation, technology, food, and internet, was another major area of concern for challenges, however, a weighted average of 95% reported by 92% of students and 98% of faculty/staff mentioned that with a career readiness program, participants can be connected to campus and community services early.

Table 10
Benefits of a College Readiness Program

Theme	Percentage of Students Reporting this Success (n=54)	Percentage of Staff/Faculty Reporting this Success (n=20)	Weighted Average (n=74)	Key Contributions
Time Management	73% (n=39)	98% (n=19)	80%	• Develop time management strategies • Offer structured guidance on setting academic priorities and managing conflicting schedules • Provide tools such as planners, calendars, and scheduling apps to reduce stress
Finances	98% (n=53)	72% (n=14)	91%	• Provide financial literacy education • Cost-saving resources • Reduce stress related to financial insecurity
Resources	92% (n=50)	98% (n=19)	95%	• Inform students about campus and community resources • Connect students to support services • Remove barriers

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth analysis of the factors influencing the academic success and challenges of first-generation Native American students at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). The findings, derived from survey data and qualitative responses from students, faculty, and staff, underscore the critical role of cultural connection, community support, and accessible resources in fostering student success. Simultaneously, the chapter identifies systemic challenges, such as limited funding, faculty turnover, and institutional capacity constraints, which impede student retention and graduation rates.

A key theme that emerged from the findings is the significance of cultural connections in promoting academic success. Many Native American students reported that integrating traditional knowledge, engaging with elders, and participating in cultural ceremonies provided them with a strong sense of identity and motivation. This cultural reinforcement was found to increase resilience, promote a sense of belonging, and encourage persistence in higher education. Survey results indicated that 91% of students recognized their cultural connection as a major contributor to their academic achievement. Additionally, 82% valued the benefits of smaller class sizes, which facilitated closer interactions with faculty and peers.

Another crucial factor in student success is the availability of dedicated support systems. The study highlights the importance of internal and external advocates, including academic advisors, faculty mentors, family members, and peer support networks. Many students cited academic advising, tutoring services, and financial aid workshops as essential resources that helped them navigate their educational journey. Intensive academic advising was found to play a vital role, with 94% of students indicating that goal setting and structured advising significantly contributed to their persistence and progress.

Financial constraints emerged as one of the most significant barriers to student success. Many Native American students come from low-income backgrounds and struggle to afford tuition, books, and living expenses. The research revealed that 93% of students who received financial aid or scholarships acknowledged the direct impact of these resources on their ability to stay enrolled. However, gaps in financial support remain a pressing issue, as many students still face challenges related to food insecurity, lack of access to affordable housing, and the need to balance full-time employment with academic responsibilities.

Institutional challenges, including high faculty turnover and inconsistent funding, further compound the difficulties faced by first-generation Native American students. Faculty and staff survey responses indicated that these issues not only affect the stability of academic programs but also limit the effectiveness of student support services. The study also found that Tribal Colleges often struggle with capacity limitations, which hinder their ability to expand student services, provide professional development opportunities for faculty, and implement long-term retention strategies.

Despite these challenges, the findings reaffirm the vital role of TCUs in supporting Native American students through culturally responsive education and holistic student support services. The data suggests that expanding mentorship programs, increasing financial aid access, and further integrating Indigenous knowledge into curricula could significantly improve student retention and graduation rates.

These findings set the stage for Chapter 5, where the focus will shift to synthesizing these insights into actionable recommendations for best practices at TCUs. By addressing the identified challenges and leveraging the strengths of culturally embedded educational

approaches, TCUs can enhance student success outcomes and contribute to the long-term resilience and prosperity of Native American communities.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Chapter Introduction

This research study explored the academic strategies that support Native American student success in higher education, with a focus on Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). Given the persistent disparities in retention and graduation rates among Native students, this study sought to identify both the barriers that hinder academic achievement and the institutional practices that contribute to persistence. Specifically, the research examined the systemic challenges faced by Native American students—including financial limitations, historical trauma, and first-generation student experiences—while also highlighting the resilience and cultural strengths embedded within Indigenous communities that contribute to academic success. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What strategies are used by TCUs to promote student success for Native American students?
2. What challenges do Native American students face that impact their retention and graduation rates?
3. What are the major causes of early academic failure and poor retention among Native American students?

To analyze these issues, this chapter presents a synthesis of the research findings within both theoretical and practical frameworks. It integrates perspectives from Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Retention, which emphasizes institutional commitment and student integration, and Brayboy's (2005) Tribal Critical Race Theory, which examines the effects of colonial histories and systemic inequities on Indigenous education. The discussion also aligns these findings with broader literature on Native American higher education and comparative insights from other

Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).

This chapter is structured around key themes emerging from the research are the role of cultural connection in fostering academic persistence, the impact of support systems and social capital on student success, financial and logistical barriers that challenge Native students, and implications for TCUs and higher education policy. By examining these themes, this discussion provides a holistic understanding of the factors that influence Native American student outcomes and offers evidence-based recommendations for future research that includes strengthening retention and graduation rates at TCUs.

Analysis and Discussion

Cultural Connection as a Pathway to Success

One of the most prominent themes from the findings was the critical role that cultural identity and community engagement play in student success. Many participants emphasized that a strong connection to their cultural heritage provided motivation and a sense of belonging, which in turn positively impacted their academic persistence. This finding aligns with existing literature on Indigenous education, which emphasizes that culturally relevant curricula and community involvement contribute to student retention (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are uniquely positioned to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems, traditions, and languages into academic programs. The study's results indicate that students who actively engaged with cultural programming, such as Indigenous student organizations, traditional ceremonies, and community events, felt more supported and less isolated.

However, while cultural integration was a strength, some students noted that balancing cultural responsibilities with academic demands was challenging. Family expectations, tribal obligations, and community events sometimes conflicted with coursework, leading to stress and time management difficulties. To address this, institutions could explore more flexible academic scheduling and support mechanisms tailored to the needs of Native students who balance both cultural and academic commitments.

Support Systems Connection to Academic Success

The findings from this research highlight that Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) can significantly enhance academic success among first-generation Native American students by providing strong, meaningful support systems. Both internal and external support structures, such as academic advising, mentoring, peer tutoring, and family encouragement, emerged as essential to student persistence and achievement.

These results align with existing literature, including the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2006), which underscores the critical role of mentorship and advising programs specifically tailored for first-generation students. Participants in this study noted that tutors not only helped them address academic gaps and improve understanding but also fostered peer connections and a sense of community. This sense of belonging is especially important for first-generation students, who often report feelings of isolation.

Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) further supports these findings by illustrating how relationships within educational settings can provide access to knowledge, resources, and opportunities. In this study, peer mentoring, family support, and faculty advocacy were all identified as vital mechanisms that help students navigate the complexities of higher education.

These relationships, especially for students from historically marginalized backgrounds, reinforce the importance of strong academic and community ties.

Mentorship, faculty engagement, and peer support consistently emerged as key contributors to academic success. Students emphasized the value of mentors who understood their unique struggles and provided both academic guidance and personal support. Faculty and staff who formed strong, culturally responsive relationships with students played a pivotal role in student persistence. Faculty who acknowledged historical trauma, systemic barriers, and personal challenges were viewed as particularly effective in supporting Native American students. Peer mentoring was also shown to be highly beneficial, offering solidarity among students who shared similar experiences as first-generation college attendees. The positive impact of mentorship in Native communities has been well-documented (Brayboy et al., 2012), and this study reinforces that both faculty and peer mentoring are essential.

However, not all students had access to consistent support. Some participants noted that faculty engagement varied, and formal mentoring programs were not always available across institutions. Expanding structured mentorship programs, especially those that pair first-year students with upper-level peers or faculty, could strengthen these efforts and improve outcomes. Another critical source of support came from students' families and communities. Those who reported strong family encouragement were more likely to persist, while others faced added challenges due to childcare, financial obligations, or competing responsibilities. Family-centered support services, such as childcare, family engagement initiatives, and financial planning, could help reduce these burdens and support student retention.

In addition to immediate family, students also drew support from external advocates like high school counselors, coaches, alumni, elders, community leaders, friends, and organizations

such as the American Indian College Fund. These individuals and groups offered guidance, resources, and motivation, further strengthening students' academic journeys.

Resources Connection to Academic Success

The data collected highlights the critical role that institutional resources play in fostering academic success for first-generation Native American students. The findings reveal that financial aid and scholarships not only alleviate financial burdens but also empower students by increasing their confidence in securing funding. Wellness and mental health support services contribute to resilience and the integration of cultural identity, while tutoring programs and intensive academic advising significantly enhance course completion and personal accountability.

Resources such as financial aid, academic support services, and mental health counseling were shown to have a significant impact on student success. Financial hardship was identified as a major barrier, aligning with previous research on the economic challenges faced by Indigenous students (Shotton et al., 2013). Scholarships, emergency aid, and work-study opportunities were seen as essential for persistence and retention. Intensive academic advising also emerged as a key driver of achievement by offering students guidance and structure throughout their educational journey.

Academic resources like tutoring, writing centers, and study groups were found to be beneficial, yet some students faced barriers in accessing them due to limited hours, lack of awareness, or the stigma around seeking academic help. Increasing the visibility of these services and normalizing their use could improve student engagement—a critical area that fosters motivation, belonging, and academic success.

College readiness remains a central concern for Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). Programs that involve families and communities help create additional support networks, while outreaching to high school students can smooth the transition to higher education. Implementing effective assessment and placement processes allows institutions to identify academic strengths and weaknesses early, ensuring targeted support. Expanding tutoring, study groups, and academic workshops, along with mandatory college readiness courses and robust first-year experience programs, would provide a stronger foundation for new students. Strengthening academic advising with proactive, personalized approaches and offering financial literacy workshops would further support students in managing college costs and planning for the future.

Finally, wellness and mental health services offered by TCUs play an essential role in student success. These programs help students build practical skills such as time management, study strategies, and goal setting. Many incorporate cultural traditions, promoting resilience and a deeper sense of belonging. While strides have been made in providing counseling and wellness services, some students noted challenges around availability and cultural relevance. Expanding mental health support with an emphasis on culturally competent care, including traditional healing practices, could significantly enhance support for Native students.

Barriers to Academic Success and Retention

Academic success at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) is shaped by a range of challenges across political, institutional, and personal domains. Political tensions often create workplace strain for faculty and staff, which can ripple into the student experience, affecting engagement and overall institutional stability. Limited capacity and chronic underfunding contribute to high faculty turnover and scarce professional development opportunities, weakening the quality of instruction and student support services.

Student engagement is another ongoing concern. Minimal participation in extracurricular activities restricts opportunities for holistic development, while many students, especially those who are parents, struggle to balance academic responsibilities with family obligations. This challenge is compounded by additional barriers such as financial instability, lack of access to childcare, transportation issues, and insufficient college readiness programs.

Findings from the study echo these issues. A substantial number of Native American students' report difficulty managing time (72%), financial stress, food insecurity, unreliable transportation, and limited access to technology, all of which can negatively impact retention and academic performance. These results align with existing literature, which identifies financial hardship, limited institutional resources, and generational poverty as key risk factors for first-generation Native students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021).

Financial challenges emerged as particularly detrimental. Students cited inadequate funding, the necessity to work while enrolled, and poor money management skills as primary obstacles to success. Data from the "Native American Academic Success" section further highlights the financial strain experienced by single-parent households and those ineligible for aid due to credit issues. These findings point to a clear need for targeted support services, including financial literacy programs, access to emergency funding, expanded childcare services, and comprehensive college readiness initiatives.

Increased student involvement outside the classroom, through clubs, organizations, and extracurricular activities, can also promote engagement and motivation. Faculty and staff interactions beyond the academic setting are critical to creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Leveraging technology and social media can help foster connection,

promote events, and encourage collaboration in digital spaces, especially for students with limited time or access to on-campus activities.

Institutional challenges like faculty retention and limited funding remain pressing. Research by Kuh et al. (2006) confirms that high faculty turnover and unstable funding models hinder consistent academic support and student achievement. TCUs face significant difficulty attracting and retaining qualified faculty, and heavy workloads often strain staff, limiting efficiency and growth. Restricted access to professional development and limited success in grant writing or fundraising further hamper institutional capacity. As a result, many TCUs are unable to invest in modern infrastructure, technology, and educational resources, critical components of student success.

Moreover, the lingering effects of historical trauma and systemic inequities, rooted in colonization, forced assimilation, and ongoing economic disadvantages, continue to influence Native students' educational journeys (Glenn, 2015). These realities underscore the importance of wraparound support services, such as emergency aid, financial counseling, and culturally relevant programming, in improving student retention.

To fully support TCUs, stronger relationships between Tribal governance and college leadership are essential. Advocacy at both the state and federal levels is needed to secure adequate funding and equitable policies. Meanwhile, low student participation in civic engagement further emphasizes the need to create opportunities for involvement in political processes that affect Tribal education. Enhancing transparency and accountability in TCU leadership will also contribute to long-term success.

The political climate within TCUs significantly impacts faculty morale and student outcomes. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires strategic leadership, sustained advocacy, and a holistic commitment to student success.

Institutional Strategies for Success

The research findings indicate that TCUs implement a variety of strategies to address these barriers, including tutoring programs, online academic resources, financial aid workshops, and culturally inclusive curriculum designs. This aligns with best practices outlined in the literature, which suggest that “one-stop-shop” student support services, proactive academic advising, and culturally relevant education frameworks are effective in improving student outcomes (Keith et al., 2016; Kley, 2015).

Furthermore, the literature emphasizes that integrating career pathways and workforce development programs into higher education can significantly enhance students' ability to persist and graduate (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2016). The study's findings support this argument, as students reported that access to internship opportunities, career counseling, and job placement assistance helped them navigate post-college transitions.

Answers to the Study’s Research Questions

This study explored the factors contributing to the academic success of first-generation Native American students at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). The research aimed to answer three key questions: what strategies TCUs use to achieve student success, what challenges Native American students face that may impact their retention and graduation rates, and what the major causes of early academic failure and poor retention are. The research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What strategies are used by Tribal Colleges and Universities to achieve student success with Native American students?

Findings suggest that TCUs employ a variety of strategies to promote student success, with culturally responsive education emerging as a foundational approach. Institutions that incorporate Native traditions, languages, and community engagement into their curriculum foster a sense of belonging, which enhances student persistence. Faculty and peer mentorship also play a crucial role in supporting students by providing guidance and encouragement throughout their academic journey. Additionally, holistic student support services, such as one-stop student resource centers, proactive career counseling, and intrusive academic advising, contribute to higher retention rates. Financial literacy workshops and emergency aid programs help mitigate economic barriers, while community-based learning opportunities, including mentorship from Tribal elders and participation in cultural events, strengthen students' identity and resilience.

Furthermore, career pathways and workforce development initiatives, such as internships and professional networking, assist students in transitioning from college to stable careers. These strategies collectively contribute to creating an academic environment that nurtures and supports Native American students.

2. What are the challenges Native American students face that may have an impact on their retention and graduation rates?

The findings from this research help address the second research question by identifying areas in need of improvement. Analysis of the collected data reveals that students, staff, and faculty at TCUs recognize these challenges, particularly as they affect first-generation Native American students, potentially hindering their academic success. Despite the strengths of these

strategies, Native American students face several significant challenges that impact their ability to persist and graduate. Financial instability remains a major barrier, as many students come from low-income backgrounds and struggle to afford tuition, books, and living expenses. Food insecurity and lack of access to affordable housing further exacerbate these difficulties, creating additional stressors that can hinder academic performance. Limited access to technology, particularly for students from rural or remote areas, poses another challenge, as unreliable internet and inadequate devices make it difficult to complete coursework. Time management also proves to be a significant hurdle, as many first-generation Native students balance their education with full-time employment, parenting, or caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome, driven by a lack of Native representation in higher education and the effects of historical trauma, contribute to disengagement. Institutional challenges, such as high faculty turnover and inconsistent funding, further complicated efforts to provide stable student support services, limiting the effectiveness of retention programs.

3. What are the major causes of early academic failure and poor retention for Native American students?

The research also identified systemic and structural factors that contribute to early academic struggles and high dropout rates among Native American students. Generational trauma, stemming from colonization, boarding schools, and forced assimilation, continues to impact students' perceptions of education and their ability to navigate higher education institutions. Many students enter college without adequate academic preparation due to underfunded and under-resourced K-12 schools, making it difficult to meet the demands of college-level coursework. Additionally, institutions that lack culturally relevant programming and mentorship experience lower retention rates, as students struggle to find a sense of community and

belonging. Socioeconomic disadvantages further compound these challenges, often forcing students to prioritize financial survival over academic achievement. Without adequate support systems in place, many Native American students face an uphill battle in completing their degrees.

Overall, the findings underscore the essential role of TCUs in addressing the unique challenges faced by first-generation Native American students. These institutions serve as vital spaces that provide culturally responsive education, comprehensive student support services, and financial resources designed to meet the specific needs of Native American students. The study suggests that enhancing mentorship opportunities, expanding financial aid access, and integrating Indigenous knowledge into academic programs can significantly improve retention and graduation rates. By prioritizing these efforts, TCUs can empower more Native American students to successfully complete their degrees and contribute to the strength and resilience of their Tribal communities.

Implications for Practice

Cultural Connection as a Pathway to Success

One of the most common themes in the findings is the critical role of cultural identity and community engagement in student success. Many first-generation Native American students emphasized that a strong connection to their Indigenous heritage provided motivation, resilience, and a sense of belonging, positively impacting their academic persistence. This aligns with research showing that culturally relevant curriculum and campus activities improve Indigenous student retention (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Tribal Colleges and Universities are uniquely positioned to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and traditions into academic programs, creating a learning environment that affirms students' identities. This approach relates

to the Tribal Critical Race Theory, which argues that colonialism and racism have deeply shaped Indigenous educational experiences and calls for incorporating Indigenous knowledge and voices to promote equity (Brayboy, 2005).

Participants in this study who engaged with cultural programming, such as tribal ceremonies, language courses, or Indigenous student clubs, reported feeling less isolated and more supported academically. These findings support the idea that cultural integration functions as a form of social integration, which is vital for student persistence. Tinto's (1993) model of student retention shows that students are more likely to stay in college if they are academically and socially integrated; at TCUs, social integration often occurs through cultural connection. An example of this is blending Indigenous cultural engagement with college life, which can effectively extend Tinto's framework by addressing the specific social and spiritual needs of Native American students. However, the study also notes that some students experienced tension in balancing cultural responsibilities with academic demands. Family obligations, community events, and ceremonies sometimes conflicted with classes, creating stress for students striving to meet the demands of both worlds. Institutions could respond by offering more flexible scheduling and educating non-Native faculty about these commitments so that academic requirements can accommodate important cultural practices (Brayboy et al., 2012). This shows that a culturally supportive campus climate is foundational to Native American academic success.

Support Systems and Social Capital

The research findings also highlight the importance of dedicated support systems, both within the institution and from students' personal networks, in facilitating academic success. Participants mentioned that academic advising, tutoring centers, mentorship programs, and family

encouragement as key supports that helped them navigate college. This is consistent with literature underscoring that proactive advising and mentoring tailored to first-generation students are crucial for persistence and degree completion. Peer and faculty mentorship were frequently mentioned as a lifeline for students facing academic or personal challenges. Faculty who served as mentors and approached teaching with cultural sensitivity by acknowledging historical trauma and systemic barriers were seen as especially effective in fostering trust and guiding students.

The significance of mentorship for Native American college students is well documented; for example, Brayboy et al. (2012) found that culturally attuned mentoring enhances Indigenous students' sense of belonging and academic confidence. Similarly, peer mentors create a sense of belonging and connection by connecting first-generation students with more experienced Native students who have faced similar challenges. Despite these benefits, the study noted that not all TCUs had consistent or formal mentoring programs, suggesting a need to expand structured mentor networks. TCUs can do this by pairing first-year Native students with faculty or advanced peers. Family and community support also was a powerful influence. Students who had strong encouragement from family were more likely to persist, whereas those juggling childcare, elder care, or other family duties struggled more. This finding can be interpreted through the lens of Social Capital Theory, the idea that social networks provide individuals with access to resources and support (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of TCUs, relationships with family, faculty, staff, and peers relate to the social capital that helps students obtain information, encouragement, and problem-solving help to overcome obstacles.

Participants who felt connected to a community of support, whether a study group, a family unit, or a campus student organization, reported higher confidence in navigating college life. This reflects how connection in supportive relationships supplies emotional and academic

resources increase student resilience and academic success. It also reinforces Tinto's (1993) assertion that social integration is pivotal for retention, as students who feel "at home" and supported in college are far more likely to graduate. However, the study did find variability in how actively faculty and staff engaged in support roles, resulting in the need for professional development to help all campus personnel become effective mentors and advocates. Overall, building dedicated support systems through intrusive advising, mentoring, and community-building appears to be the best practice for improving first-generation Native student success, converting social capital into tangible academic outcomes.

Comparative Insights from HBCUs and HSIs

Placing these findings in a broader context, comparing TCUs with other Minority-Serving Institutions, specifically Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) is important. Like TCUs, HBCUs and HSIs serve historically marginalized populations and have developed targeted strategies to foster academic success. HBCUs, for instance, are known for their supportive and family-like campus climates that nurture students' sense of belonging. Studies have noted that HBCUs provide empowering, "safe spaces" for Black students through culturally affirming curricula, mentoring, and strong student-faculty relationships (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). This nurturing environment has been credited with higher levels of engagement and persistence among Black students at HBCUs despite these institutions often having limited resources. One best practice from HBCUs is the use of structured first-year students' orientation and bridge programs, often summer programs, which ease the transition for first-generation students and build academic skills and social bonds early on (Palmer, 2010). Additionally, HBCUs often implement mentoring initiatives; for example, the Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence (MILE) at one HBCU improved

Black male retention through mentorship and leadership training (Palmer, Maramba, & Dancy, 2013). Such programs illustrate how intentional support networks and “it takes a village” approaches at HBCUs contribute to student success. TCUs could adapt similar peer mentoring and summer bridge frameworks, modified to include Indigenous cultural content, to support their incoming students.

HSIs, on the other hand, have developed strategies to not only enroll but truly serve Latinx students, a concept scholars’ term “servingness” (Garcia, 2019). By federal definition, an HSI is any college with at least 25% Hispanic enrollment, but the most effective HSIs go beyond demographics to provide culturally relevant support for Latinx students. Common practices at HSIs include offering bilingual student services, English/Spanish advisement, or tutoring, engaging families through outreach by knowing that family support is central in many Latino communities, and curriculum content that reflects Hispanic contributions and history. These approaches aim to make Latinx students feel welcomed and validated, much like TCUs do for Native students. HSIs also tend to enroll a high proportion of low-income and first-generation students, so they have comprehensive support programs, like one-stop student success centers, that bundle tutoring, financial aid assistance, and mentorship in a culturally sensitive manner (Santiago et al., 2016).

Research shows that HSIs now represent the largest share of MSIs and enroll about 66% of all Latinx undergraduates, which has spurred HSI leaders to prioritize student success initiatives like supplemental instruction in gateway courses, culturally informed counseling services, and partnerships with Hispanic community organizations to provide internship and scholarship opportunities. Best practices from HSIs that might be transferable to TCUs include family-inclusive orientation programs since many Indigenous students also have strong family

ties, cohort-based learning communities that create peer support networks, and targeted financial literacy workshops to help students navigate paying for college. Similarly, best practices from HBCUs, such as creating a campus of collective support, celebrating cultural heritage through events, and strong mentorship by same-race faculty, which are highly relevant to many TCUs' missions. In fact, TCUs share with HBCUs an emphasis on culturally affirming education; both institution types demonstrate that student success for minoritized groups is bolstered when education is delivered in a culturally congruent environment (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Garcia, 2019). By learning from HBCUs and HSIs, Tribal Colleges can further refine their own student success strategies. Like the lack of funding that TCUs face, HBCUs and HSIs face challenges, such as underfunding or serving diverse sub-populations.

In summary, while TCUs operate in a unique Indigenous context, the comparative analysis reveals overlapping themes: culturally grounded education, holistic support, and a tight-knit community are all areas relating to student success in all these minority-serving settings. TCUs can draw on the rich legacy of HBCUs' nurturing environments and the innovative practices of HSIs to enhance their own programs, thereby better meeting the needs of first-generation Native students.

Financial and Logistical Barriers

Despite the strengths noted, first-generation Native American students at TCUs continue to face significant financial and logistical barriers that threaten their college persistence. Poverty emerged as a major underlying issue as many TCU students come from low-income backgrounds with limited access to financial resources. According to a recent national study on Indigenous higher education affordability, 72% of Native American college students reported running out of money at least once in the past six months, over a quarter experienced food insecurity, and 16%

experienced homelessness while pursuing higher education (Wright & Beard, 2023). Such dire statistics reflect how economic hardship can hinder a Native American student's academic progress. In this study's findings, students frequently cited difficulty paying for tuition, books, and living expenses; some had to stop out for a semester to save money or work extra jobs, delaying their academic progress. Access to financial aid is a critical factor, and many TCU students receive Pell Grants. Students who exhaust grant aid often resort to loans or go without necessities. Such financial emergencies, like a car breakdown or medical bills, can quickly cause a student who has no financial cushion to disconnect from their academic coursework. A theme mentioned by participants was the need for emergency aid or the help of a sympathetic administrator to stay enrolled. Logistical hurdles compound these challenges. For example, unreliable transportation is a frequent problem for students commuting from remote reservations or rural areas. Simply getting to campus or maintaining a working vehicle can be an obstacle, leading to missed classes or dropped courses. Similarly, limited access to technology is a serious barrier as many Native communities lack robust internet infrastructure, and not all students can afford laptops or Wi-Fi.

The digital divide was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is an ongoing issue. One student in the study described doing homework in a parking lot and using Wi-Fi because her home had no reliable internet. Such conditions make engaging with online learning resources or even completing assignments difficult, putting these students at a disadvantage. Another barrier is the lack of childcare and family support services. Many first-generation Native students are also parents or caretakers. Without affordable daycare or flexible class scheduling, they struggle to balance school with family responsibilities (Shapland, 2011). The literature

confirms that factors like single parenthood and having dependent family members are major barriers to Native Americans' pursuit of higher education (Shapland, 2011).

In addition to student-specific hardships, institutional funding challenges and policy barriers exacerbate these issues. TCUs operate with extremely constrained resources. Congress has pledged support through the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act, but TCUs have been chronically underfunded. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights notably labeled TCUs "the most poorly funded institutions of higher education in the country." Federal funding for TCUs is formula-driven, approximately $8,000 per Native student, adjusted for inflation and authorized by law, but appropriations have never met the full amount promised, and TCUs receive no federal funds for non-Native students they serve. In practice, recent funding has been about $8,700 per Native student, far below what is needed and a shortfall of a quarter-billion dollars annually across the colleges. Unlike state-funded public colleges or land-grant universities, which HBCUs benefit from, most TCUs do not receive state government support due to their location on sovereign tribal lands and the lack of state obligation by law (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018).

This leaves TCUs heavily dependent on limited federal grants and tribal contributions, resulting in underpaid faculty, outdated facilities, and lean student services. Students in this study felt the effects of underfunding. Some noted that tutoring centers or advising offices were understaffed, computer labs had older equipment, and course offerings were sometimes limited, which could delay degree progress. High faculty turnover, often a consequence of low salaries and remote locations, was mentioned by staff as a barrier to maintaining consistent mentorship for students. Policy barriers at the federal level, such as complicated federal financial aid processes or limits on grant eligibility, also play a role. For example, bureaucratic hurdles in

applying for aid or scholarships can deter students who have little guidance in navigating these systems. Some participants shared that they missed aid application deadlines or lost aid eligibility because they dropped below full-time status while working, illustrating how policies are not tailored to non-traditional, high-need students and can have adverse effects.

Additionally, because many Native students are underrepresented in national data and often misclassified or omitted due to small sample sizes, policy decisions sometimes overlook their needs (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). First-generation Native students face many financial and logistical challenges, including generational poverty and high financial need, insufficient financial aid and emergency support, lack of basic needs like food and housing security, inadequate transportation and technology, and institutions struggling with scarce funding. These barriers contribute to Native American students having one of the lowest college completion rates of any racial/ethnic group, with around 36% six-year graduation for four-year entrants, compared to 60% nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The findings of this study reinforce that without significant interventions to reduce these burdens, improvements in retention will be limited. Addressing these barriers requires campus-level programs and systemic policy changes to make higher education more accessible and affordable for Native American communities.

Implications for Practice

The results from this study point to several actionable implications for Tribal Colleges and Universities, as well as policy initiatives at the tribal, state, and federal levels, to improve first-generation Native American academic success. Culturally responsive curriculum development should be a top priority at the institutional level. TCUs have a mission to serve their communities, including designing curricula and pedagogy relevant to Indigenous students' lives.

The findings support expanding courses and content that incorporate Indigenous perspectives, histories, and methods of knowledge. A culturally responsive curriculum enhances engagement and validates Native students' identity in academia (Brayboy, 2005). For example, science classes might include traditional ecological knowledge alongside Western science, or literature courses might feature Native authors and storytelling traditions. Such integration can simultaneously strengthen students' academic confidence and cultural pride, fostering the kind of academic/social integration Tinto (1993) advocates for. Faculty should be encouraged and trained to utilize culturally relevant teaching practices. For instance, project-based learning that addresses community issues or the use of talking circles (Bohanon, 2013) for class discussion to make learning more inclusive.

Professional development in this area is crucial. TCUs can host workshops for faculty and adjuncts on Indigenous pedagogies and Tribal Critical Race Theory principles so that instructors better understand the importance of connecting course material to students' cultural contexts. Evidence suggests that when faculty engage in culturally aware teaching, Native student outcomes improve (Shotton et al., 2013; Waterman, 2019). Therefore, faculty training programs in cultural competency and trauma-informed advising are recommended. This could include training faculty/staff about the historical traumas, with a major one being the boarding school experiences that affect students' trust in educational institutions and training in mentoring and supporting first-generation students. By building a more culturally knowledgeable and sensitive faculty, TCUs can ensure that all students, not just those lucky enough to find a great mentor, feel seen and supported.

Enhancing student support services is another implication. TCUs already excel in providing holistic support, but the study highlights areas for growth. One recommendation is to

establish or strengthen “one-stop shop” support centers. These centers concentrate on academic advising, tutoring, financial aid counseling, career services, and personal counseling in one easily accessible location, both physically and online. Research on student services indicates that integrated support centers are effective in improving outcomes for at-risk students by reducing confusion and run-around (Keith et al., 2016; Kley, 2015). At TCUs, a one-stop student success center could be staffed with advisors who are cross-trained to address academic plans, financial aid issues, and personal challenges in a culturally responsive manner. Intrusive advising, where advisors proactively check in on students rather than waiting for problems to manifest, can catch issues early. A great example of proactive advising is reaching out if a student misses classes or midterm grades dip and connecting them to tutoring or elder support as needed.

Mentoring programs should also be expanded and formalized. Based on this study’s findings, mentorship was sometimes left to happen informally. By implementing a formal mentorship program, with mentor training, matching of mentors/mentees, and scheduled interactions, TCUs can ensure every first-year Native student has a guide. This could take inspiration from successful HBCU mentoring models or the peer mentor groups shown to boost Native student integration (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). Both of those researchers found that participants in a structured mentorship program at a TCU reported increased self-efficacy, better time management, and a stronger sense of belonging after one semester. TCUs could implement similar models, like matching students with mentors from the same tribe or program of study to strengthen the connection. Additionally, providing family support services would address barriers unique to many Native students. This might include on-campus childcare, which was a persistence factor noted by Shapland (2011), parenting student support groups, and flexible

course scheduling or online course options for those with family responsibilities. By helping students manage their off-campus obligations, TCUs enable them to focus more on academics.

When it comes to financial support, the implication is clear. Increasing financial aid and reducing financial stress for students will likely improve retention. TCUs should continue to develop scholarship programs in partnership with tribes and organizations like the American Indian College Fund, which targets first-generation and low-income Native students. Financial literacy workshops and one-on-one financial coaching can empower students to budget and find resources, which, based on the study, is an approach already used at some TCUs. However, it could be scaled up. Importantly, emergency aid funds are a best practice that many colleges use to prevent students from dropping out due to a short-term financial crisis. Establishing a readily accessible emergency grant, even a few hundred dollars for a car repair or medical expenses can be the difference between a student persisting or dropping out. If available at the institution, TCUs can also improve campus infrastructure, such as housing and food security programs. If TCUs can provide affordable student housing or meal programs, some participants mentioned that their institution has a student food pantry and that students facing insecurity will have a safety net. These efforts also tie into policy, for example, advocating for the inclusion of TCUs in state-funded food assistance pilot programs or federal programs for college students' basic needs.

At the policy level, several recommendations emerge for federal, state, and tribal governments. Federally, there is a need for greater investment and tailored policy to support Native students and TCUs. First and foremost, fully funding the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Act at its authorized level would directly bolster TCU's capacity. TCUs receive roughly 20% less funding per student than promised, which is about $8,700 vs. $10,900

(American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2023). Closing this gap would provide millions in additional support for faculty hires, student services, and facilities at these colleges. The federal government should also consider increasing Pell Grant maximums and expanding eligibility since many TCU students are Pell-eligible.

Another federal policy issue is the data collection and reporting on Native students. As noted earlier, misclassification in IPEDS and other systems leads to Native students being "invisible" in data. Federal agencies should refine data practices, for instance, by tracking tribal affiliation or allowing multiracial Native students to be counted in the American Indian/Alaska Native category as well so that outcomes can be accurately measured and addressed. Additionally, federal grant programs, such as Title III-Part A for Strengthening Institutions or Title III-Part F for TCUs, should be expanded and made more flexible to fund innovative retention programs at TCUs (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2023). Tribal governments also have a role. As sovereign nations, tribes can enact policies or direct resources to support their students. Many tribes already provide scholarships or stipends to members pursuing higher education. The implication is that expanding these tribal scholarships and streamlining the application process would alleviate financial burdens. Tribes could also invest in partnerships with their local TCUs, for example, by providing land or capital for student housing projects or creating internship pipelines for TCU students in tribal departments. Such partnerships reinforce the idea of education for nation-building, a core principle in Brayboy et al., 2012, by linking student success to the tribe's future. Moreover, tribes can advocate at the federal level for policies benefiting Native students, such as protection of tuition waivers or funding for broadband on reservations.

At the state level, even though states historically have underfunded or excluded TCUs, there are promising policy moves that could be amplified. Some states have begun to offer in-state tuition or tuition waivers to enrolled members of federally recognized tribes, regardless of their state of residence. For instance, the State of Colorado has a tuition waiver program for Native American students with tribal ties to Colorado (Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2023). Expanding tuition waiver programs can improve college access for Native students by lowering cost barriers. States can also include TCUs in their higher education funding formulas or provide supplemental funds for specific needs, such as technology upgrades or capital improvements at TCUs. Even small appropriations can have a high return on investment in educational outcomes. Another state policy lever is supporting transfer pathways since some Native students start at a TCU and then transfer to state universities. States should ensure articulation agreements recognize TCU credits and that Native students do not lose progress when moving between institutions.

In light of these recommendations, it's worth noting that some concrete initiatives are already pointing the way. A recent policy brief from the Hunt Institute (Lowery, 2022) urges increased grants and scholarships for Native students, including state-level aid, and calls for more culturally responsive schooling and partnerships with tribes. The brief also highlights the expansion of distance education programs as a means to reach students in remote areas. TCUs and policymakers would do well with these suggestions by investing in what works, providing culture-based education and holistic support, and removing structural barriers, like cost and access issues. By implementing culturally informed curricula, strengthening support services, training faculty, and enacting supportive policies, TCUs can dramatically improve retention and graduation rates for first-generation Native American students. The outcome of such efforts

benefits the students and their families, communities, and tribal nations, as education enhances economic opportunities and empowers the next generation of Native leaders.

The findings call for a multi-pronged approach: institutional reforms to create an inclusive, supportive college environment, coupled with policy reforms that provide the necessary resources and remove obstacles. Ensuring Native student success will require commitment and coordination across campus offices and government agencies, but the evidence-backed strategies outlined here provide a roadmap for meaningful progress.

Study Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size and scope of the research were limited. The study focused on a select number of TCUs, three institutions, and a small cohort of first-generation Native American students. As a result, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all TCUs or to Native American students in other higher education contexts, such as those attending mainstream universities. Native American student populations are diverse, representing over 570 tribes with diverse cultures and experiences, and this study cannot capture the full range of that diversity. Additionally, because TCUs tend to have small enrollments, many quantitative outcomes had to be interpreted with caution. This reflects a broader issue noted in the literature. Native students are often statistically underrepresented in large-scale educational research and are sometimes omitted from reports due to small numbers (PNPI, 2021). This “invisibility” in data makes it challenging to benchmark and compare outcomes. Future research should strive for larger sample sizes, by pooling data across multiple TCUs or across multiple years of longitudinal data, to increase statistical power and representativeness. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the data. The study captured a snapshot of student and faculty

perspectives at one point in time. This design limits the ability to determine long-term causality or to see how student experiences and outcomes evolve. For example, we don't know from this study whether the students who benefited from certain support practices in their sophomore year will actually graduate at higher rates two years later. A longitudinal study following first-generation Native students through their college journey and even into their early careers would provide deeper insight into which factors have lasting impacts on graduation and post-college success. Longitudinal research could also help distinguish between factors that influence initial retention, staying past the first year, and those that affect completion, finishing a degree, which may not be identical.

Another limitation is the potential response biases. The qualitative portions of the study relied on student and staff self-reports in the surveys. Students who chose to participate may have been those most engaged or had stronger opinions about their experience, which could have skewed the findings. The data did not represent students who dropped out or stopped attending, yet their perspectives are crucial to understanding barriers. Similarly, faculty or administrators who participated might be more invested in student success, potentially painting a better picture of support practices than every student encounters. Future studies should include the voices of those who did not persist, by contacting students who left their TCU to learn about their reasons.

Suggestions Future Research

Given these limitations, the study opens several avenues for future research. One important direction is exploring the impact of online and distance learning on Native American student outcomes. The pandemic accelerated the use of online education, including at TCUs, and early evidence shows mixed effects. On the one hand, online courses can reach students on remote reservations and offer flexibility for those with jobs or family duties. On the other hand,

as discussed, many Native students lack reliable internet or technology, which can widen the achievement gap in online settings. Future research should examine how online learning can be optimized for Indigenous students, for example, what support structures are needed to make remote learning viable. Studies could also investigate whether online course availability helps with retention by allowing students to stay enrolled during life disruptions or whether it lessens engagement compared to face-to-face culturally immersive learning. Understanding the long-term outcomes of students who take online courses at TCUs will be critical.

Another area for future research is the effectiveness of mentorship programs and peer support interventions on Native American academic success. This study and prior literature highlight that mentorship is beneficial, but more rigorous evaluation is needed to identify which mentorship approaches yield the best results. Researchers could implement experimental mentorship initiatives, for instance, comparing cohorts of students assigned to a mentor versus those not, to measure differences in persistence, GPA, and sense of belonging. Qualitative research could complement this by delving into what mentorship components are most valued by Native American students, like having an Indigenous mentor, having a mentor who understands first-gen challenges, or the frequency and type of mentor-mentee interactions. Additionally, given the importance of community and family, future research might explore mentorship in a broader sense, for example, the role of extended family or tribal mentors, such as elders, in supporting college students. Some TCUs have started Elder-in-Residence programs, and studying their impact on student engagement and cultural connection would be worthwhile. Studies like Chelberg and Bosman (2020) have begun to quantify gains in self-efficacy from peer mentoring programs in a TCU setting, finding significant increases in students' confidence and skills over a semester. Building on this, future research could track whether these immediate self-

efficacy gains translate into higher retention or completion after a year or more. Furthermore, the research could investigate peer-led support groups for language revitalization for parenting students as a form of mentorship/community-building and assess their outcomes.

The intersection of policy reforms and Native American student outcomes is another promising research avenue. In recent years, there have been policy efforts aimed at supporting Native Americans in higher education, for example, state-level tuition waiver programs, new scholarship funds, such as the Cobell Scholarship, or federal initiatives to improve broadband access on tribal lands. However, there is little research on how these policy changes are impacting actual student success metrics. Future studies could examine, for instance, whether Native student enrollment or graduation rates increased in states that implemented tuition waivers compared to those that did not. Similarly, as the federal government and tribal nations invest in broadband through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program, researchers could study whether improved internet access correlates with increased online enrollment or better academic performance for students in those regions. Another policy-related research question is how changes in financial aid policy, such as the simplification of the FAFSA or potential increases to Pell Grants, affect Native American students' college-going and persistence. Because Native American students are often first-generation and from low-income families, they stand to benefit disproportionately from more generous and accessible financial aid, but this assumption should be assessed with data. Longitudinal policy research could track cohorts of Native American students before and after policy implementations to detect shifts in outcomes attributable to those policies. Qualitative policy research, like interviews with students about how a particular policy helped or did not help them, can shed light on the remaining gaps.

It is also recommended that future research take a more in-depth look at within-group differences among Native American students. The label “Native American” encompasses a wide range of identities, including Native Americans from various tribes, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and urban vs. reservation-based students. Each subgroup may face distinct challenges. For example, Alaska Native students attending TCUs in the lower forty-eight states might experience greater homesickness due to distance. Research that disaggregates data by tribal nation or region could identify if certain communities’ students are faring better or worse and why. Similarly, investigating gender differences, since Native women currently enroll and graduate at higher rates than Native men, would be beneficial to tailor interventions to understanding what factors encourage Native American women’s success and what barriers particularly hinder Native men.

Finally, collaborative, and Indigenous-led research approaches should be a priority in future studies. Using Indigenous research methodologies (Smith, 2012) and involving tribal communities in the research design can ensure that studies are culturally respectful and that the findings directly benefit those communities. As one report recommends, promoting collaborative and inclusive data and research is key to improving Native higher education outcomes. This could mean forming research partnerships between TCUs and mainstream universities or tribal education departments so that capacity is built, and data is shared in an effective way. Community-based participatory research could engage students as co-researchers to investigate their own experiences and solutions. Such approaches would continue the decolonization of research on Native education by moving away from treating Native American students as abstract data points and toward recognizing them as partners with valuable input.

Conclusion

While this study sheds light on critical factors affecting first-generation Native American student success at TCUs, such as cultural connection, support systems, and persistent barriers, it also underlines the need for further research to deepen and broaden our understanding. Researchers and educators can better inform practices and policies by addressing their limitations through larger, longer, and more diverse studies and having questions about online learning, mentorship, and policy impacts. The goal of this line of inquiry is to ensure that Native American students not only access college but also thrive and graduate, empowered to use their education for the betterment of their communities (Guillory, 2010). Each future study will be a step toward that goal, helping to build an evidence base for what works best in promoting Indigenous student success in higher education. The findings and recommendations discussed here provide a solid foundation along with an urgent call for ongoing innovation, advocacy, and scholarship in this vital area.

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