

Effective Strategies and Characteristics that Lead Native American Students to Complete Graduate Education

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Abstract: *Few studies have explored the success of Native American students in postgraduate degrees. To address this research gap in the literature, the current study examines the success of Native American students pursuing master and doctoral degrees. This study drew on the Graduate Student Inclusion and Success model to identify effective strategies that lead to graduate student inclusion and success. Additionally, a hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative approach was used. Ten in-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted using thematic analysis. The themes identified from data were Personal & Educational Goals, Family Matters, Financial Support, and Finding a Mentor. The results of this study have significant implications for higher education institutions, legislators, and other stakeholders that want to increase the participation rate of Native American students in graduate programs.*

Key Words: Graduate Native American Students Success, TCUs & PWCUs, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Native American students in higher education often encounter various academic and personal barriers that prevent their success in Predominantly White Colleges and Universities (PWCUs) (Makomenaw, 2014). Aud, Johnson, Kena, Manning, and Wang (2012) reported that Native American student numbers in higher education have increased in the past 10 years, yet the percentage of degree earners within this population has consistently remained low at PWCUs. However, at TCUs, which are predominately community colleges, the success rate has been higher than PWCUs (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2016). While some statistics concerning success factors are reported on Native graduates from K-12, associate, and bachelor's programs at both PWCUs and TCUs, there is minimal literature regarding success factors influencing Native American student success in postgraduate degrees (Makomenaw, 2014).

Because there continues to be little research on the experiences and success of Native American students in higher education at both TCUs and PWCUs regarding graduate degrees,

researchers such as Makomenaw (2014), Shotton (2016), and Windchief and Joseph (2015) have encouraged Native American researchers and Native allies to explore this gap in literature. This research aims to build understanding, with a particular focus on the interaction of Native American students attending graduate school at TCUs and PWCUs. Al-Asfour and Abraham (2016) conducted a literature review study and found overwhelming consensus among many Native American researchers that most factors affecting academic success for Native American students which help with retention, persistence, and completion in higher education are: a) mindset, b) culture and spirituality, c) family support, d) quality interaction with faculty, e) mentoring, and f) student engagement. While the studies reviewed by Al-Asfour and Abraham (2016) were related to Native American students in undergraduate degrees, the research for Native Americans in graduate degrees is almost non-existent within the literature.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

There is a paucity of literature available on Native American students in higher education in general, and particularly at the master and doctoral level of education. To begin to address this inadequacy, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the similarities and/or differences in the lived experiences of 10 Native American students who have successfully completed their graduate degrees. Five Native graduate students from TCUs and five Native graduate students from PWCUs participated in this study.

SUCCESS, FAMILY SUPPORT AND QUALITY INTERACTION WITH FACULTY/MENTORS: BUILDING ON THE LITERATURE

Several scholars and researchers have emphasized the importance of mindset, family support and quality interaction with faculty members for Native American students in higher education (Al-Asfour & Abraham, 2016; Makomenaw, 2012; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). These unique areas of emphasis are deserving of specialized attention in this study.

MINDSET

The literature shows that mindset is key to student success. Schmidtke (2008) found several factors contributing to Native American student success in higher education and asserted that mindset is an important factor. Students need to have the will and determination to succeed in their education and overcome barriers throughout the journey of obtaining a degree. Al-Asfour and Abraham (2016) reported that Native American students encounter extraordinary barriers in their pursuit of higher education and having a positive mindset and being aware of those barriers are crucial factors in their success.

FAMILY SUPPORT

Family support plays a significant role in Native American students' success in higher education (Brayboy, Fann, & Castagno, & Solymon, 2012; Butler & Al-Asfour, 2018; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Many Native American students who have pursued higher education outside reservations reported that family support is not readily available because of distance and economic abilities (Al-Asfour & Abraham, 2016). According to Guillory and Wolverson (2008), "family structure within the college culture enhances an American Indian student's sense of belonging and consequently leads to higher retention rates among American Indians." (p.61). Since there are only five TCUs that have masters' degrees, the majority of Native

American students enroll in PWCUs to pursue postgraduate degrees. Native American students attending PWCUs often benefit most from those institutions that exhibit a commitment to student diversity (Lundberg, 2007). Developing social-support networks and activities often aid in the development of unity between students, which fosters encouragement among students to persist in education and also serves as a family unit (Reeves, 2006).

QUALITY INTERACTION WITH FACULTY/MENTORS

Quality interaction between faculty members and Native American students was identified as a theme in the literature for student success (Al-Asfour & Abraham, 2016). The availability of help, when needed, was found to be essential by researchers (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Lundberg & Lowe, 2016) who have found that faculty interactions with Native Americans students play a critical role for their success in higher education, especially when faculty have experienced the same struggles that their students encounter.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When studying Native American students in higher education, several different research methods, and theoretical frameworks have been used by researchers. Some have used an Indigenous methodology to interpret the role of Indigenous history, culture, tradition, language, education, and self-determination and shared the colonial experience from an Indigenous peoples' perspectives (Benham, 2007; Makomenaw, 2012). With our understanding of Indigenous methodology and as Native American and Native allies, we used the Graduate Student Inclusion and Success model developed by Duranczyk, Franko, Osifuye, Barton Higbee (2015) as a lens for this study.

The Graduate Success Model identifies three critical elements as necessary for success: 1) creating a culture of inclusion, 2) advising, and 3) student professional development. The first key element of this model provides for the creation of a culture of inclusion. In order to create this culture of inclusion, Duranczyk et al. (2015) encouraged the use of a cohort model, taking specific steps to develop a sense of community between students. In addition, the Graduate Student Inclusion and Success model recommends that new graduate students are given the opportunity to interact with faculty and returning students in order to share their research interests and consider the courses they potentially might co-teach as graduate students.

The second element of this model is graduate student advising, Duranczyk et al. (2015) provides several suggestions which includes recommending activities such as formulating a program of study and research, complete annual review of student's progress, work with students to formulate their thesis and dissertation, networking, and development of mentorship programs. Duranczyk et al. (2015) emphasized that the creation of a successful graduate student model of mentoring and advising is a critical aspect of the graduate student experience and can have a significant impact on the professional lives of students. The third and final element of this model is providing professional development opportunities for graduate students. Faculty and students would develop a professional plan to discuss career goals and developing a professional curriculum vita. Also, as a part of this event, the college would develop monthly presentations and meetings between students, alumni, and faculty to share best practices in the development of students' skills and expectations of the job market.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach underlying this study is drawn from the hermeneutic phenomenology which focuses on determining the intention and meaning of an experience revealed, based on the lived experience and how that phenomenon appears to the individuals who have experienced it (Creswell, 2013). Using this research method in this study allows Native American students, who have successfully graduated with their postgraduate degrees, to share their stories in their own words. Hermeneutics is a tradition grounded in interpretive research-based philosophy and epistemology (Tuffour, 2017). Phenomenology involves understanding of lived experiences and reflecting on their meanings (Patton, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology is attentive to the description of a lived experience and places value on the interpretive process of deriving meaning from those experiences (Creswell, 2013).

The nature of Husserl's (1913) work was in conceptualizing, understanding, and describing phenomenology. Wertz (2005) stated that phenomenology is based on the assumption that all human consciousness is practical. Phenomenology aims to uncover the structure or the essence and meaning of phenomena of the subjects shared experiences (Patton, 1990). This qualitative method of research seeks to reveal the structure, essence, and meaning of phenomena as they are lived so that vertical interaction with the world can be uncovered (Husserl, 1913). In conjunction with the hermeneutic phenomenology approach to this research, our study was influenced by Indigenous methodology to further guide the study.

Weber-Pillwax (2001) defined the "Three R's" of Indigenous research as the inclusion of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. This was further delineated and elaborated by Wilson (2008) by noting that researchers conducting studies within Native American communities should reflect on questions such as "How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between the topic that I am studying and myself as a researcher (on multiple levels)?" "What am I contributing or giving back to the relationship? Is the sharing, growth, and learning that is taking place reciprocal?" (p. 77) to better guide their research. Personal relationships, particularly those involving members of the Native American community, must be strong and authentic between researchers and participants. In order to demonstrate respect for participants, the purpose of this research and questions were clearly explained. While interacting with participants, we sought to show respect by approaching them at their place or using a means of communication suitable for the participants. Developing relationships with the Native American community was also a high priority. The researchers of this study were an Arab-American, working for a TCU for more than 10 years, a Native American, and an African American ally; all believe that mutual racial minority identities and similar worldviews facilitate a kinship environment of supporting one another's challenges and struggles through research and cooperation. In the spirit of reciprocity, the study was designed to benefit participants, tribal communities, TCUs, and other stakeholders; participants were encouraged to share their perspectives so that higher education institutions might learn how to serve them better.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question guiding this study was: What are the effective strategies and characteristics that lead Native American students to complete graduate education?

PARTICIPANTS, SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

There were two criteria for participants to qualify for this study. They must have been enrolled with a state and/or federally recognized tribe in the United States, and they must have completed a postgraduate degree. Informant selection is highly relevant for phenomenological research as individuals whose personal experience pertinent to the research are looked upon for knowledge and information (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The focus of this study was limited to Native American students who completed a graduate degree and showed a willingness to share their personal experiences through narrative interviews as encouraged in qualitative research by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000). According to these authors, narrative interviews allow researchers to hear the voices from those whose experience is needed to understand a phenomenon.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants

Name	Gender	Age	State	Occupation	Highest Degree completed	Years of Working Experience	College/ University Attended
Stephan	Male	39	SD	Academic Dean	Master's	5	PWCU
Sarah	Female	33	ND	Instructor	Master's	4	TCU
Leslie	Female	42	CO	Dean	Doctoral	8	PWCU
Emily	Female	29	SD	Supervisor	Master's	3	TCU
Aron	Male	39	SD	Manager	Master's	11	TCU
Jennifer	Female	33	MT	Teacher	Master's	5	TCU
Melissa	Female	38	WA	Professor	Doctoral	7	PWCU
Tom	Male	36	SD	Associate Professor	Doctoral	10	PWCU
Tina	Female	44	SD	Principle	Master's	3	TCU
Patricia	Female	33	CO	Coordinator	Master's	8	PWCU

The mean age was approximately 36.6 years. The range was 29-44 years old. Number of years' work experience was 7.35.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection for the current study were audio-recorded and transcribed from all participants. The interviews lasted approximately an hour per participant and were structured as open-ended interviews. When all initial interviews were transcribed, follow-up interviews were completed to further discuss the experiences of success in graduate programs. During the data collection process, we went through the individual interviews with the participants to develop the validity of the data using a member check process. Furthermore, the researchers coded any aspect of the narrative that seemed like a significant factor in the individual's experience. After coding of all 10 interviews was completed, those coded elements that seemed related were combined, and the most common themes extracted. We followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) instructions on the importance of taking notes and comments on the emerging themes between participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were collected over a period of five months. During this process, the transcriptions were reviewed repeatedly, and the primary analysis was conducted. The data were coded and organized into categories and overarching themes identified. In order to validate themes, the researchers compared them with the original description of the phenomenon being studied after careful review of data by the researchers. The results of the data analysis were reviewed, and a member check was conducted to clarify and ensure the validity of the description of the phenomenon by the participants. Furthermore, exigencies concerning anonymity and confidentiality of participants had been respected in the findings as recommended by Kewir and Munge (2015).

RESEARCHERS' POSITIONALITY

The primary author, who is an Arab-American Professor and Department Chair at a tribal college spending more than 10 years serving Native American communities, has attended many ceremonies such as Sundance, consulted for tribal organizations and published articles both peer-reviewed and non-peer reviewed in higher education and career development related to Native Americans. He believes that it is critical to approach research with respect and care as a non-Native/Indigenous scholar. The second author is a Sicangu Lakota who has worked within graduate programs in both a tribal college and a STEM college. Within research, her primary interest has been in the field of understanding cultural barriers in education and employment. This interest extends into action within her private life in the presentation of information regarding those barriers to a myriad of organizations that can positively act to remove such barriers. The third author is an African American faculty member who studies minority-serving institutions (MSIs). He has published, taught courses on, and lectured on student support at MSIs, including TCUs. He has also completed graduate-level Indigenous methodology courses. He recognizes that, although he is familiar with Native American/Indigenous communities, given his ethnic background as an African American, he must approach this work with respect and care.

LIMITATIONS

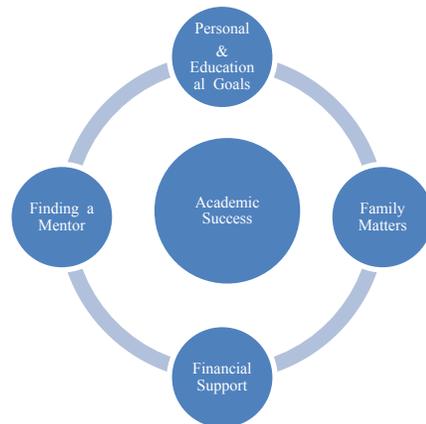
Qualitative research can provide rich data and a narrative context for data, including feelings, opinions, experiences, and knowledge shared by the participants (Creswell, 2013). While qualitative research can provide data that quantitative methods cannot, many researchers are cautious of its limitations (Creswell, 2013; Rendon & Al-Asfour, 2019). One limitation is that qualitative data are not generalizable. For this study, the small sample size restricts the widespread application of the results to all Native Americans who have completed master and doctoral degrees. Additionally, although we attempted to include Native Americans from several tribes, the majority of the participants were from the state of South Dakota. This creates a challenge in capturing data that can depict the phenomenon we sought to research in this study. Gaining access to Native American students and communities can be a challenge for some researchers. This challenge occurs partly due to issues of the historical misuse and misrepresentation of data collected from tribal nations for over a century. Because of this, lack of trust of researchers has been prevalent in many communities and reservations in Indian Country.

FINDINGS

This study investigated the experiences of 10 Native American students who have successfully completed their graduate degrees at TCUs and PWCUs. The study findings identified

four themes from the data: 1) Personal & Educational Goals, 2) Family Support, 3) Financial Support, and 4) Finding a Mentor. Figure 1 below illustrates the themes identified in this study, which are essential to the success of Native American students pursuing graduate education.

Figure 1 represents the four major themes that were identified in this study



PERSONAL & EDUCATIONAL GOALS

The majority of participants talked about their personal and educational goals, which have contributed to their ability to achieve success in pursuing higher education. This theme, Personal & Educational Goals, is defined as the act of participants setting goals and dreams of accomplishing those goals while getting educated. The participants discussed that being educated is a personal gain, which is essential, but at the same time, it encourages the person to serve the community by acquiring the highest education possible, allowing for the individual to contribute solutions to complex problems that tribal communities face today. Aron addressed the importance of education. He stated, “When I finished my bachelor’s degree, I wanted to do a master’s degree, and when I started one, I knew I had to accomplish the goals that I set for myself. Being educated is very important.” Likewise, Sarah expressed her interest in higher education and that it is “almost everything to her. My personal goal was to get a teaching degree and then do a master’s degree, who knows, maybe a Ph.D. as it has always been in my sights.” Furthering her teaching degree allows having more significant impact on her community.

The participants did express that being Native and holding a graduate degree is a key to their success. Jobs on the reservations are limited and very competitive, and some participants stated that, to have a better life, higher education will be a catalyst to achieving success. Melissa also emphasized this by saying:

Higher education is everything, whether you have a master’s or a doctoral degree. . . it is important that you get educated and be willing to serve your people . . . You do not have to be a teacher or professor; you can serve by working for a tribal entity, run for office or do consulting, regardless of what you do, serve the community and help improve the decision-making process for your people. I have always wanted to do a master’s degree in Business and help create jobs in my community.

Accomplishing personal and educational goals can be met with admiration. Students who receive higher education degrees from well-known or ivy-league universities might be treated

differently by the community. Four participants stated that some members of the community feel that they are “outsiders” or “trying to change our way of life by the White education.” Tina explained that “the system is complicated to change...with the education that we receive, our culture must be integrated with the education system, similarly to what TCUs do”. To remain culturally relevant as espoused by most students, academic knowledge must be combined with cultural knowledge and ways of being.

Sophia stated that she feels that education can help resolve many issues on the reservation, including alcohol, drugs, unemployment, and poverty. Other participants talked about the importance of education to change their family financial struggles. Jennifer spoke about this issue passionately:

Having a degree in higher education will help my family and I financially while I accomplish my goals and dreams. Those goals and dreams are also what my mom wanted for me to accomplish since I was young. She beat it in my head since I was younger. You need to go to college for your bachelor’s degree and beyond.

Some participants expressed that it was not a goal of their parents that their children attain a higher education degree; however, in their attaining the degree their parental and family emotional support was essential. Their personal goal development was impacted by the input of the family. Patricia expressed that bringing happiness to her family by receiving a doctoral degree was both a personal and an educational goal.

FAMILY SUPPORT

More than half of the students reported immediate and extended family played a role in their success. Aron stated, “When I had a difficult time in some of my courses, my family was there to support me emotionally and mentally...their support helped me feel better and allowed me to move forward.” Some of the participants have also indicated that their decision to go for a master’s or doctoral degree was because of long discussions and encouragement from family members. Sarah specifically discussed how her mother had expected her to go to college, and when she finished; her mother continued her encouragement to go for a master’s degree. Sarah stated, “I think my mom was happier than me when I completed my master’s degree.” Through her mother’s happiness at degree completion, Sarah recognized the support that was given by her mother in achieving the master’s degree.

This theme, family support, was identified from two main subthemes: emotional distress and family first. Some of the participants who completed their degree from non-TCUs indicated that being away from family can be a challenge. Tom stated, “Sometimes, I felt alone and needed help. But, when I called my sister, she would tell me that we are proud of you and you are almost there, do not give up.” According to Tom, “Without my sister and the rest of my family calling and texting or sometimes using Skype, I do not know how I would have made it.” Another participant, Jennifer, became pregnant while completing her bachelor’s degree. When she decided to pursue a master’s degree, her children provided critical emotional support to finish her master’s degree. Jennifer stated, “When coursework started to pile up, and I felt frustrated, I looked at my kids and told myself, I can do it.”

A practical example of both emotional distress and family first was when both parents and students did their homework at the same time. Since some of the participants were both students and parents, they found that when they set time for them to do homework, they would allocate the

same time for their children. Tina stated, “When I do my homework, I ask my kids to do their homework as well...this allowed them to support one another and work as a team.” Melissa stated, “Seeing my kids’ study was one of the greatest motivational factors for my success, especially when I was working on my dissertation.”

The second subtheme was family first. This subtheme highlights the importance of family and their needs. There was a concurrence among all participants that the needs of their family members are paramount to other needs/wants, including education and work. Tina said:

Being a minority was hard because I did not have anyone to talk to and I had nothing in common with most people. During that time, I wanted to give up. Why am I doing this? I should go and get a job instead of getting a degree. The family is everything. I would pick my family before my personal goals. In my culture, the family is significant and always comes first, regardless of the outcomes. When I was doing my bachelor’s degree and a family member needed to be taken care of, I dropped all of my classes and took care of her. I did not go back to school until she was feeling better. By taking that break, I was able to get closer to my family, and it allowed me to be more determined to finish college.

Like in any collectivistic society, Native American communities place great emphasis on family. Not only immediate family but also extended family members such as aunties, uncles, cousins, and adopted family. The family is the backbone and support system students rely on. The majority of participants spoke about family influence on them before and during their studies. Patricia told a story of her grandmother, who said:

Granddaughter, your education is your future. Do not give up on your dreams. In the past, we had to go through many challenges and struggles. When we had to go to boarding schools, our culture, language, and identity were taken from us. Today, in the white people’s world, we have to get ourselves educated to bring back what was taken from us and improve our community. Your pursuit of higher education is your battle; make sure you win.

While the participants made adjustments in their schedules to attend to family needs, they were still committed to finishing their degrees. Students who pursued their degrees at TCUs discussed that they were available to help their family when needed, while others who went to PWCUs expressed that it was a challenge to be available for some family members due to the distance between them. Jennifer explained, “a few years ago when I was doing my master’s degree, my grandma got sick. I had to drive six hours to get back home to help her.” Being absent from several classes or skipping a class to take care of family members could take place and jeopardize a student’s ability to pass a course. However, according to the participants, they would not hesitate to choose family over education.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Although not all participants discussed financial support as a means for their success during the pursuit of master and doctoral degrees, some participants discussed the importance of having scholarships and tuition waivers from some TCUs and PWCUs. At TCUs, some participants explained that the tuition costs were affordable. Also, there were many scholarships available to

receive a master's degree. Sarah stated, "I received a master's degree with no cost, other than some books and a few other things, tuition was paid using the scholarship money." Another participant who also attended a TCU for a master's degree explained, "other than a laptop, internet services, and books, I did not have to pay for anything." The participants who attended TCUs made it clear that there was minimal financial difficulty in paying for the educational cost. As expressed by Patricia:

I received a grant through the Office of Indian Education. This grant helped to fund my tuition, books, and fees. The college also had scholarships and endowment money that gets used to pay students tuition if they graduate and do not have money to pay for their degree before graduating. So, some students receive a master's degree for free. Others can get monthly stipends from the Office of Indian Education. I also believe that the American Indian College Fund can also provide for the educational cost. So, opportunities are available; you need to know how to find them.

Some students at TCUs find scholarships and grants to pay for the educational cost. Those who do not find it challenging to pursue graduate education. A few of the participants who attended PWCUs had two options to fund their graduate studies. These participants explained that they were able to apply for a tuition waiver, receive partial funding in scholarships and grants, while others discussed that they had no outside funding for their graduate degrees. Leslie said:

When I decided to go for my doctoral degree, I was very worried about the financial cost. I was able to secure some scholarships for tuition and housing. I had to pay for my day-to-day expenses, which can be costly. I was able to make it, and I am grateful for those scholarships. I wish that my other financial needs were also covered...I was able to work part-time and cover those costs.

The limited availability of scholarships or lack thereof was also discussed by some of the participants. Aron explained that he "paid for my entire degree from my savings account and used some loans. I did not qualify for some scholarships due to my income." Other participants also discussed that many PWCUs do not have programs to support Native American students, especially financially. Aron explained, "I tried to find scholarships, but none were available...maybe I should have attended a different college, maybe not, who knows. I did what I could, and it is something in the past now." Paying for college can be a challenge to some Native students, but the overwhelming majority were able to find ways of paying for tuition using scholarships, grants, financial loans, and other means. Financial support is a significant factor for many Native Americans who completed their master's and doctoral degrees, both at TCUs and PWCUs. The participants who graduated from TCUs proclaimed that the financial assistance with free tuition, scholarships, gas vouchers, and stipends were factors and catalyst for finishing their master's degrees. Students who attended PWCUs found some financial challenges, but there were some scholarships, reduced tuition, free housing, and other resources to support them financially. Without the financial support provided, there was a high chance that they would not have been able to complete their degrees.

FINDING A MENTOR

Almost all of the study participants highlighted the importance of mentoring in the success of completing master's and doctoral degrees regardless of if they were studying at a TCU or PWCU. At TCUs, students spoke about mentoring with individuals such as faculty members, staff, or community members, especially those who have completed a higher education degree. "I think we develop skills by having mentors, individuals who are known in the community, respected by others or an individual we look up to," said Tina who graduated from a TCU. Emily, another participant who also attended a TCU, said, "I think what you would need to do is find a mentor who understands your goals and your culture to work with you. Otherwise, you would struggle in academics." Participants felt these mentoring relationships were vital to their success. Tina also said, "You will need to find a mentor who has been in your shoes, understands you, and is willing to work with you and be honest with his/her feedback." Students indicated a need for mentors to engage them in their research and motivate them to succeed in education. Stephan expanded on the idea of gleaning skills and coaching that can be received from a mentor:

Find someone to pair yourself with who is more skilled in a particular area of education than you and see if they can mentor you or help you to acquire better skills. That person can guide you, explain how to acquire particular skills, or maybe enable you to become abreast with the latest education or jobs. Some people have one mentor or two for everything, which can be good as it can allow gaining a wealth of feedback.

Although the majority of the participants agreed that mentoring was an essential part of the path to become successful in higher education, there was no consensus as to how mentoring should occur. Some participants found other Native American students who were studying at a PWCU a great resource and a place to find mentors. From these mentors, some participants reported that they learned how to overcome challenges such as being homesick, tutoring services, organizations to join, faculty to work with, and several other tips on how to succeed. As Tom said, "When I first attended the university, I did not know anyone. But, getting to know some Native students and by developing a rapport, my life got much better. At the university, too, there were Native American students housing and a gathering place, which helped a lot." Just as students found help and mentoring from other students, students reported faculty played a role in helping as well.

Several participants mentioned faculty mentoring. They indicated that faculty members who were Native Americans or allies could be good mentors when studying at a PWCU. Native American faculty members, according to Tom, "knew of our challenges more than anyone else, they knew the ins-outs of different situations, having them as mentors or advisors would be great... I had a mentor, and he was a faculty at the university; he helped me a lot." Participants also explained that having Native Americans or Native allies can be very helpful in inspiring scholars. The participants discussed how they were able to work on presentations and publications during the times that they were working on their degrees. Leslie was able to find mentoring as an opportunity to publish articles, "I was able to work on articles, publish... I think from a career perspective; I can work at a university as a professor or I could also become a director." Some participants also discussed finding support from university staff, and one participant found a mentor, but the majority feeling was that faculty members played a more significant role in the mentoring process and contributed to their success.

DISCUSSION

This study reinforces the literature that suggest that Native American students are better able to achieve postgraduate degrees with support than without it. This work defines that the significant areas of support which highly impact the success (defined as a degree awarded) are mindset; family support; financial support; and peer, faculty, and mentor support. The higher the number of these support systems that are in place for a student, the more likely, the higher the degree of success based on the perspectives of the participants.

The purpose of this study was to provide a deep understanding of how lived experiences of participants graduating from TCUs compare to those graduating from PWCUs and in what ways do the participants perceive mindset, family support, financial support, and instructor/mentor support to be contributors to their success. It was also intended to identify practices that could improve the wellbeing of Native American students who are or will pursue a higher education postgraduate degree. Our analysis revealed four themes: “Personal & Educational Goals,” “Family Support,” “Financial Support,” and “Finding a mentor” (instructor/mentor support).”

Returning to the theoretical framework and literature that this article used as a lens to approach this study, we can start developing and creating a connection between our research and the theory we used. Duranczyk et al. (2015) developed a model for graduate student inclusion and success. The model was based on three main components, which are creating a culture of inclusion, advising, and offering students professional development. The connection between some of our findings with the Duranczyk et al. (2015) model can be made via two themes: personal & educational goals and family matters. Personal and education goals are what Duranczyk et al., discussed along with professional development, which focused on the person and how the student’s personal goals and education are factors in a student’s success. Having life goals for professional development is a significant component of graduate students’ success model (Duranczyk et al., 2015).

The results suggest that, for participants, personal and educational goals were essential factors in helping participants complete their degrees. Participants believed that, with all of the challenges that they encountered, personal and educational goals play a significant role in their success in higher education. Having a clear sense of purpose, for being an educator or someone who can give back to the community, was well-noticed throughout the interviews. To the participants, although the sacrifice was high, they were willing and happily accepted the sacrifices as long as their education did not severely impact family members. From the theoretical perspective, the findings reaffirm two themes and contribute additional themes to the literature. The study provides further evidence of the importance of personal and educational goals. The success of participants at both TCUs and PWCUs was because of a clear sense of purpose of pursuing graduate degrees. Also, it highlights the significant role that family members play in the success of Native American students in postgraduate degrees. Within TCUs, recognition of the intent of students to aid in community endeavors after degree attainment is inherent. There is a simple acceptance of this student intent and, in many cases, this goal is woven into course content. This sort of recognition is not as easily noted in PWCUs. For students who are influenced by a strong culture, the lack of such recognition can profoundly impact student motivation.

The second theme was Family Support, which Lopez (2017) presented as family, institutions, communities, community, and academic influences as interconnected. Having family support was at the forefront and a significant factor in the success of the participants, as shown in the findings. In Native American communities, a family does not only refer to the immediate family such as brothers and sisters but also extended family members and adopted relatives. All

of these individuals are important in the Native Americans' family circle. The participants who went to PWCUs described a sense of isolation and stress that came from being in an environment, which requires adaptation. While students who went to TCUs did not express this phenomenon, they discussed how attending TCUs increased their involvement with Native Americans' culture(s) and philosophies. They also recognized that their own ability to give support to family members was impacted by proximity and ability to return home. Research, reflected in this study, could be used by the educational arm of Tribal governments to develop seminars for families of students and students who chose to attend a PWCU to define for them ways of addressing this issue. Recognition of problems that can arise from removal of the student from family and community life can allow families to understand fully what their support to the student means and that they are an integral resource in aiding students to completion of their degrees. This information can also educate the administrations of PWCUs in how they can assist Native students in completing their programs of study and therefore increase their own completion rates.

Financial support and finding a mentor are two themes that were also identified from this study. The financial support theme was found in some studies of Native American students who pursue undergraduate degrees as Al-Asfour and Abraham (2016) discussed in their study. In addition, Salis, Reyes and Shotton (2018) explained that financial support could provide an important point of access to higher education for Native American students. Efforts in identifying support for Native graduate students can be undertaken by tribal organizations such as the American Indian Higher Education Consortium and the American Indian College Fund. These efforts should also be considered by current and emerging Native researchers.

Similarly, finding a mentor has also been addressed in some of the literature. Reeves (2006) encouraged faculty members to provide meaningful relationships with Native American students. In the Reeves (2006) study, the importance of Native American students studying for an undergraduate degree, working with a mentor was highlighted. Interestingly, in our study, a similar theme was identified. Faculty mentoring provides an essential opportunity for graduate students to conduct empirical research and co-author with faculty members. This offers an opportunity for students to build their curriculum vitae and start a career in higher education. These capacities can affect a student's self-efficacy toward success in graduate schools. Mentoring programs, focused on Native American students, that provide validation and sense of belonging can positively affect Native American students' academic achievement and academic leadership development. While the concept of mentoring is not unique within many Native cultures, the fact that difficulties arise when Native students are asked to reach out to a dominant culture for mentoring must be recognized. Programs might be considered wherein instructors from a Native student's previous educational institution might reach out to professors from the selected PWCU (with permission of the student) to try to establish a mentor connection. For university instructors who have had no prior involvement with Native students, the initiating instructor might then provide a mentor resource for the university instructor.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Higher education leaders, administrators, researchers, and other stakeholders both at TCUs and PWCUs, should consider being proactive in meeting the needs of Native American students seeking postgraduate degrees. Such involvement can yield a positive impact on the educational organization, the mentoring instructor, and, of course, the Native student. Our work in this research yields important implications for future research. The findings suggest that it would be wise for

researchers to explore and intricately study Native American student experiences, who want to continue education at both TCUs and PWCUs on a much larger scale. This study sparks and provides a fertile ground for future researchers to focus on this particular segment of the population as research on Native Americans in postgraduate degrees are rarely found in the literature. Due to the paucity of research and ever-important considerations in focusing on Native American students, we whole-heartily believe much work is needed related to Native American students in higher education.

The researchers strived to explore the experiences of Native American graduate students so that plans and programs can be developed to assist aspiring Native American graduate students to succeed at the postgraduate level and to help graduate program developers create an atmosphere suitable for Native American students. The nature of qualitative research provides rich data and narrative context for data, including experiences, feelings, and knowledge of the participants. As the Native American population increases, and more Native American students attend postgraduate colleges, we recommend that further research be conducted to examine the factors that play a role in the success of Native American graduate students.

To conclude, there remains a need to enhance our understanding of the under-documented educational experiences of Native American students in postgraduate degrees at a larger scale. This understanding will not only attend to the knowledge gap that currently exists and which this study attempted to close to a certain degree, but it will also allow for the creation of better policies and accommodations for Native American students in higher education in general and postgraduate degrees in particular. The findings from this article have illuminated important themes identified in this study. This study is one attempt to bring to light the factors that help Native American students in postgraduate degrees succeed in higher education and should be followed by other research at a large scale and more diverse Native American students.

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