

2020

Persistence Towards Graduation of First-Year Native American Students at a Local College

Dolores Becenti
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education

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Dolores Becenti

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2020

Abstract

Persistence Towards Graduation of
First-Year Native American Students at a Local College

by

Dolores Becenti

MA, Western New Mexico University, 2004

BA, Fort Lewis College, 1985

AA, Navajo Community College, 1983

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

October 2020

Abstract

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the graduation rate for Native American (NA) college students was less than 1%. As enrollment increases in local colleges and universities, so do concerns about the persistence, retention, and completion of NA students. The purpose of this study was to investigate what influenced first-year NA students to persist toward graduation at a local college. The conceptual framework concentrated on social integration perspectives based on Tinto's student integration model. A qualitative case study design was chosen to gain insight into the phenomenon. Purposeful sampling procedures were used to recruit 6 first-year NA students at a local college. In-depth semistructured interviews were conducted with student participants. One college administrator was also interviewed. Data were analyzed using coding to identify emergent themes, which also identified the key findings. Among the findings were that NA students needed more support and engagement with faculty, staff, and administration as they pursued their educational studies at the college. These findings were corroborated in the interview with the college administrator. A solution to the problem was to present the issues, findings, and recommendations to the key stakeholders at the college, delivered through a White Paper. Implications for social change would include NA students persisting and graduating from the local college, which would help NA students obtain employment to better support themselves and their families, as well as help them be role models and leaders within their community.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my late father, Tom Bill Becenti for believing in me and always supporting my decisions. His passion for education and helping the Diné to become more self-sufficient and productive citizens of the nation has always been the guiding force of T'áá hwó' aji t'éego. Thank you to my mother, Dorothy H. Becenti for instilling discipline and strength. It is through her matrilineal lineage, the Kinyaa'áanii clan, that I am strong. I would also like to thank my children Ty, Tamara, Seth, and Cody, as well as my granddaughter, my little hummingbird, Talise for being patient, thoughtful, and loving while I spent many late nights and weekends away from home to devote my time to researching and writing. I could not have done this without your support. I love you unconditionally. Ahéhee sha'álchíní. Ayóó Ánííníshní.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

Although there has been research on the persistence of college students (Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017), there is very little information about persistence to graduation of Native American (NA) college students (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Minthorn, 2014a; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Patterson, Butler-Barnes, & Van Zile-Tamsen, 2017; Postsecondary Education for American Indian and Alaska Natives (PEAIAN, 2012). The report by PEAIAN (2012) described that NA college students' retention and graduation rates are low. Knowing that few students complete their college education is not enough. Students do not just need to go to college, but they need to complete college. Some researchers have tried to explain what factors may influence NA college student persistence, such as values and cultural connection (Fish & Syed, 2018; Flynn, Duncan, & Jorgensen, 2012; Hagedorn, n.d.; Patterson et al., 2017; Tachine et al., 2017), but more research is needed to understand the meaningful experience of NA college students.

As the first-year student enrollment increases in colleges and universities, so do concerns about the persistence, retention, and completion rates of NA students. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017) data are limited for NA and those reported have a higher chance of error when analyzed. The NCES (2017) reported undergraduate students classified as American Indian/Alaskan Native enrolled in postsecondary institutions remained below 1% for Fall 2000-2015 (see Appendix B). For the purposes of this study I have included

Alaskan Indian with NA students. The overall national graduation rate for 2014-2015 was 63% for 2-year public institutions and 81% for 4-year public institutions (NCES, 2017). The graduation rate and retention rate for NA was less than 1% for both (NCES, 2017). Reports that focus on topics such as persistence for NA students are either lacking or very limited (Kuh et al., 2006; Patterson et al., 2017), which indicates that more studies need to be conducted on these types of topics.

There are several reasons identified by researchers (Aljohani, 2016) used to explain challenges first-year students experience that impact their persistence toward graduation. Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, and Nitzarim (2013) emphasized the need to identify the specific coping strategies that influence student persistence. Soria and Stebleton (2012) suggested that more academic engagement, such as more faculty and student interaction, would support students' retention thus increasing their likelihood to persist to graduation. Cultural dimension, as noted by Thompson et al. (2013), included having a sense of belonging and the student's perspective of campus climate, which influenced the decision to continue or drop-out. Patterson et al. (2017) believed that a one-size-fits-all approach addressing NA student dropout may be inadequate and would have to be adaptable to local conditions. Flynn et al. (2012) believed that further studies would assist in "...understanding antecedents for dropping out and developing preventive interventions" (p. 447). Although there are many different programs that address retention and persistence, most of which focus on first-year students, studies indicate that identifying influences that challenge students during their first year would provide

information on what supportive programs are more suitable for these students to create an environment that is engaging and supportive.

The local gap in practice is the increasing number of NA students enrolled at a local college (hereinafter referred to as Local College [LC]) who do not persist to graduate. The LC is a postsecondary 2-year educational institution that mainly awards associate degrees; however, through a partnership with two other state universities, students can also earn a bachelor or master’s degree. Data taken from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS, 2018) showed LC’s total enrollment (including the NA student population) for all academic years has been decreasing (see Figure 1). The overall retention rate for LC has also been decreasing as shown in Figure 2.

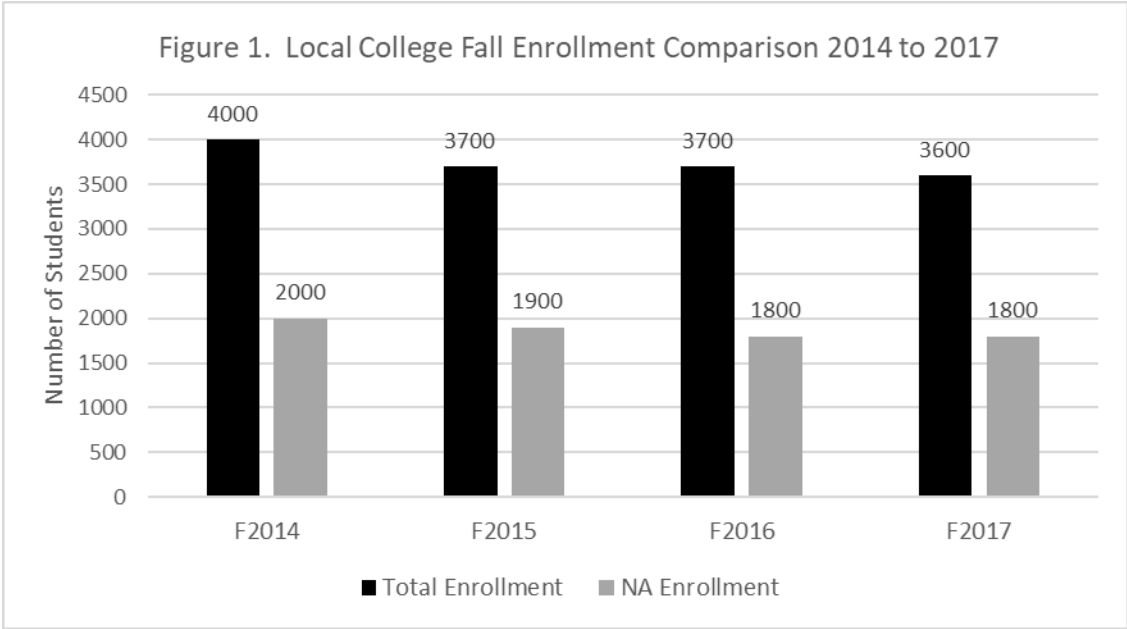


Figure 1. LC and NA Enrollment, approximated for Fall 2014 to 2017. Adapted from IPEDS, 2018.

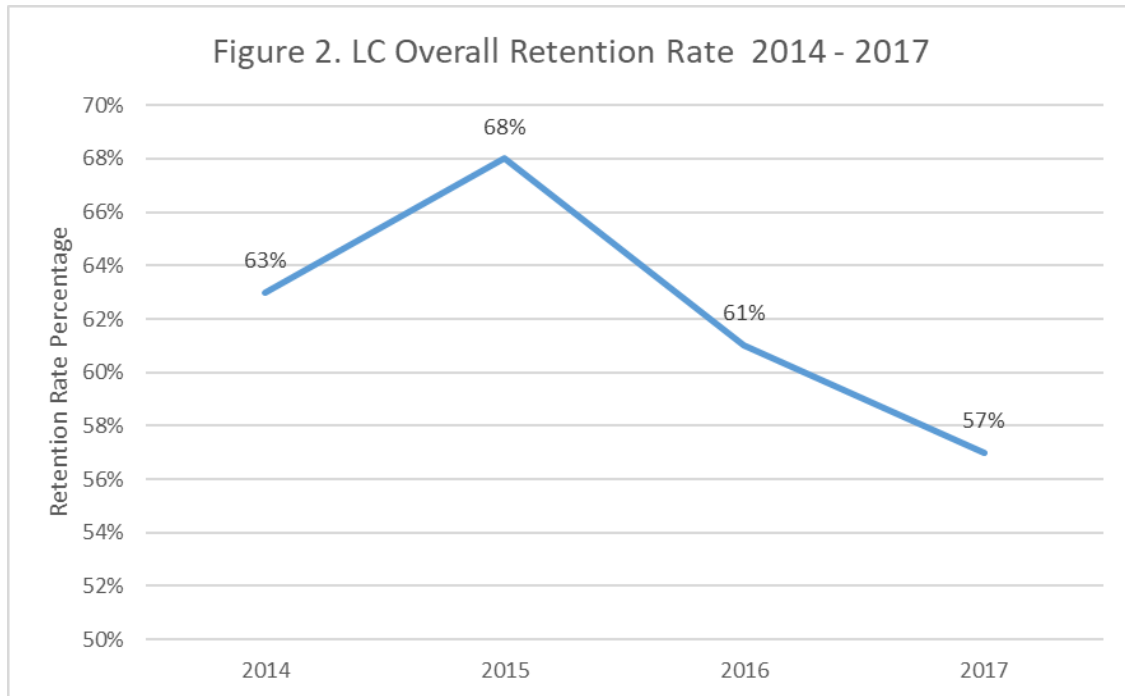


Figure 2. LC overall retention rate 2014 to 2017. Adapted from IPEDS, 2018.

The number of NA graduates at LC plateaued over the past 3 reporting years as compared to the overall graduates, as shown in Figure 3. As students drop out and do not return, or when they do return, they would not be included in the official IPEDS report, due to not graduating within the expected time frame they were allowed (i.e., a student in an associate degree needs to complete the program of study in three years). The completion of Associate degrees was lower for NA students who completed according to the 2018 IPEDS report (see Figure 4).

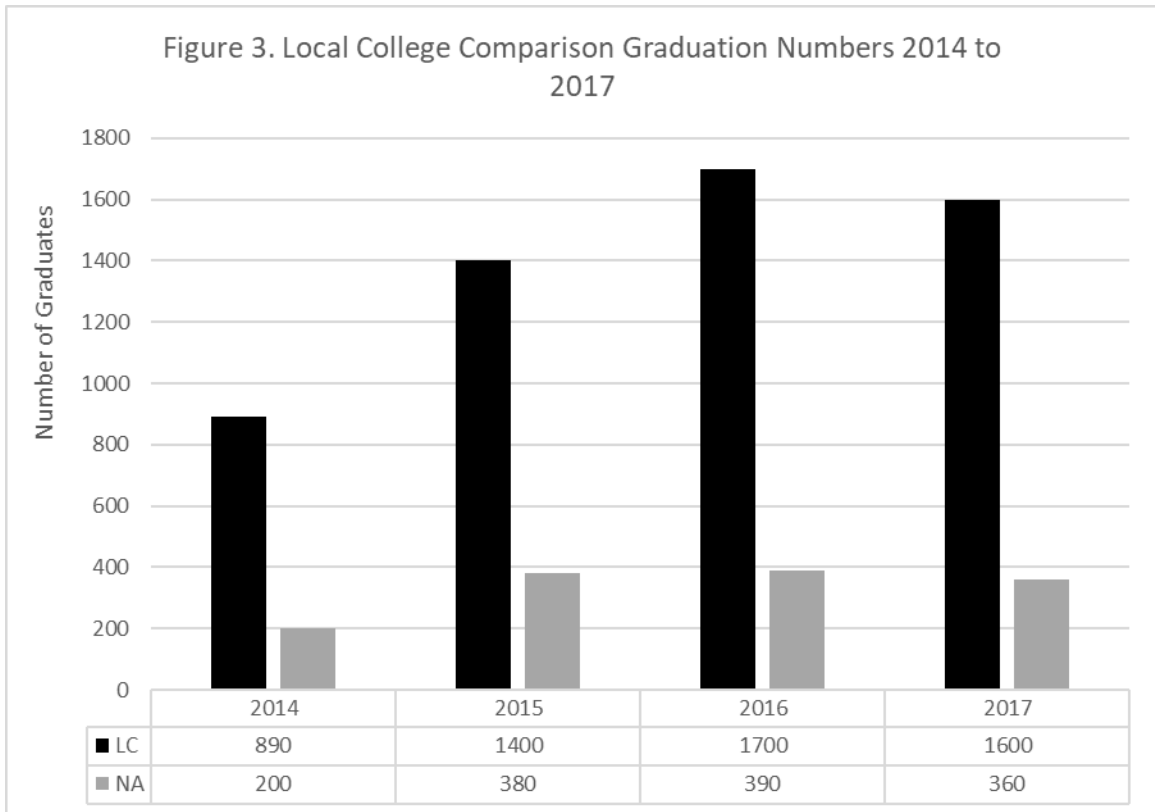


Figure 3. Comparison graduation numbers for LC and NA 2014 to 2017. Adapted from IPEDS, 2018.

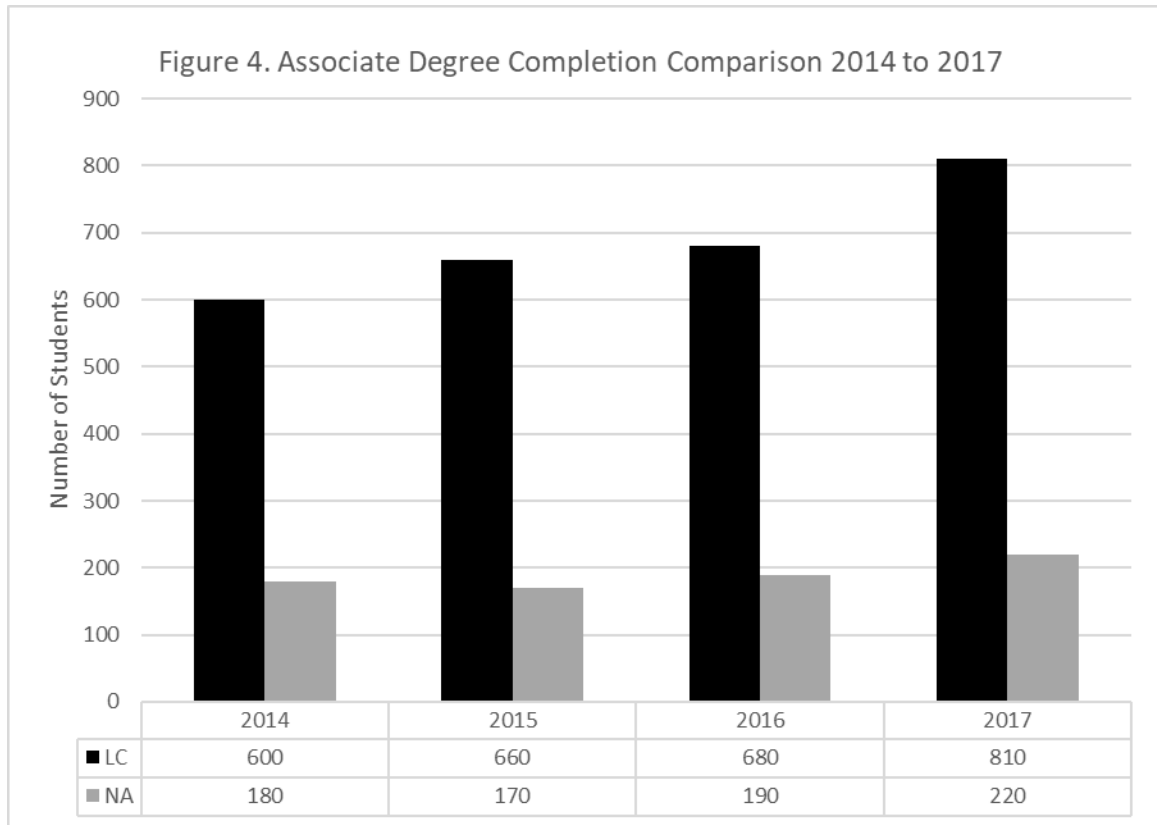


Figure 4. Associate degree comparison for LC and NA 2014 to 2017. Adapted from IPEDS, 2018.

Possible influences that prevent students from succeeding in higher education are poor attendance, minimal classroom participation, and lack of commitment during their first year in college (AIHEC, 2016). Tribal leaders testified in a conference with U.S. federal government leaders of their great concern of NA students being more at-risk to fail and drop out of school (including post-secondary institutions) and its impact on the future of tribal nations and the NA community (U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Secretary, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Indian Education, 2011). The leaders also expressed their concern that the lack of educational resources within the already poverty-stricken communities could lead NA students to not

persist. An increased understanding of what barriers exist that students encounter during their first year based on their personal perspectives would help identify students' needs and what the college can do to address those needs. Identifying what colleges perceive about student persistence would provide information as to what services need to be enhanced or changed to best support the students. Understanding students' perspectives of what would support their ability to continue and complete their degree would provide information on how to best serve the students.

Rationale

The purpose of this study was to investigate what influenced first-year NA students to persist toward graduation at a local college. The United States higher education institutions often reflect mainstream American values, beliefs, and behaviors which can make it challenging for students who identify with different traditional cultural beliefs and behaviors related to their ethnicity (Castillo et al., 2006; Fish & Syed, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017). Keith, Stastny, and Brunt (2016) emphasized the importance of the environment surrounding NA students and its impact on their college experience leading to their ability to persist to completion.

Morrow and Ackerman (2012) reported that more studies are needed on predictors of retention and what interventions are successful in retaining students. Identifying what contributing influences increase the likelihood of students' persistence would provide the opportunity to identify what strategies to develop to support student success (Jobe, Spencer, Hinkle, & Kaplan, 2016; Patterson et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2013). This study allowed me to acquire an understanding of the perspectives and

experiences of first-year NA students that influence their decision to persist toward graduation.

Definition of Terms

Academic integration: Interaction within the academic learning environment (Tinto, 1993).

First-year student: A student who has less than 30 semester hours (in a 120-hour degree program) or less than 900 contact hours (IPEDS, 2018).

Involvement/engagement: The amount of time and energy that the student expands or devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1999, p. 518).

Native American: A descendant or member of a federally recognized Indian tribe, used interchangeably with the term American Indian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Student persistence: A student's continuation of enrollment toward graduation (Tinto, 2012). Persistence is considered a student measurement (Hagedorn, n.d.).

Student retention: A student's continuation of enrollment each semester until degree completion within the allotted time (Tinto, 2012). Retention is considered an institutional measurement (Hagedorn, n.d.).

Social integration: The relationships and connections that students create outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1993).

Significance of the Study

This study was significant because it would provide an understanding of what barriers NA students encounter that influence their decision to persist to graduate or drop out of college. Although research is limited in identifying what would best support

success in retaining first-year students (Aljohani, 2016; Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012), even less is available regarding NA students in college (Patterson, Ahuna, Tinnesz, & Vanzile-Tamsen, 2014; Patterson et al., 2017; Tachine et al., 2017). Research on students' experience and perspectives of their persistence in higher education is rarely examined (Kerby, 2015). Tinto (1993), in his theory on student persistence, believed that students who engage socially and academically on campus are more likely to continue than students who do not. The results of the study provided insight as to what positively influenced students and impacted their success. Insights from this study may support the development of a curriculum for first-year students that would better prepare them for college and support them to persist to graduate.

Research Questions

Many first-year NA students enroll in colleges, yet a majority must overcome barriers to persist and graduate (AIHEC, 2016; Makomenaw, 2014; PEAIAN, 2012). This study sought to provide insight as to what influenced first-year NA students in a local college to persist to graduate. The study would bring more awareness to college administrators, faculty, and staff of the importance to better prepare NA students during their first year of higher education. The following questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What are the first-year NA students' experiences and perspectives of what influences their persistence to graduate from college?

Research Questions 2: What support did the first-year NA students receive from the local college administrators?

Research Question 3: What additional support do the first-year NA students need?

Interviews with the participants provided information to answer the research questions. Twelve open-ended questions (Appendix C) were asked of the student participants to gain their perspectives and experiences at the college. Two open-ended questions (Appendix D) were also asked of the college administrator to gain their perspective.

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate what influenced first-year NA students to persist toward graduation at a local college. To acquire this understanding, I sought to answer three primary research questions: (a) What are the first-year NA students' perspectives and experiences of what influences their persistence to graduate from college; (b) What support did the first-year NA students receive from the local college administrators; and (c) What additional support do the first-year NA students need.

This literature review presents a summary of topics of retention, persistence, graduation, social and academic integration, and NA college students. A description of the demographic, historical, and philosophic context of NAs is provided to understand the culture and environment of the students who attend colleges and the challenges they encounter (Fish & Syed, 2018; Minthorn, 2014a, 2014b; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Schmidtke, 2016). Tinto's (1993) student integration model is the foundation for the conceptual model in this study.

The literature search was conducted using multiple education databases (ERIC, Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, and Sage Journals) through Walden University's library. The parameters of the search options were set to *articles by topic* with *education* as my subject and *peer-reviewed scholarly journals* with the publication dates from January 2014 to January 2019. Search terms used were *college student persistence, college graduation, college student retention, Native American college students, and Tinto*. In my search, I also used *and* with keywords, for example, *graduation and college and NA students; retention and NA college students; persistence and college and NA students; persistence and college; retention and college; Tinto and theories*. Some of the subject headings used were *American Indian students, attrition, college students, graduation, indigenous college students, Native American college students, persistence, retention, Tinto's model, and theories on college persistence*. During the process of reading articles, I also found information that may be related to my study. Therefore I searched the author's name, the title of the article, or digital (found in the article's reference list) using Google Scholar or one of the education databases. To verify that the article was peer-reviewed, I used the Ulrich periodicals directory found on the library website.

Conceptual Framework

Theories on low persistence and retention rates of college students mostly relate to students in traditional colleges and universities (Castillo et al., 2006; Keith et al., 2016). Very few studies have yet to connect these theories to NA students in colleges and universities (Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Motl, Multon, & Zhao, 2018; PEAIAN,

2012; Thompson et al., 2013). The practice of using noncognitive predictors to measure student success pertains to academic achievement only but does not provide aspects of what influences students to accomplish their achievements (Keith et al., 2016; Robbins et al., 2004).

The conceptual framework for this study concentrated on academic and social integration perspectives in the academic and campus environment based on Tinto's (1993) student integration model. The model was used to write the research questions of what influences persistence to graduation from the context of the students' perspectives and experience of their academic and social integration on campus. The interview questions relate to the elements of Tinto's theory and the research questions (Appendix E). Therefore, by understanding what students perceive as to what has been supportive and successful in their continuation provides important concepts to review to implement positive change or enhancement of programs that support student learning.

In a search to understand persistence and retention of college students, most researchers referred to Tinto's theory of student integration to address matters on student retention and persistence (Aljohani, 2016; Astin, 1993; Hagedorn, n.d.; Jobe & Lenio, 2014; Milem & Berger, 1997; Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015). Tinto (1993) believed that each student arrives at college with a specific set of academic, family, skill, and personality traits. The interaction of these traits with the college environment determines the student's integration (Tinto, 2017). Thus, students who have the skills to navigate within the college are more inclined to be successful in completing their degree. The development of theoretical frameworks such as Tinto's (1993) model allowed further

studies to examine what other factors influence students' decisions to drop out or continue in college. Some research shows that integration and how students engage in college influence their academic achievement and college success (Andrade, 2014; Astin, 1999; Schmidtke, 2016).

Tinto's student integration model has been used widely in studies that focus on aspects of student retention and persistence (Aljohani, 2016). Roberts (2012) developed a model based on Tinto's model along with Bean and Eaton's (2001) psychological model of college student retention and Ozga and Sukhnandan's (1998) explanatory model of undergraduate non-completion, to develop a model of withdrawal and persistence for initial teacher training. Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen (2014) incorporated Tinto's model into their own work to develop a retention model that aligns with students' college experience, their career choice, and the job market. In a more recent study, Kerby (2015) expanded on Tinto's model with two other models to develop a predictive model that is flexible in building student retention plans and programs. According to Tinto (1993), understanding the characteristics of the students and why they leave is important to identify what actions are needed when developing retention strategies.

Thompson et al. (2013) emphasized the need to identify the specific coping strategies that influence student persistence. Students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, who lack academic and social skills, are more likely to enter college underprepared. The aspects of involvement would encourage students to engage in more activities on campus, both academic and nonacademic (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's (1993) model addressed academic and social integration that influence students' decisions to persist or drop out. Tinto (2012) believed that academic and social integration interacts with one another. Academic integration occurs within the academic learning environment, while social integration occurs outside of the classroom.

Students who engage in the college environment have a more profound impact on their ability to succeed in completion (Astin, 1993, 1999). According to Tinto (1993), students enter college with a variety of characteristics that impact their decisions to persist and complete their education. Students, who engage in and out of the academic environment, are more likely to persist and complete college (Guillory, 2009; Motl et al., 2018). Tinto (1993) stated "[t]here appears to be an important linkage between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort" (p. 71).

As students make progress in engaging in their own academic learning and social interaction, the more likely it is they would persist and complete their program. The focus for college administrators should be on the students' social and intellectual growth and how this is interpreted in the institutional goals (Guillory, 2009; Schmidtke, 2016). To further promote student retention, colleges should be more accountable toward the student to ensure retention and completion (Tinto, 2012). Colleges should ensure that policies reflect student retention and completion, as well as address expectations, support, an assessment with feedback, and involvement.

Using the concept of Tinto's student involvement model provided me insight and context for studying factors influencing first-year NA student persistence toward

graduation at the local college. Students who are involved and engaged, academically and socially, on campus are more likely to persist toward completion (Astin, 1993, 1999; Motl et al., 2018; Tinto, 2017). Understanding student involvement and engagement, as well as the resources that exist to increase student retention, may provide a trigger for other institutions to investigate how effective they have been in accomplishing their mission among their student population.

Review of the Broader Problem

College student persistence and retention have long been considered topics of research within mainstream colleges (Aljohani, 2016). NA college students are among the least studied groups. Students enroll in colleges or universities in anticipation that completing with a degree would provide opportunities for employment leading to independence and self-efficacy (Patterson et al., 2017). To gain an understanding of the environment in which the study is situated, the demographics, history, and current trends of higher education for NAs are reviewed (Fish & Syed, 2018; Minthorn, 2014a; Minthorn, 2014b; Motl et al., 2018; Tachine et al., 2017).

Native American Demographic Context

The 2010 U.S. census count reported 308,745,538 people were living in the U.S. (including Puerto Rico), and of those 5.2 million were people of Native American descent. These figures represented an increase of 39% among Native American or Alaska Native population since the 2000 census. There were 567 federally recognized Native American tribes of which 32 percent are under the age of 18. The median household income was \$38,530 in 2015 as compared with \$55,775 for the nation as a

whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The poverty rate in 2017 was 26.7% the highest rate of any race group. For the nation as a whole, the poverty rate was 13.4 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Brief History of Native American Education

1800s. The federal government's Indian Office established the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1879. Afterward, more boarding schools were established throughout the U.S. Indian children were forced to leave their families and move to one of these boarding schools, hundreds of miles from their native homeland. Speaking their native language and wearing traditional clothing was not allowed. They were also subjected to treatment similar to military conduct. The U.S. Congress passed the Indian Civilization Act in 1890, in which Mission schools were established throughout Indian country (Ryehner, 2013).

1900s. The Meriam Report was published in 1928, which criticized the quality of education that NA students were being subjected to and called for a culturally appropriate education. The Indian Reorganization Act, also known as the "Indian New Deal," was then passed by the U.S. Congress in 1934. The Johnson O'Malley Act was also passed by Congress, which required states to establish public schools for NA students. The first tribal controlled school established on the Navajo Nation in 1966 known as Rough Rock Demonstration School. Navajo Community College (renamed to Diné College in 1997) was the first tribal college established in 1969. Ultimately, the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1978 (Ryehner, 2013).

A report on the failure of education in Indian country was released by a congressional subcommittee titled *Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge*. As a result, the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Education Act of 1972 and in 1975 the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which allowed federal funds to be appropriated to support Indian education programs on and off Indian country. The NA Languages Act (also known as the Language Revitalization Act) was established in 1990 to support the preservation and protection of tribal languages by allowing NA tribes the freedom to use their own language in areas such as curriculum.

American Indian Higher Education Consortium. The American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) was established in 1973 by six tribal colleges to “provide a support network as they worked to influence federal policies on American Indian higher education” (AIHEC, 2016, para. 1). Since its inception, AIHEC has grown to thirty-seven tribal controlled colleges and universities, in the U.S. and Canada, and has been involved in policy changes for Indian education.

Tribal colleges and universities. Tribal colleges and universities (TCU) were established and chartered by their respective tribal governments. The mission and purpose for all TCUs were to support and educate NA students, although the institutions have open admission policies (AIHEC, 2016).

2000s. A report released by the Education Trust in 2013 titled *The State of Education for Native Students*, providing information that there were no improvements in achievement levels for NA students, which may have an impact on lack of college readiness (Meza, 2015; Ryehner, 2013). The report provided a platform of underlying

issues in the secondary level, and some results that impacted students who do desire to attend college yet lack the preparation. Statistical research in educational attainment was conducted, but the qualitative part is either lacking or missing. Another report that focused on college completion was generated by the American Association of Community Colleges, titled *The Completion Agenda: A Call to Action* (McPhail & American Association of Community Colleges, 2011). This report provided information that colleges, students and the community all are equally responsible for addressing educational challenges that affect persistence, retention, and graduation of college students.

This historical information provides a background of education within the NA community and access to education through federal policies and initiatives. Since the inception of boarding schools and public schools, NA students have had to assimilate to a model of European education. In the mid-1900s changes in federal policies allowed NA tribes to gain sovereignty which provided opportunities for some tribes to begin establishing their own educational institutes to provide a supportive learning environment for NA students based on cultural values and traditions (American Indian Higher Education Consortium [AIHEC], 2012; Brayboy, 2005; Fish & Syed, 2018; Guillory, 2009; Makomenaw, 2014; Patterson et al., 2014; Patterson et al., 2017). Despite the efforts of tribal colleges that integrate cultural values and traditions within their curriculum and support services, retention and graduation rates are still low compared to other non-native institutions (Motl et al., 2018; NCES, 2017).

Native American tribes have over the centuries tried to retain their language, culture, and traditions. Education is a mandate for all children nation-wide in the U.S. and resulted in, for most tribes, children being taken out of their homes and being placed in urban settings (Patterson et al., 2014; Patterson et al., 2017; Ryehner, 2013). It has been within the past 50 years that some tribes have taken the initiative to establish their own schools, but they still have to conform to the educational policies which mandate nation-wide and state-wide proficiency standards and testing. It is difficult enough that NA students graduate from high school not prepared for college, but even more challenging when they enter college and are unable to adapt to the college environment (Brayboy, 2005; Keith et al., 2016).

Persistence and Retention

Colleges are required to calculate their retention rate according to a formula that is defined by federal educational policies. This calculation does not include transfer students or students who “stop-out” and return later. The retention rates provided to federal and state education departments are published and made available to the public. The national average retention rate for the 2010 cohort of post-secondary institutions, according to IPEDS (2018), was reported as 77.1%. The Condition of Education 2017 reported that at two-year colleges, the overall retention rate was reported as 60% (NCES, 2017).

The issue of student persistence has continued to grow in importance as college enrollment increases. Student persistence begins once a student has been admitted into college and begins academic work. Many students enroll in college confident in their

ability to succeed in attaining a degree. But there are those who become overwhelmed or encounter other challenges, academically and socially, that influence their decision to drop-out. According to Tinto (2017), the first year of a college student is the most critical year because the student seeks to adjust to the demand for college-level learning and campus life. Astin (1993) believed that the college persistence and retention rates are affected by the level of quality of students' interactions with college faculty and staff, as well as with their peers.

Most studies of college student retention, including the theoretical models, have their deficiencies and limitations (Aljohani, 2016), of which findings are usually not easily generalizable to other colleges. Although colleges may have similar issues, each still has their own unique characteristics and challenges. Patterson et al. (2014) reported that most NA students had the highest college drop-out rate compared to other minority students and recommended that colleges not only concentrate on the student but also what exists within the college that affects student retention. Colleges also need to continue to strive to address retention beyond the first year to ensure students persistence toward graduation (Ishitani, 2016).

There are several reasons identified by researchers (Aljohani, 2016) used to explain challenges first-year students experience that impact their persistence toward graduation. Thompson et al. (2013) emphasized the need to identify the specific coping strategies that influence student persistence. More academic engagement, such as tutoring, would support students' retention thus increasing their likelihood to persist to graduation (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). The cultural dimension included having a sense of

belonging and the student's perspective of campus climate, which influenced the decision to continue or drop-out (Thompson et al., 2013). Patterson et al. (2017) believed that a one-size-fits-all approach addressing NA student dropout may be inadequate and would have to be adaptable to local conditions. Flynn et al. (2012) believed that further studies would assist in "...understanding antecedents for dropping out and developing preventive interventions" (p. 447). Although there are many different programs that address retention and persistence, most of which focus on first-year students, studies indicated that identifying influences that challenge students during their first year would provide information on what supportive program is more suitable for NA students to create an environment that is engaging and supportive (Bowman, 2016; Bowman & Felix, 2017; Guillory, 2009; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Jobe et al., 2016; Keith et al., 2016; Mosholder, Waite, Larsen, & Goslin, 2016; Tachine et al., 2017).

The student's transition to college is important, more so for NA students because of the lack of college skills and/or oftentimes having to adjust from an NA cultural, rural life to that of a busy campus. Most often NA students who lack college preparation are identified as "at-risk." Although it is important to identify students, it is also equally important that these students are able to get the support they need to address the academic and social challenges they encounter while in college (Keith et al., 2016). The experiences in the classroom and on campus reflect the personal goals of students and their commitment to the college (Lerdpornkulrat, Koul, & Poondej, 2018). If the experience is not conducive, the student may decide to transfer or drop-out.

Astin (1993, 1999) believed that students' persistence depended on the level and quality of their interaction with college staff, faculty, and other students. Tinto (1993, 2012, 2017) believed that students do not return to college because they do not adjust to the academic rigor, are uncertain of their academic goals, experience poor integration within the college community, have feelings of isolation, and/or possess a lack of commitment. Early assessment of the student's academic integration and institutional commitment provides information to identify support systems that would benefit the student to persist (Davidson, 2015). Colleges need to be aware that academic integration and the relation between the student's personal and environmental aspects (Davidson, 2015) play a key role in students' decision toward continuing their education.

Students begin college confident in their ability to succeed, but do not really comprehend the challenges of the demands of college study until they are well into the semester (Tinto, 2017). Colleges need to identify these challenges before they impact the student's self-efficacy and decision on whether to continue or not. While it is important that students who lack academic preparation are identified, it is also important that they are able to obtain the support they need early to address the challenges so they do not undermine their motivation to persist (Tinto, 2017). Colleges need to not only recruit and enroll students, but to also initiate continuing support throughout the student's term of enrollment until completion (Patterson et al., 2017). The importance of identifying NA students' self-efficacy and coping skills, as well as recognizing the diversity of their cultural values, traditions, and beliefs play a key role when designing programs that support retention of NA students (Fish & Syed, 2018).

Students who are very confident of their ability to cope with the academic and college environment have a higher persistence to continue (Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2017; Browning, McDermott, Scaffa, Booth, & Carr, 2018; Keith et al., 2016). The personal disposition of students, such as unclear or undecided educational goals, affects their persistence toward continuing to completion (Keith et al., 2016). Therefore, the students' learning environment can influence how they perceive themselves and their confidence to cope with academic and college life (Lerdpornkulrat et al., 2018).

Academic Readiness

Colleges have developed strategies in recruiting NA students to enroll in their college, but still have the challenge of retaining them to completion. The inadequate preparation for college, not only the rigor of academics but also the college environment, is a challenge that most NA students encounter during their first semester (Bowman & Felix, 2017; Flynn et al., 2012). The lack of preparation of NA students seems also to stem from not identifying a career while in high school or not understanding what a career is, thus the concept that going to college would get them a job is not understood or motivating (Flynn, Duncan, & Evenson, 2013).

NA students enter college in anticipation of attaining a degree leading to employment, and for most, jobs in their community (AIHEC, 2016). Data reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) and AIHEC (2016) have shown that the NA student population is still behind the national average in completing their degree. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reported that 29% of the U.S. population received a bachelor's

degree or higher, whereas 13% of the total NA and Alaska Native population attained a similar degree level. According to NCES (2017), NA undergraduate enrollment decreased by 26% (from 179,000 to 132,000), between 2010 and 2015.

Peterson Zah (former Navajo Nation President and former Special Advisor to the President on American Indian Affairs for Arizona State University) testified, in a meeting with representatives from the U.S. Department of Education, of his experiences of Navajo students enrolling at Arizona State University who had high expectations in attaining a college degree, yet in reality they were not academically prepared to pass their general education courses in their first year (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The *2014 Native Youth Report* disclosed the educational gaps of which was reported that NA students lacked academic preparation for higher education (Executive Office of the President, 2015). Students who are not academically prepared tend to lack literacy skills, or do not know their abilities, therefore are more likely to struggle through their first year in college (Astin, 1993; Gross & Latham, 2012; Stewart et al., 2015; Tinto, 1993).

The American College Testing (ACT) and National Indian Education Association (NIEA) reported in *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015: American Indian Students* that Native American students are more academically underprepared than any other racial or ethnic group. The report showed that out of the 73% of Native American students who hoped to earn a degree, only 11% met the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks in four subjects, as shown in Figure 5, and that has been declining in all but one subject since 2011. In 2015, of the 14,711 Native American students who

took the ACT, 52% met none of its four college readiness benchmarks, in each of four core subjects: English, reading, mathematics, and science.

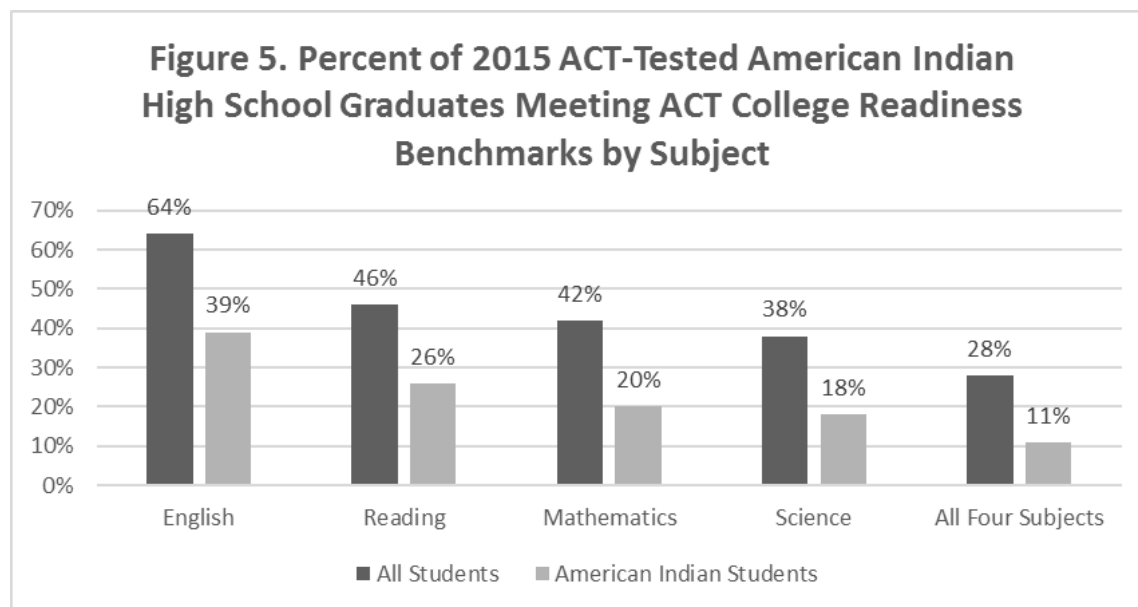


Figure 5. Percent of 2015 ACT-tested American Indian high school graduates meeting ACT college readiness benchmarks by subject. Reprinted from *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015: American Indian students* by ACT/NIEA, 2016, retrieved from <http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/CCCR-2015-AmericanIndian.pdf>.

As described earlier, the overall graduation rate for NA compared to the national rate was less than 1%. In general, the total population of NA students is too small to be included in national studies when race and ethnicities are broken down. The NCES provided a report for 2005 - 2006 comparing the degrees conferred by level, race/ethnicity, and sex (see Appendix F) which shows that NA had the lowest numbers and percentage. According to AIHEC (2016), the traditional measures of graduation rates, such as IPEDS, do not portray the success of NA college students. Students who completed their program of study outside of the traditional timeframe that is required do

not get included in the report. One explanation could be that new students are testing into remedial courses during their first year of college resulting in their having to take an extra semester or semesters to complete their general academic education before continuing their program of study. Another is the student *stopping out* and returning to complete later (sometimes years later) and discovering that they must repeat courses or take additional courses.

An increasing number of NA students have been enrolling in colleges and universities, with the anticipation of attaining a degree, yet national reports have indicated that a small percentage continue into the next term or year and an even smaller percentage graduate (IPEDS, 2018). Most college students were unaware that they lacked skills to recognize when information is needed, how to attain information, and what to do with it in an academic setting. Lack of these skills, as well as the level of anxiety students experience during the transitional process during the first year of college impact the student's decision to continue with college. It is important that colleges have resources to support students to develop their skills as well as address other challenges they may encounter in the classroom and within the college environment.

Academic Integration

The terms integration, involvement, and engagement are used by researchers in different ways (Lerdpornkulrat et al., 2018). Tinto's description of the terms integration, involvement, and engagement are not identical. Tinto (2012) described engagement and involvement as observable behaviour while integration represents an interaction, "...such as arises when one perceives oneself as a valued member of a community." (p. 78).

Browning et al. (2018) believed that every student has their own individual differences and experiences, which impact their academic and social integration in college. College students need to be comfortable within the college environment to be able to become more engaged in the classroom and the social surroundings, thus leading to more academic and social integration.

Colleges have begun establishing programs and/or curricula designed to address challenges that students encounter during their first year. The most popular resource is the *First Year Institute* founded by Gardner and Barefoot in 1999, which was later renamed to John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (Gardner, Barefoot, & Swing, & South Carolina Univ., 2001). As a result, most colleges began establishing first-year experience (FYE) programs to address college student transitional issues and work toward developing the student's skills. Gardner believed that to support student learning during the first year, programs should be designed composed of academics integrated with cocurricular activities across the college campus (Gardner, et al., 2001). Most programs have been shown to have contributed to the increase of access to higher education and at the same time increased completion rates through improved student retention. But the effectiveness of FYE programs and their effectiveness toward NA student retention still needs more research (Bers & Younger, 2014; Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013; Tinto, 2012).

New student orientations and other supportive resources, such as mentoring, tutoring, and college preparatory courses, are examples of programs that could be integrated with or supplement FYE programs. Other means of engaging students in the

academics are service learning and learning communities, which are accessible in colleges, but very little is known as to how effective they are or could be with NA students in local colleges (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). Tutoring is also another academic support system as well as faculty understanding that they need to identify students who may need these services (Guillory, 2009).

Results of a study conducted by Connolly, Flynn, Jemmott, and Oestreicher (2017) showed that FYE programs integrated within the classroom increased students' ability toward addressing challenges and engaging within the classroom. Identifying students who may be at-risk of failing or dropping-out need to be identified early in the semester and the college needs to be responsible for intervening. The intervention should include identifying what would help students gain the skills to address issues that hinder their persistence toward completing their education as well as create meaningful connections with peers and the college community (Connolly et al., 2017).

Colleges would need to establish support systems that would assist students to identify and acknowledge their strengths to overcome challenges as well as to provide a conducive learning environment. Colleges that are more compatible to meeting the needs of students and have supportive mechanisms in place have a higher student integration into the academic and social areas of college life, which impacts the student's ability to persist successfully toward graduation (Tinto, 2017). In other words, students are less likely to drop out or transfer to another college when the match between students and college are a good fit.

Tribal colleges and universities have made attempts to design FYE programs using indigenous methodology by integrating the language and culture of the tribe that the institution is affiliated with (AIHEC, 2016). The location of tribal colleges and universities on reservation lands and their institutional missions to integrate local tribal nation philosophies into all aspects of the college environment further supports this methodology. But many non-tribal colleges have a lower NA student enrollment, and very few are located near tribal reservations, therefore making it more challenging to use this method.

Mosholder et al. (2016) emphasized that it is important to recognize that first-year NA students need to adjust within the campus and a form of peer mentoring by other NA students has been found to be beneficial. Identifying peer mentors who have are confident with their ability to mediate the academic and social integration of their peers provide support for first-year college student retention (Holt & Fifer, 2018; Mosholder et al., 2016). As NA students become more integrated within the social and academic environment, the persistence to continue into the next semester increases. Colleges are encouraged to seek the assistance of other NA students to serve as mentors and/or to identify what can support new students, as well as take the initiative to understand the history and culture of NA students (Makomenaw, 2012).

Although curriculum and FYE programs that support first-year students are available, they may not be effective if students are not engaged meaningfully (Bowman & Felix, 2017; DeAngelo, 2014; Yee, 2016), therefore it is important to improve and expand upon programs that reflect the needs of the student population (Martin, 2017).

An example is NA educational philosophies, such as Sa'ah Naaghai Bik'eh Hozhoon (Haskie, 2013), a Navajo educational philosophy that integrates traditional and cultural principles of living. This method of integrating the philosophy within the academic setting (used in one tribal college) provided a glimpse of engagement but needs further study of influences that impact student persistence. By observing and identifying characteristics of successful students and how they engage academically and socially could also provide information about what positive influences would support students to persist in college (Mosholder & Goslin, 2013).

Native American students who struggle academically may be due to an environment incompatible with NA ways of being, as opposed to simply being unprepared (Keith et al., 2016). Therefore, when such issues become overwhelming for the student, it would most likely result in the decision to leave college before earning a degree. It is critical to understand what strengthens NA students' determination to persist toward graduation and what colleges can do to assist in this accomplishment. Colleges need to create an inclusive and welcoming learning environment for NA students in addition to support systems to address any academic problems (Keith et al., 2016).

Social Integration

Native American students experience similar persistence barriers to those of other students in colleges, but the significance of cultural values is an integral part of social integration for these students (Patterson et al., 2017; Schmidt & Akande, 2011; Tachine et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2013). The connectedness of culture and community impacts students' completing their education, and if not met during the first year, students

have a higher rate of leaving (Andrade, 2014; Minthorn, 2014b; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Ward et al., 2014). Tinto (2012) believed that students make decisions to stay or leave according to how they fit into the environment of the campus and the support they receive. The experience within the classroom and campus, as well as the environment within, seems to influence students' decision to continue and remain with that institution. Patterson et al. (2017) recommended that institutions need to make adjustments to address college NA dropouts by addressing it through a systemic perspective such as living and learning communities, social intervention, and learning activities.

Social engagement in NA communities encompasses the cultural and traditional values of the student and should be inclusive in the campus environment. A holistic approach that allows the student to thrive would increase the chance to persist in college (Bowman & Felix, 2017; Patterson et al., 2017; Schreiner, 2013). The beliefs and values that are encouraged in NA communities are what build strong support systems (Minthorn, 2014a). Understanding and acknowledging the NA values are a significant part of how this impacts students and their decision to continue or drop-out of college (Flynn et al., 2012). The sense of belonging within the academic and social environment of the college is important to students (Lerdpornkulrat et al., 2018) because it would create an encouraging atmosphere for learning.

Conclusion

Persistence to graduation depends on the student's academic readiness, academic integration, and social integration (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Native American students have the lowest level of overall educational attainment of all minority groups

and graduate at much lower rates than other students (NCES, 2017). Nonetheless, colleges recruit NA students who enroll anticipating graduating with a degree that would provide them opportunities to gain employment and possibly a career. Yet most students enter college lacking skills to take on the rigor of college academics, as well as the campus environment, which may create anxieties and frustrations that impact their decision to persist and continue with their education.

Approaches in addressing the issue of NA students require understanding the student's cultural background and the environment they come from (Patterson et al., 2017). NA students leaving a rural community and entering a college campus may result in a more confusing kind of "culture shock" and even more so for those who lack college readiness skills (Motl et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2017). Persistence begins once students are admitted into college and should not be blamed for poor academic performance due to their lack of college preparation. Administrators need to become more responsible in recognizing the needs of the students who enroll in their colleges and implement activities to retain them.

Research evidence suggests that students who are better prepared for college had a greater chance to persist and graduate (Davidson, 2015; Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017; Stewart et al., 2015; Yu, 2017). Students who take responsibility by being involved in their learning (academic and within the campus) are more likely to continue into the next semester (Astin, 1993, 1999; Tinto, 2012, 2017). Regarding NA students, additional influences were the extent of the student's cultural and traditional values (Makomenaw, 2014; Minthorn, 2014a; Minthorn, 2014b; Patterson et al., 2014;

Patterson et al., 2017). Colleges need to become more aware of the cultural and traditional values of NA students in order to gain a better understanding of what motivates and supports them to persist toward graduation (Champagne, 2015; Fish & Syed, 2018; Guillory, 2009; Keith et al., 2016).

Implications

The need to support first-year students to persist cannot be overstated. Many NA first-year college students lack the skills that would adequately prepare them for college (ACT/NIEA, 2016; AIHEC, 2016; Executive Office of the President, 2015; Flynn et al., 2012; Hampton, 2013; Makomenaw, 2014; Meza, 2015; Minthorn, 2014a; Minthorn, 2014b; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; The Education Trust, 2013; Ward et al., 2014). Studies on persistence and retention indicated that students who are comfortable engaging in the classroom and campus were more likely to continue to completion (see for example, Astin, 1993; Astin, 1999; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012). Students involved in their academic and cocurricular settings were more likely to continue with their education at the college (Astin, 1993; Bickerstaff et al., 2017; Schmidtke, 2016). Community colleges play a critical role for NA students who otherwise would not be able to attend a larger college or university, but the challenges that first-year NA students encounter remains the same as for any other college student. There is a need to research what NA students experience during their first year in college and understand what influences their decision to persist to complete their program (Fish & Syed, 2018).

Based on the findings, one project that could be developed is a nine-week curriculum for first-year NA students. The curriculum would be implemented in small groups of first-year students consisting of between 20 to no more than 25 students, taught in an interactive setting. Topics such as math, writing, and computer literacy skills would be aligned with supports determined as needed by the data. Integrated with this course would be mini-workshops that focus on study skills, communication, and critical thinking skills. As part of the nonacademic activities, awareness topics and skill-development types of activities would be presented and discussed outside of the classroom. Learning outcomes would be identified for the courses. An evaluation plan would be implemented to measure the social and engagement growth of the students through surveys. Another project could be a professional development workshop for college faculty, staff, and administrators. This workshop would entail information about NA demographics, culture, traditions, cultural learning paradigms, and some type of project for the semester. The workshop would be presented by a Native American person or group.

Summary

Section 1 addressed the problem in which NA students were not graduating from higher education institutions at the same rate as the rest of the U.S. population. The rationale for the study was based on the problem acknowledged by other studies. Terms specific to the study were identified and explained. The significance of the study was the importance of recognizing and addressing the challenges of NA college students and their ability to persist to graduate. Three research questions were presented and the

implications discussed. Literature was reviewed confirming the problem of persistence to graduation of NA college students as well as other first-year students.

Section 2 addressed the research design and approach. A description provided (a) how the participants were selected through a method of sampling and (b) the data that was collected using interviews. Data was analyzed through coding that identified emerging themes. Section 3 described the project, which was a White Paper. Section 4 presented my reflections on the process of writing the study and the recommendations resulting from the study.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The qualitative case study design was chosen because the research provided insight and understanding of NA students' experiences and perspectives that influence their decision to persist toward graduation at a local college. In addition, one administrator at LC was able to add their perspective for needed resources. A case study design is "...an empirical inquiry that investigates the phenomenon in-depth and within its real-world context" and its features (Yin, 2014, p. 16). The researcher is the *primary instrument* to collect and analyze data (Merriam, 2009) searching for meaning and understanding, and as a result, providing a rich description of the study. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) defined a case study as a "detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject..." (p. 59). This case study focused on the persistence of NA college students in a local college setting which provides a rich description of their perspectives of their experience.

The case study approach is more compatible to gain "...insight, discovery, and interpretation, rather than hypothesis testing" (Merriam, 2009, p. 42). Other qualitative approaches such as grounded theory, ethnographic, or narrative research designs did not fit the data collection process for this study. Grounded theory enables the researcher to develop a theory that provides an explanation that is "grounded" in data from the participants (Creswell, 2013). The intent of this project study was not to develop a theory or generate the explanation of a theory, but to gain an understanding of each student's experience to help answer the research questions. According to Creswell (2013),

ethnographic researchers "...investigate how interactions in a cultural group are influenced by the larger society." (p. 15). This approach requires the researcher to be totally immersed as an active participant in the group. This project study did not focus on the cultural system but rather the students' perspective of their experience in college. Researchers using a narrative research approach describe and interpret the stories of one or two individuals from the data gathered through a collection of reports and life experiences (Creswell, 2012). This study did not document the life stories of the participants. Last, with this study, I sought to gain an understanding of the experiences of the participants to help answer the research questions.

Participants

This study focused on the persistence to graduate of NA students classified as first-year students in a local college. For this case study, six NA students were selected to participate to provide a deeper inquiry per participant. The population for this study were NA students classified as first-year students at their time of enrollment at the college. The students were currently enrolled and had completed one or more semesters. One administrator was selected to participate to gain the perspective of student persistence at the college.

Purposeful sampling procedure was used to recruit six student participants possessing the most in-depth information about their college experience and who were willing to share their experiences at LC. Purposeful sampling involves the identification and selection of participants based on certain criteria that reflect the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2012). This type of sampling was most beneficial for this study because I

selected participants who had experience as first-year students at the college and thus had the knowledge to share as to how they persisted to continue into their next semester(s). In this study, I examined the perspectives and experiences of the participants to provide insight as to what influenced students in a local college to persist toward graduation. In addition, an interview was conducted with one college administrator to gain the perspective of what support was provided to first-year students and what other support could be offered.

Criteria for Participant Selection

Participants were NA students (18 years of age or older) who were classified as first-year students, currently enrolled at LC, and had completed at least 1 semester at LC. Participants were chosen using purposeful sampling, as this type of sampling allowed me (as the researcher) to select students who best qualified in providing the informational needs to complete the study. I interviewed the students at the college campus.

Criteria for the selection of the college administrators were open to those who had been at the college for at least 5 years or more. Department chairs were also eligible to participate, but none responded back. Therefore, one administrator was selected to participate.

Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants

The local college has an Institutional Review Board; therefore, I sought their permission to use their college as my study site. The procedures were as follows: (a) submission of the IRB Application for the use of Human Subjects, (b) completion of the computer-based training course on the Protection of Human Research Subjects and

provided the certificate, (c) provided interview questions, and (d) received the response from the IRB Director within 2 weeks. I applied for and received approval from the Walden University IRB to conduct the study (approval number 07-31-19-0311787) as well. The procedures were as follows: (a) submission of the online Form A (A description of data sources and partner sites), (b) submission of the site approval documentation), (c) IRB provided written feedback until the materials met the university's ethical standards, (d) after the proposal approval was documented in Taskstream, IRB and chair responded back on status and any further changes required were completed.

The college's institutional data office, located on the main campus, provided a listing of the students currently enrolled at the campus. Each student was notified by electronic mail (email) and by postal mail of the selection with an invitation to participate and a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix G). A deadline was included to respond back, and those who agreed to participate called or sent me an email to schedule an appointment for the interview.

The college website had a list of the administrators to which I sent emails asking them to contact me if they were interested in participating in the study. The email included a brief explanation of the study and information that I would select the first two who responded. After several attempts to acquire two administrators, only one was available to participate. The administrator was notified by email of the selection and provided a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix H). A deadline was included to

respond back, and the administrator agreed to participate by calling me to schedule an appointment for the interview.

All interviews were conducted within a one-month time period. Each interview was conducted in a private room at the college. I traveled to the site as I am familiar with the route and it is within a one-hour travel range.

An explanation was provided to each of the students who agreed to participate on the purpose of the study and their rights as a participant, including that their participation was voluntary. I also informed them that should they decide not to continue to participate that they could withdraw from the study at any time. A one-time monetary payment of \$20.00 was paid at the end of the interview as a “thank you for your time” to each student participant who completed the interview.

The college administrator did not receive any type of payment. An explanation was provided on how the participant’s information would be kept confidential by not using their name or any description that would identify them. Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. were used in place of the name for the study. The students and administrator who agreed to participate in the study signed the informed consent form in my presence.

Establishing a Researcher-Participant Relationship

When I first met with each student and administrator during the interview, I explained my role as a researcher. I provided the participant the opportunity to ask any questions before I began explaining the purpose and process of the study. I then provided an explanation to each participant of what the study was about and that the results of the study would be beneficial for students because it would allow me to design a project

suitable for first-year students so that they can persist to graduation. After the explanation, the participants were provided the opportunity to ask any additional questions, and I was honest with my answers because it is important to gain the trust of the participants. To clarify the importance of their privacy, I reiterated that the interviews were confidential. The transcripts were provided to them for their review, as well as the preliminary findings to ascertain their feedback. The interviews were scheduled in 45-minute increments, by appointment, and conducted in the meeting room of the college. The interviews were digitally recorded (with permission of the participant), and notes were taken, being careful to consider, and being mindful of making sure, that the participants knew they had my full attention. I reminded the participants that I was asking questions as a researcher. The data (digital recording, notes, interview sheets, and archived data) and laptop recording all activities of the study, are kept in a locked file cabinet in a secured premise in my home office.

Protection of Participants' Rights

To protect the participant's rights, caution was taken to ensure that each participant felt comfortable and had the option to withdraw from the study (with no negative consequences) at any time. To ensure the protection of the participant's rights, an Informed Consent form was provided and explained before the interview. Care was taken to avoid influencing the participants' decisions either through coercion (explicit or implied threats) or undue influence (excessive compensation). I informed the participants prior and during the interview that sometimes minor discomforts such as stress or becoming upset may pose a small risk during the discussion, but this study would not

pose such a threat to their safety or well-being. Protecting the privacy of the students was accomplished by assigning a number for each participant.

Privacy of data and records of the information obtained during the interview would be adhered to by limiting access to data by storing them in a locked cabinet in my house, and properly disposing of any data records by shredding them five years after the study has been completed. No other person has access to this computer, and it is located in my house. All electronic data and recordings saved on a disk, tape, or another means of electronic storage would be properly disposed of by shredding and/or permanent deletion 5 years after the study has been completed.

Data Collection

For this study, the method of data collection was in the form of in-depth interviews with the students and administrator of the college. Six students and one administrator were recruited and selected to participate in this study. I also kept field notes and a research log.

Interviews

The interview protocol included the date, time, location of the interview, and student participant's name with thirteen questions I developed (see Appendix C) and two open-ended questions for the administrator participant (see Appendix D). The participants were interviewed separately using semistructured interviews, at the study site, and in the language they felt most comfortable with. The student participants were asked thirteen open-ended questions that focused on their experiences and perspectives of what influenced their ability to persist toward graduation. The college administrator

participant was asked two open-ended questions on the perspective of what influenced students to persist to graduation. Subsequent questions followed to gain more insight, clarification, information, or understanding of the responses. Digital recording (with permission by the participant) ensured that the words of each participant were correctly recorded. Field notes were used to record any observations during the interview, such as body language. Through my observation I noticed that most of the student participants showed more emotion by holding their hand to their chest when they spoke of their goals. This gesture along with the tone of their voice, which was deep and serious, symbolized the significance of how they felt about their goals. I described my feelings in a reflective journal about conducting the research, which added to the qualitative inquiry to record assumptions, expectations, reactions, and biases of the research process. A research log provided details of the data collected, such as the date, place, and time.

Role of the Researcher

My prior employment at a local tribal college as a former administrator focused on program management and any interaction with students was primarily on the main campus. The study site was a local college, which is over 90 miles away from this tribal college. I did not have any interaction with students at LC. Therefore, the participants at the study site were from a different college, thus limiting personal bias. In addition, I am also of Native American ancestry.

Data Analysis

A computer assisted qualitative data analysis software known as MAXQDA was used to assist in analyzing the data collected from the interviews. I transcribed the

recordings from the interviews using a voice-to-text software within the week after each interview was completed. The data were analyzed after all the interviews were completed. The steps to analyze the data were as follows: (a) organize the data, (b) find and organize ideas and concepts using a coding system, (c) build over-arching themes from the data, and (d) interpret the findings (Creswell, 2012).

Organizing the data involved the process of preparing and organizing raw data into meaningful parts of analysis. After the interviews, I transformed the audio recordings into transcripts in a Word document. To ensure that the transcript was accurate I provided a copy of the transcript to the participants and all replied that their interview transcript was accurate. After this step, I uploaded the transcript into MAXQDA and began the process of open coding. MAXQDA does not analyze qualitative data itself but allows the researcher to organize the data from the transcripts. While reviewing the data I found all data usable or relevant to the study.

A coding system was used to find and organize ideas and concepts. The method of in vivo coding was used, as this type of coding allowed me to capture the meaning of the student's experience (Saldaña, 2015). In vivo coding is a coding method that places emphasis on the actual spoken words of the participants used in qualitative data analysis (Saldaña, 2015). According to Saldaña (2015) "In vivo codes are more action-oriented than the descriptive codes" (p. 77). In vivo coding entails taking the words verbatim and capturing the meanings essential to people's experience (Saldaña, 2015). The coding method allowed me to search the data for *patterns*, *topics*, and *themes* that emerged from the words and phrases (Saldaña, 2015).

Building over-arching themes in the data was the next step. I identified the clusters and the descriptions showing the themes and the frequency with which the themes were mentioned. Subgroups of related data that have similar meaning were also clustered as subthemes and labeled. The themes were interpreted to answer the research questions. I also included my views and interpretation of the findings because I can never remove myself from interpretation and personal experience (Creswell, 2012).

Evidence of Quality

The evidence of the quality of the transcripts for accuracy and the preliminary findings were conducted through member checking. The importance of member checking is that the participants have an opportunity to review what they said, add more information if they want to, and to edit what they said. After transcribing the audiotape of the interview, I reviewed the transcript and compared it with the audio recordings. I then had each participant review the transcript for accuracy and provide feedback of the preliminary findings to ensure that it matched what they truly intended to describe (Creswell, 2012).

To address researcher bias, a reflective journal was kept during the research process. I noted and recorded my reflections (thoughts, feelings, observations) during the study. The journal entries allowed me to bracket any bias I had on the data collected. Any biases that came up were reported in the final study discussion in the data results section.

Any discrepant cases or data that did not seem to line-up with the other data (which are similar in comparison) were reported in the findings. Inconsistencies among

categorizations were identified and determined if they had any connection to the purpose of the study and the research questions. If not, then I reported it in the findings and did my best to understand the discrepancy.

Data Analysis Results

The local problem that motivated this study was the increasing number of NA students enrolled at LC who do not persist to graduate. The purpose of the study was to investigate what influenced first-year NA students to persist toward graduation at a local college. The findings were exhibited related to the research questions, which were:

RQ1: What are the first-year NA students' experiences and perspectives of what influences their persistence to graduate from college?

RQ2: What support did the first-year NA students receive from the local college administrators?

RQ3: What additional support do the first-year NA students need?

The identified problem for this study and the research questions guided the data collection.

For this study, six students and one administrator at LC were interviewed, and from the data analysis four themes emerged. The LC research department provided a list of first-year NA students from which 24 students responded. The students who were selected for the interviews were based on the requirements, which narrowed the list to nine students. But six showed up for the appointment and agreed to the interview. The student participants were first-year NA currently enrolled at LC. The administrator who participated was a nonNative American and an employee of LC for over ten years. For

the study, student participants were identified as SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, and SP6, while AP1 represented the administrator participant who were all interviewed.

Transcription and Coding

I traveled to the study site and conducted face-to-face interviews in the English language, recording them on a digital voice recorder. All the participants were comfortable in speaking the English language rather than the Navajo language. Any notes taken during the interview were limited to the time, location, and nonverbal cues of the participants, such as facial expressions and tone of voice. This method reduced the effect of researcher bias or presumptions, as discussions were not driven in any direction other than initially directed by the interview questions.

The initial step in the data analysis was preparing the transcripts. I listened to each of the recordings and transcribed each interview verbatim into a Word document. I read and reread the transcripts while listening to the recordings to ensure that I transcribed each interview accurately. To ensure that the transcript was accurate I provided a copy of the transcript to the participants and all replied that their interview transcript was accurate. After this step, I uploaded the transcript into MAXQDA and began the process of open coding. MAXQDA does not analyze qualitative data itself but allows the researcher to organize the data from the transcripts. Open coding is generally the beginning stage of qualitative data analysis, followed by axial coding (Saldaña, 2015). I conducted open coding by marking the text using the in vivo coding method, followed by cutting, color coding, and sorting quotes and expressions. I then downloaded the report from MAXQDA into an Excel spreadsheet and continued with axial coding as

the second coding method. Through the inductive process of reviewing the category of codes and the subcodes, specific themes and subthemes started to emerge. After completing this step, I conducted member checking by providing the preliminary findings via email to the participants for their review and suggest comments or corrections as they saw fit. This procedure allowed the participants an opportunity to correct misconceptions of their views, if any.

Findings

Through this study I sought to provide insight as to what influenced first-year NA students in a local college to persist to graduate. The study may bring more awareness to college administrators, faculty, and staff of the importance of how to better prepare NA students during their first year of higher education. The findings were linked to the research questions.

The four themes emerged from the data analysis were: (a) characteristics that influenced students' academic experience, behaviors, and persistence; (b) resources on and off campus that support students; (c) inclusion of culture and community within overall aspects of the college; and (d) access to and need for more resources. I provided an overview organized according to each research question and the themes developed during data analysis. Each section included data obtained from interviews conducted during the study.

Research Question 1: What are the First-year NA Students' Experiences and Perspectives of What Influences Their Persistence to Graduate From College?

Data collected from the six student participants' interviews were enough to answer Research Question 1. I asked 11 in-depth interview questions related to this research question. After coding, a theme emerged relating to the characteristics that influenced students' academic experience, behaviors, and persistence, as shown in Figure 6. First-year students often encounter personal, family, academic, and social issues while adjusting to college (Turner & Thompson, 2014). These experiences can lead the student to drop out; therefore, it is vital to identify what has helped students to overcome these challenges. Each of the students interviewed discussed their personal experiences and challenges, how they dealt with them, and what empowered them to continue at LC.

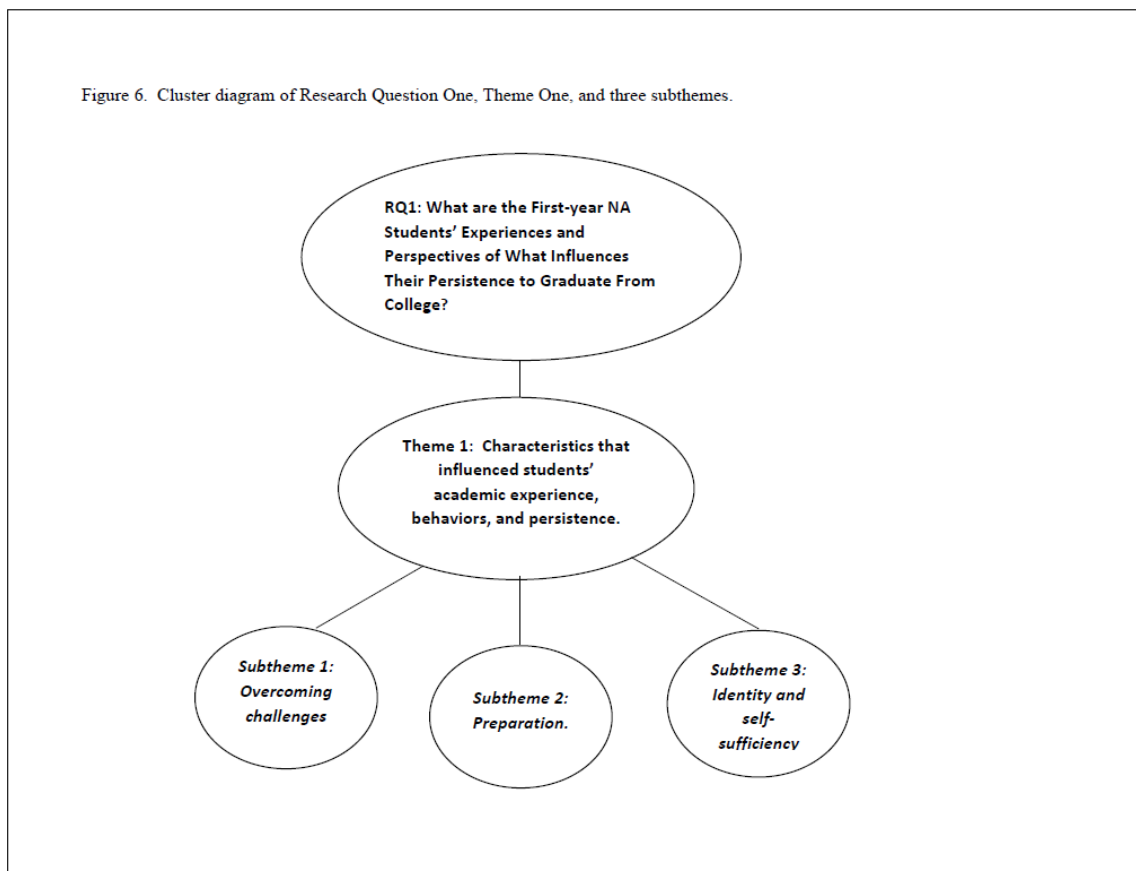


Figure 6. Cluster diagram of Research Question 1, Theme 1, and three subthemes.

RQ1, Theme 1: Characteristics that influenced students' academic experience, behaviors, and persistence. Academic and social systems in colleges, according to Tinto (1993), are interwoven and influence each other, directly or indirectly. The perspective of student experience goes beyond academics and into their social environment, impacting their behaviors. As students begin college, the overall campus experience develops into a new lifestyle.

Subtheme 1: Overcoming challenges. All six student participants spoke about the challenges they had encountered during their first year at LC. They identified

challenges that hindered them while attending LC, whether it was with academics or maneuvering within the campus environment or adjusting to a different social environment. The students also discussed how they overcame their challenges to a certain extent.

For some, it was still a challenge but not to the extreme as when they began in their first semester. For example, SP6 is a student who started college later in life due to what has been thought of as “an eye-opener” regarding the need to attain a college degree to stay employed. After 20 years of working and raising children, a decision was made to go to college while continuing to work. The employer was willing to pay for SP6’s college expenses, which motivated the student even more to enroll at LC. But SP6 had to understand and learn the process of college academic work. According to SP6:

But as I continued with my education the biggest issue was doing the work itself. They tell you that we have tutors available and being a working parent, you have kids, you have education, you have to set a certain time aside for tutoring. When you come in here there’s really no resources for tutoring, especially for Native Americans.

The challenge SP6 encountered at the Native American Center was with the tutoring services for an on-line course. The tutors were not available, so SP6 contacted the professor who was willing to provide tutoring, but after several attempts the professor could not keep the appointments. SP6 later commented that it was miscommunication with the professor and through emails and teleconferencing, the student was able to get assignments caught up.

Another challenge that SP6 encountered was in comprehending what one of the professors was saying because of his heavy accent and talking fast. The comment SP provided was:

This is what I realized, I'm more comfortable sitting down talking and studying with Native Americans because we can relate rather than sitting with an individual that is of a different race because they just directly and I guess they go off course too at a rate to where it's like speak my language here, (Author's Note: It was difficult for her to understand the professor's pronunciation due to the professor's thick accent). That's how it was, so I think that was the most difficult part of it and it still is... So I have a teacher [professor] I can get help with but he just goes too fast and I can't comprehend what he's saying. I struggle. That's the biggest thing, I think.

When I asked SP6 how the issue was addressed of not being able to understand the professor, SP6 replied "I haven't really done anything actually". Later in the interview the student indicated that plans were to meet with the program advisor to assist in talking with the professor.

Another student, SP2, dealt with anxiety and that has been a struggle since high school. The student stated "I do struggle with anxiety. It's something that plays in with my assignments and as I am a student because I get stressed out and overwhelmed".

When asked how this issue was dealt with, SP2 replied "...I have dealt with it before in high school but that's what got the best of me. Now I know what to do when my anxiety

starts up”. The student has learned to meditate and has identified what triggers the anxiety, as well as friends who provide assistance.

SP3 was unsure about continuing as a student at LC due to some personal issues of past alcohol use and a death in the family. The student spoke about the addiction and the treatment program, where the concept of religion was introduced and began attending church on a regular basis. Toward the end of SP3’s treatment program, the student made a decision to go to college. The student drew support from family and the members of the church. SP3 stated, “It is a daily struggle and that’s my part of wanting and getting back into school (toward) getting a degree”. Through the support, especially from the church, SP3 became empowered and described it as, “I have drive in my life. I have direction back in my life”. SP3 plans on graduating within two years with three degrees and to help others who are struggling with alcohol and substance abuse.

For SP1, SP4, and SP5, the challenges they encountered were adjusting to academic work and the college campus environment. The course work was harder than they realized. Scheduling a time to do homework and finding resources such as tutors was a challenge during their first semester. SP5 had to take a refresher course (remedial course) before being allowed to take the required general education courses. SP5 stated “Math is almost like a nemesis. I’m still having trouble with that”, and received assistance with tutoring at the Native American Center.

All three participants indicated that they had to ask questions and find resources on their own. The participants mentioned that having to find their classrooms and campus resources (such as the cafeteria, bookstore, and tutoring center) was a new

experience. Even though they attended orientation and one participant had visited the college during a field trip, it was different from high school. The difference was that in high school, the students stayed in one building and had a structured schedule developed by the guidance counselor, while at LC the students had classes in different buildings and had to work with an advisor to develop their course schedule. SP4 stated “You really have to have self-discipline....You have to plan”.

Subtheme 2: Preparation. Three of the student participants felt that they were not adequately prepared while three of the student participants felt that they were. SP3 admitted that he was not prepared for college:

When I first started, I had to take remedial courses in order to work myself back up with English and mathematics. And it was also my own lack of participation back in high school. I did the bare minimum to pass.

Through the support system, SP3 has been more diligent and serious in completing his course work.

SP6 felt somewhat prepared for college, but had a different understanding of what being prepared meant:

It's been years since I've been in school. When I decided to go ahead and further my education, I mean I thought am I going to struggle or what. Just going along the way, I realized that I had to know these things. So, it was scary thing but at the same time I had enough confidence knowing that I could succeed and if I had the education I needed.

Through the encouragement from a supervisor and program advisors, SP6 was determined to complete not only one, but two bachelor's degree programs next year. SP6 looks forward to graduating and starting a business.

On instances when students indicated that they were somewhat prepared, they did not have the same belief of how well prepared they actually were. For example, although SP4 believed they were prepared, but still had difficulty with the first semester due to working full-time and also taking online courses. SP4 commented "The online it was too hard to focus on it" and did not do well the first semester. It was not until the next semester when SP4 enrolled in face-to-face courses that the learning environment was more comfortable and then did better.

Meanwhile, SP5 and SP1 had family members who had attended college and had some exposure to college recruiters when they were in high school. SP2 had family members in college but "...couldn't comprehend because I didn't know the difference between associates, bachelors, what are grad students, what it is and everything" and "so it was a hard transition but there are people there to help me". Both participants indicated that they continue to seek advice from family members and friends who have graduated from college.

As students begin college life, they encounter new or different environments and have new experiences. Understandably, they felt intimidated even if they felt prepared or had family members supporting them. It is challenging enough that NA students graduate from high school not prepared for college, but even more complicated when they enter college and encounter barriers while adapting to the college environment

(Keith et al., 2016). All the student participants have had family or friends attend college, so they were somewhat aware of the aspects of college. However, it was not until they had actual classroom and campus experience that they realized that there was more to college than just going to class. They realized it was not like what they experienced in high school.

Subtheme 3: Identity and self-sufficiency. The students spoke about their determination to continue their program of study and graduate. Regardless of the challenges they encountered, what each student had in common was having a goal. They identified a goal, whether it was to keep a job, support a family, or begin a career, which was a goal they identified in their first year. With a goal in mind, they became more empowered to succeed.

SP1 has kept a goal in mind, which the student has visually kept since the first semester. SP1 stated, "Seeing that dream board (similar to a vision board consisting of a collage of images, pictures, and affirmations of her goals and as a source of inspiration and motivation) every day helps me, reminds me of why I am here. Helps me to push forward and keep coming to class". Not comprehending the difference between eight-week courses and 16-week courses, SP1 enrolled in both during the first semester. As a result, the student was overwhelmed and stressed about the coursework. SP1 took the initiative to get help from tutors and to go to the teachers for assistance. To schedule classes and activities, SP1 purchased a specific planner that was compact and small because "I was able to write everything down and keep track with it".

Another student, SP5 claimed to have "...always been independent person". The student believed the professors "...are really great. They can be straight forward". SP5 stated, "...going to college, you're independent and you gotta [*sic*] do your work". SP5 believed this empowerment resulted in doing better because "...it gives you that challenge to bring out all the skills you already have in you and bring it to the plate".

Meanwhile, SP2 was preparing to transfer to a four-year college after graduation. SP2 commented:

What has kept me on track is I am doing a lot better here now than I was doing in high school with my academics because I was a 2.0 student. But now I am like a 3.0 student. Just like from how I changed from high school was really helpful that is why I am doing the most I can here.

SP2 explained that while in high school academics was not a priority until the realization of not graduating with classmates. The student commented "So I really wanted to go straight into college and pursue a degree after graduation". SP2 took the initiative to enroll in honors courses and participated in activities through a first-generation student program known as EDGE. According to SP2 "I worked around the college as a work-study and having those connections and networking with....I just communicated a lot with everyone here".

While discussing what motivates students, SP6 indicated that students do not finish college because "A lot of it is probably lack of interest...they're lazy. Lack of motivation". Another reason provided by SP6 was "Money is a priority out there and not at school". SP6 believed that students of any generation need to have a goal in mind as

well as the ability to go after it, and it not only applies to education but with life in general.

When asked what advice they would give to first-year students just beginning their college experience, all of the student participants indicated that the students needed to be prepared for the unexpected. SP1 and SP5 emphasized that students not be shy and ask questions. SP2 commented "...don't just go into a field just because your friends like it, because someone is in it. Go after something that you're really going to enjoy. If they're undecided, I really suggest for them to do the core-academics". SP6 also had the same advice and included "...take advantage of the opportunities, like honors courses and service learning". SP7's advice was for students to "Join as many clubs that sounds interesting to you...There's many opportunities that at a college or university for an individual can be exposed to". SP4's advice was for students to:

Plan out your schedules so like have a list of all the homework they have to do for that week and plan. Finish it and when the teachers post an assignment, even if it is for the next week, just start on it. It's better to be ahead than to be behind.

Research Question 2: What Support did the First-year NA Students Receive From the Local College Administrators?

Three interview questions pertained to this research question, of which one theme and one subtheme emerged to address the types of support that students received, directly and indirectly, as shown in Figure 7. All six student participants identified support systems that they felt made an impact on their decision to continue at LC. The student participants expressed their need to feel they mattered not just as a student but more so as

an individual. The administrator participant discussed several support systems in place at LC, but also that the college could do more to support NA students.

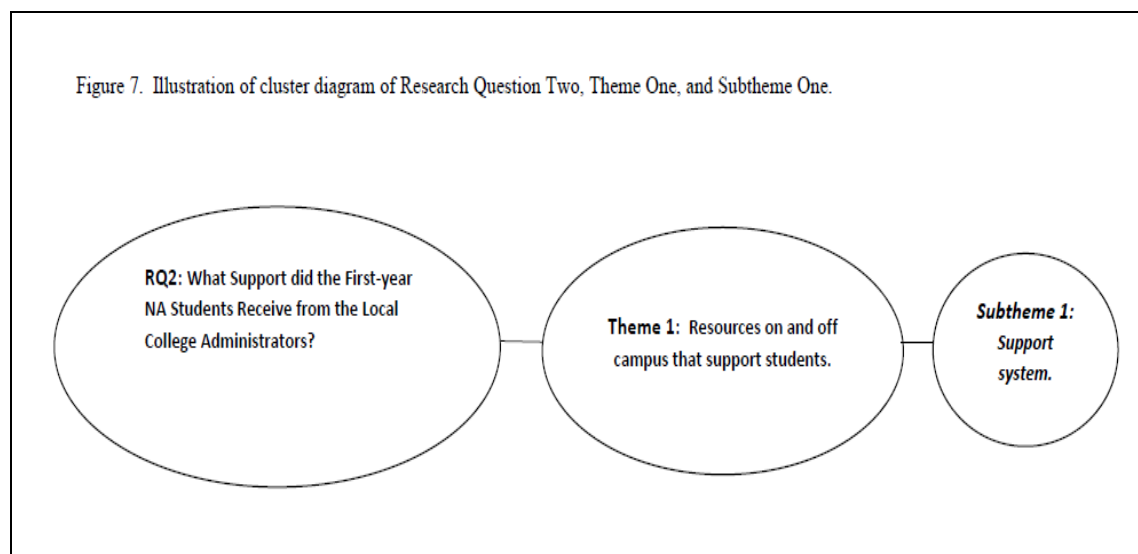


Figure 7. Illustration of cluster diagram of Research Question 2, Theme 1, and Subtheme 1.

RQ2, Theme 1: Resources on and off campus that support students.

Students enter colleges with the prospect of being on their own. However, this independence also comes with the pressure to succeed on their own. Also, students may feel apprehensive because of their unrealistic expectations of personal academic performance (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Tinto (1993) believed that colleges also have the responsibility to ensure that resources are available for students. The student participants talked about the types of support they received on and off campus, or the lack thereof.

Subtheme 1: Support system. When asked about support from administrators, four of the student participants did not have any direct support that they were aware of, although it may have been through a department chair or a faculty member who may

have been an administrator at LC. Two of the student participants identified an administrator that supported them. All indicated that they did seek help from campus resources, and most continued to receive support from these resources.

SP5 stated, "They have been encouraging. A lot of encouraging words..." have been uplifting, and "The little things, it can go a long way with positive feedback" from teachers, which has kept the student on track to continue with education. Such support not only empowered SP5 but provided a resource to turn to when in need of assistance. The student also utilized campus resources such as the Student Achievement Center and the Childcare Center, which allowed the flexibility to attend class without worrying about children.

SP3 also believed, "The more encouragement somebody has the better outcome they have, the better in their changing their mindset. They are able to complete a program". SP3 specified that the "...extended family which I consider my church family" provides much needed support. Through the church SP3 decided to go to college and commented:

I have had one administrator who has been very helpful. She's very supportive and seen all my endeavors with my class that I had in her projects. I think it's always great to find that somebody. And they have a program in any place you are at because in a way, it helps you learn more and understand more. Understand the concepts.

Student participants also had family and friends who supported and encouraged them to go to college and complete their education. SP2 indicated that mostly parents and family members provided encouragement for the student to go to school. SP2 stated:

I grew up on the reservation, so a lot of the older people tell their kids to get off the reservation and getting an education is a one-way ticket to get off the reservation. So, they encourage you to get off the reservation and pursue a degree in...and come back and help the people. It's been done that way for the longest time because my parents never attended college and they really see the importance of getting a degree. So, they really pushed me in high school...and now that I am in college, I can see the importance of it. I am trying my hardest and talking with supporting people like teachers.

SP2 also mentioned friends who all had a desire to go to college and the same expectations from family members on "getting off the reservation" to go to college. They continue to encourage each other and SP2 plans to graduate with two friends that also attend the college.

SP1 and SP4 commented that advisors and faculty have been keeping them on track with their coursework. They also mentioned that immediate family members have been encouraging. SP1 was the only participant who remarked that "I have surrounded myself with friends that have pursued the same goals and determination as me. So, we are all going to college or all completed college". The student was particular in who her friends would be.

Regarding the administrative perspective, AP1 spoke about the different types of resources available on campus at LC and also the importance of establishing relationships with students. When asked about the perspective of what influences students to persist to graduate, AP1 replied, "Well I think in general across all institutions of higher education that it would be mostly relationships and having a connection to the campus. Something that is familiar to them. Whether it be cultural or study-wise majors". About campus resources, AP1 stated, "I think over years we've done lots of things. We put in a Native American Center which is there for almost like a decade and a half". AP1 also talked about the importance of "on-boarding" and the design specifically for NA students.

Research Question 3: What Additional Support do the First-Year NA Students Need?

Three interview questions were asked regarding available or needed support for NA students. All the participants discussed what support they received and what impact it made in their lives. They also provided recommendations for improving the available resources. Five of the participants indicated that more transparency, communication, and inclusion with the community was needed. Student participants mentioned that having a relationship with faculty was a factor in their perseverance, but overall, the college could do more with community outreach. Participants gave examples such as having resources come to campus rather than just telling students what resources are available and doing better in inviting community members to engage in activities that students participate in (such as co-curricular activities). Two themes and two subthemes emerged as illustrated in Figure 8.

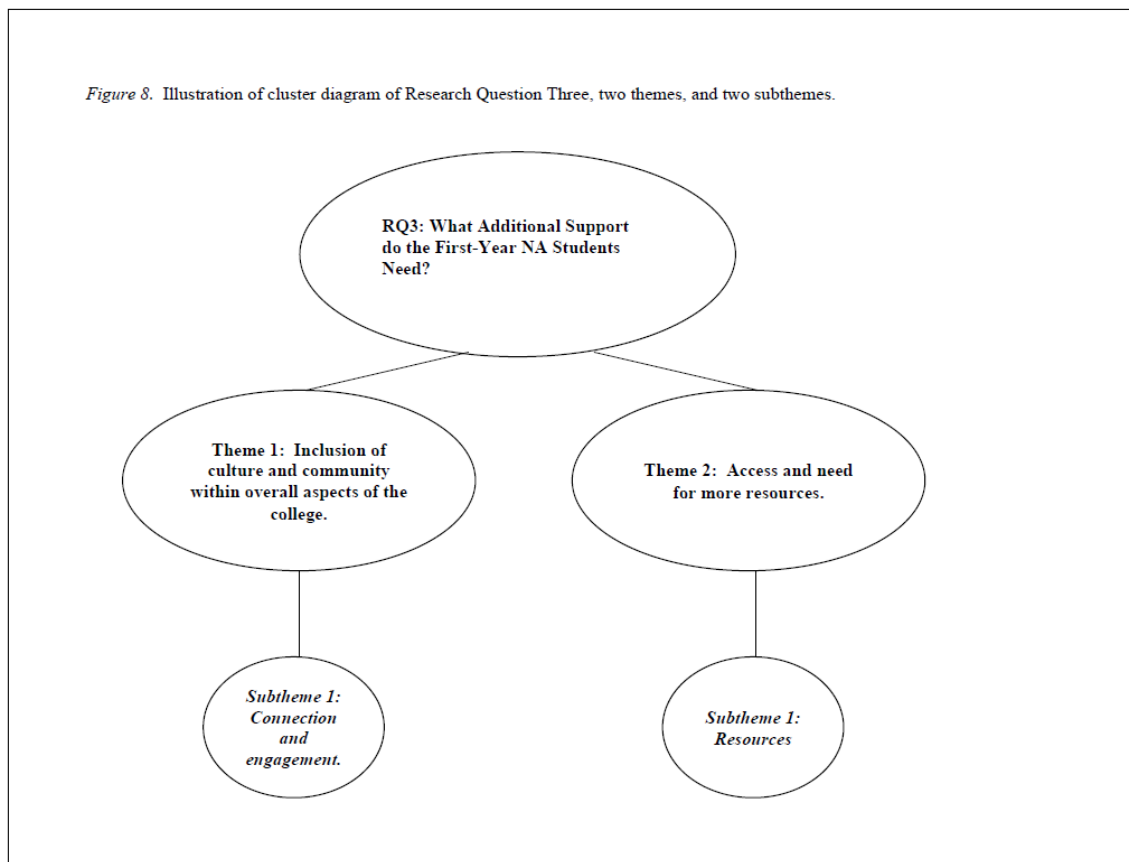


Figure 8. Illustration of cluster diagram of Research Question 3, two themes, and two subthemes.

RQ3, Theme 1: Inclusion of culture and community within overall aspects of the college. Involving students in campus activities can make their college experience more meaningful. Social events, which include community and family interaction, build social connectedness that nurtures a sense of belonging to the college environment (Tovar, Quiroga, & Torres, 2015). Pow-wow, Song-and-Dance, drum groups, arts and crafts display, concerts, and potluck dinners are some examples of Native traditional activities that are shared and enjoyed by Native communities. The ability to infuse Native

American culture into the college allows students to feel more comfortable and allows for meaningful cultural and educational connections to be made.

Subtheme 1: Connection and engagement. A consensus of the participants was that LC needed to do more outreach within the community, whether it be through co-curricular activities, assistance for students, or during the decision-making process that impacts the student body. The student participants believed that LC did not “show-case” what they are all about, especially since the immediate and surrounding communities have large populations of NA. They also believed that LC needed to be more attentive to the NA culture and traditions. Some of the student participants felt that the faculty do a good job interacting with students, but they could do more and that administrators needed to be more visible on campus.

When student participants answered the question about how the college could better support students and their expectations of LC, their answers were specific, such as SP1, SP2, and SP3 recommended more community involvement. "I think the more you have the community involved, the more word of mouth gets around, as far as what entities do ...[to] help in supporting the different causes and stuff in the community" was SP3's response. SP1 commented, "Figure out what the community needs. Knowing what makes up the population of the students are....So having the college and the community understand on what resources they need to align with". SP4 remarked:

I would expect them to be engaged with the community. I think they should really put themselves out there and share what they have to offer for the community and the people around the community. Otherwise, there's no

connection and it's like nothing really there. It's really communicating and interacting with them.

AP1 mentioned the college and faculty "...are privy to including Native culture and practices into a form of delivering the curriculum so that it's not all western developed". An example was the participation in a Native summit that was held and the emphasis to have colleges establish relationships with Native communities. AP1 remarked that:

We have done certain things like on our on-boarding processes making it more Native culture specific. So inviting the family to join in on the on-boarding process so they take part in knowing about the institution and developing relationships for the whole family. Sometimes they can be the tribe. We have students like bring their whole tribe to on-boarding so that the whole tribe can connect with the college.

AP1 believed that implementing specific culture changes on campus, "...would build retention for Native culture, inclusion instead of conforming. Rather than asking Native students to conform to the processes that have been in place for decades."

RQ3, Theme 2: Access and need for more resources. Tinto (1993) believed that by accepting individuals for admission, colleges have a responsibility to provide enough opportunities and resources as a part of support services for students. Resources should not only be provided for students but also make them available, so students can access those resources beyond the resource's operating hours. All participants identified

the types of resources that were available to them but also had recommendations for improvements.

Subtheme 1: Resources. The Native American Center was available to all NA students, as well as other students, because it houses the tutoring center and achievement center, which were mentioned as resources by the participants. Several students mentioned that as working parents, college administrators need to consider students who have other commitments and schedules that do not always allow them to take advantage of the resources available at the college. SP6 stated, “The tutoring part of it, make it available not to not only at the school but off-campus too. On weekends when we’re available”. SP4 recommended that all colleges should consider safety for everyone on campus, and suggested that LC advisors should have more meetings with students throughout the semester rather than only once or twice.

SP2 commented, “Getting the word out about the resources they offer. Just because the students don't know what is offered at the college...But also the financial situation too. Just letting them know there's scholarships available within the college”. SP1, SP2, and SP3 all mentioned that the college needed to do more outreach and collaborate with community resources to be more involved with students on campus.

The participants mentioned that not all students have the opportunity to go out into the community and seek resources on their own, especially during the first year of college. Most NA students reside outside the community and spend their day on campus. Those who are employed have a tight schedule which might not allow time in their schedule to seek out resources in the community. SP5 suggested that LC should engage

more NA alumni through seminars or workshops. The student believed alumni have so much to offer and commented, "Share their life story of how they got through college and to give some insight... Form that positive group to help motivate each other to want to succeed...".

The college has resources available to students according to AP1, but indicated that there is always room for improvement and expansion. When asked how the college could better support students, AP1 remarked:

I also see that we can provide more resources for the Native American Center. It would be nice to see the staffing increase and be able to provide like a gathering location for everybody to be at. Those are some small thing. Obviously, we always need to expand more coaching and advising no matter what but I think that some are more Native student specific. And I think the institution also needs to continue to work on integrating culture of any make.

Themes

The number of themes that emerged depended on the data and the frequency of the responses. Categories coded in each of the transcripts were combined and named according to the relevance to the research questions. Therefore, from the data analysis process, four themes emerged from the feedback of the participants which aligned with Tinto's student integration model (1993). Table 1 shows the connections between the research questions, the codes, sub-themes, and themes.

Table 1

Research Questions and Coding

Research Questions	Codes	Sub-themes	Themes
RQ1: What are the first-year NA students' experiences and perspectives of what influences their persistence to graduate from college?	Beliefs, family influence, personal goals, empowerment, growth, motivation, enjoyable, great, love it, good job no motivation, no support, not getting help, personal issues underprepared, attitude, decision, gain experience, research college	Identity and self sufficiency Challenges Pre-college preparation	Characteristics that influenced students' academic experience, behaviors, and persistence.
RQ 2: What support did the first-year NA students receive from the local college administrators?	Church, college staff/faculty, event/activities, family, friends, student support services	Support system	Resources on and off campus that support students.
RQ 3: What additional support do the first-year NA students need?	Alumni, availability, community involvement, the importance of student's needs, inclusion, opportunities, relationships, transparency, and communication Academic, improve current resources, needs of the community, outreach, progression	Connection and engagement Resources	Inclusion of culture and community within overall aspects of the college. Access and need for more resources.

Evidence of Quality

The evidence of quality was conducted through member checking and confirmability. Creswell (2012) specified that researchers check their findings with participants in the study to determine if the emerging findings are accurate, which is known as member checking. Confirmability focuses on ensuring the results of the study are an accurate reflection of the data collected and not the views of the researcher (Shenton, 2004).

To provide member checking, I sent the participants a copy of their interview transcript to confirm that I had accurately captured their perspectives. I conducted member checks by providing the preliminary findings via email to the participants for their review and to suggest comments or corrections as they saw fit. This procedure allowed the participants an opportunity to correct misconceptions of their views, if any. I asked the participants about the various aspects of the study such as if the themes were accurate and if the interpretations were fair. I gave the participants five days to review and respond to me. All the participants confirmed that the transcript was accurate and they had no further feedback to provide.

To ensure confirmability, I used a reflective journal to document my thoughts and feelings as I conducted the study. I made sure to make notes on the interview protocol during each interview of areas where I had questions or nonneutral feelings towards a participant's answer. I often used the notes to ask for clarification from the participant or flag the response to note an emotional reaction to ensure the reaction did not result in improper conclusions during the data analysis process.

I used the notes in the journal to ensure the conclusions drawn during the study represented the data collected and not personal bias or preconceived notions. A personal bias that I made note of was the fact that I am Native American and so are the student participants. But I did not know the students until they first contacted me through email or text. Several email exchanges were then conducted regarding scheduling the interview or answering questions on the process, otherwise I never met the students until the day of the interview. Although I am the same ethnicity as the students, I remained unbiased and kept myself in the role of the researcher. I also informed the participants that I would remain unbiased and my role was that of a researcher. They all understood.

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases are those cases that might challenge the theoretical proposition of a study (Yin, 2014). Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) also suggested that “when conflicting perspectives are found, qualitative researchers must re-examine other data sources to see if the differences can be resolved” (p. 309). One discrepant case was identified in regard to *resources*. During the interview, SP6 mentioned in the beginning that the challenges she had to deal with was that there were no resources for Native Americans. But during the remainder of the interview, she reflected on the resources that were available and it was the business hours needed to be expanded so that students who work can have access to those services. Other participants did use the resources and did not see it as a challenge.

Summary

The local problem for this study was the increasing number of NA students enrolled at LC who do not persist to graduate. The purpose was to investigate what influenced first-year NA students to persist toward graduation at a local college. The four themes that emerged from the data related to the conceptual framework of Tinto's (1993) student integration model and theory. The themes were generated per specific interview questions and carefully selected quotes that helped to describe the participants' perceptions. The conceptual framework was based on Tinto's student integration model (1993).

Tinto's model concentrated on academic and social integration perspectives in the academic and campus environment. The results of this study supported that students entered college with a variety of internal and external characteristics, which, combined with the college resources and support system, were related to student persistence and completion. These characteristics and extent of engagement with college staff, faculty, and other resources, affected their decision to persist on a positive path that included social and academic integration. Through the research questions within this qualitative study, I explored the internal and external influences, both positive and negative, that the students believed affected their personal decision to continue their education at LC. Based on Tinto's student integration model, I developed a model (see Figure 9) that outlined the connection of all four themes to the conceptual framework.

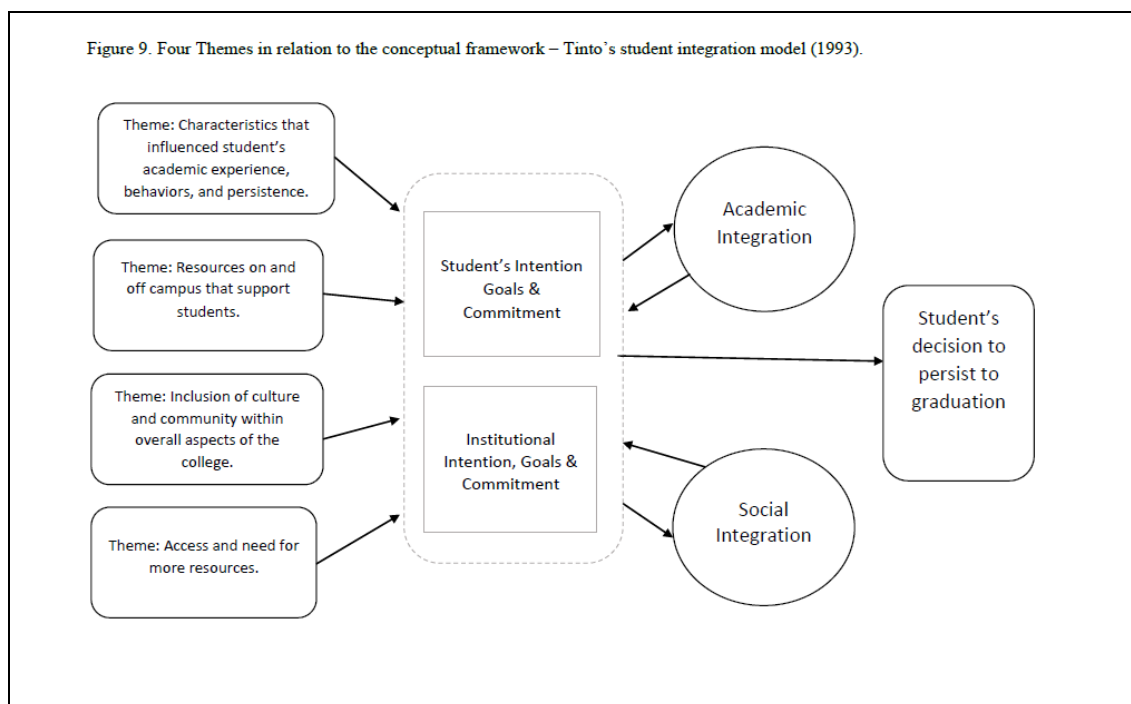


Figure 9. Four themes in relation to Tinto's integration model (1993).

Insight into the academic and social dynamics of engagement on campus and its relation to self-efficacy was evident when participants described the challenges and adjustments they had to make during their enrollment at LC. In general, the consensus among the participants in this study was that through the student's self-efficacy and support from the college, as well as their family and friends, they learned to overcome personal, academic, and social challenges to persist toward completion at LC.

The student participants provided advice for new incoming students and recommendation for what college administrators could do to improve in supporting students to persist to graduation. The utmost advice provided by the student participants was for new students to ask questions and understand what program they would be majoring in. The next advice was to develop a schedule and seek out the resources

available. Recommendations for LC administrators were improvements to expand the resources and bring community resources on campus so that students have better access. The participants also believed that the college needed to do more in engaging the community such as bringing in alumni to visit with the students.

Outcome of the Findings

Most students enter college as a way to acquire job-specific skills (Finch, Peacock, Lazdowski, & Hwang, 2015). Meanwhile, the goals to increase retention and graduation rates among colleges makes it necessary to understand better the needs of entering freshmen students (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Tinto (1993) believed that the college has the capability to retain students by reaching out and integrating them into the campus environment. The relationships that students establish on campus are essential as they relate to their involvement academically and socially. Tinto believed that the classroom was the most important place for a student to show involvement because faculty members spend more time with students than academic advisors or any other staff members on campus.

LC has resources available for NA students, but the quality of services could be improved. The participants recommended more involvement with the community and its surroundings, which is predominately NA. They suggested more outreach with the community resources to assist students with resources, such as food pantry, housing, and transportation. Other recommendations were possibly engaging alumni to meet with students on campus, bringing NA community resources onto campus, and expand services of existing campus resources.

Most of the student participants did not know who the college administrators were or what they did, therefore more transparency and communication was a recommendation from the student participants. A Native American Center was established to focus on NA students and provide access to learning resources, but the types of services and availability were limited. Services such as access to tutors and advisors were not available outside of the regular operating hours. One of the student participants mentioned that the NA students should have access to NA speaking tutors and advisors. Most important, the student participants expressed they wanted engaging, informative, and caring faculty and staff interactions.

Project

The findings from this study on NA college student persistence at LC were consistent to the literature I reviewed for this study, which showed that support that motivates students to remain in college should be all-encompassing within the classroom, campus, and surrounding community. In addition, the findings revealed that students' interaction with staff and faculty were influenced by numerous factors. Therefore, I determined the best genre for this project to be a White Paper. I understood the paper to be 15 - 30 pages in length, include the background of the problem, and summary of the findings. The paper was to include recommendations gathered from the literature and research I conducted, as well as outline the recommendations feasible to the higher education audience, specifically those who serve Native American students.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate what influenced first-year NA students to persist toward graduation at LC. Among responses from the seven participants interviewed, four themes emerged:

- Characteristics that influenced students' academic experience, behaviors, and persistence.
- Resources on and off campus that support students.
- Inclusion of culture and community within overall aspects of the college.
- Access to and need for more resources.

Though limited in sample size, the results of this study provided information of the NA students' experience and its influence on student persistence at LC. The study results indicated that student engagement, academically and socially, made an impact on the students' perception of support they received from LC and their decision to continue toward completion of their degree.

The project developed from the study was a White Paper that would assist the LC administration in their discussions on NA student persistence. A White Paper, also known as a policy or recommendations paper, identifies the significant themes that emerged from the study, the problem being addressed, and recommendations to address the problems. Presenting the results and recommendations provides the opportunity to directly address the administrators with authority to make improvements to support student persistence and retention. Furthermore, the White Paper may serve to inform

other colleges, thus impacting the NA students on a national scale. The project provides recommendations to address issues of: (a) faculty-student engagement, (b) inclusion of culture and community within overall aspects of the college, (c) expanded resources for students, and (d) administrators' awareness of first-year NA students' challenges.

Description and Goals

My intention to conduct a case study was to examine the persistence of NA first-year college students at a local college. The study was to understand what motivates students to persist toward graduation, as well as how they overcame any challenges they encountered. Based on the literature and the findings of this study, I determined that the White Paper was the appropriate genre for this project. This paper provided information and recommendations to the college's administration as they further examine how to best support first-year NA students. The student participants' perceptions of their experience at LC, and how it influenced their decision to persist toward graduation, is a significant topic to present in a White Paper to college administrators because it allows for the presentation of research findings including recommended solutions.

The White Paper highlights significant results of my study and their implications for practice to an identified audience, which is the LC administration. Thus, this White Paper presents the student participants' perceptions of their experience and what influenced their decision to persist toward graduation. The goals of this White Paper were to (a) provide insight and understanding of the first-year NA students' experience from the perspective of the students and the subsequent effect on their persistence toward graduation; and (b) recommend strategies to further support NA students.

Rationale

Persistence rates of NA college students are lower than other student populations (PEAIAN, 2012). According to NCES (2017), the graduation rate and retention rate for NA were less than 1% for both. The problem addressed in this study and resulting White Paper was the increasing number of NA students enrolled at LC who do not persist to graduate. The purpose of this study was to investigate what influenced first-year NA students to persist toward graduation at LC. I was able to gather data on the participants' perceptions of their experience, the barriers to completion they may have encountered, and the support they received from college administration. The participants also provided recommendations of what college administrators could do to support NA students and improve resources that were in place.

I selected a White Paper as the project because the data analysis results described in Section 2 presented four areas at the study site that need to be addressed as they relate to the local problem of student persistence to graduation at LC. The four areas included the on-campus resources, student academic and social integration, cultural awareness/community engagement, and support from college administrators. The White Paper suggests ways for college administrators, staff, and faculty to improve, enhance, and increase support of first-year NA students so that they can continue beyond their first year.

Review of the Literature

This review is a summary of the literature using the genre of White Paper to college administrators regarding what could be improved or enhanced to further support NA students' persistence toward graduation. I chose a White Paper to address the problem in the study because it brings to attention the need for college administrators to acknowledge the students' perspective of what support services provided by LC are working, what needs to be addressed, and what could be done to further improve support of NA students to continue toward graduation. Based on the findings of the study and the available literature, I provided potential resolutions to address challenges that NA students encounter, which influence their decision toward continuing and completing their program of study. I also included interventions that have demonstrated an increase in NA student persistence to graduation.

I conducted a literature review using multiple education databases (ERIC, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Central, Education Research Complete, and Sage Journals) through Walden University's library. The search options parameters were set to articles by topic with education as my subject and peer-reviewed scholarly journals with the publication dates, from January 2016 to June 2020. The search terms included *white papers, recommendation papers, policy statements, policy recommendations, persistence, Native American college students, first-year students, retention, advisement, mentoring, and college support services*. During the process of reading articles, I also found information that may be related to my study.

White Paper

Position papers or policy papers, also known as White Papers, are generally used to bring a topic or issue that needs to be addressed and proposing a solution to an intended audience, such as school administrators (Creswell, 2012). White Papers evolved from a marketing tool intended for organizations to market their products and services to a standard written document which identifies the problem(s), provides solutions, prompts action, establishes credibility, and provides disclaimers (Campbell & Naidoo, 2017). White Papers could be used as an informative document identifying needs and providing recommendations or solutions (Iram & Riffatun, 2019; Leal et al., 2018). A suggestion by Balian et al. (2016) is when identifying needs or recommendations, the focus should be on addressing the problem to an intended audience.

Although there is no standard definition, requirements, or guidelines for White Papers, upon reading more than 50 policy papers or White Papers, I have found the following common core components:

- Define the problem or issue.
- Analyze the data and summarize findings.
- State solutions to the problem.
- Provide recommendations.
- Include a review of the literature to support analysis and recommendations.
- Provide a conclusion to include the value of the research and recommendations.

Specific issues of a particular topic are discussed in the paper, including solutions or recommendations (Iram & Riffatun, 2019). Pershing (2015) stated, “A white paper is a form of an essay that uses facts and logic in a persuasive way to recommend and promote a solution to a particular problem.” (p. 2). The White Paper highlights key findings from the research and provides solutions or recommendations to the intended audience to decide whether to act on the recommendations or opt for another solution (Cullen, 2018). According to Campbell, Naidoo, and Campbell (2020), a White Paper should identify a problem, present a solution (recommendation), prompt action, establish credibility, and often provide disclaimers.

White Papers can be effective in bringing change at a national level, such as the recommendations that were provided by a task force which included a representation statement that was adopted by the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy House of Delegates at an annual meeting (White et al., 2017). In an article on lifelong learning, Shannon (2019) indicated how a White Paper was embraced by policymakers to establish a policy regarding lifelong learning formally and has “...continuing value as a policy document in its expansive reflection of the consultation process that shaped its formation.” (p. 113). Articulating recommendations, such as policy reform, are more effective when supported by evidence or research of the recommendations, such as a White Paper (Steiner-Khamsi, Karseth, & Baek, 2020).

In essence, this White Paper could be a marketing strategy to prompt the administrators to notice and consider the recommendations to enhance and improve the services they provide for the NA students enrolled at LC. The White Paper could be used

as a form of documentation for LC administrators to consider improving upon and/or design structured or goal-oriented NA student support programs (Dowd & Liera, 2018; Keith et al., 2016). The recommendations include but are not limited to the following: (a) broaden the knowledge base of NA students, (b) enhance campus resources and bring community resources on campus, and (c) increase interconnectedness with the NA community.

Broaden the Knowledge Base of NA Students

This study's findings included that students entered college with a variety of internal and external characteristics, which, combined with the college resources and support system, were related to student persistence and completion (Oxendine, Taub, & Cain, 2020). Characteristics of the students and the extent of their engagement with college staff, faculty, and other campus support systems, affect students' decision to persist on a positive path toward completion (Kirkness, & Barnhardt, 2016; Lundberg & Lowe, 2016; Tinto, 2017). Most of the NA students who attend LC come from reservation communities, homes, and family dynamics, which differ from the traditional non-NA family (Keith et al., 2016; Tachine et al., 2017). The challenges of poverty and historical oppression socioeconomics, impact NA family structures and may not always promote education (Allard & Brundage, 2019; Cech, Smith, & Metz, 2019; Contreras, 2019; Hornback, 2019). Self-efficacy, identity, family support, and institutional support should be taken into consideration to understand better NA students and the impact on their decision to continue toward graduation (Cech et al., 2019; Lopez, 2018).

The value of education was mentioned by all the participants, regardless of the challenges they encountered. Challenges such as having to leave the immediate family to attend class, working full-time or part-time to support the family, finding time to do homework, and understanding the course content, are examples mentioned by the students. This impacts student persistence, as students had to figure out how to fit in their educational responsibilities with their family responsibilities (Keith et al., 2016; Tachine et al., 2017). The students also reflected on their NA culture and identity, which they took pride in; they wanted to honor their family and community by getting a degree. This, in part, was also a factor in their perseverance toward accomplishing their educational goal (Bowman & Felix, 2017; Oxendine et al., 2020). One recommendation was to incorporate the students' cultural values and strengths by supporting their cultural identity and finding the strength within that identity (Crazy Bull, Lindquist, Burns, Vermillion, & McDonald, 2020).

Recognizing the historical complex of NA, education, and the U.S. government's role during the 1800s and early to mid-1900s is important as it provides the history of how NA students were treated and what they experienced (Keith et al., 2016; Shirley, 2017). Hartmann, Wendt, Burrage, Pomerville, and Gone (2019) remarked on the historical trauma that NAs experienced and the lasting impact it has had through generations. One such experience known among NA as the "boarding school experience"; of which NA children were taken away from their parents, placed in boarding schools, and were mistreated (Charbonneau-Dahlen, Lowe, & Morris, 2016; Hornback, 2019). Boarding schools have since improved immensely, but not without the

trials and tribulations experienced by NA students during that time (Gregg, 2018). The generation of NAs who experienced this trauma are now the grandparents or great-grandparents of today's generation attending college. Each NA tribe has its own stories of their tribal members' educational experience, but to comprehend the historical background of NAs is essential as it creates a better understanding of what NAs endured through generations (Crazy Bull et al., 2020; Shirley, 2017). This knowledge provides opportunities for college staff, faculty, and administrators to be more sensitive to NA history, culture, and traditions, which is key to planning for NA students (Fish & Syed, 2018; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2016).

The traditional and cultural aspects are critical for NA students, especially for those who live on the reservation and have family who (if not themselves) participate in traditional ceremonies and respect significant social events, which is a part of NA culture (Cech et al., 2019; Crazy Bull et al., 2020; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Acknowledging and respecting the ceremonies and observance of certain traditions, such as the observance of solitude after the burial of a family member, is supportive in showing respect for not only the student but also the family and clan (Skousen, 2018; Williams & Shipley, 2018). Understanding the clan system dynamics is critical for the NA people as it impacts how they interact with each other (Portman & Garrett, 2006). Understanding the difference between a female and male Hogan and its purpose is important for the Diné elders and knowing which creation stories are told during the appropriate seasons (Begay, Spencer, & Rough Rock Demonstration School, A. N. C. C., 1982). NA students' cultural,

traditional, and historical distinctiveness impacts their self-worth, which influences how they face challenges, on and off campus (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2016).

Understanding the behaviors of NA students may influence program development and assist in recognizing methods to support academic achievement (Griffin, Cunningham, & Mwangi, 2016; Lundberg & Lowe, 2016). Staff, faculty, and administrators, native or non-Native persons, should also become familiar with the challenges that NA students encounter (Bowman & Felix, 2017). The college administrators should provide opportunities such as during faculty convocation, new staff orientation, or as a part of professional development to offer workshops, courses, mentorship, or experiential learning with native medicine people.

Enhance Campus Resources and Bring Community Resources on Campus

The results of the study indicated that college administrators should be more aware of the circumstances of first-year NA students entering LC and provide services that would best support students to persist toward completion (Horn & Marin, 2017). According to Eliason and Turalba (2019), faculty who are more conscious of the depth of student participation within their classroom early in the semester, are more likely to recognize students who may be struggling, particularly students for whom English is not the first language. Faculty should reach out to resources available on campus, such as tutoring, mentoring, library, advising, and counseling, and refer NA students who are struggling (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020; Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Class participation is linked to student outcomes and student success, which in turn defines institutional success, it would be sensible for faculty to be more cognizant of their classroom

dynamics, especially with students from underrepresented groups, as well as to know what resources are available on campus (Glass, Gesing, Hales, & Cong, 2017; Lopez, 2018).

New incoming students may feel apprehensive because they have not yet acquired the skills to maneuver within a college campus and they also may have concerns about their ability to do well with their own academic expectations (Cech et al., 2019). Faculty and student interactions are essential to educational results (Waldeck, 2019). The student participants at LC indicated that they improved in their coursework when they interacted more with their instructors and sought on-campus resources, such as the tutoring center. These students also commented that they had to take the initiative to identify and locate these resources at LC. Although students enter colleges with the prospect of being on their own, the colleges also have the responsibility to ensure that resources are available for students (Tinto, 1993; Waldeck, 2019).

The student participants talked about the types of support they received on and off campus, or the lack thereof. The NA Center at LC provides tutoring and advisement for NA students, but according to the administrative participant, more could be done to enhance the center, such as increasing NA staff in the areas of advisement and mentoring. By providing on-going mentoring, first year college students are more inclined to adjust to college life (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020; Demetriou et al., 2017; O'Sullivan, Mulligan, Kuster, Smith, & Hannon, 2017). Mentoring provided by a staff, faculty, or peer who is of the same or similar race, ethnicity, or tribal affiliation (NA students) could create

surroundings where students feel more comfortable (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Castellanos, Gloria, Besson, & Harvey, 2016; Luedke, 2017; Oxendine et al., 2020).

Intrusive advising or proactive advising is another resource that could support students by providing help beyond the typical course and program advisement (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016). Advisors would help students find solutions to challenges they encounter throughout their enrollment, thus enhancing the student's skills and supporting the student's persistence to continue into the next semester leading to graduation. Today's technology allows advisors to schedule more meetings through Skype or Zoom or other means of technological communication, therefore students are provided the opportunity to meet without coming on campus or to the office (Fosnacht, McCormick, Nailos, & Ribera, 2017).

A structured first-year program, encompassing the college academics and campus resources, and including the NA cultural aspects would provide NA students social connections and the beginning of college communal connections (Peña & Rhoads, 2019). The overall aspects of these connections would develop into relationships with mentors, advisors, faculty, staff, and administrators. Designing first-year programs that foster environments that are culturally relevant to students and incorporate factors to include family relationships, supportive staff, institutional commitment, and supportive resources would create an educational environment to promote student success (Thakral et al., 2016). By orienting students to what the college has to offer, academic programs and non-academic services, as well as location of classrooms, resource centers, and cafeteria before the semester begins, provides the opportunity for faculty, staff, and administrators

to spend time with students and make them feel part of the college family (Meehan & Howells, 2018; Samura, 2016).

Other resources that NA students benefit from may not be accessible to the students while attending college. Resources, such as food bank, social services, and work force programs, ought to be allowed to set up allotted times to be on campus to provide their services to students. Having these resources on campus could be a collaborative effort between the college, the Native American Center, and the community resource program. This collaboration would create opportunities for students to access these resources, but it would also demonstrate that the college works with outside resources for the benefit of the students. This collaboration would show that the college does care about the student.

Interconnectedness with the NA community

The study participants expressed that LC needed to do more outreach within the community and “show case” what the college has to offer, especially to NAs because a large population of NA live within 30 miles of the community in which LC is located. The student participants also believed that LC should be more engaging with the surrounding NA communities by bringing in NA leaders to talk with the students or provide events such as pow-wows, song-and-dance, drum groups, arts and crafts displays, and potluck dinners. Students interaction with family and community members by engaging in activities that they can relate to, such as pow-wows and NA feasts, can make their college experience more meaningful (Lopez, 2018). Social connectedness creates a sense of belonging within the college environment (Tachine et al., 2017). The ability to

infuse NA culture into the college allows students to feel more comfortable and allows for meaningful cultural and educational connections to be made (Fish & Syed, 2018; Oxendine et al., 2020).

NA role models, alumni, and community leaders can serve to overcome students' feelings of isolation by talking with students about their experiences, their challenges, and how they overcame times of difficulty (Sánchez, Poll-Hunter, Stern, Garcia, & Brewster, 2016). It is essential to bring in successful students and community members who NA students can identify with because it provides a means for motivation (Dollinger, Arkoudis, & Marangell, 2019). Medicine people are held in high regards by all Native people, as they are the persons who provide wisdom and healing. Bringing in Medicine people onto campus before the semester begins (possibly during orientation) and bless students and college personnel and facilities displays respect for the Native population and provides the opportunity for students to embrace their spiritual being. During appropriate times of the seasons, the elders of the Native community could provide the stories, legends, songs, and prayers.

Tribal colleges and universities provide an assortment of pathways of how they integrate their tribal culture, language, traditions, and philosophy into their curriculum and activities (Crazy Bull & White Hat, 2019). They are often interconnected with a tribal reservation, which can allow the college to establish a working relationship with the Tribal College/University (TCU) leaders (DeLong, Monette, & Casey Ozaki, 2016). Crazy Bull et al. (2020) stated:

TCUs are the places where tribal nation-building occurs through the offering of academic and continuing education programming that aligns with tribal economic and governance priorities and cultural values. This programmatic and pedagogical approach provides students a path to employment, access to language restoration and cultural practices, promotion of healthy lifestyles and family engagement, connection to contemporary issues, and modern tribal governance. (p. 29)

College administrators could collaborate with a TCU to provide staff and faculty mentoring or through professional development by having TCUs provide workshops. Another recommendation is to partner with a local tribal college to establish a pathway for one of the curricula or include TCU courses as part of continuing education courses or electives.

Project Description

This White Paper can serve as the mechanism for distributing the results of my study with recommendations to improve and enhance existing services, which would enrich the NA student experience and improve retention rates. The results of my study provided the student participants' perceptions of their experience and what influenced their decision to persist toward graduation. The purpose of this White Paper is to (a) provide insight and understanding of the first-year NA college students' experience from the perspective of the students and its subsequent effect on their persistence toward graduation; and (b) recommend strategies to further support NA college students.

Potential Resources and Existing Support

As LC moves forward toward solving the problem of retention of NA students, initial resources lie within existing support services, institutional commitment, and employees. The existing resources available to NA students could be improved by providing flexible hours, such as in the evenings and on weekends. However, there may also be a need to hire additional staff to accomplish this recommendation and provide increased staffing for the NA center, such as advisement coaches or mentors who would work directly with students and faculty on campus, thus requiring funding for that process and position. To address the need to provide workshops or similar events regarding NA culture, history, and traditions for faculty, staff, and administrators, payment for consultant or workshop fees may be required. Partnering with a local TCU could offset that cost in exchange for other services. The NA center itself is an existing resource that could be enhanced through a partnership with local TCUs, and tribal resources within the surrounding communities. The most considerable resources are the NA students themselves. Through work-study programs, research, and community projects, the students could provide solutions to the challenges, which were discussed in this study.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions

A potential barrier to address NA persistence toward completion is if the administrators do not act on the recommendations, or there is initial resistance to implement changes. Initial resistance could be due to not understanding or wanting to understand the NA students' aspect and the environment they come from, which includes

their culture, language, traditions, and community. Another resistance might be due to faculty and staff already feeling overwhelmed by their duties and hesitant to accept new responsibilities. Potential solutions would have to come from the top leadership taking responsibility to initiate changes based on the common good principle, which would be to provide a conducive learning environment for NA students by creating a place where they feel they belong.

While funding is a required resource, it is also a potential barrier because the college may not have the funds to hire additional employees for the NA center. Potential solutions are utilizing the financial aid work-study programs to hire students part-time, seek partnership with local tribal or community workforce programs to hire students part-time as part of on-the-job training, or securing a grant to establish a program with a budget to include staffing.

Another potential barrier is disregarding the cultural, historical, and traditional aspects of NA students. The potential solution would be to reach out to the NA center's director to examine further the challenges that students have addressed based on their experience and perspectives while attending LC and the recommendations they provided. Further investigation could be done through a survey or focus group to identify what support services could be improved or enhanced for NA students at LC. The recommendations ought to be included within the LC strategic and master plans and would further support the initiation of improvements to address the problems associated with NA student persistence and retention.

Implementation and Timetable

The presentation of the project would be during the early part of summer 2021 to LC administrators. With the Vice-President or NA Center director's assistance, a meeting would be scheduled, and invitations emailed to LC administrators. At the meeting, a brief powerpoint presentation would be given consisting of the main points: (a) purpose of the study, (b) results of the study, and (c) recommendations. At the end of the presentation, a question and answer session would be opened. The White Paper would be given out at the end of the powerpoint presentation. I anticipate that the LC administrators would discuss the issues and recommendations over the 2021 summer term to implement perhaps of the recommendations for the following semester of fall 2021.

Role and Responsibilities of Students and Others

I would be responsible for preparing the White Paper, printing it, and developing the powerpoint. I would also be responsible for contacting (a) a select group of LC members to evaluate the White Paper and (b) an administrator at LC to schedule the presentation and request the equipment I would need to present the powerpoint. The select group of LC members would be responsible for evaluating the White Paper and providing feedback. The primary responsibility of implementing the recommendations would be the administrators, staff, and faculty.

Project Evaluation Plan

To validate my research study's significance, I would conduct a formative evaluation to acquire feedback on the White Paper prior to presenting it to key

stakeholders at LC. Formative evaluation is a form of assessment that offers opportunities to gain information that would be used to apply that knowledge to revise and improve the project (Buelin, Ernst, Clark, Kelly, & DeLuca, 2019). I chose this type of evaluation because I wanted to create the most useful White Paper with recommendations to resolve the problem.

The formative evaluation would be used to obtain feedback to review and adjust the project. I created a survey (Appendix A) to be administered to specified members of the LC community, who would express their views on the recommendations provided in the White Paper. These specified members would be the institutional review committee. The key stakeholders would be the director of tutoring and mentoring center, NA center director, dean of student services, dean of academic services, provost, vice-president of operations, and the college president.

The survey would be distributed with a copy of the White Paper via email to the stakeholders. I would then follow-up with a zoom or skype meeting with each stakeholder to go over their feedback. I would then be ready to incorporate the stakeholders' suggested revisions to the White Paper. Upon making these changes, I would schedule a meeting with LC administrators to present the White Paper. The overall goal of the project is to determine if the recommendations would be effective in addressing retention issues of NA students at LC.

Project Implications

Local Impact

The possible implications for recommendations described in the White Paper for NA students are increased persistence, retention, and graduation rates for NA students. Addressing the challenges voiced by the participants would provide opportunities in which (a) NA students may perceive the college leadership as caring about them and (b) NA students would have the opportunity, through regular support, to reach their goals and graduate. A supportive culture may be developed on campus, leading to better-integrated NA students who may decide to participate in other college activities, such as peer-mentoring, work-study participation, and research.

NA students make up a significant enrollment of students at LC, yet they often do not persist toward completion. Improving the learning experiences to encourage persistence and successful degree completion is a major step towards changes in social change pursuit and would contribute to a better educated society (Tinto, 1993). According to IPEDs (2019) the NA/AN completion rate data is approximately .006%, which is less than 1% for reporting year 2018 – 2019. The total number of graduates at LC for the 2017 – 2018 academic year was 1,298 of which 298 were NA students. The academic year 2018 – 2019, the total number of graduates was 1,405 of which 192 were NA students. As the number of graduates increased, the number of NA graduates decreased for the academic year 2018 – 2019 (IPEDS, 2019).

The project's potential influence on positive social change would have positive benefits by increasing knowledge toward creating a better college environment, which

would support NA students' persistence to degree completion. The knowledge can be used to create intervention plans and enhance programs that would be included in the overall college strategic plan that can be systemically implemented to increase the opportunity for student academic success, increase persistence, retention, graduation, and increase institutional resources. Exploring what challenges students encounter, seeking solutions to resolve barriers, enriching the knowledge of NA cultural and traditional aspects, and improving community outreach and inclusion; could improve student success. Promoting both traditional and non-traditional activities that NA students and families participate in would also indicate that college leadership are invested in their NA culture and identities. Faculty, staff, and administrators would be more approachable, and in-turn students would be more inclined to talk with college personnel without feeling intimidated.

Wider Context

Generally, students who drop out of college without attaining their certificate or degree have limited job opportunities to choose from and may have to settle for a lower-paying job. Job opportunities are scarce within NA communities and reservations, especially for NAs who do not have a college degree (Allard & Brundage, 2019). The unemployment rate in 2019 for NAs was 6.6% compared to the national rate at 3.9% (Allard & Brundage, 2019). Students who attain a college degree have more employment opportunities available and at a higher pay scale than those without a college degree. The poverty rate for Native Americans was at 25.4%, compared to the national poverty rate of 17.6% for reporting year 2017 (National Congress of American Indians, 2020).

It is imperative that NA college students persist and attain their college degree to gain employment and in turn be able to provide for themselves and their family. It is an institutional responsibility to support students, to improve retention and graduation rates and empower students to be productive citizens with skills and resiliency to succeed in their lives. NA students constitute less than 1% of the national statistics for college enrollment and even less for persistence and graduation rates (IPEDS, 2019). However, NA students do enroll in colleges and universities across the nation. For NA college students to attain their degree, gain employment, and provide for their families, thus lessening the poverty and unemployment rates for this population, it would require support from educational institutions' administration and leaders, policymakers, and public entities to promote positive social change (NCES, 2017). This project's wider implications are to draw further attention to address the importance of removing institutional barriers that prevent persistence toward degree completion for NA college students.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

This study focused on addressing the persistence of NA first-year college students at LC. Interviews were conducted with six students and one administrator to identify strengths and weaknesses of the services provided to NA students. A White Paper was identified as the project outlining the recommendations to address the problem. This section provides the final segment of the research study, including a discussion of the project strengths and limitations, my reflection of the study, what I have learned and the experiences I gained, concluding with my recommendations for future research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

The problem that this study addressed was the persistence to graduation of first-year NA students at a local college. The study findings led to addressing the problem through a project, which was identified as a White Paper with recommendations to the local college administrators. The choice to use a White Paper aligns with Creswell (2012) and Leal et al.'s (2018) belief that White Papers convey identified issues that need to be addressed to implement change or resolutions.

The strengths of the White Paper are the inclusion of the participants' perspectives of the college's strong suits and weaknesses regarding support for NA students. Through their voice and rich descriptions of their experience, the students were given the opportunity to freely express themselves, their thoughts, and recommendations. As a result, the recommendations were provided after carefully analyzing the study findings to identify how college administrators could improve their services for NA

students (Lopez, 2018; Oxendine et al., 2020). Issues such as the need to acknowledge the culture and history of NA students would provide a better understanding of NA mannerism and approach toward western educational perceptions. Recommendations are to improve the available services that NA students have access to, as well as bringing in community and tribal resources on campus. The White Paper in essence would bring to attention the needs of NA students and the impact on college retention and completion success, as well as provide recommendations that would build collaboration with the township and local NA communities. McMillan (2020) stated:

By cultivating campus environments that reflect, engage, and celebrate the cultures and backgrounds of American Indian students and other students of color, postsecondary institutions can be transformed to social and intellectual places that allow Native students to be their authentic selves and thrive in the process. (p. 198)

Limitations

The limitation for this project is the approval for and availability of resources. The recommendations provided in the White Paper may require the approval by upper management for implementation. Program planning and development to accomplish what was recommended in the White Paper may require further institutional planning, such as strategic planning, which would impact the college budget. A limited budget may not provide financial resources required for additional staff or funds to conduct extracurricular activities, therefore some of the recommendations may be categorized into a long-term plan.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The problem identified in Section 1 focused on NA first-year college students' perspectives of persistence toward graduation. Another alternative approach would be developing a professional development plan or conducting a program evaluation, which would address the problem. The professional development plan would include a series of workshops on NA cultural awareness topics for faculty and staff, which would be conducted by native tribal leaders and educators. A program evaluation of the NA first-year student program would also address NA student persistence issues at the LC and provide solutions based on the findings.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

This project study was my first large research project. As a result, I have gained a wealth of knowledge and experience. In this section, I discuss my scholarship, project development, leadership and change, and self-analysis.

Scholarship

Through the process of this project study, I gained a significant amount of knowledge and experience, as well as confidence, while conducting the research itself and developing the project, which was a White Paper. Being in the role of the researcher, I learned to think analytically, write critically and professionally, listen more attentively, and read more tenaciously. Over the course of the study, I began to evolve from a student to a professional with a keener sense of knowledge in the areas that impact college students such as retention, persistence, attrition, and completion. Collaboratively,

I also gained insight to the depth of NA culture's influence on NA students' decision in their persistence to complete their degree.

Project Development

When I began this study, I wanted to do something that would help NA first-year college students in the area of retention and persistence. Through the process of reviewing literature and interviewing students, I found that there were issues that needed to be addressed at the study site. I examined the study findings to determine what type of project I would establish that would best resolve the problem identified in Section 1. I had first thought that I would develop a curriculum for NA first-year students, but after analyzing the findings, it was more appropriate to develop a White Paper. The themes that emerged needed to be presented to the administrators. I believed a White Paper would best fit because it would allow me to provide the participants' perspectives and recommendations based on these themes.

Leadership and Change

In the Diné perspective, being a scholar is similar to being a highly respected leader. Listening, thinking, and speaking in a critical manner combined with decision making of what best serves the people are significant aspects that successful NA leaders possess. According to Lee (2014):

Leadership was earned by achieving a level of integrity. Naat'áaniis were intelligent, creative, and planned for the future. They had to be astute, insightful, fearless, and resourceful to tackle life's challenges. A naat'áanii had to understand all aspects of the community's situation, including the physical, political, social,

economic, psychological, emotional, and spiritual. They lived by the principles of caring, humility, and generosity. (p.27)

My journey as a doctoral student was another level toward developing my leadership skills. As a Diné woman, I have the main responsibility to nurture, which is equivalent to providing the wisdom and expertise of learning in all matters of life through a philosophy known within four principles of the Diné: nitsáhákees (thinking), nahátá (planning), íina (living/practicing), and siihasin (reflection/analyzing).

Changes are cycles of growth, whether it be painful or harmonious. In this study change is for the betterment of the NA students and the NA community. I take honor that as a local leader of my clan and community, I have gained expertise to provide more wisdom for my people and lead them toward positive social changes.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

By conducting the research study, I have grown as a scholar and will continue to grow. My beliefs are there are no ends, therefore my analysis of self as a scholar has grown from infancy to a practicing scholar and will continue to grow as I enhance my skills. English is my second language, and I lacked the skills of academic writing. I had to acknowledge that this cannot be an excuse and to embrace the western methodology of academics. I struggled and with the constant guidance from my chair, I learned to think linearly and critically. My knowledge and experience has expanded enormously within the field of higher education, which would allow me to contribute more in the area of NA students and the educational arena.

Analysis of Self as a Practitioner

Through scholarship, I am more qualified to be deemed as a practitioner within the higher education field. I am able to comprehend more of the critical process of decision-making at a college level and the expected outcome of those decisions. I now look through the lens with a view of the details and structure when planning and implementing projects for the betterment of the students and institution. I now ask “How can this be resolved” rather than complain without considering possible solutions. I now look for data to support facts. Through practice, I would be able to refine my skills as a scholar and a practitioner.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

My experience as a project developer with this study allowed me to gain more skills in the area of designing a White Paper. In the beginning I was unsure as to what entailed a White Paper and whether to call it a recommendation paper or White Paper. Upon consulting with my chair, it became clear as to what I needed to convey to my target audience and decided to call my project a White Paper. Conveying the participants’ perspectives of what they felt was important to the college administrators was no easy task. I had to ensure that the design of the paper would bring the voice of the participants to life.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

The importance of this study was to provide college administrators the NA students’ perspectives of what has been supportive toward their academic and social needs while attending LC. The information and recommendations provided would help

determine ways the educational environment could be improved to better support students' academic needs. Institutions of higher learning need to have a better understanding of their diverse population of students, such as their culture, language, and traditions. These aspects play a key role for students, especially those who are first-generation and have the burden of having to navigate through a different cultural environment. This study is an additional step toward examining ways of increasing persistence rates of NA students, as well as addressing issues such as creating more conducive learning environments, cultural sensitivity, and tribal community inclusion.

I began my doctoral journey knowing that I would need to commit to the program which meant juggling work, family, and education. What I did not foresee was having to deal with personal challenges such as death of loved ones, the struggles of being a single parent, career changes, medical emergencies, and taking the role of a grandparent, as well as falling into the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic. But all in all, these challenges allowed me to better understand what many NA students encounter and their perseverance, while attending a college or university. In fact, I am more resilient knowing that I can be a role model to students who do want to pursue an advanced degree.

The skills I have gained allowed me to become more confident and motivated toward working on projects concerning NA students and the community from an educational standpoint. I was humbled by the opportunity to listen to the students' experiences as they discussed their goals, challenges, growth, and perseverance. My dedication toward helping others to help themselves through education has become even

more profound as I finish my doctoral journey. There is a Navajo saying “T’áá hwó’ ají t’éego” which interprets to “it is up to you”. It is my decision to go forward and be productive because no one else can do it for me.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

This study provided findings that brought to surface the issues that impact the persistence and retention of NA first year students at a local college. Recommendations to address these issues were also provided. This study adds to the existing literature by providing another approach to addressing persistence and retention of NA students.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to investigate what influenced first-year NA students to persist toward graduation at a local college. Findings from the study resulted in a White Paper as my project. This project can potentially impact positive social change for NA students by improving academic and student engagement with the faculty, staff, and administrators of the local college. Creating a better college environment in which NA students can persist to degree completion would contribute to a better educated society. More NA students would graduate and be able to attain employment with a higher earning potential, better career opportunity, and provide for their family, which would increase their ability to become self-sufficient.

Applications

The White Paper serves to inform the college administrators of the local problem and provide recommendations for developing strategies that can improve NA student persistence. If the recommendations made in the White Paper are implemented, not only

would it improve the college campus learning environment, but it would also establish sustainable relationships with the local township and NA communities. These communities in turn support the college, as well as bring awareness of NA culture and traditions. These initiatives could increase the NA students' persistence and completion rates at the college.

Directions for Future Research

Future research on NA student persistence and completion is vital to increase the limited knowledge that is known about this topic. Another approach to study the problem would be to conduct a mixed method approach or a multiple-site case study. A focus group with NA students combined with a questionnaire would be conducted to collect the data. Possible research questions would be: (a) What are NA students' perception of their persistence to completion? and (b) What factors impact the persistence of NA students? A multiple-site case study would allow cross-examination and comparison of other colleges with NA student enrollment, such as tribal colleges and non-tribal colleges. The findings would provide more support of the underlying factors toward NA student persistence toward graduation.

Conclusion

The persistence, retention, and degree completion of NA students continues to be a challenge for colleges and universities according to reports such as IPEDS (2019) and NCES (2017). The identified problem that prompted this case study was the low number of NA students graduating at a local college. Therefore, I explored six NA students' perceptions of what were supportive factors concerning their persistence toward

graduation. The results revealed that NA students needed more support and engagement with faculty, staff, and administration, as they pursued their educational studies at the college. A solution to the problem was to present the issues, findings, and recommendations to the key stakeholders at the college, delivered through a White Paper. The results of this study would help inform the institutional stakeholders of the NA students support needs in the areas of campus resources, faculty engagement, NA cultural awareness, and the inclusion of tribal communities. Despite the small number of participants, the study is still valued as it provides opportunities for further research of NA student persistence, retention, and completion.

Navajo Blessing Way Ceremony Prayer:

Hózhógo naasháa doo	In beauty I walk
Shitsijí hozhógo naasháa doo	With beauty before me I walk
Shikéédéé hozhógo naasháa doo	With beauty behind me I walk
Shideigi hozhógo naasháa doo	With beauty above me I walk
T'áá altso shinaagóó hozhógo naasháa doo	With beauty around me I walk
Hozhó náhasdlíí'	It has become beauty again
Hozhó náhasdlíí'	It has become beauty again
Hozhó náhasdlíí'	It has become beauty again
Hozhó náhasdlíí'	It has become beauty again

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Appendix A: The Project

A White Paper

Persistence of First-Year Native American Students at a Local College



Prepared by Dolores Becenti, Doctoral Student at Walden University

October 2020

A White Paper

Persistence of First-Year Native American Students at a Local College

Introduction

Student persistence toward graduation has been an important issue for higher educational institutes for many years (Tinto, 2012). This is even more so for Native American students as data reported by National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2017) regarding the graduation rate and retention rate for Native American/Alaskan Native was less than 1% for both. Yet reports on Native American college student persistence is either lacking or limited (Patterson, Butler-Barnes, & Van Zile-Tamsen, 2017).

This White Paper may assist the college administration in their discussions on Native American student persistence. I conducted a study of which a summary and recommendations for improvement to existing efforts of Native American students' persistence to completion at Local College are provided in this paper. Six first-year Native American students provided their perspectives of their experience in persisting toward completion at Local College. One administrator also provided information of programs and initiatives that focused on Native American students. The number of themes that emerged from my study depended on the data and the frequency of the responses. The results of the data analysis provided what supported students, their recommendations for improvements, and the importance of community engagement.

The results of the data analysis of my study pointed out some recommendations to address the following issues: (a) faculty-student engagement, (b) inclusion of culture and

community within overall aspects of the college, (c) expanded resources for students, and (d) administrators' awareness of first-year Native American students' challenges.

Presenting the results and recommendations provides the opportunity to directly address the Local College administrators with authority to make improvements to support student persistence and retention.

Background to the Existing Problem

Persistence rates for Native American college students are lower than other student populations (PEAIAN, 2012). The national average retention rate for the 2010 cohort of post-secondary institutions, according to The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS, 2018), was reported as 77.1%. As I described earlier, the graduation rate and retention rate for Native American/Alaskan Native were less than 1% for both (NCES, 2017). The success of a college is often measured by its retention and graduation rates, therefore reports of low or declining rates are issues that require attention.

The problem that prompted my study was the increasing number of Native American students enrolled at Local College who do not persist to graduate. The overall retention rate for the college has been decreasing for academic years 2015 to 2017 (IPEDS, 2018). While the number of the total college graduates was reported as increasing for the 2014 to 2017 academic years, the number of Native American graduates at Local College plateaued (IPEDS, 2018). Rather than focusing on why students are not returning to complete their program of study, I chose to focus on what

factors influenced students to persist toward completion, what support they received, and their recommendations for further support from the college administration.

Keith, Stastny, and Brunt (2016) believed that the perspectives of the knowledge, experiences, abilities, and successes of Native American students is important in promoting academic success. Therefore, the purpose of my study was to investigate what influences first-year Native American students to persist toward graduation at Local College. The guiding research questions were:

1. What are the first-year Native American students' experiences and perspectives of what influences their persistence to graduate from college?
2. What support did the first-year Native American students receive from the local college administrators?
3. What additional support do the first-year Native American students need?

To collect data to address these questions, I completed a qualitative case study. Six first-year Native American students and one college administrator were interviewed. An analysis of the interviews indicated a need for improvements such as the quality of services for Native American students, more community involvement, increased community outreach, and better staff/faculty interaction with students.

Tinto's (1993) student integration model was the foundation for my study. According to Tinto (2012), student persistence begins once a student has been admitted into college and begins academic work. Understanding students' perspectives of what has been supportive and successful toward their continuation as a college student provides important aspects toward implementing positive change or enhancement of

programs that support student learning. Tinto's student integration model concentrated on academic and social integration perspectives within the academic and campus environment.

Summary of Literature, Analysis, and Findings

The literature review focused on retention, persistence, graduation, and social and academic integration of Native American college students. The demographic, historical, and philosophic context of Native Americans was also provided to understand the culture and environment of Native American college students, as well as the challenges they encounter.

The findings for this study included that students entered college with a variety of internal and external characteristics, which, combined with the college resources and support system, were related to student persistence and completion. Characteristics of the students and the extent of their engagement with college staff, faculty, and other resources, affected their decision to persist on a positive path that included social and academic integration. The findings also revealed that retention strategies for first-year Native American students at Local College could be improved to support Native American students to persist toward graduation. The participants interviewed gave their perspectives of the challenges they encountered and how they resolved to overcome them, as well as their own recommendations for improvements. The study confirmed that college administrators should be more aware of the circumstances of first-year Native American students entering Local College and provide services that would best support students to persist toward completion.

During data analysis, several themes emerged that aligned directly with the research questions. The student participants identified accomplishments and challenges that they experienced during their first year at Local College. Four main themes emerged from the data analysis, which were: (1) characteristics that influenced students' academic experience, behaviors, and persistence; (2) resources on and off campus that support students; (3) inclusion of culture and community within overall aspects of the college; and (4) access to and need for more resources. I would provide a summary of the findings by answering the research questions according to the themes and subthemes that emerged during the data analysis.

Research Question One: What are the first-year Native American students' experiences and perspectives of what influences their persistence to graduate from college?

To answer this question, ten interview questions were asked to the student participants. The students discussed their personal experience and challenges, how they dealt with the challenges, and what empowered them to continue at Local College. The theme that emerged related to the characteristics that influenced the students' academic experiences, behaviors, and persistence while attending the college.

Characteristics that influenced students' academic experiences, behaviors, and persistence. Academic and social systems in colleges are intertwined and influence each other, directly or indirectly (Tinto, 1993). Students enter college with a variety of internal and external characteristics, so as they engage within the academic and campus

environment, these characteristics affect their decisions and behaviors. As first-year students begin college, the overall campus experience develops into a new lifestyle.

To understand Native American students, it is important to acknowledge the demographics and history of Native Americans because it provides the background of the struggles, resilience, and perseverance that many tribes experienced to survive and retain not only their traditions and culture, but for those who were able to, their language. The 2010 U.S. census count reported 308,745,538 United States residents (including Puerto Rico), of which 5.2 million were of Native American and Alaska Native descent. These data signified an increase of the Native American or Alaska Native population by 39% compared to the 2000 U.S. Census count (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). There were 567 federally recognized Native American tribes in the U.S. of which 32% of the members were under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The Native American/Alaskan Native poverty rate in 2017 was reported at 26.7%, which was the highest rate of any racial or ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

It is also equally important to recognize the historical aspects of education for Native American students. Since the inception of boarding schools and public schools for Native American students, they have had to assimilate to a model of Euro American education. With the exception of tribal colleges, higher educational institutions often promote Euro American values and rarely portray the true Native American historical aspects (Brayboy, 2005). College administrators need to recognize and understand these historical aspects because they have the capability to transform the campus into a place

more compatible for its students, which may influence their decision to persist toward completion (Fish & Syed, 2018; Keith et al., 2016)

All the student participants described challenges they encountered while attending Local College and how they overcame them to a certain extent. They also discussed how they adjusted to the academic and campus environment, which for most was having to adjust to a different social environment. When asked about their experience as a first-year student at the college, three participants indicated that they had to adjust to the rigor of academic work, which was for most incredibly stressful. But through their own initiatives they sought resources such as the tutoring center for assistance. The participants mentioned that although they had challenges, they were able to find resolution and continue with their studies as reflected in Tables A1 and A2.

Table A1

Student Interview Question Two Transcript: Tell me about your experience as a first-year student at the college?

Student Participants and Responses
Challenging experience:
P1: At first with some areas of my classes was a little overwhelming. Overall been stressed about that, but having the tutor center and being able to go in there and get help with papers or understanding how to write papers now, helps me. And going to the teachers and asking them. Something that not many students are willing to do that and afraid to do that. So really relying on the teacher's resources. Their information helped me.
P4: It was kind of hard for the first year. When I first started taking classes I had a job at the same time. So my job was in town and so I couldn't come up here every day. So I took online classes. The online it was too hard to focus on it. Because I would go to work 8 to 5, and I'd get home and I'd be too tired to do anything. It was kind of hard for the first year. That's why when I came back and I started taking classes here and I found that easier.
P5: I've been ten years out of high school. Coming back to school was a real challenge. Because after ten years of being out of high school, you kind of forget things. And especially for my math Algebra. Looking at it again for the first time after

ten years, I didn't know how to do this problem, so I took a refresher course. Is what I am on now and am still struggling a little bit but managing to keep it at an A. It's pretty hard in some areas but in some areas I'm like really good at it, like English. I love English. It just came naturally. Math is almost like a nemesis; I'm still having trouble with that. But overall it has been a great experience. I'm still trying to get pass those little tiny obstacles right now.

P6: I had to learn a lot of information myself. There was really no guidance through the process of what I was going to school for. It was working and going to school.

Good experience:

P2: I like it. I like that I came to a small community college because I have heard of my classmates who have been to a bigger university and have struggled and it's hard for them. But here I know people who have family members who work here so the transition was easy. I like the classroom ratio because I can get along with my professors and they are helpful and guide me to like my career path. I really enjoy it being small enough. It's not overwhelming. I am transitioning into a four year so I am glad I got the experience here now before I go into a bigger environment.

P3: My experience has been enjoyable. Enjoyable, stressful, a time for growth. A time that I've come to find and see if my passion has been invited in my heart, my soul, and my life to pursue and education. And the main focus of my education is to give back

Students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, who lack academic and social skills, are more likely to enter college underprepared (Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, & Nitzarim, 2013). The American College Testing (ACT, 2013) and National Indian Education Association (ACT/NIEA, 2016) reported that Native American students are more underprepared for college than any other racial or ethnic group and need additional preparatory coursework. Lack of these skills, as well as the level of anxiety students experience during the first year of college influence the student's decision to continue with college.

When asked if they were prepared for college, most believed they were. On instances when students indicated that they were somewhat prepared or had some understanding of college, it was not until they had actual classroom and campus

experience that they realized that there was more to college than just going to class (Table A2). All the students had a family member or friend who attended college, but knowing someone who was or is in college was different from actually experiencing attending college for the first time.

Table A2

Student Interview Question Three Transcript Example: Did you feel you were prepared for college?

Student Participants and Responses
P1: Yes
P2: Kind of not really. In high school there would be colleges who come in and talk and a lot of them I couldn't comprehend because I didn't know what the difference between associates, bachelors, what are grad students, what it is and everything.
P3: I would say no. When I first started I had to take remedial courses in order to work myself back up with English and mathematics.
P4: Yeah I think I was prepared. Because at the high school I went to we kind of talked about where the colleges are and how to do everything. I think we even took a field trip here.
P5: I felt I was prepared. I signed up for college about 3 or 4 months in advance. Because this is something I really wanted to do for myself as one of my goals to actually get a degree.
P6: Somewhat. It's been years since I've been in school. When I decided to go ahead and further my education, I mean I thought am I going to struggle or what. Just going along the way I realized that I had to know these things. So it was I say a scary thing but at the same time I had enough confidence knowing that I could succeed and if I had the education I needed.

When asked what challenges they dealt with and how they overcame them, most experienced having to navigate through the campus on their own and the responsibilities of coursework. Challenges ranged from having to find a planner that best worked for the student to addressing mental health issues. The students also recognized these challenges and sought to resolve them as evidenced in Table A3.

Table A3

Student Interview Question Four Transcript Example: What challenges have you dealt with as a student and how did you overcome them?

Student Participants and Responses
P1: For me it was figuring out what planning system works for me. Keeping track of my assignments, my grades and not slacking – Oh I can do this and I can push this off.
P2: I do struggle with anxiety. It's something that plays in with my assignments and as I am a student because I get stressed out and overwhelmed. But I have dealt with it before in high school but that's what got the best of me. Now I know what to do when my anxiety starts.
P3: Challenges that I have dealt with are past prior alcohol abuse. Death in the family. Because there are some issues that have come up. I drew support from my support system, my family, also my extended family which I consider my church family.
P4: I took all online first. And then for that you really have to have self-discipline. And like plan out your day about when you're going to do your homework, when you're going to read this and do that. But then like I was too tired from work. Because I worked full-time and then I was a full-time student at the same time.
P5: One was math but I went to a tutoring program. And also the student achievement center, the tutoring success center is the one I go to also. And also for daycare because I am a single mother with 2 kids. So daycare on campus has been a lot of help too, because she can go to school at the same time.
P6: I think a lot of it is particularly here at the school it's just resources for assistance, that was the biggest. But as I continued with my education the biggest issue was doing the work itself. They tell you that we have tutors available and being a working parent, you have kids, you have education, you have to set a certain time aside for tutoring. When you come in here there's really no resources for tutoring especially for Native Americans. This is what I realized, I'm more comfortable sitting down talking and studying with Native Americans because we can relate rather than sitting with an individual that is of a different race because they just directly and I guess they go off course too at a rate to where it's like speak my language here. That's how it was, so I think that was the most difficult part of it and it still is. The tutoring part of it, make it available not to not only at the school but off campus too. On weekends when we're available.

The students also spoke of their determination to continue as a student at the college and looked forward to graduating. Each of the students had a goal, whether it was to keep a job, support a family, or begin a career – it was a goal they identified in

their first year. With this goal in mind, they became more empowered to succeed. Table A4 provides some responses from the students when asked what has kept them in college.

Table A4

Student Interview Question Five Transcript Example: What has kept you here at college and kept you on track?

Student Participant and Responses
P1: What has kept me is my goal. I have a goal in mind. I have a dream board and that dream board I learned what I wanted to do and when I accomplish it.
P2: Just like from how I changed from high school was really helpful that is why I am doing the most I can here. Like I am taking honors courses. I do service learning. I try to take advantage of those opportunities
P3: Just the passion I had in life. I have drive in my life. I have direction back in my life. I could say that I was lost.
P4: My goals
P5: Empowerment feeling of yes I did this on my own.
P6: I think number one is my advisor. And number two is just me wanting to accomplish the goals that I pretty much wanted and what they offer in my field of work.

The students discussed the need for Native American students who are still in high school to take upper level math, English, and science courses so they can improve their academic skills when they take the college level courses. They also discussed independence and self-efficacy, in terms of incoming students needing to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. When asked what advice they would give to first-year students just beginning their college experience, all of the student participants indicated that the students needed to be prepared for the unexpected.

Table A5

Student Interview Question Seven Transcript Example: What advice would you give first-year students just beginning their college experience?

Student Participants and Responses
P1: To ask questions. Don't be afraid to ask questions. It may be overwhelming. Yeah you may not know what to do but your questions could be other questions that your peers have. It will help prepare you.
P2: I would tell them that their major doesn't have to be certain, like when they started, that they can be a liberal arts student. Get their core classes completed first. Along that way declare their major because if they go straight into something taking classes then changing their major can go the complete opposite and they basically like wasted their time and money. I would also tell them to take advantage of the opportunities like honors courses and service learning and build their CD as a student so that it can help them go into a four-year university or get their degree that they want to pursue.
P3: Out of experience. Join as many clubs that sounds interesting to you. It is a time to where you can experience other things in life that you have never been experienced to. There's many opportunities that at a college or university for an individual can be exposed to.
P4: Plan out your schedules so like have a list of all the homework they have to do for that week and plan. Finish it and when the teachers post an assignment, even if it is for the next week, just start on it. It's better to be ahead than to be behind.
P5: The advice I would give is try not to feel overwhelmed by the idea of you know, of like being just like high school. Because truth is it is not like high school. You have to work hard at your goal if you want it. You have to do the work. It's all about wanting to finish until you get your degree. If you're going to slack how you supposed to reach that goal. So my advice would be keep pursuing the goal, no matter what the obstacle. Find a way to get pass it. And always ask for help. Even the littlest thing that it's okay to ask for it. And don't be shy. Because being shy won't get you anywhere.
P6: I think one of the things is don't just go into a field just because your friends like it, because someone is in it. Go after something that you're really going to enjoy. If they're undecided, I really suggest them to do the core academics – English, math – what each class requirements are. Also talk to an advisor and ask them questions about how long they anticipate before they graduate. And a little bit of research on what the field of study they are going in what is available out there for employment where they want to reside. I think those are some of the key resources they need to look into when they decide to.

It is also important to understand the perspective of college administrators on what influences college students to persist to completion. Administrators are key

individuals who have influence in the decision-making process, therefore it is imperative to know what they believe are the supportive mechanisms in place and how effective they are toward student persistence and retention. Understanding the student population and their needs is vital toward strategizing programs that support student persistence and retention. The perspective of the college administrator at Local College was discussed as shown in Table A6.

Table A6

Administrator Interview Question One Transcript Example: What is your perspective of what influences students to persist to graduate?

Administrator Participant and Responses

AP: Well I think in general across all institutions of higher education that it would be mostly relationships and having a connection to the campus. Something that is familiar to them. Whether it be cultural or study-wise majors. Something that drives them to major in something else, like social worker for example. So I think that relationships is the basis for retention.

Interviewer: What do you think are factors in the influence you said, one is relationships, on how they connect?

AP: I think that it depends on the institution and how they design their on-boarding processes. On-boarding is designed in, every institution defines it in a different type of time-frame. I think all of practices and consistency of messages supporting where students are coming from in their life build that foundation for relationships. I think it's in all facets in program. It can be everything from connecting the student to new student orientations, to student success courses, so how it maps whoever time-scheduling so that there can be the sensitivity of tribal traditions and individuals needing to be out for periods of time because of their commitment to their family and/or their tribe or whatever the case may be. I think that will build retention for Native culture, inclusion instead of conforming. Rather than asking Native students to conform to the processes that have been in place for decades. It's about flexing and bringing in inclusion, including traditions and It's really difficult. I've seen students really being torn up between *Well, how my family and my tribe commitment*. But it doesn't. It clashes instead of including. I want to challenge the college to I think it's about changing the culture of the college so each person at each level whether each faculty or janitor or tutor or whatever are privy to the fact that this is about inclusion of culture is integrated and not about *We set a certain standard and if you can't meet it then I guess you're not doing it right*. So I think it is about that.

That is my overarching summary but I think that if we do that thing like assertively I

think over time like it's not like you're going to flip the switch and it will work perfect but if can slowly implement certain cultures changes that are profound. I think that helps the relationships.

Research Question Two: What support did the first-year Native American students receive from the local college administrators?

All the student participants identified a support system that made an impact toward their decision to continue at Local College. The students voiced their need to feel they mattered not just as a student but more so as an individual. The college administrator discussed several support systems in place at the college that focus on student retention, but also that more could be done to support Native American students. To answer this research question, two interview questions were asked of the students (Tables B1 and B2) and discussion from one of the interview questions for the administrator (Tables B3 and B4).

Resources on and off campus that support students. Students enter colleges knowing they would have more independence from their family and friends, but not actually realize the depth of the pressure to succeed on their own. As a result, students may feel somewhat apprehensive because of their unrealistic expectations of personal academic performance (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Colleges need to assume the responsibility to ensure that adequate resources are available for students (Tinto, 1993). Subsequently when students engage in campus activities that support academics, the chance of doing well in class increases, as a result impacting student persistence to continue beyond the first-year in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek,

2006). The students discussed the types of support they received on and off campus, or the lack thereof (Tables B1 and B2).

Table B1

Student Interview Question Nine Transcript Example: How have college administrators been supportive in your academic performance?

Student Participants and Responses
P1: They want to make sure, at keeping us on track and making sure not defaulting from what classes to attend or classes that we don't need for our college degree.
P2: They [one program department] are really helpful for many reasons because I go to them and talk to them about where I'm going and if it's the right decision. And just like how they go to their position and just getting their feedback. Talking to them really helps me a lot and I just created a bond with them.
P3: I have had one administrator who has been very helpful. I think its always great to find that somebody. And they have a program in any place you are at because in a way it helps you learn more and understand more.
P5: They have been encouraging.
P6: It's mainly my advisor. And the people that do a lot of training here. They're pretty supportive and put me in the direction of the resources I am looking into.

Table B2

Student Interview Question 11 Transcript Example: What services provided by the college helped keep you in college? If none, what services would be beneficial to you and why?

Student Participants and Responses
P1: The student tutoring center. I'm able to go to them for help with my papers. I felt that's the main ones I currently use to what I can do.
P2: I think my professors. They really helped me the most. But there was also the program here called EDGE. They serve first generation college students. They are really helpful. They put on little workshops and events.
P3: Services was like the tutoring center. That helped me a lot. As far as writing papers and mathematics. The Native American Center as well did a lot to help me.
P4: The tutoring center. The achievement center. I think the student activities. It is a way for you to take a break away from work and have fun. If you need a break.
P5: A lot of services helped me here. There's a lot that I've seen and the student achievement center helped me for two weeks with food, I didn't know they had. Because they get help from ECHO foodbanks
P6: I think they have all the services available that I need.

Four of the students did not have any direct support that they were aware of, although it may have been through a department chair or a faculty member who may have been an administrator at the college. Two of the students did identify an administrator who supported them. All indicated that they did seek help from the campus resources that were available, and most continued to receive support from those resources. The Native American Center, which houses the tutoring center and achievement center were often mentioned as the resources utilized by the students. Regarding the administrative perspective, AP1 discussed the different types of resources available on campus and the importance of establishing relationships with students (Tables B3 and B4).

Table B3

Administrator Interview Question One Transcript Example: What is your perspective of what influences students to persist to graduate?

Administrator Participant and Response
<p>AP: We have done certain things like on our on-boarding processes making it more Native culture specific. So inviting the family to join in on the on-boarding process so they take part in knowing about the institution and developing relationships for the whole family. Sometimes they can be the tribe. We have students like bring their whole tribe to on-boarding so that the whole tribe can connect with the college. I think the on-boarding process is a big thing. I also think that as we go on into why students take courses. I think it's important to make sure we have six or seven Native specific [enrolled in each course].</p> <p>The institution and the faculty are very privy to including Native culture and practices into a form of delivering the curriculum so that it's not all western developed. So that is one of the things that's been, like one of the big topics right now. We went to Native summit with the Department of Education in July. And we've been working on something like trying to create gathering locations. We're working on making proposals to have signage be not only English but Spanish and Native signage so that we can integrate into that relationship into the culture.</p>

Table B4

Administrator Interview Question Two Transcript Example: How could the college better support students to persist to graduation?

Administrator Participant and Response

AP: I think over years we've done lots of things. We put in a Native American Center which is there for almost like a decade and a half.

I think one of the things that the college has done is change placement standards for incoming freshmen. And part of the reason why is because we are using accuplacer scoring and that was really just - In that moment what does the student remember. So it really wasn't giving us accurate placement. We are going in a multiple measure placement assessment process. We don't want to misplace students or over place them. We want to make sure they are supported. So we've done and we have a lot more work to do, but we have put in extensive learning support for students through placement. I think ensuring that they're staying in a forward motion. They're supported through coaches or whatever, advisors through the process. I think it's huge. It makes a big difference in retention. I'm seeing success.

Research Question Three: What additional support do the first-year Native American students need?

Three interview questions were asked regarding available or needed support for Native American students. All the students discussed what support they received and what impact it has made in their lives. The college administrator provided a summary of what is in place and what more could be done for Native American students.

Transparency, communication, improving the availability of resources, and inclusion of the community were areas that needed to be addressed, according to the students.

Inclusion of culture and community within overall aspects of the college.

Involving and engaging students in campus activities that include social interaction, can make their college experience more meaningful. Social events, which include community and family interaction, build social connectedness that nurtures a sense of

belonging to the college environment (Tovar, Quiroga, & Torres, 2015). Some examples of native traditional activities that are shared and enjoyed by native communities are Pow-wows, Song-and-Dance, drum groups, arts and crafts display, concerts, and potluck dinners. Including the culture and community for Native American students who attend the college could also help upcoming Native American students who are in high school or those who have spent some years out of school, to feel more enticed to enroll at the college.

Native American ethnic identity is not viewed only as an individual, but of shared cultural identity of which most tribes practice such as clanship, ceremonies, language, and relationships (Markstrom, 2011; Williams & Shipley, 2018). It is important to understand and acknowledge the cultural environment in which Native American students are functioning and examine how it interacts with the current campus environment that they are adjusting to (Crazy Bull et al., 2020; Flynn, Olson, & Yellig, 2012). By infusing Native American culture into the college, students may feel more comfortable, which would allow for cultural and educational connections to be made.

The students commented that more outreach within the community is needed, whether it be through co-curricular activities, assistance for students, or during the decision-making process that impacts the student body. They believed that the college could expand on its resources and “show-case” what they are all about, especially since the immediate and surrounding communities have large populations of Native Americans. At the same time, they also believed that college personnel should be more attentive to the Native American culture and traditions to better understand the environment from

which Native American students come from. Some of the student participants felt that the faculty do a good job interacting with students while the administrators could do better in being more visible on campus (Table C1).

Table C1

Student Interview Question 10 Transcript Example: What should college administrators focus on to ensure students complete their program of study?

Student Participants and Responses

P1: For sure the path that each student is taking. But as well as getting to know each student. Because there are some students who so drop out because their problems. And having the teacher know the scholarships and resources that help you so that you don't have to dropout.

P2: I think like just how well they are doing in class and, I really say this a lot, but its mental health. If one of the student's mental health goes down, then it's a struggle to go on with their education.

P3: Just more encouragement. The more encouragement somebody has the better outcome they have, the better in their changing their mindset. They are able to complete a program. Each one is different. And I think that a lot of administrators and faculty staff try to help the students already. And from what I see is the curriculum within one class they try to explain more about the fields that are available and what you will be doing in the field and why this field pertains to this field. I've seen a couple people change their field of studies because of that and I think that is very helpful. I'm not sure if they finished it but I believe that's the type of encouragement that has helped that I see. Just having that open door.

P4: Maybe like the teachers, like if you have a failing grade in the classes maybe they can check on you every now and to see if you need extra help.

Maybe like have a meet and greet. Because I am not so sure who the Dean is. I think that would be a good thing. That way everyone can meet the Dean and they know who it is. And if they have questions about the college or anything, they can go to them.

P5: I feel they are doing a pretty good job right now, like with workshops and with activities. Explaining why you need an education. It's just some students see through a different perspective. Each to their own opinion.

P6: At the beginning they should survey them before they go into class because they can ask them, What kind of knowledge would you gain from taking this class.

Access and need for more resources. Retention of college students begins when they are accepted for admission, hence colleges have a responsibility to provide enough

opportunities and resources as a part of support services for students (Tinto, 1993). The students identified resources that they have used or knew were available, but also made recommendations for improvement in regard to access. Consideration should be made to provide services after hours and on weekends for students who are not able to access these services during normal working hours.

Most of the Native American students who attend Local College reside outside the community and spend their day on campus. The students mentioned that not all students can go out into the community and seek resources on their own, especially during the first year of college, so they rely on what is available at the college. The students and college administrator believed that the communication between students and college personnel could be improved, and there could be more community inclusion on campus (Table C2 and C3). Consideration also needs to be made for students who are employed, have family obligations, and have children to tend to, thus creating a tight schedule which might not allow time for them to seek out resources in the community.

Table C2

Student Interview Question 13 Transcript Example: How could the college better support students to persist to graduation?

Student Participants and Responses
P1: Figure out what the community needs. Knowing what makes up the population of the students are.
P2: I think communication and just getting out, like the resources ---getting the word out about the resources they offer. Just because the students don't know what is offered at the college.
P3: I would just say more community involvement. I think the more you have the community involved, the more word of mouth gets around, as far as what entities do in for help in supporting the different causes and stuff in the community.
P4: More meetings with the advisors. Because wall we have is like one meeting. One or two meetings this semester and that's it

P5: I guess more success stories. [how do you mean?] Because I've seen a lot of people who actually graduated from here, their personal stories of how they got through college. Like one of those things that they do on those workshops or those seminars where you go and some kids have actually graduated from here. Share their life story of how they got through college and to give some insight. [so alumni?] yeah. It's like almost like a group and help the other person and the other person helps you. Form that positive group to help motivate each other to want to succeed in that.

P6: Getting the right people to communicate to them. The direction. That's probably one of the biggest things. That way they know. Availability is the biggest thing. You've got to make yourself available to people if you want to be successful. And putting someone else in charge that doesn't know the background of it, you're just going to lose your customers.

Table C3

Administrator Interview Question Two Transcript Example: How could the college better support students to persist to graduation?

Administrator Participant and Response

AP1: If you look at all [state colleges], their name creates a relationship that outright people gravitate to them. Whereas places like us, I mean we are very community serving. We basically design and build our own academic and support program based on what the community feedback is and for the most part. I think if you look through at all institutions we have privy to what the industry needs are in the local community and how you conserve the world as a whole too. Because right now the big deal in higher ed is to have lots of online degrees so that anybody can study anywhere across the globe. So I think it's being cutting edge but still sticking to your [if you will] your community based on what it's about, who lives here, and what they need. Part of what we get into too is, our area is, and there are lots of institutions like this and you might even go to Alaska and into the community college there. They're serving Native students as well. Their community needs and resources are certain discipline or careers. I think it is about offering those opportunities that individuals can feel like *Well I can get my education but I can still go back and work in my community and give back*. So closing that loop is huge and being able to provide that opportunity for people to close that loop. They can go back or to the other side of the world and work. Being cutting edge is like type of information that is for all institutions. Overall have a base for clientele.

We have a non-tribal Native serving grant that with Department of Education that serves, the target is for First-Time Degree seeking Native students. We just entered year four and five-year grant. So far we've learned that we need to do more support for part-time Native male who are over your traditional age student incoming. Their age is like mid to upper 20s. We need to provide more support for those students. They tend

to struggle finding a major they can land on. We have an area we need to focus more. It would be nice to see the college, institutionalize some of the services that we have in that grant right now that are being successful. We have a Native coaching model which is called the Warrior Model. We are hoping to publish that. I hope we get to institutionalize that but we are showing promise to support them.

I also see that we can provide more resources for the Native American Center. It would be nice to see the staffing increase and be able to provide like a gathering location for everybody to be at. Those are some small things. Obviously we always need to expand more coaching and advising no matter what but I think that some are more Native student specific. And I think the institution also needs to continue to work on integrating cultures of any make.

Recommendations

Colleges have the capability to retain students by reaching out and integrating them into the campus environment (Tinto, 1993). The interactions and relationships that students establish on campus are essential as these influence their academic progress. The areas that needed to be addressed in relation to the local problem of lower student persistence to graduation at Local College included the on-campus resources, student academic and social integration, cultural awareness/community engagement, and support from college administrators.

The insight into the academic and social integration on campus and their relation to self-efficacy was evident when the students described the challenges and adjustments they had to make during their enrollment at Local College. Creating a community that encourages student engagement and motivation is important toward fostering a successful student learning environment. The recommendations to improve, enhance, and increase support of first-year Native American students would increase their chance to continue beyond their first year. Recommended improvements for college administrators to be

aware of (a) broaden the knowledge base of Native American students, (b) enhance campus resources and bring community resources on campus, and (c) interconnectedness with the Native American community.

Recommendation 1: Broaden the knowledge base of Native American students

How successfully students transition to college is important, and more so for Native American students because of the lack of college skills and/or often having to adjust from a Native American cultural, rural life to that of a busy campus. While it is important to identify students, it is also equally important that they can get the support needed to address the academic and social challenges they encounter while in college (Keith et al., 2016). Campus and classroom experience often reflect the personal goals of students and their commitment to the college (Lerdpornkulrat, Koul, & Poondej, 2018). When issues of not being able to adjust to academic and campus life become overwhelming for the student, it would most likely result in the decision to drop-out of college.

To address the problem of student academic and social engagement, faculty and staff need to do more to assist students not only to pass their course, but to assist in accomplishing their goal toward graduating. The focus for college administrators should be on the students' social and intellectual growth and how this is interpreted in the institutional goals (Guillory, 2009; Schmidtke, 2016). It is important to understand what strengths Native American students possess and their determination to persist toward graduation. Students enter college with a variety of characteristics that impact their decisions to persist and complete their education (Tinto, 1993).

Administrators could create a more inclusive and welcoming learning environment by ensuring that faculty, staff, and administrators understand and acknowledge the background of Native American history, culture, and environment. Examples are the demographics as reported earlier, reservation lifestyles, meaning and respect of traditional ceremonies, family composition (multi-generational households), reservation livelihood (water hauling, planting, ranching, sheep herding, etc.), chapter involvement (similar to town halls), and most important the education that students receive (mainly public education). This comprehension would provide an opportunity towards a better understanding of the Native American students enrolled at the college, as well as prospective students. This would lead to better communication and development of policies to reflect student retention and completion, as well as address expectations, support, and involvement. In turn it also allows the relationships that students establish on campus to become more meaningful as they relate to their involvement academically and socially.

Recommendation 2: Enhance campus resources and bring community resources on campus

Resources should not only be provided for students but also make them available, so students can access those resources beyond the resource's operating hours. College administrators have an obligation to provide resources to support students to continue beyond their first year (Tinto, 1993). According to Tinto (2012) students make decisions to stay or leave according to how they fit into the environment of the campus and the support they receive.

The students and administrator identified the types of resources that were available and some recommendations for improvements. The most prominent resource mentioned was the Native American Center, which facilitates the tutoring center and achievement center. But according to the students interviewed, the quality of services and access to resources could be improved. The students recommended that quality of services such as availability and staff knowing the resources available could be improved. Services such as access to tutors and advisors were not available outside of the regular operating hours. Native American speaking tutors and staff would also be helpful for those who need classroom instruction interpreted so that they can better understand the assignment. Most important, the student participants expressed they wanted engaging, informative, and caring faculty and staff interactions.

Most of the Native American students reside outside the community and spend their day on campus. Since not all students have the opportunity to go out into the community and seek resources on their own, especially during the first year of college, another recommendation was to bring community resources on campus, such as the food pantry, housing, and transportation. The students also recommend bringing in alumni to visit with the students, especially first-year students to provide their perception of what helped them to persist and graduate. There was also the issue of the students not knowing who the college administrators were or what they did, so more transparency and communication was another recommendation for improvement. By knowing who the upper management personnel are, students are more apt to express their concerns as well as knowing who they can seek for support.

Recommendation 3: Interconnectedness with the Native American community.

The sense of belonging within the college classroom and campus is important to students because it creates a supportive environment for learning (Lerdpornkulrat et al., 2018). Most of the Native American students who attend Local College live in rural communities on the reservation. For these students, entering a college campus may result in a more confusing kind of “culture shock” and even more so for those who lack college readiness skills (Motl, Multon, & Zhao, 2018; Patterson et al., 2017).

The responsibility of maneuvering through and understanding the complexities of the classroom and campus environment should not be placed solely on the Native American students but should also be the responsibility of colleges to accommodate students to adjust and support them. Understanding the values and the connectedness of culture and community of Native Americans provides insight as to how it influences Native American students and their persistence toward degree completion (Andrade, 2014; Minthorn, 2014b; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Ward et al., 2014). Addressing the persistence and retention issues of Native American students should take into consideration the student’s cultural background and the environment they come from (Patterson et al., 2017).

To address what students recognized as an issue regarding lack of cultural awareness and community engagement, administrators should investigate what resources are available and how effective these resources are toward supporting Native American students. Questions to consider are: Does the college environment support or constrain Native American students’ identities? Does the college environment enable Native

American students to be successful, regardless of their level of development? Does the college promote positive representations of Native Americans throughout the campus environment?

Conclusion

My study was conducted to examine what barriers Native American students encounter that influence their decision to persist to graduate or drop out of college. The local problem was the low persistence of Native American students at Local College. Six students and one administrator participated in the study. The students' perceptions of their experience uncovered the successes and challenges during their first year at Local College. The administrator discussed programs that were available and initiatives that supported the students. All the participants indicated that the support services for Native American students could be improved and they provided some recommendations, which are included in this White Paper.

The study findings provided some insight as to what influenced the students to persist toward graduation. Through their perseverance and support from the college, as well as their family and friends, Native American students have the ability to overcome personal, academic, and social challenges to persist toward completion at Local College. Recommendations were (a) broaden the knowledge base of Native American students (b) enhance campus resources and bring community resources on campus, and (c) interconnectedness with the Native American community. These recommendations can serve as a guide for college administrators to follow as they strive to address persistence

and retention of Native American students, as well as improve institutional and instructional practices.

Stakeholders' Survey

Addressing Native American Students' Persistence Toward Completion

Date:

Your participation is important in determining if this White Paper project met the goal of communicating to stakeholders' (a) the students' perceptions of what they believe supports their decision to continue at LC and (b) recommendation for improvement, which would contribute to Native American students' persistence toward graduation at LC.

On a scale of 1-5, please rate the following aspects of this presentation using:

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = neutral 4 = agree 5 = strongly disagree

Circle the number of your choice.

Project (White Paper): The goals of the project were clearly explained

1 2 3 4 5

The recommendations were clearly presented.

1 2 3 4 5

What recommendations would you suggest to improve persistence of Native American students toward completion?

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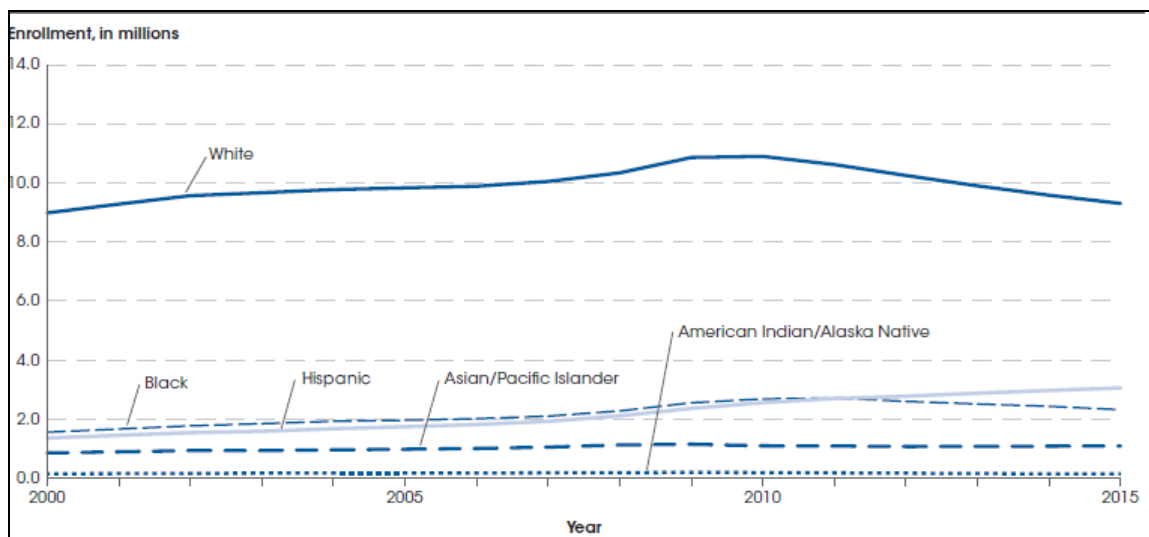
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Appendix B: Enrollment of Undergraduate Students Fall 2000-2015



Note: American Indian/Alaska Native student enrollment has remained under 1% of total enrollment. From “The Condition of Education 2017” by National Center Education for Statistics, 2017, page 117.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Student Participants

Study: The Persistence of First-Year NA Students at a Local College

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Dolores Becenti

Interviewee:

Ya'a'teeh. My name is Delores Becenti, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program with Walden University. Under the supervision of Dr. Sydney Parent, I am examining the factors that influence first-year Native American students to persist toward graduation. I am requesting your participation in an interview that would take about 45 minutes to an hour. Participation in this study is voluntary and will not affect your grades in any class. Your name will not be used in any way. To protect your confidentiality, I will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. Data will be kept secure by coding names (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.), stored in a locked fire-proof file cabinet in my office, and properly disposed of by shredding five years after the study has been completed.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, a possible benefit of your participation could be knowing that the results of this study will contribute to our knowledge about factors related to the academic success of Native American college students. There are no known risks to your participation. Furthermore, you may withdraw from this study at any time for any reason, with no negative consequences.

A thank you gift in the amount of \$20.00 will be provided at the conclusion of the interview.

Interview Questions:

1. What year in college are you in?
2. Tell me about your experience as a first-year student at the college?
3. Did you feel you were prepared for college? If not, why?
4. What challenges have you dealt with as a student and how did you overcome them?
5. What has kept you here at college and kept you on track?

6. If you think about friends who have started college but not finished, what do you think kept them from doing so?
7. What advice would you give first-year students just beginning their college experience?
8. What support did you have for your decision to go to college from parents, family, or friends?
9. How have college administrators been supportive in your academic performance?
10. What should college administrators focus on to ensure students complete their program of study? Why?
11. What services provided by the college helped keep you in college? If none, what services would be beneficial to you and why?
12. What are your expectations of a local college?
13. How could the college better support students to persist to graduation?

Appendix D: Interview Protocol for College Administrators

Study: The Persistence of First-Year NA Students at a Local College

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Dolores Becenti

Interviewee:

Greetings. My name is Delores Becenti, and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Educational Leadership program with Walden University. Under the supervision of Dr. Sydney Parent, I am examining the factors that influence first-year Native American students to persist toward graduation. I am requesting your participation in an interview that would take about 45 minutes to an hour. Participation is voluntary.

Your name will not be used in any way. To protect your confidentiality, I will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. Data will be kept secure by coding names (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.), stored in a locked fire-proof file cabinet in my office, and properly disposed of by shredding five years after the study has been completed.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, a possible benefit of your participation could be knowing that the results of this study will contribute to our knowledge about factors related to the academic success of Native American college students. There are no known risks to your participation. Furthermore, you may withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, with no negative consequences.

Interview Questions:

1. What is your perspective of what influences students to persist to graduate?
2. How could the college better support students to persist to graduation?

Appendix E: Framework Alignment Matrix

Research Questions	Tinto's Theory	Student Interview Questions
<p>RQ1. What are the first-year NA students' experiences and perspectives of what influences their persistence to graduate from college?</p>	<p>Pre-Entry Attributes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills & Abilities • Intentions • Family Background 	<p>IQ3. Did you feel you were prepared for college? If not, why? (skills and attributes)</p> <p>IQ12. What are your expectations of a local college? (Intentions)</p> <p>IQ8. What support did you have for your decision to go to college from parents, family, or friends? (Family)</p>
	<p>Academic Integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Performance • Faculty/Staff Interaction 	<p>IQ2. Tell me about your experience as a first-year student at the college? (Academic performance)</p> <p>a. What are some positive classroom experiences?</p> <p>b. How did you feel about college academics as compared to high school academics?</p> <p>IQ4. What challenges have you dealt with as a student and how did you overcome them? (Academic)</p> <p>IQ5. What has kept you here at college and kept you on track? (Academic)</p> <p>IQ9. How have college administrators been supportive in your academic performance? (Faculty/staff)</p> <p>a. How did they interact with you?</p> <p>IQ11. What services provided by the college helped keep you in college? If none, what services would be beneficial to you and why? (Faculty/staff)</p>
	<p>Social Integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extracurricular Activities • Peer Groups 	<p>IQ2. Tell me about your experience as a first-year student at the college? (Extracurricular)</p> <p>a. What type of extracurricular activities did you participate in?</p> <p>IQ6. If you think about friends who have started college but not finished, what do you think kept them from doing so? (Peer Groups)</p>

		IQ7. What advice would you give first-year students just beginning their college experience? (Peer groups)
RQ2. What support did the first-year NA students receive from the local college administrators?	Academic Integration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goals & Institutional Commitment • Faculty/Staff Interaction 	IQ9. How have college administrators been supportive in your academic performance? (faculty/staff interaction) IQ11. What services provided by the college helped keep you in college? If none, what services would be beneficial to you and why? (Institutional commitment)
RQ3. What additional support do the first-year NA students need?	Academic Integration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goals & Institutional Commitment • Academic Performance • Faculty/Staff Interaction 	IQ10. What should college administrators focus on to ensure students complete their program of study? Why? (Institutional commitment) IQ13. How could the college better support students to persist to graduation? a. What academic support is needed? (Academic performance) b. How can faculty and staff better interact with students? (Faculty/staff interaction)
	Social Integration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extracurricular Activities • Peer Groups 	IQ13. How could the college better support students to persist to graduation? a. What type of extracurricular activities should be provided to support students? (Social integration) b. How can peer groups support first-year students to persist to graduation? (Peer groups)

Appendix F: Distribution of Degrees Conferred by Race/Ethnicity and Sex 2005 – 2006

Race/ethnicity, sex, and level of degree	Total	Associate's	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral	First-professional ¹
	Number of degrees					
Total degrees conferred²	2,936,095	713,066	1,485,242	594,065	56,067	87,655
White	2,049,406	485,297	1,075,561	393,357	31,601	63,590
Male	856,763	190,139	467,467	150,954	14,659	33,544
Female	1,192,643	295,158	608,094	242,403	16,942	30,046
Black	300,525	89,784	142,420	58,976	3,122	6,223
Male	96,028	27,619	48,079	16,959	1,081	2,290
Female	204,497	62,165	94,341	42,017	2,041	3,933
Hispanic	227,208	80,854	107,588	32,438	1,882	4,446
Male	86,440	30,040	41,814	11,637	826	2,123
Female	140,768	50,814	65,774	20,801	1,056	2,323
Asian/Pacific Islander	185,508	35,201	102,376	34,029	3,257	10,645
Male	82,032	14,224	45,809	15,803	1,555	4,641
Female	103,476	20,977	56,567	18,226	1,702	6,004
American Indian/Alaska Native	23,936	8,552	10,940	3,504	230	710
Male	8,658	2,774	4,203	1,244	105	332
Female	15,278	5,778	6,737	2,260	125	378
	Percentage distribution					
Total degrees conferred²	100.0	24.3	50.6	20.2	1.9	3.0
White	100.0	23.7	52.5	19.2	1.5	3.1
Male	100.0	22.2	54.6	17.6	1.7	3.9
Female	100.0	24.7	51.0	20.3	1.4	2.5
Black	100.0	29.9	47.4	19.6	1.0	2.1
Male	100.0	28.8	50.1	17.7	1.1	2.4
Female	100.0	30.4	46.1	20.5	1.0	1.9
Hispanic	100.0	35.6	47.4	14.3	0.8	2.0
Male	100.0	34.8	48.4	13.5	1.0	2.5
Female	100.0	36.1	46.7	14.8	0.8	1.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	100.0	19.0	55.2	18.3	1.8	5.7
Male	100.0	17.3	55.8	19.3	1.9	5.7
Female	100.0	20.3	54.7	17.6	1.6	5.8
American Indian/Alaska Native	100.0	35.7	45.7	14.6	1.0	3.0
Male	100.0	32.0	48.5	14.4	1.2	3.8
Female	100.0	37.8	44.1	14.8	0.8	2.5

¹ A degree that signifies both completion of the academic requirements for beginning practice in a given profession and a level of professional skill beyond that normally required for a bachelor's degree. This degree usually is based on a program requiring at least 2 academic years of work prior to entrance and a total of at least 6 academic years of work to complete the degree program, including both prior required college work and the professional program itself. First-professional degrees are awarded in the fields of dentistry, medicine, optometry, osteopathic medicine, pharmacy, podiatric medicine, veterinary medicine, chiropractic, law, and theological professions.

² Totals include degrees conferred to nonresident aliens who are not shown in the table.

NOTE: Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2007*, based on 2005–06 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2006.

Note. From "Status and Trends in the Education of American Indians and Alaska Natives: 2008" by U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2006, p. 135.