

# **CULTURAL RESILIENCE: VOICES OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS IN COLLEGE RETENTION**

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

This study begins with the notion that Native American college students call upon particular cultural factors as they persist in mainstream higher education institutions. The nineteen Native-American students' stories via interview reflect their imaginative efforts to survive by holding up higher education as a means to empower their families and communities. The results echo those of HeavyRunner and Marshall's (2003) theory of cultural resilience as specific cultural factors such as prayer, giving back and family support, were expounded upon as relating to persistence in college retention.

La présente étude adopte au départ la notion selon laquelle les étudiants autochtones des collèges nord-américains font appel à des facteurs culturels particuliers pour persister dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur. Les récits de dix-neuf étudiants amérindiens recueillis au cours d'entrevues reflètent leurs efforts d'imagination pour survivre en mettant de l'avant que l'éducation supérieure est un moyen pour habiliter leurs familles et leurs collectivités. Les résultats font écho à ceux de la théorie de la résilience culturelle de HeavyRunner et Marshall (2003), pour lesquels des facteurs culturels spécifiques, tels que la prière, la restitution et le soutien familial, sont liés à la persévérance scolaire au collège.

A traditional hero fights for honor and to make his people live; a physician and writer is not a mythic hero; yet a traditional hero transforms into physician, advocate, and writer and strives with healing art in medicine, law, and text to make his people live anew and to uphold their honor in a degrading world which proclaims a vanishing race into the vanishing guilt of the nightmare of history, because, as Ohiyesa [Charles Eastman] writes, 'my desire [is] to use all that I had learned for [my people's] benefit' (Eastman, 1936, p. 74), and the traditional hero is reborn with all the underlying comic transcendence of tragic processes, and the myth lives in ordinary dress (Faulds, 2003: 6).

As early as 1936, Charles Eastman shared insight into the plight of Native Americans who aspired to acquire a college education as a means to help their people. Since early colonization, Native Americans have been known to be shape shifters, in the sense that their lives' journey entails a continuous transforming evolution of bridging their traditional cultures to that of mainstream society. This bridging is not due to a particular preference for what came to be the dominant culture, but it is utilized as means to invoke and uphold collective survival for Native American populations. An example of such bridging is found in the ever-increasing population of Native Americans who acquire mainstream college degrees. Despite the threat of acquired acculturation into mainstream society through these academic accomplishments, there is evidence that some Native American college students maintain a strong sense of Native American identity prior to and during their educational process. However, limited research is available that focuses upon Native-American students who persist in college and the multiple cultural perspectives they bring to their experience of higher education. As a result, the purpose of this study is to uncover, via American Indian student voices, cultural aspects that have led to their retention in college.

This study springs from the theory of cultural resilience. Strand and Peacock (2003) define cultural resilience for Native Americans as the incorporation of traditional practices and ways of thinking as a means to overcome oppression and other negative obstacles faced by this population. The theory of cultural resilience stems from a strengths perspective that all populations have positive attributes (Lum, 1996) and this correlates with resilience studies (Bernard, 1997; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1997) that have measured why some people did well and others did not in adapting to negative environments. The literature indicates that the strengths perspective is a particularly appropriate choice for Native American populations as they have employed and utilized cultural fac-

tors for centuries as a means to survive (Harris & McFarland, 2000). Within these populations, commonly shared Indigenous values are effective in substance abuse treatment (Harris & McFarland, 2000); prevention programs for Native American youth to build strong identities (Sanchez-Way & Johnson, 2000) and Native American women's wellness (Walters & Simoni, 2002).

Furthermore, a review of the literature strongly suggests that some Native American students persist in completing undergraduate education in mainstream institutions by employing pre-entry Native American cultural factors that serve as coping mechanisms for navigating institutions of higher education (Garcia, 2000; HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003). HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003) refer to Native American cultural factors as cultural resilience and define them as factors that support, nurture, and encourage Native American students, families, and communities. They categorize and name these Indigenous factors as: spirituality, family strengths, elders, ceremonial rituals, oral traditions, tribal identity, and support networks that serve as effective coping mechanisms. This study stems from the theory that some Native-American college students utilize cultural resilience to navigate through mainstream higher education institutions.

Depth is added through the direct voices of Native Americans from diverse tribes who attended four universities concerning their direct lived experience in higher education, and the use of cultural resilience in their persistence. This provision within educational studies that incorporates the different ways of knowing with Native American populations is essential to reverse a system of knowledge that has been repressed for five centuries. Deloria and Wildcat (2001) sum this up best in their succinct statement, "In short, we do fit comfortably or conveniently within Western civilization. This is not a regret. It is an affirmation—a living testimony to the resilience of American Indian cultures" (vii).

The results of this study can lead to practice implications as Native Americans have historically been reported as having the lowest college retention rates of all United States racial minority populations. When studying this population, the majority of research studies primarily emphasizes the deficits of the Native-American student and/or the higher education institutions they attend as contributors to low entry and retention. It is not uncommon for higher education retention quantitative studies to be poor predictors of academic success for this population. Reasons noted for this entail small sample sizes, racial and ethnic identification inaccuracies, and the limitations of quantitative research in describing the educational *experiences* of the participants that can shed insight into retention. Furthermore, Native American populations com-

monly are included in mainstream groups or clumped into the category of “other,” negating rich, diverse cultures that can constitute a different way of knowing outside of majority societal structure. As a result, few research findings are available that focus upon Native American students who succeed in college. Furthermore, limited studies are available that address the influence of Native American culture for Native-American students persisting in higher education, and how Indigenous cultures and values can be instrumental in completing higher education degree programs.

Utilizing the framework of HeavyRunner and Marshall’s (2003) theory of cultural resilience, the objective of this research study is to explore what cultural factors are perceived as effective in assisting Native-American students in graduating from college. How do Native-American college students utilize cultural resilience as a means to persist in college?

## **Method**

In researching Native American populations, it is especially important to incorporate the many voices of Native American participation in academe while providing enough thick description to enable the reader to form an opinion on the data analysis. In keeping with the spirit of social justice, I employed a narrative analysis of interview data to examine how pre-entry cultural factors, and through those, different ways of knowing, are instrumental in the persistence of some Native-American students while attending higher education institutions. From a cultural perspective, the interview method was selected because it so closely resembles that of storytelling, a form of oral tradition that encompasses the transfer of information from one Native American generation to another.

## **Participants**

To detail the scope of this study, a total of nineteen Native-American students were interviewed in their last year of undergraduate studies in three public higher education institutions (two state and one regional) and one private, federally-funded, university whose student body consisted exclusively of Native Americans. The universities are located in three different states with large Native American populace. Three to six students were interviewed from each institution. Each of the universities was selected due to its top ranking as a national leader in conferring undergraduate degrees for Native American populations; their diversity in geographic location and tribal representation. The participant population was comprised of eleven females and eight males. Nineteen diverse tribal affiliations were represented with an age range of twenty

through fifty-six.

### **Sampling Procedure**

The sampling procedure for the students in this study was criterion-based sampling as I selected students who met specific criteria, namely Native Americans in their last year of undergraduate studies. I focused upon students in their last year because they had the most extensive higher education experience, thus having the most to share concerning their lived experience in college. Snowball sampling was also utilized as I often depended upon the interviewees and other key informants to direct me to others who met the participant criterion for the study.

### **Data Collection**

The methods of data collection included primary data collection in the form of one-on-one extended, structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions. I employed a narrative analysis because it offered me the greatest means to allow the Native-American students to tell their own stories. As Native Americans and their communities are better understood when using their own cultural conceptualizations and terms (Champagne, 1997), my research questions focused upon the students' direct, lived experience (person-centered). On an indirect broader scale, the questions also alluded to the communities and cultures from which they come based upon the exploration of their pre-entry cultural experiences and beliefs (community-centered).

### **Data Analysis**

I used the cultural factors of spirituality, family strengths, elders, ceremonial rituals, oral traditions, tribal identity, and support networks that are described by HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003) as preliminary coding themes through which I framed my analysis of the data. I then conducted a cross-interview analysis (Patton, 2002) by pulling chunks of data from each question in the interview based upon these coding themes.

Finally, I "fleshed out" the patterns by "extension (building on items of information already known), bridging (making connections among different items), and surfacing (proposing new information that ought to fit and then verifying its existence)" (Patton, 2002: 466). In this way, I looked to deduce other themes that might emerge from the data. This analysis was the source of the emergence of new themes and potentially new theory as a product of this study.

## **Results**

In the beginning of my interview data analysis, I used the cultural factors described by HeavyRunner and Marshall that assisted students in persisting in higher education as preliminary coding themes through which to frame the analysis of my data. These categories included tribal identity, spirituality, family strengths, elders, ceremonial rituals, oral traditions, and support networks. However, I did not ask the students preliminary interview questions regarding the named categories, but instead I began the protocol by asking them what being Native American meant to them. This is in keeping with “sound ethnographic research” when “both questions and answers must be discovered from informants” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995: 112). As a result, the participants reflected upon the factors that fit into the preliminary categories and named some categories that were outside of those named by HeavyRunner and Marshall.

Native Americans acquire understanding from a holistic conceptual framework, meaning no knowledge is irrelevant or unimportant, resulting in the Indigenous philosophy of circular thinking (Bobiwash, 1999). Accordingly, the participants described their tribal identity components as interconnected with spirituality, family support, elders, ceremonial rituals, and oral traditions. The manner in which they used these components in pursuit of higher education and other life experiences encompassed the coping mechanisms of cultural resilience. This interconnected circular thinking of family, kin, and tribal bonds represents a unity of spirit in Native American cultures (Benham & Mann, 2003) with an aim at balance (Harris & McFarland, 2000).

Upon analyzing the data, three prominent themes surfaced that directly related to the theory of cultural resilience as a means to persisting in college. These three themes are: giving back, prayer, and family support. Using the students’ own words to frame this data, I expounded upon these categories to provide a sense of their lived experience.

### **Giving Back**

The participants in this study proposed to use their higher education degrees as a means to “give back” by promoting change for their people. As a Cherokee student remarked, “I think it’s just involved in the traditions and the heritage. As long as I’m giving back you know, somewhere.”

One student aspiring to be a tribal lawyer, speaks to her concerns that her family and some tribes are lacking in adequate health care:

I definitely would like to do something to give back because

I know all the problems my mom and auntie would talk about. There was a lot of problems. I remember one of my cousins wrote a book about his experience in working with the tribes. I think it was [name of tribe]. So, I want to work to help tribes like that. I don't want to see like my mom and all my aunts on my dad's and mom's side suffer because they don't have like health care.

Another young woman already gives back to her community by assisting Native Americans in seeking financial aid to attend college. She comments on how she wants to use her social work degree to address social issues currently faced by tribal communities:

There's just so much out there that I want to do with Native Americans, you know? Whether Keetoowah or Cherokee [tribal organizations], it doesn't matter. I would want to work with Keetoowahs or just Native American people as a whole. I would like to have some type of rehabilitation center for drugs and alcohol...I've been thinking about a women's shelter. We don't have one. And then there's another [laughing], all kinds of things. I see my granny like with the elderly. She's made some mistakes, you know, getting older she gave up her house. She lives in an apartment for the elderly. It's not like it's her home. And I feel like there ought to be a community center or a community place for the elderly. A place where like my granny can go outside and work on her garden, plant her own flowers.

A male Apache student expressed his desire to use his environmental science degree and possibly future advanced degrees as a means to give back by helping to clean up dirty sites on his reservation:

There's a lot of polluted Indian reservations and I don't think we know too much in-depth about them. And what I want to do with my degree, I would want to go back to my tribe. Let them know you have individuals, use me so that we can enhance the community that we live in. But I know that with an undergraduate degree, you have a broad understanding of what's going on. And on to the next level, the master's. And beyond that you'll help to refine your educational tools and become more specialized. That in turn you can use to help your people to become better equipped in solving environmental problems. So that's what I want to do. I want to go back and help my people in that area.

A female student shared her previous experience of growing up with a History curriculum that encompassed erroneous information concern-

ing Native Americans and her desire to use her higher education to make necessary changes:

But growing up in North Dakota, I've had several experiences with museums and their interpretation of Native Americans and non-Native American teachers and what they tell their students. I mean even on the reservation, the things that were taught in our history class is just ridiculous. So, I want to be involved with different museums. I want to go back and work at, or do something to correct what is happening at our cultural center. It's just wrong for kids to grow up and not know where their tribe originated from. It's just ridiculous. And I would love to come up to assist in coming up with a curriculum for Native American Studies implemented in the school system, like mandatory, you know?

For many, their drive and desire to use their education to make a change for Indian people was not motivated by monetary rewards, but a self-induced responsibility to use their college degrees to give back to their communities:

I would take a pay cut if I was making a difference as far as doing something that meant something. You know like I said, everything I'm learning, I feel like it is my responsibility to pass that on. There's so much information written about us. And a lot of people, that's the only exposure they've ever had to Native Americans, like the book they open or the museum they visit. And there's so much things that are incorrect and so blown out of proportion. Just a little change, you know? And that would mean I was doing what I need to do.

As an example, one young man's focus was directed towards college graduation and the possibility of playing professional baseball. He shared his plight of personal persistence in college completion and career planning as a life-long ambition. Using these assets, he hopes to give back by dissolving some of the stereotypes held by majority society:

I was just always so headstrong in knowing that I wasn't going to fail. I set out to just be doing what I'm doing to disprove the stereotypes about Native Americans amongst just everybody, you know? It's so, it almost seems that you know Native Americans do get the worst of it when it comes down to it about the stereotypes and that kind of stuff. That's just something I wanted to do is to dispel the stereotypes and just prove people wrong at a very young age by being Native American and succeeding. So, I'm not quite there but



hopefully in the next half year or so, hopefully everything I've been working so hard for will turn out.

Another student hopes to also use her educational attainment as a means to break down the negative stereotypes held by mainstream society. She comments on her desire to give back by being a role model for other Native American people:

Being a Native American, being Keetoowah, is something that I want to be an example to those, our Native Americans, to show them that we can make something out of ourselves. And if you continue your education, you can be an example to the Keetoowah people because even though we have that many members [8,000], not a lot of them are educated. Because there are so many people that just think, "Oh, they just drink all the time." That's just the stereotype. Yea...it may be true on some, but there are some out there too, like myself, that is proud to be Native American *and* able to get an education.

Some of the students desired to use their degrees as a means to provoke survival and persistence in Native American communities. One young woman speaks specifically to swaying the stereotypes concerning Native Americans in business and her views on Native American survival through persistence:

So it really kind of, it's kind of like you're the underdog almost and you know it. We talk about that a lot in business, the program that I'm in, just because we make up less than one percent of the population. A lot of the businesses that Native Americans are involved in are like casinos, and how that's a stereotype, and how we need to break that and start learning to build small businesses and to be better business people. And you know people know that know, that your stereotypes are not always what we are. But to kind of use it to push us forward to kind of, I don't know how to say it. But to use it to let others understand we're not, we're not a huge population, but we're still going to survive, we're still going to make it through. I think it's just something positive, you know enough about the whole alcohol and poverty thing. It's time to focus on more positive things.

### **Family Support**

The importance of the nuclear and extended Native American family is viewed as both an identification bond and substantial support system (Fixico, 2000). As noted in the tribal identity theme, the students named

their family members as the primary source of instilling who they are as Native Americans. This view was also found in a study of Navajo college graduates as parents' and family members' support were ranked the highest on a measurement scale of what contributes to college success (Rindone, 1988).

In lieu of "family strengths," a cultural resilient factor described by HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003), the students in this study used the words "family support" when responding to the question of what other factors had assisted them in completing college. In keeping with allowing the members of the study to define their own terms to classify their events (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995), I have replaced the preliminary category of family strengths with family support.

For all of the students interviewed, family members served as their major support network in college persistence. For many acquiring a college degree was such a collaborative effort that they felt as if it belonged to all that were involved in their support. This is relayed by a young Navajo student who expounds upon the importance of her family's support as they look toward her graduation:

I swear every one of them. You know my dad, my mom, my two brothers and two sisters, you know? You know me graduating, it's like yea, I'm graduating, but to them it's like they're graduating as well. It's like a big deal [laughing].

A Cherokee Keetoowah woman provides remarks concerning both her nuclear and extended family along with her Cherokee church family serving as a substantial source of support toward her studies:

My family they're such big supporters. My husband, he's always there to help me anytime I need it. Any kind of paper I write, he's looking at it, making sure everything is good or somebody in my family does. Or even my church family, we have a bunch of teachers and education majors in there. And they're just, anything you need help on, just be sure and tell us. They've been a big support.

A Choctaw student provides a similar answer when asked what other factors have helped him to complete his college education, "I would say my family. They've always encouraged me, not just my immediate family, but I have cousins and uncles who've always seen something in me."

A Navajo student responded that during the critical freshman year in college, it was the family decision to have her sister live with her that made all the difference in persisting:

For me personally, it was having my family. One of my sisters moved out here with me and that helped me so much. My freshman year, I stayed in the dorms. You know it was

tough. I'm pretty quiet for the most part. I really keep to myself so I'm not outgoing. I didn't make much friends, so it was just pretty tough. But then my sister came out here with me. We got our own place and I don't know. It helped me so much. I mean seriously, I wouldn't be here if my sister wasn't here with me.

When asked what other factors assisted her in finishing school, a Kickapoo student responded in this way:

I'd have to say just like the support of my family. I'm the only one of my cousins that goes to school. But my mom, she's always there for me. Like when I was thinking about coming here, she was like "If I have to, I'll get you wherever you want to go." So that was kind of one thing for me. And my grandparents, too. [My grandfather] was just always supportive in everything I did. He never thought that I couldn't do anything. I think their support and my extended family, too.

She goes on to further explain the personal motivation she has to complete college to set a precedent for her cousins to follow in using their education to provide for their parents:

Like my cousins, you know I want to set an example because my aunt, she works at restaurant as a cashier. She's fine with that, but she has no benefits and she's already like forty-seven years old and she's always sick and everything. And so I want to encourage her daughters to help do something, so they can help their parents.

Another response regarding family strengths and support was provided by a young wife and mother who was going to college full-time while being employed part-time:

I have a very strong support in my family that has really helped me. But then my immediate family of course. My husband and daughter have learned to take care of themselves [laughing]. So, my immediate family is my network of support. My mother and my sister also, you know they help a lot by just helping with my daughter. When I have to study all weekend or write papers, they take her so that it can be quiet in the house.

For others, drawing strength from past and future generations was instrumental in completing their education. A Creek and Navajo student comments on the importance of the strength she drew from her family, especially her grandfather, now deceased:

I think my biggest supporters were my grandparents. Because it was like if I did something that I received awards or

joined anything, I think my grandfather was the proudest because he would just brag to everyone. I think it was important that I had that support from at least him and then the rest of my family. If I needed anything, they would help. I don't know how I would have gotten through the last two years had it not been for my family.

A newly married Choctaw student remarks upon the strong support of her family and her future children as motivating factors to complete college, "So, I get a lot of help from family and friends, my parents. And then now my husband and my kids I hope to have someday. Right now, those are the things."

The importance of family support in completing college was very instrumental to the students, as they were quick to mention their families before naming any other factors that may have assisted them. Many specified their immediate family members, such as spouses, siblings, and/or parents, as being extremely supportive in helping with their studies and/or providing emotional support. However, in keeping with the traditional values of the importance of extended families in Native American cultures, it was not uncommon for grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles to also be included in the support system. The support of their families was so critical that some of the students openly questioned if they would have persisted in their studies had their families not been so encouraging.

### **Prayer**

With regard to Native Americans, spirituality is sometimes demonstrated through prayer (Garcia, 2000); all of the students in the study admitted that they personally pray in some capacity and viewed this as part of their spirituality. When the participants discussed the types of things they prayed for as related to college, they felt it was important for them to do their part in the coursework and viewed this as their personal responsibility. Their prayers were mostly for their families as their studies often took them away from those who needed them, causing them great concern. Other factors in prayer were relayed in the form of seeking personal strength, persistence, and direction. For a Navajo student, prayer directed her choice in what to major in:

I think it was my sophomore year, I was applying for the education program and I had been doing a lot of praying on what I should do and where I should take it. And business wasn't the first thing on my mind, but I just prayed that God would lead me to a career that He wanted me to do. When it came to praying about it, it was you know, God let me know

what You want me to do and open these doors and close them. And make it clear-cut to me where You want me to go and that's exactly how it happened.

An Apache student attested to maintaining humbleness as a part of his praying about issues as related to college in this way:

I pray for a clear conscience that everything will be okay. I don't pray that I want a hundred percent on that test. I just, that's just not the way you do it. I don't pray about getting high on yourself. That's what I was taught in general, just ask for everything to be good.

A similar response was echoed by one student's revealing how she prayed concerning college-related stress factors:

I think my tendency is just for my stress level goes on just worrying about my family because I am like three hours away and just worrying about myself in terms of help. If I don't do well in this way I may not have a scholarship for next semester, so I have a tendency of covering all bases [laughing] for myself. It's not like I pray to have to pass this test, you know? Like I have to pass this test. If You are for real, help me pass this test [laughing].

For a Choctaw student, praying to pass a test or to get an A would be considered rude as it negates the personal responsibility of self. Instead, she chooses to pray for strength and motivation to do what she needs to do:

I have prayed like with the research paper and stuff like that. I don't pray to pass a test. I pray for help for me to hang in there, you know? And just to get it done. I don't pray to get an A or anything like that. No. I pray to give me strength and motivation.

The participants offered varied responses as they spoke to their spirituality and how this has assisted them in persisting in college. For many, their spiritual belief system entailed an amalgamation of Christianity and their traditional tribal beliefs, causing them to seek and discover balance between the two. Whether traditional, Christian, or a mix of the two, all of the students acknowledged that they pray. Gratitude was a common theme in their prayers and they thanked their Creator for all things, both good and bad, because of the belief that everything happens for a reason. Other things that were named as deserving gratitude were the rain, sun, life, intellectual and athletic ability, motivation, the ability to help others, and their education. One student also mentioned praying for his family's protection and safety while he studied in the library. More personal and insightful prayers that were directly related to

attending college were perseverance, focus, stress reduction, boldness, courage, and assistance in making a career choice.

## **Discussion**

Some studies have indicated that Native-American students do persist in higher education and are able to maintain a sense of Native American identity throughout and after their educational process. HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003) find the theory of cultural resilience applies to this concept and define this as factors that nurture and support Native-American students. They name and categorize these factors as spirituality, tribal identity, oral traditions, elders, family strength, ceremonial rituals, and support networks. Within this preliminary framework, the objective of this study was to explore what cultural factors are perceived as effective in assisting Native-American students in graduating from college. In other words, how do Native-American college students utilize cultural resilience as a means to persist in college?

This study is found to be generalizable to the broader theory of HeavyRunner and Marshall as the preliminary categories of cultural resilient factors named by these scholars were revealed through data analysis of my study. Although the frame employed is culturally appropriate, in many aspects, HeavyRunner and Marshall's factors are general in nature and narrowly define these factors. Their categories lack in the depth and breadth that would be provided by the participants' voice and in this way, my study differed from HeavyRunner and Marshall's as it focused upon the real, lived life of individual Native-American students by utilizing their own voices to speak to their individual experiences.

As a result, this data revealed the rich diversity of the participants concerning the cultural factors of spirituality, tribal identity, oral traditions, elders, family strength, ceremonial rituals, and support networks named by HeavyRunner and Marshall. Although some generalities were noted across all the participants' responses, diversity was found in the varied responses that reflected the participants' tribe, gender, acculturation and age. The students spoke to and demonstrated their experiences with these cultural components while connecting all of these factors to their Native American identity and their pursuit of higher education.

The participants in my study replaced HeavyRunner and Marshall's family strengths category with "family support." Especially rich in detail were their descriptions of how their families specifically administered this support in assisting with their higher education. Family financial support was not mentioned, except in one instance when the student referred to her mother telling her she would see to it that she was able to

attend school wherever she wanted to go. Although her mother worked as a secretary, it was not the offer of financial support that held significance for the participant, but the fact that her mother was willing to support her academic pursuits. In this vein, the emotional and logistical family support was most relevant and ranged from encouragement to babysitting and proofreading academic papers.

In contrast to HeavyRunner and Marshall's study, the participants in my study described their spirituality and their use of it in college as highly complicated and diversified. Depending upon their keeping of traditional beliefs and/or their conversion to Christianity, or a mix of both, each had their own personal definition of what spirituality meant to them and how they utilized spirituality in college persistence. Commonly found among all participants was their use of prayer as part of their spiritual belief system and this was reported in diverse aspects. For example, some of the participants mentioned the importance of expressing gratitude in prayer, especially for the gifts the Creator has bestowed upon them. Many others prayed for perseverance, motivation, and humbleness while attending college and/or for the well-being of their families. Receiving good grades was not mentioned as a part of their prayers, but instead the students placed this responsibility upon themselves, choosing instead to seek strength to complete all that was expected of them.

In the interviews, identity emphasis was placed upon Native American traditions and culture versus occupational identity, which is more commonly found in majority culture (Kawulich & Curlette, 1998). Although their college degrees and future occupations were discussed, the discussions were in relation to ways in which their degrees can "give back." Using their education to advance and empower their Native-American families and communities was yet another extension of their identity as Native Americans.

The Native-American students in this study were not a colonized, defeated, or conquered people, but instead continued to persevere as they emerged as new leaders. Imagine if you will, a spiral pattern that is evolutionary and empowering, with individually-and socially-constructed life tasks, through the words of an Ojibway and Lakota participant:

I think about all the history behind me, and like my grandmother who was real strong in spirit. She's in the spirit world right now, but she's a part of me and my daughter and her [daughter's future] children are a part of it. I am just one person in a long lineage. It doesn't stop with me. It goes on and I need to make sure that I can hold it together in a positive direction. We're this history of people. Up to now, it's up to me to represent it in a positive way, a Native way. But I'm

also not caving in. I'm pushing an agenda in a positive way. So that said, pretty much sums it up. That's the way I feel.

Emancipation and survival are addressed in this study through the recognition of how the participants view their worlds, an important component found in the road of self-determination and sovereignty. Strickland (1997) succinctly interprets the following passage of survival by Muscogee Creek tribal member and prolific writer, Patty Harjo as "a road behind and a road ahead":

[Our] ancestral roots are transplanted to a new land of adjustment, grief, pain and sorrow, to a future unknown...a future that seemed only a candle in the darkness, a candle of hope for a new beginning. In this land...all cultures and heritages began moving onward toward the sun. Now our sun shines bright, our future is growing clear. We hide our grief, pain and fears. We are moving on. We try to grasp the good of our heritage. (128)

The preliminary strengths which evolved into cultural resilience for the students in this study originated with their families and communities, holding the empowerment of difference. As succinctly noted by Pewewardy (2000):

Subsequently, our strategy and our ethnic struggle against colonization should be to deconstruct it (decolonization process) and replace it with the struggle for tribal community. Many Eurocentric systems are set up to detach us from the community, from our sense of tribal community. Building community opposes domination and injustice. (26)

While pursuing higher education, these students were able to retain their core identity of being Native American, a gift instilled in them by their families and Native American communities. Although not denying that their college degrees will create evolutionary changes, they held firm to cultural resilience as a survival mechanism. George Manuel, the Shuswap Indian leader from Canada, calls Indigenous peoples to a "re-evaluation of assumptions" and a "new language in which the truth can be spoken easily, quietly and comfortably" (Allen, 2002: 201). He goes on to state how this can be accomplished:

We do not need to re-create the exact forms by which our grandfathers lived their lives—the clothes, the houses, the political systems, or the means of travel. We do need to create new forms that will allow the future generations to inherit the values, the strengths, and the basic spiritual beliefs—the way of understanding the world—that is the fruit of a thousand generations' cultivation of North American soil



by Indian people. (201)

The findings of this study indicate it is the Native-American families and communities, not the educational institutions, who set the precedent for their own empowerment. For the Native-American participants who were interviewed, it was not educational institutions and their support programs that caused persistence in college, but the culture of their families and communities. Despite nearing the completion of their undergraduate studies, education did not offer assimilation into dominant culture, but instead offered a tool in which they could help others. This correlates with the writings of Dr. Eastman, which are found in the opening paragraph of this study, as he described his version of the traditional hero so many years ago (1936). It also reflects that Native American peoples have “shown in many cases that they themselves can return to traditional patterns after major changes have taken place...cultural autonomy is neither impossible nor impracticable when Native American peoples themselves want it” (Elsass, 1992: 103).

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