NAVAJO STUDENTS' DECISION-MAKING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ACCESS AND PERSISTENCE IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students are not only historically underrepresented in undergraduate education but also underrepresented in graduate education. AI/AN graduate students accounted for 0.4% of total graduate student enrollment in 2016. Navajo graduate degree-seeking students and those students who applied for a tribal fellowship accounted for 0.2% of the total Navajo Nation population. This critical qualitative study examines decision-making factors influencing Navajo students' pursuit of doctoral education and their experiences of persisting in graduate school. The study was guided by three research questions: What decision-making factors influence Navajo students to pursue a doctoral education?; What resources are Navajo students using to increase access into doctoral education?; What challenging experiences do Navajo students experience in their doctoral program and what resources are they using to increase their persistence?

To gain a deeper understanding of student experiences, I utilized two Indigenous analytical frameworks, the Navajo Corn Model and Tribal Critical Race Theory. Eight research participants were identified through homogenous and purposeful sampling methods. Data were collected through interviews and participant journaling, and were analyzed through content analysis. The study's findings identified six factors that influenced Navajo students to enroll and persist in doctoral education: desire to enhance their personal career trajectory and skill sets; familiarity and openness to learning how to

apply to doctoral programs; overcoming difficult and discouraging experiences; successfully earning a master's degree; desire to support family, community, and Navajo Nation; and knowledge of how to navigate higher education systems in order to increase persistence. These findings are valuable for providing higher education administrators with data that can aid the creation or revision of policies and programs. This dissertation is important because, as the number of Navajo students earning graduate degrees increases, the tribal skill set increases. Tribes and higher education institutions have an opportunity to better support and enhance AI/AN graduate student enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment and advance the efforts of tribal nation building.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

American Indian and Alaska Native students are not only historically underrepresented in undergraduate education but also "grossly underrepresented in graduate education" (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013, p. 8). In 2016, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) graduate students accounted for 0.4% of total graduate student enrollment in the United States (Council of Graduate Schools & Graduate Records Examination, Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees, Table B.19, 2016). The low enrollment percentage is alarming, particularly when compared to their non-Native peers that same year: White graduate students accounted for 49.4% of total enrollment, while African Americans comprised 10.0%, Latinos/as 8.1%, and Asian/Pacific Islanders 5.3% (Council of Graduate Schools & Graduate Records Examination, Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees, Table B.19, 2016). In addition to current low enrollment, AI/AN graduate enrollment appears to be decreasing. From 2009 to 2010, total AI/AN graduate student enrollment dropped by 10.3% (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015). Furthermore, AI/AN students lag behind their non-Native peers in areas of persistence and degree completion. It takes an average of 10.3 years for AI/ANs to earn their doctoral degree (time to degree from start of graduate school) – the longest in comparison to 9.8 years for African Americans, 7.7 years for

Latino/a students, and 7.3 years for Asian Americans and Whites (National Science Foundation, Table 72, 2016).

Education scholars report that American Indian and Alaska Native enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates rely on national educational data (e.g., National Center for Educational Statistics, National Science Foundation Survey of Earned Doctorates, etc.). However, these large data sets do not disaggregate data based on tribal affiliation. Lack of disaggregation by tribe can present an incomplete picture of education success, persistence, and attainment for American Indian nations, and those who work to promote education services for AI/AN students. It is vital for AI/AN tribal nations to collect and maintain educational data that identify areas in which their education systems are excelling and need improvement.

Currently, decision-making factors that lead to graduate school enrollment are unknown and unpublished for specific tribal nations and AI/AN as a whole. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to provide an in-depth understanding of graduate students who are citizens of the Navajo Nation. Utilizing narrative inquiry to gather stories and lived experiences from students of one tribal nation, this study explored the decision-making factors Navajo student participants consider when deciding to pursue and persist in graduate education. Findings from this study present practical implications for faculty and staff in graduate programs to improve and provide additional resources for Navajo and AI/AN students as they prepare to apply for doctoral programs and to help with persistence rates. Additionally, findings from this study can be beneficial for the tribe in informing and strengthening the role of education through a nation-building approach. Brayboy, Castagno, and Solyom (2014) describe tribal nation building as, “the

political, legal, spiritual, educational, and economic processes through which Indigenous peoples engage in order to build local capacity to address their educational, health, legal, economic, nutritional, relationship and spatial needs" (p. 578). Tribal nation building is inextricably tied to higher education, because tribes need their citizens to be educated with specialized skill sets in order to govern their nation.

There are 573 independent federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribal nations (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2018). In 2010, the American Indian and Alaska Native population reached 5.2 million people (United States Census, 2010). With a projected continued increase in population, tribally specific data are important because this information helps provide a more accurate picture of the strengths and challenges facing tribal communities. Tribally specific data can thus present important information for addressing unique needs based on each tribe's unique demographics (e.g., citizenship population, Indigenous language, environment, educational attainment, etc.). Tribally specific education data also allow tribes to engage and develop their own visions, goals, and policies for tribal nation building.

Tribal nation building honors individual tribal sovereignty, history, culture, and epistemology and acknowledges that individual AI/ANs have the ability to contribute to the well-being of the overall nation (Brayboy, Castagno, & Solyom, 2014). Based on their unique demographics, AI/AN nations can combine tribally specific data to develop culturally appropriate strategies to address the unique needs of their citizens, with each process varying based on the tribal nation's individual governmental structure and context. "Looking to the experiences of Indigenous students in graduate education and the health of tribal nations around the country, [allows us to examine] whether these

policies and practices are advancing the health, well-being, and success of Indigenous communities" throughout Indian Country (Brayboy et al., 2014, p. 588). Indian Country is defined as "all land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the United States Government…all dependent Indian communities…[and] all Indian allotments" (18 U.S.C. § 1151).

In order to help inform nation-building efforts for a local tribe in the southwest, this dissertation examined the decision-making process, motivating factors, resources used to increase persistence, and graduate school experiences of doctoral students from the Navajo Nation who chose to pursue doctoral education. The Navajo Nation is located largely in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, and is the second largest federally recognized American Indian nation with approximately 332,000 citizens (US Census, 2010; Yurth, 2012). In order to understand the educational, economic, and social needs of the Navajo Nation, it is important to remember that AI/ANs have different needs and socioeconomic statuses. For example, the Navajo Nation's median household income of $26,267 (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Estimates, 2015) is significantly lower in comparison to the overall AI/AN median household income of $38,530 and $55,775 for the U.S. nation as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Moreover, the Navajo Nation's poverty rate of 32.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) is much higher in comparison to the overall AI/AN poverty rate of 26.6% and 14.7% for the U.S. nation as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In terms of income and poverty, the Navajo Nation is worse off than other American Indian and Alaska Native nations and the U.S. as a whole. As a result, it is important to utilize tribal nation building to explore the needs of individual nations in their quest to strengthen their nations for the well-being of their citizens. Focusing on improving educational outcomes

for Navajo students raises the number of educated professionals in the tribe and contributes to strengthening the tribal workforce.

Tribal nation building promotes education achievements of tribal citizens, which in turn strengthens the health and well-being of the nation. In 2011, the Center for Disease Control health disparity and inequalities report stated:

> Education attainment and family or household incomes are two indicators used commonly to assess the influence of socioeconomic circumstances on health. Education is a strong determinant of future employment and income. Income can influence health by its direct effects on living standards (e.g., access to better quality food and housing, and health-care services). (Beckles & Truman, 2011, p. 13)

While the Navajo Nation's Department of Dine' Education (DODE) collects data from prekindergarten through secondary education, it unfortunately does not collect higher education data. Therefore, this study utilized the Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Assistance (ONNSFA), which is responsible for reporting the number of applications received and awarded on behalf of the Navajo Nation, for higher education data specific to graduate students. The ONNSFA requires applicants to be citizens of the Navajo Nation, be accepted to an accredited postsecondary institution, submit a financial needs analysis, provide official transcripts, complete an application, and, for graduate students, submit a graduation/degree checklist. ONNSFA data on the number of Navajo graduate student applications received and awarded are the most reliable higher education data for the Navajo Nation. However, it is known that there may be some Navajo graduate students who choose not to apply for an ONNSFA graduate fellowship.

In general, the total Navajo graduate student enrollment remains low relative to the Navajo Nation's overall population of approximately 332,000 Navajo citizens (U.S.

Census, 2010; Yurth, 2012). According to the 2017 ONNSFA annual report — calendar year statistical profile — 12,807 students requested scholarships and 6,755 students were awarded scholarships. In other words, the number of Navajo students pursuing a college/graduate degree and who requested scholarships is 3.8% of the total Navajo Nation population. Of the 6,755 scholarships given, 814 graduate students were awarded, comprising 10% of total students awarded (ONNSFA, 2017, p. 2). Of the 814 graduate student fellowships awarded, ONNSFA awarded 592 fellowships to students pursuing a master's degree and 207 fellowships to students pursuing a doctoral degree (Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Assistance, 2017, p, 4). The total percentage of Navajo graduate degree-seeking students and those students who applied for an ONNSFA fellowship is 0.25% of the total Navajo Nation population in 2017 (ONNSFA, 2017, p. 4). The Navajo graduate student enrollment percentage of 0.25% was significantly lower than the nationwide American Indian graduate student enrollments at 0.4% (and both are significantly lower than non-Native peers' enrollment in graduate school).

In defiance of the low Navajo graduate enrollments, ONNSFA graduate student fellowship awardees increased from 9% to 12% of the total number of students receiving awards from 2009 to 2017 (ONNSFA, 2009-2017). In 2009, there were 539 Navajo graduate students awarded and in 2017, 814 graduate students were awarded, resulting in a slight increase of 275 students over the last 8 years (ONNSFA, 2009-2017). Although enrollment was slowly increasing, identifying strategic avenues to improve access to graduate education and persistence factors for Navajo students is worthy of investigation. In 2017, ONNSFA reported 27 Navajo students "earned a Master's degree and 94 earned

a Doctorate degree" (Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Assistance, 2017, p. 3). Graduate education provides students with advanced training and capacity building, and strengthens nation building.

American Indian graduate students are one of the least studied groups of graduate and professional students, but scholarship on American Indian graduate students has recently started to emerge in doctoral dissertations, peer-reviewed articles, books, and reports. To date, there have been 10 unpublished doctoral dissertations written about American Indian graduate student experiences relating to retention, persistence, success factors, degree completion, and educational success (see Ballew, 1996; Burke, 2017; Garvey, 1999; Heionen, 2002; Henning, 1999; Moon, 2003; Neuerburg, 2000: Poolaw, 2018; Secatero, 2009; Shotton, 2008; Solyom, 2015). Only one dissertation (Secatero, 2009) briefly addressed graduate students' preparation for accessing graduate school. However, three reports (see Buckley, 1997; Kidwell, 1986; McDonald, 1994) were written about general American Indian graduate student experiences. Eight peer-reviewed articles have been published about American Indian graduate student experiences regarding the medical school application process, navigating doctoral programs, persistence in graduate education, female doctoral student perspectives, and how nation building relates to graduate education (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015; Gay, 2004; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Lacourt, 2003; Lintner, 2003; Patterson, Baldwin, & Olsen, 2009; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). Lastly, one book chapter provides an overview of AI/AN graduate student experiences (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012). This dissertation adds new knowledge to the growing American Indian graduate student scholarship by highlighting decision-making factors that influenced and prepared Navajo

students to pursue graduate education. Furthermore, there has not been a graduate student study that involved participants exclusively from one tribal nation—the Navajo Nation.

Purpose

The purpose of this critical qualitative study is to learn more about the decision-making process Navajo students consider when preparing to access a doctoral program and to explore factors that increase student persistence. Furthermore, this study aims to explore resources used to successfully graduate with an advanced degree. Understanding, documenting, and sharing Navajo student experiences of personal motivation, academic preparation, and support systems provides valuable information about strategies to increase access and persistence rates. Additionally, understanding Navajo student participants' challenges and the ways they identify solutions to these challenging situations provides navigation strategies for prospective graduate students. Hearing from participants allows for a better understanding of their lived experiences (Delgado Bernal, 2002), which was helpful in developing strategies to increase access and persistence for more Navajo graduate students enrolling in doctoral education and earning advanced degrees. To better understand Navajo student participants' experiences of access and persistence, this study is grounded by the following research questions:

RQ1: What decision-making factors influence Navajo students to pursue doctoral education?

RQ2: What resources are Navajo students using to increase access into doctoral education?

RQ3: What challenging experiences do Navajo students experience in their

doctoral program and what resources are they using to increase their persistence?

Significance

This study provided an opportunity for Navajo graduate student participants to share their lived experiences about their journey into graduate education, one that has not been documented before. The study acknowledged and validated students' lived experiences (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Research findings identify themes (and subthemes) and provided real-life examples of how Navajo students successfully prepared for, applied to and started their graduate education. Graduate program faculty, staff, and student support service professionals who work with American Indian students can refer to findings from this study to help frame conversations when advising students on how to prepare for, apply to, and succeed in graduate school. Moreover, the study's research findings can be used to provide higher education administrators with data that can aid the creation of new culturally respectful policies and procedures to increase access and persistence for all students. Policies intended to increase access to higher education have focused primarily on undergraduate students and have not had the desired impact among graduate education.

This dissertation is important because, as the number of Navajo students pursuing and earning graduate degrees increases, the tribal skill set increases. Navajos with graduate degrees who return to work for the Navajo Nation provide an opportunity to strengthen nation building and tribal sovereignty. The opportunity for skilled graduates to assist the Navajo Nation in providing services to improve the quality of life for its citizens allows the nation to thrive and advance through the contributions and efforts of

its own people. “Graduate and professional school participation…is about being positioned to serve one’s community in ways that may not be possible without having attained that success” (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, p. 89). Therefore, studies that promote information on how to best support and enhance American Indian graduate student enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment present the opportunity to fundamentally advance the efforts of tribal nation building.

Positionality

As a citizen of the Navajo Nation originally from Shiprock, New Mexico, I begin by sharing my Navajo clans, which establishes my cultural identity and lays the foundation of my kinship, *Ké*, with the audience/readers. *Ya’at’eeh. Shí éí Colin Ben yinishye. Tábąąhí nish’į, Ta’chii’nii báshíshchíín. Tódích’íinii dashicheii, aadoo Áshįįhí dashinálí.* This Navajo cultural introduction translates as; Hello, my name is Colin Ben. I am of the Water’s Edge clan, born for Red Running into the Water clan. The Bitter Water clan is my maternal grandfather’s clan and the Salt clan is my paternal grandfather’s clan. As a Navajo man, I also embody the identities of a son, husband, father, brother, uncle, and grandfather.

As a Navajo first-generation student from a low-income background, my mother Gladys has had the strongest impact on my personal, academic, and professional life. As a hard working single parent, working as a special education teacher’s aide for 15 years (on minimum wage), and a Navajo sandpainter (to create an additional income), she provided for my four siblings and me. She later worked in the same school district, but in other positions as a bus driver for 7 years and a substitute bus driver for 2 years.

Throughout my youth, my mom would tell us endless stories and examples of "why it is important to get an education." In other words, she instilled the value of education, which I hold dear to my heart. With my mother's constant reminders and reassurance, I embraced the notion that I could use my education as a way to a better life: a life where I would not have to worry about paying for the electricity bill every month (in some instances when we could not pay for our bill and had our electricity disconnected, we would walk to our neighbors to use basic electric appliances) or wonder how we are going to eat during the summer when the schools were no longer providing free lunch.

Also, during my early childhood, my parents divorced and my father occasionally visited us. He usually picked me up when he needed help on the farm or on construction jobsites. He was a hard worker and got the job done. He would work long hours and he felt that holidays were not an excuse to skip work. I vividly remember us doing electrical work on a home in a remote community on the Navajo Nation; we worked through lunch and about 2:00 PM I told him, "Dad, I'm hungry. We need to have lunch now. I'm not doing anymore work until we eat." After working with him for a day or two, he would usually drop me off and say, "I'll pay you later when the family pays me." I knew he would not be able to keep his promises, which he almost never did. Regardless of his occasional visits, he was very knowledgeable in Navajo history and culture, and spoke eloquently in our Navajo language. As a college student, I asked him questions about our culture and thereafter, he always shared Navajo teachings with me. As I wrote my master's thesis, he provided me with a wealth of cultural knowledge about Navajo creation stories, ceremonies, history, cultural values, and teachings. As a college student, I accepted him for the random visits throughout my childhood. I forgave him for being an

absent father in my formative years. As our relationships strengthened, we would talk on the phone on a regular basis. In the last conversation I had with him before he passed away due to complications with lung cancer, I told him, “Dad, I’m finally going to graduate on May 4th. So, put that in your calendar. I want you to be there.” He replied, “Son, it’s about time you’re going to graduate. It’s taking a long time. You should run for Navajo Nation President now.” The last four words I told him before we ended our call were, “Dad, I love you.” He passed away shortly thereafter and 6 months before my graduation, but I know he was with me and our family during commencement.

Growing up in Shiprock, I remember that our neighbor’s father had a good paying job, and their family had nice clothes, vehicles, cable television, and the latest toys. It was in those formative years, as a young teenager, that I promised myself that I would try my best in my school in hopes for a better life. I took school assignments more seriously, worked hard, and earned a B average throughout high school. Although I earned a B average, I developed study skills, disciplined myself to balance my time among homework, basketball, band, and friends. Those skill sets were foundational to successfully starting my educational journey through higher education. In addition to my college preparation, throughout high school, my mother would have her kids walk alongside the highway in Shiprock to pick up trash. That was a unique way to teach us the concept of helping our community stay clean and simply giving back to our community. My mother’s teachings around giving back to our community and the value in education have influenced my career of helping others in need, and helping students navigate the westernized higher education system to reach their educational goals.

The Shiprock High School (SHS) senior class invited me to give their

commencement keynote address in May of 2014. As an SHS alum, addressing the graduating class of 123 seniors and approximately 3,000 of their family and friends gave me the opportunity to "give back" to my community and to come full circle with my alma mater. My speech addressed four key areas of advice that would help guide next steps in their educational and professional journey. The four topics included identifying their passions, asking for help when in need, earning a degree is invaluable, and giving back to their Navajo community. Approximately, 98% of the seniors and attendees were Navajo, so it was an honor to provide the seniors with advice and share vignettes from my educational journey. I earned my bachelor's degree in Southwest Studies (with a concentration in American Indian Studies) from Fort Lewis College, and a master's degree in American Indian Studies (with a concentration in American Indian higher education) from the University of Arizona.

My academic journey has allowed me to also build my professional experience in the area of student support services. Most recently, I was a Predoctoral Research Scholar in the Center for American Indian Education at Arizona State University. Previously, I was the Assistant Dean for Diversity in the Graduate School at University of Utah from January 2013 to August 2015 (I am proud that I doubled the office's annual budget, created a graduate assistant position, and secured funding for a graduate diversity retention fellowship). My prior work experiences include Program Coordinator of the McNair Scholars program at Westminster College from January 2010 to August 2012 (I helped the program advise 45 seniors on how to create competitive graduate school application packets, with a 91% acceptance rate), Program Manager for the Udall Foundation's Native American Congressional Internship Program from January 2007 to

December 2009 (I mentored 37 emerging tribal leaders about the congressional legislative process and helped them better understand how to conduct congressional and tribal leader consultations), and as Coordinator of Retention Programs and Services with the Native American Student Affairs at the University of Arizona from September 2006 to January 2007 (I helped the Director advise 20 students in the First-Year Scholars Program that doubled retention rates from freshman to sophomore year). My professional work experience for the past 12 years demonstrates my commitment to improving access, retention, and cultural support of American Indian and historically underrepresented students in higher education. The combination of my previous career experiences of working with undergraduate seniors applying to graduate programs, creating and implementing recruitment and retention initiatives for historically underrepresented graduate students, and collaborating with graduate program faculty and staff on how to increase the quality of services for graduate students, all contributed to my process of narrowing down and identifying my dissertation research topic.

In an attempt to clarify my bias, values, and assumptions, I have provided information about my background and positionality. I acknowledge that I approach my study through my inherent values, lived experiences, and epistemology. As I conducted the study, I acknowledge my positionality as it applies to my research questions, methodology, analysis, and reporting. I hold an insider position (e.g., Navajo citizenship, shared experiences) and outsider position (e.g., higher education professional, doctoral student from another institution). As an insider, I shared many similar experiences with my participants who were also Navajo graduate students and who grew up in the Navajo Nation. As an outsider, I interviewed a participant who was raised in an urban city and

who held a different epistemological world-view. A second layer of my positionality relates to the bachelor's and master's degrees I have earned. I acknowledge that I am privileged to have received educational training in college and graduate school. I have a cultural responsibility to give back to my Navajo community. The concept of giving back is a way to honor my family and kinship, as they have made sacrifices to support my educational journey. Abiding by an Indigenous research methodology, it is important that my research contributes to the educational needs of the Navajo Nation and Indian Country at large. For example, I will share my research findings at education conferences such as the Navajo Studies Conference, National Indian Education Association, Indigenous Peoples of the Americas special interest group as part of the larger American Education Research Association, and Critical Race Studies on Education. Furthermore, I will share my research with Indigenous community members, educators (e.g. K-20), and higher education administrators, to increase access for American Indian students to pursue graduate education.

In addition to sharing the research findings with stakeholders mentioned above, I plan to share my experiences of conducting the research. I will describe how I related to many of the participants' desire to earn a doctoral degree to support their family and tribe, utilizing academic support networks, and the importance of applying to graduate fellowships to reduce my concerns of paying for graduate school. As a financial need-based student throughout undergraduate, master's, and part of my doctorate, applying to graduate fellowships has been a constant priority. Searching the internet for fellowships was time-consuming, but once I found a fellowship I qualified for, I was dedicated to complete their application requirements. As a result of my determination and discipline, I

was able to earn multiple fellowship awards that covered my total cost of attendance (and I received a refund). Securing fellowships allowed me to direct my time and energy on my coursework, and is how I was able to focus my time on writing my dissertation chapters.

This introduction chapter provides the state of American Indian—specifically the Navajo Nation—graduate education. Chapter 2 presents an overview of Navajo and American Indian graduate education literature. The literature review includes topics of American Indian graduate student experiences, American Indian epistemologies, retention initiatives, and concludes with descriptions of the two Indigenous theoretical frameworks used in this study. Chapter 3 describes the critical qualitative research methodology used and provides justification for the study's research design. Chapter 4 uses storytelling as a way to address research question one, which explores decision-making factors that influenced participants to pursue doctoral education. Chapter 5 uses storytelling to present findings from research questions two and three. The first half of the chapter describes what resources participants used to increase access into their doctoral program. The second half identifies challenging experiences in their programs and descriptions of resources they used to strengthen their persistence. Chapter 6 presents a summary of the study; offers implications for research, policy, and practice; advice to prospective graduate students; and a conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents an overview of scholarship on Navajo and American Indian education with specific focus on the postsecondary context at the graduate education level. This literature review identifies a gap in the literature related to decision-making factors Navajo and American Indian students consider when they decide to apply to and persist in graduate school. In conducting this review of the literature, it became clear that Navajo and American Indian education scholarship is divided into central themes. Literature related to the history of American Indian education generally focuses on federal education policies and the legacy of boarding schools (Carney, 1999; Deyhle, Swisher, Stevens, & Galvan, 2008; McCarty, 2002; Wright & Tierney, 1991). This literature is mostly focused on examining the K-12 level. Second, literature on American Indian retention initiatives has outlined the low numbers of student enrollment and graduation rates and seeks to identify institutional and personal strategies for improving academic outcomes (Benjamin, Chambers, & Reiterman, 1993; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Lopez, 2018; Tate & Schwartz, 1993; Tierney, Sallee, & Venegas, 2007).

The third theme focused on literature on American Indian graduate student experiences' social, structural, and personal contexts and challenges facing American

Indian graduate students (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2014; Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015; HeavyRunner-Rioux, 2017; Lacourt, 2003; Limb, 2001; Lintner, 2003; Patterson, Baldwin, & Olsen, 2009). A fourth theme is American Indian epistemologies, which seek to provide a foundation for understanding why Indigenous knowledge should not only be referenced, but centralized in education curriculum and pedagogy for Native students (Covarrubia & Windchief, 2009; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Kirkness & Barnhart, 1991; Lee, 2006; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). Lastly, an overview of the Corn Model (Secatero, 2009) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefanicic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) is included to provide background information that sets the foundation for the use of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) in the study. As previously stated, we begin with a historical background of American Indian education.

History of American Indian Education

This literature review begins with a broad framing of American Indian education and secondly, it offers information on Navajo education. Carney's (1999) research has identified three time periods focusing on American Indian higher education that include the "Colonial Period, Federal Period, [and] Self-Determination Period" (p. xi). The Colonial Period (1609-1777) is grounded in European education structure and Christianity (Carney, 1999). During this time period:

> In education, as in all else, the Eurocentric position dictated what was to come. Early colonists, it cannot be denied, attached importance to native education. But it was education on European terms, assimilationist in concept and curriculum, predicated on the assumption that it was the duty of civilized man to bring enlightenment to the less civilized areas of the world. (Carney, 1999, p. 19)

Early European colonial settlers along the east coast began efforts to educate, civilize,

and Christianize American Indians in the area (Carney, 1999). McCarty (2002) and Carney (1999) provide historical accounts of how colonial Americans attempted to educate American Indians starting in some of the first higher education institutions, such as Harvard, William and Mary, and Dartmouth. They also offer accounts of how Ivy League institutions created specific charters to include Indigenous students in higher education. These institutions offered curriculum focusing on grammar, had low enrollments, and had dismal graduation rates (Carney, 1999). For example, "Harvard Indian College…had only four students with one graduate during its 37-year existence" (Carney, 1999, p. 156). However, these institutions did little to provide culturally responsive learning environments for American Indian students (Brayboy, 1999; Lomawaima, 1995).

After the American Revolution ended in 1783, the new United States federal government began negotiating treaties between the U.S. government and American Indian tribes (the first treaty was in 1778 with the Delaware tribe) (Carney, 1999). During the Federal Period (1778-1933) the U.S. government passed numerous acts and policies affecting American Indians. A key act was the *Indian Civilization Act* of 1819 that "authorized the president to employ 'person of good moral character' to teach agriculture to the Indians, and authorized the establishment of what would come to be called 'the civilization fund,' $10,000 annually to support Indian education" (Carney, 1999, p. 52). Furthermore, the U.S. Constitution provides language that forms the sovereign status for American Indians, and three U.S. Supreme Court case decisions established the foundation for U.S. and American Indian federal policy through the Marshall trilogy, named after the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Marshall. In 1823 *Johnson v. McIntosh*

established that American Indians were occupants of the land and could not transfer their land, American Indians were domestic-dependent nations in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* in 1831, and American Indians had tribal jurisdiction over their land in *Worcester v. Georgia* in 1832 (Carney, 1999; Getches, Wilkinson & Williams, 1998). These Supreme Court decisions would later impact how American Indian governments and their educational structures evolved, specifically how tribal nations would utilize their sovereign status to create and promote education curriculum that reflects their culture, languages, and traditional values.

Early U.S. Presidents created and enforced policies of assimilation and forced removal through Indian education. Beginning in 1879, American Indian industrial boarding schools were intentionally located outside tribal homelands to extract children from their families and their cultures (Szasz, 1974). Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) provide a partial list of boarding schools off and on tribal lands:

> In the late 1800s, off-reservation boarding schools were seen as the ideal facility to Americanize Native individuals. Off-reservation boarding schools included Carlisle (Pennsylvania,), Chilocco (Oklahoma), Genoa (Nebraska), Haskell (Kansas), Phoenix (Arizona), Salem (later known as Chemawa) (Oregon), and Sherman (California); the federal Indian school system also included on-reservation boarding schools and day schools. (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. 47)

The number of boarding schools continued to increase and "by the turn of the century twenty-five off-reservation industrial boarding schools had been opened" (Szasz, 1974, p. 10). These boarding schools were eventually researched and evaluated by the Brookings Institution, which published the Meriam Report in 1928. This report "marked a shift in federal constructions of safe/dangerous difference. The Meriam Report proposed a remarkable possibility: that the federal government should support Native people who

choose to 'remain an Indian'" (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. xxiii), that is, American Indians who want to incorporate their culture and language into the curriculum. The report placed the harsh and inhuman treatment of American Indian youth in the national spotlight, and helped raise the consciousness around federal American Indian policies.

A major positive change in American Indian policy is known as the Self-Determination period (1934-Present), which began with the passing of the *Indian Reorganization Act* of 1934, which "provided for the reestablishment of tribal governments as a move toward Indian self-government (Deloria, 1993)" (Carney, 1999, p. 4). Lomawaima (2000) and Carney's (1999) research provides a context that includes federal and tribal policy that affects Indigenous education. Lomawaima (2000) summarizes the historical political relationship between the U.S. Government and American Indian tribes. She connects the concept of Indian Self-Determination (which is based on the sovereign right of a group to self-governance) with "Indian self-education" (Lomawaima, p. 8) and argues that American Indians as sovereign nations have the right to control their education. Currently, American Indian education is considered to be in the self-determination era. This means tribal nations now govern, design, and control the education available to their citizens. An increase in self-determination also means tribes have greater access to federal funds to support their education initiatives. Carney (1999) explained that in the 1960s, the Office of Economic Opportunity had "Indian Community Action Programs that allowed the tribes [to] increase latitude to administer their own programs and initiate their own reforms" (p. 106). When the American Indian self-determination era started to make "real impacts" (Carney, 1999, p. 96) in the late 1960s, educational initiatives started to create positive change for American Indian students.

This was due largely to tribal nations' ability to connect education directly to the American Indian students' lives and help students better understand how education could improve their nations as well.

The Navajo Nation was one of the earliest tribal nations to exercise its sovereign right to determine what type of education is needed for its people. For example, Navajo community members of Rough Rock, Arizona identified the need to educate their children locally in a way that incorporates curriculum centered on Navajo history, culture, and values (McCarty, 2002). In 1966, Rough Rock Demonstration School, "the first American Indian community-controlled school opened its doors to 220 [Navajo] students" (McCarty, 2002, p. 83). The creation and use of bilingual and bicultural education curriculum starting from Rough Rock Demonstration School in the 1960s through the 2000s served as one model in which education reform began to reflect cultural values and relevance. An example of how Rough Rock created their Navajo curriculum is explained by McCarty (2002):

> With a grant from Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1967, the school established the Navajo Curriculum Center, the first enterprise in the United States to be devoted to the production of Indigenous children's literature" (McCarty, 2002, p. 94). In its first 4 years, the Curriculum Center produced over a dozen texts, most of them professionally published and beautifully illustrated by local artists. Ethelou Yazzie's (1971) *Navajo History* and Robert Roessel and Dillon Platero's (1968) *Coyote Stories* remain the most popular; they have been reprinted many times and continue to sell briskly around the world. (p. 94)

Bilingual and bicultural curriculum has since been incorporated in public, private, charter, and community-controlled schools throughout Navajoland. Navajo language, history, and government courses are taught in elementary and secondary classrooms. In general, research on Navajo education student experiences, pedagogy, and curriculum

ranges from elementary to secondary education, and postsecondary education (see Benally, 2013; Benham & Stein, 2003; Bitsoi & Lee, 2014; Deyhle, 1995; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; L. Lee 2006; T. Lee 2009; Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010; McCarty, 2002; Roessel, 1999; Tachine & Begay, 2013; Thompson, 1975; Williams, 1999).

Indigenous-controlled education continued into higher education and in 1968, the Navajo Nation established the first tribal community college, Navajo Community College (now known as Diné College). "Diné College was established in 1968 as the first tribally-controlled community college in the United States. In creating an institution of higher education, the Navajo Nation sought to encourage Navajo youth to become contributing members of the Navajo Nation and the world society" (http://www.dinecollege.edu/about/history.php). Furthermore, "Diné College and/or other higher education post secondary institutions…facilitate the integration of Diné language, culture, history, and government subjects into the Navajo Nation" (Deyhle, Swisher, Stevens, & Galvan, 2008, p. 29). Deyhle, Swisher, Stevens, and Galvan (2008) describe such actions as a demonstration of self-determination through education by documenting Navajo and worldwide Indigenous educators who collaborated to create culturally relevant bilingual and bicultural curriculum. Their research presents best practices for developing culturally relevant curriculum among Indigenous communities worldwide and ensuring that children receive quality education.

As an example of decolonizing western curriculum, Deyhle, Swisher, Stevens, and Glavan, (2008) provide examples of how language revitalization curriculum and programs were created to address the needs of the local community. Language revitalization programs worldwide were successful in teaching younger Indigenous youth

how to speak and write in their language (Deyhle, Swisher, Stevens, & Glavan, 2008, p. 339). Deyhle et al. (2008) reference multiple studies that found that Indigenous students who were bilingual performed better in school and on tests, as opposed to their peers who did not participate in language revitalization programs (p. 339). They conclude that Indigenous students who performed better in school and on tests were in a greater position to follow an education pathway that leads into higher education. A factor that strengthens the pathway is the students' reliance on and practice of their traditional teachings (e.g., Indigenous epistemology). Students who are grounded in their cultural identity, connected to their community, and have a strong cultural resilience, are equipped to overcome educational adversity and being steadfast in their Indigenous worldview presents the ability to increase retention and graduation rates.

American Indian College Student Retention

Historically, American Indian students have the lowest college access, retention, and graduation rates compared to other underrepresented groups (Benjamin, Chambers, & Reiterman, 1993; Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Dodd, Garcia, Meccage, & Nelson, 1995; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). To illustrate the American Indian demographics on enrollment and graduation rates, Shotton, Lowe, and Waterman (2013) explain:

> Higher education enrollment for Native American students has more than doubled in the last 30 years … Despite this steady rise in enrollment, Native American college students remain less likely than their peers to enroll in college (DeVoe, Darling-Churchill, and Snyder, 2008). [Furthermore,] in 2008, 38.3% of Native American students completed a bachelor's degree, the lowest rate of all racial and ethnic groups and well below the national average of 57.2%. (Aud et al., 2011, p. 5)

Research indicates that American Indian college and graduate students face many challenges regarding access, financial aid, lack of academic preparation, graduation rates, and cultural norms (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno & Solyom, 2012; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Literature focusing on American Indian and Alaska Native students attending elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and graduate education tends to utilize a deficit framework to describe student access, experiences, achievement, graduations, etc. Tuck (2009) refers to this research as damage-centered research:

> In damage-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe. Though connected to deficit models—frameworks that emphasize what a particular student, family, or community is lacking to explain underachievement or failure—damage-centered research is distinct in being more socially and historically situated. It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. (p. 413)

This dissertation study aims to counter "damage-centered research" (Tuck, 2009, p. 413) and focus on positive-centered research highlighting student success in a "desire-based framework" (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). For example, a desire-based approach would highlight how families have positive impacts on AI/AN students' academic trajectory.

American Indian students rely on their family for support as they navigate higher education (HeaveyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jeffries, & Baysden, 2000; Waterman, 2012). HeavyRunner and DeCelles' (2002) Family Education Model (FEM) identified factors that contribute to American Indian students' access and retention in Tribal Colleges and Universities (p. 3). These factors contributed to the formation of FEM, and include:

> (a) Many students and their families need the college to act as their liaison with existing social and health services during times of crisis; (b) tribal colleges must seek to enlist, develop, and structure the ability of family members to support student efforts; and (c) tribal colleges must engage family members in the life of

> the college community by enlisting them as partners and involving them in cultural and social activities. Together, these assumptions have functioned to create an environment that honors and includes the extended family and nurtures appropriate partnerships. (HeavyRunner & CeCelles, 2002, p. 4)

The FEM is centered on American Indians' traditional concepts of cultural family teachings and principles. The authors argue that "replicating the extended family structure within the college culture enhances the student's sense of belonging and leads to higher retention rates" (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 1). Furthermore, they identified FEM's common principles that involve students, family members, tribal college staff, retention program staff, and student service practitioners. A few of the principles include:

> Tribal college staff and students' families must work together in relationships based on equality and respect; tribal college staff enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members…retention programs must affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society; retention programs embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process; student service practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development. (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 4)

Although HeavyRunner and DeCelles' (2002) research focuses on the tribal college context, their principles and recommendations can be applied to the non-Tribal Colleges and Universities (e.g., public 4-year and private university) context. In other words, when working with Native students, it is important to remember that success for American Indian students is strongly influenced by family support; however, research also suggests faculty mentorship is also significant.

Dodd et al. (1995) and Tate and Schwartz (1993) argue that faculty who genuinely cared for American Indian students' well-being, academic success, and who provided mentoring were major factors in increasing student retention. Tate and

Schwartz's (1993) study identified ways in which Social Work faculty demonstrated multiple levels of care. Students reported faculty mentorship in the following ways: "faculty made special efforts to help, faculty understood my educational needs, [and] faculty understood my family responsibilities" (p. 26). Tate and Schwartz (1993) found that students who reported higher rates of faculty mentorship also showed higher rates of graduation and education satisfaction.

Research on American Indian college students suggests success is increased when multiple support systems (e.g., family and faculty) are utilized (Dodd et al., 1995; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). This increases their retention throughout college. American Indian undergraduate persistence is important to this study; it provides a foundation for understanding student experiences of matriculating towards a college degree. Strengthening American Indian undergraduate student retention rates increases the population of students in the pathway of continuing their education into graduate and professional programs.

American Indian Graduate Student Experiences

Within postsecondary literature, peer-reviewed scholarship specific to American Indian graduate and professional experiences is limited but growing (see Brayboy et al., 2014; Goforth, Brown, Machek, & Swaney, 2016; Lacourt, 2003; Limb, 2001; Lintner, 2003; Patterson, Baldwin, & Olsen, 2009; Rodriguez-Rabin, 2003; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). Few doctoral dissertations have explored issues related to American Indian graduate student success (see Ballew, 1996; Burke, 2017; Garvey, 1999; HeavyRunner-Rioux, 2017; Heinonen, 2002; Henning, 1999; Moon, 2003; Neuerburg, 2000; Poolaw,

2018; Secatero, 2009; Shotton, 2008). As this is the focus of the current study, it was alarming to find that only one dissertation (Secatero, 2009) thus far has addressed, in part, American Indian graduate students' preparation for accessing graduate school. Three reports (see Buckley, 1997; Kidwell, 1986; McDonald, 1994) and three book chapters (see Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015; Secatero, 2014) demonstrate how American Indian graduate student experiences have evolved within the past 30 years. Figure 1 illustrates currently available Navajo and American Indian literature and identifies the literature gap in the pathway between undergraduate education to graduate education.

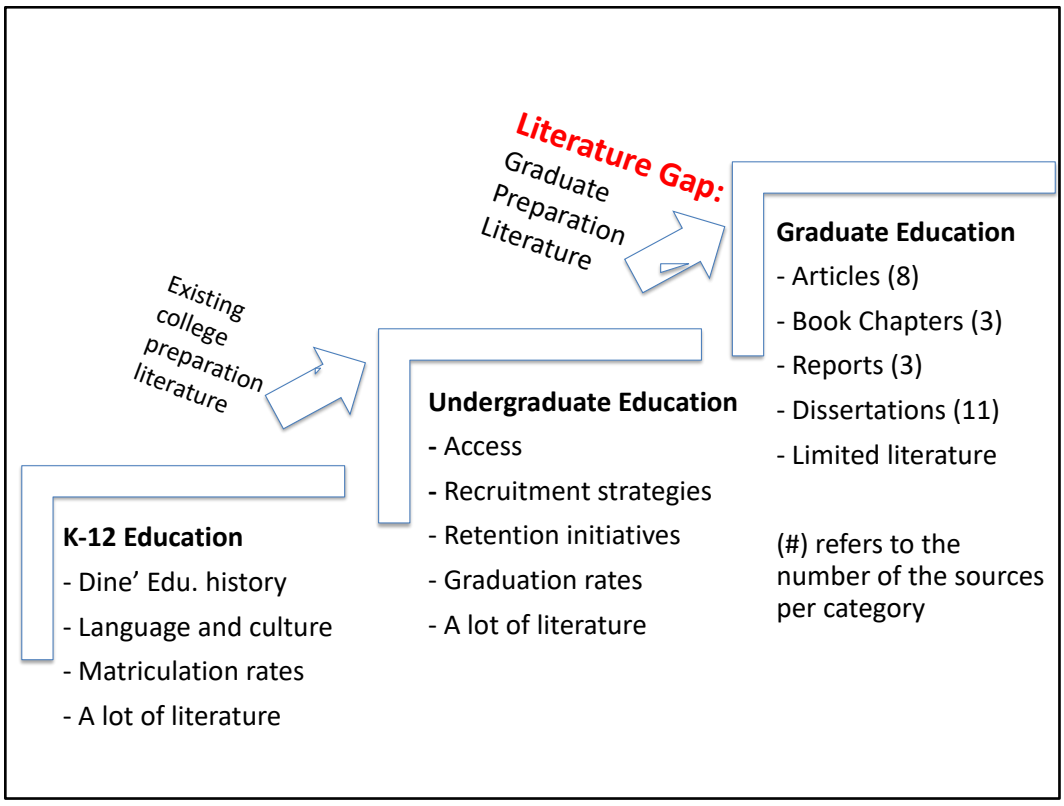

Figure 1. Navajo and American Indian Education Literature Review

From this figure, it is evident that existing literature does not focus on graduate school preparation at any meaningful depth.

An area that retention scholars have not fully explored involves American Indian graduate student socialization factors. For instance, Viernes and Thompson (1993) and Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez (2011) argue that it is important for African American and Latino/a students to participate in the socialization process of entering doctoral education. Specifically, the socialization process includes learning how to navigate campus culture, recognizing the importance of faculty mentoring, building a support system, and understanding how to utilize resources to conduct research (e.g., research support from subject expert librarians, utilizing the graduate writing center) (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Viernes & Thompson, 1993). While scholars have explored the socialization process of African American and Latino/a graduate students (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011), research on American Indian graduate student socialization is needed to address their specific persistence needs. The socialization process is one of the first stages of the graduate student experience, which influences their retention rates. In addition to the socialization process, American Indian students may rely on the Indigenous concept of giving back to their community as a cultural strategy that improves their retention (Lopez, 2018).

The American Indian traditional value of pursuing education with the intention of serving or giving back to our community is a common factor in literature specific to American Indian graduate students (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015; Limb, 2001; Shotton, 2008). Moreover, a highly educated workforce means increased individual capacity, which increases opportunities for larger contributions to tribal nation building

goals (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2014). As the number of educated American Indian graduates increases, so does the number of American Indians trained to meet the unique needs of Indigenous communities. American Indian graduates present a growing skill set for becoming ideal candidates to serve in leadership positions within the community. Unfortunately, an increase in capacity without an increase in employment prospects at "home" may lead individuals who want to return to their tribal communities to serve the needs of Indigenous peoples to seek opportunities elsewhere. This reduction in capacity has been termed "brain drain" (McKenzie, Jackson, Yazzie, Smith, Crotty, Baum, & Eldridge, 2013). While Indigenous students attend institutions of higher education with the intention of serving their people, they are more likely to return to provide the professional services they have been trained for when the conditions for their return are right. In other words, there must be work and living opportunities (McKenzie et al., 2013). Additionally, American Indian students may graduate with student loan debt and economic considerations that prevent their return to their home community due to limited employment opportunity.

However, when tribal nations are prepared to receive their graduates and provide professional and economic opportunities, these graduates are critical for strengthening the future of their tribal nation (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012). Limb (2001) states that American Indian Masters of Social Work students have shown a greater responsibility to care and provide for "economically disadvantaged populations," which includes a large percentage of Navajo and American Indian populations (p. 54). Thus, career goals that encourage serving a historically underserved community and strengthen nation-building efforts have been found to increase American Indian student motivation

and persistence in higher education (Brayboy et al., 2014; Litner, 2003).

Lacourt (2003) offers the example of how the service (as a form of "giving back" to ones' Indigenous community) provided by an advisor to an American Indian student club can simultaneously fulfill a cultural role of providing guidance to younger American Indian students, while providing information necessary for students to meet the requirements of their academic programs. Building a career serving American Indians in urban communities, on university campuses, and/or within tribal nations in rural communities is a valued contribution of Indigenous reciprocity (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Indigenous reciprocity is a significant cultural value in Indigenous communities because of the interdependency between "relationships and responsibilities" (Brayboy et al., 2014, p. 587). Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) illustrate Indigenous reciprocity by stating that most American Indian students have a strong commitment to give back to their Indigenous community upon earning a college degree. Therefore education is believed to not only benefit the individual student, but their Indigenous community as well.

Although American Indian students often report pursuing education out of a desire to meet the needs of their communities, American Indian student access and retention in predominately White institutions (PWI) remains challenging throughout the United States. Goforth, Brown, Machek, and Swaney (2016) acknowledge the challenge of recruiting and retaining American Indian students in school psychology graduate programs and explore recommendations and strategies to increase access. A major barrier that American Indian students experience is access to information that would improve their knowledge of how to successfully prepare for and apply to graduate programs. In a

national effort to increase access to information on how to prepare for graduate education, the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Congress funded the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (McNair Scholars Program). The McNair Scholarship Program is a Federal TRIO program intended:

> To increase the number of students from underrepresented groups who go on to graduate study. By encouraging and supporting qualified students through undergraduate school and the transition to graduate school, the ultimate goal is to increase faculty diversity in colleges and universities. (https://www.westminstercollege.edu/about/resources/mcnair-scholars-program)

The McNair Scholars Program is designed to increase the number of students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds or from ethnicities currently underserved in graduate school (specifically African American, Native American, Latino, and Pacific Islander). Although the McNair Scholars Program has provided vital opportunities for thousands of underrepresented students, the number of American Indian students participating in the McNair Scholars Program has remained one of the lowest of any racial/ethnic population (M. Hinsdale, personal communication, January 24, 2017).

A second example of a nationwide program designed to increase graduate school acceptance rates is Graduate Horizons. Graduate Horizons is a:

> Non-profit organization that supports the higher education of Native American students by providing college and graduate admissions workshops to American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students/participants from across the nation. Graduate Horizons is a four-day workshop for Native college students, college graduates, and master's students in preparing for graduate school (master's, Ph.D. or professional school). Graduate Horizons partners with 45 university graduate/professional degree programs where admission officers, professors and deans mentor and advise students on the admissions process, professional/career development, and the various fields of study, research, and graduate programs available. (http://www.graduatehorizons.org)

No research about Graduate Horizons and its success rate (defined here as enrollment in graduate programs) is currently available in peer-reviewed journals.

On a regional level, institution-specific programs designed to increase graduate school attainment may be available. For example, Arizona State University offers a 2-day graduate preparation program called Graduate Pathways. "Graduate Pathways educates and helps American Indian students successfully apply to enter their graduate school of choice. The conference will assist participants in preparing competitive applications, learn about graduate programs, and network with faculty mentors" (https://aisss.asu.edu/gradpath).

As important as graduate preparation programs are, they are few and far in between and do not guarantee program admission. Patterson, Baldwin, and Olsen (2009) as well as English and Umbach (2016) stated that American Indian students who were denied admission into graduate programs had poor access to graduate school information, were not prepared for standardized entrance exams, and did not understand how their undergraduate institution and major factored into their graduate school aspirations and choice. Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2014) further the conversation by reframing their analysis away from American Indian student performance on standardized admissions exams and focusing on graduate school institutional admission policies and calling for revisions to the admission process that incorporate nation-building tenets into their admissions considerations. Brayboy, Castagno, and Solyom (2014) argue that "democratic merit" (p. 586) used in graduate programs' "selective admissions process based on an individual's previous accomplishment on (mostly) standardized measures of achievement" (p. 586) needs to be replaced with a nation-building tenet:

> Looking into the heart of people is not only an acceptable metric through which to view admission but an important and useful one. An individual's 'heart' [reflects] the potential and possibilities of that individual's contribution to society and provides a valuable and compelling understanding of merit. From a tribal nation-

> building perspective, looking into an individual's heart is indicative to knowing how she/he will give back to her/his community and respond to emerging challenges. (Brayboy et al., 2014, p. 588)

Graduate programs and faculty admissions committees should acknowledge American Indian student applicants' desire to contribute to their community as an indicator of personal motivation that helps lead to academic success.

Beyond a desire to "give back" to one's community, another source of motivation for enrolling and persisting in higher education reported by American Indian graduate students is the support and love from their families (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Secatero, 2009; Shotton, 2008). The Family Education Model, developed to improve student experiences at tribal colleges, provides an Indigenous framework that highlights the cultural role of family and student services staff in reinforcing retention rates (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). According to the model, traditional concepts of family, cultural family teachings, retention program staff, tribal college staff, and student service practitioners contribute to American Indian students' access to and persistence in higher education (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Moreover, family support is a vital contributing factor for American Indian graduate students completing their degree programs (Garvey, 1999; Heinonen, 2002; Henning, 1999; Neuerburg, 2000; Shotton, 2008). Shotton's (2008) research highlighted doctoral students' familial support in the forms of personal encouragement: spouses "taking on extra duties around the house" (p. 160), family "prayers" (p. 210) for students, and the involvement of extended family members "particularly from mothers and grandmothers, were strongly associated with persistence" (p. 36). Moreover, participants in Neuerburg's (2000) study explained family support as "my daughter and my sister-in-law just took over the kitchen and took

care of the family" (p. 76).

In 2016, as American Indian students matriculate through graduate school, their average age for doctoral recipients was 39 years of age when compared to their non-Native peers' age that same year: 36 years of age for African American students, 33 years of age for Latino/a students, 32 years of age for White students, and 31 years of age for Asian students (National Science Foundation, Table 27, 2016). Because Native graduate students tend to be older than their non-Native peers, research has found that when they are accepted into graduate programs, they have to arrange for a greater responsibility of care and financially provide for their children and extended family at higher rates than their non-Native peers (Brayboy et al., 2014; Waterman, 2012). Moreover, Native graduate students are more likely to have grown up in low-income households, making it difficult for them to access resources necessary to fulfill family care and academic needs (Brayboy et al., 2014; Limb, 2001). Thus, Native students work one or more jobs during graduate school.

Furthermore, classroom climate and context influences student success. American Indian students arrive on campus with an Indigenous worldview/epistemology and when participation in classroom discussions includes conversations that are grounded in cultural, racial, and political experiences, American Indian students report instructors and/or fellow students not acknowledging their unique perspectives and ways of communication (Covarrubias & Windchief, 2009; Gay, 2004; Lacourt, 2003). The inability to acknowledge different forms of epistemologies between American Indian students and instructors occurs more often than not (Ballew, 1996). Guillory and Wolverton's (2008) study highlights the misinformed understanding between American

Indian students' lived experiences and higher education administrators' perceptions regarding student motivation, persistence factors, and academic barriers. "The need to understand [Indigenous knowledge] is imperative so that [i]ndigenous students can make sense of their own experiences and their placement in institutions of higher education" (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009, p. 17).

American Indian graduate student experiences of adversity, isolation, and racism effect their time to degree (Ballew, 1996; Henning, 1999; Poolaw, 2017; Secatero, 2009; Shotton, 2008). Ballew's (1996) study on American Indian women in doctoral programs identified that students experienced multiple forms of feeling "different" from their peers, which led to feeling alienated and isolated on campus. There is a dearth of research exploring American Indian female graduate student experiences (see Ballew, 1996; Rodriguez-Rabin, 2003; Shotton, 2008) and research specifically focusing on American Indian male graduate students is almost nonexistent, with the exception of Poolaw's (2018) study that explored "successful experiences of Indigenous males who earned a master's or professional degree from non-native institutions" (p. 10).

Another form of adversity American Indian students experience is institutionalized racism. Solyom (2014) examines how administrators at a predominately White institution have the inability to fully understand and acknowledge the cultural, spiritual, and academic implications of allowing their university to use an American Indian iconography and namesakes to promote institutional athletic teams. This creates a campus climate that negatively "affect[s] the persistence and experiences of American Indian students" (p. 18). As American Indian graduate students face multiple forms of micro- and macro-aggressions on campus, they rely on coping strategies that are

culturally relevant (Heinonen, 2002). Moon (2003) identified examples of cultural coping strategies such as practicing Indigenous spirituality and acknowledging reciprocal relationships that aid American Indian graduate students in navigating the difficult situations that arise in the academy. As graduate students learn how to incorporate personal and cultural knowledge to address challenging situations, their confidence grows into multiple forms of a successful student. The interpretation and definition of a successful student differs for American Indian individuals, Indigenous communities, higher education institutions, and higher education researchers. Secatero (2009) defines individual student success in relation to the Corn Model well-being framework, which has attributes of acknowledging the role of family, preparing for graduate school, building a supportive faculty and mentor relationship, and utilizing cultural identity and knowledge (p. 179). To provide the foundation for the Corn Model, describing the significance of American Indian epistemology is required.

American Indian Epistemology

American Indian epistemology provides knowledge from lived experiences "embodied within a cultural community" (Burkhart, 2004, p. 22). American Indian epistemologies are multifaceted and multidimensional (Burkhart, 2004). According to American Indian ways of thinking, there are many ways to transfer knowledge; for example, knowledge can be transferred by oral storytelling, through Indigenous languages, ceremonies and prayers, and through cultural teachings (Aronilth, Jr., 1980, 1992; Iverson & Roessel, 2002; Morris, 1997). Storytelling is vital to American Indian identities. It is believed "our stories serve as our American Indian genre of education that

instills strength in our inner beauty to remember who we are, where we are from, and where we are going in our precious lives" (Secatero, 2009, p. 30). The act of transferring American Indian knowledge through storytelling and acknowledging relationships keeps us connected to fellow Navajos in the form of kinship—*Ké.* Furthermore, American Indians understand the inter-connectedness with animate and inanimate objects (Aronilth, Jr., 1980, 1992; Cajete, 1994). Once the interconnectedness is established, a reciprocal relationship follows. Such reciprocity is a foundational concept within American Indian philosophies (Cejete, 1994; Deloria, 1999).

Several scholars have centered their research on American Indian epistemology and explore American Indian student experiences in classrooms and the academy. Lee's (2006) study describes how Navajo and Pueblo students' cultural identity is reinforced through the use and revitalization of their Indigenous languages, and how language is connected to culture (e.g., worldview, *Ké*, respect). Lee's (2006) study provides an intertribal analysis of language and its connections to cultural identity. In a tribally specific description of Navajo cultural identity in an educational environment, Aronilth, Jr. (1994) states, "according to the teachings of our forefathers, Diné philosophy contains four important areas of learning about our body, feelings, mind, thinking, thoughts and our whole life. We are born with these and grow with them from childbirth to old age" (p. 45). Furthermore, Aronlith, Jr. (1994) explains the concept of Navajo education:

> As an educator and a learner, there are four basic essential elements toward satisfactory performance. These are: [c]reating spiritual motivation and having comprehension, [b]uilding a firm structure to make correct decisions in life, [w]orking for a good pattern of life and accomplishment, [and] [ability to plan, implement, and think correctly. (p. 48)

Traditional concepts of Navajo education, identity, and the culture of learning in an

educational environment provide a unique worldview. After establishing the unique Indigenous epistemological lens, we can explore student experiences with regard to retention initiatives and challenges to academic success. When analyzing Navajo and American Indian student retention, we must acknowledge that culturally unique situations that relate to Indigenous epistemologies affect American Indian students' retention rates (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). A respectful way to address culturally unique situations involves the utilization of American Indian epistemology in praxis.

American Indian epistemology in praxis has been incorporated into a few K-12 schools and higher education institutions in the form of bicultural and bilingual curriculum (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Lee, 2009; McCarty, 2002). McCarty (2002) documents how Navajo community members in the 1960s to 2000s became empowered to create a community school that incorporated Navajo history, culture, and language into its curriculum. Navajo language classes helped students place increased value on their unique identity and helped build stronger connections to their American Indian community (Lee, 2009). Lee and Quijada Cerecer (2010) expand on McCarty's (2002) research by exploring Navajo and Pueblo high school student experiences of receiving different levels of sociocultural curriculum (e.g., Navajo language class), which increased persistence and graduation rates. It is important for American Indian students to strengthen their cultural identity (e.g., spirituality, language, Indigenous values, self awareness) before and during college, as their cultural identity can be relied on to endure difficult situations. This is referred as "cultural resilience" (HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003, p. 15). In other words, a Navajo student may strengthen their cultural identity by

acknowledging the teaching of our ancestors, as described by Werito (2014):

> The principles of hózhó are encapsulated in the cognitive (mental), physiological (physical), psychological (emotional), and intuitive (spiritual) aspects of human development and growth—or holistic living and learning…Diné philosophy of learning and living are Nitsáhákees (Thinking), Nahat'á (Planning), Iiná (Living), and Siihasin (Assurance), in respective order. These four aspects of Dine' philosophy are understood to represent life principles that guide our processes of thinking or conceptualization, planning or self-actualization, doing by establishing relationships with others, and reflecting or being self-reflective and aware of others and the natural spiritual world. (p. 28)

When Navajo students are self-aware of who they are and where they come from, they are less likely to be persuaded away from the Navajo concept of 'walking in beauty.' Furthermore, Deyhle (1995) stated, "the more academically successful Navajo students were more likely to be those who were firmly rooted in their Navajo community" (p. 419). Navajo community, culture, and epistemology are explored in the next chapter through the use of Indigenous frameworks.

Indigenous Theoretical Frameworks

To gain a deeper understanding of Navajo student higher education experiences, I utilize two distinct education analytical frameworks grounded in Indigenous epistemologies. In order to understand the experiences of Indigenous peoples, as this study seeks to do, it is important to utilize Indigenous frameworks. Such frameworks allow researchers to engage in research from a perspective that reflects relevant and unique tribal and cultural epistemological values and ontological commitments. This study utilizes Secatero's (Navajo) Corn Model (Secatero, 2009) and Brayboy's (Lumbee) Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005).

Based on traditional Navajo thinking, the Navajo centered Corn Model (Secatero,

2015) allows me to understand student experiences from an individual motivation perspective. The Corn Model is a holistic, culturally grounded model that promotes American Indian student well-being in U.S. higher education institutions across four areas: physical, social, mental, and spiritual. The Corn Model suggests the four areas are interconnected and interdependent in important ways. The health of these areas is believed to influence the success of others.

Brayboy's (2005) work, on the other hand, offers a lens to understand how historic, political, and economic forces impact Native students' education success. TribalCrit focuses on systemic forces and examines the lived realities of Native peoples within the larger societal context of U.S. higher education institutions. It recognizes the liminality of Native peoples, as both a racialized and political group, in relation to the U.S. government and calls for culturally relevant research that promotes the sovereignty and self-determination needs of Indigenous peoples. When combined, these theoretical models provide the foundation for a robust analysis of Navajo student experiences.

Corn Model

According to Secatero (2015), "The corn model can be deemed as a higher education model that encompasses spiritual, mental, social, and physical well-being" (p. 22) specific to American Indian college students. The first element, physical well-being, refers to Navajos' sense of place. Place is considered "our seed of knowledge" (Secatero, 2015, p. 58) and where education begins. Literally, this refers to Navajoland as the seed of our creation and an important site of growth. The physical also refers to how we motivate ourselves to learn new concepts in life. Key concepts that embody this element

include mortality and physical health factors such as family, diet/exercise, nourishment, sense of belonging, and sense of place. An example of how the physical element can manifest in Navajo culture is when a Navajo baby is born. When a baby is born, his or her umbilical cord is buried in the ground at a location of family significance. Along with prayers and songs, corn pollen is offered to connect the child to the land. This is believed to reinforce the child's connection to their homeland, to their people, and to themself. Children are encouraged to return to visit the site where the cord is buried, which allows them to connect physically and spiritually with the land. These visits also allow the young person to learn more about the area and peoples they come from and provide the opportunity for them to experience cultural enrichment and learning. For a college student, returning home to Navajoland may be an important action that contributes to physical well-being.

The second element in the Corn Model (Secatero, 2009) is related to social well-being. As we continue to grow like a stalk of corn, we advance to social well-being. We develop networks and communication skills to further enhance our college survival skills. Secatero (2009) suggests that concepts that form and strengthen social well-being include social capital, building resources, literacy skills, and graduate school preparation. This can include Navajo students participating in college enrichment programs such as the McNair Scholars Program, which seeks to arm students from historically underrepresented backgrounds with the knowledge and skill sets necessary to enroll and succeed in graduate school. Whereas students may enroll in a research methods course, these programs extend student preparation to receive undergraduate research experience and individualize mentoring. The effect is that students leave the program prepared to

submit a competitive graduate school application. In this stage, Secatero suggests ears of corn are often grown that represent our mentors and support persons.

The third element, mental well-being (Secatero, 2009), refers to the idea that as we continue to develop our social well-being, especially through interaction with mentors and various educational enrichment opportunities, we continue to think in advanced ways. This leads to mental well-being. Mental well-being includes critical thinking, concept development, and the ability to identify and pursue professional/career goals (Secatero, 2009). For example, when students read new literature and are exposed to new concepts, they begin to make meaning of the new information and in some cases relate new knowledge to existing paradigms. This element represents the top portion of the corn stalk. Moreover, American Indian graduate students who demonstrate a strong mental well-being element were able to incorporate sound reasoning in planning ahead in designing their thesis/dissertation committee and how each member was able to provide expertise to the study and provide constructive feedback that strengthens the research study. Lastly, this element allows American Indian students to develop a sound research prospectus, and enables them to reach their research goals.

As we progress to our final stage, spiritual well-being is achieved. Spiritual well-being encompasses our life goals and the interconnectedness of family and religion. According to Secatero (2009), key concepts that form this element include self-actualization process, achievement, belief system, rite of passage, and elders' knowledge. A cultural example involves Navajos coming to an understanding of their purpose in life, abiding by the teaching of *Hozho,* and completing the life cycle to old age (Secatero, 2014, p. 22). When Navajo students acknowledge the power and sacredness of their

spiritual well-being, they have an increased ability to reach and attain their academic and career goals. As their spiritual well-being element is strengthened, it contributes to a healthy balance between physical, mental, and social well-being elements. Lastly, Secatero (2014) describes the spiritual well-being teachings with that of a corn tassel, which is the location for its sacred corn pollen.

Indigenous Epistemology as it Relates to Navajo Thought

This study, like the Corn Model, is grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing. The Corn Model is uniquely grounded in Navajo epistemology. An Indigenous description of epistemology is the "ways of knowing or how peoples come to know the things they know" (Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl, & Solyom, 2012, p. 425). According to Navajo scholar Wilson Aronilth, Jr. (1980), Navajo epistemology, known as *Hozho* and *Sa'ah Naagai Bik'eh Hozhoon* (SNBH), was created by the Holy People to inform Navajo people of philosophical teachings, values, concepts, and laws of nature. "*Hozho* means in English to 'walk in beauty' and live a harmonious life, while SNBH places human life in harmony and balance with the natural world and the universe" (Lee, 2006, p. 92). Therefore, Navajo epistemology is not only a philosophical system, it outlines a set of behaviors, actions, and values that should guide Navajo peoples' engagement with the earth and all its elements. The Navajo epistemology acknowledges that our universe entails animate and inanimate objects that are related. Understanding the interrelatedness between Navajos and our environments is gained through storytelling, songs, and prayers. "A positive Navajo education is necessary in order for each individual youth to feel the power of the sense of worth, not only in himself, but also in his/her education, values,

beliefs, community, and land" (Aronilth, Jr., 1992, p. 16).

Navajo epistemology is useful for this study because it is the foundation of the Corn Model, which allows me to frame the study to acknowledge and value Navajo experiences in higher education. The process of acknowledging and validating Navajo student knowledge and actions reflects teachings of SNBH (Aronilth, Jr., 1980, 1992; Iverson & Roessel, 2002; Morris, 1997). Secatero's (2014) framework incorporates a cultural metaphor of corn. Corn is significant to Navajo people and is also considered sacred. The process of planting and farming corn relates to the different stages Navajo students may experience in college (e.g., the growth of corn is related to the academic growth and cultivation of students). Most Navajos view corn as part of our subsistence and religion, sustaining us physically and spiritually. Corn is cooked in multiple ways such as in steam corn stew, kneel down bread, or fried corn. Corn is also cooked and used in a religious context when it is used to make Navajo cake during a ceremony and corn pollen is used in conjunction with prayers and songs.

The Corn Model offers a multilayered analysis of students, because it acknowledges corn's ability to nourish Navajo peoples across physical, social, mental, and spiritual contexts. The Corn Model views these four areas as interconnected and interdependent meaning the health of each area relies upon the health of the others. If a student is imbalanced in one, then the others may also fall out of balance. Similarly, Tribal Critical Race Theory utilizes a multilayered analysis between American Indians, U.S. Higher Education institutions, and the federal government. I preface descriptions of Tribal Critical Race Theory, with an explanation of Critical Race Theory that provides the foundation for Tribal Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory

The evolution of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) has had profound impacts on the way scholars analyze the inequalities experienced by historically underrepresented students. Critical Race Theory evolved from Critical Legal Studies (Ladson-Billings, 2010). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) describe how the intersections of "race, racism and power" (p. 3) formulate Critical Race Theory and how they can be applied to the field of education to analyze "educational inequalities" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 47). According to Ladson-Billings (2010), Critical Race Theory is characterized by four tenets:

1. Racism is 'normal, not aberrant, in American society';
2. Employ[s] storytelling to 'analyze the myths, presuppositions, and receive wisdoms that make up the common culture about race;
3. Insists on a critique of liberalism; and
4. Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation. (Ladson-Billing, 2010, p. 8-12)

In addition to Ladson-Billings' (2010) foundation tenets of CRT, Parker and Villapando (2007) identified CRT themes that emerged within a higher education environment that include:

1. The Centrality of Race and Racism;
2. The Challenge to Dominant Ideology;
3. A Commitment to Social Justice and Praxis;
4. A Centrality of Experiential Knowledge; [and]
5. A Historical Context and Interdisciplinary Perspective. (p. 521)

Critical Race Theory validates the lived experiences of people of color by using counter-storytelling as a way to provide voice to those who have been historically silenced (Parker & Lynn, 1997; Solorazano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) and Parker and Lynn (2002) use "counter-storytelling as an analytical framework" to address a "set of basic insights, perspectives,

methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). Solorazano and Yosso (2002) and Delgado and Stefancic (2012) acknowledge that racism is prevalent in majoritarian storytelling and is rooted in Whiteness. A form of counter-storytelling can be narratives as described by Posner (1997) and Ladson-Billings (2010). Narratives "provide a deeper context to lived realities" (Ladson-Billings, 2010, p. 11) and were used in this study.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been used to analyze data acknowledging that racism exists in the U.S. educational system and directly impacts Navajo students. This study acknowledges two CRT tenets throughout. The first tenet acknowledges that race and racism are central in American society and within higher education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical Race Theory has also been used to analyze how students face racism in their educational journey (e.g., in classrooms, through teacher interactions, and with other students) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). For example, Navajo students experience educational inequalities that include disparities related to the quality of curriculum, students' sense of community in the educational environment, and institutional racism (Deyhle, 1995). Educational inequality is defined as unequal access to quality education, the intersection of class and property, and the unfair treatment of students of color verses White students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The second CRT tenet central to this study is "centrality of experiential knowledge" (Villalpando & Parker, 2007, p. 520). Critical Race Theory validates the lived experiences of people of color by using counter-storytelling as a way to provide

voice to those who have been silenced (Solorazano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Encouraging Navajo students to share their stories, which are not told in mainstream discourse, counters the "majoritarian stories" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) that frame American Indians' "subdominant place and role" in society (Lee, 2009).

Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefanicic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) provides the foundation from which Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) has evolved. Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005) has strengthened the way American Indian experiences are acknowledged and voices heard and validated. Both theories have been presented as theoretical perspectives to conduct a deeper cultural analysis of the experiences of Navajo and American Indians in higher education with regards to race, racism, colonization, tribal sovereignty, access, preparation, challenges, and solutions. A detailed description of TribalCrit is discussed below.

Tribal Critical Race Theory

According to Brayboy (2005), Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) is built on the foundation of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorazano et al., 2005), but includes an Indigenous epistemological framework that validates cultural knowledge and values. TribalCrit recognizes that, in addition to racism, for American Indians, "colonization is endemic to society" (p. 430). TribalCrit centralizes tribal sovereignty, and recognizes American Indians as a unique political group – who hold dual citizenship among their tribal nations and the U.S. Brayboy (2005) states, "this theoretical framework provides a way to address the complicated relationship between American Indians and the United States federal

government" (p. 425). In short, the theory seeks to examine the implications for education presented by American Indians' "liminality as racial and legal/political" (p. 425) peoples as well as individuals.

According to Brayboy (2005), TribalCrit is characterized by nine tenets,

1. Recognition that colonization is endemic to society;
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain;
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities;
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination and self-identification;
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens; and,
6. Government policies and education policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theories; they make up theory and are therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work toward social change. (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430)

Utilizing the TribalCrit framework to unpack the liminal relationships Navajo students have with higher education institutions allows researchers to understand the ways social and academic structures promote or impede programs for Navajo students. This study uses all nine TribalCrit tenets, and focuses on three: tenets five, six, and seven. Tenet five, "the concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens" (p. 429), is illustrated by highlighting students' Indigenous cultural values and how these values influence their behaviors and academic and professional goals. In short, this tenet allows me to explore how students plan to use

their educated positions of power to help others.

Tenet six, "government policies and education policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation" (p. 429), provides an opportunity to reflect on the history of U.S. Federal Indian law and policy in the context of American Indian education and how it directly effects the educational experiences of Navajo students. This historical focus on assimilation suggests a need for research to examine what kind of additional programs and resources are available or needed for Native graduate students at the institutional level. Such programs, as many Indigenous scholars argue, should reflect Indigenous epistemologies, be culturally relevant and culturally grounded, and seek to address needs outlined by Indigenous peoples – rather than assume the general U.S. status quo context is the same context facing Indigenous peoples and their communities (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2014; Lomawaima, 1995; McCarty, 2002; McCarty & Lee, 2014).

The last TribalCrit tenet I use is "Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430). This tenet validates the participants' lived experiences as Navajo people and how they navigate higher education with a goal of graduating and pursuing their career. The first part of the tenet suggests there is a need for research that is tribally grounded and tribally specific, if we are to best understand the lived realities of Indigenous peoples. This belief complements the presence of Secatero's Corn Model in this research and calls for a need to understand all four elements (physical, social, mental, and spiritual well-being) of Secatero's (2015) Corn Model.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) and the Corn Model (Secatero, 2015) are Indigenous frameworks and epistemologies that complement one another and provide critical modes of analysis for this study. These frameworks allow for a more culturally respectful and culturally nuanced data analysis. Both encourage multiple forms of analysis, from a focus on the individual and his/her individual experiences in the Corn Model, to a focus on the structural and systemic processes that impact the education context through TribalCrit, to paint a holistic picture of Indigenous students and their communities. Both frameworks support Navajo and American Indian students' pursuit of living a balanced lifestyle, walking in beauty, and contributing to sovereign/health of our Indigenous communities.

Moreover, while Brayboy's model is presented as an intertribal Indigenous theoretical framework, Secatero's model allows for a more tribally specific analysis. By embedding Indigenous knowledge systems via the Corn Model (Secatero, 2015), and TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), this study supports the process of individuals and communities reaching a Navajo state of living in harmony and beauty—*Hózhó*. Lastly, while the Corn Model is rooted in Navajo epistemology and philosophy, TribalCrit is rooted in a larger intertribal community throughout Indian country. Both frameworks are distinct from one another, and when combined, allow for research that is culturally appropriate and methodologically respectful. The combination of both theoretical models provides a foundation for a robust narrative analysis. The Corn Model and TriblCrit both utilize oral storytelling as a cultural teaching method and way of sharing knowledge, which lends itself to conducting individual interviews.

In summation, American Indian and Navajo education has a unique history

dictated by U.S. Federal policy, which eventually led to American Indians exercising their sovereignty by creating schools, such as the Rough Rock Demonstration School, that are rooted in Navajo history and culture. In the era of American Indian self-determination, schools within Indian country began to incorporate Indigenous epistemologies into the curriculum in elementary, secondary, and tribal colleges and universities. However, not all universities, (especially PWIs) utilize culturally relevant curriculum. Research has also found that in addition to curriculum, American Indian family members and culturally sensitive faculty provide needed support for American Indian students to combat low recruitment, retention, and graduation rates (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Dodd et al., 1995; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Secatero, 2009; Shotton, 2008; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). As American Indian students learn to navigate undergraduate education (while raising the retention rates), some acknowledge the value in continuing their education into graduate school. However, upon enrollment in graduate programs, American Indian graduate students face countless obstacles in the areas of personal, social, and structural challenges. In spite of these challenges, students continue to find ways to remain resilient. Literature shows that American Indian graduate students are committed to serving their community and their tribal nations, which helps them find inspiration to persist (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015; Secatero, 2009; Shotton, 2008). Research on American Indian/Navajo graduate students' decision-making factors was the next logical subject to explore and document. This study aimed to accomplish this. Chapter 3 illustrates how both Indigenous frameworks, Corn Model and TribalCrit, influenced the study's research methodology.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This critical qualitative study was designed to examine the decision-making factors that influence Navajo students to pursue graduate education. Additionally, I examine resources Navajo student participants used to increase access into graduate education and strengthen their persistence in graduate school. This chapter explains each phase of the methodology and presents details about the study's research design. Because this research is focused on the experiences of Navajo students, it is important to select a methodological approach that reflects the epistemological values that guide Indigenous worldviews and relationships, and is relevant and respectful. I begin by discussing a methodological approach grounded in Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies. Next, I describe and present a rationale for the use of a critical qualitative approach. Third, I explain the study design, participant sampling, data collection methods, and data analysis. Lastly, I offer information on ethical considerations, study limitations, and conclude with a summary.

Critical Indigenous Research Methodology

The process of conducting critical research involves the researcher raising an awareness of a problem or issue that is rooted in inequality with the intent to create

positive changes, while acknowledging the author's positionality (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Critical research engages in a deep analysis of the subject matter, which allows the researcher to reframe situations, design research questions, and explore and challenge research methodologies (Bensimon & Bishop, 2012). Utilizing critical research required me to conduct an in-depth analysis of Navajo student experiences. As stated in Chapter 2, American Indians and Alaska Natives are considered liminal peoples – comprising both a racial and political group. Many American Indian tribes are concerned with protecting their sovereignty and "liminal" status, and exercising their self-determination. As a result, research with and for American Indian communities becomes inherently critical because it must take into account their political and racialized status. Because the U.S. has been established with a system of racial inequality, a critical research design is important to ensure the study is focused on the pursuit of equity in education.

According to Smith (1999), Indigenous peoples are one of the most researched people in the world. Historically, non-Indigenous researchers conducted the majority of research on Indigenous peoples. Often the end product of this research was not useful for Indigenous communities (Deloria, 1969; Smith 1999). The history of using Indigenous peoples to advance the personal and professional interests of non-Indigenous peoples has occurred throughout the academy for hundreds of years. As a result, Indigenous scholars are now demanding that academia recognize Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate forms of knowledge and ensure that research about Indigenous peoples is conducted by and with Indigenous people (Smith, 1999).

The development of Critical Indigenous Research Methodology (CIRM) was the

result of discussions among Indigenous scholars. CIRM is "rooted in [I]ndigenous knowledge systems, is anticolonial, and is distinctly focused on the needs of communities … [whereas it] recognizes the self-determination and inherent sovereignty of [I]ndigenous peoples" (Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl II, & Solyom, 2012, p. 423). Indigenous knowledge systems involve understanding Indigenous epistemologies and especially the role of traditional values that utilize a respectful and reciprocal relationship between the researcher(s) and participant(s). Using this traditional way of thinking, the researcher has a responsibility to all involved in the research process, as well as practicing respect for "balance and harmony" (Smith, 1999, p. 120), enacting reciprocity of taking only what is needed and in return providing for others (e.g., gathering knowledge for the purposes of giving back to the community or providing something useful in exchange), and accountability to the Indigenous community (Brayboy et al., 2012).

Furthermore, Critical Indigenous Research Methodology emphasizes that research should not be conducted simply for the sake of conducting research, but to raise awareness around an issue of concern identified by an Indigenous community (Brayboy et al., 2012). Research that is guided by CIRM should involve the Indigenous community in the research process to identify potential solutions that benefit the community. In other words, "from a Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies and TribalCrit perspective research should be about working with communities to pursue data and research agendas that are useful--an understanding that the usefulness of research goals is not defined by the researcher but by community leaders, Elders, and members--rather than seeking to pursue knowledge for no other reason than the sake of knowledge" (J. Solyom, personal

communication, fall 2016). Brayboy et al. (2012) describe how CIRM is critical:

> The critical component is that the methodologies recognize particular (group-based)—legal and inherent—rights of [I]ndigenous peoples and work toward a vision of justice determined by communities and in relation to things like land, histories and resources. Thus[,] engaging in research from an [I]ndigenous methodologies paradigm entails an understanding not only of the history and practices of [I]ndigenous communities[,] but also of how research may be used to advance the *political* and *social justice* goals of [I]ndigenous communities. (p. 443)

Because this study is focused on the experiences of Navajo students, utilizing a critical Indigenous research approach is not only important, it is culturally required.

Narrative Inquiry

Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies can utilize quantitative approaches to data collection but often incorporate a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is "pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 2). This approach uses multiple methods of collecting data to understand social phenomena. A qualitative inquiry is the best option for this study because its approach is holistic and focuses on Navajo student participants' unique lived experiences. Here holistic refers to the ability to pull from multiple data collection methods to extract information about the emotional, academic, personal, familial, and social experiences of the students. This allows the researcher to understand student well-being and gain understanding about the different social contexts (e.g. tribal, familial, academic) that influence students' perceptions, experiences, and decision-making. In short, a qualitative approach allowed me to engage in in-depth semistructured interviews and participant journaling where the focus of data is on obtaining an in-depth understanding of the how and why of student experiences.

Within qualitative approaches to inquiry, narrative analysis is a type of research design (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Because American Indian/Navajo students statistically represent one of the lowest racial/ethnic populations in U.S. higher education institutions, narrative analysis acknowledges and aligns with their position in the academy, such that "narrative analysis seeks to describe the meaning of experience for those who frequently are socially marginalized or oppressed as they construct stories (narratives) about their lives" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 22). Creswell (2013) describes narrative research,

> As a method, it begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals. Narrative stories are gathered through many different forms of data, such as through interviews that may be the primary form of data collection, but also through observations, documents, pictures, and other sources of qualitative data [such as journaling]. (p. 71)

Using an approach of "oral history consist[ing] of gathering personal reflections of events and their causes and effects from one individual or several individuals" (Creswell, 2013, p. 73) provided a framework that explored the cause and effect of Navajo students' decision-making process.

Furthermore, Creswell (2013) described how narrative stories can be analyzed using a "thematic analysis in which the researcher identifies the themes 'told' by a participant" (p. 72). Adding another layer to the analysis occurs when, "[n]arrative researchers situate individual stories within participants' personal experiences (their job, their homes [their university]), their culture (racial or ethnic [Navajo identity/epistemology]), and their historical contexts (time and place [American Indian self-determination era])" (Creswell, 2013, p. 74). Lastly, narrative research encouraged "collaboration with participants by actively involving them in the research (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000). As researchers collect stories, they…provide ways to be useful to the participants" (Creswell, 2013, p. 75). This research practice aligned with the concept of conducting research that is useful to both participants and Indigenous nations found in Critical Indigenous Research Methodology (Brayboy et al., 2012).

Study Location and Population

Shotton, Lowe, and Waterman (2013) state "80% of all Native students enrolled full-time in colleges and universities were in public institutions as opposed to private institutions and only 5.5% were enrolled in a tribal college (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003)" (p. 5). The Southwestern PWI selected for this study has one of the largest American Indian and Alaska Native student enrollments in the nation with 2,685 total students enrolled in the Spring 2016 semester (M. Begaye, personal communication, August 26, 2016). Of the 2,685 total AI/AN enrolled students, 392 were students from the Navajo Nation. According to the 2017 ONNSFA Annual Report of the *Top 20 Graduate College and University*, Southwestern PWI ranks first on the list based on the number of Navajo graduate students receiving awards. In the 2016 Fall semester, the university had 21 Navajo doctoral students (not including law students) and 66 Navajo master's students for a combined total of 87 Navajo doctoral and master's students enrolled at the institution.

The magazine, *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*'s annual rankings of *The Top 100 Degree Producers: Graduate and Professional* in July 2013, based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics, states that Southwestern PWI leads the nation in the following program rankings/categories: "Native American Doctoral (All Disciplines),

Native American Doctorate (Education), Native American Master's (Public Administration/Social Service), and Native American Professional Doctorate (Law)." As a result of its high enrollment of Native students, especially Navajo students, and its relative closeness to the Navajo Nation, the institution was determined to be a favorable research site. Lastly, Native administrators who work within student affairs indicated support for the project. This welcoming approach resulted in their support to promote the study to their students and identify potential participants for inclusion. Another Native administrator, Dr. Yazzie, whose role is to ensure that AI/AN undergraduate and graduate students' persistence and graduation rates increase at Southwestern PWI supported this study. Furthermore, he is interested in the study's findings and implications to see if and how they can be applied at Southwestern PWI. Dr. Yazzie expressed a need to gain a deeper understanding of the Navajo and AI/AN graduate student experiences on campus. In this study, the American Indian community consists of Navajo students attending a higher education institution, as opposed to American Indian communities within the tribe's jurisdictional boundaries or Indigenous communities located in urban areas. Following a CIRM approach, this study provides beneficial information to the Native administrator and AI/AN community on the Southwestern PWI campus as well as to the broader higher education community.

Participant Sampling and Recruitment

A "homogenous sample" (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014) of eight participants "with similar demographic or social characteristics" (p. 32) was selected for this study. The number of participants aligns with the oral history design of narrative

analysis, in which "several individuals" (Creswell, 2013, p. 73) shared their stories. The homogenous sample method was used to identify participants who are citizens of the Navajo Nation and enrolled in doctoral programs at Southwestern PWI. A secondary sample recruitment method utilized purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling involved a "decision as to whom to select as participants for the study, the specific type of sampling strategy and the size of the sample to be studied" (Creswell, 2013, p. 155). In other words, purposeful sampling was "intentionally sampl[ing] a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (Creswell, 2013, p. 147). Purposeful sampling strategy allowed me to identify students who shared their stories and contributed to the larger narrative that answers the study's research questions. A combination of both homogenous and purposeful sampling strategies enabled me to find a specific student population that provided unique perspectives intended for this study.

The 21 Navajo doctoral students enrolled at Southwestern PWI were initially invited to participate in the study. Doctoral students were a priority over master's students, because they have a longer amount of time to experience and navigate graduate school, which enabled them to provide a more robust account of their persistence in graduate school. For the purpose of this study, eight students were interviewed (five male and three female).

I used two methods to invite students to participate in the study: (1) the Director of the Native American Center forwarded an email message that I composed that described the purpose of the study and invited all Navajo graduate students to participate in the study; and (2) I composed a similar email invitation for the Native Graduate

Student Association club president who forwarded it to all members via the club listserv, which explained the purpose of the study and invited their participation.

After I received confirmation email messages from students who indicated an interest to participate in the study, I confirmed and scheduled an in-person meeting (Creswell, 2013). Participants were offered an opportunity to recommend interview locations to help them feel comfortable with their interview environment. I asked them to identify a quiet location for digital voice recording purposes. Six of the eight participants did not recommend an interview location; as a result, we met in a conference room in the education building. Two participants preferred to be interviewed in their offices on Southwestern PWI main campus. At the beginning of each interview, participants were briefed on the study, and received information about how their privacy and information were protected.

Data Collection

Pre-Interview Preparations

In preparation for the interviews, I reviewed my interview protocol and outline, which included a cultural introduction. When conducting research using a Critical Indigenous Research Methodology approach, it is important to establish cultural relationships between the participants and interviewer (Brayboy et al., 2012). Specifically, I shared my Navajo clans to establish *Ké* (kinship/relationship), described the Navajo community where I was raised, my educational journey, and explained how my dissertation research fulfills an area not previously explored. Additionally, I ensured the digital voice recorder operated correctly, the list of semistructured and probing

questions was printed, the consent form was printed, and a small cultural gift was ready to be given to the participant. The act of receiving stories from the participants was followed by offering them a gift in a reciprocal fashion. This process encourages cultural reciprocity in that the participants and I both engaged in the process of receiving and giving towards one another.

Student Interviews

Eight Navajo students were interviewed for this study and their interviews ranged between 62-155 minutes long. At the start of the interviews, I described the purpose of the study, research topic, participant sampling criteria, and explained that participation was voluntary and they could opt out at any time. Semistructured questions were used, as they allowed participants to respond to the questions and interject additional information and topics they deemed important and valuable to the study. This approach collected a holistic story of the participants' educational experiences. The semistructured interview questions were divided into three sections called introductory questions, intermediate questions, and ending questions (Charmaz, 2006). For example, an introductory question asked, "What college or university did you attend for your undergraduate degree?" An intermediate question asked, "What motivated you to want to earn a doctoral degree?" Lastly, an ending question was phrased, "Is there anything else you think I should know about your experience of transitioning to graduate school?" For a complete list of interview questions, see Appendix A.

The process of ordering questions based on their significance (intermediate questions having the most significance) is intentional and designed for the flow of the

conversation (Charmaz, 2006). Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) recommend researchers, "[s]ave complex…[and significant] questions for the latter part of the interview after rapport has been established" (p. 254). In alignment with the theoretical framework of this study, interview questions were constructed to reflect important aspects of the Corn Model, TribalCrit, and CIRM. Furthermore, the interview questions were structured to provide insights that contributed to answering the study's overarching research questions. The interviews were digitally voice recorded. Interviews were transcribed after each interview using Dragon, a transcription software, that converts interview audio files into text. When Dragon converted an audio file, the software did not recognize most of the participants' words as they were spoken with a Navajo dialect and pronunciation, which resulted in endless incorrect and misspelled words. The Dragon software produced transcripts that needed corrections. The process of correcting the transcription required me to simultaneously read and delete the incorrect words produced by Dragon, replay and listen to the interview audio files, and retype the correct words in the transcript. The process of revising incorrect text was taxing. Using Dragon for the process of transcribing interviews allowed me to begin analyzing the narrative data.

Student Journals

To supplement individual interviews, the research design involved participants recording their thoughts and feelings in the form of journaling (Bergerson, 2002). Only one participant completed the five separate journal narratives that focused on topics not discussed during the interviews. The topics were developed to allow participants to write about factors that encouraged them to pursue their higher education degrees, such as how

their interactions with university students, staff, and faculty affected their feelings towards persistence, or how they developed a value of education, or who/what has impacted them the most in their educational journey. A complete list of journaling prompts is in Appendix B. The purpose of encouraging participants to write about the five prompts was to gather data not collected during the interview and to provide participants the freedom and time to write about what was most important to them.

Journaling provided an opportunity for participants to share experiences that may have been too sensitive or emotional to vocalize during the first interview and in a person-to-person environment (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I provided participants with directions for responding to prompts (topics) designed to help answer the study's overarching research questions. Journaling could provide a sense of control for the participant to write, edit, and rewrite their responses until they felt it is ready to be shared. The text from the one set of completed journals was combined with the interview transcriptions and used to create vignettes to highlight participants' lived realities. Participants were asked to journal five times and submit their journal narratives via email. Once I received the emailed journals, they were saved in the student journaling folder under the participants' pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. A complete description of the steps taken to maintain participant confidentiality is discussed in the ethics section of this chapter.

During the interviews, I explained the journaling timeline and process to the participants and I invited them to submit journals. Unfortunately, I received a low response rate for the journals. I emailed the participants offering two options that I hoped would work better with their schedules and increase their response rate. The first option

was to continue to submit all five journal entries, and the second option was to schedule a follow-up interview to discuss the five journal prompts. All but one of the participants opted for an in-person follow-up interview, and a couple of participants preferred a telephone call for their follow-up interview. I read the five journaling prompts (see Appendix B) to each participant and asked them to respond. Their responses were digitally voice recorded, transcribed, and added to the participants' first interview transcription before analysis began. Two of the participants selected their offices on Southwestern PWI main campus for the follow-up interview sites, while the remaining follow-up interviews took place in an education conference room on the Southwestern PWI campus.

Researcher Memos

I wrote research memos to reflect on each step of the data collection and analysis process (e.g., after interviews, transcriptions, and coding). Memoing allowed me to think, reflect, and write freely. Memoing after interviews and transcriptions was used as a "space to become actively engaged in [the] materials, to develop ideas, and to fine-tune subsequent data-gathering" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). Furthermore, memos reflected my thought process, my emotional reactions to the participants' experiences, general events that occurred during interviews, transcription, and after rounds of coding. For example, a memo I wrote during the interview process was about how the participants responded to an interview question focused on resources they used to increase their persistence. The participants told me negative experiences they had encountered in their program, before they addressed the question of what resources they used to strengthen their persistence. It

was important for them to tell me their story of a negative interaction they had with their program faculty, staff, and/or institution. As a result of my memos and acknowledgment of their need to tell their unfortunate experiences, I revised the research question to include this new and important topic in my study. Other memos I wrote described how I personally related to participants' experiences of searching and applying for graduate fellowships to help pay for the total cost of attendance, believing that earning a doctoral degree would enhance my career trajectory and salary, and utilizing academic networks to better understand what is expected in writing a statement of purpose and other documents for a doctoral program application packet.

The written memos also assisted me to brainstorm information about useful ideas, patterns, and themes related to the study and documented notable experiences, feelings, and references experienced during the interviews. "Writing notes, reflective memos, thoughts, and insights is invaluable for generating the unusual insights that move the analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 212). Memoing assisted me to analyze the data early in the interview process, helped me refine my interview questions, and helped determine which narratives contributed to answering the original research questions. Lastly, memoing provided a place to explain lessons learned while I conducted initial interviews where I rephrased the way I asked questions, and the order in which I asked the questions in the remaining set of interviews.

Data Analysis

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) state, "Qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through a

systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). The analysis of participants' interview narrative and journal narrative data involved four levels. The first level of analysis contained two stages; first I listened to and transcribed each interview, and noted key themes or patterns that arose. The second stage involved journal entries in which I combined submitted narratives with participants' in-person interview transcriptions. I read the journal narratives and took notes of key themes and patterns that emerged. These observations became topics for research memoing.

The second data analysis level used HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative analysis software that allowed me to conduct multiple layers of coding and groupings. During this level, two types of coding were used – in vivo coding and descriptive coding. In vivo coding software was used to identify specific repeated phrases spoken by the participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Using the participants' own words (from interviews and journaling) as codes kept my analysis closer to the participants' lived experiences. Descriptive coding allowed me to select multiple sentences and code them with a word or two that summarized the narrative subject matter or content (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In vivo coding and descriptive coding were used for both interview narratives and journal narratives.

After second-level coding was complete, I moved to the third-level data analysis. This process combined subcodes that are closely related. For example, I combined similar codes such as "asking for advice is important" and "asking for advice is embarrassing" to "asking for advice." These emergent categories were used to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). After the codes were refined, I conducted a fourth and final round of coding, in which I narrowed down the

total codes based on a "thematic analysis" (Riessman, 2008) to a reduced subset of coded groups. I used the HyperRESEARCH code book to create new coded groups, and these coded groups became themes. The themes constituted the major findings of the study, which I discuss in the findings section.

Trustworthiness

This study incorporated a variety of methods to ensure trustworthiness that included member checking, triangulation, and data collection from multiple sources. Trustworthiness is important to establish the validity of research and allow the researcher to move beyond the "subjective, context-dependent, and socio-cultural nature of categorization during the analytical process" (Bergman & Coxon, 2005, p. 11). This study incorporated culturally appropriate methods that allowed participants the opportunity to review their comments and provide "input" or edit their comments to more fully express the message they intended to convey (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). This process encouraged cultural respect and reciprocity. Member checking occurred once throughout the research process. Specifically, after the transcription process, I shared transcribed interview narratives with participants and allowed them to review and suggest edits to their narrative content. Only two participants responded that they would provide edits to their transcriptions, but they did not.

This study's research design gathered participant interview narratives (stories), journal entries, and researcher memos as types of data for analysis. Altogether, these diverse data collection strategies contributed to data triangulation (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). "When qualitative researchers locate evidence to document

a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Participant interview narratives, participant journals, and researcher memos collect different information and were designed to assist in answering the study's research questions. For example, interviews encouraged participants to share their unique lived experiences in response to the semistructured interview questions. Participant journals were designed to allow them to share their insights on topics not explored during the interview. A majority of the participants responded to the five journal prompts at the end of their interviews. Lastly, I wrote multiple memos, which captured insights into my experience with the research process and how it progressed. The process of collecting a robust data set from multiple methods of researcher memos, participant journals, and interview narratives increased the study's trustworthiness.

Ethical Considerations

Creswell (2013) states that ethical issues are present at every stage of conducting research; in other words, they are found in aspects of the research design, data collection, data analysis, and even data reporting. I aimed to address ethical issues by ensuring the researcher's positionality was acknowledged, university IRB was approved, interview site/gatekeeper approval was granted, participant confidentiality was maintained, and data reported were inclusive of all perspectives. Research participants' identities were kept confidential throughout the study. To protect participants' anonymity, I assigned each participant a pseudonym based on common Navajo names. Their pseudonym was utilized throughout all documents including interview transcription narratives in Dragon,

data storage in HyperRESEARCH, in document analysis, journal reporting, and in the dissertation write-up. A master list of pseudonyms was kept in a separate file to reference for participants' identification. All files, transcription narratives, and data analysis in the HyperRESEARCH and Dragon softwares were housed on my laptop, which was password protected. I am the only person who had access to the documents involved in this study.

Prior to participant interviews, a *New Study Application* was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Utah for review and approval. I also completed the online CITI training required of most researchers at public universities and included certificates of completion with the IRB study application (see Appendix C). Because I interviewed citizens of the Navajo Nation outside the nation's jurisdiction, I did not submit a research proposal to the Navajo Nation Human Research Review Board (this office is the tribal version of the university IRB office) for review and approval. The Navajo Nation Code, which is equivalent to the U.S. Constitution, has language explaining when a tribal IRB is needed. Within the Code, chapter 25 is dedicated to the Navajo Nation human research code. Section 3252 states, "The purpose of this Code shall be to set forth the conditions under which investigators, physicians, researchers, and others may perform research activities on living human subjects within the territorial jurisdiction of the Navajo Nation" (p. 295). The study occurred on the Southwestern PWI main campus, which is located off the Navajo Nation and as a result does not warrant tribal IRB approval. The University of Utah IRB office staff explained that an IRB application is not required by the Southwestern PWI IRB office because its employees did not engage in my research. The extent of the institution's employees who

assisted in the study preparation included the Director of the Native American Center who identified and emailed Navajo doctoral students who fit the sample criteria stated above. The Director submitted a letter of support which explained his level of participation (e.g., providing access to Navajo graduate students) in the study to the University of Utah IRB office. The letter of support was not required by the University of Utah's IRB office, but was highly encouraged. Abiding by university and tribal IRB protocols while acknowledging ethical considerations ensured this study's design is academically sound and culturally respectful.

The overall research design – from developing research questions that were culturally significant and relevant to tribal communities, to conducting interviews from a culturally respectful method, and to including participants during the member checking process to review interview transcriptions – was important to conducting the research through a Critical Indigenous Research Methodology framework. Ethical research from a CIRM perspective "refers to engaging in research under the observation of rules of conduct that express and reinforce important social and cultural values of the population you are working with and for" (J. Solyom, personal communication, fall 2016). Under a CIRM approach, the 'rules of conduct' are largely based on Indigenous knowledge systems and a belief that "a commitment to relationships, responsibility, respect, reciprocity and accountability are central guiding factors in research" (J. Solyom, personal communication, fall 2016). Adhering to CIRM's ethical research factors in addition to Western academic versions of ethical research guidelines strengthens the study's overall design and findings.

Study Limitations

In all research, there are limitations and this dissertation is no exception. For example, because of the small sample size, the findings do not reflect the experiences of all Navajo doctoral students nor all American Indian doctoral students. As a result, the study findings are not generalizable. In regards to the sampling method, only students who self-identified as citizens of the Navajo Nation were invited to participate in the study. The study's findings are based on student participants who volunteer to participate and only reflect their views. However, while there are limitations, this study is well designed and makes a significant contribution to the field of American Indian graduate education.

Summary

This dissertation used a critical qualitative design to examine the decision-making factors that influenced Navajo students to pursue doctoral education and their experiences of persisting in graduate school. A qualitative inquiry was the best option for this study because its approach is holistic and focused on Navajo students' lived experiences. Grounding the study with a Critical Indigenous Research Methodology required that the research be centered by the Indigenous community's needs and makes contributions to improve the community situation. A homogenous and purposeful sampling method approach allowed me to identify eight Navajo doctoral students at a Southwestern PWI to participate in the study.

A culturally relevant interview protocol allowed me to establish relationships by exchanging and sharing Navajo clans and community information between me and the

participants. Semistructured interview questions and participant journaling were used to collect narrative data. I also wrote memos to reflect on my thought processes, feelings, and events that occurred during the process of conducting the study. After interviews were transcribed, four levels of analysis were used to code the data into thematic findings. Lastly, this study incorporated member checking and triangulation through data collection from multiple sources to ensure the trustworthiness of the study's findings.

This study is important because in 2017, 0.25% of the total Navajo Nation population was pursuing graduate degrees and had applied for Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Assistance graduate fellowships. As previously stated, the Navajo graduate student enrollment percentage of 0.25% was significantly lower than the nationwide American Indian graduate student enrollments at 0.4% (and both are significantly lower than non-Native peers' enrollment in graduate school). The study's research findings are valuable for providing higher education administrators and faculty with data that can aid the creation of new policies, procedures, and programs to increase access and persistence in ways that are culturally respectful. This dissertation is important because, as the number of Navajo students pursuing and earning doctoral degrees increases, the tribal skill set increases. Therefore, studies that promote information on how to best support and enhance American Indian graduate student enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment present an opportunity to fundamentally advance the efforts of tribal nation building.

CHAPTER 4

STUDENTS' DECISION-MAKING FACTORS

Eight Navajo doctoral students were interviewed, which provided a robust amount of data to analyze. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the participants including information about their previous or current professional background (prior to enrolling in a doctoral education) and descriptions of the academic subject area or personal motivation that inspired a return journey to graduate education. I expand upon participants' background and decision-making factors in more detail throughout the chapter.

As stated in the previous chapter, the analysis process involved four levels. The first level consisted of transcribing all interviews and noting key terms, themes, ideas, and thoughts that emerged. The repeated key terms or phrases generated an initial list of codes from 177 single-spaced typed pages of narrative data. In level two, I used in vivo coding and descriptive coding techniques to code line-by-line, which yielded a total of 989 codes. Level-three analysis combined codes that were closely related, based on the subject matter, and produced 292 groups. The final level of analysis involved combining the 292 groups into larger thematic clusters that informed the final six findings. The six factors that influenced Navajo students to enroll in doctoral education were the following: desire to enhance their personal career trajectory and skill sets; familiarity and openness to learn how to apply to doctoral programs; overcoming difficult and discouraging

Table 1. Study Participants

Rose	Professional Background: Educator with experience in K-16 education Passion: Improving Navajo language revitalization efforts
Sonya	Professional Background: Tribal Government (Public Service division) Passion: Serving the social service needs of Navajo people on the nation
Sam	Professional Background: Education data analyst Passion: Addressing the need for sustainable housing for Indian country
Harrison	Professional Background: Service provider for K-12 education and language services Passion: Helping Navajo youth with language impairments
Waylon	Professional Background: Tribal Government and Non-profit organization specializing in education services Passion: Using community cultural wealth to serve Indigenous clients
Jarvis	Professional Background: Food service industry and TA at postsecondary level Passion: Creative writing, adult fiction
Richard	Professional Background: Public Health Passion: Providing mental health counseling services to Navajos
Shelia	Professional Background: Higher Education Recruitment and Retention Services Passion: Using cultural teachings to serve American Indian students

experiences; successfully earning a master's degree; desire to support family, community, and Navajo Nation; and knowledge of how to navigate higher education systems in order to increase persistence.

This chapter addresses the study's first research question, "What decision-making factors influence Navajo students to pursue doctoral education?" Findings are presented in a storytelling format from the students' perspectives. Using a storytelling format to answer the research question aligns with the two Indigenous theoretical frameworks guiding this study – the Corn Model and TribalCRT. Both theories place value on the experiences of Native peoples and honor the practice of storytelling within Native communities.

The stories shared herein are not intended to document the students' entire life history but, rather, feature life experiences that best describe and influence their decision-making factors related to pursuing a doctoral education. Of the six total themes, three specifically address research question one. These themes include the following: desire to enhance their career trajectory and skill sets; desire to support family, community, and Navajo Nation; and familiarity with and openness to learn how to apply to doctoral programs.

The first theme (desire to enhance their career trajectory and skill sets) was defined by participants' previous employment experiences that contributed to their drive for professional growth and promotion in their career fields. Participants believed that earning a doctoral degree will position them to be competitive applicants as they strive for their next career position. The second theme (desire to support family, community, and Navajo Nation) was described by participants who have unwavering and loving

support from their family members. This theme included their desire to provide financially for themselves, significant others, children, and extended family. The Indigenous concept of "giving back" was also present in this theme. Students indicated a desire to invest their time and expertise to help strengthen their hometown or community and/or provide necessary services and leadership for the Navajo Nation. The last theme (familiarity and openness to learn how to apply to graduate programs) involved relying on a combination of resources that helped participants better understand how to write a compelling statement of purpose, ask for strong letters of recommendation, study for the Graduate Records Exam (GRE), and utilize the internet to search for information on how to complete an application packet (when they were without mentorship). In most cases, participants were first-generation students whose families were unfamiliar with the formal education process of applying to a doctoral program at a predominately White institution. The remainder of this chapter highlights the stories from Navajo doctoral student participants that illustrate the three thematic findings.

Rose

Rose was raised on the Navajo Nation and because her family moved to multiple communities throughout the nation, she was familiar with many different communities throughout. She lived in large Navajo towns where her peers spoke predominantly English and she also lived in small and rural communities where her peers spoke Navajo as their first language. Attending a Navajo language and culture immersion school as a child in a small, rural community left a lasting impact. The immersion school curriculum afforded her a unique opportunity to learn to speak Navajo fluently and become more

knowledgeable in Navajo culture and philosophy. Rose recalls, "I was immersed into the language and culture. But, I'm glad I did, because now I'm able to read, write, [and] speak it. And as a result, I have a lot of cultural knowledge, linguistic knowledge about our language." Rose's grandparents were community leaders who influenced her desire to excel in school and work for the community. Now as a mother and grandmother, Rose draws on family as a form of inspiration and support, "My family from the onset, have always been very supportive." With the loving support of her family, Rose has earned her bachelor's degree and two master's degrees from multiple universities in the Southwestern United States.

Supporting Family, Community, and Nation

Rose's grandparents, children, grandchildren, and her students have all influenced her desire to pursue a doctoral degree. As Rose climbed Chief Manuelito's (a prominent Navajo leader who stressed the importance and value of educating Navajo children) metaphorical educational ladder, she recalls how her grandparents would provide her with advice, words of wisdom, and traditional motivational teachings. In one motivating conversation, her grandparents shared:

> They used to tell me in Navajo, "*Íhojiił'aah. Nitsídzíkeesgo. Ts'ída doo hánanitł'áa da*. You have those *naaltsoos hweeltsos"* [which translates as], "When you get your diploma and college degree, you can do anything you want. You don't have to struggle, you don't have to worry. Because you'll be a professional, you're going to have a job and support yourself and your family."

Keeping her grandparents' traditional teachings close to heart, Rose earned her bachelor's degree and served as an early childhood educator for 15 years. Upon her return to the Navajo Nation to work in the field of education, she was "very shocked to know that

[Navajo children], even my children, have a very limited Navajo speak[ing ability].” Navajo language revitalization became her passion and informed the way she worked in the school systems. She became a strong advocate for language revitalization and ensuring Indigenous knowledges and theories are acknowledged and incorporated into the curriculum. Educators who have demonstrated how to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum and have published on this topic were a source of inspiration for Rose:

> Knowing that Dr. Yazzie[1] is reading [and producing] Native research, that’s what motivated me. Seeing Native scholars and reading about Critical Race Theory with African Americans and the other cultures, but I didn’t realize we had our own theories. I think that's what motivated me; like wow, it is still at its infancy state that I could make some contribution whether it be in education or Native American Studies. I think that was the most motivating part. I had the opportunity to do it and to make it. Not just for me, but for other scholars who were doing such good work in their fields.

Learning from Native scholars like Dr. Yazzie and other Native professors whose expertise is in American Indian education became a motivating factor for Rose.

Enhancing Their Career Trajectory

Rose has taught students for 30 years ranging from classes in prekindergarten, elementary, and middle school, to special education. In addition to grade school, Rose taught college courses at Diné College and Arizona State University. To enrich her teaching experiences, she also served on national education councils and boards. She summarizes her professional journey:

> I became a teacher, then became a dean of students, then I became an academic coach, and language specialist. I was an assistant principal and then I became a principal. And I became an assistant superintendent and then I was a

[1] Dr. Yazzie is a pseudonym name used to ensure his identity is kept confidential.

superintendent for the last 8 years.

Rose's career trajectory allowed her to hone her skills as a teacher, administrator, and advocate. She said the next logical step in her educational journey was to pursue a doctorate degree. Earning a doctorate degree was a goal of hers for many years, and she described how she plans to use her doctorate skill sets to improve her nation:

> So, to have a Ph.D. is only a dream for me because I'll be the first person in my family to obtain a Ph.D. degree. And I just don't want it to just sit on the shelf. I really want to make it meaningful, so where I could actually change the tribal code, the language policy that are currently outdated. So, that we can move forward and get our nation's youngest children to, again, revitalize [the Navajo] language.

Combining over 30 years of working in the field of elementary, secondary, and higher education and the intellectual skill sets she was learning throughout the doctoral program will position Rose to create positive changes for the Navajo Nation. Rose acknowledged that earning a Ph.D. degree is not the end goal, but it strengthens the way she advocates to improve the education system for Navajo youth. In other words, her career trajectory is about giving back to the Navajo Nation by creating programs for Navajo citizens that allow the nation to build capacity in the field of education. As a result, Rose's career trajectory has the potential to strengthen the Navajo Nation's sovereignty and self-determination.

Preparation to Apply to Doctoral Program

Rose formed a partnership between a Southwestern PWI and the Navajo Nation to offer teacher training that allowed Navajo educators to earn bachelor's degrees. In 2016, 30 Navajo teachers graduated with their degrees. Building on her successful rapport with key administrators at the Southwestern PWI, she started the conversation about creating a

Navajo Doctoral Cohort Program. Rose stated, "Then we started talking one day and Dr. Yazzie said, 'We could start it. The Pueblos have started it. I want to do one for Navajo.' He said, 'You know it's going to be hard to find 17 to apply.' I said, 'Let me do that and let's start it.'" Rose took the lead to identify and recruit ambitious Navajos to apply to the doctoral cohort. Drawing upon her past professional experiences, she was also instrumental whereas she offered recommendations on how to design the program:

> I wanted it to be a program that we all could [offer] substantial amounts of impact on our nation. Whether it's on early childhood or whether it's in law enforcement, whether it's in higher education. Whatever it may be, I wanted it to be the pioneer of making positive impact for our nation, with real research and data-driven studies.

Rose's emphasis to identify Navajos who could strengthen and refine their skill set through a doctoral program and return to the nation to advance Navajo education is an excellent example of tribal nation building.

Process of Applying to Doctoral Program

After Rose recruited a group of Navajos to commit to the Navajo Doctoral Cohort Program, she needed to work on compiling her own doctoral application packet. The application process entailed writing a personal statement and research interest, taking the Graduate Records Exam (GRE), ordering official transcripts from all higher education institutions, asking for multiple letters of recommendation, submitting a writing sample(s), and submitting a resume/curriculum vitae. Depending on the amount of materials required, students applying to a doctoral program can spend months preparing to apply while others quickly gather their materials in a few weeks. In Rose's case, working on applying to the program required time and constant reassurance. Rose

commented:

> I didn't realize it was so intense. And it was like what if I don't pass the GRE because they want current GRE scores. They want different works that we've done as far as papers. And I knew the GPA part wasn't going to be a problem and getting the transcripts.

During the process of applying, Rose experienced many emotions such as excitement, determination, and even self-doubt or imposter syndrome (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). Rose shared honest moments of questioning her application process:

> Are we even going to be accepted? That was the first thing we thought. Oh my gosh, what if we're not accepted. Or at least we tried, it was very stressful. And waiting to hear back and getting everything together. Buying GRE study guides. It was a big step and everyone would say, "Oh, you guys are fine." And I'm thinking, "What if we don't pass and they are going to think she's not everything we thought she was."

Rose also wondered if the application review and selection committee would value her extensive work experiences teaching from K-20, recognize her drive to serve Navajo students, and acknowledge her potential to make significant contributions to the program. Furthermore, because she was returning to graduate school many years after she earned her master's degree, she faced unique challenges:

> Because for some of us going back to school to earn our doctorate later in life, we often lose track of [professors], because [applications] ask for recommendations and they have to be [from] scholars and people of that caliber. For example, I've been out of school for a while. I'm like okay, who do I contact that knows my capabilities that's at an institution [of higher education]? Will they even remember me or are they still there? That part was hard, even just to find people that could vouch for you to say that you have the ability to do that advance level work.

Rose's concerns provided a scenario that she and other nontraditional students had to work through in order to submit their complete application packet.

Reflections

Professionally, Rose successfully held multiple educational leadership positions ranging from teaching elementary, secondary, and higher education courses, and honing her leadership skills by becoming an effective principal and a superintendent. Earning a doctorate was the next goal she set for herself and her research focus was on language revitalization. Her research focus was a continuation of her grandparents' tribal advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C. that occurred over 40 years ago. Rose recalls:

> At a very young age, I remember being 5 or 6 years old they took me to Washington D.C. I did not know at the time they were advocating for the Bilingual Education Act. I remember being with them and them telling me, "*shiyázhi* [my child] it's very important to learn all you can." I remember them taking me to the Library of Congress. I remember looking down and thinking, wow, look at all those books. They said, "There's so much knowledge, go read everything you can, because that is what is going to make you successful. One day when you're grown up, you're going to be here. You're going to be able to help our people."

Rose listened to her grandparents, internalized their cultural teachings, and created a professional career that has helped students, families, and educators.

Sonya

Sonya was raised in a single parent household with 14 other siblings in a rural town on the Navajo Nation. As one of the eldest children, she helped her mom raise her siblings. She attended boarding school on the Navajo Nation and later participated in The Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saints' Indian Placement Program that relocated her with a family and school in California. She eventually returned to the nation and graduated from her hometown high school. She excelled academically to earn her bachelor's and master's degrees and returned to work for the Navajo Nation after each

degree. Throughout her educational journey, she has had the support of family. She comments, “My husband was there fortunately to help us with expenses and childcare, that type of thing. So, I didn't work.” Together, they raised three children. Her children have climbed Navajo Chief Manuelito’s education ladder, and most have earned their graduate degrees.

Supporting Family, Community, and Nation

Sonya believed that education is a way to position herself to provide for her family, children, and to work for her nation to improve services to her people. She has always been motivated to do well in education and that determination provided the foundation for her to earn her educational degrees. Sonya said:

> I think what motivated me early on in education is simply being raised in a single-family. I taught my girls through the years of rearing, that things happen in life and sometimes when things happen it means that you may be left alone with children, if you have children. So, I always told them that you need to get an education, so that you can provide that financial foundation for any children that you might have.

Sonya’s childhood experiences directly influenced how she valued education. She learned that earning college degrees can provide an opportunity to secure a job with the tribe, contribute to the tribal workforce, and strengthen her nation by offering her needed skill sets. Subsequently, her educational journey has set a path for her continued educational trajectory and for her children’s education. Her children were a major motivating factor in her educational pursuits. Now that her children are grown adults, and have earned their bachelor’s and master’s degrees (one earned a doctorate), she has decided to return to school to complete a Ph.D. She has always had the goal of earning a doctorate degree:

> My belief is that you have a destiny and I have a destiny. I have always been interested in going to graduate school. I think that Ph.D. program…really would give me an opportunity to teach. As it relates to human services or services to the people or I could just do research. So, although the field has kind of changed in the program that I'm in, but I think I can still teach social work if I wanted to. If I wanted to do research and that's something I want to do and teach at the same time. And it's a good way to retirement.

Earning a doctorate degree will position Sonya to remain on the Navajo Nation, but offer her the flexibility to change her career.

Enhancing Their Career Trajectory

Sonya earned a bachelor's degree and returned to the Navajo Nation to work. After working for the nation, Sonya returned to Southwestern PWI to earn a master's degree. With her master's degree in hand, she returned again to work for the Navajo Nation. As a tribal division director, she recalls, "I wanted a doctorate in social work, but I kind of moved away from that. I wanted to go to law school, but I think I outgrew [law]." Although she got accepted into law school, the timing was not right and she deferred. Later she decided to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy. Sonya discussed her long-term career goals:

> I know [Southwestern PWI] struggles with those extension programs [on the Navajo Nation], because trying to find professors in those outlying areas [is difficult]. Travel is quite a lot for them. And my experience in school and then seeing a lot of the outsourcing of classes on the Navajo Nation. I guess my involvement with my people in the work[force] and I knew that many of them…[are not] able to leave the reservation because of family commitments and such. But they have an interest in education. I thought, wow, it would be good to be that resource [professor] to help extend that [educational] opportunity out there.

Becoming a professor will offer Sonya the flexibility to work on the nation, do research, and prepare for retirement.

Preparation to Apply to Doctoral Program

Sonya had already earned a master's degree, and applied and was accepted to law school (but deferred her admission offer). It was just a matter of finding the perfect timing to start her doctorate. She was recruited by a fellow Navajo professional to participate in the Navajo Doctoral Cohort Program. Sonya told the recruiting person, "I have always been interested in going to graduate school. She told me about the program and I think that Ph.D. program … would give you give me an opportunity to teach in almost anything." The timing was right and the new partnership between the Navajo Nation and Southern PWI provided a structured learning environment in the doctoral cohort program. Sonya asked her supervisor if he could support her pursuit of her doctorate and he supported her wholeheartedly (e.g., approving time off from work to focus on her academic work).

Process of Applying to Doctoral Program

Sonya was a full-time Navajo Nation employee when she started the process of completing her doctorate application. She recalls the doctorate cohort recruiter explained to her, "What I needed to get in [application documents] and I did it within the span of a week or less. Then after that it was waiting." She was surprised that the required application documents were not that difficult to complete. Sonya remembers her experience working on her application packet, "You know for me it just came together. I did my personal statement, not a problem. And then I got my three references and since my grades were here, I just had them shuffled over. A very recent writing that I did and I had done the long proposal for a huge grant that I had gotten. I submitted that. And so, I

did not find it terribly hard." Although the process to complete the application packet was not too difficult for Sonya, she had to consider how to balance her time and workload:

> The only challenge that I saw was, I knew that I would continue working, but I also knew that I needed to talk to my boss to make sure that the days that I will be here [at Southwestern PWI], that he was supportive. I went to talk to him when I applied, and I said, "This is the kind of program I'm getting into and sometimes I'll need to take time off to write. I don't know what I'm getting into right [now]." I was surprised and amazed to find how supportive he was. He said, "Although we can't pay for your school, if we do have money in the future we might be able to reimburse you for your books or…larger expenses." But that hasn't happened yet, but what has happened is he's allowed me [to take time off to complete key stages], like in June and July, I was taking my comprehensive exam. Actually, I took all of June off except for maybe a week so I can write my exam. So that kind of support, of course I was able to use my leave.

Having a supportive work supervisor afforded Sonya the time to focus on gathering her application documents and, later, to fulfill her program requirements.

Reflections

After Sonya earned her bachelor's degree and her master's degree, she returned to the Navajo Nation to work for the nation. Her commitment to provide expertise as division director for two tribal departments demonstrates her desire to serve her people and help improve their way of life. Sonya's leadership for both departments is an example of her commitment to "give back" to her government and nation. Furthermore, the process of Sonya leaving the nation to earn her degrees and return to work for the nation builds tribal capacity that supports tribal nation building. In addition to serving her nation, she explained the importance of earning college and graduate degrees with her children. A key message that Sonya has shared is, "I've always told my [children] you know in education it's not how smart you are, it's about dedicating time. Just putting a lot of time, focus and understanding whatever it is that you're trying to learn." Sonya's

philosophy of dedicating time to learn (regardless of the subject matter) is invaluable and can be applied to her, her children's, and her Navajo clients' educational and professional pursuits.

Sam

Sam grew up and attended K-12 schooling in a border town at the edge of the Navajo Nation. He describes his parents' religious affiliation as, mom is "Christian and assimilated" and dad is "very traditional." After graduating from high school, Sam enlisted in the United States Air Force. While in the Air Force, he completed three general education courses offered during the day, while he worked the night shift. Upon completing his service in the Air Force, he enrolled in a community college in his hometown and later transferred to Southwestern PWI to earn his bachelor's and master's degrees. Sam's parents earned their associates degrees and his older sister earned a bachelor's degree. They have set the path for him to follow the family's footsteps to pursue higher education.

Supporting Family, Community, and Nation

Throughout his undergraduate educational journey, Sam identified three motivating factors for enrollment that included his parents' academic tenacity, his personal drive, and positive influence from friends. His parents earned their associate's degrees and have worked for their companies for 25 and 35 years:

> So, [my parents] did it, and then my older sister. She got her degree in civil engineer[ing]. I think that I just felt like, I had too much going for me to not get a degree. You know, like there's people in way worse situations that still finish school. I felt like I put that pressure on myself. That was also a personal goal, I've

> always wanted that degree, no matter what.

In addition to his family providing support and motivation, Sam also received support from his friends. After one of his friends shared a job announcement in the Graduate College at Southwestern PWI, he secured a professional position in the Graduate College, and the employee tuition benefit motivated him to start his master's degree by making tuition more affordable. Sam's master's program was located on the downtown campus and it became a challenge to commute between the two campuses. He eventually withdrew from that program and was accepted into another master's program on the main campus. In his case, working on the main campus and going to school on the main campus was convenient and a motivating factor in continuing his new master's program.

Enhancing Their Career Trajectory

While serving in the U.S. Air Force, Sam worked in the avionics department where he provided troubleshooting for fighter planes. Specifically, he worked on the plane's computer system, board systems, weapon systems, navigation, and flight controls. The computer skills he gained helped him manage and access complex computer data systems at Southwestern PWI. In his professional position at the Southwestern PWI Graduate School, Sam was promoted four times. He began as their office specialist and ended as a data analyst. Sam credits his professional success to his ability to:

> Reach out to a…supervisor and being confident enough to say, "I know you hired me to do this job, but I'm stuck here. What should I do?" I think for a long time, I was really scared to ask my supervisor for help, now not so much. I'm open to mentorship, I'm open to new ideas and open to people's advice.

Sam's willingness to seek mentorship is a quality that elevated his career trajectory.

Preparation to Apply to Doctoral Program

Sam earned his master's degree and worked at Southwestern PWI before he applied to his doctoral program. He resigned, and initially wanted to return home to be more involved with his family. Sam said, "My nephew was growing up and I didn't want to miss out on their lives. They were playing football, sports, and I wanted to be there." His younger family members were a motivating factor to return home, but he was unable to secure a job in or near his hometown.

Instead of returning home, Southwestern PWI hired him as one of their academic advisors for graduate students. Shortly after he started his advisor position, a professor invited him to join his research team. The professor needed a person with a social science background, experience working in higher education, and access to graduate student data. "I said, okay. I signed up and that's how I became a Ph.D. student. That's how I got in. I got invited, long story to say, I got invited to a research team" said Sam. He later resigned from the advisor position to start a full-time position as a program manager operating an office that serves both an academic department and American Indian communities. He was working full-time and going to school full-time.

Process of Applying to Doctoral Programs

The process of applying to the Ph.D. program was fairly easy for Sam because he worked in the Graduate College designing new graduate program requirements for multiple departments: "I had a huge advantage because I built [website] applications on the back end. So, navigating in the graduate admissions application here at [Southwestern PWI] was my job, because I built them, I can't really say it was difficult." Sam was well

aware of the common department application requirements.

Once Sam was accepted into his doctoral program, he needed to prepare for the program because his bachelor's and master's degrees were in completely different fields of study. Sam described how he prepared, "I immediately took two quantitative statistics and analysis courses. I knew exactly what I needed for the [program], so I took two quantitative design courses and a course [in the Ph.D. field] just to get my brain kind of thinking that way."

Reflections

With Sam's experiences of serving in the U.S. Airforce and starting his professional career at Southwestern PWI (where he was promoted four times), he remained humble -- humble in a sense that he understood that he was not able to earn his accomplishments on an individual basis. He acknowledged his mentors who helped him along this path. For example, Sam was not afraid to ask for assistance when he exhausted his options:

> The most important thing that I did was probably being able to accept help and understanding that it's okay to ask for help. It's okay to ask for assistance. I think that if I kept silent and I kept to myself, then I would've been done a long time ago.

Sam understood the value of seeking out mentors when he was in need, and he knows that there are many educators who are passionate about providing the best level of service and resources to doctoral students.

Harrison

Harrison's parents raised him and his sister in a small rural community on the Navajo Nation. He attended an elementary boarding school and in eighth grade his parents enrolled him in a private Christian school with the intention to strengthen his academic underperformance. "My reading was behind and I was behind in majority of the academic areas. So, [the private Christian school] really helped me progress in all subject areas before I went into high school," said Harrison. He attended high school off the nation and stayed in an American Indian dormitory. After graduation, he earned his associate's degree from Diné College. He then transferred to the state university to earn his bachelor's degree and later received his master's degree from a Midwestern university. At the time of the interview, Harrison was about to graduate with his doctoral degree from Southwestern PWI.

Supporting Family, Community, and Nation

At every educational degree level starting from associate's, bachelor's, master's, and to his doctorate, Harrison's parents were a constant source of support for him to excel. Harrison shared a conversation he had with his father that became a source of motivation for him to overcome obstacles:

> "You've seen us when we were younger, you saw us struggle with money. You've seen us go through the government [for] commodity food, [and] asking [for] food stamps. You know, asking relatives to loan us gas money, just to have gas money just to go to work. You know, you've seen us and you you've been there." And he said, "That's not something we want for you." So, it all made sense at the end.

Harrison understood his father's advice and loving words of motivation, which enabled him to work harder so that he is in a position to provide for himself.

Another significant event that became a major motivating factor occurred during a high school elective class. An interaction with another student had a profound impact that provided Harrison with motivation for pursuing a career in helping Navajo students with disabilities. He said:

> They ended up putting me in the classroom with children [who have] physical disabilities. A speech therapist would come in and I was always curious as to what she did. So, I asked, "Can I sit in on one of your sessions?," because I just want to know what she does. She said, "Of course." So, I sat in her session probably a good month. And then I worked specifically with one individual who had an alternative device [for] communication. So, I learned how to work the [Augmentative and Alternative Communication] AAC device … how to use it in the cafeteria or changing the device when you're going to the classroom. And that's how I was like, I want to do this. This is something I think is really cool. So, I began to like that field.

Harrison's interest to learn how the AACD device operates and how it enables students who cannot communicate in traditional ways to communicate based on their own ability sparked a passion that has lasted his entire educational career. The alternative technology (AACD device) became their voice, which enabled them to communicate, and it was fascinating to Harrison.

Enhancing Their Career Trajectory

Harrison started his career utilizing his bachelor's degree where he worked for a nonprofit organization in a town that borders the Navajo Nation. He was a service coordinator who, "Worked with Navajo children who had special needs. Like speech, language, physical therapy, and occupational therapy. I did that for a year. I need[ed] a break from school." Depending on the types of needs of the Navajo students, Harrison would set up appointments with:

> [a] speech language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist,

> medical doctors, depending on the severity. If the family couldn't make it to the hospital, I would transported [them] to the hospital for services. [At that time] I worked with a speech language pathologist and she kept telling me, "You should apply for a master's program."

Harrison began to understand that the type of services he could offer Navajo children and their families were limited because he did not have an advanced degree. "So with my bachelors, I can't really do anything with it. So that's when I learned about the graduate program…That I needed my master's to be a clinical therapist." His desire to offer more services to Navajo children was a motivating factor for him to return to earn his master's degree, which would provide him with the credentials needed to make the level of impact he desired. Harrison commented:

> After I graduated with my master's I moved [to a border town] and worked as a speech language pathologist for the [school district that served] schools [on and off the Navajo Nation] for 5 years. I worked for the [the border town] school, so I work with four schools [located in rural communities throughout the Navajo Nation].

As a result of working 5 years with many children who had a variety of speaking disabilities, Harrison realized the speaking assessment tools were not appropriate for Navajo students, which made it difficult for them to test out of the speech therapy. I discuss these concerns in the next section.

Preparation to Apply to Doctoral Program

Harrison identified a larger systemic problem that created barriers and made it difficult for Navajo children to test out of speech therapy. He described the process of testing out as:

> Once a student qualifies for speech language pathology, for speech therapy, [and receives services] in the program for at least 3 years, we do a reevaluation to determine where they're at. Do they still need services? Or do they need to be

> exited? So, an issue that kept coming up for Navajo children was, we use assessments that are not adequate for Navajo children. It was hard for us to exit Navajo children out of speech therapy.

Western education emphasized the process of quantifying how a person improves their speaking ability numerically. Relying solely on numbers does not adequately provide a holistic diagnosis or assessment. Harrison explained why only relying on numbers was problematic for Navajo students:

> [Although] we see the gains that [Navajo students] make in therapy, we documented, "He's making gains," but one of the things that was required through the district and the state was numbers. "What assessment did you use? What's their assessment scores?" So, we would report their assessment scores and they would always be low [because of language and cultural differences]. So it was kind of hard for us to exit them out of therapy when they didn't really need therapy anymore. That was one of the issues, then I thought, "Okay this is going to go on for a long time. How can we change this? How should it be changed?" And then I thought, "Oh, I can just go back to school and this would be my primary area of study." Which is language and assessment and diagnostic tools. So that's how I decide to go back to the Ph.D. program.

Harrison was now determined apply to a doctoral program that had professors who were experts in dual language assessment design and he found them at Southwestern PWI.

Process of Applying to Doctoral Program

Harrison began to work on his doctoral program application and he relied on his experience of applying to his master's program and used his work experiences to explain how starting a doctorate program was the next logical step in his academic and professional career:

> Now that I [am] more cognizant about how graduate school works, I did my research. I look at [Southwestern PWI], U of A, University of North Dakota. And I applied to other universities like University of Ohio and Michigan State. But the one thing that really stuck out at [Southwestern PWI] was my mentor was looking at bilingual assessments. How to create assessments? How to better identify children who come from a bilingual background, how can we better identify them

> as having language impairments? So that's what drew me here, but I applied to other universes just in case. So, [Southwestern PWI] was my first choice. That's how I came into the program. I really knew what my research would be. I knew where my background was and what I wanted to do specifically. So that help me finish the program [application] right away, because I really knew what I wanted to do.

Having a specific dissertation research focus at the time of completing his doctoral application allowed Harrison to articulate his passion for research and explain how that aligned with the professor(s) in the department. He shared his experience of completing the application documents for each program he applied to:

> They require the same things. One was, contact the person that you would like to be [your] mentor [and find out if] they are willing to be your mentor. So that was the first step. So, I emailed quite a few professors and I said, "This is my background, this is what I would like to do," and I said, "Are you accepting any students to mentor, anytime soon?" So, if they said, "Yes, I am looking for another student to mentor, so-and-so just graduated and I'm willing to be your mentor." So that was the first process. So, once I got all that, then I said, "Okay."

Harrison's emails addressed key points when contacting professors for the first time and included an introduction of himself, explanation of his research interest and interest in the program, and asked whether the professor was accepting new mentees (which could position him to be offered a research assistantship that would significantly reduce the cost of attendance). The process of emailing professors with the three points just mentioned was an effective skill that helped Harrison find the right doctoral program. Harrison was reassured when he received email responses like:

> "Yes, I'm looking for a mentee and I do have some funding, please do apply if you want to." So then after that was done, I said "Okay." And that's when I went through the whole application process, which was the application, a writing sample, three letters of recommendation.

Upon learning faculty were accepting new mentees, Harrison became committed to complete and submit the entire application packet. Once Harrison found the right

doctoral program that was a "good fit" with regard to his research interest, offer of mentorship, and funding, he started working on his application documents. As Harrison started drafting his documents, he did not understand the expectations for the letter of intent, resume, essay, etc. He said:

> You know, I had no one [to provide advice on my application]. Like my parents weren't at that level. They've never gone to that level of education, so they didn't know. I turned to one of my professors [at Diné College]. I said, "I am applying for my Ph.D., I don't know what I'm doing." So, I gave all my application [documents], to him. I had no formal preparation of how to get into graduate school. The only way I knew was my professor, he was only one that helped me.

Harrison was grateful that his former professor was able to read his letter of intent, resume, and essay, and offer feedback on how he could clarify areas and strengthen the content.

Reflections

Harrison's ability to work with Navajo students provided a focused academic and career trajectory. In other words, after earning his bachelor's and master's degrees, he returned to work with Navajo students who have multiple disabilities in the public-school districts. He identified a systemic problem that Navajo students with disabilities are having difficulty with, and dissecting that problem became the foundation of his doctoral dissertation research. Harrison's research focused on improving the assessment tools used by Navajo children. He said, "my dissertation is basically saying, rather than using standardized assessments, which are bias[ed] among Navajo children. We need to use an alternative assessment, known as dynamic assessment to better identify Navajo children with language impairment." Harrison's research will provide awareness to a field that has little to no understanding of American Indian students with language impairments.

Waylon

Depending on the winter and summer seasons, Waylon grew up in two small remote communities within the Navajo Nation. He attended public school, K-12, in his beloved community and his family predominantly spoke Navajo in their home. Throughout his high school years, he worked at the only gas station in his community. The purpose of working before and after school was to help contribute to the family income. Waylon said, "Knowing that my parents didn't come from too much money and the socioeconomic status wasn't very high, in fact it was on the lower end," he felt the need to help his family by working until he graduated from high school. Waylon's philosophy of helping his family has continued throughout his professional career. The value of helping others and his father earning an associate's degree were early examples that contributed to his educational journey. Waylon later earned his bachelor's, master's, and soon, his doctorate degree.

Supporting Family, Community, and Nation

Waylon's family has been the number one supporter of his educational pursuits. Specifically, his grandmother and parents are individuals who have impacted him the most and their love for him has motivated him to continue to pursue his doctorate. Waylon recalls how his grandmother, who raised him as a child (while his parents were working), wanted to meet with him one last time:

> She had gotten sick. They had the prognosis [and] it was terminal cancer. It was during that time that she talked to each of us individually. She called each of us in and expressed her wishes for each of us. And mine was that I was going to get my doctoral degree and [at the time] I didn't plan on pursuing any more education. [And] she talked about this beautiful dress that she was going to wear to my graduation.

Waylon continued to work, but held on to those words spoken by his grandmother. After the passing of his grandmother, his mother was going through her belongings and found a letter she wrote to Waylon, but never mailed:

> [The letter] was supposed to have been for my master's degree [graduation]. She had given me a congratulatory card and there was 5 dollars in there. And she wrote something in there and I still have it today and it's been my motivating factor.

In addition to Waylon's influential grandmother, his parents also played a paramount role in developing his motivation. At every educational level, Waylon's parents supported him even though they had not earned a bachelor's or graduate degree:

> My parents were so excited for me, but they didn't know what it meant. I didn't even know what it meant in terms of the resources and training that I would be receiving. I think it's the fact that they've always been there. Whether it's a phone call or a text. They're the ones saying, *"Shiyázhí, [my child]* don't give up, *Yéego ánít'į. Áłtso íinilago "hxéh hxéh" didíiniił* [try hard, when you are finished, be thankful and give back]."

Receiving continuous encouragement was appreciated and when expressed in the Navajo language, it provided Waylon with a deeper Navajo level of support and love. He applied the support from his family throughout his educational journey and also as he developed his professional career.

Enhancing their Career Trajectory

A pivotal motivating experience occurred when Waylon participated in the Washington Internships for Native Students (WINS) summer program at American University in Washington, D.C. The WINS program offers an American Indian Studies course (AIS) after students return to campus from their internship sites. It was during the AIS course that Waylon was provided with curriculum that increased his understanding

and awareness of how he could use his background, experiences, and opportunities as the foundation to start his career to help other students and eventually Indian country.

One of his first career positions was working for the Navajo Nation under President Begay's administration and focused on youth development. While working full-time with the youth department, Waylon completed his master's degree. After earning his degree, he taught:

> I started teaching at Diné College from 2004 to 2008. I just I really enjoyed helping Navajo students. [As a Diné College professor] I traveled [to multiple campuses to teach.] I didn't just teach in the evenings and weekends in Window Rock or Ganado. I also taught in Chinle and in Tuba City. So, on Sundays I would drive out to Tuba City to teach and work with the students there.

After building his teaching experience and refining how to better serve students at Diné College, Waylon wanted to work with the Navajo Nation Education Department. While working in the education department, the department administrators started a professional development plan and encouraged their employees to return to higher education to earn their certifications and degrees. Waylon shared his professional development experiences in the department:

> I was hoping that I would grow there, but it felt like I had already reached the limits of what I could learn in regards to any professional development in-house program that existed; it wasn't there. I was basically told, "You have your Ed.D. [degree], you have nothing left to learn," which was far from the truth.

At that point, he started thinking of applying to the Doctor of Philosophy program at Southwestern PWI. Based on his years working in the education department, he identified an area that needed to be further explored in academia and it became his research interest:

> Why are American Indian students significantly found at the lower end of Western measurement standards, when it comes to content learning and knowledge? I wanted to understand [and] develop the education system for

> Navajo [education]. And to be able to identify what curriculums are we using and what assessments are we using. And how is that being interpreted.

Waylon's work experience in the Navajo Nation's education department directly influenced the research areas he wanted to explore in the doctorate program. With his research topic in mind, he was able to articulate the reasons why Southwestern PWI was a good fit for him.

Preparation to Apply to Doctoral Program

Waylon identified an education problem of how Western measurement standards were not in alignment with a Navajo philosophy of teaching and learning. He argues that there is an educational mismatch:

> The mismatch comes in terms of speaking of apples and oranges. Explor[ing] that space between Navajo society and Western society without negating who they are as Indigenous peoples and without negating those knowledge systems. But to be able to make sense of it on different areas, one would be explain[ing] this in Western educational terms for those in Western education. The next one would be helping the [community] explain it, because they were from inside the [indigenous] community. Thirdly, be able to evolve that. We have those external influences of who we are as Navajo people, we know what's best for our people, knowing what we know and having those knowledge systems in place.

Waylon now wanted to dedicate his time and energy to address the mismatch in a research-intensive doctoral program.

Process of Applying to Doctoral Program

Waylon's desire to improve his knowledge and existing skill set as well as his prior experience applying to an Ed.D. program contributed to a smooth application process for the Ph.D. He describes how he completed his application by saying:

> We transferred a lot of my coursework, scores and everything from my first

> doctoral program, because it was on record already for my Ed.D. [at Southwestern PWI]. And then we have to submit writing samples, we had to present an area of research that we wanted to focus on.

Waylon had to create a new research statement and it was an intense process of writing it to reflect how his research interests had evolved, and how Southwestern PWI educators would offer him the environment and support to explore his research areas of interest. Furthermore, Waylon "felt that I had been prepared up to that point for it. Mostly from wanting to improve myself as this [is now] considered my new professional development plan. Plus, it was a requirement of my employer [at the time]." Waylon applied and was accepted.

Reflections

Waylon's parents and grandparents contributed to his knowledge of Navajo language and culture. The cultural teachings positively impacted him and provided guidance for his academic and career journey. For example, Waylon explained as he matriculated through his undergraduate, master's, and now doctoral degree programs, he relied on the Navajo teachings of identity and self-worth and how his Navajo forms of identities provide a stable foundation from which he is able to navigate the academy. With that understanding, Waylon offered Navajo students advice:

> [An] overarching advice that I would give them is to not lose [themselves] in the process. We've been taught by our elders in our tribe and in our family and that grounds us [with our Navajo identity] in terms of not having to waste time trying to find ourselves. Don't lose yourself, because you already know who you are, you have your clans, you already have those principles have been shared with you. And if you don't know about those principles, learn about those principles, because they're shared in everyday Navajo society.

Waylon's commitment to incorporating and abiding by his cultural teachings is evident in

his research and within his career to strengthen the educational system for Navajo children.

Jarvis

Jarvis lived in an urban city in the Southwest for most of his life and was raised by his mother. His mother is German American and his estranged father is Navajo. Jarvis said, "I'm an only child and she was a single mom. It was just me and my mom. My family was my mom." Jarvis' mom was a public-school teacher in an urban city in the Southwest, which resulted in him taking school seriously. Jarvis recalled:

> I've always been good at school, so that kept me motivated; I enjoy doing it. That's the positive reason I stayed in, and I guess the negative reason is that everything else looks much worse than being a student. I couldn't think of a better gig to get into.

Jarvis' extended family would view him as "the smart one" and they encouraged him to excel. In addition to succeeding academically, Jarvis had written and published fictional stories and poems. Jarvis was a Ford Foundation predoctoral fellow and was successfully matriculating through his doctoral program. He had been married for 3 years and his wife supported and influenced his educational journey.

Supporting Family, Community, and Nation

After earning his bachelor's degree, Jarvis and his wife moved to San Diego to start their life together. Unfortunately, his position as a cook did not provide enough financially. Being in a position of financial need became a motivating factor to return to school. He described that time as:

> [We were] just sort of staying afloat and we realized it wasn't working, so we

> decided to come back to Phoenix because my wife could get a job with her parents' company. And now I'm back in Phoenix still with my degrees that don't get you a job. So, my first plan was to try to become a full-time employee at [Southwestern PWI] and then I would be able take classes for free and slowly get a master's degree.

As Jarvis applied for positions at Southwestern PWI, he scheduled meetings with individuals throughout campus to discuss his career aspirations. During a meeting, a department chair encouraged him to apply as a student (and offered him funding), as opposed to applying for one of their staff positions. Jarvis said, "I applied for a master's and then that master's turned into a Ph.D. So, I switched into the Ph.D. program during my first year of being a master's student." His main motivating factor was to find an opportunity that would position himself to provide for himself and his wife.

Enhancing Their Career Trajectory

Most undergraduates work part-time jobs to help with the cost of attending college and graduate school. Jarvis was no different. He shared a story of his undergraduate job and how it connects to his graduate school experiences:

> I clean[ed] the parking lots on campus early in the morning Monday through Friday. Sometimes I [would] be cleaning the parking lot and some of my professors who I had that semester would [walk by me], because they parked their cars there. And they'd see me with the little grabby thing, the bucket and my uniform on. And now as a graduate student, I don't park there, I'm not that high, but I purposely decide to dress like a professor, and … now I'm in the office with the professors, talking about [research]. So, it's a concrete way in which I feel it was a full circle moment for me. When I come back to the parking lots I use to clean. I'd say, "Oh yeah, I'm not cleaning these anymore."

Having his professors watch him clean the parking lots was a humbling experience; the type of experience that builds drive and character. While waiting to secure a position at the university, Jarvis worked at a call center. He said the call center

was “awful and I was not making much money.” He was relieved that he was accepted into the master’s program (and later accepted into the Ph.D. program) as it came with funding. Jarvis was glad that he did not have to work at the dreaded call center any longer and was able to focus on his graduate program.

Preparation to Apply to Doctoral Program

As Jarvis started to think about the option of pursuing graduate education, he consulted with his wife about returning to higher education. He said, “so being married affected my decision initially. And the financial situation obvious affected it because you need to find a way in [to the university system], because out here it's just minimum-wage drudgery.” Jarvis’ preparation to apply for the doctoral program was unlike other Navajo doctoral students. Jarvis was accepted into a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) doctoral program, which was not related to his undergraduate degree program. As a result, he had to academically “catch up” and prepare for the rigors of the new discipline and increased level of study. The summer before his first semester, Jarvis:

> Downloaded a bunch of teaching [materials]. Different professors … record a series of lectures that they give on the topic. There [are] audiobooks of different lectures on different [subject areas]. So, I found different topics about [STEM] and I just listen[ed] to those all the time. I didn’t have that much time to prepare, because I didn’t even know I was in [the program] until the summer.

The audiobooks provided Jarvis with a general foundation from which to learn and excel in graduate school. He was offered a teaching assistant position and it was for a STEM course he had not taken before. So, he had to listen to online lectures that related to the course as well. “So, I had to do a lot of catching up. I was just 1 week ahead of the class

for the whole semester. Just try to learn the [STEM course material] and then teach it."

Process of Applying to Doctoral Program

Jarvis understood that his process of applying to the master's program, which led into the doctoral program, was "unorthodox:"

> Yeah, I suspect this is going to be an outlier. So, it is summertime and I'm trying to get a job at Southwestern PWI and I meet with [the STEM program director.] She said, "You seem like one of us, this could be a good fit. I think we could get you funding as a master's student. Would you be open to that? It's not a job, but it's still money and you can take classes." That all sounded good.

Jarvis was focused on finding a university job that would make him eligible for an employee tuition remission, which would make the cost of tuition and attendance dramatically more affordable. Instead, the STEM program director recognized his potential and intellectual capabilities. During their meeting, she asked him:

> "When would you want to go back to school if you could? Not considering anything else." And I said, "I would be in class tomorrow if I could." And she was like okay and she made it so I didn't have to take the GRE. I got some recommendation letters from professors who liked me as an undergrad. I had to do it all really quick, because of the deadline was … 4 or 5 months prior, so they're not supposed to be letting anyone in. I did all that really quick and wrote my essay for the application. I got accepted and I was in. That's how it happened.

Completing a doctoral program application packet is time consuming. Jarvis started and submitted his application in a very short amount of time. As he was working on his application, he had to multitask his time by working at the call center, writing the essays, and requesting transcripts and letters of recommendations. "The applying part was stressful because at the time, my whole life was up in the air."

Reflections

Although Jarvis was not raised with his Navajo family and culture, he shares an important cultural trait, that of storytelling. Jarvis always took his schooling seriously, and as a result, he excelled academically from elementary school through his doctoral program. An area he enjoyed was writing stories. He shared his experience of devoting time to write and rewrite his Ford Foundation predoctoral fellowship essay:

> I always try to be good at writing, because I still have this theory that you really [got to] make a story in your application essay. Because people are story animals … a real person is reading your application essay and it's better if you make them enjoy the experience, than make it laborious for them. I was like treating my life, sort of detaching from my life, and looking at it as a storyteller. Trying to find what to emphasize, what to leave out, how to connect the dots. So, it could be the most compelling.

Jarvis's ability to effectively write compelling stories also enabled him to publish fictional short stories and poems. Storytelling is a common form of Indigenous teaching, which Jarvis will gain a deeper understanding of, as he continues to build a relationship with his Navajo father's family.

Richard

Richard grew up in a large community on the Navajo Nation and attended a boarding school located on the Navajo Nation from kindergarten to sixth grade. While in boarding school, he joined cub scouts and later boy scouts. It was during these formative years that he learned about the concept of helping others, which later developed into the concept of giving back to his community:

> I felt like their teachings … like helping the community, helping out others in need and making sure that [we are] looking out for the well-being of others. Those kind of values and teachings [I learned]. I want to say that came mostly from [cub and boy scouts], because that was when I started becoming part of both

> organization[s]. We started to think more about the community and then when I look back at my family. They value that; but I think my family really looked at the need to help one another. Like within our family unit, making sure we're all okay.

From seventh grade to his senior year of high school, Richard attended public school on the Navajo Nation. After earning his high school diploma, Richard attended a local community college in a town that bordered the Navajo Nation. He transferred to the state university to earn his bachelor's degree. He believed that earning a bachelor's degree and working in a law office would prepare him to enter law school:

> I wanted to become a lawyer. My main motivation at that time was [to earn a 4-year degree], which was one of the steps I needed to take to apply for law school. I think at that time I was really motivated [to] help out my community, our Navajo Nation, or other Native American tribes with legal concerns.

Richard earned his bachelor's degree and he was ready to study the law. He took the LSAT and applied to law school, "But I wasn't accepted for law school. So of course, I was devastated." He later earned a master's degree, became a father, worked with Navajo and non-Navajo clients, and decided to return to graduate education to earn his doctorate degree.

Supporting Family, Community, and Nation

Throughout Richard's undergraduate and master's schooling, his ambition to become a Navajo lawyer was a source of motivation to pursue education. He remembered his legal assistant instructor told him that he needed at least a bachelor's degree before he could apply to law school. His immediate goal was to earn a 4-year degree, followed by earning a professional degree. He believed that lawyering was a way to allow him to enact his desire of helping others that he internalized throughout his childhood:

> I felt one way I could give back was through the law, by help[ing] out Native people, as much as I can with their lands, their water rights, or their human rights. Especially in my community, I thought, that's one way I can give back of becoming an attorney.

Another motivating factor that developed during Richard's childhood and has persisted with him is the need to earn education degrees, which would position him to financially provide for himself and his family. He recalled:

> I figured I'd be financially stable. And I just always envision, one day, someday, I'll have a [steady] income. So, I can do things that I always dreamt of or wanted to do. And helping out my family financially, as well. [Also, being able to] support my own family. So, I was really driven by those kinds of things.

Richard's motivation was rooted in earning degrees that would lead to pursuing a career that would provide him with financial stability and an opportunity to give back to his family and nation.

Enhancing Their Career Trajectory

After Richard earned his master's degree, he worked for 5 years in the field he was trained in. He had worked in every position for which he was qualified. Richard described this period in his career as feeling "bored with the profession, because I felt like I maxed out the position. I work with kids, adolescents, and with families in their homes. Then I work with geriatrics. I did case management. I did almost everything, except for being the director." He was ready to develop his skill set and wanted to expand his professional experiences. As a result, he realized that if he wanted to advance to higher positions within his field, he needed to earn a doctorate degree:

> I started inquiring about a Ph.D. and did my research on what a [person with a] Ph.D. can do. That's when I got interested in going into research. I said, "I would like to do some research on Native American people and see what would improve Native American lifestyles or well-being." The research portion was a big draw to

> me to want to get my Ph.D. Because I wanted to become a better researcher and then do some studies with the Navajo population or maybe Native American populations in general that [would be] beneficial [to their communities].

The opportunity to conduct research that would help improve the way of life for Navajos and/or American Indians excited Richard. Conducting research that would benefit Indigenous communities was a form of "giving back" and tribal nation building. Another reason for earning a doctorate degree was that it would better position him to start his own private practice:

> I thought this degree would help give me the necessary skills, knowledge, and maybe income of potentially starting my own practice on the reservation. I figured that was one way to help me eventually do that. And that's why I seek the Ph.D. degree. I want to just learn more. I love learning. But I felt like there was more learning to be done. That's why I went out to get my Ph.D. in [a field that serves others].

Richard held on to his career dream of returning to the Navajo Nation to serve his people. Until then, he utilized the skills he gleaned from his master's program to serve people in multiple environments ranging from the largest city in the state to smaller border towns. It was during his position in the border town that he was able to work with Navajo families and when he realized that he needed to take the next step and start his doctoral program.

Preparation to Apply to Doctoral Program

Once Richard accepted that he would not start law school and become a lawyer, he started to consider a master's program. He met with an admissions counselor to learn about the master's program, their application process, and realized they do not offer master's degrees; only doctorate degrees.

> I was like, "Man, I don't want to be in school for another 5 to 7 years [working

> towards my doctorate]." It's funny now, because I'm now in the Ph.D. program. I was like, "No way, I don't want to [commit to 5 to 7 years]. That is too long."

Richard believes it was funny because he has now completed 6 years in the program. He applied to another program in the college that did offer master's degrees, and he was glad that both programs were closely related and that their classes were offered at both the master's and doctorate levels. Richard matriculated through the master's program, and "still had law school in the back of my head, but I wanted to try this program out."

Richard had earned his master's degree and worked for a total of 7 years in the field. He recalled that his decision-making process had multiple influences:

> There wasn't like [a singular moment of deciding], hey I should do this [right now]. I think it was just a buildup of, like, "What else can I do?" I said, "I think I'm going to get my Ph.D." And probably because I just became in a new dad. I thought about to the income too because I thought the most I could probably make in this profession was probably, $50,000. But then, I thought it would be cool to have a higher income and one way to do that is to go back to school for a Ph.D. It's not going to be dramatically bigger, but it's going to be a little bit bigger. And plus, I'll have more experiences and have more knowledge. And [have the advanced training to] improve my skills [of serving my clients] and becoming a researcher. It felt like it was going to give me all those things I wanted at the time.

Richard's journey of starting his doctorate program was gradual and took a few years to fully develop into his decision to apply, but once he committed to apply, he realized it was a different process than his master's application.

Process of Applying to Doctoral Program

As a first-generation student, Richard's access to family who had experience with completing graduate applications was not existent. He said, "I didn't come from a family of educated people and who could help me navigate or give me some information I needed. Like to say, by the way if you want to do this, this is what you need to do. I had

to figure out on my own." After working in the field for about 5 years, Richard tried to recall the process of completing his master's program application. A new requirement at the doctoral level was taking the GRE to be included in his application packet. He remembered that the GRE was a challenge:

> Studying for GRE was tough, because I've been out of school for so long, and you have to relearn mathematics, science, and vocabulary. All the [subjects] that I haven't been accustomed to thinking about or doing in years. I studied for GRE several times.

He took the GRE and felt that it was only one part of his application, so he needed the other sections to be strong. Writing his personal statement was tough, because he had to articulate why the program was a good fit for him based on his research interests and the faculty's expertise. He described that writing his personal statement and taking the GRE were the toughest and he had to commit time to working on them:

> I remember that it took me a long time, just to get it all together. I believe it was the application, a personal statement, all transcripts, a sample writing, and the GRE. And I had to look up [what] a sample writing [is]. It said, a writing that you turned in [in] a class. So, I had to look and consider what I wrote about and what I want to submit.

Within Richard's doctoral program, the selection committee invited their top applicants for an on-campus interview:

> I got invited to interview about a month [after submitting the application], which was cool and awesome. I think what made the interview process comfortable, [so that] I was not nervous [about getting denied admission was] because I was satisfied with my situation already. I was working at a job that paid me and I was comfortable with the pay. You know obviously, a PhD pay would be a lot better. But I was still comfortable with what I was making. I was living close to my family. I was living in my hometown. Everything was there and my son was, just three hours away. So, it was an ideal situation kind of be in. So, I wasn't in a situation where, I was like, "Oh man, what am I going to do with my life if I don't get in [to the doctoral program]?" I think some students are putting a lot of pressure on themselves, because they're like this has to work out or I have to get accepted. For me it was like, "I'm happy with where I'm at. I'm happy with where my situation is. So, if I get in, cool. If not, no big deal." So, when I

> interviewed, I was just myself. I was friendly and wasn't stressed, you know. As research says, the more stressed you are, the less focused you are or the less ability [you have] to describe past experiences or elaborate more, problem solve, or any of that. So, I was really comfortable. So, I guess I probably interviewed really well, because I was accepted.

His approach worked out in his favor and he was accepted into the doctoral program and is currently fulfilling his practicum requirement for graduation.

Reflections

Richard's educational journey led him to experience multiple forms of difficult and challenging experiences. However, he had been able to persevere and overcome those difficult obstacles. For example, his law school application was denied, which led him to find another graduate program that still enabled him to serve others. After resigning from his full-time position, he lost his salary, but was able to live off of his research assistantship income. When he separated from his partner, he moved to a new state without his son (which was extremely difficult for him), but Richard gained custody of his son while continuing to live off of his assistantship income. Despite facing multiple hardships, Richard maintained his drive, discipline, and determination to work towards his Ph.D. degree:

> The most important thing I did, and I think is, just keep going [and] not to give up on myself. There are times I didn't turn in the best work, I would just say, "Alright so if I got to redo it, I got a redo it. If I get bad grade, I get a bad grade. But I just kept coming. I just kept going at it." I was discouraged in a lot of different ways. Whether I felt alone or I felt like I missed family, or whether I felt financial [burdens], because I was like really broke too. Like really, really broke and you're trying to support a child, like we're going to free meals, stuff like that. I just kept thinking that you got to just keep going. I kept going and I don't know, sometimes I thought it would be easier for me to give up and just say I am getting it full-time job somewhere.

The moments of discouragement were always followed by a rekindled motivation and

perseverance. Richard was determined to endure those hardships, so that he would earn his Ph.D. degree. His mentality turned to, "I'm not leaving, I'm not quitting, but if I'm out of this program, it's because they kick me out." But, then he was thinking, "There's no way they are going to kick me out if I'm trying or working hard."

Sheila

Sheila is a citizen of the Navajo Nation. Her mother is Navajo and her father is a citizen from another American Indian nation. She was raised by both loving parents in a large community located on the Navajo Nation. She attended public school from kindergarten through high school. Her parents both worked for the public school district in her hometown. After Sheila graduated from high school, she attended Diné College, which had a campus center in her hometown. Her decision to remain in her community to earn her associate degree was based on the following:

> I wanted to take Navajo culture, Navajo history, Navajo government, and Navajo language [classes]. And I thought, like … it's in our community. Diné College was designed for us, to use, to take advantage of what they offer. I just thought about all the educators who work hard to make that happen for us. So, [that's when I decided] I'm going to Diné College.

Sheila earned her associate's degree and transferred to Southwestern PWI to earn a bachelor's and master's degrees. She is a doctoral student at Southwestern PWI.

Supporting Family, Community, and Nation

Sheila was positively influenced and motivated by her family and community members. She recalled one motivational conversation she had with her father about her experience of attending Southwestern PWI. The conversation focused on her experiences

of isolation, self-doubt, and sense of belonging at the predominantly White institution. Sheila's father asked how she liked her new school and classes, and how was it going. She said:

> I thought I can either lie or be honest. I'm like, I'm going to let him know how I really feel. I said, "I don't know if I can do it. It's just big and I said in all of my classes I don't know anybody. I'm the only Native person. I'm just not used to it. I'm used to going to the grocery store and seeing all Natives. It's different, like living down there." And I said, "I knew I'll get used to it, but I don't know. It's a different place and I don't know if I belong."

Opening up and being brutally honest about not feeling comfortable in a new university was the best thing Sheila could have shared with her father. After all, it was her father and she could not lie to him. His response to her was thoughtful, caring, and full of love. After a moment of being silent, he responded to her:

> "You know, you do belong. And you have so much [to offer], the people that you have classes with," he says, "They can learn from you." And he said, "I want you to think about this. When you're in your class, you asked anybody next to you, ask them, "where are you from?" Then they may say from Michigan, New York, and wherever they stay there from. That's what they're going to say. But for you, you know where you are from ancestrally. You can go down the line and say this is where I'm from. This is how I'm connected. I know my history. You know your language, you know your culture. You have that and that should make you feel empowered. So, when you're in that classroom and don't feel like you don't belong. All those people in that class can learn from you. You have so much to offer. You have so much to give. So, I don't want you to feel like you're less or that you feel like you don't belong. So, go back there next week and sit up straight, be proud of who you are, because you carry that with you. You carry all of that knowledge with you. You're going to do okay and just carry that with you." That was my words of encouragement, empowerment.

That conversation with her father left a profound impact and had motivated Sheila throughout her bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs. After reflecting on his loving words, she internalized those teachings and said, "So that's what motivated me. That's why I sa[y], I do belong here. I can be here. I can't have those feelings, because he's right. So that's what encourage[s] me to continue."

Enhancing Their Career Trajectory

During Sheila's last 2 years of her undergraduate program, she was a student worker in the Graduate College at Southwestern PWI. Throughout the 2 years of working in the Graduate College, she began to gain a deeper understanding of what graduate programs were about. Her colleagues began to offer her advice on building rapport with administrators, and they encouraged her to apply to a graduate program:

> There was a lady that worked at the Graduate College, she worked on the other side of the hallway with the recruitment office. She was a Hispanic lady. She's the one that took me under her wing. She said, "Sheila, don't think that this job is just a student worker job." She said, "Go above and beyond. Do more than what's expected. These connections [with university staff are] what you would need, when you want to apply to graduate school." Then I'm like, "Well, I'm not going to graduate school." She said, "Yes, you are. You're going to graduate school." I said, "Me? No." At the time I'm just trying to graduate with my undergrad[uate degree]. She was the one who said, "By the time you graduate with your degree and you're going to go out there in the world to try to find a job. They're going to come back at you and say, 'Do you have a master's degree?' We're at that age, where they're going to start saying that to you."

After Sheila graduated with her bachelor's degree, the Dean of the Graduate School offered her a position to continue working for their office. Soon after she started her full-time position, her colleagues in the Graduate College encouraged her again to consider graduate school. Sheila recalled, "So, I got the job and then Pat said, 'Now what you need to do is start taking classes, because you are a staff [member]. Start using the tuition waiver and sign up for a graduate course.'" Sheila took their advice of applying to graduate school and later earned her masters' degree. After graduation, she worked for Southwestern PWI as an academic advisor for 3 years. Sheila was then recruited by an American Indian administrator to work on American Indian student programming. She accepted and began her professional career. Her three professional positions have all been at Southwestern PWI. While in her current position, her colleagues, again, began to

encourage her to think about applying to a doctoral program.

Preparation to Apply to Doctoral Program

While Sheila worked at Southwestern PWI, she was invited to meet with a high-level university administrator who wanted to discuss strategies to increase the enrollment numbers of American Indian students at Southwestern PWI. Sheila's conversation with the administrator focused on AI/AN students' lived experiences. Sheila said:

> I was really nervous, because I'm thinking I wonder what he wants to talk about. So, I met with him and it was a 30-minute meeting. Right away we sat down, he gave me this [paper] and said this is the retention rates for American Indian students. He goes, "I don't know if you're aware of this, but take a look at that." He was explaining it to me and I was looking at it. You know, of course the American Indian students were at the bottom [of the racial and ethnic demographics]. Then he asked me, "How do you think we can fix that? What are your thoughts to improve those numbers?" So, I was looking at it and then I just looked at him and I said, "Before we can sit here, look at these numbers, and for me to answer that question, I invite you to come with us on one of our [tribal recruiting trips] to one of these tribal communities." I said once he goes out and see where our students are coming from, seeing the environment they come from. Seeing the living conditions they may be coming from. The services, the access to healthcare, the education system and then you will have an understanding of where they're coming from.

Encouraging the administrator to gain a deeper understanding of the living- and academic environments from which American Indian students are being raised was a new perspective for him to consider. Sheila continued to tell the administrator:

> When you fully understand [the socio-economic conditions and education system within tribal nations], and you are able to see that, then we can come back and start talking about [the enrollment rates]. But I want you to be able to understand where our students are coming from. So, for you to ask me that, I don't feel you have an understanding, yet, of what our students are dealing with. And he just looked at me and said, "I like that." He goes, "That is the first time someone ever said that to me." Okay, let me know, and then we talked about other stuff. He then said, "All right, it's great to meet you Sheila." So, I left, and I got in the elevator. I was going down the elevator and I just started crying. And I'm thinking, like, he's asking me. This rez [reservation] girl from [the Navajo Nation], the [high-level

> administrator] asking me what I thought. I just told him what I thought. It was probably not the answer he wasn't expecting to hear, but I thought I gave him a glimpse of reality.

As Sheila reflected on their conversation, she realized that more American Indian higher education professionals need to be in the same type of meetings with high-level administrators, so that there is strong advocacy occurring on behalf of American Indian students. Her realization helped spark her desire to pursue a doctorate degree, so that one day, she could be at the decision-making meeting to ensure resources are allocated for AI/AN student populations on campus and that they are offered in a culturally respective way. Sheila further commented:

> [Administrators] don't know our students. That's when I thought in order for me to make a difference, I need to be at those tables. Like I'm thinking of having these conversations with them. Now what do I need to get there? I said and maybe the only way they really listen to me, is if I have a Ph.D. If I have a doctorate, [I would] be able to sit at those tables and have these kinds of conversations. So that was my first thought of, "Okay, I'm going to pursue [a doctorate] and this is what I want to do." I want to work in higher education, in that capacity and being able to change that way of thinking. That too many times they just want us to look at their agendas and their data and trying to fix it. When they're not even really understanding the students that they're working with. And what are the factors that are contributing to why the numbers are so low.

Sheila dedicated her entire professional career to be a student advocate. She has worked with many higher education staff to increase the quality of services for AI/AN students at Southwestern PWI. However, some of those interactions did not go smoothly and she had to learn how to strengthen her advocacy methods. She remembered her mentor telling her that:

> You're going to have people that are going to tell you what they want and what they think is best [for AI/AN students]. But they don't know that is best for our students and what we're trying to do. They have no idea. That's why we need individuals like you. So, you go back there and tell that lady what you want. And if she didn't listen to you, you go back until she listens to you. That's what being an advocate is for. That's why we need people [like you] here, because these guys

> are quick to tell us what we [should] want and we just listened; but, no. You go back and you tell her [what specifically you need her to do on the project].

This conversation with her mentor instilled in Sheila that AI/AN students need steadfast advocates who understand their background, history, culture and daily struggles, which enabled her to better meet their needs.

Reflections

Throughout Sheila's life, her parents instilled their cultural values and teachings to help family members, extended relatives, and friends throughout their community. Her parents frequently volunteered their family members to help with events and/or ceremonies happening throughout the community. Sheila had established a community mindset, so much so that:

> I'm always thinking like I how can I help. What could I do? I hear like someone needs help with this, like okay. Well, I'll provide a basket of food. So, thinking about that, that was our cultural lifeways. That we're always coming together to help someone in need. And keep lending a hand to your community.

In addition to helping others, another important cultural teaching Sheila learned from her parents was to acknowledge relatives when in the community. The act of establishing her cultural relationships is a form of expressing *Ké* (Navajo kinship/relationship):

> I could go to Bashas' [local grocery store] with my mom and my mom would say, "Oh, that's your auntie right there." From there on when I see her, I would greet her as my *shi'ma yazhi* [my little mother]. And you learn so many things from walking into Bashas'. By proper [cultural] ways to greet and acknowledge people. But there's also community people, respected community people, who always cared for me, watched out for me, protect me. I acknowledge everybody within my community that those are the ones who guided where I'm at today.

When Sheila would see community members on and off the Navajo Nation, she would greet them based on *Ké*. Sheila said, "Like when I come home, it was never, "Oh, hi

Shelia." It was always, "*Yá'át'ééh she'awéé'* [Hello my baby] or *Yá'át'ééh shiyázhí"* [Hello my little one]. It was those kinds of greetings, or "*Yá'át'ééh shimáyázhí"* [Hello my maternal aunt]. Sheila acknowledged her Navajo values and traditional sense of community/belonging as cultural factors that strengthen her retention efforts.

Conclusion

The Navajo student stories shared throughout this chapter provided examples of their decision-making process, which was influenced by their family, community cultural upbringing, career trajectory, and educational experiences. A common finding among participants was their desire to "give back" to their families and the Navajo Nation by way of strengthening the government operations/services, its sovereignty, and self-determination. Earning a doctorate degree will enable them to improve services for the people; in essence, it is building the capacity for the Navajo Nation.

This chapter explored the decision-making factors that influenced Navajo students to pursue doctoral programs. The next chapter will highlight students' experiences regarding what resources they used to help them access their doctoral program, and the resources they used to persist in their doctoral programs.

CHAPTER 5

RESOURCES THAT INCREASE ACCESS AND PERSISTENCE

This chapter continues to follow the storytelling format and is organized based on themes and subthemes that answer research questions two and three. Each theme and subtheme is defined and illustrated by multiple quotes from participants. Together, the themes and subthemes address the research questions from a variety of rich perspectives, resulting in a holistic analysis. Multiple student experiences were woven together following the storytelling format, which allowed me to feature participants' voices and highlight their lived experiences.

The first half of the chapter addresses research question two: "What resources are Navajo students using to increase access into doctoral education?" Of the five-major overarching thematic findings related to the study, one theme specifically addressed this research question – "knowledge of how to navigate higher education systems in order to increase persistence." Students additionally described the resources they tapped into to address concerns or experiences with financial challenges related to the cost of attendance and challenging aspects of effectively balancing time management and responsibilities inherent to academic coursework/research, program timeline expectations, and professional work deadlines.

Navigating Higher Education

"Knowledge of how to navigate higher education systems in order to increase persistence" was defined by students as working with professors, mentors, and advisors during the application process and securing assistantships; learning about and attending university-sponsored workshops for graduate school preparation; receiving support from their fellow doctoral students and peers; and calling upon family members (e.g., parents and grandparents) for words or acts of encouragement as needed. This theme consists of five subthemes related to research question two. The five subthemes are the following: having a strong academic and personal supportive network, financial incentives/support, employer support, use of online application resources, and having a strong self-awareness of their personal strengths.

Academic and Personal Support

The first subtheme that addresses research question two is having a strong academic and personal supportive network. Participants relied on multiple forms of resources to assist them in accessing their doctoral program. Specifically, they valued support from their professors, encouragement from professional colleagues, their families' financial and emotional support, peer mentoring, and positive reassurances that they can and should start their doctoral program. Professors are an important resource to assist participants in accessing doctoral programs. Particularly, professors offered their time, knowledge, and expertise to assist them as they started their applications. Harrison recalls:

> No one told me this is how you write your letter of intent. This is what you do or this is how you set up your resume. You know, like, I had no one. So, I turned to

> one of my professors in Crownpoint. I said, "I am applying for my Ph.D. [and] I don't know what I'm doing." So, I gave all my application [documents to him]. I had no formal preparation of how to get into graduate school. The only [person] I knew was my professor. He was only one that helped me.

Navajo students sought out professors they felt comfortable with and whom they trusted as they confessed that they were unaware of what is expected for each of the application documents. Furthermore, they asked for advice on how to strategically complete the letter of intent/statement of purpose, resume/curriculum vitae, scholarship essay, and even sought verbal encouragement. Rose described how Dr. Yazzie made time to meet with her to answer her doctoral application questions, and offer encouraging words and advice:

> Dr. Yazzie would [refer] us to different people we could talk to. But if it wasn't for him, we wouldn't all be here. I think as busy as he is, he would take time to meet with us and talk with us. And it made it a lot easier. He believed in us. I think sometimes we just need that person. Even if it's just that one person that says, "You're going to do this. You're going be great." We were like, "really?" And we start to believe that and I think that is really important when we look at increasing our numbers [of American Indians] nationwide, as far as in graduate programs and graduate studies.

In addition to meeting with professors to receive helpful advice, participants attended university-sponsored activities that provided information on preparing for and applying to graduate education. Sam said, "I did attend a couple of the writing workshops that [Southwestern PWI] offer[ed], that helped out a lot. I would say that [writing] was the most intimidating part of getting into grad school. It was a clear weakness that I had." Writing workshops were an example of resources available to assist some students in applying to graduate school. Conversely, other participants who lived and worked in rural Navajo communities at the time of applying to their doctoral program did not have access to writing workshops. Harrison described his situation:

> I didn't have any resources, especially like on the reservation. Even like the Navajo Nation scholarship [office], they didn't have a program [to help with applying to graduate school]. Like, "Oh, we're hosting this program," you know what I mean. There was nothing like that.

As a result of the lack of university recruiting/application workshops and limited tribal programs that focused on offering resources for prospective graduate students, Harrison sought assistance and advice from his former tribal college professor to strengthen his doctoral application.

Other Navajo doctoral students valued rapport with and support from coworkers. These students preferred to turn to their coworkers for help when applying to their doctoral programs. Sheila attended brown bag luncheons to listen to people conducting research. During one of the brown bag luncheons, she started a conversation with her colleague about how to apply to graduate school. Sheila commented on how her colleague offered advice and support:

> She was saying, "write your statement of purpose and then bring it to me." So, I'm like "okay." And then I sent it to her, then she added stuff and said, "Go back and fix it. Let's look at it again." So, I had to repolish it. She really helped me.

Sheila's colleague invested her time to edit and proofread Shelia's application documents. In other instances, Navajo students received verbal encouragement for applying to graduate school (when at the time, they did not think it was an option) from their colleagues. For example, after years of working in the field, Richard said:

> I got some encouragement [from colleagues, who said,] "Like, you know, you should go back to school. I think you will make a good [graduate] student." There was probably two people that said those kind of things. And that felt good.

The combination of Richard receiving encouraging comments from his colleagues and his attainment of the highest career position he could with his master's degree contributed to him applying to the doctoral program. Words of encouragement also came from

family members, relatives, and community members.

Navajo students relied on their family and native community members as resources who helped them start their doctoral programs. Family members such as parents and grandparents offered cultural teachings that contributed to their desires to excel in academia, Navajo community members expressed how proud they are of the students who are working towards their doctoral degrees, and spouses offered their financial support when their partners took time off work to continue in their doctoral programs. Sonya described how her husband worked throughout her educational journey to help provide for their family:

> I just always feel very privileged with my husband's support. Because he was always there for me to finish my bachelors, and then going on into [my master's program], and then coming into the Ph.D. program. I don't know that all Navajos or other people have that privilege. And so, I think what if I didn't have that. Would I still be here? Would my story be different? I think my family [and husband] plays an immediate role in getting educated.

Expanding on family support as a resource to increase access, Navajo students received similar levels of inspiration from their Navajo community members. Many community members may not be blood relatives, but based on *Ké* (Navajo cultural teachings of relationships based on the clan system), they are culturally considered family. Sheila described how her Navajo community expressed their support and excitement when they realized that she was pursuing her doctorate:

> And she [a community member] just got all excited. She goes, "Whenever you get done, you make sure you invite me [to your graduation] and we're going to butcher [a sheep]. We're going to do all this stuff [of preparing a Navajo feast and celebration] for you. I'm just so proud of you." And then she said, "And you have to remember that you're doing this for all of us. This is for everybody." And that was a reminder, that it's not just an individual thing.

The conversation Sheila had with her community relative reminded her that she was not

alone in her doctoral journey, and that earning her doctorate is not an individualistic achievement. Rather, she was a representative of her community and earning her doctorate provided her community a sense of accomplishment. Shelia's conversation with her fellow community member reminded her of her father's teachings of remaining focused on helping their community, as opposed to individualistic gains:

> My dad always said, "Think about the work you're doing. Is it helping your community? Is it helping your people? Yes or no? If it's a no, then you're not doing your job." That's what I've been taught. So, I always remind myself [of his teachings and to] find something that is helpful. So, having that mentality, that thinking, that mindset, that growth of, I'm not just doing this for personal reasons or advancing myself. To put myself out there, like, I'm doing this to help my people, to carry my people with me. That they're in this with me.

Family and community members both offered guidance, cultural teachings, support, and positive reinforcement for earning a doctoral degree that would allow participants to serve their people.

Financial Fellowships as Support

The fourth resource Navajo students utilized to increase access into doctoral programs was applying for graduate fellowships and assistantships to defray the cost of attendance. A majority of the students expressed concerns about receiving graduate funding to assist them in paying for tuition, books, housing, food, and living expenses influenced their decision to apply and/or enroll in graduate school. In an effort to reduce their financial concerns, students applied for university and external funding opportunities. Jarvis described how attaining a university-sponsored fellowship workshop was beneficial:

> Two people who had won the [National Science Foundation] NSF [Graduate Research Fellowship Program] GRFP held a workshop with some other students

> like me who were just beginning to work on our application essays for different fellowships. And that helped me a lot, just going through drafts. Being someone who's always trying to be good at writing helped, because I still have this theory that you really got to make a story in your application essay. Because people are story animals, no matter what. It is still a real person reading your application essay and it's better if you make them enjoy the experience, than make it laborious for them. So, I spent a lot of time with my application essays; trying to tell a story in the right way.

Attending the fellowship workshop helped Jarvis refine and strengthen his compelling essays. As a result, he received the National Science Foundation GRFP, which significantly contributed to financing his cost of attendance.

Searching and applying for resources and fellowships to help cover the student's total cost of attendance was a predominant concern. When departments offer students research assistantships (RA) or teaching assistantships (TA), they waive students' tuition and fees, and provide a financial stipend. In some cases, the assistantships included employee benefits like health coverage. However, that was dependent on the department. Some Navajo students who were first-generation students were unfamiliar with the assistantship process and benefits. As a result, they were unsure how the assistantships would be applied to their school account, as described by Harrison:

> My department sent me letters [explaining] my tuition is being waived. You're getting a stipend every 2 weeks for working as a TA and RA, and then on top of that you're getting [a] scholarship from the program. I was like, okay. So, then I start thinking, this is probably not going to be enough. So, I applied for other scholarships. So, I was being proactive in that sense. Because I wasn't sure how financially things were going to work out. At the end, I didn't pay for anything. Everything was paid for throughout the [doctoral] program, from the department. I did get a stipend every 2 weeks for the whole 5 years. So, I just work like 10 hours for them and that's all I did. No one told me, like, you'd be paid with a stipend and they're going to waive your tuition. I didn't know that [assistantship process and benefits] at all. So, when I got my paper [offer letter], I really didn't know what it meant. And it said it was paying 25% of this and 75% of that, and like what does that really mean? Like what percent of what?

Harrison had difficulty fully understanding the assistantship benefit language and

percentages. As a result of not fully understanding his financial offer, he applied to additional fellowships to ensure his total expenses were met. He was thankful that his department offered full funding. Other Navajo doctoral students were thankful that their department offered them teaching assistantships, which helped them pay for their tuition and fees. Jarvis said:

> The only TA line that [the department] could give me for funding was human anatomy and physiology. I had to do a lot of catching up, I was just 1 week ahead of the class for the whole semester. Just try to learn human anatomy and physiology and then teach it. So, there's the lecture section which is huge and there's a real professor. And then there's breakout lab sections and I was the TA for two breakout lab sections. And I was the authority in the room, there was nobody above me in the room. I got to know what I'm talking about.

Doctoral students who were appointed to a TA position received the benefit of a tuition waiver and teaching experience they can put on their curriculum vitae. The process of preparing, teaching, and grading papers was time taken away from studying for their doctoral courses and research. For some students like Richard, the TA position was the only option to pay for his tuition. As a result, he was a TA for the majority of his doctoral program.

Employer Forms of Support

Navajo students utilized other forms of institutional resources to help them pay for their cost of attendance, such as the university employee tuition reduction benefit. The employee tuition reduction benefit applies to Southwestern PWI's employees who are benefits-eligible employees. Sheila worked full-time at Southwestern PWI and was a benefits-eligible employee who utilized the benefit:

> I'm getting the tuition [benefit]. However, I'm being taxed on my tuition. So, some money came out of my paycheck. But you know, I will be able to get that

> back when I do my taxes. But still, I have a dent in [my] paycheck. I think the challenging part is that I'm a full-time employee, plus I'm in a Ph.D. program [full-time].

Although the tuition benefit was taxable through her paychecks, it allowed Sheila to access graduate school. Similar to Richard, Sheila was in a position where she was pressed for time preparing materials and fulfilling the responsibilities of her full-time leadership position at Southwestern PWI, which took time away from studying for her doctoral courses and research. A similar tuition benefit was described by another student who works in the private industry. Waylon described receiving tuition reimbursements:

> I started a new employment in December of 2016. And part of what I negotiated along with my salary was this Ph.D. program [tuition] to be included in [with] my professional development plan. And that I get full-tuition reimbursement. So, that's how I'm paying for it.

Prior to Waylon starting his career in the private industry, he worked for the Navajo Nation and the Nation received a grant that enabled the Nation pay for his tuition for three semesters during his doctoral program. The Navajo students in this study were resourceful in identifying employment benefits that enable them to start or continue their doctoral education. The process of identifying employee benefits occurred by talking with their supervisors, human resources representatives, friends, and reading benefits information on their company's website. Sam recalls his conversation about tuition benefits:

> A friend said, "We have a position opening in my department. You could take this low paying job and you can get a tuition benefit to use for a master's degree." I said, "Okay, that sounds a good deal, because then that will delay my student loans."

Online Application Resources

The Navajo participants utilized online application resources when they applied to their doctoral programs and, for one student, this was the only resource available to guide the process. Online application resources included information that explained what a letter of intent is and what should be included in the letter. Southwestern PWI's departmental website hosts links to materials and information on how to prepare a graduate application. Simply using the internet to read and learn about the graduate program mission, faculty research areas, and application requirements (which explained what was needed for each document of the application packet) was additionally helpful. Harrison described a lack of resources while he was on the Navajo Nation:

> I don't know how I did it because I didn't have family members and I didn't have mentors that were like, "Oh by the way, there is this program [that can help you better understand how to submit a competitive graduate school application]." No one educated me about any of that. I think the only resources I had, was probably the internet. Like reading up about the program.

Harrison took the initiative to find locations to access the internet, which allowed him to learn about the degree program, research initiatives in the department, student resources, and application requirements. Once Harrison learned what documents were required for the application packet, he said:

> So, everything I did was like, "Okay [I need to figure this out]. What's a letter of intent?" I would go online and be like, "Oh, that's a letter of intent. So, this is what I need to write about, this is how it looks." So, it was mainly everything online. So that's how I learned how [it is formatted], and that's what my resources were. It was just like independent research. So, I didn't have any like, graduate [programs to help increase access into doctoral programs] or anything like that.

A similar experience involved Rose using the internet to learn how to apply to the doctoral program at Southwestern PWI. Rose worked on the Navajo Nation and said:

> I looked at [Southwestern PWI's website] about how do you apply. You know

> they have those links on how to prepare an application. Then I would also go and [use] Google Scholar [to learn more about] it. Okay, [this is] the best way to write a thesis or a paper. Those types of support services – if you go online even to the [university] website or [departmental] website, there's a lot of resources there that can help you prepare. They'll give you links to different support service. Just with Dr. Yazzie himself, he had different links he would send us and say, "What do you want to do? Do you want grammar [resources]? Do you want to know how to structure or how to write a detailed resume? Do you want to learn the differences between [a resume] and a curriculum vitae?" Things like that, the little things like that really helped.

Using the internet to access program information and directions to learn how to apply for graduate admission is one form of resource used. Additionally, Navajo students used the internet to access the Graduate Records Exam's (GRE) free online practice test. Prior to taking the online practice test, Rose studied with other Navajo students who were preparing to take the GRE. Rose said, "We bought the GRE study guides. We did it ourselves, because it had been a while since some of us took our GRE. So, we thought, we're going to have to take it, so let's prepare for it first."

Self-awareness of Their Personal Strengths

The final significant resource Navajo students identified as useful to increase their access to graduate programs was their self-awareness of their personal strengths. Self-awareness was defined by students as having confidence in their academic and personal abilities and learning to be resourceful on campus. An example of this was shared by Jarvis:

> However it happened, I was as good or better than most of my peers at reading and writing throughout my educational career. And I think that helped me stick with my schooling. It boosted my intellectual self-confidence and made me believe at an early age that I was going to get through my educational journey, successfully. To put it another way, I always believed I was smart enough to get through whatever school asked me to do.

Other students described how they excelled and the grades they earned in their master's program as forms of self-confidence when they were applying to the doctoral program. Richard commented, "by the time [I applied] my [master's] grades were good, and I know I had confidence in my [academic] abilities." As students excelled academically, they acknowledged multiple forms of support they received. When faced with challenging experiences in graduate school, students learned to be resourceful. Being able to locate resources (e.g., asking peers, staff, professors for information; attending workshops; and conducting independent research) that helped them address challenging experiences led them to improve their self-confidence and as a result, their grades improved. Furthermore, those participants who were pursuing their graduate program and working in the area of student support services, learned about university-wide resources available to all students. As a university staff member, Waylon described how he utilized resources:

> So, I worked with and supervised the student workers there, as well as I became the senior office specialist. That motivated me in terms of being resourceful for others, but also for myself to be able to learn about all the different opportunities that were available to me as a student and as well as for American Indians.

Another example of students being resourceful on campus and understanding their personal strengths was their ability to advocate for themselves. Sheila was taught to, "speak up, so people will know who you are ... these are connections that you would need, when you want to apply to graduate school."

In summation, Navajo doctoral student participants had the ability to identify and use multiple resources that effectively assisted them to access information and apply to their doctoral programs. They identified resources that allowed them to learn what was expected in each application document and to apply to fellowships that alleviated the

burdens of their total cost of attendance. Furthermore, they surfed the internet to locate information they needed to complete their applications and relied on their personal strengths and self-confidence to keep them motivated as they worked through the application process. The five themes of having strong support networks, applying for financial support resources, receiving tuition remission and reimbursements, utilizing the internet to access information to help them complete their applications, and using their self-confidence, all contributed to participants starting their doctoral programs. As the participants began their doctoral journey, it was important to better understand the factors that challenged and aided their persistence efforts.

Challenging Experiences and Persistence

The second half of this chapter highlights participant stories that address the third research question: "What challenging experiences do Navajo students experience in their doctoral program and what resources are they using to increase their persistence?" Two of the major themes respond to this question and they are centered on internal and external factors. Internal factors included examples of lower rates of personal motivation, difficulty adjusting to graduate education, isolation and depression, and poor time management, to name a few. External factors involved interactions with others such as negative and unsupportive faculty, financial challenges, and work-related stressors. I start with student stories about difficult and challenging experiences that threaten their persistence. These experiences led them to identify resources to address and overcome those difficult experiences which, in turn, increased their persistence. These resources comprised the third theme related to research question three.

Before research question three can be fully explored, it is important to acknowledge the systemic problems within higher education institutions that are rooted in the historical formation and evolution of many PWIs. Systemic problems include, but are not limited to, assimilationist practices (Lomawaima, 1995), value placed on meritocracy (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), encouraging individualism, focus on Western knowledge, exclusion of American Indian epistemology as scholarship (Smith, 1999), and limited resources for serving American Indian students (or Students of Color in general) (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Every institution has structural problems that negatively affect students and Southwestern PWI is no exception. As Dr. Yazzie, a professor and administrator at Southwestern PWI said, "resources do not exist in a vacuum," they are created to assist students who face difficult and challenging situations on campus. Institutions have traditionally created equity and inclusion divisions that are charged with developing initiatives to serve historically underrepresented students. Furthermore, institutions developed student support centers that are centered on race and ethnicity. However, more services and resources are needed to effectively address the unique challenges experienced by American Indian students.

Although there are systemic problems at all institutions of higher education, most institutions are working hard to identify and address the unmet needs of and challenges faced by their students. To this end, Southwestern PWI's education center held a series of listening sessions during the 2016-2017 academic year across its campuses to better understand what problems its American Indian students experienced and explored what resources may be needed from them to overcome those challenges and be successful. Both undergraduate and graduate students attended the sessions and provided feedback.

The listening sessions identified that American Indian students were having difficulty developing a sense of belonging/inclusion, were facing financial concerns, needed more visibility and representation on campus, and wanted additional resources to encourage mentorship opportunities.

Internal Factors

Similar to the listening session findings, this research study identified multiple threats to Navajo graduate student persistence. Every participant explained how they faced adversity and followed their stories with descriptions of the resources used to help address or solve their challenges. The multiple layered effects of academic adversity, challenging experiences, and difficulty with self and others, all contributed to the overall threats to their persistence. Threats to persistence specifically included difficulty adjusting to graduate education expectations, poor time-management, feelings of isolation, and managing mental health. Furthermore, threats to persistence also included discouraging interactions with advisors and mentors, financial challenges, and maintaining full-time work responsibilities. These are detailed in the sections below.

Adjusting to Doctoral Education

As participants began their doctoral experience, they had many questions about their programs, such as learning about their coursework requirements, how to best work with their professors and advisors, and simply how to get back into the student mindset of reading, writing, and discussing coursework after having been away from school for several years. As they began to understand what was expected of them as doctoral

students, they also had to maintain their family responsibilities. For example, Richard describes how he adjusted:

> I had a really rough first year. I had to adjust to being back in school again, schoolwork again, and adjustment to a new university. Adjustments to just being a minority in the college. I didn't know these things would affect me, but it all did. So, I was in a romantic relationship that first-year. I think that took a lot of my time, too. I was stressed out all time. Not sleeping well. So, after that year, I said, "How can I succeed as a student in this program?" I had to readjust everything. At the end of the year, I did a self-evaluation.

Richard identified actions (or inactions) that contributed to his stress and he created a routine to alleviate those stressors. He implemented this new routine (e.g., studying at the Native American Center and building a sense of community with other students at the center, scheduling regular exercise time, and reserving time to visit with his son, etc.) his second year and it worked.

Other doctoral students had a hard time adjusting to their doctoral programs because they were the only American Indian or Student of Color in their classes. Harrison's adjustment to his program was a challenge because he felt the pains of isolation. The first 2 years he secluded himself and focused on completing the program's required coursework. Harrison said:

> At the end of my second year, I did my oral comps. So, I was like, okay, I can now kind of relax. I would tell [Native professors] I need more interaction with other [Native] people. [My Native female professor said], "Come here or go there." So, interacting like, hey there's other Natives here too. You're just not the only one here, type thing. [She said,] "There's more students here, take this course next semester, there's more Native students in this course." So, the first course that I took with her, there was another Hispanic individual who wasn't Native. After class I would talk to her, this is what I'm going through and this is how I feel. She's like, "Oh you know, next semester take this course." And I did. There were more Natives and that's how I learned about other [Native] student organizations. That's how I became friends with Natives.

As Navajo students matriculated through the first couple of years in their program, they

continued to have difficult adjustment experiences. Sheila openly described her challenging times:

> I just finished my second year of my doctoral program this fall and I'm [now] starting my third year. It's been very difficult for me, because I was out of school for over 10 years. And trying to get the groove back to disciplining myself to read and write again. I felt like I forgot how to write. And the confidence in my writing [got me] thinking, "Am I ready for this? Like, am I capable of doing all this work?" And once I start taking these classes and things that they were telling us. Things we need to do and talking about theories and frameworks and methodological approaches. It was just really overwhelming for me at first. And at first, I felt like I was embarrassed to ask people [for clarification], like you're in a doctoral program, you should know this. You're at this level and you should know what you're doing. But I'm thinking, I didn't.

Sheila and the other participants all had to learn how to adjust to being a graduate student, and embrace the responsibilities and challenges that came along with their student status. Exercising their creative ways to address adjustment issues of loneliness in their programs and the amount of studying at the graduate level helped them find balance to their well-being. As the participants learned how to adjust to being a doctoral student, they quickly realized that time management was a way to balance all of their responsibilities.

Understanding Time Management

Once students began to better understand how to navigate and adjust to being a doctoral student, other intrinsic threats to persistence started to emerge including difficulty with time management. For doctoral students, who may have many responsibilities on top of myriad academic expectations and commitments, finding the right balance to best utilize their time efficiently was difficult. Once they found a good balance between school coursework, work, family, and their community during one

semester, it may change the following semester based on the demands of new classes. Sheila, who works at Southwestern PWI, described how challenging it was to balance her time:

> So, my time [is] really challenging now. I worked all day yesterday and then I had a paper to do. I was here [on campus] till 1 o'clock in the morning working on my paper in here [at work]. And so, it's been like that. When I'm at work all day and in school all evening, [I'm doing coursework] until all hours of the night. Then sleep, then come back to work. So, time management is challenging. Being able to balance all of that work life, school life, and study life. It's like I don't have a personal life; it's shot. I seriously don't have time. Like my friends want to go to the movies. [But] I got to read or write. So, sacrificing things like that and just time [management]. Those are the challenges with my Ph.D. program.

Sheila was not only sacrificing her time away from her family, she was also sacrificing their time without her during important family gatherings that emphasize the importance of family unity and community bonding through Ké. Sheila said:

> I have to really sacrifice a lot of … my personal time. Even my family time, I can't go home is often like around Christmas. I can't go home for the holidays, because I have this stuff I need to get done. It's due at the end of the month of December. So, [I] sacrifice[ed] things like that. Those are the challenges with my Ph.D. program.

When Sheila remains focused on her academic work (and does not go home), she sacrifices her personal, mental, and spiritual well-being. In many cases, reuniting with their Navajo families was participants' source of personal, mental, and spiritual strength. Interacting with family was their source of motivation and helped them keep their personal and academic life in balance.

Dedicating time to study, read, and write significantly impacted students' ability to learn and understand the coursework. As Sonya said, "It's not about being smart, but about dedicating time to study and learn." However, most students have other responsibilities that require their time, such as working full- or part-time jobs, raising

children, taking care of their aging parents, being a spouse/partner, and/or traveling for work or personal reasons. At the beginning of Richard's doctoral program, his son was living with his mother in a neighboring state. Richard commented on how that affected him in his program:

> So, I made that decision [to start a doctoral program in another state]. It was the one of the toughest decision ever, but I'm glad I stuck by it. If I had support, especially from [my son's] mom, it would've been a lot smoother. I think the first two years she said, "You're a bad parent because you left. You just left." She made it look like, that I wasn't going to visit him or spend time with him. I was driving back and forth [from state to state] often like almost every weekend.

Pursuing his doctoral degree away from his son was difficult for him, but he was determined to spend the weekends visiting his son. The time commitment used to travel to his son resulted in Richard not studying. Richard said:

> All my peers were saying, "I'm going to relax and study and read all throughout the weekend. Get my work done." I was spending it with my son and driving on the road for 6 hours [each way]. Get there Friday, spend time with my son, then come back Sunday night [around] 9 P.M. or 10 P.M. And try to read [after returning] and be ready for Monday. And that was the challenge, because there's a lot of reading in my program. And I was exhausted, and I was determined to see my son almost every weekend, which affected my ability to [study], be prepared for my classes, [and] doing homework consistently. So yeah, and that also affected my GPA [Grade Point Average], but I knew that was important to me. I figured a way to balance it out and I did it even though it was the hardest and toughest thing.

Richard and Sonya were raised on the Navajo Nation and understood that everyone has to drive hours to the border towns for groceries, household items, and for entertainment. Sonya also had to drive over 6 hours each way to attend her weekend doctoral classes. Driving took time away from her studying, and it also added to other forms of stress. Sonya explained:

> [I]t was quite a bit of a drive because sometimes our class ends on Sunday at 5:00 [P.M.] and I would take off [back home] because I had to work the next day. And it was after one of those drives back, on the following Monday I had to do a report

> before one of the committees of the Navajo Nation Council and that's when I [began to experience the effects of] Bell's Palsy. I watched it happen, felt it happen during the day. So, I guess I didn't realize how much stress I was under. So that was the first sign to slow down, it's too much.

Finding the right balance of time to fulfill the requirements of work and school was difficult. The academic and work stress, physically driving long hours, along with her anxiety took a physiological toll on Sonya's health. The participants all learned how to balance their academic and professional responsibilities (as best as they could), while pursuing their degrees. However, once they developed a better grasp of balancing their time, they were faced with other threats to their persistence such as feelings of isolation in their programs.

Effects of Isolation

Another threat to persistence that was significant for participants was feelings of isolation while in their program and on the Southwestern PWI campus. As participants enrolled in advanced degree programs, they realized they were only one or part of a small number of Students of Color and even more so as Navajo graduate students. Harrison's story illustrated his desire for a Native community:

> I was the only Native in this program. The first 2 years was hard, because I just took courses after courses. I had to really focus. So, once I got done with all my courses that's when I sa[id], "I need to start seeing other Native people, because I don't have that exposure. I don't talk Navajo to anyone, so I need to start talking Navajo to other individuals." So, I actively started going to [the Native American Center], just to see Native people. Just to see someone brown, because in the department it's all White. I need to see my own people. I need to interact with my own people. So, in that sense I became lonely. I didn't need to be friends with them, I just needed to see that there are other Natives here [on campus]. So, in that sense, I started to get more involved with them. I joined in the [Native Graduate Student Club] and so I made more friends and we [would] go to the movies. So, you know, building that relationship with other Natives was very helpful.

Students felt isolated for multiple reasons, such as Harrison being the only Native in his program, conducting independent research, and personal feelings of simply being alone in the doctoral process. Conducting independent research was isolating for many reasons, Sheila explained:

> There are moments of highs and lows [in the doctoral program]. There's moments like, "What am I doing? What did I get myself into?" [Other moments] like, "Do I have the ability to do this? Can I really do this?" And then the feelings of loneliness. I had this conversation with another friend. I said, "It gets lonely." She goes, "Of course, because it's just you and your computer, writing. You're the only one. And you start feeling those moments of isolation and loneliness." Because, I'll be here in my office or be [in the conference room] by myself doing my work. I go, "It's just kind of sad." She goes, "Well that's just how it is. That's when you need to talk about it. This is what the journey is like." And I'm like, "okay."

Feelings of isolation, loneliness, and being alone are lived experiences that Navajo participants had to endure and were threats to their persistence. Participants left their families or hometowns to pursue their doctoral degree and as a result, they felt a sense of loneliness. Richard described how feelings of being alone were only one of many difficult experiences faced during his doctoral journey:

> I was discouraged in a lot of different ways. Whether that I felt alone or I felt like I missed family or whether I felt the financial [burdens]. Because I was like really broke too. Like really, really broke. Like and you're trying to support a child, like we're going to free meals, like stuff like that. I just kept thinking that "You got to just keep going." I keep going and I don't know, sometimes I thought it would be easier for me to give up and just say I am getting a full-time job somewhere. Someone would hire me, but I knew, like I had to keep going and I felt like this was that important.

Participants felt exhausted, which was compounded for those who also struggled with feeling like they were the only Native student or Student of Color. Feelings of exhaustion, mixed with negative effects of isolation, difficulty with time management, and the toll of adjustments to a doctoral program, all affect the students' mental and

physical health and highlight the need for access to health and spiritual support services.

Mental Health Concerns

Another threat to persistence involved students facing issues that affected their mental health. Specifically, students had bouts with depression, exhaustion, imposter syndrome, and other personal challenges. Mental health "affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices" (www.mentalhealth.gov). Jarvis described how his mental health was jeopardized:

> Since going into a [doctoral] program where I didn't have a background [in that field], it was tough. That was a challenge, catching up on biology. Also, a couple months ago I was diagnosed with clinical major depression and that's been the main struggle this semester. I got on medication and the side effects were bad. I switched medications and switching medications just wrecked me for a while. So it's been a challenge. [Also,] my mom has dealt with a lot of cancer issues. Cancer in the mouth, tumors in her brain and so I take care of her. She scheduled the brain surgery, so it could be during winter break. So, I would have time to [care for her]. That's stressful to take care of your parent. And I've been married for three years. Being married and still trying to figure it out, [while] being in grad school, it's a lot.

Participants developed coping skills to work through depression, providing care for an ailing and recovering parent, adjusting to being in a married relationship, and adjusting to the rigors of graduate schools are exhausting. In addition to Jarvis' mental health threats to persistence, Sheila described how work can also be exhausting and threaten persistence:

> I think being in a doctorate program, it's challenging mainly because [of] my full-time work. I [have] to switch gears after work hours to be a doctoral student. To be a student and to have a student mindset. Do your readings, do your writings, meeting with your professors, and meeting [academic] deadlines.

Working and professional duties take time and energy away from the participants conducting their doctoral coursework. In addition to the issue of time, the emotional toll

they experienced while working with their students was taxing. Sheila explained:

> For myself it's been very challenging because for example, a student came to see me, and we start talking. She's a transfer student and [we] … talked about why my decision to come here has been great. And then after our whole conversation about this great feedback of why she transferred to [Southwestern PWI], then she switched gears to a more personal [conversation]. And [she described] what she's struggling with. She started crying and she talked about her 2-year-old daughter and how being a single-mom and being here [is challenging]. She brought that human connection of, like, that's when they're a part of you. You start thinking about the healing that we need in their families. Then the trauma that she's feeling that has affected her. The feeling that she was experiencing and now she's here. And she's having a hard time dealing with that.

The combination of Sheila's training in academic counseling and her parents' teaching her the Navajo responsibility of caring for others, enabled her to fully engage with her student's concerns. For example, Sheila said:

> I'm listening to her, you know, I am consoling her. I'm encouraging her, I'm giving her examples of what she could do to help her cope. We probably talked for over two hours. When she left, I [was] exhausted, because I felt like I was carrying what she felt. And felt for her, I gave her a hug and she left. She's away from home and it's our responsibility as American Indian staff. I [wonder] how are going to care for her and make sure she's okay. That she's going to get up the next morning and want to go to class and continue. That's our responsibility here, to help the students [who are struggling]. So, she left and I have to go back to finishing my work, but emotionally I feel wounded. I hurt and then I'm thinking, "What do I need to do to help lift me up and help care for myself?" Because I still got to do my work, I still have to do a bunch of readings.

Self-care was vital to participants maintaining healthy well-being. Furthermore, self-doubt was another threat that was reduced when they receive positive feedback from faculty advisors. Jarvis described how he dealt with imposter syndrome:

> Yeah, it's hard because you don't get validation very often. I feel like you can successfully defend your prospectus and that's a big landmark and you know you're moving in the right direction. Or maybe a publication, that's definitely the right thing, like stuff like that. But in the end, it's like a 5-to-10 year process, before you reach the goal you set out to reach. It's a long time, long time. A lot of time for self-doubt. A lot of time to feel like you're not moving as fast as you should. Being overworked is draining.

The implication of imposter syndrome is that it lowers students like Jarvis' internal motivation to excel in their coursework (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010).

When students doubt themselves, they may question why they are pursuing a doctorate degree. As Waylon's professional career trajectory changed, he began to question his participation in the doctoral program and, on a personal and cultural level, this was challenging for him:

> I had already dedicated myself to my career and this [doctoral program] is my part of my career professional development. So, when I made the … significant career change, it made it easier for me in terms of the nature of the work, but also… I had to refocus on well, "Why am I going to [graduate] school now, considering I'm not in that setting anymore [working for an employer who recommended that all employees earn advanced degrees], as well as on the reservation." And so, then it became a different challenge in terms of well, "Why am I doing this now given that I left [the Navajo Nation] where I want to help?"

One of Waylon's original motivating factors for pursuing a doctoral degree was to connect his coursework and research to the educational needs of the Navajo Nation, and return to the Nation to offer his expertise to address those needs. Losing the connection and relevance between his academics and the Nation put him in a difficult situation that may jeopardize his continued enrollment and persistence.

Working toward a doctorate degree involved many years and maintaining a balanced mental health throughout those years was difficult. This becomes challenging for participants whose reasons for earning a doctorate may also change. It is also a challenge for students who experienced feelings of isolation and who had difficulty adjusting to being a student. The illustrations of threats to persistence up to this point have focused on internal factors and on individual participants. However, there are additional external threats to persistence that involved other people, finances, and employment.

External Factors

External threats to persistence were defined by participants as challenging experiences of interacting with others, academic policies, faculty expectations that do not align with student goals, and financial factors that hinder their educational progress. The threats included advisors and mentors who were unsupportive of participants' needs, the overwhelming process of securing funds to pay the total cost of attendance, and having to work many hours which reduces time focusing on their academic coursework.

Unsupportive Advisors and Mentors

Many of the participants reported that they had bad experiences with their advisors and mentors. In most cases, they chose not to publicize their ordeals for fear of jeopardizing their rapport, which could result in a loss of support when asking for a reference or fear of retaliation, loss of an assistantship position, and disappointing their advisor for not pursuing the academic career path. Unfortunately, Harrison and his advisor did not agree on how he should best utilize his doctoral degree training and career trajectory. Harrison explained:

> When I came into the Ph.D. program, I just thought, oh, I'm going to just get my Ph.D. I'll be good, and I can say, "I have my Ph.D. [degree]" I did not know the political issues or the political factors behind getting a Ph.D. [For example,] making your mentor look good, because you got a job talk at XYZ [institution]. Because you got a job [offer] at XYZ [institution]. Because you got a publication in XYZ [journal]. Because you got grant money [from a prestigious organization or federal agency]. You make your university look good, because of all [your accomplishments].

Harrison's goal was to earn his doctorate and return home to work with Navajo youth. However, as he excelled in his doctoral research, his potential also grew. His advisor encouraged him to expand his career opportunities. Harrison described how the

conversation with his advisor evolved into a difference of professional and cultural goals:

> I would like to … say, "Yes, I got my Ph.D. and I can come back to the reservation [to start my career]." Lo and behold, I never knew that I [would] be pressured [into a different career track]. Like, this is what you need to do. And I'm like, "really?"

Harrison clearly expressed his career intentions of working with Navajo school children. He had identified a program in his field of study at a Research 1 institution that was a few hours' drive from his Navajo community, both of which are positive factors in his job search. However, Harrison's advisor disregarded his focus and redirected him to consider other opportunities. Harrison described his conversation with his advisor as:

> I shared with my mentor, "So there's a program at the University of New Mexico spearheaded by another Navajo professional. She works with the Navajo community, but it's primarily just therapy. No research, no teaching, just primarily therapy. So, my goal was to go in and provide therapy and do research. This is what I want to do." But my mentor did not like that at all. She said, "No fucking way. We made you a researcher, we provided you with [research skills], we invested so much money in you. You're one of our top students in our program. You've successfully got a grant. You graduated with honors, you've done everything. And that's what you're going to do. Become a therapist." [That was] something I initially wanted to do. To just to go back and do research, but now she said, "No."

Harrison's unhealthy interaction with his advisor illustrated that she did not respect his desire to return to the Navajo Nation to serve Navajo youth or the importance of helping his community with his advanced skill set. She did not offer any culturally responsive advising and guidance. As Harrison neared the end of his doctoral program, he was strongly encouraged to apply to faculty positions specifically at Research 1 institutions. He applied to a few positions and was invited to interview on multiple campuses. However, he felt that this career trajectory was being forced upon him. Harrison described his difficult situation:

> I'll be honest with you. I just got an email from my mentor saying that I might

> have gotten the job at [a Research 1 institution]. You know what I'm saying. And I'm just like, my heart is broken, because I don't want to go. I want to go back [home] and be near my family. Work at this American Indian program that services Native American populations. Where I could provide therapy and just do research at the same time. But now, it's like, no. This is what we want you to do. And [if I don't go, it's] like I'm letting the university down, after what she told me. In that sense, I wish I knew what I was getting myself into.

Harrison's personal goal to earn a doctorate and to return to help his Native community was undermined by his non-Native advisor who forced her Western imperialistic values onto him. This process forced him into a new career trajectory he did not want. However, Harrison conveyed that although he was now thousands of miles away from his Navajo community, his research remains focused on improving services to Navajo youth.

Another example of Navajo students having difficult experiences with their advisors occurred when Richard was repeatedly reminded that he was poor and his externship locations are limited due to this financial situation:

> I've been in situations where my advisor has said some things to me that upset me. I never talked to her about it or anybody else that were in a staff or faculty position because I didn't want no retaliation. When I was applying for assistance programs and trying to get assistance to pay for college [my advisor said] things like, "If it weren't for that [assistance], you wouldn't be here because you can't afford to pay for [graduate school]. Your family can't afford to pay for [graduate school]." She didn't know my background, but I think she expected, just assumed that I came from a poor background. And I didn't like that, but even though it was true. I didn't like her talking about my economic disadvantage.

Richard's advisor telling him he would not be in graduate school, had it not been for assistance programs was disrespectful and showed no level of tact. When Richard resigned from a full-time working position to return to graduate school, his full-time salary stopped. As a resourceful and resilient student, Richard would brush off his advisor's disrespectful comments and find solutions to his financial concerns. Richard said:

> I didn’t always get funding or scholarships. But I didn't let that [hinder] me from going to school. I knew that I was eligible for student loans. And so, if I didn’t get any scholarships, I would get a loan. But I didn’t like how she would say, “You wouldn’t be here if you don’t get no funding, no assistantships. How are you going to pay for school?” And I didn't like that, because I grew up poor and I still am poor. It sucks when somebody reminds you of it.

Richard’s advisor also shared unsupportive comments about where he should do his program internship that were, again, based on finances. The way his advisor “advised” his internship selection process was illustrated by Richard:

> I’m here [in Michigan] on my internship and I’m all the way across the country. I had her influence [me]. I wanted to go to California and she said, “How you going to afford California? You’re poor. You know, your family can’t afford California.” And it made me feel bad, because I wanted to be in several [internship] programs in California. Particularly Berkeley and she dictated my decision-making. And saying like maybe I should go somewhere else, because apparently, I can't make it out there [financially]. And I let her influence me, I let her get to me. And that’s not me, I don’t do that. But when somebody like that, someone you apparently look up to, and someone that apparently is your advisor, like a powerful figure in the program, says things to you [repeatedly], you kind of buy into that.

Richard’s negative interaction with his advisor provides multiple issues to unpack. Rather than listening to understand Richard explain his financial situation, Richard felt that his advisor offered her assumptions about his financial background and humiliated him by repeatedly telling him his opportunities were limited because he was poor. Instead of shaming Richard, his advisor could have encouraged him to apply to prestigious fellowship opportunities and selective internship opportunities. Participants faced difficult conversations about their financial challenges with their advisors, and they also had to address those challenges related to paying for the overall cost of attendance.

Financial Challenges

The most common challenge and threat to persistence discussed by participants related to finances. When participants started their doctoral programs, finances were their number one concern. Being in a position to pay for their total cost of attendance was a significant concern. Most participants were raised in low-income households and were first-generation students who experienced living with very little financial means. Their ability to build resilience during their childhood years prepared them to endure the financial challenges of their educational journey. Harrison shared a conversation he had with his father about those difficult childhood years:

> My dad is like, "You know, one day your high school diploma won't mean anything. It won't mean as much as it does right now. So, you really need to think about your future. You really need to think about how you're going to, you know, provide for yourself or for your family if you have a family. So how are you going to [do that?]" And he would always say, "Look at us. You've seen us struggle. You've seen us when we were younger, you saw us struggle with money. You've seen us [receive] the government commodity food and food stamps. You know, asking relatives to loan us gas money, just to have gas money just to go to work. You've seen this and you've been there." And he said, "That's not something we want for you." So, it all made sense at the end.

Growing up with limited financial security was a source of motivation for Harrison to excel academically, and to be proactive in applying for multiple fellowships to help pay for his graduate education. Another first-generation student, Richard, spoke about how he was well aware of the struggles that resulted from having limited funding. He described his financial concerns in the doctoral program as:

> I know what it's like with this [low-] income. I've been a single parent and I was like, man, we're going to struggle. Me and [my son], we're going to struggle. Like trying to make it on $40,000. At least, it was just enough. I'm living in a studio apartment, paying all these bills, and we need a bigger place.

Other participants, like Jarvis, planned to work for Southwestern PWI to qualify for the

employee tuition benefit program. Jarvis' goal was to, "become a full-time employee at [Southwestern PWI] and then I would be able take classes for free and I would just make money and sort of slowly get a master's degree." Jarvis' plan changed when he was accepted into a doctoral program with funding. Although he did not use the employee tuition benefit, other participants did. Sam worked for Southwestern PWI throughout his master's and doctoral programs, which qualified him for the employee tuition benefit. Sam said the benefit, "Was a good deal and it delayed my student loans too."

Although participants struggled and found ways to get by with limited funding through their doctoral program, they accept their current situation knowing that it is a temporary sacrifice. For example, Sheila said, "The challenges with my Ph.D. program, of course [are] financial. [I'm] just try[ing] to make it. I keep telling myself, 'this is only temporary.' Like this is not going to be like this forever."

While students applied to multiple fellowships to help offset their cost of attendance, some students received fellowship denial letters. As a result, paying for their doctoral expenses became a challenge. Sonya shared the experience of applying for a tribal scholarship:

> The only resource I [applied] to was the Navajo Nation scholarship. [I applied to it to help with expenses] like driving down [here] and I had pay for a hotel last night. You know, so that [graduate fellowship could have provided] extra money for those expenses. I couldn't get any of [their support and it] was [an] amazing surprise. I thought that the nation would support me, knowing that I was in a doctoral program. That I would be an additional resource [on the nation] with those credentials, but I think [the] scholarship has its own criteria [for awarding applicants].

When Navajo doctoral students were denied fellowship opportunities, it threatened their persistence and matriculation rates, especially for those who must commute long distances from their tribal communities to attend classes in urban cities. The last sub-

theme related to external threats to student persistence involved balancing school with full-time work commitments.

Working Dilemmas

The majority of the Navajo participants in this study had full-time professional work positions while enrolled as full-time doctoral students. Both their academic and professional positions required time to successfully meet the goals and expectations associated with each. The time spent at work was time not spent on academic coursework and research, which could be considered a threat to student persistence. Sheila described her experiences of working while pursuing her doctorate:

> So, it is challenging. It is tough to work full-time and try to be a full-time doctoral student. And sometimes I wake up and I'm like, "What am I doing? Do I not do one or the other? Do I not be a full-time [employee] and just focus on my doctoral program? Or do I not do my doctorate and just focus on my work?" But I'm like, "I need to pay my bills. I have to make a living, I have a car payment." Like I need to work, so it's just being able to have that balance. But what helps me get through this, is this [pointing to cultural objects], you know. This is helping me be persistent, because then it goes back to our culture. It goes back to family values and teachings.

Another student who worked full-time and was enrolled in the doctoral program full-time echoed Sheila's sentiments. Rose described how she made both positions work:

> That is probably one of the most challenging experience[s] that I've ever had, but it's also the most rewarding. We need to devote time and that's what I've done. I've taken a sabbatical for a year [from work] to just concentrate on my research, because I knew that working, having a family, and trying to do this was nearly impossible. It really is, because I have a job that was very demanding. I would go to work at 7:30 A.M. and I wouldn't be home no earlier than 11 o'clock at night. So, I would I would just do my studies from like 11:30 P.M. to about 3:30 A.M., get 2 to 3 hours sleep and I'm up again. And that wasn't working. I was just draining myself and I caught myself procrastinating. Thinking you can be superwoman and try to do it all.

Navajo doctoral student participants were faced with numerous difficult and

challenging experiences that threatened their persistence efforts and could have forced them to withdraw from their doctoral programs. However, their ability to face difficult situations and identify resources that could assist them in addressing those issues was an example of their problem-solving and resilience. The final section of this chapter highlights the resources participants utilized to increase their persistence at Southwestern PWI.

Resources that Increase Persistence

In the sections above, participants provided a deeper understanding of the multiple threats to persistence they experienced in their doctoral programs. How they identified resources that helped them respond to their challenging experiences to strengthen their persistence remains to be explored and is the focus of this next section. Specifically, I now turn to answering the second part of the third research question: "What challenging experiences have Navajo students faced as doctoral students and what resources did they use to strengthen their persistence?" The themes that respond to the resource part of the question include providing and receiving support from fellow doctoral students and peers; effectively working with professors, mentors, and advisors in their learning process and research projects; and drawing upon the encouragement of family members (e.g., parents and grandparents) to address threats to motivation and thereby enhance their persistence. Additional significant persistence factors included having a Native campus community that offered support, resources, and a sense of community; securing fellowships to assist with educational expenses; and relying on individual resilience. Lastly, the process of students navigating higher education

institutions involved them identifying and utilizing services from various offices, personnel, policies, and knowledgeable peers to help address their academic and personal needs.

Supportive Peers

Navajo doctoral student participants expressed that their peers played an important supportive role in understanding their course material and assignments. Students felt comfortable to openly talk with their peers about their difficulty in comprehending coursework assignments and concepts. During these conversations, peers helped them discuss and brainstorm research ideas as told by Sam:

> As far as my peers, I think that we help[ed] each other a lot, we encourage[d] each other. And we're able to bounce ideas off one another [or] something that you may be struggling with, writing a piece, trying to analyze some data or something like that. Someone amongst your peers has encountered that same problem and may lend an easier solution for you, [or] an easier path to help with that piece of research that you[']re] working on. So, I think what's very helpful is having a good network of fellow peers in the same degree level, because you're going to share the same burdens and same difficulties. The other thing … it's just as good to vent [to them] too. Even though you may not [have the same] problem as your peers, I think it's just having someone to listen to your frustrations. Even though they may not lend a solution, but they're able to help … be an outlet for you.

Fellow doctoral students provided both academic and emotional support (e.g., peers listen and validate participants' experiences and struggles, which in turn helps them feel less isolated). Sheila describes how her peers helped her understand the difference between theories:

> And being in this cohort program, there's a lot of [new concepts] that I'm still thinking about it [and] being able to understand theory. [They're] talking about theories and frameworks and methodological approaches. It was just really overwhelming for me at first. I felt like I was embarrassed to ask people, like you're in a doctoral program, you should know this. You're at this level and you should know what you're doing. But I'm thinking, I didn't. Then how do you make

> that practical? How do you apply that within your community? Like we could talk about theory all day, but how are we making it relevant in our [Native] communities? It took a long time for me to even understand that, like you know, they're throwing [us] all of these academic terms. Then I would run back to those individuals, who had that experience or have written about that work. [I asked], "What was your theoretical framework? Who were the people that you cited?"

In addition to seeking out support from peers to understand theories and how to apply them to Native communities, participants also relied on their peers for reassurance that they, too, are struggling through their doctoral programs (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). Sheila said:

> And you start having those conversations that will just help enhance your thinking or maybe validate how you're feeling and what you're thinking. So, going through this, I think it's just having these conversations [that are helpful]. [For example], I had a conversation with a friend of mine. She's not here at Southwestern PWI, she's a doctoral student in Montana. I met up with her to have dinner and we just started talking about our [doctoral] programs. Where we're at [in the program] and what she's struggling with. And it's just soothing to know, like, you too [are struggling, because] that's how I felt or that's where I'm at. And them giving you advice [is invaluable].

Participants felt comfortable seeking out support and help from their peers. During their informal peer-to-peer discussions, many important and encouraging words were shared. In some cases, these conversations provided Navajo students with a surge of motivation. Richard described how vital his peers were to his doctoral journey:

> I made some good relationships [with] my peers. The people I went to school with. They open my eyes to some things that I probably didn't see or recognize. Like, I have this friend named Vanessa and she's always telling me, like, it gets really deep. "You don't know how valuable or important you are. Like, you are a Ph.D. Native American student and you don't know how unique you are. And you have this ambition to give back to your people, you don't know how much you mean to your people." She takes it that far, I'm like, "Yeah, [that's] something that I don't think about. Like, me being here is really significant. Yes, there aren't many Native American Ph.D. students." When I get the encouragement from my peers, it makes me feel like, wow, I need to keep going. Then I start internalizing it and feeling [the level of significance] too.

The final example of how peers play a vital role in Navajo doctoral students'

persistence was when they offered constructive feedback on their research papers. Some students took their papers to a writing center; however, Sam valued feedback directly from his trusted peers. Sam described this process:

> I still go to my peers. In each class you make friends with people. And you can give them your paper and read their papers. I would say that's the best resource that I have. And … the first time you hand your paper to somebody else [I thought], "Oh gosh, they're going to see how bad of a writer I am," and I think that really weighed on me, because knew that I wasn't a great writer. [I was] just afraid of those criticisms, but allowing that [process to take place]. Allowing that feedback knowing that, that feedback can help you become a better writer. I think that being able to receive assistance, receive help and being okay with that, being confident enough [to share my papers]. That was the only way [to strengthen my papers], otherwise I would be done.

After Sam incorporated the writing feedback from his peers, he felt confident enough to submit the updated version to his professors.

Encouraging Professors and Faculty of Color

Building a positive rapport with professors and faculty can increase doctoral students' positive experiences in their program (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012). Participants described encouraging professors as always available to answer their questions, providing resources to enrich their educational journey, offering constructive feedback on papers, respectful during their interactions, and viewing their traditional culture as an asset. In many instances, professors and faculty mentors were also eager to help students become successful doctoral students. Participants valued the mentorship they received from their professors. Jarvis described how his professors were willing to help him:

> The most helpful school resource for me has been the time [I spend with my] professors. The most straightforward way to gain access to a professor's time is to attend office hours ... I think there are multiple benefits to talking with a professor

> outside of class. The most obvious reason for talking to a professor is that it allows you get help and [they] make sure you have a good grasp of what's going on in class. Talking to a professor can help ensure you know what the professor expects from you for assignments. Meeting a professor outside of class gives the professor a face to attach to your name. If you are a decently pleasant person, that's a good thing. Meeting with professors also opens you up to new opportunities. If a professor knows what you're interested in and has a high opinion of you, that professor may reach out to you with an exclusive opportunity.

Participants sought out Native and Indigenous professors for guidance and support. Rose described how they helped her better understand theoretical frameworks:

> Sometimes we get confused of all of the methodology. Dr. Lopez[2] [was] very helpful. We'll ask [her], "Are we even on the right track?" She helped us and provided us with technical assistance and support. Dr. Lopez has been a life saver. She scaffolds the theories and she help[ed] us understand it and [how] it's meaningful to our own research. [Dr. Lopez] has been a huge blessing. [The department], they have their resources that they email us all the time. We have support groups, they help us with our progress deadlines. I think those two right now are probably our biggest support. But that also goes for our instructors as well. They're very open-minded and they always provide us with meaningful feedback.

In addition to asking professors to help clarify theoretical frameworks, students asked professors to help them organize their thoughts and/or arguments for research papers. Sheila and Waylon provided two examples of how Indigenous professors provided them with guidance, Sheila said:

> There are times that I come into writing blocks and what I'll do is talk with them. I'll say, "This is my thought for an outline. What do you think?" I sent outlines to [Dr. Lopez] and [Dr. Yazzie], and I'll say, "What do you think? Should there be something else that I should be discussing here?" [Through their mentorship], I've actually [re]learned how to do outlines, before I would just sit there and write. That's how I did my papers. But [with their guidance and support], I've learned how to do outlines.

Waylon echoes Sheila's sentiments with:

> [Dr. Lopez] is the example I like to use. She was my professor and she [was] always willing to help develop plans, whether it's setting timelines and schedules.

[2] Dr. Lopez is a pseudonym name used to ensure her identity is kept confidential.

> Based on when it's due and creating buffers for ourselves [to reduce getting] overwhelmed. [Dr. Lopez genuinely demonstrated care by] just checking in with us with our overall well-being.

Other Native professors offered their support by referring participants to cultural resources. Harrison sought help finding a Native community on campus. He said:

> I took courses with Native professors. You know, that was helpful too because they knew other resources. I would tell them, "This is what's happening. I'm the only Native in [my department], and I need more interaction with other [Native] people." [The Native female professor's] like, "Come here or go there." And she would invite me to dinner every now and then. So, interacting in that sense, like hey, there's other Natives here too. You're just not the only one here.

Participants received encouragement specifically from Native faculty and Faculty of Color, which justifies the need for the academy to diversify the professoriate. Faculty of Color who have shared or have similar backgrounds are more apt to have the understanding of the issues and context that affect diverse student populations and can incorporate culturally relevant and responsive curriculum (Brayboy, 2009).

Family's Support and Love

In addition to Native faculty offering support and guidance, participants valued their family's generous support and love. Family support and love was described as re-emphasizing cultural teachings, encouraging students to remain focused on their coursework, and practicing their spirituality. Students relied on their family support and love to face and overcome difficult experiences on campus and to strengthen their persistence. Sheila shared her father's cultural teaching and related it to her navigating the academy:

> [He said,] "You know where you are from ancestrally. You can go down the line and say this is where I'm from. This is how I'm connected. I know my history. You know your language. You know your culture. You have that and that should

> make you feel empowered. So, when you're in that classroom and feel like you don't belong. All those people in that class can learn from you. You have so much to offer. You have so much to give. So, I don't want you to feel like you're less [than] or that you feel like you don't belong. So, go back there next week and sit up straight, be proud of who you are, because you carry that with you. You carry all of that knowledge with you. And know that we're always going to be here. We're not going anywhere. You're going to do okay and just carry that with you." That was my words of encouragement and empowerment.

Parents offering empowering advice that is rooted in cultural history, identity, and knowledge was one of many forms of family encouragement. Another form of family encouragement was described by Richard:

> [My family] knew I wanted to go to school. So I don't think they put me in a situation to choose something else besides education. Sometimes [my family] kind of blinded me on things going on [back home], because they thought like, "Oh, this is going to interfere with his school." Sometimes I never knew about family things. If I had known that [family events were taking place], I would have come back [home]. When I come home I then realize that, oh, my brother had surgery. And I'm like, "I didn't know that." And my family was always like, "Yeah, I don't want to bother you. [Richard]'s doing good in school. [We] know everything will be okay with family. So you don't need to get him involve." So, part of me felt like I should be involved. But I understand where they were like coming from. And they managed to take care a lot of their own [business]. So, that's one way they [supported me, acknowledged my time, and] encouraged my education.

Richard's story illustrated how his family demonstrated their compassion for his education and their investment in him succeeding. When doctoral students returned home to visit their family on the Navajo Nation, their parents and relatives would share encouraging words of support and love. Waylon described his conversations:

> When I come back and I think it's the fact that they've always been there. Whether it's [in person], a phone call or a text. They're the ones saying, **"***Shiyázhí* [my child] don't give up, *Yéego ánít'į. Ałtso íinilago "hxéh hxéh" didíiniił* [try hard, when you're finished, be thankful and give back]."

The Indigenous concept of giving back is foundational to Navajo culture; just as important as Navajo ceremonies. Navajo doctoral students acknowledged that their

culture and prayers helped them reach their accomplishments in life, and in this case, their educational dreams. Sonya described how she relies on her spiritual life to help guide her:

> We still have life protection prayers. We still have to take care of that in order to be mentally and physically healthy. The reliance on [Navajo ceremonies] is still there. So, even when my girls were away at school and they come back. I have [ceremonies] done, I have things done especially when I'm feeling down and especially when I got my Bell's Palsy. My girls were there, they were the cooks, [and] they were the errand girls. We'll have things done and so they see the importance [of our culture] and it's a part of our lives.

Mentors and Advisors

Another significant resource participants used involved working with helpful and sympathetic mentors and advisors. Sometimes, effective mentoring occurred on a one-to-one basis and in other instances, it took place in a structured mentoring program. Sam recognized and described how important his advisor was in his research exploration process:

> My chair may not be an expert in working with Indigenous communities. That's on me, that's what I do for living. But [he] is an expert in exploring new sustainable and environmentally friendly ways to produce construction projects, which is very appealing to Indigenous communities and to find someone that has a passion in that field and to marry the two ideas and thoughts together, I think that it's going to work very well. [I] think that, that's just something that he's very, very helpful on. I think [he's] someone that you can definitely lean on. There's the [human] relationship aside from just research, but also the constant checking up. [He asks,] "How you doing? How are you juggling everything? How's the class going? How are your courses going?" You know, besides just asking for updates on research and things like that.

Structured mentoring required by a mentoring program was just as effective for other Navajo doctoral students like Richard. Richard described his participation with his mentoring program as:

> In my first year [of my doctoral program], I got a scholarship through a diversity

> [office]. The director [of the mentoring program said,] "Once you're part of our program and you got a scholarship, you're family here. You're always welcome to come here." She's been another great resource [through] the mentoring program. They were right about [saying] we can help you help you through whatever [issues you're facing.] I had moments even when I was having a bad semester and they'll be like, "How can we support you? What you need?" They were just there all time. I felt like I needed that throughout this [entire] program.

Participants appreciated and valued the rapport they built with their mentors and advisors. It was with their help and guidance that participants were able to navigate the doctoral program coursework and requirements, and mentors offer participants advice on how to prepare for their careers. Jarvis described the level of impact his advisor had on his educational trajectory:

> A Ph.D. candidate's advisor has a huge impact on their educational journey. Since I am still his student, the impacts are still happening. Overall, it's been very positive. He's been giving me lots of help and support. My advisor is a good resource. He's young, recently hired, so he really knows what it's like out there on the job market right now. My advisor helps me [better understand] the job market. He was hired at the beginning of this academic year as tenure-track assistant professor in my program. He helps me with [information on how to apply for a job]. We have similar interests, so I guess he's a resource for [helping me] stay excited about grad school.

Mentors and advisors offered supportive information to help guide participants with their research, access to resources, and career advice. In addition to mentors and advisors playing a vital role in students' persistence, Navajo students relied on their connection to the Native campus community for support.

Identifying Navajo Campus Community

Participants expressed that establishing a sense of community and a safe haven in a predominately White institution helped with their persistence. On the Southwestern PWI campus, the Native American Center provided support to undergraduate and

graduate AI/AN students. Richard described how he benefited from their services and space:

> I felt like even though I wasn't probably interacting with everyone or knew everyone [in the Native American Center], I would to just study and read there. [Studying] among my peers or among people who were also here [provided a sense of community]. [I thought they may be] probably dealing with some of the same things I was dealing with, like being a minority in a major [White] university. So, that's where was my safe haven. So, I made friends with the [assistant] director and we became friends. And she was very supportive like a mentor and would talk to me. [She would ask me,] "Where are you at [in my program]? What are you doing?" She's always very encouraging and then they invited me to speak at events to other undergraduate [American Indian students].

Richard found his Native campus community at the Native American Center, and other participants sought out and found their sense of community there too. Harrison shared a similar experience:

> I was the only Native in that department there getting my Ph.D. I would leave just to go to [the Native American Center] and be like, "Oh yes, there are other Natives here." Like just having them around and just having the [Native American Center] was very helpful in getting reconnected, if that makes sense. So, overall just having that Native connection is, it's like huge. It's like a support system.

Participants felt a sense of belonging while at the Native American Center, which was counter to the larger campus environment, which represented a predominately White institution. Navigating the PWI spaces was described as tiring and Navajo students sought refuge in the Native American Center. Richard recalled that experience:

> At the end of the year, I did a self-evaluation. I wrote down things I thought I needed to [do in order to] be more [successful]. I need to go to the American Indian student center more. One of the things I needed was [Native] peer interaction. I needed a safe haven. Where I could feel like I was back in [my hometown on the Navajo Nation] … I needed that. I added [the Native American Center] to the list [of things to do more of the following academic year in order to be more successful].

Lastly, as Navajo students found other AI/AN students at the Native American Center,

they were invited to participate in Native student clubs. Harrison accepted their invitation and

> [I] Became a part of the [Native American] graduate student [club]. They would do some cultural [activities] and in that sense, I was learning about certain things. As well about my own culture.

Participation in the graduate student club provided an environment for Harrison to meet many AI/AN graduate students he had never seen on campus before. The Native graduate community was a resource he searched for and he now had found. The Native American Center not only was a safe space to network with other Indigenous students and staff, but the staff encouraged students to utilize their resources and apply for graduate fellowships.

Graduate Funding Opportunities

The Native American Center was a gathering place for AI/AN undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, which made meeting other Native students much easier on the large PWI campus. As participants began to frequent the center, they received emails from the center's Native listserv. The email messages provided information related to (but not limited to) scholarship and fellowship opportunities, internship/externship announcements, work-study/job opportunities, student club activities, and upcoming academic workshops/speakers. Participants found the email announcements beneficial because they identified fellowships that they were eligible for. Harrison appreciated the fellowship announcements and applied to as many as he could:

> So financially I was set. Part of that is because of my department and part of it was because [of the Native American Center]. The [American Indian student] program on campus is very supportive financially. They're always saying, "These scholarships are available. Apply for them." So, in that sense, I felt like financially I was stable here. I never took out a loan for my Ph.D. program.

However, other doctoral students needed to be proactive to identify external funding opportunities. For example, Jarvis heard about the prestigious Ford Foundation Pre-doctoral Fellowship program and was determined to apply. He described his experience of working on his fellowship application:

> I should talk about the essay for the Ford Foundation Fellowship, which is something I actually tried really hard on. [A strategy I took to write the essay] was sort of detaching from my life and looking at it as a storyteller. I was trying to find [my lived experiences] to emphasize, [and determine] what to leave out. So, that it could be the most compelling story.

With the help of fellowship writing workshop facilitators, Jarvis wrote, edited, and re-wrote his essay. He submitted his application and was selected as a Ford Fellow, which awarded students with approximately $24,000 for the academic year.

Some Navajo students chose to dedicate their time to work on a competitive dissertation fellowship to the Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Assistance (ONNSFA), which awarded up to $20,000 in dissertation fellowships. Harrison shared his experience of applying for an ONNSFA fellowship:

> I did get scholarships from the Navajo Nation scholarship office. That did help with expenses like books, rent, and tuition. I applied for other scholarships, so I was being proactive in that sense. Because I wasn't sure how things were going to work out financially. So, I would get the Navajo scholarship and as soon as I got the Navajo Nation scholarship I paid for my rent from August to January. So that [financial award] all went to my rent. So, I didn't have to worry about my rent. I did that for the first 5 years. So, I never was like, "Oh I have $5000. What should I go buy?" No, I think more importantly, I need[ed] a roof over my head. That's how I paid my rent, once I got another scholarship, I paid for my apartment throughout the whole year. I [received departmental] stipends that paid for my necessities and food. I didn't need to pay for my car, because it was already paid off.

In retrospect, Harrison was concerned with financing his doctoral program, so he proactively began to save money before he started his Ph.D. program. Harrison recalls:

> The one thing that I thought I was going to have an issue with coming into the

> Ph.D. program was money. I really didn't know how things were going to work out. So, I started saving my money while I was working [before he started his program]. So, I had a savings account and I started saving money. I thought this could last me a couple of years. Then once this runs out, I can get student loans. So that was my mentality coming into my doctoral program.

Harrison demonstrated financial planning and discipline before he started his doctoral program. Participants in this study all took proactive steps to apply to multiple graduate funding opportunities to help pay for their total cost of attendance. Although participants received denial letters, those were overshadowed by letters describing their financial awards. Future financial planning can be related to personal motivation and resilience, as described in Harrison's story.

Relying on Personal Resilience

Participants faced and overcame obstacles while trying to understand how to best navigate higher education institutions, demonstrating resilient qualities. Their knowledge of and experiences with personal resilience were demonstrated when they took academic/career risks, in their love of learning, building confidence in their academic abilities, and implementing self-care and self-discipline. Rose talked about how taking a career risk propelled her to aim higher:

> When I taught in Chinle, I could have just been a teacher. There was an opportunity for me to go to [Desert] University. And taking that risk of going to [a new] city, relocating my family, and taking the risk of [being] a teacher in the largest public school in the nation. Yikes! It was something that was unfamiliar. I think that was the turning point in my educational journey, because I was able to be a successful [teacher] in a city in working with inner city students. I remember the first week that I taught at my middle school, the principal asked, "I know you have a degree in second language acquisition and background in linguistics. We have an ELL [English Language Learners] program here for newcomers. Would you be able to teach it?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I'll do it." I didn't know that they did not speak not even a word [of English]. I'm like, "Oh my gosh. What did I agree to?" And knowing that in three years of working with them, they were able

to become English proficient.

Rose's ability to design a curriculum to teach ELL students to become proficient in the English language strengthened her self-confidence in her teaching abilities. That self-confidence later enabled her to challenge herself to pursue bigger career dreams. Rose said:

> Knowing that I could do it outside [the Navajo Nation] and I could be successful at it. It boosted my self-esteem. I'm thinking that I always felt White society was always superior, because when I moved to different places, *Bilagáana* [White people], they know it all. Then I realized that within a couple of years of [teaching] in the city that I am just as smart as they are. I am just as good as they are. And I can do anything they can do, if not better. And knowing that I can teach their language successfully to immigrants from other countries and they failed to do so. That's when I knew and it was a turning point, thinking okay, I can do anything.

Another form of resiliency demonstrated by Navajo students was their continuation of finding ways to learn, challenging themselves intellectually, and improving their professional skill sets. Waylon described his love of learning:

> It was very exciting to earn my Ed.D. degree and implement it and put it to use [on the Navajo Nation]. I told myself I needed a plan [to continue my education], just because I have my [doctorate] degree doesn't mean I'm done learning. I looked at [the Ph.D. program] as an opportunity for professional development.

Waylon was required to participate in a professional development plan as a new requirement initiative from a tribal employer. He viewed his Ph.D. program as his professional development plan that would allow him to explore educational disparities occurring on the Navajo Nation. Once participants began their doctoral programs, they built their academic self-confidence, as told by Jarvis:

> I was good or better than most of my peers at reading and writing throughout my educational career. It boosted my intellectual self-confidence and made me believe that I was going to get through my educational journey successfully. To put it another way, I always believed I was smart enough to get through whatever school asked me to do.

Lastly, participants understood the importance of maintaining self-care and self-discipline that, when used together, could improve their ability to be resilient. Sheila described how she enacts self-care:

> I need to remember to take care of myself. Like this is what I want to do and continue to help students. But I have to remember that I need to take care of myself in order for me to continue to be persistent in my program. At work when students are coming to me, [they] think that they're coming to me for help. But really, they're helping me, you know. This is helping me be persistent, because it goes back to our culture. It goes back to the [Navajo] family values and teachings. So, it weighs a lot [in] the work I do. I think maybe this is just Creator's way of telling me that you need to do Creator's work. And these students are coming to you for a reason. Now we need to continue to take care of each other. We need to continue to help one another. So, the work I'm doing, that I'm getting it back and they're helping me.

Participants relied on their traditional teachings and spirituality to assist them with building their personal resilience. Sonya described how she was self-disciplined with her school assignments and how she shared those teachings with her children (in hopes of them applying it to their schooling):

> I think it's [important to understand the significance of] time, disciplining myself with my time, because I've always told my girls, "You know in education, it's not how smart you are, it's about dedicating time. Just putting a lot of time and focus in understanding whatever it is that you're trying to learn."

Navajo students have the ability and understanding to draw on multiple resiliency factors to enable them to overcome threats to their persistence. Those that were most significant for participants included supportive peers, professors, mentors, and family members; their ability to connect with their Native campus community to identify resources; and relying on their personal resilience and strengths. The themes presented here are the most significant among the participants, but do not represent all of their personal strengths and resiliency factors. It is my hope that we acknowledge their lived experiences as they matriculate through their doctoral journey. The student participants

shared that their use of multiple resources changed from semester-to-semester and year-after-year based on emerging challenges as they progressed towards graduation. As the participants learned how to identify and utilize multiple forms of resources, they all offered advice to prospective graduate students. Sharing this advice was a small way for them to give back to their Navajo community.

Prospective Graduate Student Advice

The participants demonstrated their resiliency, determination, and ability to become successful doctoral students. As they learned how to compile a strong doctoral program application and matriculate towards graduation, they developed advice for prospective graduate/doctoral applicants. Below is a list of their suggestions:

Richard's advice:

> If they're thinking about applying to grad school, you have to get your grades in order. That's really important. Your grades and your skills as a student, like in your writing, in your reading, and overall [academic] skills. Get yourself ready, because it gets more challenging in graduate school. And utilize as much resources as you can and network, network, network. Someone might be like, "Oh, there's scholarship you should apply for or you could work here." Just network, meet people in the field. I think that's the important thing. [Lastly,] Just make sure that whatever degree you want to go into aligns with your passion of what [career] you want to do.

Rose's advice:

> First of all, choose a profession or area of study that you are passionate about. If they do that it becomes easy. At least 6 months prior, look at different colleges and compare them. [Compare] financial [opportunities,] but look at their success rates, look at the diversity, look at the support systems those colleges may have, and make those contacts early on. Choose the best school for you and your course of study. Make sure that you have people in your support system to help guide you. If you do that, it's easy. There are a lot of opportunities or a lot of scholarship and grants. Take advantage of them.

Harrison's advice:

> Just do it. Just apply and see what happens. You know, because a lot of times people say, "Oh, this is what I want to do." ... You have to take the first step. It's easy to talk about, but you just need to take that initiative. Like they say, *T'áá Hó Ájít'éego,* [the English translation means], it's all dependent on you. It's your role, it's your duty to make that initiative. So that's what I mean by, "Just do it."

Sheila's advice:

> These [Higher Education leadership] positions that are advertised which make important decisions that affect our [Native] communities, [have] qualifications that you have to have a Master's or doctoral degree. A lot of those positions like that are held by non-Natives and so, in order to change that we need more Navajos to have to those degrees and credentials to get those jobs. But then again to remember that it's not about advancing yourself, it's about how are you going to get this degree to advance your people, and to make those decisions for them.

Jarvis' advice:

> I'm not in a good position to give advice on what how you should do it. I didn't even apply the right way. I didn't take the GRE. [However, Jarvis did share], it's so hard to write application essays. I [would say] just work really hard on it.

Sam's advice:

> Ask for help when you need it. Don't be afraid to ask for help, I would say is number one. Yep, because there is a lot of us out there that are willing to help you, we've been through it. Why reinvent the wheel?

Waylon's advice:

> My recommendation would be, don't lose yourself in the process. You already know who you are through the Navajo identity that you have been given by your clans and your place in Navajo society. I feel it is advantageous coming to Western worldviews of education [with your Navajo identity], to be able to not negate it in your studies as well. Maintain those relationships in your family and in your community, is important. That way you have that as your foundation and your support for whatever you're going to do [in graduate school].

Sonya's advice:

> [Applying to graduate school] is not scary. The thing that is a little scary is the thought of writing my dissertation. I haven't written it. I've done a lot of writing toward it, because I've done all my papers in my [dissertation] focus area. My belief is if I did the research and writing all three years that, my material eventually will come together. So, I think it's really just a step-by-step [process]. You will get help. There's people out there who have gone through this process

> and it's not as difficult as it may seem. Like working through the long math problem, when we use to have to do the long-written stuff out. That's kind of the way I see it, like a puzzle and it slowly comes together.

These Navajo doctoral students' advice stems from their rich experiences that vary from disciplines, professional experiences, financial backgrounds, and cultural teachings. When combined, they provide a wealth of guidance and encouragement.

The two most salient themes that emerged from the participants' advice related to persistence factors and advice on how to apply. Persistence advice included the importance of applying for fellowships and networking with professors that could lead to future opportunities, choosing an academic program and career field you are passionate about, serving your tribal nation as a form of motivation, and asking for help when in need. The advice participants gave about applying was direct, such as, "just do it," take the initiative to compare graduate programs for the right fit, ensure that your grades are stellar, and know the act of applying is not scary. The most important takeaway message that can be gleaned from their multiple perspectives and advice is that applying to a doctoral program can be successfully completed and with the use of resources that help with their persistence, prospective students can also excel in graduate education. In other words, participants were setting the example and paving the way for other Navajo and American Indian students to follow.

This chapter explored research question two, which identified key resources participants used to access their doctoral program. These included themes of utilizing academic and personal networks, financial fellowship support, employer forms of support, online application resources, and relying on personal strengths. The second research question provided an opportunity for the participants to share stories that

described the theme of threats to persistence, such as difficulty adjusting to doctoral education, isolation and depression, unsupportive faculty, and financial challenges. It was important to identify which resources the participants used to overcome the threats to persistence. Those resources included having a reciprocal working relationship with peers, building a positive rapport with professors and mentors, family support as a form of motivation, participating in the Native campus community, and applying to graduate fellowships. The study's findings provide new insights about resources used to increase access and persistence in graduate education. The final chapter offers the dissertation summary, discussion, and implications.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored and highlighted the decision-making factors that influenced eight Navajo graduate students to enroll in doct oral programs at a predominantly White institution in the Southwest. It also examined their experiences in graduate school and the strategies and resources they utilized to persist. Participants shared stories of resilience, personal challenges and triumph, and discussed specific factors such as knowledge of academic resources, spiritual practices, and the support of family and community as essential to their success. Because Navajo students, and American Indian and Alaska Native doctoral students, are severely underrepresented in graduate and doctoral education, it is important to understand their experiences and reasons for pursuing graduate education.

I began this dissertation study discussing the small but growing body of literature highlighting AI/AN graduate student success and how graduate student experiences have evolved in the past 2 decades. Synthesizing American Indian graduate student scholarship revealed a gap in literature and this study aimed to explore that gap. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 suggested that existing literature does not offer in-depth information about graduate school preparation for AI/AN doctoral students and research studies that focus solely on student experiences of one tribal nation are scarce. While this

research is invaluable, to date, no study has examined the motivating factors for enrolling in doctoral education for Navajo and AI/AN students. Having an understanding of the process that informs the decision to apply, enroll, and persist in doctoral education fills the literature gap (as illustrated in Figure 1) related to AI/AN students seeking graduate education.

To explore the research questions guiding this study, I utilized two Indigenous theoretical frameworks, the Navajo-centric Corn Model and an intertribal theory known as Tribal Critical Race Theory. These theories, introduced in Chapter 2, allowed me to use culturally relevant frameworks to analyze the Navajo graduate students' stories/narratives. Because storytelling is central to both frameworks, they allowed me to explore the study's three research questions using narrative inquiry. Through in-depth semistructured interviews, participants were encouraged to share their stories, opinions, challenges, and recommendations for those who wish to follow a path toward a doctoral degree.

The first research question guiding this study was discussed in Chapter 4. This question explored participants' decision-making factors and produced findings that demonstrated that the decision to enroll in doctoral study was related to a desire to enhance their career trajectory, eagerness to support family, community, and the Navajo Nation, and their familiarity with and openness to learning how to apply to a doctoral program. From there, the second research question, and the focus of Chapter 5, sought to better understand the resources participants used to access their doctoral program. In other words, how did they identify doctoral programs to apply for, gain information about the application materials needed, and navigate the application process? During this part

of the interview, many participants expressed that both academic and personal supportive networks were invaluable to the process of identifying potential academic departments and applying to them. The use of online application resources was instrumental to allow them to access important application information and departmental resources when they were geographically too far away to "drop by" the university and ask their questions in person. Importantly, online resources allowed them to identify and apply to fellowships to reduce concerns related to the cost of attendance – one of the most commonly cited concerns related to attending graduate school.

The third research question, featured in Chapter 5, explored participants' experiences, once enrolled, especially regarding threats to their persistence. I asked them about the challenges they faced and many shared expected, and unexpected, challenges that threatened to destabilize their progress and continued enrollment. While discussing the nature of the challenging experiences, which revealed some common shared struggles across the group, the participants went on to share positive lessons and resources they drew upon to strengthen their persistence. The challenging experiences responses (threats to persistence) were grouped into two categories as students described internal factors such as difficulty adjusting to graduate education, isolation and depression, and poor time management, and external factors such as negative and unsupportive faculty, financial challenges, and work-related stressors.

Lastly, the participants ended on a positive note and shared information about the important resources they used to increase their persistence. They drew upon peer support and established peer networks. They also discussed the importance of effectively working with professors, mentors, and advisors. For some, encouragement of family members was

vital to getting them through tough times as family was able to provide personally and spiritually meaningful comfort and motivation. On campus, having a Native campus community that offered support, resources, and a sense of community was important to combat the feeling of being the "only one" in their department or on campus and suppressing the sense of isolation and loneliness they may have experienced. Securing fellowships to assist with educational expenses was important as was relying on their individual resilience. The findings reported in this study are reflective of how the Navajo student participants used their education in an effort to strengthen tribal nation building, in this case the Navajo Nation.

Discussion

The study's findings provide a deeper understanding of why the Navajo student participants desired to pursue doctoral degrees and what resources they valued and used to help them solve their challenging situations. Specifically, this study identified three key themes related to decision-making factors, including the following: 1) enhancing their career trajectory; 2) desire to enhance their family, community, and Nation; and 3) their openness to learn how to create a strong application packet. Earning a doctoral degree not only enhances participants' personal career trajectory, allowing students to become more competitive for more advanced positions, and higher salaries, but it also enables them to meet requirements of positions that are designed to serve and give back to their communities. Their educational attainment benefits Indigenous communities as described by Rose's story about starting her career as a classroom teacher, which led to becoming a principle and ultimately the superintendent. This reflects Brayboy, Castagno,

and Solyom's (2014) discussion of the interdependence between community relationships and responsibility. Rose developed a personal responsibility to provide educational services to her community, which she was able to accomplish after she earned her graduate degrees.

The second decision-making factor, a desire to enhance outcomes and opportunities for their family, community, and nation, was paramount and a major motivating influence for the participants. The existing literature described how family members play an important role in supporting student success and sustaining students' motivation, persistence, and graduation. For instance, HeavyRunner and DeCelles' (2002) Family Education Model argued that traditional concepts of cultural family teachings are important and family member support and involvement were key to student retention. Moreover, Shotton's (2008) research also highlights how, in an effort to support Native students, family members took on extra responsibilities in the home to contribute to the success of the student. Neureburg's (2000) research also discusses how Native graduate students provide care for extended family while in their program as a way to support the success of Native college students. Lastly, the decision-making factor, enhancing their career trajectory, aligns with and supports existing research that argued that American Indian students' career goals that are designed to serve Indigenous communities resulted in their increased academic motivation and persistence (Bryaboy et al., 2014; Litner, 2003).

This study's findings contribute another perspective to the conversation about Native student's families. Whereas previous literature emphasized the role of the family in supporting the success of the student (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002), the

participants in this study revealed that their desire to support their family was equally important in inspiring them to earn a doctoral degree. By completing a doctoral degree, participants believed they would be able to provide enhanced support and opportunities for their families, allowing them to give back to the family that provided the support which enabled their success.

Furthermore, the decision-making factor, desire to enhance their community, is in alignment with existing literature that argued that American Indian graduate students who enroll in higher education with the goal of serving their Indigenous communities increase their persistence and "were noted as significant motivators for completing doctoral programs (Moon, 2013; Henning, 1999; Lacourt, 2003; Neuerbug, 2000; Secatero, 2009; Shotton, 2008)" (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012, p. 88). This theme was also described by the cultural concept of giving back to their communities and has been found to positively influence persistence for AI/AN students who identify with their tribal communities (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015; HeavyRunner-Rioux, 2017; Limb, 2001; Lopez, 2018; Shotton, 2008). Having a larger goal that benefits community, rather than simply focusing on individual benefit, allows students to understand the impact of completing a doctoral degree. Giving back allows students to imagine a future where their contributions enhance the well-being of their families, community, and nation. The traditional value of giving back provided an understanding that their individual sacrifices will lead to long-lasting benefits for others or the Navajo Nation.

Lastly, the Navajo participants described the decision-making factor, desire to enhance their nation. This theme aligns strongly with the work of Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2014) who stated that American Indian graduates become a highly educated

workforce who are charged with strengthening their Nation's self-determination efforts and sovereignty. Obtaining a doctoral degree was believed to strengthen and enhance the current workforce of the Nation to provide services that align with the needs of the people in critical areas, whether it is by adding to the number of educators, engineers, or health care professionals.

A significant finding that provided new understanding and knowledge to existing research was how Navajo students were open to learning how to complete a competitive doctoral program application packet. As previously stated in the literature review, only one dissertation (Secatero, 2009) briefly explored American Indian students' preparation for accessing graduate school. This study expands Secatero's (2009) work by offering an in-depth description of the process students undertook as they applied to their doctoral programs. Standard application documents required included GRE scores, statements of purpose, letters of recommendation, GPA scores, and Curriculum Vitae (CVs). When participants did not understand how to complete the required documents, they accessed resources to learn how to do so. For instance, one participant discussed how they searched for online resources to better understand what is expected in a statement of purpose, while others discussed tapping into their existing networks for advice and guidance. Several participants described meeting with professors and mentors to seek guidance on how to clarify their essays, identify viable writing samples, and complete their CVs. Participants relied on their personal networks as well as their individual resilience throughout the process – from deciding to enroll in a doctoral program through their time of enrollment. These strategies allowed them to work through issues of self-doubt; challenges with full-time work commitments; balancing their time between work,

school, and family; and dealing with difficult or unsupportive faculty or mentors. Synthesizing the findings of this study with current American Indian education literature allows for a better understanding of how and why Navajo students considered multiple factors in their graduate school decision-making process. This study's findings present a much-needed contribution to the growing conversation about American Indian graduate education.

This study also contributes to the use of Indigenous theoretical frameworks to offer a deeper cultural analysis of Indigenous stories. Although Secatero's (2009) multiple well-being Corn Model framework supports the use of interviews, focus groups and storytelling as a form of data collection, Brayboy's (2005) work also mentions the importance of stories as data. The focus of TribalCrit on Indigenous stories and the assertion that "our stories are our theories" (p. 426) suggests that listening to the stories and experiences of Navajo students, through the use of interviews, will provide an opportunity to learn about the factors that make them successful and allow them to persist. This section discusses the findings through the lens of the Navajo centered Corn Model (Sacetero, 2009) and the intertribal Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005).

The majority of the Navajo participants acknowledged that they are originally from a community within the Navajo Nation and their sense of belonging, identity, and sense of place was culturally rooted within Navajoland. Their physical homeland helps form their Navajo identity and provided them with the teachings that strengthen their resilience and persistence in their educational journey. The participants mentioned the need to return "home" to experience their cultural sense of place by immersing themselves in Navajoland and to reground themselves in order to combat feelings of

loneliness and isolation at the PWI. Furthermore, Sheila mentioned that although she was away from home, she surrounded herself with cultural items in her office that enhanced her sense of place on a PWI campus, while simultaneously acknowledging that the campus was on Indigenous lands of the neighboring tribal nations. The participants' examples of how they were culturally connected to a sense of place aligned with the first element of Secatero's (2009) Corn Model's physical well-being and sense of place.

The participants all shared stories of how they identified and used academic and personal support networks to build their list of resources, such as mentors, advisors, and fellow doctoral students. Good mentors validate participants' experience and goals of serving their people. Their support networks were closely related to the second element of the Corn Model (Secatero, 2009), which focused on social well-being and could be understood as utilizing social networks and communication skills. Social well-being was understood as the exchange of resources, cooperation among peers through social media, and information gatherings. Student communication and rapport were additionally strengthened when they sought guidance from their mentors. Lastly, their resourcefulness was demonstrated when participants used their computer literacy skills in order to learn how to format and complete the required application documents. Literacy skills is one concept that forms the social well-being element of Secatero's (2009) Corn Model.

All of the students demonstrated qualities of critical thinking and goal setting as they explored doctoral programs to determine which program offered research that matched their passions. Further, critical thinking was demonstrated when participants discussed their process of synthesizing the literature related to their dissertations. As students synthesized the literature, they developed ideas or ways to contribute to the

literature in the form of concept development. Goal setting was demonstrated by participants' ability to articulate academic goals of earning their doctorate degrees, which would position them to work towards their professional goals (as described in their career trajectory stories). These qualities related to the third element of the Corn Model's (Secatero, 2009), mental well-being, which involved critical thinking, concept development and setting goals.

Of the four elements within the Corn Model, spiritual well-being was the least discussed with only brief descriptions of participants engaging in traditional ceremonies or church events. Seven out of the eight participants talked about how their families planned traditional ceremonies related to their educational goals, overall well-being, and encouraged the act of prayer. The one participant who did not describe his spiritual well-being grew up in an urban city with little connection to his Navajo family. Although this study did not explore how spirituality affected participants' decision-making factors, students referenced their spirituality when they discussed factors that encouraged their persistence. The spirituality conversations can be related to the last Corn Model (Secatero, 2009) element, spiritual well-being, which is known as life goals that are interconnected between family and religion. Participants and their families sought out elders or medicine men to help rebalance their life aiming for a state of *Hozho.* This became important when participants sought guidance when encountering unexpected challenges to their persistence.

The study's finding, related to resources that increased persistence, highlighted how students relied on their traditional teachings of being connected to their Navajo community. This finding was identified by culturally analyzing the narrative data using

Brayboy's (2005) Tribal Critical Race Theory tenet, "the concepts of culture knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens" (p. 429). This tenet described how cultural values and knowledge influenced participants' educational and career goals. Brayboy (2005) argued that there are multiple forms of Indigenous knowledge in the areas of cultural, survival, academic, and spiritual. For example, the cultural and spiritual knowledge and values Sheila learned from her parents of serving the community and the importance of prayer were used to ground her identity and motivation as she navigated her interactions with students, staff, and faculty at Southwestern PWI. She believed that where ever she is, her family is culturally with her through prayers and the way in which she conducts herself. The power of prayer and spirituality is in Secatero's (2009) and Brayboy's (2005) Indigenous theoretical frameworks. The cultural teaching of serving Indigenous people helps reaffirm participants' choice to pursue a doctoral degree to serve Indigenous people and reinforces their persistence efforts.

Another significant finding that highlighted threats to persistence revealed that unsupportive faculty reinforced the negative historical interactions between AI/AN students and faculty, as illustrated by Richard's advisor who repeatedly reminded him that he is "poor," which limited his internship options, and Harrison's advisor forcing him to start a career as a professor hundreds of miles away from his desired and beloved homeland and people. This finding became apparent when analyzing the narrative stories using Brayboy's (2005) Tribal Critical Race Theory tenet "government policies and education policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation" (p. 429). Brayboy (2005) argues:

> TribalCrit explicitly rejects the call for assimilation in educational institutions for American Indian students…Education, according to TribalCrit, might also teach American Indian students how to combine Indigenous notions of culture, knowledge, and power with western/European conceptions in order to actively engage in survivance, self-determination, and tribal autonomy. (p. 433)

This tenet allowed me to understand that institutions of higher education continue to employ faculty who harbor Western educational values to assimilate AI/AN students and force those values onto the Navajo participants. Native students may be valued for their diversity and their potential to serve their field, but only if they give up their desire to serve their Native communities. For some participants, receiving faculty support was contingent upon their incorporation of Western values and pursuing a career in mainstream institutions (not in tribal serving institutions).

Another finding in the decision-making factors related to Navajo doctoral participants' traditional value of not only giving back to their family, community, but actively providing public service to benefit their tribal nation. As described by participants, nation building goals increased their persistence rates and encouraged their learning process making Western knowledge relevant and applicable in their Navajo communities. Furthermore, participants' resilience and ability to seek out mentors who were able to help them connect the skill sets they are gaining in Southwestern PWI to their positions on the Navajo Nation or when serving Indigenous people served as an important source of persistence. The themes of giving back to family, community, and Nation, and persistence were identified when applying the third TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) tenet "tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples" (p. 429). Using TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) and the Corn Model (Secatero, 2009) together offered an

Indigenous theoretical lens to understand and unpack Navajo student stories of how they sought to strengthen their Nation and, as a result, how they enact nation-building efforts.

Perhaps most surprising was the unintended finding of this study. As a result of how students responded during the interviews to questions about persistence, the dissertation study slightly changed. When students were asked to describe what resources they use to help with their persistence efforts, each participant began with a story of a negative experience or problem they encountered. The stories of negative experiences and problems were unexpected and were important in understanding participants' lived experiences and made it clear that all participants felt this was information that was significant in the context of their doctoral journey. Stories of threats to persistence were so common that I revised the research question to include "What challenging experiences have Navajo students faced as doctoral students?" Revising the research question resulted in a new category of "threats to persistence," which brought to light participants' negative experiences, which in many cases they had not shared with department administrators due to fear of retaliation or consequences.

Implications

The findings of this study present implications for research, policy, and practice to improve how higher education institutions and Indian organizations serve Navajo and AI/AN graduate students. This dissertation identified Navajo graduate students' decision-making factors, examined resources used to increase access and persistence, and explored threats to persistence, all of which can influence future research and practice. This study can be used as a foundation to expand related research exploring the experiences of

AI/AN graduate students from many Native nations in an intertribal participant study that involves students from multiple universities nationwide. Including participants from multiple locations will offer a perspective that is more reflective of students throughout the nation and throughout Indian country.

A second study could focus specifically on American Indian and Alaska Native male student experiences, which is an area that is severely understudied. According to the 2017 Office of the Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Assistance Annual Report, their award recipients' gender were 36% male recipients and 64% female recipients. The low percentage of Navajo male recipients highlights the need to better understand why Navajo men do not pursue graduate education at the same rates as their female counterparts. All of the male participants in this study expressed their sense of isolation and described being the only Navajo in their program. Furthermore, research on AI/AN male students is important because their enrollment in higher education nationwide has dropped within the last 30 years (Brayboy, Solyom, Chin, Tachine, Bustamante, Ben, & Poleviyuma, 2018). As a result of this, the majority of the research on AI/AN graduate students focuses primarily on the experience of American Indian women, who dominate enrollment in postsecondary education (Shotton, Waterman, & Lowe, 2013).

Additionally, all Navajo doctoral participants felt a major threat to their persistence was financing their doctoral programs; thus, future research exploring how American Indian and Alaska Native graduate students may benefit from their tribal nations building partnerships (or memorandum of understandings) with institutions of higher education to alleviate and reduce the burdens of the cost of attendance has not be documented. For example, Southwestern PWI has formed a memorandum of

understanding with the Navajo Nation to offer a tuition matching program for multiple academic programs (e.g., teacher education and law). The tuition matching program provides a positive influence for institutions of higher education to student recruitment and retention rates. By minimizing the total cost of attendance, this research implication expands Nelson's (2015) dissertation research that explored how American Indian undergraduate students' financial aid status affects their enrollment.

Although the study's participants acknowledged that their spirituality helped them persist in their doctoral program indirectly, they did not provide deeper explanation. Future research could explore how spirituality influences Native students' sense of identity, relationships with others and the degree to which those effect their educational achievements throughout their doctorate programs. Spirituality as defined by the participants included engagement in traditional Navajo ceremonies, attending Native American Church, practicing Christianity, and/or being Atheist. Furthermore, Native male graduate student experiences and an intertribal participant study on decision-making factors are all worthy of future investigation.

As stated in the methodology chapter, this study utilized Critical Indigenous Research Methodology and aligns well with previous research that indicates that Navajo and AI/AN students are severely underrepresented in doctoral education (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Furthermore, this study presented an in-depth analysis of student experiences and followed a culturally respectful reciprocal rapport between the participants and myself. As a result, this study identified six factors that contribute to students' decisions to access doctoral education. The next step in a CIRM approach is to share the findings with key stakeholders. A creative way to share the findings is to create

a model illustrating factors AI/AN students used to increase access into doctoral education. Scholarship that outlines preparation and strategies to increase access specifically for AI/AN students into doctoral education does not exist. The six findings of this study offer narrative data that can be further analyzed to create an AI/AN doctoral student access model. A model that visually identifies factors to increase access would be beneficial to prospective AI/AN students, higher education institution staff, faculty, and administrators, and Tribal Nations. When developing the access model, it will be vital to include the Indigenous construct of storytelling, whereas the student participants' stories will be used to mold the creation of the model. To strengthen the design of the model, I will refer to and build upon Secatero's (2009) study, which was one of the earliest conversations around AI/AN graduate student preparation. Constructing this model will be the next step of my research process.

In regard to policy implications, this study can be used to inform educational administrators and state legislators to amend existing policies to further increase access and affordability for AI/ANs enrolling into doctoral education. For example, the former Navajo Nation President Peterson Zah advocated to the Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico Board of Regents to consider Navajo students residing within the Navajo Nation's boundaries as in-state residents for tuition purposes. Advocating for in-state resident status would significantly reduce the students' tuition, which reduces their total cost of attendance. Below are two policies that explain how American Indian students qualify for in-state residency. According to the Arizona Board of Regents policy number 4-203 8. A., "The individual is an enrolled member of an Indian tribe recognized by the United State Department of the Interior whose reservation land lies wholly or partially in

Arizona and extends into another state and is a resident of the reservation" (p. 10). Additionally, the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) Board of Regents policy, R512.7.1.2.3., established in 1975 that in-state residency status for American Indians "whose reservation or trust lands lie partly or wholly within Utah or whose border is at any point contiguous with the border of Utah" (https://higheredutah.org/policies/r512-determination-of-resident-status/). This dissertation could provide administrators and legislators with an introduction to how and why Navajo doctoral students are concerned with paying for their graduate education. In this study, financing their programs was a deciding factor for enrolling into specific programs. Furthermore, once policy makers better understand that financing their cost of attendance was a barrier to Native student enrollment, it is my hope that they create new policy language that further increases access for AI/AN students. For example, the USHE Board of Regents could consider expanding residency language to include American Indians whose ancestral homelands lie partly or wholly within Utah borders to be considered in-state residents for tuition purposes. For the USHE Board of Regents, in-state residency status for tuition purposes could be compared to similar policies in Arizona and New Mexico that involve the Navajo Nation and their Navajo students. The Arizona in-state residency policy differs in that it was amended in 2013 to include students who are Arizona tribal citizens and who reside out of state. This policy helps recruit and "retain American Indian students by making educational costs more affordable" (https://uanews.arizona.edu/story/instate-tuition-creates-opportunity-american-indian-students), by allowing Arizona Natives who reside outside of Arizona to qualify for in-state status for tuition purposes. For example, a Navajo citizen residing in South Dakota who wishes to enroll in Southwestern PWI in

person or online is eligible for in-state tuition rates.

A second example of using this study's findings to inform policy is to encourage doctoral programs to acknowledge AI/AN students' drive and passion to give back and serve their Indigenous communities as an asset and/or persistence predictor and to consider that drive as a factor in their application review process. Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2014) challenged faculty admission reviewers to consider AI/AN graduate students' desire to give back as an indicator of their future academic success and consideration for admission beyond simply relying on merit-based measures such as GRE scores and GPA scores. It is important to consider students' intentions for pursuing a doctoral degree and how they plan to use the skill sets gained in the program to reach their professional goals postgraduation. All of the Navajo doctoral participants expressed a desire to give back as a form of motivation to pursue their doctorate. Academic programs that have a mission of addressing social justice issues and designing their work and research to reduce educational inequalities could pilot using this new factor as a prediction of Indigenous students' persistence.

This study's findings also present implications for practice among faculty and staff in graduate programs. The Navajo doctoral students' decision-making process could be used by academic faculty who advise Navajo and AI/AN students to enhance mentoring and advising services available to undergraduate and master's students. The findings can be used as an outline to guide conversations in one-to-one settings or with larger groups of AI/AN undergraduate and master's students to better support their motivations to pursue doctoral education and understand their experiences and concerns. Staff and faculty can determine which findings would be most useful for their

conversations with prospective students.

Moreover, the study findings suggest higher education institutions must improve their efforts to increase and retain the number of both AI/AN faculty and Faculty of Color, who were identified as important stakeholders in helping participants navigate challenging experiences during their enrollment and influenced their desire to persist. Supportive AI/AN faculty and Faculty of Color who understand the needs of diverse students can simultaneously increase the number of mentors Navajo and AI/AN students can utilize while also retaining the student diversity so many institutions of higher education claim to value. However, it supports the argument that diversifying faculty in higher education improves the retention and achievement of Students of Color (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). Based on the many negative interactions between the Navajo doctoral participants and non-Native faculty, it is additionally imperative to train non-Native faculty to become more culturally respectful of AI/AN history and values, and to acknowledge that Indigenous history and culture are assets that students rely on to increase their motivation and persistence. As a result, non-Native faculty mentoring must change to better serve AI/AN student academic needs.

Lastly, the findings can help form how institutions create and/or revise resources and services that are specifically designed to serve AI/AN graduate students. It is my hope that educators will use the study's findings to learn about the lived realities of Navajo doctoral students, and use the findings to inform how they can develop strategies to increase the number of Navajo and AI/AN students accessing doctoral education.

Summary

This study shared important insight into the motivation and preparation for completing a doctoral program application for Navajo doctoral students. It explained what resources they used to increase access, identified challenges experienced in their doctoral programs, and highlighted how they utilized multiple resources to address those challenges to ultimately strengthen their persistence. While this insight is invaluable, it is important to recognize that this study could not have been possible without the eight Navajo doctoral student participants who generously volunteered to share their lived experiences of navigating educational systems throughout the Navajo Nation and in schools off the nation. The participants willingly shared their stories, which were heartfelt, motivational, and heartbreaking at times. This allowed me to learn about and showcase their determination and resilience. Although they shared educational stories from kindergarten through 12th grade, their undergraduate experiences, and stories describing their master's programs, I did not include them in this study as they extended beyond the scope of this dissertation focus. However, I plan to use the data in future American Indian education research that explores how the participants' secondary, undergraduate, and master's experiences have shaped their ideas and motivation about pursuing a graduate degree. Another future study could expand the participants' narratives to include their comprehensive educational history and journey from kindergarten to their doctoral degree.

This dissertation is important in that it is the first study to highlight Navajo doctoral participants' decision-making factors that were influenced by their resourcefulness when learning how to complete a doctoral program application. The

study also focused on participants' drive to enhance their career trajectory, while also describing their eagerness to support their family and nation. This study is beneficial to the field of American Indians in higher education because it identified resources that participants used to increase their access to graduate school. Specifically, this study provided the participants an opportunity to share their lived experiences of what helped and hindered their access to graduate school. Notably, they were able to use supportive networks, online resources to learn about their graduate programs requirements and fellowship opportunities. Conversely, this study also brought to light their experiences that threatened their persistence, such as internal factors of adjusting to graduate education, isolation, and depression; and external factors related to unhealthy relationships with their advisors, mentors, and work-related stressors. Factors that contributed to threats to persistence are in alignment with the few studies about American Indian graduate education. The last, but not least important aspect of this dissertation is how the participants were able to increase their persistence by working with supportive peers, effectively working with their professors and mentors, receiving encouragement from their family, and relying on their individual resilience.

As a Navajo educator, it is now my cultural responsibility to share the study's findings with American Indian and non-American Indian educators in higher education institutions, with the Navajo Nation education departments, and with national Indian education organizations, in hopes of increasing the quality of support for Navajo and AI/AN students applying to doctoral programs, providing resources to strengthen their persistence, and achieving their dreams of earning a doctoral degree. As educators, we must work together to design recruitment and retention initiatives that are specific to

Navajo and AI/AN graduate students, so the number of Navajo and AI/AN doctoral students who graduate with advanced skill sets that provide them opportunities to strengthen their families, communities, and the Navajo Nation will increase. Ultimately, participants will strengthen their family's educational trajectory and contribute to their beloved Nation's nation-building efforts.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Hello [insert name], thank you for allowing me to interview you today. The purpose of our conversation today is to understand your experiences of accessing graduate school. The working title of my study is, "Navajo Student Experiences of Accessing Graduate Programs." I would like to focus on three overarching topics of decision-making factors, resources that aided your access into graduate school, and resources you use to help persist in grad school.

You were identified based on the fact that you are a citizen of the Navajo Nation, you attend ASU and you're a current graduate student. I anticipate that our interview will last 90 minutes. Is that okay with your schedule? *Read to the IRB interview informed consent language to participants.*

Warm up questions

1. Please tell me where you were raised and where your family is from?
2. What college or university did you attend for your undergrad degree and why did you choose to attend there?
3. Please explain how you selected your undergraduate major?

Intermediate Questions

4. Tell me about your undergraduate college experience and what kept you

motivated to earn your college degree?

5. When did you start thinking about graduate school?
6. What motivated you to want to earn a graduate degree?
7. Why did you decide to pursue graduate school? Was there a specific experience that influenced this decision?
8. Tell me about the graduate application process. How did you prepare yourself for graduate school and what was your graduate application process like?
9. What resources or services helped you get into graduate school?
10. When deciding to apply to graduate school, how did you address any challenges that arose?
11. Now that you are in graduate school, what specific resources/offices/people do you find helpful to being a successful student? How are they helpful?

Ending Questions

12. Looking back, what is most important thing you did to get you to this point?
13. What advice would you give undergraduate Navajo students who are thinking of applying to graduate school?
14. Is there anything else you think I should know about your experience of transitioning to graduate school?

Thank you, [insert name] for allowing me to interview. I really appreciate your time and the conversation we had. Once I transcribe our interview, I'll email you the transcription and feel free to let me know if there is anything you want me to change. After I analyze and write up my findings, I'll provide you with the results. At that time, feel free to offer any feedback.

APPENDIX B

JOURNALING PROMPTS

1. Please tell me a story of when and how you began to value education.
2. Who or what has impacted you the most in your educational journey?
3. What role, if any, did your family and culture have on your educational success? Please provide examples.
4. Can you describe how your interactions with university students, staff and faculty affects your attitude towards persistence?
5. Please tell me what school resource (s) is the most helpful and why?

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