NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF
ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAMS

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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Native Americans remain the most underrepresented community and culture in higher education due to a long history of colonialism and acculturation, a lack of adequate preparation for higher education at the secondary level, and lack of access to culturally relevant programs and pedagogy in traditional colleges and universities. Improved access and achievement in higher education is important for Native American students given the connections with socio-economic power and attainment for communities in the United States in our current knowledge-based economy. The study examines perceptions of Native American students toward online higher education in order to explore the viability of online degrees as a pathway to educational attainment. Defined by cultural relevancy and informed by indigenous research methods and theories, the study involved three talking circles of Native American college students from higher education institutions in the Inland Northwest (Eastern Washington and North Idaho) and six tribal education administrator interviews. Those conversations were transcribed and analyzed for common themes.

Analysis of the findings revealed that student participants perceive online degree programs to be isolating and lacking in culturally relevant support systems. The findings also show that many students have very limited exposure to online degree programs when evaluating
colleges, and access to the necessary technology and internet connection for completing a degree online is often inadequate where they live. These factors contribute to an overall negative perception of online higher education for the study participants.
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Dedication

To my children, Reed and Taylor, for whom I hope this journey will provide an example of what one can accomplish when you put your mind to it and do not let anything derail your dreams and aspirations, and in whom I hope to inspire a love of lifelong learning and a desire to do good work with others in mind.

Conquer one day at a time.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The history of Native American higher education is replete with curricular trends aimed at assimilation, indoctrination, and acculturation of Native students. Since the creation of the first Indian College in the United States at Harvard University in the 17th century, institutions of higher education have engaged in a sort of double-speak, proclaiming publicly that higher education would benefit Native students and communities, when in reality the educational mission was geared toward remolding the Natives in the colonial model. Colonialism, or the systematic takeover of culture and country, has been perpetuated for centuries, and not just at isolated institutions but throughout the country. Describing federal policy toward Native American education, James (2006) states, “Efforts were consistently made to break down Indigenous cultures and social patterns through, among other things, forced ‘education’ aimed at inculcating the language, values, and behavior patterns of mainstream American society” (p. 47). These efforts were meant to “eliminate Indian cultures, communities, and ways of life” (James, 2006, p. 47).

The pervasive use of colonial thinking and acculturation in higher education have been critical components in the lack of access and success for Native American students (Wright, 1991a). In spite of these revisionary themes that have plagued the history of Native education, great strides have been made to improve access to higher education, and more avenues exist today than ever before for achieving a college degree. Tribal colleges, community colleges, mentor programs, community programs, as well as evidence-based achievement and early access

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1 In this dissertation, the terms Native American, Native, and Indigenous are used interchangeably, and were chosen due to their common use in literature written by Native American scholars.
programs have become important parts of the higher education landscape, and are increasing the opportunities for Native students to obtain post-secondary educational certifications.

Still, Native Americans continue to be the most underrepresented minority group in higher education (Harrington & Harrington, 2010; Hunt & Harrington, 2011). Reasons include that many Native students, particularly those raised in and around reservation communities, are effectively denied access to state and private colleges and universities by virtue of poor preparation in high school, lack of financial resources, and a scarcity of community support with which Native students tend to thrive in higher education (Jenkins, 1999; Wright, 1991a). For those who do matriculate, completion rates are markedly lower when compared to those in the dominant culture, and are even below that of other ethnic and political minorities, such as Hispanic and African American communities (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Larimore & McClellan, 2005).

The historical underrepresentation of Native Americans in higher education is problematic because Native communities are deprived of the benefits of higher education when their constituents are unable or unwilling to obtain a post-secondary degree. “A college education is a significant driver in the socioeconomic advancement of American Indian communities” (Hunt & Harrington, 2010, p. 1). Ensuring access for Native Americans could lead to a leveling of the economic and political power of Native communities with those of the dominant culture in America, and may provide a sounder foundation for self-determination and sovereignty (Huffman, 2001; Hunt & Harrington, 2010).

One significant and potentially viable access point to higher education for Native Americans is online degree programs. Online education, which emerged from traditional correspondence and video-based distance education programs, evolved as a means to provide
greater access to non-traditional students who struggle with any number of obstacles to obtaining a college degree: financial constraints, family and work obligations, and the lack of a desire to relocate are among the barriers faced by non-traditional students, all of which are addressed to some extent by distance education. Online degree programs in particular offer flexible, and often more affordable higher education, directly to the student when and where they choose. As technology and academic rigor improve in online courses, online programs may enable those who might otherwise eschew higher education a chance to enjoy the benefits of a college degree.

Despite the increased availability and quality of online higher education, a small number of Native Americans take advantage of this medium. While Ambler (2004) and Berkshire and Smith (2000) comment about contributing issues to low Native enrollment in online degree programs (e.g., lack of cultural relevancy of the programs and lack of access to appropriate technology), there is limited information about the perceptions of Native students toward online higher education. The goal of this study is to identify the perceptions of Native American students toward online higher education in an attempt to reveal limitations and areas of strength in online education as it relates to Native students so that changes can be made which enable greater access to be gained through this medium.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of the study is to identify Native American student perceptions about online degree programs offered by non-tribal institutions in order to understand strengths and limitations of the medium as an access point for obtaining a degree. Ultimately, the insight gained through the study should help universities to meet the unique needs of Native American students via online programs. By expanding the understanding of the perceptions held by Native American students toward degree acquisition via online programs, public colleges and
universities may be able to learn how best to approach outreach in online programs for Native students and could eventually lead to increases in Native enrollments and degree completion, both of which are imperatives for this underserved population. Expanded understanding of perceptions may also provide perspective on how public universities prioritize Native American student needs.

The overarching research questions that guide the study are:

- How do Native American students perceive online higher education?
- How do program availability and access to technology shape perceptions of online higher education?

Significance of Study

A college degree is recognized as one of the most important factors in political, sociological, and economic advancement for communities and individuals (Hunt & Harrington, 2010; Kingston, Hubbard, Lapp, Schroeder, & Wilson, 2003). Because of the key role a college degree plays in economic and political agency, it is important that higher education institutions work with communities and preparatory school districts in their service areas to ensure that those who aspire to obtain a college education are able to do so. A largely overlooked population in higher education research, Native Americans are the most poorly represented minority group in higher education, and their underrepresentation has contributed to depressed socio-political and economic conditions in many traditional Native American communities (Brescia & Daily, 2007). More research examining aspects pertaining to access to higher education for Native students is needed to better understand the conditions and policies that contribute to limited post-secondary success for Native Americans.
Little research examines the perceptions of Native American communities toward online education, nor have researchers examined the obstacles and synergies inherent to online higher education and their relationships to culturally traditional Native American communities. Some research exists on issues contributing to low adoption of online education by Native Americans, such as the digital divide (Berkshire & Smith, 2000; Bissell, 2004; Fairlie, 2005; Salpeter, 2006; Sanchez, Stuckey & Morris, 1998; Stuart, 2008) and access to higher education in general for Native American students (Jenkins, 1999; McClellan, Fox, & Lowe, 2005; Pavel, 1999; Tierney, Sallee, & Venegas, 2007). However, there remains a gap in the research pertaining to how college students from traditional Native American backgrounds perceive online education.

By studying the perceptions of Native American students toward online education using a qualitative research approach, the study helps reveal perceived strengths and weaknesses of online higher education for Native students. With a better understanding of the way Native students relate to online education, whether in a positive or negative light, universities may be able to improve or adapt online programs and outreach strategies to Native American communities. With improved access to post-secondary education and stronger relationships between the academy and Native communities, those communities and individuals may experience socio-economic and political benefits.

The results of the study may also prove beneficial to colleges and universities as well as Native Americans and their communities. In an era of public and federal demand for accountability in higher education, institutions have a vested interest in increasing enrollments, providing programs and services which improve retention and graduation, and attracting students who can and will be successful in completing their education. Should online programs prove to be a desired and relevant access point to higher education for Native American students, colleges
and universities may choose to focus more resources toward increasing the availability and visibility of the online programs they offer in Native communities.

Also of significance to colleges and universities is the need to increase exposure for all students to a truly multicultural education, meaning diverse peer interactions are a central tenet of all programs offered in the institution (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004). As universities seek to prepare the next generation of leaders and facilitate global learning, integrating Native American voices and perspectives into courses and programs online will help to facilitate greater cultural competency and global citizenship for all students.

Ultimately, the study is important because it increases understanding of perspectives Native American college students have toward online education, which in turn may guide further studies and programs which should ultimately enhance the accessibility of degree programs for Native Americans.

**Research Design and Methodology**

The study is an exploratory qualitative project designed to increase understanding of the perceptions Native American students have toward obtaining a degree via online programs. The study utilizes qualitative research methods, largely relying on a set of talking circles with Native American students at various institutions in the Inland Northwest (Eastern Washington and North Idaho). The talking circles were facilitated by semi-structured questions which allowed for the study results to be directed by the research participants. The talking circle content and structure are informed by Indigenous research theory (Chilisa, 2012; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) and are designed to assess perceptions of appropriateness, access, quality, and barriers to online degree programs in terms of meeting the needs of Native students.
To enrich the data, six Native American tribal education administrators and counselors were included in the study. The transcribed and coded data from the interviews and talking circles were member checked and triangulated using current literature, documents obtained from tribal high school counseling centers, and college recruiting web sites. The findings of the study provide deeper understanding of student perspectives of online degree programs.

**Conclusion**

In order to assess the viability of online programs as a pathway to higher education success for Native Americans, it is important to understand the perspectives held by Native students toward online higher education. The study elicited responses that address perceptions of quality, relevancy, synergies, and obstacles inherent in online education and provide a thorough picture of the feasibility and importance of committing resources to development of online programs specifically designed to attract and meet the needs of Native American students.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Native American students are among the least represented cultural groups in higher education, and with a knowledge-based economy in the United States that requires higher education for many of the most lucrative and desirable jobs, improving Native American student access to higher education is crucial. Research is needed in order to reveal strategies and opportunities for improved access to the benefits of higher education for Native American students. One area that is opportune for research is distance education, specifically how online programs might serve Native American students. These types of programs evolved from traditional higher education as a means to provide access to populations that may be unable or unwilling to attend a traditional residential college, and they have become an important access point for many non-traditional students. Examining online higher education in terms of the access it provides, the learning approaches necessary to be successful in online courses, the benefits inherent to the tool, and the limitations for broad adoption, provide insight into the potential for online programs to meet the needs of Native Americans. In order to provide a more complete understanding of the context in which the study is situated, the literature review begins with a look at the history and current trends of higher education for Native Americans, and then includes an overview of the aspects of online and distance education germane to serving diverse populations.

History of Native American Higher Education

The history of Native American Higher Education is a tale of assimilation, abuse, and acculturation: of boarding schools, unequal access, unfair assessment, and irrelevancy (Deyhle &
Native Americans were introduced to the European model of higher education beginning with the founding of the Indian College at Harvard in 1656. In the centuries that followed, Indian colleges and boarding schools rose and fell across country, most of which were founded in association with churches, and had the dual mission of education and salvation (ERIC, 1989). Despite the efforts of institutions such as William and Mary, Dartmouth, and others that included Indian education as a part of their mission, “by 1932, only 385 American Indians had been enrolled in postsecondary institutions and only 52 had actually graduated” (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012, p. 7). Despite the colonial and controlling past, trends in higher education are showing promise in terms of serving Native Americans, primarily via tribal colleges as they rise in reputation and popularity. There are strong forces in the traditional academy that are also working to remedy the access and assessment gaps in order to ensure there are more opportunities for Native American students (Jackson et al., 2003; Wright, 1991a). Higher education for Native Americans has evolved over time, and continues to progress in terms of relevance, inclusion, and access.

An appreciation of the state of Native American higher education today calls for understanding of the path it has followed to get here. McClellan et al. (2005) classify the history of Native American higher education into three eras: Colonial, Federal, and Self-Determination. The Colonial era (1400s-1780s) is characterized by the assimilation practices referenced earlier, as the colonial colleges offered access to Native American men, promising to acculturate and “improve” the men they “educated”, hoping they would return to their tribes to “civilize” their families and communities (Ambler, 2004; Wright, 1991a). Many of the colonial colleges and even colonial charters themselves actually had Indian Education and acculturation as part of their mission statements (Brayboy et al., 2012; ERIC Report, 1989; McClellan et al., 2005), which is
the beginning of what could be called the “double-speak” of Native American higher education. Universities assert that they serve that population to their funders and supporters while they simultaneously seek to assimilate and acculturate the native students (Wright, 1991b), which are clearly antithetical missions.

Wright (1991b) insists that the reason only a very small number of Native Americans took advantage of colonial higher education, and such a small number take advantage of higher education to this day, is due to the tribes’ and tribal leaders’ distrust of the schools. “American Indians have adamantly refused to surrender to an institution which for centuries has sought to assimilate them, to remake them in the image of their European subjugators” (Wright, 1991b, p. 84). Consequently, elders refused to send or allow Native men to attend college. In fact, in all of the colonial era, only four Native men actually graduated (McClellan et al., 2005). Though a distrust of higher education may still be present in some traditional Native American communities, there is likely recognition of the fact that higher education is a valuable commodity for economic and political empowerment of tribal members and communities. Unfortunately, there is little in the research on higher education for Native Americans pertaining to the desire for or aspiration to obtaining a higher education degree.

In the Federal Era, which extended from the end of the Revolutionary War through 1934 and the signing of the Indian Reorganization Act (McClellan et al., 2005), the nation saw a huge increase in university and college building, and yet only a small number of those colleges had Native American education as a part of their mission. Where it was part of the mission, it tended to mean boarding schools with the same focus as the colonial colleges: assimilation and acculturation. These boarding schools had a devastating effect on families and communities as children and youngsters were forced to leave their homes to go to school. Students were forced
to abandon their Native language and cultural practices, and they were taught to look down on
the ways of their parents and ancestors (Pewewardy, 2002). To this day, as Ambler (2004) says,
“’distance education’ for American Indian people meant boarding schools” (p. 4), and there is
inherent distrust in the term because of that connotation. Because of this connection, though
boarding schools and higher education are not synonymous in the absolute, they may be roughly
synonymous in perception.

In the Self-Determination era (1934 - present), with the advent of the Indian
Reorganization Act of 1934, sovereignty was re-established for tribes by the federal government,
and in the 1960s tribally controlled colleges and universities (TCUs) emerged. These colleges,
chartered as community colleges by tribes themselves, provide a pathway to higher education for
tribal members in ways traditional schools never did. The programs they offer are relevant,
relatable, local, and the pedagogy is culturally-based (Bull, 2012). Although tribal universities
and colleges “play a significant role in the educational attainment of Indigenous students”
(Brayboy et al., 2012, p. 68), it is important to note that “there is also some evidence that relying
solely on TCUs to educate Indigenous peoples in the United States may be problematic”
(Brayboy et al, 2012, p. 71) due to low completion rates. Graduation rates, 2-year degree rates,
and matriculation to four-year institutions are all very low for Native American students, so a
more concerted effort to coordinate with mainstream higher education may yield better
completion rates and outcomes for Native students.

State run community colleges, like the TCUs that are primarily classified as community
colleges, have also created a viable pathway to higher education for Native Americans, offering
low cost tuition, connection to community, flexible programs, and low or no admission
requirements. Unfortunately, these institutions function largely as vocational training for Native
students, preparing them for low-wage jobs as the vast majority of Native American students do not enroll in or complete transfer track programs (Alba & Lavin, 1981; Brayboy et al, 2012).

Though TCUs and community colleges play an important role in academic attainment for Native Americans, the overarching goal of providing a rich and broad landscape of options for obtaining a four-year college degree is far from a reality. The US Department of Education indicates that as recently as 10 years ago, Native students made up less than 1 percent of all students registered for college, and most were at two-year institutions such as TCUs or community colleges (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Low persistence rates among Native Americans compound yearly to create graduation rates that hover at less than 1 percent for all degree types (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Pavel, 1999). Brayboy et. al. (2012), emphasizes Native American underrepresentation by stating that traditional college-aged Native Americans are “less likely to be enrolled in a college or university than their white, Asian Pacific American, or black/African American peers” (p. 54).

Despite the fact that most state and private colleges and universities include access and multicultural education as part of their mission statements, the numbers show that most have failed to make significant strides in achieving access for Native Americans. Native Americans continue to be the most underrepresented and underserved population in higher education today (McClellan et al., 2005). “Fewer numbers, in a political arena like education, mean less attention with limited program and fiscal action” (Tippeconnic, 2000, p. 47), conditions which perpetuate the low numbers of Native Americans in higher education. Though the figures have been slowly improving in terms of pure numbers, those numbers are still low relative to the population of Native Americans in the US.
One emergent pathway to higher education for non-traditional and marginalized populations is the development and increased availability of distance programs, and in particular, rapid advancements in online degrees. A closer review of online education reveals trends in pedagogy which favor community building, connection between instructor and student as well as student to student, and cultural relevancy; concepts which may prove relevant to Native American student success.

**Distance and Online Higher Education**

Distance education as defined by Keegan blends two perspectives that distance education is a “vehicle of instruction” (p. 45) and a “teaching mode” (p. 45), and asserts that it is “1) the quasi-permanent separation between teacher and student throughout the length of learning process; 2) the influence of an educational organization in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services; and 3) the use of technical media: print, audio, video, or computer to unite teacher and learner to carry out the content of the course” (as cited in Casey, 2008 p. 45).

Distance education came into existence as the availability of the national postal service allowed for the easy and inexpensive exchange of information between teacher and student (Beldarrain, 2006). Since its inception, distance education has evolved using technology and advanced methods of pedagogy to become a robust, respected, and reliable means of obtaining an education, from technical training to graduate degrees (Beldarrain, 2006).

Online technology has been central to the astronomical growth of distance education, and the technologies available today allow courses and programs to be designed in a way that meets the needs of diverse audiences in all corners of the globe. While the first correspondence courses were confined to the written word and created isolation, online programs can leverage
technology to provide rich course content and interactive activities that connect learners who may be widely dispersed geographically as well as in terms of diversity measures such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender (Beldarrain, 2006).

**Online Programs and Native American Communities**

Many recent studies have explored ways in which online programs can be leveraged to provide culturally relevant programs to provide diverse learning opportunities to students from non-traditional backgrounds (Beldarrain, 2006; Sanchez et al., 1998; Stein & Jetty, 2002, Wang, 2007). Current best practices in online course design utilize many techniques that ensure robust learning experiences for students who may not resonate with more Euro-American models of education such as the traditional “banking method” of teaching articulated by Friere (1974). Similarly, the competitive schooling model that occurs in higher education classrooms at traditional institutions often does not resonate with many culturally traditional Native American students (Pewewardy, 2002). And as more research points to the outcome benefits of social interaction and group work in online courses, course design incorporates those elements more frequently (Dixson, 2010; Wang, 2007).

According to Sturgis (2012), “transformational change may be coming to wired minority students as a result of technological developments in online learning. Hybrid courses, adaptive learning techniques, assessment analytics and open-learning initiatives may make one-size-fits-all classes a thing of the past” (p. 18). These pedagogical methodologies, as well as those mentioned in the previous paragraph, are in direct correlation with many tenets of culturally traditional Native communities (Berg & Ohler 1991; Berkshire & Smith, 2000; Sanchez et al., 1998; and Vogel 2011). Research is clear that Native students do better in school when they have a sense of connection and community (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008), which students and
faculty alike assert can be a part of well-designed online courses (Beldarrain, 2006; Casey, 2008; Stein & Jetty, 2002). Likewise, using several different media strategies to convey content can mimic story-telling and verbal traditions prevalent in many Native American cultures. These attributes of online programs may not be clear to those who are unfamiliar with design principles and best practices, which may contribute to low numbers of Native students utilizing online degree programs for higher education.

There appear to be many other potential synergies between culturally traditional Native American values and online education, including that it is often less expensive than a traditional, residential college experience, family support is more readily available to students who stay home while pursuing a degree, admission standards are less strict, and the potential for community-based, culturally relevant pedagogical practices and programs is great (Ambler, 2004; Bissel, 2004; Sanchez et al., 1998). A closer examination of these elements (cost, community and family support, admission requirements, and other opportunities inherent in online higher education) will provide a deeper understanding of the potential for online education to serve Native American students.

Cost

In terms of real costs to attend, online degree programs can be less expensive than attending a traditional, residential college. The savings are not only found in tuition, base tuition being typically the same or as much as one third that of on campus tuition (Casement, 2013; Wang, 2015); however, there are no additional costs incurred for moving, room and board, and in many cases textbook costs and fees are significantly lower than on-campus classes because instructors utilize online and open-source resources more heavily than campus-based courses (Finkelstein & Scholz, 2000). Also, with the increased flexibility realized in online education in
terms of when class can be accessed, it may be easier to hold a full or part-time job while enrolled than it would be as a traditional on-campus student who has to adhere to a class schedule. With Native American reservation communities being some of the most depressed socio-economically, cost is a major consideration when deciding if and where to attend college. “Indigenous youth disproportionately come from economically poor families and require financial assistance to pursue higher education” (Brayboy et. al., 2012, p. 65). Online programs can have a distinct advantage in terms of affordability over a traditional residential experience by removing the fiscal barriers of additional travel, housing, board, and fees that are incurred on campus (Finkelstein & Scholz, 2000). Online higher education offered by accredited state universities nearly always qualifies for federal and state financial aid as well, providing a viable pathway to higher education funding.

Community and Family Support

Another benefit of online education for Native students is the ability to remain at home with family and community as they complete a degree. As noted in Brayboy et al (2012), one reason TCUs are successful at providing a college education for Native students is the predominance of support services offered at the school, and the fact that students can remain in their own tribal community while attending. Leaving home and experiencing feelings of isolation and separation can lead to greater dropout potential, and Native American students are especially vulnerable. In point of fact, “those from low-income families and racial minorities are particularly at risk for feelings of exclusion, loneliness and academic alienation. The costs of leaving college can be large for everyone: lost tuition, loan debt and a subtle but consequential diminishment of self-esteem” (Stevens, 2014, p. 1).
For many traditional Native cultures, family and community responsibilities come first, and obtaining a degree online allows flexibility of schedule and allows students to stay at home while pursuing a degree (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Not only do many non-traditional and Native students have family responsibilities to attend to, research shows that Native students persist and achieve at a higher level when supported by family (Demmert, 2001; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Therefore, remaining within their communities allows students to take advantage of that family support in real time, with no need to reach out via technology or travel to be with their loved ones and community mentors.

Admission Requirements

One contributing factor in the underrepresentation of Native students in higher education is the lack of adequate college preparation typically provided in the K-12 systems serving Native communities. Native students are more likely than whites and African Americans to have poor preparation in high school (Pavel, 1999) and are less likely to take college preparatory and advanced courses, which severely limits their access to four year institutions (Brayboy et. al., 2012). The lack of preparation leads to a very small number of students having college ready transcripts when applying to college, and in fact only 21 percent of graduating Native high school students in 2003 had college ready transcripts (Brayboy et.al, 2012). Like community colleges and tribal colleges, many online programs offer open-enrollment, without the need for an SAT score or competitive GPA to qualify (Sturgis, 2012) which increases access opportunities.

Opportunity

An online education offers the opportunity to create pathways for more Native educators to become instructors, which creates more authentic mentoring opportunities (James, 2006). In
the United States there are relatively few Native American educators overall, and many of those may not be available to or interested in moving to teach on a residential campus. However, teaching online could allow these faculty members to extend their reach and serve as mentors for Native college students who are widely dispersed geographically. College success and persistence in Native American students not only hinges on the support of family and community, but also on the support and mentoring of those in the academic institution as well, whether faculty or advisor, cultural group, or some other structure that provides accountability and unconditional support (Jackson et al., 2003; Jenkins, 1999; Reyhner & Dodd, 1995).

Because online instructors do not have to be on campus to teach, Native scholars and educators can be contracted to teach courses from anywhere, which could have positive influences on Native students. An influx of Native instructors has not yet been realized in state and private institutions’ online degree programs; however, with all but five of the 34 TCUs offering distance education (Ambler, 2004), there are likely many more Native American instructors in online education associated with tribal colleges. Should more Native American students adopt online education, it may follow that more Native Americans would be attracted into the professions of instructor or professor.

Technology literacy is an important skill in our society (Selfe, 1999), and online educational pathways provide meaningful experiences with a variety of technology and media employed in the course of degree completion to students who might otherwise miss out on these opportunities (Brescia & Daily, 2007; James, 2006). Increasing the technological literacy of Native students and instructors who are hired remotely to teach online may have other far-reaching benefits for Native communities. In the current technology-oriented society, aptitude with computers and computer-based communication is critical in creating long-term economic
growth and viability, so by introducing more Native students and instructors to the tools used in online education, Native communities may benefit greatly in the future (Ambler, 2004; James, 2006).

Brayboy et al (2012) discuss the way that Native American higher education, if done respectfully and relevantly, contributes to nation-building and self-determination in Native communities. Though not yet universally implemented, many online programs are designed with cultural inclusivity principles which emphasize authentic learning activities, cultural contextualization, and community based learning (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000). Such principles dovetail well with traditional Indigenous cultures and reflect the values touted by Brayboy et al (2012) as important in educational programs that serve Native American students.

By increasing the numbers of Native American students in higher education, the multicultural opportunities for all students increase and improve, which has a “positive educational impact” on all students (Gurin, Nagda & Lopez, 2004, p. 18). Creating courses which not only involve Native-centered pedagogical practices such as community building, non-competitive space, and storytelling, but also include non-Native students, enriches the college experience for all involved (Gurin et al., 2004).

Finally, the flexibility of online course design and facilitation, the ability to create collaborative, media-rich courses, and the ability to use creative pedagogical approaches, makes online degree programs an ideal area for investigation by universities and colleges to meet the needs and desires of this underserved, underrepresented, important population. And yet, the most significant barrier to adoption of online higher education in Native American communities may be the lack of access to the necessary technology, also known as the digital divide (Sturgis, 2012).
Technology: The Digital Divide

The term “digital divide” describes “the gulf in access to technology tools and related learning opportunities” (Bissell, 2004, p. 135) that exists between many lower income, rural, and minority communities and middle and upper class communities. The divide can be quite drastic for many Native American communities, primarily those living on or near reservations. Because reservations tend to be rural and remote, and have fewer resources to invest in technology infrastructure, the availability of internet, computers, and even phones is much lower than what is seen in virtually every other community in America (Bissell, 2004; Salpeter, 2006; Sturgis, 2012). And it is not just the financial and rural aspects of Native American communities that contribute to the digital divide. According to Bissell (2004), there is the worry expressed by some elders that bringing the technology of the outside world on to the reservations might “lead to the infiltration of mainstream American values on reservations” (p. 144). Indeed, Berkshire and Smith (2000) agree that “access [to computers and the internet] may be the easiest obstacle to overcome” (p. 25) when bridging the digital divide on the reservation. Therefore, unless what is provided is culturally relevant, it is possible that the tribal communities will not truly embrace technology (Berkshire & Smith, 2000; Bissell, 2004).

However, according to Salpeter (2006), the trend shows that households with youth ages 12-17 are much more likely to have internet access and a home computer than those without. The increased access of younger generations suggests that the Native American youth currently enrolled in high school will have access to and knowledge of basic technologies required to pursue a degree online. Also of interest is the fact that 99 percent of public schools provide internet access (Salpeter, 2006). While reservation and tribal-serving schools were not considered separately in the Salperter (2006) article, federal programs have been put in place to
increase technology access on reservations, primarily in schools (Bissell, 2004). Also of note is the fact that many tribes are creating meeting places for students to gather and work on their online courses (Sturgis, 2012).

Though access to necessary technology is definitely not ubiquitous on reservations, the gradual narrowing of the digital divide and a societal focus on increasing access to technology and higher education for Native Americans encourages universities to begin to give culturally relevant course development serious consideration in an attempt to meet the emerging need for online higher education. While the digital divide is still an issue on many reservations, Native students have also been known to overcome it by the very nature of a sharing and collaborative culture (Berkshire & Smith, 2000). Students who do have access to the necessary technology share with those who do not, and tribal community centers share technology freely with tribal members. More work can be done to bridge the technology gap, yet with tribes investing in public technology infrastructure (Bissell, 2004), federal funds going toward the same, and students and families working together, the lack of access to technology is resolvable.

**Learning Approaches**

Student learning approaches may also have a significant impact on Native American students’ perception of online higher education. As the number of online degree programs increases, many studies have been done to determine how to improve student success and course efficacy, many centering on how online students learn. A recurring theme from those studies is that student success online is largely based on student engagement. Student engagement online, as articulated by Dixson (2012), includes collaboration and connection, active learning, and instructors being active and present in the course, while Robinson & Hullinger (2008) refer to the “level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and
enriching educational experiences” (p. 102). Hadwin and Oshige further includes “students’ motivation and goals for learning” (as cited in Meyer 2014, p. 77). Therefore, the construct of student engagement involves several factors that must be thoughtfully built into courses. In order for students to experience success and satisfaction with online courses, these factors must align with students’ preferred learning approach.

Meyer (2014) highlights how these factors can be problematic for first-time online students due to characteristics the students may have which could lead to a low opinion of online courses, especially when the courses lack pedagogical design that incorporates student engagement strategies. Specifically, Meyer says “...a lack of experience with constructivist methodologies and a preference for traditional pedagogies; such students are comfortable with teacher-centered pedagogies and may feel uncomfortable being asked to learn differently” (p. 76). Meyer (2014) also discusses first-time online students’ inherent preference to learn in a face-to-face environment as a possible hindrance to learning online. These perceptual hurdles may prove to be difficult to overcome in communities and families without a history of success in the online environment.

While it would be a mistake to over-generalize and assign one learning approach to any cultural group, as Pewewardy (2002) says, there may be a “cultural personality” (p. 25) that pertains to Native American students who have grown up with different “cultural experiences” (p. 25) than the “mainstream culture” (p. 25). In this regard, it is important to consider how preferred learning approaches affect student perceptions of online higher education, and also how previous experiences with online courses that exhibit varying degrees of student engagement have influenced those perceptions.
**Summary**

With the founding of the first Indian College at Harvard in the seventeenth century, there began a tumultuous history of Native American higher education that perpetuated themes of acculturation, assimilation, and underrepresentation. From boarding schools and colleges with the express mission of “civilizing” Native Americans, to the more modern issues of narrow admission standards, lack of mentoring, and high cost of tuition, higher education has failed to serve the Native American population in a meaningful and relevant way that would promote access and achievement. Despite development of community and tribal college programs which offer increased non-traditional pathways to a degree, Native students remain the most underrepresented population in higher education, which in turn limits Native community access to the dominant political and fiscal benefits that an educated populace provides.

Comparatively, the increased availability and capability of technology to provide educational access has led to the rapid growth of online degree programs in the US. Created as an alternative delivery method for reaching place-bound and non-traditional students, distance degree programs, and online programs in particular, have become a respected and accredited pathway to degree. Serving non-traditional students when and where they are able to access courses, online degree programs allow marginalized students to obtain a degree without leaving the support and security of their community, jobs, and families.

However, in many reservation communities, which tend to be rural and remote, there remains a digital divide or technology gap which prevents access to the basic hardware and internet connection required to take advantage of online degree programs. Nevertheless, tribal and federal funding for technology infrastructure improvements on reservations coupled with
advances in wireless and mobile technology are slowly bridging this divide, potentially resolving the technological access issue in the foreseeable future.

Though there are apparent benefits inherent to online degree programs that could serve Native American students, given the history of Native American higher education, it is problematic to simply predict if these types of programs can actually improve access and achievement for Native Americans. Instead, the study seeks to close the gap between understanding and practice as it pertains to how online programs could serve Native American students. The intent of this study is to address this gap by exploring perspectives Native American students have toward online higher education as well as examine what draws Native American students to higher education programs in general.
Guided by Indigenous research theory (Chilisa, 2012; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008), the study utilizes qualitative methods to understand how Native American students perceive online degree programs in higher education. Qualitative research, grounded in constructivist epistemological approaches, seeks to tease out understandings, obstacles, and pathways. As indicated by Morgan and Smircich (1980) “qualitative research is an approach rather than a particular set of techniques, and its appropriateness derives from the nature of the social phenomena to be explored” (p. 1). In order to allow for the unknown to become known, qualitative methods are structured to provide space for the voice and perceptions of the study participants toward online higher education programs to be heard.

**Epistemological Perspective**

The study is built on the epistemological perspective of constructivism, which asserts that knowledge is socially constructed, and “real understanding is only constructed based on learners’ previous experience and background knowledge” (Ultanir, 2012, p. 1). The constructivist approach resonates with me as a researcher given my belief that all knowledge and perspective is socially and situationally created. The approach is relevant to the study given the limited understanding of the topic and that Native American voices have largely been left out of the discourse of higher education research, particularly with regards to online programs. Therefore, there is a need to add the Native American student perspective to the conversation.

The constructivist perspective suggests that the perception of Native American students toward higher education in general and online education specifically is informed by their previous exposure to higher education and technology as well as connection with others who
may have studied online. Perspectives are situated historically, culturally, and socially. Therefore, it is important to work toward a greater understanding of what perceptions exist, as well as how those perceptions were created in the first place in order to affect positive change in the future.

For the study, a constructivist lens influences the creation of open-ended interview questions, analysis of transcripts, and the use of member-checking for results. Power and perspective have been critiqued at each stage of the research, primarily ensuring the research is not conducted from a deficit model perspective. Instead, the perspectives conveyed by the participants in the study are placed at the center of the analysis and findings.

**Theoretical Framework for Methods**

In order to responsibly and respectfully represent Native American issues in higher education, it is important to understand what theories Native scholars use, and how they apply those theories to their own research in Native American higher education access. Issues such as history of Native American higher education and access, colonialism, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the digital divide are germane to this research project, and have been explored by Native American researchers such as Deloria, (1990, 1991), Kovach (2009), Wilson (2008), Shotton (2013), Tierney (1975, 2007), Fox (2005), and Miheusah (2004), as well as non-Native American scholars like Chilisa (2012). Many Native American scholars approach the academy and research from a critical theoretical viewpoint, centering Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing, and critiquing the colonial power structures and systems in place in academia that negatively affect Native American access and success in higher education. Indigenous research theory and methods are closely aligned with these principles and as such will be the predominant guiding theory used to scaffold this study.
Indigenous research theory (Chilisa, 2012; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2001 & 2008) eschews the cultural-deficit model that many researchers start from when researching access issues in Native American higher education. Instead, the study is grounded in a perspective of situating the research power in the voice and knowledge of Indigenous people rather than the dominant cultural or researcher perspective.

The four main principles of Indigenous research methods and perspectives that must be adhered to are respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Wilson (2008) alludes to these four tenets of Indigenous research in his book *Research is Ceremony*, and these concepts are common threads that are represented in research projects conducted by Native American researchers and non-natives who work responsibly with Native communities in their own research. These four principles guide the study at every step of the research and analysis process.

Indigenous research theory is also informed by many of the principles of critical race theory as described by Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings (2009). Critical theory is described by Calmore (1992) “As a form of oppositional scholarship, Critical Race Theory challenges the universality of white experience/judgment as the authoritative standard that binds people of color and normatively measures, directs, controls, and regulates the terms of proper thought, expression, presentation, and behavior” (Cited in Tate, 1997, p. 196). Perhaps the most central tenet of critical race theory is the acknowledgement and critique of power, and more specifically how power differentials affect the interpretation of data. The power differential perspective dovetails well with Indigenous research methods in the reorientation of power from the researcher perspective to the participant and community perspective. Given the history of acculturation and exclusion of Native Americans in higher education, the use of methods and
theories that adhere to a critical perspective allows for the Native voice to be included in the discourse.

Some Indigenous scholars assert that non-Native researchers should not and cannot employ Indigenous research methods and theoretical frameworks as they have not lived the Indigenous experience, nor are they prepared to understand and embody all that Indigenous research entails for those who are part of that community. However, Ladson-Billings’ (1998) description of critical race theory calls for “naming one’s own reality” when working with marginalized groups in order to situate the research historically and contextually. Therefore, though I accept the assertion that non-Native research should not use Indigenous research methods to some extent; I contend that careful study of these methods and ideals helps ensure a culturally responsive approach to research in a community of which I am not a part. Kovach (2009) says of non-Native researchers who are drawn to Indigenous approaches “it has to do with a generation seeking ways to understand the world without harming it” (p. 11). Indeed, as a non-Native researcher and educator working with Indigenous communities, I have an “ethical responsibility to ensure that Indigenous knowledges and people are not exploited. Research is about collective responsibility…” (Kovach, 2009, p. 36). Kovach (2009) also poses the question which I must ask myself frequently to assure my research, motives, and results are respectful: “Are you helping us?” (p. 36).

Therefore, though I may not truly be practicing Indigenous research in its purest sense, the careful study and application of the methods described by Chilisa (2012), Kovach (2009), and Wilson (2001, 2008) guide the culturally responsive approach to research that is employed in this study. It is present in the very choice of research questions and qualitative approach, as well
as the literature chosen to review the topic, and in the critical framework used to examine transcripts and review findings.

The intention of using a qualitative format and semi-structured talking circles and interviews is to center the voice of the research participants, giving that voice and perspective power over and above that of the researcher and institution. Indeed, the use of open-ended questions to guide the study creates space for new knowledge to emerge in the voice of those most affected by the assimilating paradigms of traditional higher education. Indigenous research perspective is utilized throughout the study to support and critique the methods, analysis, and conclusions. Likewise, the four ideals of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) have been used as litmus tests throughout the design and implementation of the study. The use of qualitative methods, testing interview questions prior to implementation for accurately assessing the central issues, analysis of potential researcher biases, partnerships with participants, and member-checking research results have all been used to ensure the research project maintains a responsible, respectful approach.

**Research Methods**

Given the importance of understanding Native American student perspectives which have been largely excluded from higher education research, the study was conducted using qualitative methods in order to gain insight into the following research questions:

- How do Native American students perceive online higher education?
- How do program availability and access to technology shape perceptions of online higher education?

The purpose of the study is to learn about student perceptions, to hear Indigenous voice on the matter of online higher education, and to gain insight and perspective. Semi-structured
talking circles (focus groups) are the method best suited for understanding the construct of perception and “allows the interviewer to delve deeply in to social and personal matters” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 315) which in turn improves the quality of the data collected.

To facilitate successful talking circles, the participants must not be made to feel like subjects of a study, but instead as researchers themselves, fully invested in meaning making and providing honest and insightful answers. It is incumbent upon the researcher to provide the space, amenities, and atmosphere which foster a comfortable, sharing environment (Nagel & Williams, 2012). To that end, the consent form and the preliminary portion of each interview and talking circle were very clear in explaining the purpose of the study, how the results would be used, confidentiality options, and the methods that would be used to analyze data (in a way that was easily understood by non-researchers).

**Participants**

Recruiting Native American students who are already familiar with higher education as a general concept was critical to the study so as not to risk confounding the data with perceptions of Native youth who may not be in favor of or familiar with higher education in a broad sense. The participants are self-identified Native American college students who are also currently-enrolled tribal members, who were raised in traditional tribal or reservation communities. The students were recruited from institutions in the Inland Northwest which include two large public research universities and a small regional college. While no specific quota for gender was set, men and women were equally recruited, and were nearly equally represented in the participant group.
Further, five Native American educators and educational administrators and one social worker who works with tribal communities were interviewed as to their perceptions of online higher education for Indigenous students. It became clear in my initial talking circle of students that college decisions are often made in close consultation with trusted advisors and school personnel, and therefore it was important to include those perspectives in the research.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit student participants because of the very specific criteria needed and the desire to meet the students in a location that would be comfortable for them. Therefore, to find student participants, I connected with the Native American student centers and clubs on each of the three campuses, and recruited through social media, flyers, emails, and school announcements. To encourage enough participants at each venue, I provided lunch and gift cards as gifts of my gratitude. Native American educators and education administrators were recruited using snowball sampling. Castillo (2009) suggests that when you have a difficult population to reach, to ensure that a representative group of individuals from the target population is sampled, snowball or chain sampling is the best method for finding participants. Indeed, this method provided access to a variety of educators and administrators from diverse regions and backgrounds, including professionals from K-12, post-secondary, and community organizations.

**Interview and Talking Circle Procedures and Setting**

Prior to embarking on the actual research, two pilot interviews were conducted in order to help refine processes and procedures for the study. Practicing the questions in advance helped to ensure that the questions produced limited confusion and lead to good discussion, concurrently allowing me to practice note-taking and probing questions, and confirm that ample time would be allotted for each talking circle event.
In order to cultivate open participation, it was important to provide an inviting, safe, welcoming space. The talking circles were conducted in the common rooms of the Native American student centers on the various campuses. The spaces were set up in informal rough circles in order not to feel clinical or hierarchical. I intentionally sat in a location other than the head of any table. A meal and refreshments were provided. I began each session with a welcoming statement, a giving of thanks, and a description of how the session would proceed. Participants were asked and encouraged to speak freely.

Participants were made aware that the session would be audio recorded, to be transcribed for detailed analysis following the event. However, because verbal reactions do not represent the sole data present in an interview, some non-verbal data from body language cues were collected as well. To meet this data requirement, I took notes following the interviews and talking circles and juxtaposed these notes with the transcripts. Once the transcripts were coded, several participants were asked to review to ensure they maintained accurate representation of the thoughts and feelings expressed in the meetings.

The first set of questions posed in the interviews were of a personal nature to find out about the participants themselves, requesting demographic data they were willing to share such as age, tribal affiliation, year in school, and where they grew up. I also asked the participants why they agreed to participate in the study and inquired as to their motivation for involvement.

Following the questions about who the participants are as individuals and community members, questions focused more on the perceptions the students have toward higher education in general and about online degree programs more specifically. Setting the stage were questions focused on what options they considered when choosing a college, and what factors they weighed when making the choice to apply for admission to college. Administrators were asked
similar questions but in a way that allowed for them to offer their thoughts on how the students they work with choose a college. Overall, questions focused more on the perceptions the students hold toward online degree programs and online technology in general: had the students considered online as an option, why or why not, and what factors might make online programs seem more desirable to the students (see Appendix B for detailed protocols).

Consent

Informed consent is an important aspect of all research, and I worked in conjunction with the Washington State University Institutional Review Board to construct a thorough, comprehensive consent form and letter that was shared with all participants in accordance with the IRB requirements for all human subjects research projects (Appendix A). Prior to collecting consent forms, I spoke with participants, encouraging them to ask questions and gain perspective on the study purpose and methods, on my role as a researcher, and about the structure of the study. Asking the participants if they would prefer anonymity or to be recognized in the study is consistent with Indigenous Research methods, and therefore was offered to all participants and their wishes in this matter were honored.

Documents

The ultimate goal of the study is to improve understanding of Native American student perceptions of online higher education. A constructivist perspective suggests these perceptions were shaped by students’ exposure to information and impressions of online higher education in the past. Therefore, it was important to explore what exposure the students have had to information about online programs to understand how that exposure may have shaped student perceptions. Relevant documents, college web sites, and college recruitment materials were collected and analyzed for triangulation of the data. Documents reviewed include materials from
high school guidance counselors’ offices in regional high schools that serve a large number of
Native Americans, and recruiting materials produced by online and traditional colleges.
Numerous college web sites from several different types of institutions in the Pacific Northwest
were reviewed for relevant material (or lack thereof) in the recruiting and retention of Native
American students, including admissions pages, online programs offered, on-site programs
offered, and any other material identified by the participants as being important in their search
for a college. The sites for collection of these documents were revealed through the interview
process as students identify where and how they chose where to go to college.

Data Analysis

In broad terms, each interview and talking circle was transcribed and then analyzed for
themes. “The power of qualitative research comes in large part from the ability to move
between, explore, and enhance the design, data analysis, and findings as the study proceeds.
Analysis ‘works on’ data.” (Caudle, 2010, p. 417). Therefore, at first descriptive codes were
applied throughout the transcripts by underlining important quotes or phrases and copying the
key word or quote to the margin. All noted quotes and key words were copied directly from the
 transcript rather than using my own language to summarize. This method is consistent with the
theoretical framework and allowed these codes to maintain the integrity of the words and ideas
that were shared with me by the participants. All the codes were then transferred to an Excel
spreadsheet, which allowed me to re-read and ensure purity of the transfer of ideas. Using this
method allowed me to elicit broad themes and find the emergent data, having been deeply
immersed in the transcripts several times throughout the process.

Those detailed codes were subsequently analyzed and honed to reflect twenty concrete,
finite sub-themes which were then grouped into five major themes which affect the perception of
Native American college students toward online higher education: Learning Approaches, Support and Relationships, Access, Impressions, and Outside Influences. The twenty sub-themes were each categorized into one or two of the major themes (Table 3.1).

### Table 3.1: Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
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| Learning Approaches | ● Culture  
                        ● Generational  
                        ● Learning Approach  
                        ● Motivation          |
| Support/Relationship| ● Community  
                        ● Connection to School  
                        ● Culture  
                        ● Family  
                        ● Mentoring  
                        ● Relationship  
                        ● Support          |
| Access              | ● Access  
                        ● Funding          |
| Impression          | ● Interest  
                        ● Perception  
                        ● Quality          |
| Outside Influences  | ● Exposure  
                        ● Instruction  
                        ● Needs  
                        ● Preparation  
                        ● Program         |

Adhering to the Indigenous research methodological perspective ensured the data coding was done from a Native American power-perspective rather than a deficit perspective, and meaning-making centered on the values expressed by the participants, eschewing euro-centric perceptions while eliciting significance from the data. I found this difficult to do, and constantly had to check my own privilege and review what I was pulling out from the transcripts. At each pause or page, I would review the notes and codes I had pulled out for purity of expression.
Caudle (2010) notes that preparation of the researcher can have an important influence on the quality of the data produced by the research session. Therefore, I studied the data collected in the practice interviews and previous talking circles for alignment with Indigenous research methodologies and the four tenets of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility carefully to prepare a plan for data collection and decision-making prior to conducting each subsequent interview or talking circle.

Participants were asked to confirm summary statements throughout the interviews to ensure general understanding of concepts and “correct interpretation of their view” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 222). Immediately following each interview, I reflected upon the session, writing impressions and preliminary perceptions of potentially relevant data so as not to lose important evidence. These notes and impressions supplement the audio data collected and the formal notes taken during the interview.

In alignment with Indigenous research methods and theories, the data analysis employed an emergent approach. Emergent coding utilizes the language that is revealed during the interviews to determine the codes. Therefore, the codes pulled out of the transcripts into the margin all utilized participants’ own words and phrases, relying on participant voice to reveal trends and themes.

Subsequent to the transcribing, coding, and analysis of the interviews, document and website materials were analyzed using content analysis to provide triangulation of the findings. In general, these supplemental materials were examined for the themes apparent from the interviews as well as any verbiage or images which focus on Native American recruitment and access.
Validity and Reliability

Reliability and validity are concepts which are defined by positivism and are not entirely applicable in qualitative research, as they are not germane in their original definitions to understanding a construct such as perception (Golafshani, 2003). Instead, qualitative researchers look more to rigor in methods to provide the validity often demanded of scholarly work. In the context of this study, the validity and reliability sought is the approval and resonance of the results with the participants and their community members.

The primary method of ensuring quality in the results and data was the use of member-checking, which was employed following data analysis. In addition, exploring the data for saturation points leads to a reasonable amount of validity and reliability that can be expected from a qualitative study. And finally, triangulation of the data with documents and web sites was also used to add richness to the data.

Limitations

The role of the researcher in qualitative research, and in guided interviews and talking circles in particular, is important to recognize. Especially when working within an Indigenous research paradigm where relationship and respect are integral to meaning making, recognition of the influence of the researcher on the process and outcomes is essential (Chilisa, 2012). Therefore, there is recognition of the fact that the interviewer is part of the process and meaning derived from the interactions in the study (Seidman, 2012).

Unique to this study is that as a white researcher working with a community that is not my own, the truthful exchange of ideas may have been compromised, which could have impacted the quality of the data collected. I am keenly aware of this issue, and worked hard to gain trust and create genuine relationships with the participants in order to foster a meaningful
and honest interaction during each talking circle. All participants were made aware of the purpose and methods of the study and my background as a scholar and researcher to help give my visit context. It was apparent to me, however, that despite how welcoming and gracious all my student groups were, they appeared to be acutely aware of my role and “otherness” in the room. A room full of students that was boisterous, full of laughter, and people talking over one another became a research talking circle with folks who seemed hesitant to share and whom I often needed to call on individually to elicit answers. Once we concluded the research questions, the ease and jovial atmosphere would return almost instantly. This phenomenon was noticed in each of the three talking circles, making it quite apparent that I was somewhat of an outsider.

I have studied decolonizing research methods (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) and used those tenets to check my work constantly for adherence to these ideas. However, it has been apparent throughout the process that, though all participants were kind, welcoming and helpful, there was an understandable and deserved measure of caution and reserve in the meetings with students.

Another acknowledged limitation is that the student participants, as current college students themselves, come from a relatively privileged perspective, having the resources to attend college, when many Native Americans lack many of the necessary means to make that decision. The results are reflective of a very specific subset of Native American students and as well as students’ advisors and mentors. I can imagine that if the sample were more inclusive of a wide cross-section of traditional college-aged Native American individuals, the results may be quite different.

The greatest limitation is probably the lack of broad generalizability due to the small, non-random sample. However, the study is intended to provide insight and understanding into
the perceptions of Native American college students toward online degree programs and is not intended to provide concrete, replicable results that would be generalizable to an entire community or group of individuals. Thus, by adhering to recognized standards of conducting a qualitative study utilizing interviews and through member-checking and triangulation, the resulting data provides a better understanding of the issue.

One of the attributes of qualitative research is that the existence of limitations, of bias, and of perceptions has an impact on results, which is acknowledged, appreciated, and inherent in the process. Context is important in qualitative research, and recognition of the limitations and biases contribute to the total picture of the research outcomes.

Conclusion

The study, guided by epistemological, theoretical, and methodological tenets, provides important insight into the perspectives of Native American students toward online higher education programs. Acknowledgement of the limitations, researcher bias, and epistemological stance provides context, caveat, and perspective to the results, and by adhering to the rubrics of qualitative research and Indigenous research theory, a broader understanding may be gained regarding how online programs might serve Native American students as a means of accessing a college degree. The overarching goal of the study is to provide the resulting data to the larger higher education community and tribal educators and to begin a meaningful discussion of what may be done in the area of online higher education to provide a valid access pathway for Native American communities. The following chapter highlights the stories and insight gained from working with the participants and provides a rich narrative on the factors that inform Native American student perspectives toward online higher education.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of the study is to identify Native American student perceptions about online degree programs in order to understand strengths and limitations of the medium as an access point for obtaining a degree. Through the use of semi-structured talking circles with Native American college students and interviews with tribal education professionals and administrators, I sought to learn more about the students’ college choices and experiences with online education, as well as their varying perceptions of online degree programs. The insights garnered from talking with members of the Native American higher education community, students and administrators alike, were in some ways surprising, and in others confirming.

It was clear from the outset of the research that culturally relevant student support programs and communities are critical to college choice decisions as well as the success of Native American students, regardless of delivery system. Likewise, the absence of a meaningful sense of community coupled with inadequate personal connection to instructors and peers are important aspects that influence student perception of online higher education.

Five major themes (Table 3.1) and twenty sub-themes emerged from the data. The themes describe the foundation of Native American college students’ perceptions of online degrees: learning approaches, support and relationships, access, impressions, and outside influences. The chapter goes into more detail about each of the five themes and how those themes relate to the overall perception Native American students have toward online higher education.
Learning Approaches

The most prominent theme to emerge from each talking circle was related to learning approaches and, specifically, how participants’ learning approaches and their perception of their own learning preferences enable them to be successful in online courses and shapes their attitude toward online higher education in general. Students referred frequently to their preference for face-to-face instruction, connection with peers and instructors, the opportunity to observe the instructor rather than to participate in isolation, and self-imposed motivational strategies. The literature confirms that the majority of online learners tend to be introverts and possess personality types that prefer or thrive in solitary conditions (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006); whereas Native American students tend to thrive in collaborative and communal settings (Brayboy et al, 2012).

The students I spoke with nearly all stated that they prefer oral learning, the ability to get immediate feedback in verbal and non-verbal cues, and a classroom environment that encourages them to adhere to deadlines and keep up with course work. For example, one student from a large four-year state institution said, “I prefer taking face to face [classes] because you can actually learn, and I learn better from hearing people talk and explain.”

Opportunities to collaborate, interact with others, and ask questions are components of oral learning, and the student participants frequently said they prefer this approach to education. One small regional college student said, “I learn better in class where I can interact with people.” Many students said they had taken online courses from various institution types (e.g. community colleges, for-profits, and large universities), and their predominant perception was that they had felt isolated, were unable to get good and timely feedback, and were often distracted, which led
to procrastination and, frequently, poor performance. Specifically, for example one participant said:

Just being in the classroom environment and being around, by good students, like if I did an online program it would be different, because like, I’m at home and I’m doing it on my own time, and sometimes procrastinating, it would always go on the back burner, because life takes over. But I’m like, if I’m in a college setting, and a college campus, then I’m actually more focused to finish my degree.

Student participants like this one were clear that they wanted the “college experience,” and that they learn better in a classroom environment with access to instructor and peers. Those participants who offered suggestions for improving the courses to meet their learning approach mentioned a preference for having live discussion or “office hours” where classmates and the instructor could interact in real time. More than once, the student participants asked for online chat rooms, interactivity, and the ability to have meaningful connection and conversation associated with a course. Dixson (2010), Meyer (2014), and Wang (2007) provide ample evidence of the positive influence student engagement activities have in student achievement, so it should not be surprising that students themselves crave these activities in their course work.

Another emergent trend is that several students noted they have family members who had taken online courses or degrees, and they perceived that those family members had to “cut out personal time and family time” and had to be “really dedicated.” Many students admitted that much of their perception of online education and the learning approach necessary to be successful came from watching their family members isolate themselves to finish their degrees. One student participant whose mother did her degree online said, “She really likes to be at home and in her bed and just do her papers and turn them in online and do her homework.” Another
participant in the same talking circle followed up this comment saying, “I feel like all our moms could do that though. Like, my mom’s old-school that way…. So it’s just like I can’t sit down and just bust out the papers and not have distractions like that.” These statements point to a potential generation gap in learning approaches which may imply that larger numbers of more mature community members might be more receptive to pursuing online degrees. In fact, this generational trend is reflected in the literature and in enrollment numbers, with the typical online student being between 25 and 50 years old (Colorado & Eberle, 2010). This trend is somewhat ironic because, though the current generation of traditional-age college students is more likely to be “digital-natives,” those in the earlier generation, for whom the technology is more foreign, find online learning more to their liking.

Nonetheless there were student participants who noted some positives with online learning, describing factors that, if implemented, would help them decide to take more online courses. A few students mentioned, for example, that an online course that includes a discussion board would allow them to “edit themselves.” These students also found the very structured, linear nature of online courses appealing. Some also mentioned that taking hybrid or “flipped” classes which utilize a web-based resource to support the classroom learning helped with their understanding and retention. One student participant said, “I could sit in a class and not even know what the professor is saying sometimes. And sometimes they go back online to what their slides have said before, like oh, okay, you were talking about that…” Another student admitted that she appreciated hybrid classes, “For me, I think it’s great to have hybrid, like you still do, like the online portion, but you meet up in the classroom setting, so you still have that one-on-one professor. But I still like that human aspect of it.”
To that end, some of the administrator participants noted that they had seen success at the high school and continuing-education level with non-traditional-aged students when they utilized collaborative spaces in which students could access their courses with a mentor present, such as in a tribal learning center or high school computer lab. Though these courses were asynchronous and self-paced, the fact that students could collaborate with each other and ask questions of a live mentor or facilitator vastly improved their perception of the quality of the class as well as their performance in the class.

Finally, when considering how learning approaches affect the participants’ perception of online higher education, several administrators and a few students talked about how motivation is key to successful completion of online programs. They noted that students who are enrolled in online courses needed to be self-motivated, scheduled, and attentive. A student from a small liberal arts college said:

Well, yeah, there is no deadline, basically you make your own deadlines. So you get all of your own homework, you get the book, and you kind of basically do it yourself. And then it’s up to you to schedule your exams and when you take your exams, find a proctor, basically do everything.

The need for online students to be self-motivated and attentive to sometimes ambiguous deadlines points to the importance of course design with a pedagogy that involves student engagement strategies, clearly articulated timelines and deadlines, and access to student support. Meyer (2014) articulates the importance of clear understanding of deadlines and expectations when she describes transactional distance theory in online courses and its effect on student learning. Transactional distance theory refers to the physical separation between student and instructor as well as the cognitive distance between instructor expectations and student
understanding (Meyer, 2014). Transactional distance is mitigated by following best practices in course design, which includes a strong instructor presence and creating the sense that the instructor is attendant in the online space (Dixson, 2010). Unfortunately, student engagement activities and clearly expressed course expectations are not present in all online higher education programs and classes. However, as rankings such as those provided by *US News and World Report* become more important in college choice decisions, student engagement activities and thoughtful pedagogy (metrics weighted heavily in the rankings) are becoming important requirements of online programs across the country.

In summary, the learning approaches of the interviewed students, coupled with their difficult experiences with online courses, including feeling isolated, poorly directed, and unable to ask questions or connect with and observe instructors, appears to explain the distinct lack of interest in online education as a means to obtaining a full degree. However, some of the participants see the benefit of online as a potentially effective *supplement* to the on-campus or face-to-face college experience as it gives them a forum for open and thoughtful communication and provides supplemental materials that can support in-class learning.

**Support and Relationship**

Participants overwhelmingly spoke of the desire for relationship and support from college, community, peers, and faculty, which is a key component in any college experience (Tinto, 1999). Unique to these participants, however, is their specific need for culturally responsive and relevant support programs and centers. In many ways support and relationship are related to the findings about learning approaches in that the students are looking to connect face-to-face with mentors, peers, community, and educators in and out of the classroom in ways that resonate with experiences in their home communities. Whether they review the availability
of a campus-based Native American student center and the presence of a reservation near the college or they seek to connect with instructors in the classroom, connecting with an educational community that mimics or substitutes for their home community is an important aspect in deciding where to go to college and what delivery mode they will choose for many members of the Native American community studied.

The administrators I interviewed were possibly more adamant about emphasizing the need for strong community support in secondary school and upon matriculation than the student participants. One high school counselor put the need for support and relationship in school this way: “...part of it is that our kids are so connected to extended family, that that’s what they see the school as. And if they do not have that connection that also connects them to their culture, then they just give up.” Another high school counselor that helps students with college choice said of what students look for when choosing where to go to college, “I would think that they consider what kind of support systems that a college or university would have for Native American Students.” And “...where they have a good population of Native American students then that’s a -- that meets a need because they have a lot of support services for, you know, Native American students. Which means retention…”

The mention of retention is important because the connection students experience on campus is critical to retention and graduation rates (Chatriand, 2012). In emphasizing this fact, one of the administrator participants spoke of her granddaughter who chose to go to a private university in a large city based on the fact that they offered the program of study in which she was interested. However, when she got there, she had trouble:

She [pause] there are no networks for her there. She’s kind of like, [pause] she feels like a fish out of water. Because there are no services that relate to her as a Native student
that’s [also] a Native woman. So she is struggling to, [pause] not academically, but just socially, just to be part of [a community]. She found out that coming from a community where you have lots of family ties, where you have lots of connections that you know meet your needs personally as a native woman. She doesn’t have any of that there.

Though participating in the study as an administrator, this participant had experienced the frustration that comes with the lack of support services through witnessing the struggle her granddaughter endured. Her halting speech and careful demeanor as she relayed the story corroborate the irritation and resentment behind the personal story she conveyed. She ended by saying that her granddaughter was considering transferring to a college closer to home with a Native program, highlighting the importance of culturally relevant support programs in persistence for Native American students.

Support at the university or college level is not the only level where culturally relevant support is necessary. For many Native American students to even consider going college after high school, they must be supported earlier in their schooling by family, schools, and mentors in order to motivate them to succeed later in the higher education environment (Adelman, Taylor, & Nelson, 2013). Regrettably, this kind of support is lacking for many students, and although online courses are occasionally used to fill in curricular gaps at the high school level according to the high school administrator participants, these courses are often unsupported, self-paced, and lacking opportunities for student engagement or culturally relevant pedagogy. This situation causes students to feel isolated and uninspired. That is why some tribal education centers focus on connecting with students and parents at the secondary level, mentoring and empowering students to fulfill the required courses for college admission. When tribal learning centers
employ online courses to support student success, they frequently do so by bringing the students together to work in a collaborative space with an instructor present.

It is clear to see how a student matriculating to a college or university would want a level of connection, support and relationship similar to their pre-college experiences. Indeed, in the words of a student from a large research institution:

Well, I’m a business student and everyone’s like ‘why didn’t you just go to [University with a well-known business school]?’ I would be in a lot of trouble in a big city, and I feel like I already had a set-in-stone community here. And the Native American program here is phenomenal.

The desire for relationship and support is also apparent in the student participants’ expressed desire to go to college close to home or family. Several of the students in one talking circle at a large public university said that they chose the institution because of its proximity to their reservation and their family. A few of them had left the area initially to go to college, but chose to return to reestablish their family connection. However, only one student mentioned that although online education had afforded her the opportunity to remain at home with her family, specifically her small child, the desire for better connection and relationships in the classroom ultimately persuaded her to move to a campus-based program. “And so I was like, I’ll take online classes. So I did that at first but it was kind of difficult because I feel I really didn’t learn from the classes.” Unfortunately the classes she took were poorly designed and did not include robust engagement opportunities that may have improved her experience. “And I don’t know, I think from taking the online classes I feel like I can just like easily cheat and just not really learn,” she said. “And so I prefer taking, like, face to face classes because you can actually learn…“.
Another aspect of the expressed desire for support and relationship was evident in the discussion when students talked about how first-hand, personal connection to the *institution* was critical to their college choice. Whether it is connecting to mentors from the institution, having family who are alumni or fans of the institution, or having visited the institution for a camp or learning experience, these personal connections were valuable to many when making college choice decisions. A student at a large research institution shared:

And I went here [current institution] like every year. And so it was just like networking with a lot of faculty here and grad students here and making those personal connections, that like, I was just like, I think I want to go to [institution name] because I could take advantage of the people I know here, and getting scholarships and, just, I think, performing better here because I know people here and they are very knowledgeable in what resources I can [use]. I think that’s for me. Because I already had community here, that’s why I came here.

Another said that the fact that the institution was the “first four-year college” he had ever visited had an impact on his deciding to go to that school, in addition to the fact that they have a robust Native American Student Center.

The effect of forging a strong connection to an institution is also evident in the repeated reference to the effect of mentoring on their college choice. Preparatory programs such as TRIO, Gear Up, and summer camps (all mentioned by different student participants) that mentor Native American high school students were very motivational and helped students to connect with each other, with faculty, and with program staff to provide that relational connection for the students that encourages them to enroll at that institution. Not surprisingly, however, these mentor programs are not set up to introduce students to online courses and programs, and most online
programs themselves do not make pre-college mentoring and outreach to specific communities a priority. Without that early exposure to online programs, and lacking any connection to mentors who encourage or promote online higher education, how could a student reasonably consider this an option? The answer is that they rarely do.

On the whole, there is strong evidence that support and relationship are key components in college choice decisions, as well as in matriculation and persistence to graduation, and this finding is consistent with the literature (Guillory, 2009). Unfortunately, those two elements are largely either missing or perceived as lacking from most online higher education degree programs. Because knowledge is the result of experiences, the students who participated in this study who have had no exposure to or experience with supportive online courses nor been mentored or cultivated by online programs in an effort to help them connect to the faculty, support staff, or online institution in general, the participants would likely perceive that most online programs are lacking in those support and relationship factors.

Access

The ability to access the technology and funding necessary to pursue a degree online is critical for students to consider an online degree as a feasible option. Unfortunately, for many Native American communities, access to the computer and networking technology required for online education is a significantly limiting factor. Likewise, funding for college is a concern across the United States in many Native American communities. Because access to technology is so critical for online education to work and technology access is one of the core research questions, each interview and talking circle included questions specifically formulated to elicit information about the infrastructure available in the participants’ communities. I did not
explicitly solicit answers to questions regarding funding issues, yet this issue emerged as an important factor in college choice for the student participants.

Though there is the perception that internet access in the United States is ubiquitous, the fact remains that a large percentage of rural and low-socioeconomic status populations in the country are without adequate internet and hardware that would allow them to connect to online degree programs. The lack of technology resources is a reality for many of the students and administrators that were interviewed for this study. One question asked during the talking circles and administrator interviews to elicit information about access to internet and computers in students’ towns and homes was, “Do you believe you have the tools available to you to access it if you considered online higher education, from where you live?” Predictably, many students said that the internet at their homes was “spotty” or “gappy,” and that computers at home and even at the local schools were inadequate and outdated. One student from a large research university responded to that question by saying: “Honestly no. Just recently back home we just got internet, honestly.” And then “...because I’m from a, like a, out in the middle of nowhere pretty much on a reservation, and it’s really hard to get to even just a public library to use the internet.”

This last comment is concerning because a common perception is that Native students without access at home may have access at a local library or high school. In fact, in the words of one administrator from the same area: “Even if they can’t afford it in their homes, there’s other resources for them to get that resource though. [Like through] our local tribal college library that’s open with a computer lab. Our local town libraries have Wi-Fi access.” These comments are indicative of a disconnect between what the students perceive and what the general public perceives in terms of public access. Without adequate access to appropriate technology, students
are unlikely to consider online as a viable pathway to a degree. And though community resources may be provided, if students are not able or are unwilling to travel, or are unaware of what is available, the online option really is not feasible.

Though inadequate access was not a finding among all the students who took part in the study, lack of adequate access to technology was mentioned frequently by the administrators that were interviewed in the study, and it is an area that is important to consider. For online higher education to effectively serve tribal communities, the technology infrastructure in those communities will need to be funded and improved, as will increasing students’ awareness of technological resources that are available to them outside the home.

Funding is another important issue affecting access to higher education in the United States, and the study participants mentioned it occasionally when they were asked “What factors would need to be in place for you to consider online higher education?” Many students said that if online was “cheaper” than on-campus tuition, they may consider it, because “finances are important” in their college choice decisions. One student even noted, “The programs are really expensive when it comes to online.” This perception is surprising because tuition for online bachelor’s degrees are typically the same as on-campus programs, but this opinion may indicate that the only online degree programs the student had evaluated were those offered by a for-profit institution. It is worthy to note that only one administrator participant noted that “credits are free” for Native American students through the local tribal college; though, she did not specify whether that applies to online as well.

Access to online higher education fundamentally depends on two factors being favorable: technology infrastructure and funding. Without adequate internet connections and modern computers, students would be unable to take advantage of online degree programs even if they
wanted to. Though there may be community facilities that provide internet access, these are not present in all rural communities, and the need to travel to take classes negates the convenience that online education provides. In terms of funding, though higher education in general requires a high level of financing, if there is the perception that online is more expensive than traditional programs, adoption will subsequently be low. For online degrees to be viable, it is important for higher education institutions that are looking to serve Native American students work to educate those communities as to the real costs (and savings) in obtaining a degree this way from a traditional college or university. The reality is that access and the attainment of degrees, whether online or face-to-face, are negatively impacted by lack of sufficient funding in tribal communities.

**Impressions**

Impressions, in this context, refers to general feelings or perceptions students hold toward the inherent attributes of online programs and courses, and how those may or may not fit their ideal of a college education. The theme is derived from the sub-themes of perception, interest, and quality. The students who participated in the study articulated a range of impressions they have of online programs and courses, including accountability, skepticism of program quality, and practicality of how online education could fit into their lifestyle and goals for a college education. Coding the statements of overall perceptions and impressions as a cumulative story revealed that the impressions were predominantly negative or neutral. Several of the students had tried some online classes and had experienced numerous unfavorable attributes. Some of these attributes are inherent in online courses, yet some are indicative of poor design and are not ubiquitous within online programs.
Issues of accountability and ease of cheating were mentioned more than once in separate talking circles as concerns prevalent in online courses. For example, one student participant shared, “I think from taking the online classes I feel like I can just like easily cheat and not really learn.” Another student participant pointed to lack of instructor attention to quality discussion board posts by telling us, “They’re like ‘Give your opinion on this…’, and I would just be like, I would say the same thing every time…” And a student participant from a different university said summarily: “The one thing I didn’t like about the e-course was I often thought to myself, they really have no way to verify that this is even me taking the course. So… I could have not even taken the course and I could have paid someone to do the course for me. ...there was really no accountability.” The impression that there is no verification of students in the space and that cheating would be easy are ultimately perceptions of the overall quality of the courses, and these students have judged it lacking.

One potentially significant finding pertaining to impressions of quality in particular is that the vast majority of references to quality issues were made by the administrators that participated in the study, not the student participants. Some mentioned questions of accreditation as a reason why they do not recommend online programs to their students. The perception that many online colleges are diploma mills and scams is a serious concern for students who frequently need to rely on financial aid. One high school counselor said: “…as a high school counselor I was pretty leery of, you know, of which were going to be really legit. We have to be careful of that as Native American students too, because if we receive a tribal scholarship, or if we receive a Bureau of Indian Affairs scholarship to pay for those online classes we’ve got to be careful that - you know, which one is selected and… that we trust [the school]…”

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Another impression many participants have of online course quality is that it is easy to miss deadlines, misunderstand course requirements, and procrastinate, which leads to poor performance and difficulty completing classes. An administrator from a small regional college illustrated the point by saying, “…maybe they’re having a hard time like even logging on to get started, then I don’t know why they don’t try to contact the instructors. It seems like they wait too long so they’re getting way behind, and by the time they finally get going it’s kind of too late.” Several students in one of the talking circles related examples of courses where they missed deadlines due to being unclear as to the requirements of the course. It is indicative of poor course design when students are unable to clearly navigate the syllabus and course requirements. However, this appears to be a fairly common issue for the students who participated in the study.

One final impression of online higher education that student participants commonly mentioned is that by partaking in online higher education they would miss out on what some called “the college experience.” Many of the student participants said they chose to attend the college or university in person to take advantage of all that a residential campus has to offer. From sports to social engagements, student participants did not want to give up the extracurricular experiences at a traditional institution by staying home and taking an online degree program. One student participant gave this explanation:

I wanted the college experience. I pretty much had that in [a study abroad opportunity as a freshman], but I was just like, you have to experience it [college] for yourself… It’s, you can’t explain. You can show videos, you can show pictures... you have fun in college, but I could take classes online but I don’t know about getting a full degree. I could see how it would be convenient for someone who was like, ‘Oh I work full time
and have a kid,’ but I was like, I would want the experience. You have to get it out of your system before you get that career or job.

Another student participant was more general in her description of wanting that college experience when she said, “I just wanted to explore a new environment. I didn’t want to be cooped up in the house, like, most of the time… [I] just wanted to go out and see the world, I guess you could say.”

Other student participants echoed the desire to have a new experience or get out of their hometown and meet new people as well. Saenz, Marcoulides, Junn, and Young (1999) define the “college experience” as being made up of 13 variables that include such factors as “friendships with students of different backgrounds” (p. 201), “talk with professor about a course” (p.201), “advice from friend about academic problems” (p.201), and “attendance at athletic events and campus events in fine arts” (p.202). According to Saenz et al. (1999), the college experience and social integration is important for retention and academic success. It is not surprising, then, that students say they seek these experiences when choosing their higher education pathway because the availability of a rich college experience may ultimately lead to greater success.

Not all of the impressions held by the participants were negative, however. There were comments throughout the study that online higher education could be convenient for some, and that it has benefitted some friends and family, and even the participants themselves in certain instances. Though for the majority of the students that participated in the talking circles online degree programs do not seem to be a viable or desirable pathway to a degree, there are perceptions that it may be appropriate to meet a need for some, particularly if the cost were significantly less than a residential program.
Overall, the impression that these Native American students and administrators have of online higher education is that there are issues of accountability and rigor, that online degrees are not as high quality as on-campus degrees, and that online does not allow for students to have the genuine college experience. Online education may serve a practical purpose for some by providing convenience, but for the traditional-age student participants in the study, online higher education simply is not what they wanted. Educators who seek to serve Native American students more responsively should work to ensure exemplary course design with clearly articulated deadlines, authentication measures such as exam proctoring, and providing multiple opportunities for student engagement; all of which would address the concerns noted in this theme.

**Outside Influences**

Student perceptions and knowledge are based more on their experiences and influences than on reading and researching the justifications and foundations of these activities. In the context of this study, there are numerous outside influences that impact Native American student perceptions of online higher education. Sub-themes of exposure, wants and needs, preparation, and programs were germane to the theme of outside influences.

Exposure to higher education via multiple pathways, including specific needs the students have pursuant to getting a degree, teachers and programs at the high school level and how well those prepared students for college, and, finally, program availability all play a part in students’ college choice decisions. These outside influences are out of the control of the students, but are a fundamental part of the college equation.

Gaining exposure to higher education in primary and secondary school influences college choice decisions for many students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Whether that exposure comes
from parents, high schools, mentor programs, or media like television or radio, these exposures affect much of what students perceive about college. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) note that students with parental ties to a particular university or college strongly influence a student’s decision to attend that specific institution, which was confirmed by one student participant, who said that her father is a huge fan of the school she ultimately attended. She dedicated herself to work really hard to get into that school because it was such a big deal in her family. “I’m not sure when he [her dad] fell in love with the school, but it kind of was like a legacy for us too.” Due to that legacy connection, that student then said, “...it was just a matter of working to get here.” While some student participants were influenced by exposure due to family ties, others were part of a dual enrollment program in high school that acquainted them with the school that they eventually decided to attend. Regardless, this direct positive experience with a particular school influenced their decision to attend.

Consistent with the review of materials done in support of the research, online programs have almost no presence in the high schools and Native education centers where the student participants may have looked for information on college. For instance, at one Tribal Education Department office where I conducted an interview, a review of the wall of college brochures showed only two online programs out of the 48 programs represented, and neither of those indicated any Native American support programs or had marketing specifically targeting Native American students, though many of the recruiting brochures from brick-and-mortar colleges had appeals to the Native American community. Likewise, the administrator participants also said that they rarely, if ever, recommend online to the traditional-aged college-bound students they advise. Therefore, if students’ parents and other family members had either no experience with
or exposure to online education, or they had poor experiences with it, students would not be likely to consider online for pursuing a college education.

When determining where to go to college, students also have many questions they consider. Why do they want a degree? How quickly do they need to get done? What type of degree would be the most beneficial for them? Will they need to work in order to go to college? Do they need credits in the summer, or are some high school courses only offered online? These are the types of wants and needs that guide college choice decisions. The wants and needs expressed by students toward their education were varied, and no single answer came to the forefront as a result of the questions outlined above. However, there were enough mentions of these types of wants and needs, many of which could be classified as outside influences, that it warranted a mention in this theme.

Another component of outside influences that was common in the conversations with student participants and administrators is the apparent lack of preparation for college students experienced in the high schools. Preparation at the high school level impacts student college choice and perception of online programs because if faculty and advisors are not adequately preparing students for college and exposing them to opportunities to meet college requirements, then students are at a disadvantage when it comes to college choice. Regrettably, many of the student participants were very aware that they and their peers were put at a disadvantage when it came to college preparation. One student articulated the problem like this, “The teachers don’t understand the background… and they don’t really put the full effort into understanding their students, I think, and so I think that really affects it [preparation].” And another said this about how teachers at his high school are dismissive of Native American students:
And it was just like, they [teachers] get this cocky attitude, it’s like, oh, they’re just going to do fishing, they’re just going to do geoduck diving or like the stereotype towards it. And that’s basically high school. It’s just like, oh, they’re going to do drugs, like what happened to their parents or their families…”

An administrator participant said that many “teachers don’t feel they’re responsible for counseling,” and that attitude coupled with the stereotyping and lack of mentoring at the high school level leads to confusion. One administrator said, “students don’t know why they are going to college, or why they should go to college.” As discussed in the support and relationship theme, there are mentor programs and tribal education centers that are very successful in encouraging and inspiring students to go to college, but not all students have access to these programs and are unfortunately victims of a system that perpetuates stereotypes and tracks students accordingly. The lack of college preparation and support in college choice is a matter of ignorance and lack of education, and it has a profound effect on the college aspirations of Native American students. The administrator participants were all adamant that they work to combat this lack of exposure and support by mentoring and supporting students as much as they can within the scope of their position and organization. One administrator from a tribal education department said:

I talked with my team and said ‘Ok, this is the reality, how can we design an advising time that will have an impact so that we can change that thinking [teachers who do not feel it’s their responsibility to advise]?’ You know, because we want them [Native American students] really to be thinking about college… We need people that are really committed to helping students, you know, prepare for college, that whole college
experience. You know, just preparing them for everything that’s involved with that freshman year.

Coupled with the stereotyping and tracking of Native American students in high schools is the lack of preparation for the academic rigor of a four-year university and the type of motivation and time management skills necessary for success in an online program. According to some administrator participants, without this early education “It is the rare student that is ready to go to a four-year institution,” and therefore students seek programs where success is more likely at first, such as at local community colleges.

Degree program availability also appears to play an important role in college choice for the student participants. Some students in every talking circle said that they chose the school they were attending based, in part, on the curriculum offered and alignment with their personal goals for higher education. And for many, the online schools simply do not offer the programs they want. As one student participant said: “They’re [online schools are] selective… There’s not as much degrees to choose from, you know. You either have a doctorate degree, or a business degree, or a law degree, and that’s it.” This is an important finding because if the Native American students do not resonate with program content offered online, there will likely continue to be low adoption rates of online degree programs.

Outside influences have a significant impact on college choice for the student participants in the study. Exposure to higher education in K-12 education, tracking and stereotyping in high school, family ties, and students’ own wants and needs really dictate if, how, and where they will go to college. While this phenomenon is not unique to the Native American community, some of the issues of tracking and preparation are compounded in a community where many students are first-generation college students because what is lacking in the schools is not necessarily made
up by parents in the home. In order to increase college aspirations and adoption of online or face-to-face higher education, colleges, mentors, and high schools will need to do more to expose students to the benefits of higher education, reduce tracking of Native American students and stereotyping them as non-college material, and work to meet the wants and needs of the diverse Native American communities.

Summary

Numerous factors that contribute to Native American student perceptions of online higher education emerged from conversations with the participants, and many of these are germane to college choice in general. Overwhelmingly, students revealed an aversion to the learning approaches necessary to being successful in an online course, which include working independently, limited interaction with faculty and peers, and self-direction. The student participants, instead, said they desire relationship, support, and connection in their classes, and they prefer oral learning to online scholarship. Factors of access and outside influences have a major impact on perception and lack of adoption of online degree programs, as do the impressions that students and tribal education administrators have of overall online program quality and applicability to their own educational goals. In the following chapter, the implications of these findings are examined in relation to the theoretical framework, with recommendations for further research and practice that may create easier access and greater interest among Native American students in online degree programs.
CHAPTER FIVE
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Exploring and identifying Native American student perceptions of online higher education is one important step toward helping faculty and administrators create meaningful, culturally responsive, accessible online degree programs to attract and enable more Native American students to earn their college diploma. By considering these perceptions, online education providers may be able to meet the expectations and desires of Native American students, rather than assuming the models that work for the dominant cultural audience will also work for Indigenous students. The study utilized aspects of indigenous research theory and a constructivist perspective to frame the methods and analyze the data. By coding the data from three talking circles of Native American college students and six interviews with tribal education administrators, the study uncovered important factors that shape perceptions the participating students had toward online higher education. The purpose of this final chapter is to discuss the implications of the findings, specifically how they may inform further research and improve practice in providing online higher education to Native American communities.

Summary of Findings

The research questions guiding the study are: “How do Native American students perceive online higher education?” and “How do program availability and access to technology shape perceptions of online higher education?” The responses to these questions are important because they should provide a better understanding of how online degrees can be tailored to meet the needs of Native American college students in order to create a viable and desirable access point to higher education. Further, it is critical to add the voice of Native American students to the growing literature in online higher education efficacy and relevance in order to potentially
improve overall retention and graduation rates and meet the needs of this historically underserved and overlooked group.

Emerging as the most prevalent theme in the study is the disconnect between student participants’ preferred learning approaches and the learning approaches that foster success in an online program. Participants most commonly agreed that they prefer oral learning in a face-to-face classroom environment, and therefore the self-directed learning approach required to be successful online does not suit their personal educational goals. The collaborative learning approach that participants said they prefer closely aligns with the research on and practice of student engagement, which is in high demand on campus and online (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Likewise, research clearly supports the case that students who are more engaged socially and cognitively will be more successful online (Dixson, 2010; Meyer, 2012; Smart & Cappel, 2009).

Despite the research showing how beneficial engagement opportunities are for online students, the findings of the study suggest that many online degree providers have not implemented engaging activities and pedagogies to the extent required to make a difference in the overall experience of students. Student participants who had experience taking online courses reported feelings of isolation; lack of connection with content, peers, and instructors; and had the perception that they were on their own to complete the course. The results show that they prefer a more social, interactive, and connected experience in their courses, and for that reason they would not consider pursuing a fully online degree.

Nevertheless, student and administrator participants did indicate that the use of online resources to support in-class learning was often helpful and created an alternative learning approach which enhances understanding and retention of content. When used in a hybrid
manner, online course work was a welcome element of course design. Likewise, a few of the administrator participants shared that when students who are enrolled in fully online courses came together to work collaboratively in a classroom with a facilitator that is unaffiliated with the course, they were much more successful than students in online courses where such interaction was not available. This finding suggests that hybrid or “flipped” learning – lectures and content are online, and in class is discussion and applied learning – scenarios may be a viable alternative to traditional education scenarios and fully online degrees.

Another finding that emerged is that students often mentioned that an older parent or family member had been successful in completing an online degree. This finding suggests that there may be some generational differences that play into the perceptions of online higher education. This finding is somewhat counterintuitive considering that the younger generation is likely to be more tech-savvy and computer literate than their parents, aunts, and uncles, yet they still desire the more traditional classroom and college environment. Conversely, the students perceive that their parents and older family members are more likely to be successful online because, though their technology literacy may be lower, they are more goal-oriented and the ends are more important than the means when it comes to higher education. Some student participants said specifically that they wanted the “college experience,” which is generally not a goal for the older student who is more self-directed and motivated by several factors extrinsic to the college experience itself (Gigliotti & Gigliotti, 1998). The findings suggest that in a very focused and structured course environment like that offered by online higher education, older students are more likely to be successful.

Culturally relevant support systems also emerged as a major factor which the student participants seek when choosing their institution of higher education. This support may be
supplied by a number of sources, but one significant component many participants said they sought is the presence of a Native American student center or community where they can connect with other Native students and find a “home away from home.” The desire for familial and community connection and the subsequent academic achievement that occurs is supported by the literature on Native American student success (Brayboy et al, 2012; Demmert, 2001; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Many Native students come from areas where extended family and the community are tightly-knit, and they crave community and a place they can go for understanding and connection. The participants of this study consistently said they were unable to find community connection in online education.

Relationship, like student support, plays a significant part in the participants’ college choice decisions and affects their perception of online higher education dramatically. Relationship in this regard refers to a number of personal connections that students seek at the institutions of higher education, including a meaningful way to connect in real time with instructors, peers, mentors, and even with the institution itself. When student participants had a chance to visit an institution in person, through high school programs, dual enrollment, or family ties, such visits often influenced their decision to attend that particular institution, and this finding is consistent with the findings in Johnson (2010) where campus visits were noted as an important factor in student college choice. The need for relationship is an important finding related to college choice and decisions about adopting an online degree program. The findings suggest that most of the Native American student participants had not had a chance to connect with online instructors or advisors, nor had their mentors and family members connected to a school offering online education. In general, there was no affinity for or connection to online programs, which appears to be related to students’ negative perception of them.
The lack of consistent access to state-of-the-art technology and internet connection, coupled with broader issues of funding technology improvements in education, also negatively influenced participants’ perceptions of online higher education. Several student and administrator participants noted that the technology infrastructure in their communities is not robust enough to support pursuing an online degree. While this was not true for all participants, it did arise as a significant barrier to adoption of online learning for many students. Berkshire and Smith (2000) have said that students should have access to community resources if their personal technology infrastructure was not robust enough to support online education. However, some participants said community access would not be a viable option due to distance and the frequently substandard local resources. Perceptions of online education are likely closely tied to the lack of necessary technology access at home and in the community.

The findings also suggest that many of the student participants perceived online higher education as more expensive than campus-based programs. This finding is important to address as it points to a contradiction between the literature documenting the cost of online higher education and student participant perceptions. Online degrees, particularly bachelor’s programs, are typically priced the same as the host institution’s on-campus tuition or lower (Wang, 2015). However, students’ perceptions that this is not the case may be tied to their being familiar with for-profit institutions’ online programs only. Regardless of why, several participants have the impression that online higher education is more expensive than traditional college, and that perception is a major driver of how online education is perceived by the participants, as it is across higher education in general (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

Another key finding that emerged from the study is that the negative experiences many students have in high school, including stereotyping by teachers, lack of college preparatory
curriculum, and absence of effective advising, negatively impacts Native American student perceptions of higher education in general and online in particular. Student and administrator participants discussed instances of high school personnel stereotyping Native students as not interested or unlikely to succeed in higher education. In these cases, teachers and counselors are not adequately preparing students for college in terms of directing students toward relevant coursework and expectations for continuing their studies. The literature confirms that despite having early aspirations for attending college, students are often not supported in a culturally relevant and responsive way that encourages and guides them toward pursuing a college degree (Brayboy et al., 2012; Pavel, 1999). Without appropriate preparation and exposure to college preparatory coursework, coupled with stereotyping and lack of support from high school mentors and administrators, many Native American students are at a disadvantage from the start of their college career.

In sum, the findings suggest that online higher education is not a preferred pathway to higher education for Native American students in the study who perceive the medium as an isolating, inferior method for obtaining a degree when compared with traditional higher education. Student participants alluded to online higher education being a fine resource for others, but it was not a viable pathway to a degree for themselves. Also, Native American students are not likely to be exposed to high quality culturally relevant online courses and programs in high school or as freshman or transfer students, nor do advisors and mentors discuss online higher education very often. And finally, the distinct lack of culturally compatible support programs and perceived lack of student engagement activities that would connect the learner with instructors, peers, and course content, exemplify the antithesis of the type of educational environment in which traditional-aged Native American students thrive. These
findings provide the basis of a roadmap through indigenous research theory to recommendations for higher education institutions that seek to serve Native American students and their communities through online programs.

**Connecting Theory, Findings, and Practice**

The guiding theoretical framework for the study is Indigenous research theory, which challenges dominant positivist and post-positivist assumptions about the nature of knowledge by asserting that “knowledge is relational” (Wilson, 2001, p. 176), not firm and fixed, but fluid and co-constructed. It also goes beyond constructivism by affirming that knowledge is shared and collective, not an “individual entity” (Wilson, 2001, p. 176). Indigenous research scholars situate story, voice, and Indigenous knowledge at the center of the research, avoiding a cultural-deficit model often present in research with the non-dominant culture (Smith, 2005). Further, Boyd asks the researcher to analyze “what knowledge do you privilege?” (as cited in Kovach, 2009, p. 79). Researchers and educators honor Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge in inquiry, analysis, and delivery by utilizing the principles articulated by the four R’s of respect, reciprocity, relevance, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). It is through this lens of Indigenous research theory – situating participant understandings and perceptions at the center of the evaluation – that the findings reveal a pathway to practice.

**Respect.** Respect is a foundational precept in Indigenous higher education, and it is evident in many areas of the study. The participants’ references to connection with mentors and family that influence their college choice decisions is one example of respect having an impact on student choice and perceptions. Additionally, the importance of respect was apparent in the findings from the lack of Indigenous ways of learning and knowing supported by online education, to the lack of support some participants felt from their high school teachers and
programs in preparation for college. These examples highlight instances where a lack of respect has led to unfavorable consequences in perception of online courses and college in general. It is incumbent upon providers of higher education to honor the sovereignty of Indigenous nations, respecting their rights to self-determination in education, as in all matters. By respecting the knowledge of local tribal leaders, educators, and students, public institutions can honor Indigenous theory and provide meaningful and desirable pathways to degree attainment for Native American students.

The findings of the study were derived by applying a respectful and culturally appropriate approach, creating space for an exchange of ideas that is in line with Indigenous methodologies. The utilization of Indigenous research methods, and framing the conversation from the Indigenous perspective, honors collective knowledge building that respects self-determination, and privileges Native voice.

Relevance. It was apparent from the findings that the participants did not perceive online degrees as being relevant to their college goals. Without relevant degree programs, and with no relevant support programs that provide authentic personal connections and relationships, student participants did not acquire positive impressions of online higher education. In contrast, student participants perceived relevance in the on-campus programs in which they were enrolled, and the study findings point to relevant cultural connection as a primary source of that perception. The findings also suggest that a lack of relevant outreach and education about online programs leads to a lower opinion of how online degrees might fit Native American community educational needs. The perception of relevance has a significant impact on the adoption of higher education in Native communities.
Relevance also informs ethical research with Indigenous communities. There is an assumption that higher education, and online degrees specifically, provide adequate access to underserved populations, however, the study sought to expose those assumptions by asking members of the Native American community if online is relevant to them. By asking open ended questions primarily in group settings, the study utilized relevant research methods to assess Native American student perceptions of online higher education. Indigenous research theory scholars (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009) urge researchers to ensure the knowledge gained through research with Native American communities will be relevant to the wants and needs of the community involved, not simply benefit the researching institution. The findings indicate that overall, the construct of relevance informs student perceptions of online higher education and guides recommendations for research and practice resulting from the study.

**Reciprocity.** The absence of reciprocal relationships in online higher education programs between students and their instructors, peers, and mentors as described by the study participants, contributes to unfavorable perceptions of online degrees. The students on campus are able to build those reciprocal relationships, and benefit from the community ties they experience in cultural support centers and with those on campus who are sharing their experiences in real time.

Reciprocal relationships and partnerships that would provide culturally relevant programs and education are lacking from many online programs. Despite the opportunity that exists to collaborate between colleges and tribes, the administrative participants perceive that those reciprocal arrangements are opportunities that have gone unmet. The lack of reciprocal programs and connections leads to online higher education being perceived as less desirable by the participants in the study.
**Responsibility.** Participants in the study pointed to a number of instances where online degree providers did not meet their responsibility to provide culturally relevant support programs, student engagement, and pre-college programs that cultivate and inspire Native American students to pursue an online degree. The lack of college preparation and stereotyping in high schools as described by some participants points to irresponsible practices at the very foundation of providing college access for Native students.

Public institutions of higher education and secondary schools have a fundamental responsibility to serve Indigenous communities in ways that honor sovereignty and self-determination. The findings point to deficiencies in the relevance, reciprocity, and respectful practice that would enable progress toward meaningful access. In order to meet the goal of appropriate and extensive access to higher education for Native Americans, the study findings suggest the need for practitioners and researchers to incorporate relationship building as a fundamental tenet of working with Native American communities.

**Relationship, the fifth “R”.** The findings of the study, coupled with the guiding literature on culturally responsive higher education for Native American students, indicate the need for a fifth “R” of relationship in the tenets of Indigenous education, research, and theory. Relationship is the common thread, appearing throughout the theory, results, implications, and recommendations, and provides a foundation for the other four R’s. In order to build respect, there must first be a foundation of genuine relationship. In order for two sovereign entities to create meaningful reciprocal partnerships, trusting relationships must be forged. It is through authentic relationship that relevance can be determined, understood, and honored in the development of culturally responsive programs and pathways to higher education. And finally,
cultivation of a trusting relationship provides practitioners with insight into their responsibility to honor the needs of the Indigenous communities with whom they are engaged in partnership.

Through the voice of the participants, privileging students’ experience and their collective knowledge, the findings reveal perceptions of online higher education that are antithetical to the collaborative and relational ways many culturally traditional Native American students prefer to learn. The study findings further expose the desire for relationship in education in terms of connection to peers, mentors, and instructors at the institution. Indigenous scholars who study Native American attainment in higher education highlight the importance of community and connection, as well as family and institutional support in educational achievement (Brayboy et al., 2012; Demmert, 2001; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). The relevance of culturally-based support systems in higher education is underscored by the findings, which indicate that numerous participants sought relationship via Native American student centers and mentors when choosing their college. In online programs, however, the students do not find the personal connections and relationships that they desire,

Hunt and Harrington (2010) also tout the role of relationship and connection when they recommend that “mainstream colleges and universities should work with local tribal governments and other community programs to improve outreach efforts to American Indian students and their parents” (p. 9). The importance of the element of institutional connection and relationship was revealed in the findings as well, as many student participants said that their experiences and connections with a college mentor or camp program prior to matriculation built an affinity for that institution that translated into enrollment. Once again, these types of student development and mentoring programs are largely absent from online higher education, and
therefore students are unlikely to form ties with online degree providers or envision themselves enrolling in an online degree program.

Despite colonialism and a legacy of assimilation and acculturation that persist in higher education, Native American students are starting to resonate with what traditional higher education has to offer, in part because of the relationships and connection opportunities available to them on campus. Conversely, it appears that Native American students mainly see online as a viable pathway only if there is some outside influence requiring them to utilize this medium. Through a critical perspective, in order to increase the appeal of online programs and meet the needs of Native American students, institutions must move past the paradigm of “one size fits all” and a cultural deficit model to a model that honors the wisdom and needs of Native communities by way of relationship, partnership, and culturally relevant support.

Grounded in the foundation of Indigenous theory and the literature about Native American higher education, and with a focus on the fifth R of relationship, the recommendations that follow emphasize that it is not the responsibility of the academy to “solve the problem” of creating pathways to for Native students to access higher education. Instead, on a local and institutional level, higher education institutions have a responsibility to connect, listen, respect, and respond to the needs of their local tribal communities, building partnerships and relationships that honor the specific needs and desires as articulated by the sovereign tribes. Because there is no one definite learning style that can be declared as being universally Native American (Vogel, 2011), and there is diversity in the ways in which Native communities may approach education, creating local partnerships and using institutional resources to facilitate tribal self-determination in higher education honors the tenets of Indigenous theories and epistemologies.
Recommendations for Practice

Though the findings of the study clearly indicate that online higher education is perceived as lacking the fundamental building blocks that would enable traditional college age (18-25) Native American students to pursue their degree online, there are a number of recommendations for practice that emerge from the findings, many of which would improve overall appeal of online degrees for not only Native American students, but for all aspiring college students from diverse multicultural backgrounds.

*Include culturally relevant support programs and virtual (online) or regional (physical) student centers in online programs.* The findings of the study and the literature are very clear on this point: Native American students desire culturally relevant support systems when they matriculate and are more successful where they can take advantage of these systems. Many of the study participants indicated they chose their current college based on the fact that it offered a robust Native American student center. And nearly all literature on college persistence for Native American students refers to the need for a “home away from home” where students find support and relationship that resembles their tribal communities (Adelman et al., 2013; Brayboy et al., 2012; Deloria, 1991; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, Pewewardy, 2002; Wright & Tierney, 1991). In order to serve Native students, online degree providers would need to create analogous student support centers in the virtual environment or consider creating regional Native American student centers in partnership with tribes to support students gathering and interacting in the same ways in which support centers do on campus.

Creating Native American student centers in partnership with tribes to support online students would serve a number of purposes. Not only would it provide a physical place for students to gather and support one another, but it could also provide an avenue for exposing
students to online higher education in their own home communities where family support would be the most extensive. Partnerships between online degree providers and specific tribes could ensure that the programs delivered are those that are most needed by the students who are tribal members, and that local facilitators and tribal education administrators would be able to support student learning in a collaborative environment, even if the programs are delivered asynchronously.

There is also ample opportunity and incentive for online degree providers to form online communities where students can create and nurture personal connections and relationships, ask each other questions, and share experiences. These types of informal groups are commonplace on the internet, typically surrounding a shared area of interest, and the idea could easily translate to the academic environment. By creating, supporting, and marketing such collaborative opportunities online, there is greater possibility that online degree providers would attract and retain Native American students, since the availability of culturally relevant support systems is a key resource that students consider when choosing an institution of higher education.

*Provide abundant opportunity for student engagement in online courses.* In addition to the desire for student support services, the findings and literature also affirm that online courses should be designed with ample opportunities for engagement, including timely and meaningful connection with instructors, collaborative work with other students in the course, and providing multi-modal instructional content. The days of the correspondence model of distance education are gone as the availability of technology and students’ technology literacy and expectations have evolved. Simply posting written content in the course space with limited instruction and interaction is no longer accepted by students as quality they are willing to pay for. Students are
more engaged when pedagogical strategies are scaffolded on theories of active learning (Meyer, 2014).

To serve Native American students in a more relevant way, online degree providers should endeavor to require engagement strategies be built into all courses. The current research in online pedagogy emphasizes the efficacy of engagement strategies, and the tide is slowly turning as technology improves, students become more demanding of high-quality course design, and instructors experience improved outcomes for students in courses with “active and authentic pedagogies” (Meyer, 2014, p. 44). Indeed, as reported by Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Fung (2010), the Community of Inquiry model of engagement, which demonstrates the interconnectivity of Social Presence, Cognitive Presence, and Teaching Presence, confirms that by focusing on all three of these aspects in course design, student perceptions of quality improve, as does student achievement. Therefore, Native-American-serving online institutions would likely benefit from being perceived as offering quality options, and they may grow their Native enrollments if these institutions invest greater focus on student engagement elements in course design.

*Provide outreach and education at a local level through partnerships.* A central tenet of Indigenous research theory is the necessity of relationship in Native American research, and by extension, in educational delivery. Quality online learning for Native American students would emphasize the central tenet of relationship by serving Native American communities in culturally relevant and responsive ways. The study findings pointed to the lack of available information about local online degree programs, lack of relevant and desired programs offered online, and some critical misunderstandings in terms of the cost of obtaining a degree via online programs. To address this disconnect between the academy and high schools and tribal education offices,
online degree providers should work to establish relationships with local Native-serving high
schools and tribal educators, learn what programs and delivery options would appeal to learners
in their communities, and create the programs that would be the most beneficial to those learners.

Through established collaborative relationships, online education providers could work
directly with the tribes to provide targeted information about program availability and the cost of
attendance, and ensure the cultural relevance of programs delivered. By collaborating with tribal
education professionals, the likelihood of ample numbers of students enrolling that would ensure
program viability is much greater. Institutions that value the tribe’s and tribal elders’ input,
establish partnerships that respect the sovereignty tribes hold in their own right, and provide
reciprocal programs that truly benefit tribal members and communities would simultaneously
demonstrate a cultural understanding of the four R’s in (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991), which are
Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility. Additionally this demonstration would
help cultivate a relevant community and student connection to the institution that should
contribute to growing enrollments and meeting community needs.

*Explore technology funding for tribal communities.* Solving the technology access issue
is a difficult one because it involves funding on a grand scale. However, as in the previous
recommendations, institutions that work on building relationships and partnerships with regional
tribes could explore grant funding for improved technology infrastructure. Universities and
colleges typically have considerable experience in soliciting grants, and they also have the
capacity to engage in writing proposals that could support the innovative work tribal educators
are already doing to procure funding. Working at the local level in partnership strengthens the
value proposition of the ask and provides additional resources of time and money which are
finite and often stretched thin as it is.
Developing collaborative relationships is an important component of broadening the technology infrastructure, and improved access to technology impacts not just access to online degree programs but also access to college applications, promotional materials, and financial aid applications. Though it may seem counterintuitive to focus on local partnerships when online higher education is meant to serve a geographically dispersed audience, the reality is that by starting local and creating the programs and pathways that are culturally relevant and strategic, it is more likely that the programs created will serve a broader audience of Native American students.

_Honor indigenous research theory in praxis._ Institutions of higher education should work diligently to honor indigenous research theory and the tenets of culturally responsive and respectful practice when attempting to implement programs that serve Native American students. The findings underscore the need for recognizing respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) in designing and delivering programs that will resonate with Native American students and meet their needs. _Respect for_ the wants and needs of the students and communities, _relevance_ in educational program development, enforcing _reciprocity_ in terms of giving back to the communities upon whose land the universities are situated, and ensuring _responsibility_ for working in partnership with the sovereign tribes, will ultimately result in educational pathways acceptable to Native American students.

It is not enough to make assumptions or stereotype communities and students by creating programs and pathways that suit the academy and overlook local needs. Instead, it is critical to build relationships and cooperative partnerships with tribes and tribal communities in order to ensure culturally relevant programs are developed. Indigenous researcher Kovach (2009) asserts that there is a collective responsibility in research and practice to avoid exploiting Indigenous
knowledge and people. In context of the study, to enact praxis that respects Indigenous ways of learning and knowing will require partnership and collaboration, listening, and serving. Ultimately, by creating relevant and responsive programs and pathways, the resulting degree programs should be more effective and more apt to lead students to successful completion than trying a one-size-fits-all approach.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The need for increased access to higher education for Native American students is critical to the mission of public higher education, and though the results of the study show less than favorable perceptions of online programs, the findings provide a rationale for exploring the following areas a little deeper.

*Examine how more older Native American students are using online degree programs,* and *what factors predict successful online degree completion.* The study focused on the perceptions of traditional college-age students (18-25), yet a common thread was that many of the participants have older family members who have pursued a degree online. Determining what is different about the older audience and their perceptions of online degree programs would expand the knowledge of what works and what does not in terms of serving Native American communities via online degrees.

*Explore perceptions of traditional college-age Native Americans who are not currently enrolled in higher education.* The student participants in this study are all representative of a relatively privileged group as they are currently enrolled in higher education. It would add depth to the understanding of Native American perceptions of online higher education to understand the perspectives of those who are not currently enrolled college students, as they may have very
different perspectives on cost, access, technology availability, and other qualities inherent to online degree programs.

Further explore Native American student perceptions of online higher education by talking with students enrolled at diverse institution types. To broaden the scope of findings, research should be conducted with Native American students currently enrolled in tribal colleges, community colleges, private colleges, and already in online programs. The resulting data would help to deepen the understanding of how effective online programs are at meeting the needs of Native American students across a broad spectrum of institution types.

Explore the role of culturally relevant course design, and how that influences Native American student perceptions of online higher education. The student participants in the study had not experienced culturally relevant or responsive course design, and that undoubtedly shaped their overall perceptions of the quality and relevance of online higher education for meeting their educational needs. It would be interesting to research the perceptions of Native American students who had experienced courses and programs designed in a culturally relevant way, and learn if better course design produced different perceptions.

Bringing it Home

The findings demonstrate that regardless of delivery method (online or face-to-face); Native American students look for support systems, mentors, and connection to peers, faculty, and content. The experience of the students who participated in the study suggests that universities are not doing an adequate job of providing ample student engagement opportunities and culturally relevant support services in their online programs. Therefore, the students perceive online degrees as irrelevant in their educational attainment. Though online courses and
materials may be beneficial to students when utilized in hybrid or “flipped” scenarios, the traditional-aged college students in the study rejected the idea of pursuing a degree fully online.

A closer examination of online courses and programs confirms that there is a distinct lack of partnerships and cooperation between online degree providers and tribes that, if increased, could lead to more relevant programming. Through implementation of cooperative programming and culturally relevant support systems and course design, along with increased funding for technology infrastructure, online degrees could eventually provide a desirable pathway to degree attainment for Native Americans. Until then, universities would serve the community better by strengthening Native American support centers on campus and implementing recruiting measures that bring students to campus and create relationships between students and campus mentors and faculty.
REFERENCES


Appendix A
Participant Consent Form

Attention: Study Participant

RE: Native American Student Perceptions of Online Degree Programs

From: Kelly Ward, Professor, Principal Investigator
Kelly Newell, Ph.D. Candidate, Co-Principal Investigator

Researcher’s statement
This letter is regarding the research project that Kelly Ward Ph.D and Kelly Newell are conducting through the Washington State University, College of Education. We are asking your consent to conduct this research as approved by the WSU institutional review board number 14288. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When I have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called ‘informed consent’. I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

Purpose and Benefits
The purpose of the research project is to gain an understanding of the perceptions of Native American students toward online degree programs, primarily those offered by state universities and colleges. Benefits to the participants may include a better understanding of themselves, their perceptions of higher education in general, and technology-mediated programs more specifically. Benefits to society may include a better understanding of how online higher education can be tailored to meet the needs and desires of aspiring Native American college students in order to provide a viable, desirable access point to higher education for Native students. Access to higher education contributes to improved economic development in communities, and improving the viability of online programs for Native students may improve graduation and retention rates for those communities.

Procedures
This project will take place during the Spring 2015 semester, during which time a several interviews will be conducted. All participants will be given a sheet outlining the description of the research and a consent form from each agreeing participant will be collected before session begins. Any participant not giving consent will not be used in the research project. Participants consenting to the study will be informed that they may discontinue their involvement at any time.

Participants will be asked to review the research results to ensure accurate representation by the researcher prior to publication.
**Risks, Stress, or Discomfort**
There will be minimal risk associated with your participation in the research. A risk is minimal where the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the proposed study is not greater, in and of themselves, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. During the interview we will address perceptions of access to higher education for Native students, perceptions of the availability of higher education, and strong emotion may be evoked. However, these conversations will occur in a very supportive, non-judging, confidential environment where participants may discuss openly and participate at their own free-will.

**Confidentiality**
Participant confidentiality is of utmost importance to the project; therefore, students’ names will be coded to ensure anonymity throughout the study and into any publications that may come from the data. All personally identifiable material will be kept solely by the researcher and destroyed at the conclusion of the project.

However, should the student request a waiver of anonymity, or request transparency and recognition in the research, simply notify the researcher of the level of recognition the student is comfortable with, and all material from that student will be attributed accordingly.

**Subject’s statement**
This study has been explained to me. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have general questions about the research, I can contact Kelly Newell (knewell@wsu.edu). If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant, I can call the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-9661. After review, please check the boxes below that you consent to and then sign and date the bottom line to acknowledge that you understand and give consent to the research project.

I consent to having information collected from:
- Audio recordings of the interview/focus group
- Follow up questions used for clarification after the initial interview/focus group
- Review of research findings

Researcher ___________________________ Date ________________

Participant ____________________________ ________________ ____________
Signature Print Date

I request to waive my anonymity, and would like recognition and attribution of my contributions to the research. Please recognize me in the research using the following:

Attribution Requested ________________________________
Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Environment: Warm, inviting and comfortable space, comfortable, informal seating, and a relaxed atmosphere created. Food and refreshments provided.

Welcome and Introductions:

Thanks for agreeing to participate in this study on your perceptions of online higher education programs. I am excited to get to know you better and learn more about your experiences. Before we begin you will need to read and sign an Informed Consent Form. This form will tell you more about the study and asks you to sign indicating that you agree to participate. Do you have any questions?

I am going to record this conversation so that I can listen to it later and transcribe our conversation. I will ask you to review the summary and data prior to publication in order to ensure accurate representation of the perceptions recorded in the study. Do you have any questions?

Guiding questions and protocols for the college student focus group:

- **Understanding the participant and their background**
  - Tell me about yourself: Age, hometown, year in school, tribal affiliation, where you attended high school.
  - Why did you agree to participate in this experience?

- **Perceptions of online higher education**
  - What factors influenced your college choice process and what are the most important factors that influenced your choice?
  - When you decided that you would like to go to college, what institution types did you initially consider, and why?
  - Have you at any time considered getting your college education through an online degree program?
    - Why or why not?
  - Have you ever seen promotional materials for college or universities at your high school?
    - If so, do you recall what institution types were recruiting at your high school?
  - Please tell me about the availability of online access where you live.
  - Do you believe you have the tools available to you to access it if you considered online higher education, from where you live?
  - Do you know anyone who has pursued or obtained a degree online?
    - If so, what can you tell me about their experience?
What factors might have to be in place in order for you to consider online higher education?

Does the availability of certain programs and degrees influence your college choice?

Have you considered that online higher education could foster a community-centered environment?

Do you perceive any benefits of obtaining a degree online?

Do you perceive any problems with obtaining a degree online?

Is there anything else you would like to share (with the group) (with me) about your journey toward choosing a college?

Thank you:

Participants received the researcher’s thanks and a gift for their participation. They were reminded that the researcher will be checking in with them later to ensure their ideas have been fairly and accurately represented.

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Guiding questions for the tribal education directors and guidance counselors:

- Understanding the participant and their background
  - Tell me about yourself: Age, hometown, years in administrative role, tribal affiliation, where you go to college (if applicable).
  - Why did you agree to participate in this experience?

- College choice for tribal members
  - What factors do you think are most important to aspiring college students in this community when choosing an institution of higher education?
  - What types of institutions do you think most students consider, and why?

- Perceptions of online higher education
  - Do you think aspiring college students consider getting a college education through an online degree program?
    - Why or why not?
  - Have you ever seen promotional materials for college or universities made available in your area?
    - If so, do you recall what institution types were recruiting at your high school?
  - Please tell me about the availability of online access in this community.
  - Do you believe students in this community have the tools available to access it if they considered online higher education?
  - Do you know anyone from this community who has pursued or obtained a degree online?
    - If so, what can you tell me about their experience?
● What factors might have to be in place in order for an aspiring college student to consider online higher education?
● Do you perceive any benefits of obtaining a degree online?
● Do you perceive any problems with obtaining a degree online?
● Is there anything else you would you like to share (with the group) (with me) about the topic of college choice or, more specifically, online education?

Thank you:

Participants received the researcher’s thanks and a gift for their participation. They were reminded that the researcher will be checking in with them later to ensure their ideas have been fairly and accurately represented.