

Examining the Impact of Indigenous
Cultural Centers on Native Student Experience

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Sociology

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April 15, 2022

Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: Native American Education, American Indian Education, Invisibility,
Cultural Centers, Indigenous Identity, Settler Colonialism in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Research has noted the persistence of hostile campus environments for underrepresented college students. However, Native and Indigenous students continue to be one of the most understudied populations within higher education, particularly as it relates to their campus experience and ways in which they navigate institutional climates. In addition to illuminating the campus climates Native students face at predominantly White institutions, this dissertation examines the impact that Indigenous cultural centers have on their overall campus experience and persistence. As the primary method, it draws on 12 semi-structured interviews with Indigenous students at a predominately White institution within the Southeast United States. Findings from this study demonstrate the systemic colonization which exists in higher education through the analysis of microaggressions students regularly face. Unique to Native students, these were most often laden with narratives of erasure. However, in the face of less-than-ideal climates, participants in the study also derived a sense of community, affirmation, and support from the existence of a Native student center. Though participants derived many benefits from having such a space, they also indicated that the Native center was not always immune to the climate issues faced within the larger campus. These accounts contrast existing research on cultural centers. Findings from this study suggests that the narrow understanding of Indigenous identity as an exclusively racialized one, functions as a powerful tool in advancing erasure narratives within the space itself.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Research has noted the persistence of hostile campus environments for underrepresented college students. However, Native and Indigenous students continue to be one of the most understudied populations within higher education, particularly as it relates to their campus experience and ways in which they navigate institutional climates. In addition to illuminating the campus climates Native students face at predominantly White institutions, this dissertation examines the impact that Indigenous cultural centers have on their overall campus experience and persistence. As the primary method, it draws on 12 semi-structured interviews with Indigenous students at a predominately White institution within the Southeast United States. Findings from this study demonstrate the ways in which colonization manifests in the higher education setting through the analysis of participant encounters in and out of the classroom. For Native students, these were most often laden with narratives of erasure or the idea that Native peoples have all but ceased to exist. However, in the face of less-than-ideal climates, participants in the study also derived a sense of community, affirmation, and support from the existence of a Native student center. Though participants derived many benefits from having such a space, they also indicated that the Native center was not always immune to the climate issues faced within the larger campus. These accounts contrast existing research on cultural centers. Findings from this study suggests that the narrow understanding of Indigenous identity as an exclusively racialized one, functions as a powerful tool in advancing erasure narratives within the space itself.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to past, present, and future Native students. Know that you enrich the spaces that you enter. Boldly take up space.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to those who supported and challenged me during this process. To my advisor, Dr. Sam Cook, words cannot express how much your support has meant over the last several years. There were many times I felt quite out of place within academia. Your genuine demeanor as well as your full confidence in me was critical to my own persistence as a graduate student. My own commitment to Native students grew not only out of experience but also out of that which was modeled for me. I would like to thank my co-chair, Dr. David Brunsmas, for the level of support that he invests in all of his students. It is an unfathomable number of hours you spend providing meticulous feedback to strengthen our work and abilities as writers. I would like to thank Dr. Sarah Ovink for the indispensable experience I gained “learning the ropes” of qualitative research and Dr. Karl Precoda for challenging my theoretical understanding of Indigenous identity. I am forever grateful that I have been able to learn from each one of you.

To my mother, thank you for modeling perseverance and for believing that I could do quite literally anything. Thank you for all of the sacrifices you have made so that I would have opportunities. Thank you for your encouragement and most importantly your unwavering love. To Alicia Phillips Stephens and Tyler Cooper, thank you for being the most amazing friends anyone could ask for. Your support and friendship mean the world to me. To Lilly and Max, thank you for being the best company while dissertating during a global pandemic. Without you both, I would have surely gone mad. Finally, to the Native campus community, you have been a home away from home and have given to me what I can only hope to give to you.

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Terminology

Within this document you will find that Native American, American Indian, Native, Indian, and Indigenous are used interchangeably. Throughout my experience, I have found that individuals have differing preferences when it comes to these labels. Most Native people rarely use any of these terms to refer to themselves, but identify themselves as a member of a specific tribal community. This carries a deeper meaning about a People and their culture given (A) the vast diversity among Native communities and (B) any other label is one given by the colonizer. My choice to use them interchangeably is an effort to both acknowledge the varied preferences and disrupt the notion that any one is more collectively preferred or correct.

Chapter I

Introduction

Campus cultural centers historically emerged as a response to the demands and experiences of marginalized groups at predominately White institutions (PWIs) (Patton, 2010; Pittman, 1994). Scholars trace this emergence to the post-civil rights period of the 1960s and 1970s (Bankole, 2005; Patton, 2010; Pittman, 1994; Princes, 2005). As institutions began to integrate, universities sought to recruit potential students from minority populations (Pittman, 1994). Unfortunately, institutional cultures and climates rarely change overnight, thus campuses often remain hostile places for students of color (Keels, 2020; Masta, 2018; Pittman, 1994). Students began to demand spaces which validated their own identities, provided an escape from overt and covert racism, and simply allowed them to be themselves (Pittman, 1994).

In more recent years, there has been a limited, but growing body of literature examining the impact of cultural centers on campus climate, minority student experience, and the retention of those students (Hord, 2005; Jenkins, 2008; Keels, 2020; Patton, 2010; Pinchback-Hines, 2013; Shek, 2013). Research suggests that cultural centers aid in retention by offering spaces for meaningful community building, providing reprieve from daily microaggressions, exhibiting cultural mirrors, facilitating cultural engagement; and providing significant social capital and support (Hord, 2005; Hypolite, 2020; Jenkins, 2008; Keels, 2020; Museus, & Neville, 2012; Patton, 2010; Pittman, 1994). However, much of the current literature focuses on either BCCs (Black Cultural Centers) or cultural centers more broadly; though administrators are discouraged from taking a homogenous approach as the populations which centers serve have very different needs (Benitez, 2010; Patton, 2010).

One argument against cultural centers is that they may encourage minority students to self-segregate as opposed to integrating into the larger campus community (Kubzansky, 2020). This is an argument that has been echoed by many conservatives. However, a recent book by Micere Keels (2020) boldly pushes back against this argument pointing out that minority students tend to spend time in more diverse friend groups (as compared to their White peers) while also learning from faculty who do not hold their racial or ethnic identities. Thus, these students “navigate unequal power relations in almost all aspects of their college experiences,” rightfully earning them places of reprieve and restoration (Keels, 2020, p. 17). She makes a strong case for what she calls “strategic disintegration.” This is described as the “periodic

separation of non-White students from a majority-White campus, which benefits the mental and emotional experiences of students of color” (Keels, 2020; Kubzansky, 2020, p. 1;). The author’s study, which included 500 Black and Latinx students found that those who had access to “counterspaces” reported a “more positive college experience” and “were more likely to graduate” (Keels, 2020; Kubzansky, 2020, p. 1).

This project is interested in understanding the unique challenges and contributions of Indigenous Cultural Centers and the resulting impact on student experience. To date, most research on Native and Indigenous student experience is limited to examining what happens in the classroom. The present study is important given both what is known more generally about cultural centers and the state of American Indian students in the higher education system. Native students currently have one of the lowest college attainment rates in the country as compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Keith, Stastny, & Brunt, 2016). There are a number of factors that contribute to this issue with some studies indicating that Native students are more hesitant to leave their home communities (Guillory, 2009) and travel home more frequently than other ethnic groups (Benjamin, Chambers, & Reiterman, 1993). This finding reinforces the significance of community and place as the central elements of Native culture and identity (Holms, Pearce, & Chavis, 2003; Kidwell, 2005). Thus, while place making and community building likely impact the retention of most populations, for Native students, these factors may carry even more weight. Additionally, little exists in the way of gauging racial climate as experienced by Native American and Indigenous Students more generally (Lundberg, 2014).

What we do know about Native student experience, and what will be discussed in future sections, is that their experience is often marked with colonial attitudes which promote erasure and invisibility (Masta, 2010; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). While many marginalized students experience invisibility in higher education, the unique ways in which this manifests for Indigenous students is described in future chapters. These discussions draw on theoretical work that addresses erasure, invisibility, *and* a failure to understand Indigenous identity as both a “racialized identity and a political one” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 432).

This study utilizes a qualitative approach to examine a recently established Native and Indigenous Center at a predominantly White institution in the southeast. It seeks to uncover what the space means to Native/Indigenous students on the campus, why and in what ways they utilize the space, how they experience the space, and how they interpret their experiences. This project

addresses a gap within the research on cultural centers by focusing on the Native student population and their perceptions of the role which cultural centers play in their college experience. Investigating these connections is imperative to have a better understanding of how institutions can better support Native student retention. A great deal of literature explaining low retention of Native students places much of the blame on cultural conflicts and poor preparation without examining the institution's climate or sources of institutional support.

Finally, this project seeks to uncover in what ways spatial negotiations might differ for those utilizing Native students centers *and* for what possible reasons. Students within the center of interest have experienced documented, and sometimes public, forms of conflict within the very space that they seek out as a reprieve. This finding is not present within any of the literature on Native student centers or cultural centers more broadly. In order to best serve and retain Indigenous students it is imperative to understand what has made this space, in particular, more vulnerable to racialized incidents and how students make sense of those interactions. This work hopes to illuminate recommendations regarding ideal models for Native centers, though a comparative study may be warranted to extend that work.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

The State of Native American Education

In their book, *Beyond the Asterisk*, Shotton, Lowe, and Waterman (2013) state that it is essential for those working within student affairs to understand the various student populations which they serve. Regrettably, as several scholars have noted, research on the Native American student experience and development is severely lacking (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Minthorn & Marsh, 2016; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Shotton, Lowe, and Waterman (2013) posit that the lack of research on this student population may be directly related to their general invisibility within the academy. The invisibility of Native students within higher education research has come to be known by some as the asterisk phenomenon (Garland, 2007; Lowe, 2005; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman 2013). “Invisibility is, as stated, the modern form of racism used against Native Americans. In academia, Native peoples continue to be relegated to a mere footnote under an asterisk in reports and scholarship, justifying their exclusion from research studies because of low numbers” (American Indian College Fund, 2019, p. 5).

Outside of tribal schools, Native students will likely remain one of the smallest populations on most campuses given Native people make up just under 2% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). However, their college enrollment rates have steadily increased over the last several decades (Carney, 1999; Huffman & Ferguson, 2007; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013), suggesting a growing interest in degree attainment. This alone should arguably pique institutional interest in this population given that many are heavily engaging in diversity and inclusion efforts. Furthermore, Native student enrollment is increasing despite little to no recruitment efforts from colleges and universities (American Indian College Fund, 2019). What remains problematic is the inability of institutions to retain Native students as they have excessively high attrition rates compared to other populations (Carney, 1999; Huffman & Ferguson, 2007; Lopez, 2018; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013).

In 2017, of Native students ages 18 to 24, only 20% enrolled in postsecondary education (McFarland et al. 2019). This was lower than all other demographics with Whites experiencing 44% college participation (McFarland et al. 2019). Lopez (2018) reported that 43% of Native

students enrolled in higher education *did not* continue. Of those who did continue, only 12% of those earned a bachelor's degree. Comparably 37% of persisting White students earned a bachelor's degree within the same time frame examined (Lopez, 2018). Equally alarming is the lack of attention given to this glaring issue (Waterman, Lower, & Shotton, 2018).

In 2019, *The American Indian College Fund* reported that roughly 14% of American Indian and Alaskan Natives over the age of 24 held four-year college degrees. These findings drew from data reported by the US Census. In comparison, just over 30% of all Americans hold bachelor's degrees (American Indian College Fund, 2019). These numbers suggest that while education remains a privilege for much of American society, degree attainment for Indigenous Americans is even more uncommon. In order to address issues around Native student development, societal inequality, and tribal nation building (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2014) student affairs professionals and educators alike must prioritize an effort to retain this population.

Factors Impacting Persistence and Retention

A recently published literature review synthesizes the major factors surrounding Native persistence and retention at institutions of higher education. It examined peer reviewed, empirical research on this topic since 1993 (Lopez, 2018). The review narrowed down findings within this body of research to four major categories: "family support, institutional support, tribal community support, and academics" (Lopez, 2018, p. 798). From the discussion of the four categories it becomes clear that institutions are able to intervene in a positive manner within at least 3 of 4 factors.

Family support may be the one major area that colleges and universities have the least influence over. According to the research literature, students have reported that families can be a source of both encouragement and motivation (Bass & Herrington, 2014; Lopez, 2018; Schmidtke, 2016). Schmidtke (2016) discusses qualitative findings whereby students indicated encouragement received from family members and a general support of the student's goals and interests. Family was also a major motivator. Studies indicated that students sought the capacity to create better lives for themselves and their children (Bass & Herrington, 2014; Lopez, 2018). Other research notes that students desired approval from families and to make family members proud (Bass & Herrington, 2014; Lopez, 2018; Makomenaw, 2014).

Institutional support is also a major factor when it comes to Native student retention. Lopez (2018) breaks institutional support into three major subcategories: support services dedicated to Native students, faculty support, and financial support. Native students can have a hard time adjusting to campus life (Lopez, 2018) and experience internal conflicts with institutional culture (Jackson et al. 2003; Lopez, 2018; Tate & Schwartz, 1993). Support services for Native students have a positive impact on persistence and retention through mentoring (Shotton et al. 2007) and academic counseling (Guillory, 2009). Furthermore, institutional support such as Native or Indigenous cultural centers provide places of sanctuary from hostile environments and areas where Native culture can be celebrated (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010).

The way in which faculty engage with Native students is also a contributing factor to their success and persistence (Lopez, 2018). A more obvious way in which faculty positively impact Native persistence is through quality instruction and mentoring (Bass & Harrington, 2014; Schmidtke, 2009). Studies also found that when Native students perceive faculty to respect their culture and when interactions with faculty are generally positive, persistence and GPA were higher (Bass & Herrington, 2014; Marroquin & Coach, 2014). Thus, general interactions and respect for diverse ontologies (both socially and as it applies to course material) can impact academic success and retention.

Finally, financial barriers remain a challenge to many college students, particularly those from marginalized groups and those who are first generation students. According to the American Indian College Fund (2019) many Native students come from low socio-economic backgrounds. Several researchers have found that finances and financial support significantly impact persistence for many Native students (Huffman, 2003; Lopez, 2018; Reyes, 2001). Findings and recommendations from scholars have indicated that increases in financial support would greatly impact persistence among Native students (Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Chen & St. John, 2011). In their recent report on American Indian Education, the American Indian College Fund (2019) says the following regarding financial support for Native students:

- “Everyone wants to graduate without debt. Financial assistance achieves that end but also has a historical significance that provides restitution for Native students by righting the wrongs of past discrimination.”

- “Financial support can come in many forms: institutional scholarships, grants, and in-state tuition for all members of federally and state-recognized tribes.”
- “Consider tuition waivers for Native students in states which took Indian land to give to land grant institutions. Waivers are a form of restitution for past wrongs that reduce historical barriers to equity” (pp. 10-11).

Lopez (2018) states that, “...AI/AN students have different factors influencing persistence compared to other students in postsecondary education” (p. 802). It has been argued that the most notable difference is the salience of interdependence for this student population (Huffman, 2001; Lopez, 2018). Literature around Native student persistence emphasized the importance of tribal support in three major ways (Lopez, 2018). These included the desire to give back to one’s tribal community, staying connected to one’s tribal community, and remaining connected to one’s cultural identity (Lopez, 2018).

Multiple studies document the desire of Native students to give back to their tribe. Many students hope to use their degree areas to address a need or issue in their own communities (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010). In her study on cultural resilience, Drywater-Whitekiller (2010) quotes several Indigenous students who sought to use their education to address things like lacking health care on reservations, legal issues, pollution, and conservation. One Cherokee student within the study stated, “I think it’s just involved in the traditions and the heritage. As long as I’m giving back you know, somewhere” (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010, p. 6). This statement illustrates reciprocity as an internalized value of many Native youth. Though Native cultures are not a monolith, reciprocity is a common cultural value found among many tribal communities.

Within the study, students’ desire to give back was not influenced by the desire for money but a hope to leverage their education in a manner that positively impacts their communities (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010). This common theme demonstrates the importance of Native student retention as a mechanism for tribal nations building. Institutions, especially land grants, should feel an ethical duty to be invested in their role in supporting tribal communities and their students as they have long benefitted from the displacement of Native Peoples.

Lopez (2018) notes that the desire to give back is directly tied to the connection one feels to the community and longing to maintain that connection. The desire to maintain a connection to community often results in increased home-going habits among Native students (Waterman,

2012). Research discussing home-going habits indicates that it often has both positive and negative effects. For instance, studies have found that frequent home-going habits of Native students can have a negative impact on academics (Benjamin et al. 1993; Waterman, 2012). However, for many Native students homegoing is also a strategy which allows them to resist assimilative environments and maintain their “cultural integrity” (Waterman, 2012, p. 204).

Family and tribal communities were also cited by students as the most salient sources of support (Waterman, 2012). Waterman (2012) suggests that student affairs theory must take in consideration the home-going habits of Native students as these habits relate to culture, connection to place, spirituality, responsibility, and resistance to assimilative environments. Extensive home-going is often framed as negative, but this framing is based on a Western value system of individualism (Waterman, 2012). Student affairs literature urges on-campus engagement as a major source of success. However, Waterman (2012) suggests that opting for community engagement as opposed to campus engagement can be an intentional act against assimilation which promotes cultural integrity. This must be understood within historical context and the way in education has been historically weaponized against Native peoples. Additionally, institutions must come to understand tribal communities as an extension of the family. For some Native students, college going decisions are made with their entire communities, not just their immediate household.

Culturally, Native students may experience shock within predominantly White institutions and may also struggle to maintain a connection to cultural identity (Gloria & Kurpius, 2001; Lopez, 2018). It is important for Native students to be able to locate relevant cultural engagements as well as Native/Indigenous student organizations as these reinforce and celebrate cultural identity (Dodd et al. 1995; Lopez, 2018; Waterman, 2007). Research shows that students have attributed their success and persistence to involvement in such activities and organizations which affirmed their own culture. Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) describe positive interactions that Native students had with American Indian student groups and multicultural offices, positively impacting their overall experience. One student noted the importance of finding those who relate to one’s own experiences such as missing home and missing cultural ceremonies (Jackson et al. 2003). Such examples along with the home-going of Native students exemplify the need for institutional support of cultural engagement on and off campus.

Academics represent the fourth major contributing factor found among literature on Native student persistence. Academic preparation and skill development in elementary and secondary schools have a significant impact on persistence for Native college students (Lopez, 2018). Despite having similar self-reported GPAs, reservation students express having a more difficult time academically in comparison to Native students who attended school off of the reservation (Huffman, 2003). This suggests that where Native students attend elementary and secondary schooling contributes to the level of academic preparation and in turn persistence in college (Huffman, 2003). Scholars have discussed the limitations of reservation schools as it relates to both adequate funding and college preparation (Huffman, 2003). Guillory (2009) conducted focus groups among Native American students and campus representatives and found that both groups agreed pre-college preparation was lacking. One student from the study stated, “I think our education is getting a lot better on the reservation, but I really don’t feel like I was prepared” (Guillory, 2009, p. 18).

General academic skills are also reported as underdeveloped. Lee et al. (2010) indicates the importance of academic and study skills as these are positively correlated with other persistence factors such as higher GPAs and the ability to obtain scholarships and financial aid. However, findings from a study of 330 American Indian/Alaskan Native students found that 7% selected “inadequate reading and study skills” as a reason for likelihood of future departure (Lee et al. 2010). Students who act as a self-advocate, asking questions when things are unclear are more likely to gain the understanding they need. However, one qualitative study found that Native American students are less likely to ask questions of instructors when instructors did not invest in first developing a positive relationship with the student (Schmidtke, 2009). This study suggested that instructors might consider cultural differences in regard to social interactions, proactively responding to those who might be struggling as opposed to waiting for students to seek their help (Schmidtke, 2009). Instructors might also facilitate relationship building with known Native students in their classroom (Schmidtke, 2009).

Colonialism in the Academy

According to Masta (2018) the Native student experience is marked by both colonialism and microaggressions. Though the expanse of literature on Native students pales in comparison to other marginalized groups, that which exists bolsters this finding. The ways in which Native

students experience colonialism manifests in ways which closely align with Veracini's (2011) definition of settler colonialism. Veracini (2011) makes clear the distinction between settler colonialism and other forms of colonization. At their core, they demand two very different things. Colonialism says, 'you, work for me', while settler colonialism says, 'you, go away' (Veracini, 2011). While both create inequality, the demand for labor (domestic or abroad) functions differently than strategic erasure. Additionally, it is clear through Veracini's (2011) theoretical analysis that settler colonialism is not a point in history, but a system that must be maintained.

Native students in the academy experience settler colonialism in a myriad of ways. For one, Native history and course content is most often presented at institutions as elective rather than required material, thus reaching a smaller portion of the student population (Masta, 2018) and contributing to an ignorance around the existence and history of Native Peoples. When intellectual space is given to topics and research on Indigeneity, it often exists at the margins of the academy rather than within the mainstream of education (Masta, 2018; Ruck-Simmons, 2006). The classroom experience for Native students is also impacted by settler colonialism as "the classroom culture is to a great extent, an extension of mainstream American culture" (Cooper, 1995, p. 279). Curriculum is heavily influenced by dominant culture and paradigms which rarely make room for other ways of knowing, learning, and being (Masta, 2018; Masta, 2019). Finally, their experiences of microaggressions often intersect with widespread settler myths and attitudes which seek to relegate Indigenous peoples to the past or quantify and invalidate Indigenous identity (Masta, 2018). Examples of this intersection often manifest in the form of microaggressions, a concept which is defined in the next section. The microaggressions that Native students experience are often laden with notions of erasure and in turn invisibility.

This project hopes to tease out ways in which invisibility and erasure manifest for Native students, and how (if at all) this is mitigated by access to an Indigenous Cultural Center or counterspace. According to Cherokee intellectual Andrea Smith (2016), Indigenous Peoples must be in a constant state of disappearing. This bolsters earlier arguments by Veracini (2011) which states that settler colonialism requires both Native Peoples to "go away" and is a system or mythology that must be maintained in the settler mind. Smith (2016) argues that this is, in fact, required for non-Native peoples to justify the claiming of what was once Indigenous. The continued existence of Native Peoples serves as a constant reminder of what was and continues

to be problematic about the formation of America as we know it (Shohat & Stam, 2014). Smith's (2016) goes even further to make a statement that is very relevant to this project. What is already known about documented incidents within the space in question is that the appropriation of Native identity is rather common. Smith (2016) asks, "why would non-Native peoples need to play Indian – which often includes acts of spiritual appropriation and land theft – if they thought Indians were still alive and perfectly capable of being Indian themselves" (3). An example described in later sections embodies Smith's sentiments by illustrating that, in some cases, Native peoples are not even perceived as authorities on what constitutes belonging in their own communities and must tolerate the desire of others to appropriate a romanticized identity.

Microaggressions

A term coined by psychiatrist Chester Pierce (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso & Lopez, 2010), microaggressions have been defined as subtle insults directed at minority populations (Pinchback-Hines, 2013; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). They can be verbal, non-verbal, visual, or environmental (Masta, 2018; Pinchback-Hines, 2013; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Pierce (1995) argues that the cumulative effect of microaggressions over a person's lifetime can negatively impact health and mortality in addition to social, emotional, and psychological well-being. Microaggressions are marked by direct or implied negative messages related to one's group memberships (Green, Johnson, Johnson, & Thomas, 2018; Masta, 2018; Sue, 2010). Additionally, the analysis of microaggressions often focuses on everyday occurrences, lived experiences, and the micro level exchange between persons (Masta, 2018; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Equilin, 2007).

As other research has noted, Native American people often experience microaggressions unique to them because of the intersection of race and colonialism (Masta, 2018). While many Native people experience microaggressions related to race or phenotype, almost all experience microaggressions that are rooted in settler colonialism (Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011; Masta, 2018; Shotton, 2017). Shotton (2017) states that Natives are largely absent from the discussion of microaggressions though most people gain their perceptions of Natives through problematic secondary sources. A more recent study focused on microaggressions experienced by Native women during graduate studies. This study found that microaggressions were common and ranged from faculty expecting less out of Native students to

overly romanticizing Native people (Shotton, 2017). Conclusively, Native women in the study expressed that their experiences with microaggressions “...resulted in feelings of isolation and fatigue” (Shotton, 2017, p. 48). This finding supports other research which found increased experiences with microaggressions led to feelings of isolation, ultimately having a negative impact on academics (Sue, 2010; Tachine, Cabrera & Yellow Bird, 2017).

Feelings of Isolation

Feelings of isolation are not uncommon among Native students at PWIs (Cross, 2013; Guillory, 2009; Jackson et al. 2003; Peters, 2018; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellowbird, 2017). Student Affairs practitioners might often think of isolation as loneliness or lack of integration into campus life. This kind of understanding explains why the first few weeks of school are heavily focused on social engagement and peer to peer interaction (Woosley, 2003). However, Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellowbird (2017) suggest that isolation can take on a more complex meaning for this particular student population whose identities are rooted in place and relationality. Drawing on the work of Deloria and Wildcat (2001), Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellowbird (2017) state that, “Native identity is frequently relational in nature, which means that isolation is more than simply loneliness, but rather, it is separating Native students from who they are” (p. 794). Qualitative findings from their study suggest that while feelings of isolation do stem from racialized experiences and microaggressions, such feelings also extend from being separated from family, community, and their own culture (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellowbird, 2017). This supports earlier discussions which suggest persistence and retention can be supported through helping students stay connected to both their communities and their cultural identities.

Another finding from Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellowbird (2017) is the positive way in which Native centers on college campuses can mitigate feelings of isolation. While students in their study described feeling isolated, they also indicated that finding the Native center made things easier and assisted with their transition (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellowbird, 2017). Students described the Native center as both a “home away from home” and a place where they could be themselves (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellowbird, 2017, pp. 798-799). An interesting, but not surprising finding was that students also expressed components of the peoplehood model (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellowbird, 2017). The peoplehood model was articulated as a way of

understanding Indigenous identity and sovereignty and includes place, language, sacred histories, and ceremonial cycles (Holm, Pearson, & Chavis, 2003). Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellowbird (2017) found that within the Native center, students used their Native language and also actively investigated kinship bonds, determining who they might be related to based on their tribal clans. Though little work has been done on the uses and impacts of Native student centers, there is a limited yet growing body of literature that discusses identity based centers more broadly. In the next section I briefly discuss the emergence of cultural centers on college campuses and the major themes which emerge when examining their impacts.

The Case for Cultural Centers on College Campuses

As both Patton (2010) and Pittman (1994) have noted, the historical emergence of cultural centers is rooted in the Black student movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Though integration and minority student recruitment were on the rise at the time, predominantly White institutions (PWIs) remained hostile to students of color and also lacked cultural mirrors for minority student populations (Horde, 2005; Patton, 2010; Pittman, 1994). The demand for Black cultural centers sought to provide more welcoming spaces on college campuses as well as hold administrators accountable in regard to campus climates and the success of all students (Patton, 2010; Pittman, 1994). Since then, we have seen the continual rise of cultural centers on college campuses, and they have expanded to address a wider range of identities and experiences. With diversity being a major factor in today's institutional mission statements, minority students continue to challenge colleges and universities to provide resources which mirror the stated values of institutions (Pittman, 1994).

Though research prior to the 2000s focuses on the emergence of cultural centers, more recent, albeit limited literature, examines the role that cultural centers play in the lived experiences of students (Hord, 2005; Patton, 2010). Additionally, authors attempt to detail best practices of centers. The following sections summarize the ways in which identity based centers have been described in the current literature and exemplifies why they continue to be relevant and necessary for minority student success. The major themes that emerge in regard to their impact on minority student retention are discussed within the sections that follow.

Safe Havens, Community, and Cultural Mirrors

According to Bauman (2018) racial incident reports for college campuses saw a substantial increase from years 2015 – 2016. Prior to that, hate crimes on college campuses had remained steady in recent years with roughly 970 crimes reported annually (Bauman, 2018). This report was based on data from the Department of Education (Bauman, 2018). Data collected from a 2018 survey on hate and bias incidents indicated that 3 out of 4 students were aware of a hate or bias incident that occurred within two years of their attendance (Jones & Baker, 2019). While Bauman (2018) attributes the increase to the current political climate, it is also a clear indication that racial attitudes have hardly changed in the U.S.; rather they have operated in the form of covert as opposed to overt racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Though many institutions proclaim their campuses to be beacons of diversity and inclusion, climate and racial incident reports indicate that campuses can be far from inclusive for marginalized students. This fact often weighs heavily on their overall student experience.

Examples of such incidents are, unfortunately, quite common. More recently, a student was charged with racial intimidation when racist vandalism and the destruction of personal property occurred in a shared dorm room at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (Campus Racial Incidents, 2020). In 2014, three students were expelled from San Jose State University for racial harassment which included calling a peer three-fifths of a human being and attaching a bicycle lock to the student's neck (Campus Racial Incidents, 2020). In February of 2019, students found a black doll hung in a residence hall at Eastern Michigan University (Campus Racial Incidents, 2020). Within the new normal of Zoom lecture, racist "Zoom Bombs" have been reported at the University of South Carolina and Oklahoma City University (Campus Racial Incidents, 2020). These are but a few examples included within a disturbingly long list of reports found on the "Campus Racial Incidents Page" of the online *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. This extensive list of well-documented campus incidents negates the inclusive atmosphere that many colleges attempt to publicly project.

While campus cultural centers certainly cannot alleviate all feelings of stress, exclusion, and anxiety around campus climate, they are described as providing sanctuary and reprieve from less than welcoming environments (Hinton & Hughes, 2010; Howard-Hamilton & Patton, 2010; Jenkins, 2010; Keels, 2020; Lozano, 2010; Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). In discussing the role of Latinx cultural centers, Lozano (2010) notes that such spaces are essential for Latinx/a

students given the various waves of anti-immigrant political stances in the U.S. “American” to many has become implicitly synonymous with being White (Devos & Banaji, 2005), leading many to draw conclusions about citizenship solely based on race or ethnicity. In our current political climate, attacks against marginalized students arguably bolsters the need for such spaces.

Other research has echoed the role of cultural centers as safe havens for marginalized students. Black cultural centers have been described by students as a “...retreat from the perceived hostility of an unwelcoming campus community” (Young & Hannon, 2002, p. 1). Lui, Cuyjet, and Lee (2010) note that Asian cultural centers provide a safe space where stereotypes of Asian students are disrupted, invisibility stemming from the model minority myth is challenged, and culturally centered “...discourse can occur outside Eurocentric critique” (Lui, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010, p. 34; Okutsu, 1989). Though little research has been done on American Indian centers specifically, Shotton, Yellowfish, and Cintron (2010) argue that these spaces are one form of institutional support used to help Native students persist in the face of continued racism within the academy (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). However, the nuanced differences in the role that centers fulfill is necessary to understanding how to best serve Native students. As the previously mentioned studies note, Black students may use cultural centers as a reprieve while Asian students may seek out an affirming space where they are both visible and where requests for academic support are taken seriously. Additionally, the possibility that invisibility and erasure may still permeate a space carved out for Native students warrants investigation. It is necessary to understand these challenges and also what positive role these spaces *do* fill in order to inform the models, missions, and support services in Native centers.

In addition to providing safe spaces in often hostile environments, campus cultural centers provide a social space which promotes a sense of belonging and community building in an effort to reduce feelings of isolation or alienation (Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010; Princess, 2005; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Student Affairs practitioners recognize the importance of finding community and social belonging during that first year of transition into college life. The impact of community and social belonging have been found to positively correlate with both college persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Woosley, 2003) and the intent to graduate (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Tachine, Yellowbird, Cabrera, Francis-Begay, & Rhoades, 2016). Students describe these spaces

as a place to find familiar cultures. Native students have indicated that within these spaces they bond over things such as shared language and shared understandings around humor (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017). Additionally, cultural centers are consistently described by students as a “home away from home” (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010; Tachine, Cabrera & Yellow Bird, 2017).

One aspect of cultivating feelings of belonging is seeing oneself and one’s culture reflected throughout a college campus. At predominately White institutions, marginalized students may have the experience of being the sole student of color within their classrooms (Keels, 2020). Additionally, it may be rare that they have a professor of the same racial or ethnic background throughout their college trajectory (Keels, 2020). Marian Wright Edelman, a prominent Civil Rights activist and children’s advocate, is often credited for saying “you can’t be what you can’t see.” Centers provide a meeting space to find other students and peers from similar racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds (Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017). In addition to finding peers from familiar backgrounds, they also have the opportunity to engage with faculty and staff who share their identity (Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010). It is particularly important for minority students to see examples of successful professionals who share their identities, particularly in those fields that may have little minority representation.

Cultural Centers as Counterspaces

Cultural centers also function as counterspaces or spaces of resistance where political engagement and social justice activism evolves (Keels, 2020; Lozano, 2010). For instance, Lozano (2010) points to student run programs and publications which have emerged from Latinx cultural centers. Arguably, the community information and opinions produced by these initiatives might otherwise be non-existent at a predominantly White institution (Lozano, 2010). This provides valuable cultural education and political thought to the larger campus community as well (Lozano, 2010). Counterspaces can facilitate a sense of belonging, assist students in preserving their culture, minimize feelings of alienation, and encourage further identity development (Lozano, 2010, Robertson, Bravo, & Chaney, 2016; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

In discussing the contributions of Asian American cultural centers, Liu, Cuyjet, and Lee (2010) state that these centers first and foremost promote the appreciation and acknowledgement

of Asian American culture. They argue that committed space and resources also demonstrate acknowledgement of the Asian American student population by the institution. “The recognition afforded by physical accommodations, staffing, and resources far outweighs the cursory acknowledgement achieved by food fairs, cultural festivals, and campus performances” (Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010, p. 29). In the same vein, Stovall (2005) argues that Black cultural centers provide a space where Black and African worldviews and cultures are centered. At PWIs both social culture and academic views are influenced by White western values whether explicitly stated or not (Stovall, 2005). Stovall (2005) goes on to say that, “it is only in the month of February that many White colleges attempt to acknowledge a positive African American presence” (p. 104). However, cultural centers provide spaces throughout the academic year where both western cultural norms and academic discourse can be challenged in what may be perceived as a safer environment.

Yosso and Lopez (2010) argue that it is within cultural centers that students of color build “communities of resistance” (94). They state that, “counterspaces that students of color build represent the cultural wealth of their home communities” (Yosso & Lopez, 2010, p. 94). They also suggest that this aspect of building “communities and resistance” directly challenges Tinto’s description of transition within student development whereby previous perceptions and behaviors are cast aside for those of the institution (Yosso & Lopez, 2010, p. 94).

Cultural Engagement and Education

A common charge made against identity based cultural centers is that they promote self-segregation (Bankole, 2005; Kubzansky, 2020). However, this claim demonstrates a lack of understanding around the actual purpose, mission, and vision of these spaces. It also fails to acknowledge the very different experiences underrepresented students have in college as compared to their White peers (Keels, 2020). While centers do provide much needed support to marginalized student populations, they also play a significant role in building cultural competence for the entire campus (Jenkins, 2008). Cultural competence benefits all students and is increasingly demanded from major employers. Increased diversity within the workforce requires individuals to be able to effectively communicate and collaborate across differences (Lazzari, 2019). In addition to cultural engagement programs which expose students to various worldviews and life experiences, many centers also facilitate broader diversity inclusion training

which help students from all backgrounds to understand the impacts of microaggressions and implicit bias.

Cultural centers provide programs that not only develop soft skills and critical thinking around race relations, but also contribute to more positive campus climates (Patton, 2010). Many cultural centers situation their missions within an anti-racist and social justice framework (Benitez, 2010). Benitez (2010) argues that both identity specific centers and multicultural centers (MCCs) should include the participation of White students in deconstructing both Whiteness and the dominant culture. As institutions of higher education have historically embodied White cultural values and served White students, researchers do not suggest that the major mission of cultural centers include meeting the needs of White students (Benitez, 2010). However, White students benefit from the exposure to diverse cultures, critical thinking around equity and social justice, and learning to consider their own privilege in relation to others (Benitez, 2010; Sallee et al. 2009; Tatum, 2007). Thus, identity based centers and multicultural centers play a role in the development of minority and majority students in addition cultivating global citizens prepared to engage in an increasingly diverse workplace.

Student Leadership Development

Another significant impact noted in the discussion of cultural centers is the influence on social capital and student leadership development. Leadership on many campuses mirrors western values and a corporate approach to leadership (Lozano, 2010). For many groups, this style of leadership may be culturally inappropriate. Additionally, practicing leadership among a close community or ethnic enclave may enhance the ability to demonstrate leadership when entering a professional setting or within a more global setting (Lozano, 2010).

Leadership, mentoring, and faculty engagement is emphasized with regards to literature on Asian and Latinx cultural centers. In the case of both, students who identify with these spaces may not always subscribe to western leadership ideals (Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010; Lozano, 2010). Centers have the ability to facilitate the development of bi-cultural leadership skills (Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010). Upperclassmen can also utilize the space to mentor new students in navigating the university environment from both academic and cultural perspectives (Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010). Finally, Liu, Cuyjet, and Lee (2010) discuss the role cultural centers play in creating relationships between professors and students and administering programming that might

contribute to more culturally sensitive faculty as well. Center administrators often facilitate programming that brings students and faculty together. Mentoring relationships are established between students who might have otherwise been too shy to seek out faculty (Liu, Cuyjet, & Lee, 2010). Faculty, on the other hand, can simply fail to recognize a need or desire to collaborate. Majority faculty members might also attend programming to enhance their cultural competencies or learn how to more effectively engage diverse student populations in the classroom.

Native and Indigenous Cultural Centers

Scholarship has long noted a contentious history between Native communities and the American education system. Early efforts to include Indian populations in education were primarily concerned with assimilation (Grinde, 2004; Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Cultural differences are often cited as a major reason why American education is supposedly devalued by tribal communities and why students from tribal communities often fail to matriculate (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). It has been suggested that many tribes did not see value or practical application in the teachings of western institutions (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). These explanations in isolation put the onus on tribes and Native students without investigating campus climates and support resources.

Like other minorities, Native students can experience a plethora of jarring experiences when leaving their communities to attend PWIs (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). These include but are not limited to feelings of alienation, isolation, and overt and covert racism (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). American Indian Centers provide spaces on college campuses which can mitigate negative experiences, facilitate community, and reinforce the cultural values of Indigenous students (Guillory, 2009; Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Feelings of isolation and the perceived failure of institutions to accommodate other cultures are associated with higher attrition rates among Native students (Day, 1999; Jackson et al. 2003; Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010).

Among the literature on cultural centers, there appears to be but one work which exhibits a focus on Native cultural centers in higher education. In their chapter, Shotton, Yellowfish, and Cintron (2010), discuss the historical development of the Jim Thorpe Multicultural Center. The center, which is located on campus at the University of Oklahoma, has served Native students for

nearly three decades (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). In 2010, the authors described the center as being located in a three-story house that was central to campus (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). The center, which included “two conference rooms, a living room, a lounge, a dining room, a fully functional kitchen, and several offices” had originally been used as a sorority house (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010, p. 53). It is described as lined with pictures of Thorpe, students past and present, and Native artwork (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010).

After its establishment as a student center, it began to support many aspects of Native student activities, community, and development (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Shotton, Yellowfish, and Cintron (2010) note that students utilized the space for student organization activities, lounging, studying, meeting up with fellow students, communal meals, and cultural engagements. The authors state that the center has been a comforting space which emphasizes communal values found in many Native communities. Additionally, it has served as a “home away from home”, a place where students can heal, and a “safe haven” (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010, p. 54).

Initiatives facilitated through the center include programming, a population specific retention experience, a mentoring program led by Native students, cultural events, and other student activities (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). In addition to being introduced to widespread campus resources and offices, Native identifying students attending University of Oklahoma were also introduced to Native faculty, staff, students, and the many Indigenous students’ organizations on campus (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Making them aware of communities and organizations early on is an effort that is intended to aid in their adjustment and retention (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Equally impressive is the retention program the authors noted, also facilitated by the center. Perhaps best described as peer mentoring, the retention program pairs lower classmen with upperclassmen and graduate students. Upperclassmen help to guide students in many ways including pointing them to appropriate resources, providing tips for academic success, and general social support (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). The authors note that many of the peer mentoring meetings happen within the center. A cultural event that regularly happens within the space is drum practice. Finally, the emphasis as denoted by the title of the chapter, is on the center as a sanctuary. It is a place which is described as a reprieve and a place where Native students can be

themselves. The authors write, “During times of stress and tragedy, particularly when students encounter racism, the center serves as a safe haven where students can gather to seek healing and restoration. It offers a space where American Indian students can see themselves reflected in the larger campus community as they celebrate and strengthen their identity as American Indian people” (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010, p. 56).

Proportionate to their numbers, Native Americans exhibit lower retention and college graduation rates than all other minorities in the country (Harrington & Hunt, 2010). Data from the Consortium for Student Retention Data indicate that, for Native American students, retention beyond the first year is lower than all other racial and ethnic minorities. Scholarly research names a number of contributing factors including family obligations, academic struggles, and financial challenges (Lee et al. 2010; Lopez, 2018). While additional research is warranted regarding Native students and campus climate, studies also suggest that Native students face general invisibility on predominantly White campuses, racially and ethnically charged stereotypes, feelings of isolation, and unwelcoming classroom environments (Masta, 2018). Literature on campus cultural centers offers a glimpse at ways in which some of these issues might be mitigated through community building efforts, support resources, engagement with culturally similar students and faculty, and peer mentoring (Horde, 2005; Keels, 2020; Patton, 2010;).

There are several speculative reasons why such little research exists on Indigenous centers. One is the paralleled representation of these spaces on college campuses; meaning that, of all cultural centers, there are the fewest number of Indigenous student centers (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Even among other types of identity-based spaces, the number of cultural centers is not in line with college participation rates by race or ethnicity. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reported higher enrollments in both Asian and Hispanic students. However, BCCs remain most represented on college campuses (Patton, 2010). This suggests that diversity and inclusion in higher education might often operate as a binary understanding of race relations on campuses. As mentioned in previous sections, there is also a lack of research on Native students in higher education literature more generally (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Institutions and research often point to low numbers to justify a lack of both attention and resources dedicated to Indigenous students (American Indian College Fund, 2019; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). This reasoning only furthers invisibility and the

narrative of erasure. It also conveniently forgets the historical and continued impacts of colonization, genocide, and assimilation on both population numbers and distrust of educational institutions.

This study aims to expand research on Native specific cultural centers by examining one such center in the Southeast. It aims to understand student experiences within the center and how students themselves interpret their own experiences. It is particularly interested in understanding the interactions which occur within the spaces as the center of focus has experienced a number of known racialized incidents. This is not a finding within any of the current literature on cultural centers and contradicts a prominent stated function of the spaces, which is to provide a reprieve from microaggression and hostile environments. As these are not exclusive spaces, the study is also interested in learning how the broader campus community engages with the space. The study's major research questions are:

1. What are the experiences of Native/Indigenous students on campus?
2. What are the experiences of Native/Indigenous students within the center itself?
3. How do Native students interpret or make sense of their experiences?
4. How does the center bolster positive—or mitigate negative—experiences on campus?

Chapter III

Methodology

To understand the experiences of Native students, the present study utilizes a qualitative approach. The design was guided by the aforementioned research questions and the desire to center the experiences of this population on predominantly White campuses. The research is also informed by an Indigenous epistemology which holds that stories are valid sources of data and are inseparable from both theory and practice (Brayboy, 2006). It employs an interpretive analysis engaging both single and double hermeneutics. Single hermeneutics refers to when the researcher makes sense of a particular experience or phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Double hermeneutics describes two layers of interpretation whereby the researcher attempts to understand how participants make sense of their own experiences (Smith et al. 2009).

Drawing on Tribal Critical Race Theory, a major focus of this work is the distinctiveness of tribal identity and how potential perceptions around this identity impact experiences of Native students on college campuses. Through a critical Indigenous lens, it seeks to analyze issues specific to Native student populations and spaces that serve them. Findings from the study bolster existing yet limited literature on the general experiences of Indigenous students while contributing new findings to research on cultural centers, which has predominantly focused on Black and Latinx spaces.

Research Design

Seeking to understand the experiences of this student population I chose semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data. Semi-structured interviews are often regarded as the most appropriate method for interpretive analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Such interviews consist of a guide of questions while allowing for probes and follow-up questions (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This allows for a more conversational flow to the interview experience. My aim was to provide ample space for participants to tell their own stories while maintaining consistency across interviews. Secondary data consisted of informal incident reports and oral histories. The incident reports were informal reports previously made by Native and non-Native individuals who frequented an Indigenous cultural center at the research site. These informal reports consisted of notes made by center staff regarding incidents that patrons found problematic. These were incidents that students and faculty/staff wanted noted but did not wish

to advance through the formal bias reporting process of the institution. Approval to utilize this documentation was gained through the Institutional Review Board (with participant permission).

Interview recruitment efforts consisted of emailing and flyers posted within the center. Both the standardized email and flyer were previously approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Flyers were placed in the Indigenous student center and included a brief statement of the project's purpose, eligibility requirements, and the investigator's contact information. Those who reached out regarding the study were asked to provide their email address and were then sent the standardized email. The same email was also sent to the Native student listserv. The listserv included current students and recent graduates. The standardized email included a brief description of the study, an attached consent document, and a Qualtrics link for those who wished to opt into the study. The Qualtrics link took interested individuals to an eligibility survey. Those who met eligibility criteria were later contacted via a follow-up email in order to schedule an interview time.

The study, which used purposive sampling, does not suggest generalizability, but attempts to illuminate potential challenges and best practices which may be specific to Indigenous cultural centers. Purposive sampling was appropriate given the objective to capture experiences of a specific demographic (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Interview participation criteria included the following: 18 years or older; self-identified as Native American, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Indigenous, and/or indicated a specific tribal community; current student or recent graduate; and indicated regular use of the center during their time as a student. Students who graduated before 2016 were disqualified from participating as the center did not exist prior to this time. The eligibility survey also asked about the frequency of center use during COVID19 and prior to COVID19. Respondents could choose from the following options: almost every day; several times a week; once a week; several times per month; once per month; hardly ever; and never. Eligible participants had to indicate that they utilized the center at least *several times per month* prior to COVID19. This was how I conceptualized a minimum for "regular use." However, no one in the sample indicated frequenting the space less than *several times per week*.

My goal was to interview a minimum of 12 participants. My rationale for 12 interviews was based both on the work of Guest, Bunch, and Johnson (2006) and the realization that I may be limited by the size of the population on campus. When interviewing, Guest, Bunch, and

Johnson (2006) suggest that saturation is often reached within the first 12 interviews. Saturation is described as the point where new information no longer emerges from added interviews (Guest, Bunch, & Johnson, 2006). However, they also note that this concept is rarely operationalized by researchers. They argue that saturation can be determined by examining codes. At the point where no new codes emerge, it can be assumed that saturation has been accomplished (Guest, Bunch, & Johnson, 2006).

Campus demographic data stated that there were only 48 American Indian and Alaska Native students on this particular campus (On-campus Enrollment Profile 2017-18). Only 39 of those were enrolled at the undergraduate level. Due to the small number of Native students on campus, recent Native graduates were also recruited. I planned to first code the initial 12 interviews. If new codes continued to emerge, I would continue the interview process until saturation was reached or until I was limited by the number of responses to recruitment efforts. I was ultimately limited by the number of respondents who opted into the study. However, very few new codes emerged after coding six interviews. Participants ranged from 19 to 32. Seven of the twelve had recently graduated and five were current students. Eight participants identified as female and four identified as male. In some cases, their areas of study might be housed within the same school or college. However, none of the participants had the same major. This is important to note as they may potentially navigate their major as the only Indigenous student in their classes.

Table 1*Sample Characteristics*

^a Participant	Status	Age	Gender	Major	Center Use	PCombined Income
Elena	Recent Grad	23	Female	Sociology	Almost Every Day	21,000
Kendra	Recent Grad	25	Female	Human Nutrition	Several Times a Week	75,000
Emily	Current Student	19	Female	Theatre	Almost Every Day	79,000
Noah	Recent Grad	29	Male	M.A. Political Science	Several Times a Week	95,000
Nathan	Recent Grad	32	Male	M.S. Computer Engineering	Several Times a Week	----
Hope	Current Student	21	Female	Natural Resource and conservation	Several Times a Week	----
Casey	Current Student	24	Male	Forestry	Almost Everyday	85,000
Nora	Recent Grad	22	Female	Animal Science	Several Times a Week	110,000
Dakota	Current Student	21	Female	Public Health	Several Times a Week	----
Jamie	Recent Grad	24	Female	Agricultural Leadership	Almost Everyday	60,000
Steven	Recent Grad	22	Male	Communications	Several Times a Week	40,000
Lynnly	Current Student	21	Female	University Studies	Several Times a Week	45,000
^a Participants' names are pseudonyms				PCombined Income = Parents' Combined Income		
---- unknown by participant						

While there are many reasons individuals might choose not to participate (such as ethnographic refusal, time limitations, etc.), recruitment may have potentially been impacted by drops in student engagement that could be felt during the pandemic. I believe it important to mention the impact which COVID19 had on the data collection process. My initial methodological approach intended to include interviews with non-Native students for comparative analysis. However, access to non-Native students decreased as student presence on campus dramatically declined. My interest was exclusively on those Native and non-Native students *who frequented the center*. Recruitment of non-Native students included word of mouth advertisement within the center and flyers which were placed within the space. Due to the decrease of in-person engagement, I found it acceptable to focus the interviews on the experiences of Indigenous students as this was also the population I aimed to center. Native students who frequented the space were still accessible via student organization and center listservs.

Native students who met eligibility criteria were contacted via email to schedule an interview at a time convenient for them. All twelve interviews were conducted via Zoom to

adhere with social distancing guidelines at the time. Interviews were conducted between January 2021 and August 2021. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours. Though participants had already received the consent form via email, I reviewed it with them once more at the start of each interview. For this study, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) recommended a consent information sheet which did not require signature. In lieu of signature, consent was obtained verbally on both the recording and later documented through the transcript. The discussion of consent included both general participation and permission to be recorded. It was reiterated with each interviewee that participation was completely voluntary and that anticipated risks were minimal. The main foreseeable risk included a possible emotional response from recalling a personal experience. Participants were also made aware that they could skip questions, ask for clarification, and stop the interview entirely. After reviewing all protocol information with participants, I proceeded to start with demographic questions. The following table does not include all interview questions, but gives an overview of how research questions were operationalized into interview questions. For the complete interview schedule, see Appendix A.

Table 2

Operationalizing Research Questions

Demographic and Background Information	<p>In an effort to learn more about your background, can you tell me a little about yourself?</p> <p>Where did you grow up?</p> <p>Have you lived in other places?</p> <p>Where did you live the longest?</p> <p>What was it like growing up there? What was/is your community like?</p> <p>What was life like at home?</p> <p>Can you describe your family dynamic?</p> <p>Who predominantly raised you?</p> <p>What is the marital status of your parents?</p> <p>How many siblings do you have?</p>
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	<p>What do your siblings do (school/profession)?</p> <p>What was the highest educational degree completed by your parents?</p> <p>What do your parents do (professionally)?</p> <p>What do you estimate to be the combined income of your parents or your household?</p> <p>How old are you?</p> <p>How do you identify in terms of gender (when filling out forms and around friends/family)?</p> <p>What is your current class standing (freshman, sophomore etc.)?</p> <p>How do you identify racially or ethnically (when around friends/family and when filling out forms)?</p> <p>For those that identify as Native/Indigenous: What is your tribal affiliation?</p> <p>How does your stated identity group or community define inclusion criteria? In other words, according to you, your family, and your peers, what defines someone as (state the race/ethnicity they gave)?</p>
<p>What are the experiences of Native/Indigenous students on campus?</p>	<p>What was the application process like?</p> <p>Were there challenges during the application process?</p> <p>What is your general perception of faculty here? Do you feel supported by faculty and instructors?</p> <p>Have you had any positive experiences with faculty? Can you describe these?</p> <p>Have you had any negative experiences with faculty? Can you describe these?</p> <p>What institutional support do you feel you have here (for example: university resources, staff, offices, programs, financial support etc.)?</p>

	<p>Is there anything lacking that you feel you would benefit from personally or academically? Can you describe what else you might benefit from?</p> <p>Do you feel like you were academically prepared upon entering college?</p> <p>Do you feel like you have struggled academically at all during your time here?</p> <p>Drawing on your own experiences, what is it like to be [insert participant stated race /ethnicity] at this university?</p> <p>Do you feel as though you fit in at this particular institution?</p> <p>Have you had any negative experiences at this institution based on identities you hold?</p> <p>Have you had any positive experiences at this institution based on identities you hold?</p>
<p>What are the experiences of Native/Indigenous students within the center itself?</p>	<p>In what ways do you utilize the space or for what kinds of purposes (study, hangout, seeking resources, homework, programs, etc.)?</p> <p>What makes you choose this space for these things? What makes it optimal for you?</p> <p>Do you utilize other identity or cultural centers as well?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">If so, which ones and for what purposes? If not, why not?</p> <p>Do you use other centers on campus? For instance, the [names of additional campus centers]?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">If so, what do you use those spaces for? If not, why not?</p> <p>Have you attended programs hosted by the center? If so, how many would you say you attend each semester?</p> <p>Have you sought out support from center staff in any way? Can you give examples?</p>

	<p>Besides using the physical space, can you describe any other ways in which you engage with the center or any of the other identity centers on campus?</p> <p>What, if any, positive experiences have you had with the Native / Indigenous Center? Probe: Can you describe in detail any of these experiences?</p> <p>What, if any, negative experiences have you had with the Native / Indigenous Center? Probe: Can you describe in detail any of these experiences? Probe: How do you interpret these experiences? In other words, what do you think contributes to these negative experiences?</p>
<p>How do Native students interpret or make sense of their experiences?</p>	<p><i>This question was addressed in the form of probes. When students discussed various types of positive or negative experiences, follow up probes would ask them to reflect on potential causes underlying those experiences.</i></p> <p>Probe: How do you interpret these experiences? In other words, what do you think contributes to these positive experiences?</p> <p>Probe: How do you interpret these experiences? In other words, what do you think contributes to these negative experiences?</p> <p>Probe: Why do you think that is?</p> <p>Probe: How do you make sense of that experience or situation?</p>
<p>How does the center bolster positive or mitigating negative experiences on campus?</p>	<p>What does the Native / Indigenous Community Center mean to you personally, if anything at all?</p> <p>What do you personally believe are the benefits of having such a space?</p>

I started the interview process with background questions. This allowed me to get a sense of each participant’s community, household, and pre-college experiences. This set of questions included things like “What is your community like?” and “Can you describe your

family dynamic?” Additionally, I asked questions about parental combined income. Though this was self-reported and some participants were unsure, combined household income ranged from \$21,000 to \$110,000. Noting that they identified as Native, American Indian, or Indigenous on their eligibility survey, I then proceeded to ask how they conceptualized Native identity and how their respective communities define belonging. I thought these questions important to add as they could potentially influence how belonging is defined or perceived within the center itself.

Later questions explored college going decisions and challenges during the application process followed by institutional support and academic experiences while in college. These intended to unearth what challenges (if any) centers might help mitigate. Final questions asked about experiences related to any identities held in addition to the use of and experiences within the center itself. Examples of institutional experiences include, “Drawing on your own experiences, what is it like to be [race/ethnicity] at this university?” and “Do you feel as though you fit in at this particular institution? Why or why not?” Regarding the Indigenous center, inquiries included, “In what ways do you utilize the space or for what kinds of purposes?” Additionally, participants were asked to reflect on both positive and negative experiences in the center. The semi-structured format allowed me to follow up with probes to anything that wasn’t clear or to ask additional questions when participants alluded to something of interest but with minimal detail. Oftentimes probes simply asked for specific examples or elaboration on something previously mentioned.

After each interview, video files were deleted and audio files were uploaded to TranscribeMe. TranscribeMe is a secure transcription service that is approved by the respective institutional review board (IRB). Voice recognition transcription was used and therefore I later reviewed transcripts alongside audio for accuracy. Corrections were made where needed, but the voice recognition method proved very accurate. Once transcripts were reviewed and cleaned, audio files were also deleted. Transcripts were stored in a password protected cloud drive per the approved IRB protocol. A copy of each was uploaded to Dedoose in order to proceed with qualitative coding and analysis. Though not promised upfront, participants were sent digital Amazon gift cards as a “thank you” for their time.

Incident reports followed a nearly identical protocol in regard to data collection. The primary differences were the email language and the more focused questions during the

interview process. Those who had an incident report on file were contacted directly via email and provided the consent information sheet. They were made aware of the general purpose of the study and that they were being contacted to gain permission and clarity regarding their previously documented experiences. They were also told that it was completely voluntary and their experiences would not be utilized without permission. If agreeing to participate they were prompted to follow a link to the eligibility survey. If they were 18 or older, they were contacted to set up an interview time convenient for them. These sessions were also conducted via zoom. Consent was established verbally during the interview. Rather than using a guide of interview questions, I read and reviewed the notes with the participants and asked them to confirm the notes based on their recollection. They were given the opportunity to clarify any details and they were asked how they made sense of their own experiences. These recordings were also transcribed with voice recognition through TranscribeMe. After reviewing for accuracy, transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose. Audio and video recordings were then deleted. All participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality.

In order to gain a broad understanding of both the Native center's inception and the trajectory of the Native community within the institution, two oral histories were collected. They primarily served the purpose of providing background information and context. Some scholars have argued that "oral histories are the perfect venue for institutional knowledge retention" (Glowacka-Musial 2020). Oral histories have been described as both dialogues and conversations about previously occurring events or memories (Glowacka-Musial, 2020; Shopes, 2002). Lauded for having a democratizing effect on history, they give voice to individuals or communities which are often marginalized (Cándida Smith, 2011; Glowacka-Musial, 2020; Shopes, 2002).

Though praised for documenting institutional knowledge, scholars also note the limitations of oral history as a method. In reality the limitations are no less severe than any method that relies on oral tradition and personal recollection. The limitations would be similar to any method employing interviews. Because there are limitations to the human memory, Glowacka-Musial (2020) calls any historical account an "interpretation or approximation" (2). Finally, because interviewers select who to collect oral histories from, oral histories can arguably be agenda driven (Glowacka-Musial, 2020). Thus, research suggests that investigators might explain their criteria for selecting interviewees in detail (Glowacka-Musial, 2020). Researchers

could also include a broader pool of narrators (Glowacka-Musial, 2020). This “helps counter the subjective nature of represented views, and again builds a more diverse collection” (Glowacka-Musial, 2020, p. 2).

For the purposes of this study, faculty with long standing ties to the community were identified in order to gain a sense of the progression they experienced related to Native engagement. Once identified they were contacted via email. For those who wished to participate Zoom interviews were scheduled for a time and date convenient for the participant. Consent forms were verbally reviewed with participants at the start of all recordings. The structure of the conversation mirrored semi-structured interviewing whereby guiding questions were utilized while allowing room for probes and conversation (Brinkmann, 2014). Video for these recordings were deleted while audio files were transcribed using TranscribeMe. Like all data associated with the project, transcripts were kept within a password protected cloud drive. The two oral histories were not coded but primarily used for background information. However, they were checked against each other for consistency in understanding the community’s history on campus. Any incongruencies are stated as such in later chapters.

Coding and Analysis

The coding process utilized several phases and types of coding. Most often data analysis is thought to take either an inductive or deductive approach but research notes that, in practice, coding of qualitative data often takes a combined approach (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Some have asserted this approach increases the rigor of qualitative analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Taking a combined approach allows researchers to look for and confirm existing theories while also open coding for new things that emerge within their data sets (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). Types of coding in this study included pre-coding, structural coding, and open coding. Pre-coding and open coding followed an inductive approach whereby the data informed the development of codes instead of starting with codes which may then be applied. Conversely, structural, deductive coding was utilized in the sense that some codes were predetermined based on my research questions and existing literature.

My analysis began during the first read through and comparison to audio files. As previously noted, I read through all transcripts and compared them to audio to ensure the accuracy of the voice recognition transcription process. During this process I pre-coded, making

notations of excerpts, potential codes, and any patterns I saw emerging. I entered the pre-codes into Dedoose, which is the qualitative software I utilized for coding and analysis. In the second read through, I continued with an inductive approach called open coding, developing and applying codes based on the data and what emerged as interesting, significant, or at all related to my questions. Finally, I developed codes based on my research questions and the existing literature on cultural centers and Native student experience. These were also entered into the coding software platform. I read through each transcript again applying the codes where applicable.

After the coding process was complete, I sought to determine the prevalence of each code. Using analysis tools, I examined the frequency of each. As I had also created subcodes during the process, I too examined which codes were repetitive or could logically be collapsed. Some codes were not relevant to my questions and thus were deleted. However, I made note of interesting findings that might lend itself to future research. I also noted outlier responses as they provided a contrast to dominant themes and potentially illuminated future research questions. Looking to my current research questions for guidance, I further examined those themes which both addressed my questions and proved dominant in their frequency. The themes and stories which emerged proved to bolster existing research on Native student experience while offering new insights on cultural center benefits and challenges.

Reflexivity Statement and Research Challenges

Within Indigenous theory, scholars take varying positions on whether non-Western peoples should conduct research among Indigenous people. Conversely, as Deloria (1997) notes, there are also Western scholars who have suggested that Indians "...cannot be trusted to be objective, to be analytical, or to understand what is happening in their own communities" (Deloria, 1997, p. 211). This argument falls apart given the sheer lack of objectivity Anglo researchers have historically employed in creating racialized "others". In truth, we all bring specific and varied cultural lenses to anything we approach, thus full objectivity is something we strive to approach but none of us can fully achieve (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Deloria, 1997; Jones, 1970).

Brayboy and Deyhle (2000) defend the insider perspective though they also note that both positions come with their own unique advantages and challenges. Brayboy, who hails from

the Lumbee community, speaks about challenges with over-rapport which is generally described as missing things which might be culturally taken for granted by insider perspectives (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). He also describes methodological processes that have directly conflicted with norms within his own culture. For example, asking more questions than he would normally ask and accompanying people in scenarios where he was not invited (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). He also feared that taking a strictly observational role in some activities would be perceived as snobbery by other community members (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000).

Contrastingly, Deyhle describes her experience as an outsider in the Navajo community. She suggests that to overcome challenges to being an outsider, she has taken a social justice approach. She positions herself as a broker, making it her goal to get inside stories to the outside world while maintaining the integrity of those stories and voices (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). While they describe challenges to both positions, they push back on the idea that an outsider position should be privileged. They argue that while insiders are poised to conduct projects in more culturally appropriate ways, both perspectives can result in good research if each confronts the limitations of their positionality and conducts their research with integrity (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000).

Narayan (1993) suggests that no researcher should be fully considered an insider. She argues that since we all occupy multiple social locations (as opposed to singular identities), participants will likely find some way to differentiate themselves from the researcher (Narayan, 1993). The researcher for instance could be the same race or ethnicity but occupy a different social class or hold a higher level of education. These differences can create suspicion among participants and thus still requires the researcher to gain trust during the data collection process.

During this project, I conducted research among Native students with whom I have an existing relationship. I also identify as a Native scholar. I was hyper conscious of the likelihood of over-rapport and endeavored to approach what I heard with “new eyes and ears.” However, like Narayan (1993), I argue that my age, seniority over the students, and my level of education also set me apart from them. As I anticipated, my existing relationship with students proved to be an asset in regard to what I perceived to be their level of comfortability. One thing I noticed was their comfort in speaking about their engagements with non-Native individuals, particularly their unpacking of whiteness. I cannot say with any certainty whether they would have felt as comfortable having those conversations with someone who identifies strictly as White.

Interestingly, however, over rapport did seem to manifest in other ways. I noticed some respondents following their statements with things like, “well you know” and “right.” In these instances, I refrained from confirming any of their statements and simply focused on drawing out information and rich details. For other participants over rapport seemed to result in less detail as they almost seemed to assume I already knew their experiences. In some cases, this might be true and yet I needed to capture it as if hearing it for the very first time. In these cases, the open-ended format allowed me to follow up with probes to keep these participants engaged.

I predicted the quality of the interviews to be negatively impacted by the move to virtual activity. However, I did not perceive this to be the case during the actual interview process. Though I had established rapport with respondents, there seemed to be a great level of ease in what respondents chose to share. Though we have no way of comparing what would have resulted from in-person interviews, the ability to participate from one’s home could have potentially increased the comfort level of participants. My experience with using video interviews for qualitative data collection supports previous findings of this rather novel research. Concurring with Weller (2017), “Remote modes do not necessarily mean that rapport is more challenging to establish or maintain. ‘Remoteness’ shifts the encounter in such a way that the physical separation between researcher and participant can facilitate a greater (emotional) connection through participants’ increased sense of ease with the setting and mode” (p. 623). While not likely suitable for all projects, the circumstances of a global pandemic have likely illuminated the number of tools at our disposal to effectively collect qualitative data.

In the next two chapters I focus on the major findings which emerged from my data analysis. They are grouped into two major sections. The first chapter deals with the overall experiences of Native students on predominately White campuses. This chapter is broken down into the dominant themes which emerged. They include microaggressions, which inevitably intersects with discussions around stereotypes, invisibility, isolation, and tokenism. The second findings chapter examines student engagement with the Indigenous center on campus. In addition to highlighting the multitude of ways students utilize the center and center staff, it describes the perceived challenges and benefits students derive from these spaces. Among those are community and counterspace, impacts on retention, challenges within the space, and a more nuanced understanding of faculty engagement within these spaces.

Interview Participant Profiles

As previously noted, Native student populations tend to be one of the most underrepresented at predominantly White institutions. On this particular campus there were reportedly 48 Native students (including graduate students) when the research was proposed. Because of the size of the campus population and my concerns for concealing students' identities, I chose not to disclose the tribal affiliation of participants. For the makeup of this Native student community, that would make it much easier to narrow down each individual. It is important, however, for readers to get a better sense of who each participant is, their more general backgrounds, and the many positionalities they may come from. The first participant I will introduce has been given the pseudonym "Elena."

Elena, who was 23 at the time, was enrolled in a tribal community located in the northeast part of the United States. She had recently graduated with a degree in Sociology. She stated that she had lived most of her life in or near larger cities. These included Cincinnati, Northern Virginia, and New York City. Her tribal community was based near an urban area as well and her time in college was the only time she recalled being in a smaller or, what she described as, a more rural setting.

Elena also described her socioeconomic status growing up. She mentioned that as a child, she did not really register the differences or meaning behind varying economic positions, but looking back her family did not have a lot in the way of money. She stated,

Like, you're just a kid. You just had what you had, and you always had your family around. Growing up being from a very large family, we didn't have a lot. But as a kid I didn't know what that meant. I just thought that, you know, everyone lived this way.

While money was described as scarce, she emphasized the value she placed on growing up close to community. She added,

But growing up where I grew up, I would say it was very beneficial to me as an older person because I got the chance to grow up around my language, my community, my culture. I grew up around my family, like I knew both my grandparents and my sisters and brothers. I knew my community. I knew my tribal council.

Community was something that Elena emphasized in relation to her tribal identity. In addition to her mother, her grandmother and aunt played significant roles in raising her. While she knew who her dad was, she noted that she did not grow up with a father around. However,

she had a large family and her siblings, of which she had nine, also helped raise her and teach her how to do things like cook.

While she reported her parents' highest level of education as being high school degrees, her family did push her to go to college. Elena said,

...as a kid, my family kind of groomed me to believe college was the only choice I had. I remember I was going to do the military, but my family was like, if I don't like college and if I can't get through college, then I can do the military and when I went to college, I wasn't 18 yet. And so, I couldn't have enlisted without a parent's signature. And my mother was not signing. So, I had to pack my stuff up and get a degree.

She also noted that high school teachers pushed her to go to college. Though she could not recall the exact number, she applied to many colleges and universities. Her family's financial standing allowed for free application and so she decided to take advantage of that, casting a wide net.

Regarding the application process, Elena mentioned learning to navigate that process on her own. While she eventually felt less challenged by the process, it caused frustration for her in the beginning. This is a common experience of many first-generation students like herself. Of this she said,

I was that kid that had to learn it on her own. I had to learn the FAFSA by myself. I had to learn the college applications. I had to learn how to get transcripts. I had to learn how to write these essays and, you know, write these cover letters and things like that and do resumes. So, a lot of it was very, very frustrating in the beginning. But the more college applications I did, the more I got used to them.

She described her biggest hurdle in applying to college as not understanding scholarships opportunities and the process for scholarship funds.

A participant given the pseudonym “Kendra” was also a recent graduate. She had majored in Human Nutrition and was a member of a tribe located in the southeastern part of the U.S. She was twenty-five at the time of her interview and was working as a therapist for clients with eating disorders. Growing up she oscillated between living close to her tribal community, located in a more rural setting, and living on the outskirts of a more urban area, roughly 30 to 40 minutes from the community. She described the rural community as consisting of mostly White and Native populations.

Kendra identified as Native and Black and stated that in the rural setting, she was bullied a lot as she stood out as a person with a darker complexion. She explained that this not only extended from White citizens but other Natives as well. She said,

I think there can be some colorism in the Native community. Whether that be the darker you are, the lighter you are. I think that there is always a stereotype that comes with that. I think there has been a lot of advocacy against that and trying to be inclusive in different cultures. But I do think that does come up a lot.

This statement alludes to the colorism that undoubtedly exists too in minority communities.

Kendra's parents separated when she was four and formally divorced when she was seven years of age. From that point forward, she and her brother were predominantly raised by a single mom. Her mother is Native and she also mentioned remaining close to her Native grandparents throughout her life. When asked about her family dynamic more broadly, she responded,

I think my grandfather was a big pillar in our family, and he passed away a couple of years ago. I think that did change our family dynamics. And since then, my mom doesn't really go to our powwows much anymore because she has her own political stance on that. But I think since he passed, she's kind of strayed away from the tribe a little bit more too. And so, I think that's impacted a little bit where my brother and I are still active in our tribe a bit more and my mom isn't really.

Kendra's brother works full time while also striving towards a master's degree. When asked about the highest level of education completed by her parents, she noted that her mom too had her masters and her dad had a high school diploma. Her mother currently worked for an energy company.

According to Kendra, she was given two options post high school, college or the military. She said, "I'm not really cut off from the military so college it was. But I actually did have a huge internal motivation to go to college because I like education and wanted to get into my career." Beyond the options laid out by her mother, she did not recall others influencing her decision to attend college. During the application process she applied to ten different schools and did note receiving support and assistance from her mother during the process. Like Elena, Kendra noted the biggest challenge as identifying scholarships, stating,

A lot of the time it was hard to find scholarships because a lot of Native scholarships are tribe specific. And so, it was very hard. And at that time, my tribe wasn't federally recognized. They are now, but they weren't at the time. And so, it was very hard for me to find applications and things like that for me to apply for scholarships with an Indigenous background.

It is true that scholarship opportunities for federally recognized students are greater than for those from state recognized communities.

Like other participants, Kendra was also asked about the general sense of supportiveness from her tribe in relation to her decision to attend college. She reported that while there was nothing directly stated as negative, she perceived a difference in reception when returning home. She stated,

It could have been my own perception of things, but in a very small community... a lot of people stay there and so when you get out and you do bigger things... I think people think you're better than. Or maybe that's my own perception. But I feel like I was treated differently in some ways because of people thinking I thought I was better when I didn't. And so, I would say in that way, maybe, but there were no people verbally saying, like, you shouldn't go to college and things like that.

While research has indicated the importance of homegoing habits for Native students (Waterman, 2012), participants in this sample also allude to the challenges one might face returning after college.

“Emily” was a participant in the sample who was a current student. At the time of the interview she was 19 and a sophomore. She was majoring in theater and identified as an Alaskan Native. She explained that she spent a portion of her life in foster care before later being adopted. Describing her time in foster care, she said,

In Alaska, first I was living with my mom and dad. My mom had me at 15, so she was pretty young and both of them had a [substance] problem. So, from there, we went into foster care after, like a lot of cases of domestic violence and both parents going to prison a couple of times, they had to sign away their rights. And then we went into foster care. We had some good homes, some bad homes. Our social worker changed a lot. So, like at least for my siblings and I was like, very inconsistent, just like not knowing anything and

everything, being able to change within the drop of a hat. And then when I moved to Virginia, I lived with my stepdad's parents.

When comparing her home life in both places, she noted the economic and material differences as significant. She recalled that her first time visiting a dentist was at the age of nine, after she moved in with her step- grandparents.

Also, a first-generation college student, neither her biological parents nor her adoptive parents attended college. She stated that not having anyone in her family who attended was actually a motivator for her. She applied to seven different colleges and described the essays as being somewhat difficult in that many asked her to reflect on her life experiences. She stated,

I think the hardest part was trying not to sound like a pity party because I have been through a lot of things... like the death of a parent, divorce. I remember a junior year joke with one of my friends saying, like, you check all the boxes: adopted, foster care, death of a parent, divorced parents. I don't know...it was just a lot.

Like others, she also described the challenges she had completing federal financial aid forms. She expressed that not having parents who completed college or that were familiar with exactly how to complete the aid process made it difficult. She also described her step-grandparents as being less familiar with technology making online forms difficult for her as well. While she was mostly focused on finding a school with her major, she did notice the presence of a Native student organization and center which was appealing to her during her search for colleges.

The next participant is "Noah." At the time of his interview he had recently earned his master's degree within a fast track program that combined the bachelor's and master's of arts. His field of study was political science. Noah was 29 at the time of the interview and married. He had followed his wife to the area so that she could pursue a veterinary program. When asked what motivated him to attend college, he said,

I always joke with people, but I think it's the honest answer. It was a girl, my wife. We couldn't be more different on paper. She graduated high school as valedictorian ...she got a full ride to an Ivy League university for undergrad. Very academically driven and motivated and her parents are academics. That sort of her background. I think she sort of encouraged me and subtly pushed me to start thinking about things in a different way and finding what interests me and what motivates me. And I reached a point in my career that I knew I couldn't do the things I wanted to do professionally without getting a college

degree. We had already decided that we wanted to get married ...and I decided I would go with her [to school] and not knowing anybody there except for her.

Growing up, however, Noah was admittedly not interested in school. He grew up in the southwestern part of the U.S. He recalled earlier childhood years which consisted of living on the reservation with a large extended family and kinship network nearby. He explained that,

There were really just lots of things to do for a young boy with an imagination. We'd go play in the dry riverbeds and, you know, just get into trouble. I grew up in an area where some of my family go back several generations. And so, we lived in my great grandfather's house and generations of extended family were nearby. I grew up with a big family.

He reflected on this time in a positive manner and with imagery of he, his brother, and his cousins wandering wide open spaces and deserts. However, he also recalled the lack of economic opportunity due to how rural and isolated the area was. These factors led his parents to relocate to a nearby urban area. He said that when he moved from the reservation to the suburbs, he became aware of the disparities in educational quality and access.

Noah might describe his academic journey as a bumpy one, albeit with a successful conclusion. He explained that as early as middle school, he thought that school was somewhere he did not want to be. He said,

When it came time for me to graduate high school and attend college, I started at a community college nearby and quickly failed out, even though I had a full ride scholarship from the tribe. Failed my first semester, but my second semester, I was on academic probation and pretty much decided that school wasn't for me. At that point, I think I did a couple of other semesters at community college, taking one or two classes and paid my way through. I lost my scholarship because of academic probation and ended up taking a few years off of school completely. I worked. After getting outside work experience, I realized that I did want to be in school, I had the motivation and the interest in particular areas.

After following his wife to veterinary school, he applied to the political science program at the same institution where she attended. He noted that he almost did not get in because of his prior GPA. However, several faculty advocated on his behalf. He later completed not only his

bachelors but his masters as well. He said, "I graduated with honors, which was great. I think 10 years ago, I wouldn't have believed it if you told me that."

Nathan was a recent graduate who had also completed a master's degree. He had studied computer engineering and was 32 at the time of his interview. Similar to Noah, Nathan and his wife had been enrolled in the institution at the same time. Both are citizens of tribal nations located within Oklahoma, where they met in college. With two younger brothers, Noah is the oldest of three children. His father had joined the Marines after high school and now works as an I.T. manager and his mother is a bookkeeper. He explained that his mother was the one who pushed him to pursue college, stating,

I was my mother. When I was in my senior year of high school, I told my parents I didn't want to go to college. I was going to join the Marines. That caused a bit of an uproar at the household, but I told them I'm not doing any recruitment, I'm not sending out letters, I'm going to the Marines. And because I did that, my mom was like, 'no, you're not.' So, she looked for colleges for me. Now at the time you know, we were middle to lower middle class, so there wasn't a lot of money to go to college. Thankfully Haskell Indian nations had lower priced tuition. My mom found it and said, 'no, this is where you're going.' So, before college, I wasn't really driven and once I got there, I was like, Oh, OK more driven.

After completing his associates at Haskell, he began applying to several different schools to complete his bachelor's degree. He knew that he wanted to pursue engineering and ended up at a state university in Oklahoma where he later met his wife. He did not intend to get his master's until later on. When the decision was made that they would relocate for her to pursue a doctorate, he had planned to get a job nearby and work while she attended graduate school. However, he struggled to find anything at the time. He explained that applying to the master's program was a rather quick and last minute decision, stating,

I think we knew 8 to 10 months in advance, so I started applying for jobs. Nothing was hiring at the time. I mean, nothing. To a point where we moved her in and I was still living in Oklahoma because I didn't have a job. I'm like well I can't find a job. What am I going to do? Um, I guess I'll just go down there and, like, deliver pizzas or something until we figure things out. That's when she was like just apply to the institution and see what they tell you. If there are prerequisites then you go to a junior college, get

your prerequisites before you get in. I was like, OK. So, actually, that same day I was like, let's see what it would take to apply for computer engineering. The due date for the application was that Friday. So, I was like, well, let's do this. In three days, I got the application, letters of recommendation, and everything together and sent in. And they told me yea come on in. So, I finally got to move with my wife once I got accepted.

When asked about challenges experienced during the application process, Nathan stated that his biggest challenge was writing essays. He did not view writing as one of his strengths but had support from both his mother and wife who frequently looked over his papers. He noted that he has always felt supported by family and community members during his college trajectory.

For “Hope” feeling supported during college was more nuanced. At the time of her interview, Hope was a senior studying Natural Resources and Conservation. She is from a tribal community in the southwest region of the United States and attended a boarding school for high school in New Mexico. She described life in her community as close knit with family always being nearby. She said,

The single dirt road would have my cousins and then their families living there and then going up, more cousins and family. And then finally we'd get over the hill. There would be my house with my mom on her land where she grew up too, because traditionally in that culture, you know, the man would go and live and build a home for the woman on her land. So, that's what my dad did. And then my cousins lived right there. So, it was pretty good. I felt like I grew up knowing my cousins. But that got difficult when we moved away to Phoenix because it was so far. But that was for just a short time. And then see, um, yeah, I didn't really grow up with running water. So, that was like a big thing. So, we had to haul water most of the time or go down and take showers at my cousin's place because they had running water.

At 21 years of age, Hope was the youngest child and had six older brothers. In addition to her parents, she credited her siblings and cousins for having a hand in raising her, stating, “it was a whole community that helped raise me.” It was her older brothers who motivated her to attend college. Three of them had attended college and one was in seminary school. In many aspects she looked up to them and wanted to follow in their footsteps. She also witnessed the ways in which college impacted their ability to provide for themselves. “They were able to, like, move away from home and get a job and do better than what my parents were doing. So, that

kind of motivated me to do well in school and to do everything I can to get into college,” Hope said.

Hope described the application process as relatively without challenges and credited the ease to the preparatory boarding school she attended for high school. She described the school as focused on Native student success and helping them get into college. She noted always having people in the school who were resources. They assisted with the application process, reviewed essays, and connected students to resources. They also helped them to apply for application fee waivers if needed. The main challenge she described was self-doubt stating, “I feel like there was a lot of impostor syndrome. I kind of was doubting myself, like, oh, maybe I'm not smart enough to go to college or not smart enough to apply to this college or whatever, but I mean, I kind of got over that.”

When asked if she felt supported by her tribal community during her college trajectory, she responded at length. As Hope explained the complications of going home, I imagined her experiences to be similar to first generation students as well as those from other rural communities. While there were certainly those who were affirming, she also got the sense others were less supportive. She explained that,

When you come home for winter break or for the summer, it's kind of like ‘oh, you're coming back and now you're like, thinking you all that.’ I don't know. It's weird. It's like they're very supportive on the outside, but then, like when you do come back, they make these comments about you being out there and thinking you all of that because you're out there and going to college and they're not.

She explained that there were always a few people who made her feel that she had a responsibility to be home helping her parents. Additionally, when she did attempt to help others in her community, they often perceived her as being condescending when that was not her intention. Though she regularly went home when she could, she described going home as complicated for those reasons.

Pursuing a bachelor's degree in forestry, “Casey” was a junior in college. He was 24 at the time of his interview. He had earned his associate's degree at a community college and then took time off from school, during which time he worked as a welder. He grew up most of his life in different parts of Virginia and West Virginia and is a member of a tribal community located in the southeast region. His father is an electrical mechanic and his mother is a nurse. He explained

that growing up, his parents worked a lot of the time in order to provide for their family. Casey credited his grandfather a great deal for his upbringing as he spent much of his time with him. He spoke fondly of being able to learn from the “older generation” and also recalled spending a great deal of time in church. “Up until I went to college, I never missed a service,” he said.

Several factors influenced Casey’s decision to attend college. Though not all, a few family members encouraged him to attend, his grandparents, aunts, and uncles were proponents of college. In addition to a younger sister, he had a fraternal brother who he described as academically inclined. While Casey did not seem to view academics as a personal strength, he knew he did not want to be restricted to the limited job opportunities available in his community. “I thought, I don't want to be working a dead end job, because obviously around where I'm at, there aren't too many good job opportunities. And I didn't want to get stuck in that sort of field.” As a side job, his dad would sometimes work with trees to earn additional income. Casey would help with those jobs. “I've always enjoyed learning about medicinal stuff and things like that. Being out in nature. It's just a big, big thing I enjoy. So, that's kind of what pushed me to go to college.” He decided to enroll in community college first with the intent to pursue a degree in forestry.

When asked about any challenges experienced with the application process, Casey noted the difference between community college and applying to larger universities. He said,

It was definitely hard and weird. It was kind of easy get into community college and apply and everything. It was very basic, easy to understand. It took into account you probably don't have increased computer skills; you've never done this before. So, we're going to help you out. That sort of a mindset. When applying to other colleges, it was definitely more difficult. There were a lot of things I had never done before, things I had to fill out. I didn't know a lot of stuff. So, it was stressful. And I had to make a whole lot of calls trying to figure everything out. And there's obviously, I mean, there's no one there to hold your hand or help you to show you how to do it. So, it was difficult.

Casey also described challenges with internet access. He stated that where he lived was very rural and finding a place where he could connect and get work done towards his applications, and then later for course work, was often challenging.

I asked Casey if there were specific things he looked for when evaluating institutions to potentially attend. In addition to looking for forestry programs, he was concerned with the

climate towards people from the Appalachian region. It was at the point that he expressed that part of his identity as being more salient than his Indigenous identity. He said,

I actually feel more strongly about Appalachian culture than I do for my Native culture just because I've seen how it is for my tribe and I've seen how it is for my family from West Virginia. And I've got family in Alabama and Georgia and stuff. They're all mountain people. Coincidentally, a lot of them are Native, but as a whole, they just like to be called Appalachian. And so, I took that into account big when I was looking at schools. How do they treat people from the area? How do they go about the curriculum? Do they have anything that I could learn more about Appalachian culture neck and neck with the Native too?

Of his current institution he felt that he had everything he was looking for. He noted that he was able to take American Indian Studies courses and Appalachian Studies courses all while pursuing his forestry degree.

One thing he argued could improve at the institution was orienting students and families on how to pay for college. He explained that he did not understand the scholarship process and had just settled on the idea of “being in debt for the rest of his life.” He said those parents who went to college may have financially planned ahead or at least knew how to navigate the system. That was not the case for Casey and he wished that institutions did a better job at coaching students and families on how to pay for college early on.

Another participant whom I will call “Nora” has just graduated with her bachelor’s in animal science. She was 22 at the time of her interview and had hopes to attend veterinary school. In her own words, Nora described her family as Latino and Indigenous. Her family came from an Indigenous community located in South America. While she primarily grew up in the northern part of Virginia, her family's culture significantly influenced the way she was raised, from the music that was listened to, to the foods eaten, and the language spoken in her household. While Nora noted identifying with both the Latino and Indigenous communities, she found that on this particular campus, her life experiences mirrored those of Indigenous students to a greater degree. She said,

I first tried to join the Latino student organizations, but I felt like I didn't really fit in there because some of the students had come from wildly different backgrounds, which is fine,

I just didn't relate. Like, wealthier or White Latinos. I Found that the Native group was a lot closer in experiences to me.

Nora only applied to one school as she was accepted as an early decision student. When asked about challenges during the application process, she replied,

The application itself was pretty straightforward, but I had trouble with the FAFSA because my family doesn't speak English, so I was doing it on my own and I was hoping that I wasn't breaking any laws. I had also had trouble with the essays because I didn't know how vulnerable to be.

She stated that her parents had always made education a priority for her because they did not have the same access and opportunities growing up. Her family sacrificed a great deal leaving their community in South America. Her immediate family was very supportive of her attending college, as was most of her Indigenous community. However, there were occasionally those who did not understand why she was not married or having children at her age.

Dakota was another student in the sample. She grew up most of her life in California before moving with her family to the eastern part of the country. At the time of the interview, she was 21, a current student, and studying public health. She indicated aspirations to pursue medical school. Both of her parents are physicians. Her mother, who is Native, is an OBGYN physician and her father is a family practice physician. Dakota explained that while she and her siblings were well taken care of growing up, both parents worked a great deal to provide for them. Her father would regularly be on call for emergencies. She stated that since moving to the east, her parents do not have to work as much because the cost of living is more favorable.

For Dakota, there was always an expectation within her family to attend college. However, she personally enjoyed learning as well. When asked what motivated her to attend college, she said,

I've always really liked school and learning, so I just wanted to continue learning and I was really excited to learn more about Native American Studies. Like I said, my mom majored in it and my sister. And so, they always knew more than me.

She also mentioned that friends and peers were an influence as they too were all attending college.

Dakota applied to one university but indicated that it checked many of the things she was looking for. It had the major area of study she wanted to pursue while also having American

Indian Studies courses. She said that she also researched the available resources and community for Native students and was pleased to find a student organization and powwow. She was also hoping to attend an R1 institution where there would be plenty of opportunities for her to become involved in research. While she found the application process fairly simple, she identified her biggest challenge stemming from the SAT, stating, “I'm a very bad standardized test taker because I get test anxiety, which I'm working on. But that was definitely the biggest challenge, like my SAT score. I would say that was it.”

One thing that Dakota spoke about in her interview was an occasional lack of confidence in asserting her Indigenous identity. While discussions of her heritage were a significant part of her upbringing, she noted not always feeling confident to state this around others due to presenting as White. However, she also understood Indigenous identity to encompass more than the western definition of race. She described her mother and sister as being more heavily involved in community and culture, and seemed to desire a similar, stronger, connection. Dakota's involvement with the Native campus community seemed to strengthen her cultural sense of self, as she described her participation in cultural events and referred to the community in familial terms. This suggested an impact of such resources on the continuing identity development of college aged students.

Like several other participants, Jamie had recently graduated. While in college she earned a degree in Agricultural Leadership. At the time of her interview, she was 24 and working in a research role for a food production company. She grew up near her tribal community which is located in the southeast region of the U.S. From what she knew about her family's history, at least seven generations had lived there. She described her community as rural and very close knit, stating,

You know, there's not even a grocery store in the community. So, a lot of what we did was, you know, taking care of each other. And to this day, if you need some sugar you call grandma or you call one of your aunts and see if you can grab something. But again, it's very community, very family centered, very much a sharing and giving community.

Jamie stated that growing up around community and agriculture influenced her decision to attend an institution with a strong agricultural background. She said,

One of the things that I would say helped me decide [on a college] was actually agriculture. As you know, I majored in agriculture and I went there because of some of

the things that I experienced growing up. I grew up on a six to seven acre lot of land with my family. That was attached to a hundred plus acres of tribal land. Being around that agrarian society and just growing up in a community that shared and gave, we often did a lot of gardening and things like that, especially in the summertime, to support ourselves, to support other community members, which is ultimately what led me towards studying agriculture.

While college was never an expectation from her parents, Jamie stated that she was “always kind of on that path.” She did well in school and what motivated her was a desire to have more opportunities for herself, her family, and her community. She did have those around her who influenced her. One major influence was her uncle who went to college; he would regularly help her with homework when she was younger.

Jamie described her application process as relatively simple. She credited this to an ongoing relationship she maintained with an admissions representative after they had visited her high school. She explained that she stayed in contact with them, and they supported her along the way answering any questions she had. By her senior year she was offered an opportunity for her and her parents to visit campus. She actually received her acceptance decision at the end of that visit. The challenges she faced during the application process included being a first-generation college student and access to reliable internet. She explained that since neither of her parents had attended college, there was not anyone in her household that understood the process. In addition, access to reliable internet was a challenge in her community.

Steven was a member of the same tribal community as Jamie. However, he grew up in an urban area just forty minutes northwest of where the tribe was based. At the time of his interview, he had just recently graduated with a degree in communications and was 22 years of age. He describes himself as coming from a “mixed background.” His mother’s side of the family is White and his father is Native American. While he was predominantly raised by his mother and grandmother, he spent time with his dad’s family on weekends. He said, “So, I definitely got immersed. And my first experience with the tribal Nation was like the Powwows and everything.”

Steven described his home life as a bit unstable. He had a parent who struggled with substance abuse and, as a kid, school became an outlet. It was a place that was stable and certain. He did not have to think about what might be going on at home for eight hours a day.

He stated, "I always presented, and I still do, like very bubbly, very outgoing, very carefree. But honestly, I think that just came from not knowing what was going to happen next. Just live life to the fullest and be happy because it could all flip up on its head at any second." He credits his grandmother for much of his upbringing and providing stability in his early life. She passed right before he started college.

He almost decided not to attend because he was not ready for the social aspects of college after her passing. However, it was always his grandmother who emphasized the importance of education and so he did not want to let her down. He named her as a motivating factor to attend. He explained,

I think with all the stuff that I was going through, I had to do it for someone else. In my heart, in my mind, I wasn't ready to do it for myself...I guess at that moment when I was applying to college it was for my grandmother, like I couldn't even live with myself if I didn't.

Steven found the application process relatively simple. Other than combatting his own lack of motivation at the time, he did not perceive there to be any challenges for him during that process. When asked if his family, peers, and community were supportive of his choice to attend college, he expressed sentiments that were similar to Hope's. He described sensing feelings of resentment from one family member but resolved to understand that it had nothing to do with him personally. He said,

The only thing I could ever say is that little bit of resentment you feel from like an older brother when you're doing more than them, if that makes sense. Like they're resenting you because they didn't do enough, and now you're younger than them and you're starting to get leaps and bounds ahead of them in like the generic life path. So, just that feeling from my brother, but like knowing that it was more his struggle than him not supporting me. Because I knew, like, at the end of the day, he supported me with everything he had. I just knew that it made him feel some type of way, seeing me go through it.

Other than one family member, he said that most people were generally supportive of him and his choice to attend college.

Last, but not least, was Lynnly. A current student athlete, she comes from a Native nation in the Northeast which borders Canada. Apart from attending a boarding school for part of her high school trajectory, she lived within her tribal community for most of her life. She has six

siblings, five sisters and one brother. Like Lynnly, one of her sisters is also active in athletics. Her older siblings would regularly look after the two of them while their parents worked. She described being close to her family, but her support system extended beyond those in her immediate household. Her tribal community offered an extended sense of family. It is this kind of community upbringing that inspires a desire for her to give back.

When I asked Lynnly what motivated her to attend college athletics and family were major factors. She said,

Lacrosse really instilled that in me, to want to go to college. I realize the way I can make it sound...I can make everything sound so phenomenal. I can make everything sound so happy. But it wasn't always. And now I see my parents struggle...And I've seen such harsh things that I wanted to create a better life for myself and my family and especially my parents. Seeing what they did in our childhood and being able to remember it, I would I want to give them a better life even when they're older.

Being able to provide a better life for herself and care for her parents were important to her and she viewed opportunities with college athletics as a path to be able to achieve such goals.

Lynnly had applied to several schools during the application process. For one institution in particular, she described the process as very intimidating. It was an Ivy League school which required interviews and an evaluation conducted at her high school. She went through several stages of the process which she indicated were stressful. She ultimately did not attend that school. For the remaining places to which she applied, her main challenge was paying all of the fees. She did not perceive other application processes to be difficult but noted that not all schools offered application fee waivers. Generally, people in her community were supportive of her attending college. However, she too perceived some level of resentment, stating, "I think once I was doing the things that a lot of people weren't doing, it became like this intimidation thing. I felt like even though I was succeeding, I knew that some people wanted to see me fail every single day. I knew that." Ultimately, however, she felt that she was supported by those in her life who mattered most to her.

In the next section I examine the broader campus experiences of participants, particularly those related to their Indigenous identity. I identify several themes which surface when analyzing their experiences in and out of the classroom. What emerges is the degree to which erasure, invisibility, and stereotypes dominate their experiences. Such interactions occur with

peers but also faculty, pointing to the need to expand our understanding of campus climates for Indigenous students and the ways in which institutions may better support their journey within higher education.

Chapter IV

Native Student Experience at Predominantly White Institutions

Despite their low degree attainments, the amount of literature on Native student experience pales in comparison to other identity groups (Willmott, Sands, Raucci, & Waterman, 2016). Shotton, Lowe, and Waterman (2013) attribute this to the invisibility of Native students within higher education. Much of the literature on Native student degree attainment analyzes factors such as academic preparedness, financial challenges, and even cultural factors (Lopez, 2018). While all of these have shown to play an important role, it is equally important to understand the ways in which Native students experience campus climate and how these experiences might impact decisions to discontinue their education or persist. Masta (2018) notes that this is often overlooked.

Most studies that have examined campus climate found that Native students often deal with microaggressions and harmful stereotypes (Masta, 2018; Owens, 2002; Oxendine, Taub, & Cain, 2020). Many Native students also report having strong feelings of isolation, both from culture, communities, and in terms of representation (Brayboy et al. 2015; Masta, 2018). Scholars have indicated that some microaggressions are unique to Native students as they can be connected to the political aspect of Native identity and are often a manifestation of settler colonialism (Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011; Masta, 2018). These might include comments that deny the sovereignty of tribal communities and those which suggest that Native peoples are essentially extinct (Clark et al. 2011; Masta, 2018). Data from this study support the existing, albeit limited findings.

In this chapter I focus on the major themes that emerged regarding Native student experience on campus. These include microaggressions and underlying stereotypes, isolation, invisibility, and tokenism. Throughout the discussion of the data and findings I draw on theoretical works which help to explain the prevalence of these experiences within predominantly White institutions. I begin with microaggressions, broken down by type as outlined in Sue's (2010) taxonomy. Sue (2010) defines three different types of microaggressions: microinsults, microinvalidations, and microassaults. When coding for microaggressions I first considered whether the experience, as described by a participant, met the general definition found within the scholarship. I then applied another layer of codes using the taxonomy of Sue et al. (2007) to categorize each microaggression into one of three major

categories.

Microinvalidations

Microinvalidations have been defined by scholars as those verbal or non-verbal interactions which aim to invalidate the experiences of individuals from marginalized identities. (Ong 2021; Senter & Ling, 2017; Sue, 2010). A common example found within the literature is the interrogation that follows when Asian Americans indicate their hometown. This type of invalidation establishes all Asian people as perpetual foreigners (Amos, 2015; Ong, 2021). Native students in the current sample experienced the invalidation of their own identity. They also experienced comments which negated their experiences and knowledge. Additionally, it was common for them to hear comments which relegated the existence of Native people to the past.

At the time of her interview, Elena was a recently graduated alumnus. She is from a tribal community in the Northeastern United States. When asked about negative experiences associated with any identities she held, she described a microinvalidation which relegated Native people to the past and denied contemporary issues faced by Native communities, including those she knew to be true for her own community. She stated,

I took a lot of political science classes...and I would always try to push the narrative of like this is going on. Here is something else going on in Indian country and things that go on in my own community. A lot of people would make the comment like, 'oh, that's in the past', 'like you guys aren't here.' I felt like a lot of comments were making us look like artifacts. Like, I just wasn't really supported with the faculty members. They would let people make really, really rude comments.

Both of these invalidations can be understood as part of a settler colonial project that is indeed an ongoing process as opposed to a historical set of events (Veracini, 2011). In his articulation of settler colonialism Veracini (2011) tells us that is a system which must be maintained, and that part of that maintenance is perpetuating the narrative of a race that is in a constant state of disappearing. Veracini (2011) makes a clear distinction between colonialism, which he articulates as that which is concerned with labor extraction, and settler colonialism which is concerned with supplanting the original inhabitants of a particular place. While settler colonialism often includes elements of violence and physical erasure, it also includes the

production of national mythology and narratives which assert the near extinction of Indigenous Peoples. Also important to note, in this excerpt, is that Elena did not feel supported by faculty due to a lack of microaggression intervention.

Another microinvalidation described by students is that which challenges their indicated identity. These types of invalidations can often stem from stereotypes regarding how others expect Indigenous peoples to look or present themselves. At the time of his interview, Nathan had recently graduated with his master's degree in computer engineering. He represents a tribal community located in the southwest region of the U.S. When asked what it is like to be his stated identity [Native] within the institution, he recalled a common reaction to times he might mix aspects of his Native culture with casual or street attire, stating,

There would be times I was wearing a beaded necklace or my hat on campus or shirt that said something about being Native and people would ask you like 'you're Native?' I'd be like, yeah, and people would be shocked. And it's just because I don't look it, right? I don't have the dark skin or the long, long black hair in braids. So, I'm not Native? So, yeah, I had to explain a lot to people on campus.

Nathan suggested that it was common for people to react in disbelief when indicating that he identified as Native. He interprets their disbelief to be connected to his appearance and the fact that he does not phenotypically show up in an expected or stereotypical manner. Dealing with identity invalidation was common among participants and reminded me of an essay by Becca Gercken-Hawkins (2003) in which she describes being told to straighten her dark curls and work on a tan prior to her job search within academia. The frustration she describes in her essay is centered around the focus on her appearance and ethnic matching in hiring practices within departments. Though she identified as a Native scholar and valued the authority of cultural experience, she felt that it was her studies, teaching, and research that prepared her to teach Native American Literature, not her personal background. Conversely, it would be correct to assert that not everyone who identifies as Indigenous would be equipped with the knowledge to teach in her discipline. Like Gercken-Hawkins (2003), the students in this study allude to being examined by others who are in search of some type of physical trait that would signal their bona fide Indianness.

Similar to Nathan, Steven, a student representing a tribal community in the southeast region, indicated that it was common to deal with both erasure myths and the invalidation of identity claims. He stated,

...I would have friends either not understand that there are still Natives, like living, period. Or, just couldn't believe that I was Native. I don't think a lot of people I guess really go through that where they're like, I mean other than like some I guess smaller minority classes never have to go through that completely... like you don't question your own identity, but everyone around you does.

In addition to the stereotypes and images perpetuated by film, media, and our k-12 system, I argue that we can also link instances of disbelief to a failure to understand Native identity as one that is political and tied to nationhood. In his outline of Tribal Critical Race Theory, Brayboy (2005) asserts that Native Americans have unique relationships to state and federal governments. This is clearly demonstrated through state and federal laws, the U.S. constitution, and treaties (Brayboy 2005; Bush 2004). Thus, Brayboy (2005) argues that Native identity must be understood as occupying a “liminal space” between that which is a racialized identity and a political one (p. 432). Tribal Critical Race theory accounts for both stating that,

American Indians are both legal/political and racialized beings; however, we are rarely treated as such, leaving Indigenous peoples in a state of inbetweenness wherein we define ourselves as both, with an emphasis on the legal/political, but we are framed as racialized groups by many members of society. The racialized status of American Indians appears to be the main emphasis of most members of U.S. society; this status ignores the legal/political one, and is directly tied to notions of colonialism, because larger society is unaware of the multiple statuses of Indigenous peoples (Brayboy, 2005, pp. 432-433).

The microinvalidations experienced by participants took several forms. Within this taxonomy there were two prominent themes that could be derived from the implied messages. One, which stems from erasure myth, was the messaging that Natives no longer exist. The second which stemmed from stereotypes, was the idea that Indigenous people exhibit specific, identifiable physical characteristics. Drawing on work of Brunsma et al. (2020) and Veracini (2010), Consciously or unconsciously, these interactions reinforce erasure mythology and solidify the place of whiteness in society (Brunsma et al. 2020; Veracini 2010). It also allows for the separation of oneself from the legacy and ongoing project of colonization (Veracini 2010).

Invalidation of tribal identity, however, not only disregards the existence of the sovereign nations and complex sociopolitical locations from which students come, but creates an educational environment whereby many in the institution deny integral parts of who they are.

Microinsults

Microinsults are a classification of microaggressions which seek to demean or debase a group of people or identity (Ong, 2021; Senter & Ling 2017; Sue, 2010). They are often unconscious comments or slights (Senter & Ling, 2017). Many microinsults stem from commonly held stereotypes. Ong (2021) gives a common example experienced by the Latinx community which presumes that all Latinx individuals are undocumented. For participants in the sample, common microinsults include the idea that all Indigenous students receive free tuition, implying that Natives receive a “free ride.” Students too faced a myriad of assumptions and questions that suggest Native people have not evolved with modern society. The microinsults experienced by participants could, in some instances, be seen as contributing to stereotype threat.

At the time of her interview, Hope was a 21 year old senior studying natural resources and conservation. She hailed from a Native community in the southwest region of the U.S. When asked if she had experienced negative incidents within the institution based on any identities she held, she responded,

I feel like I get a lot of, like, arrogant questions. I get a lot of assumptions that people have just come up to me and be like, ‘so Natives live in teepees’ or ‘you come to school free’ or like them thinking all Natives don't exist.

Emily indicated having very similar experiences. Emily was a current student representing the Alaskan Native community and was 19 at the time of her interview. She was pursuing a degree in theater. She described her campus experience as follows:

It's a little hard sometimes with just people always assuming, like, oh, you go to school for free then. Oh, you must have it so good because you go to college for free. It's more like you have it a lot harder than what people make it seem like. It's just like, oh, just because I checked the box, I'm going to get a bunch of scholarships and things from the university, which really is not the case. And then another part that is kind of hard is just being asked the same questions over and over again. Like you live in an igloo?

Nathan also experienced microaggressions that emphasized the “free ride” narrative. He stated,

Someone found out I was Native and their immediate first question was, is that why you have tattoos? I'm like, well no. I don't know how those two correlate. I've also heard, do you get money from casinos? Like, do you get money from your tribe back home, from casinos? Do they send it to you? No, no they don't.

These three examples highlight microinsults which are deeply rooted in narratives of tribal dependency and the alleged benefits received by tribally enrolled citizens. Though there are certainly scholarships that exist specifically for Native students, many are highly competitive. Like any other competitive scholarship, not everyone who applies will be awarded. Additionally, many do not fund the full amount required for a bachelor's level education. Finally, the vast majority of these scholarships focus on students from federally recognized tribes leaving a more significant financial need for those students from state recognized tribal communities. Out of the twelve students interviewed, all but two indicated needing to utilize student loans and/or financial aid to cover the costs of college attendance. Of the remaining two, one received an athletic scholarship.

In addition to the “free ride” narrative, we see in two of the above examples thoughts around the ways in which contemporary Indigenous people live. As I read through these excerpts, I reflected on the last few times I visited the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. During most of these visits I was extremely aware of a focus on the past and little which showed contemporary issues or Indigenous contributions to society. It is a stark contrast to how the progression of other people groups is depicted. These microinsults, which assume Native Peoples to be unevolved, are less the fault of individuals and more the result of a system which paints them as such. However, the perpetuation of narratives, imagery, misinformation, or a lack thereof has real implications for the ways in which Native students experience spaces of higher education.

Within interviews students were asked various questions about their experiences with professors, including, but not limited to, mentor relationships, general perceptions of faculty, and both positive and negative experiences with faculty. Some students reported that microinsults were also experienced through interactions with those teaching their courses. Nora, an Indigenous animal science major recalled the following:

I had one of my professors that said tribes fighting was like dogs fighting, that's just what they do. I mean, I don't remember exactly how she said it, but that was basically the gist of it.

Nora went on to explain that while some of her professors may have had good intentions, she found it very uncomfortable to talk about issues that were deeply personal to her and her own experiences. She expressed that it was particularly hard to hear and confront these types of opinions expressed by an authority figure in front of mostly White peers. Martin (2019) writes about the ways in which teachers can contribute to the development of stereotype threat through microinsults such as these, as well as through other microaggressive behaviors. Stereotype threat has been defined as “the fear of confirming a negative stereotype” about one’s own identity group (Martin 2019; Steele & Aronson 1995).

Within the microinsult previously described, Nora’s professor invoked an all too common stereotype; one that paints Native people as violent and hostile. Several scholars have written about the origins of this stereotype pointing to the dime store novels first published in the mid-1800s and later popularized western films (Hirschfelder & Molin, 2018; Kilpatrick, 1999). In these forms of popular media that were widely consumed, Native men in particular, were depicted as inherently violent and devoid of humanity. They rarely had speaking parts that could otherwise show them as dynamic human beings (Kilpatrick 1999) and most often were pictured with either a tomahawk or knife for scalping (Hirschfelder & Molin, 2018).

Also, in this excerpt is the underlying White supremacist explanation for minority issues. The notion that tribes constantly fight each other parallels the familiar rhetoric around Black-on-Black violence which (A) paints minority populations as inherently violent and (B) takes no responsibility for creating the socially constructed conditions in which crime often thrives (i.e. poverty). These types of narratives seek to distance majority populations, institutions, and systems from the challenges plaguing marginalized communities. Hirschfelder and Molin (2018) argue that, “such representations obliterate or mask the realities of tribal nations struggling to maintain their populations, lands, resources, and sovereignty” (p. 1).

In a similar vein, Noah, a recent graduate of political science, described an experience with faculty which discouraged him at the very start of his graduate studies. He stated,

During graduate student orientation for my program, the director of the graduate

program in political science...we all came into the conference room and we're sitting there and he's going around introducing everyone. Sort of saying what their research interests were and mine at the time had to do with Native American political participation and tribal sovereignty. He knew that and I had worked with him the year prior. As he's going around the room introducing people, he stops at me and he says, this is Noah. He's interested in identity politics. And that just sort of, you know, was really offensive to me to sort of boil all my experiences, all of my interests, everything that I wanted to do into "identity politics". It sort of discounted it as you know, not real political science. There are people here that are doing global security or international studies, diplomatic work, political theory. It immediately made me feel as if I didn't really belong here because I wanted to do cute things like identity politics. So, that was probably one of the worst things that could happen to me in my graduate program.

Seemingly small on the surface, this interaction led Noah to question his academic and professional aspirations as well as his general belonging within the program. These types of microinsults are far from uncommon. As Martin (2019) writes, common microaggressions within the educational setting include both a lack of sensitivity towards identities and people groups, as well as lowered expectations for underrepresented students. While there are many factors contributing to both persistence and attrition of graduate students, researchers utilizing a socialization framework point out the importance of both departmental culture and student/faculty relationships in graduate student success (Gilmore, Wofford, & Maher, 2016). According to Hunter and Devine (2016), feeling appreciated by faculty members and their department had a positive impact on their experience and retention and helped them to combat feelings of being emotionally depleted. Though Noah went on to successfully complete his program, he goes on to talk about how he relied more on faculty associated with the Native community as he felt a higher level of trust and comfortability with them. These faculty, however, were most often outside of his own academic department.

Microinsults described by participants included interactions with both faculty and peers. Underlying messages within these interactions focused on the misconception that all Native citizens derive specific benefits related to their identities, that Indigenous people are inherently hostile, and that contemporary Native people have failed to evolve with society. Present in one case was an insensitivity to Indigenous issues in conjunction to lowered expectations of a faculty

member. In Noah and Nora's case stereotype threat seemed to emerge from these interactions as they seemed to fear giving confirmation to problematic beliefs held by faculty. While peer interactions are all too problematic, the microinsults experienced by faculty can be particularly detrimental as they negatively affect the student-faculty relationship, an important form of social capital which can certainly impact their success.

Microassaults

The least common among the types of microaggressions experienced was microassaults. Few respondents indicated having experienced microassaults related to their racial or ethnic identities. However, those which were described clearly demonstrate the more overt forms of racism that persist on college campuses. Microassaults are described as more intentional and explicit attacks intended to do harm or discriminate (Sue, 2010). That microassaults showed up fewer times within the data is not a surprise. Research suggests that this is in line with the ways in which modern racism predominately functions. Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2011) argue that while more blatant acts of racism are becoming less prevalent, we should not take this to mean racism is on the decline. Instead, it has merely changed shape to uphold systems of inequality while in some ways conforming to newer social expectations of behavior (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). Though a more contemporary analysis of racism has emerged, this does not seek to downplay the impact which more overt experiences have on students, particularly at a critical point of their development into young adulthood.

Kendra, a recent graduate, described two incidents that fit within Sue's (2010) definition of microassault. At the time of her interview, she was 25 years old. She had graduated within the last two years and represented a tribal community in the southeast region of the U.S. When asked about experiences related to identities she held, she recalled the following experience within student housing:

My neighbor at [student housing complex], he was drunk on his front porch. I walked outside and he called me the N-word and told me to go back to where I was from.

Overt actions as described in this example clearly seek to make individuals feel both uncomfortable and unwelcome. They also impact feelings of safety and security. What is further implied is that persons of color are perpetual foreigners and that only White individuals truly belong.

Kendra recalled a separate experience whereby she and her friends attempted to attend a local house party. Of that experience, she stated,

Me and my group of friends, we were a diverse group. So, it was like three black men, me, and then a couple of BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) women. And we were trying to go into this fraternity house party. We were trying to go in there and they said that they didn't let people of color into their house.

Similarly, this represents not only an overt act intended to cause harm, but demonstrates clear discrimination on part of the fraternity and its members.

Noah also described more experiences which can be categorized as more overt. Regrettably, his experience occurred during what he recalls being the campus's first powwow or Native cultural event.

There was this guy. Undergrad student. This White guy, walking around with two girls. And he said something about the male dancers. They have all the regalia on and he said something about chickens dancing. And I stopped and I turned to him and he didn't see me and he says, 'Oh yeah, that's a fucking chicken look at all the feathers.' I Just couldn't believe how, I mean, what he said was obviously very offensive. But I couldn't believe how comfortable he was saying that out loud in front of other Natives. Just sort of the way he carried himself just sort of took me back. Because he had obviously never been in a situation where he was around a lot of Natives. It just blew me away.

Throughout the interview, Noah recalls that first cultural event with fondness. It is something he remembered as being mostly joyous and impactful for the Native community on campus. Yet, there were moments within this achievement that he seemed reminded of the peripheral space the Native community held within the context of the larger campus community. He also stated,

I remember seeing cadets' sort of dancing and tomahawk chopping during the powwow. I remember one girl sort of bouncing her head to the drumbeat and sort of dancing to make her friends laugh. And as innocent and harmless as that seems, it was kind of heartbreaking because there is a sort of reverence that I think most people bring to it, that I certainly bring to that, hearing the drum and being in the presence of that, being in that environment. And it just sort of broke my heart. And it was really deflating for a celebration that was the very first.

While more blatant acts proved less prevalent, it is also unsurprising that these experiences continue to occur. In her discussion of American Indian Victims of Campus Ethnoviolence, Perry (2002) notes that a sociological analysis of campus climates would predict “counter-hegemonic threats” from dominant groups when the dominant hierarchical structure and culture are challenged (p. 36). Perry (2002) argues that campuses must be explicit in addressing incidents on campus as many underrepresented students in her study believed that administrators would not or could not do anything responsive. She notes this doubt is exaggerated among Native American students who already feel “they were invisible or unworthy of attention” (Perry, 2002, p. 51). In the next section I go on to discuss feelings of invisibility among this population and how this theme emerged within this particular study.

Invisibility

Much of the literature on Native students directly calls out the invisibility they experience on college campuses, particularly within predominantly White institutions (American Indian College Fund, 2019; Masta 2010; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). In coding for invisibility, I highlighted those statements which had underlying sentiment of feeling unseen. In some cases, students directly mentioned feeling invisible. Other statements that fell within this theme centered on confronting erasure myth, a binary approach to race, and institutional support or attention that was perceived to be lacking. For instance, in the aforementioned examples of microinvalidations within this chapter, several students noted that their peers did not recognize the existence of contemporary Natives. In other words, those around them subscribed to the mythology that Natives were all but extinct. This can inevitably lead to feelings of invisibility.

Low numbers can also result in poor institutional efforts dedicated to resourcing and supporting this particular population. Students are not oblivious of this fact. As education increasingly follows a business model approach, resources and focus are aimed at populations that will have a higher yield. This in many ways mirrors what has been called the asterisk effect in research (Garland, 2007; Lowe, 2005; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Higher education and student affairs research have historically paid little attention to the Native student experience. Such research has used low numbers and statistical insignificance to justify ignoring exceedingly low rates of educational attainment. In my experience, campus administrators and

diversity practitioners use similar arguments in explaining how resources are allocated, following a corporate model of education.

Last, but not least, is the way in which dominant culture, and by extension the institution, views the racial fabric of our society. In a 1997 article published within the *California Law Review*, Juan Perea endeavors to define and articulate the effects of a black/white binary understanding of race. He does this by analyzing writings through a legal and historical lens and examining the implications on people groups, namely Mexican Americans. In his explanation he starts by explaining paradigms and their use in science. His definition and discussion in many ways resembles Zerubavel's (1991) discussion of distinctions as he argues that paradigms are "the set of shared understandings that permits us to distinguish those facts that matter in the solution of a problem from those facts that do not" (p. 130).

Perea (1997) goes on to demonstrate through textual analysis that the shared understanding of race in the U.S. contains primarily two categories, Black and White. Pointing out this paradigm is not intended to discourage or undermine the fight for Black justice, but to illustrate the implications for other groups that do not fall within these two categories. A major implication which this binary has had in the Southeast is the paper erasure of Natives during the early to mid-1900s (Tayac, 2009). During this period Virginians were allowed only one of two racial classifications White or non-White (Tayac, 2009). Non-White was documented as "coloured" and was often later interpreted to mean Black or African American. Though erased on paper, the burden of proof remained on Virginia Indian communities to be able to show their lineage and heritage. Many only recently received federal recognition due to this era of paper erasure. It is important to tease out and understand the prevalence of this paradigm within the dominant society as this was a major way in which students in this sample experienced invisibility.

Jamie, who was 24, graduated with a degree in Agricultural Leadership. She came from a southeastern tribal community and noted the following about her departmental experience.

It was hard sometimes because, again, going back to the College of Agriculture that I was a part of, I was seen as another White girl, so to speak. In a lot of cases, you would have racist comments coming up or you'd think they just were not OK being said in the classroom, which was really hard. And it was also hard because with such a small Native presence or Native community on campus, a lot of times I felt invisible. And a lot of

times, you know, I wondered why the Native community didn't have opportunities like the other cultural centers, like the other communities. But I mean now, I think they have definitely made a turn for the better and I'm grateful for that. But at the time, I would say there were a lot of questions in my mind about why the university didn't value Native perspectives and just the culture in general a little more than they did.

For Jamie, invisibility manifests in several ways. First, she alludes to the black/white binary in that she was often perceived in the classroom to be exclusively White. Probing further within this conversation it was determined that she experienced this perception with faculty and students, and they assumed an affinity with her based on her phenotype. She often heard racialized comments that might not otherwise be shared among students who were perhaps less racially ambiguous. Jamie noted that she found it hard to respond in these situations knowing she should speak up but also internalizing the comments herself (feeling they were directed toward her unbeknownst those delivering them). In another part of her statement, she notes feelings of invisibility stemming from simply being one of the few Natives on campus. Finally, as mentioned previously, students are aware of the distribution of effort, recognition, and resources at an institution. She speaks about her perception of the opportunities for Native students compared to other cultural groups on campus.

Steven was another participant who described invisibility within the black/white paradigm. Within the course of the interview, he talks about this being his experience so frequently that it had a clear impact on his mental and emotional well-being at times. He notes that he is half White and presents as racially ambiguous. He grew up spending time with both his White family and his Native family. Throughout his educational trajectory the way in which others interpreted his identity differed in varying spaces and contexts. However, he was rarely assumed to be Native. He stated,

This is going to sound so insensitive, but like I went from being like the whitest Black kid, which I mean, I guess I'm White, but I'm definitely more identify with just like Native. Went from that to being like the blackest White kid.

Steven noted he was most often presumed to be mixed between Black and White, never measuring up to either group's expectations, though this is not how he identified personally. Sometimes, he would challenge the assumptions and other times he would not due to racial fatigue or not wanting to deal with the follow-up questions concerning his Native identity.

Hope also described ways in which invisibility and the inability to neatly categorize people impacted experiences within the Native center on campus. Hope was a current student and 21 at the time of her interview. She was studying Natural Resources and Conservation. From her perception, the inability to readily identify people as Native or Indigenous moderated the comfort level of non-Native patrons within the Indigenous cultural center. Assumptions about the absence of Native people in the space led to engagements that Native students deemed undesirable or disrespectful. Hope stated,

I think just because, like, the stuff in the cultural center, just like having people almost not like have the same respect for being Native or Indigenous as like they do other cultures because with being Native or Indigenous, there's no one way to look, if that makes sense.

Mentioned less frequently was the place of Native Peoples within the curriculum. However, Emily was a student who directly addressed Natives being excluded as a people group within her classroom discussion. She said,

I think the hardest part or challenging part about in the classroom and major is just how people fail to recognize other races. I'm a sociology major now, too. And I just noticed, like some of those classes, when we talk about different races or ethnicities, I know a couple of times, like, they just list Hispanic, Black, Asian or White. So, I think a lot of times just like being excluded in general.

Emily's experience highlights the importance of inclusive pedagogical practices and the role that faculty play in not only impacting minority student experience but the way in which they challenge or uphold narratives of erasure.

Feelings of invisibility can impact whether a student sees themselves reflected in, and no doubt valued by an institution. Student development theories which cling to oversimplified ideas about early engagement fail to recognize the ways in which institutional climates might inhibit this process for underrepresented students. While early engagement is certainly a prominent factor, the dominant culture of an institution also plays a role in shaping those engagements, both in peer to peer interactions and in faculty/student interactions. Feelings of invisibility were associated with several factors such as a lack of institutional resourcing and opportunities, incorrect assumptions about one's identity, small population numbers on campus, and finding one's identity group to be absent in curriculum. For Native students in the sample, confronting

invisibility was a common experience which seemed to mentally place them at the periphery of the institution. This too is linked to feelings of isolation which are discussed in the following section.

Isolation

In addition to invisibility, scholars have indicated that Native students experience a strong sense of isolation, both socially and culturally (Brayboy, Solymon, & Castagno, 2015; Masta, 2018; Oxendine, Taub, & Cain, 2020). Participants from this sample bolster this finding focusing primarily on the social aspect. While some students did talk about missing their community and cultural aspects of home, they hardly had expectations for a western institution to mirror the communities they came from. Rather, it was extremely jarring for them to find so few people from their cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds. This was evident in the way's participants spoke about isolation. Isolation was most often referenced in conjunction with being "the only."

Nora references this when talking about her major and minor. She expresses a heightened sense of this feeling when course topics focused on marginalized people groups and she represented one of the only minorities in class. She stated,

In my major, it was pretty isolating. I always felt like the only one and in my minor, like in the sociology courses, it was kind of worse because the topics were about me or about my groups of people. I had one teacher who was very well-intentioned in trying to improve diversity and inclusion in agriculture. But like, she wasn't as well versed in the topics as I would have liked, so she would get some of the details wrong.

Elena, who comes from a tribe in the Northeast United States, also discussed feeling alone in relation to being "the only." Based on the sample characteristics described earlier, it is not surprising that participants described themselves as the only Native in their major. Out of roughly 32,000 students, these twelve participants represented one fourth of the Native population on campus (2017-18 Factbook). They were spread across many majors as well. When asked what it was like to be Native at the institution, Elena said,

While I'm in the Native and Indigenous center I was very happy. I loved it. It was like my favorite place on campus. But being Native outside of the center, I felt very alone. I felt disconnected. It was a lot harder to make friends in my classes because sometimes I'll be

the only student of color, like not even being Native, not even being like who I am. Like I would be the only woman in my class a lot of times too just because I took a lot of political science classes and for some odd reason, a lot of my political science classes were male cadets, which was so odd to me. But I was very uncomfortable in a lot of my classes.

Noah also referenced feelings of isolation. He was one of the few students who spoke more to the cultural uniqueness of each Indian community. Noah was a student who started his trajectory as an undergrad and went on to complete a master's degree as well, thus having the graduate and undergraduate experience at the same institution. He came to the institution, located in the southeast United States, from the southwestern part of the country. He noted,

When another Native from my area showed up, it was great because we could talk and I knew some of the things that they had experienced. But again, even though we're both from the same state, I'm from the southern part and she's from the northern part. And so, our differences are almost night and day. So, it's really isolating. Because you know, I say I'm Native American. It's much deeper than that. I'm [tribe].

In the last part of his statement, he states his tribal affiliation, which I chose to redact for increased anonymity. However, this statement was really powerful in reading through the transcripts. It suggests a deep connection to community and another layer of nuance when we talk about Native identity. There are no monolithic peoples within any racial or ethnic category. Yet, Indigenous students often articulate a connection to collective communities that are inseparable from their individual identities. Here, this deeper connection to a People (capital P) suggests another layer of isolation that is specific to one's community in contrast to a broader racial or ethnic category.

Tokenism

A common experience among many minority students (Han, Dean, & Okoroji, 2018; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002), tokenism was another theme that emerged regarding the campus experience for this sample. First developed in 1977 by Rosabeth Kanter, tokenism is a theory concerned with explaining group dynamics among people of different cultural backgrounds, particularly when one or more groups is disproportionately underrepresented (Billings 2021; Kanter 1977). As Billings (2021) writes, "the theory of tokenism explains the

processes through which individuals suffer the negative social and psychological outcomes of being underrepresented in their social context” (p. 241). Tokenism for this sample took two dominant forms: 1) being called on or highlighted when Native subject matter was being discussed in the classroom setting, and 2) being asked to speak on behalf of all Native people. In a perhaps more glaring example, tokenism was intertwined with what could arguably be perceived as cultural appropriation.

Hope spoke about being frequently asked to represent all Native people. In class her thoughts and opinions were often interpreted to be widely applicable to how all Native people think or opine. I noted her level of frustration during this conversation as it stuck out as something that really seemed to bother her and she felt strongly about. She said,

In some like classes or conversations, a lot of people say, oh, yeah, Native Americans this, Native American that. And I'm always like that token I guess. They will be like oh, she's Native. And they'll be talking about this whole other tribe. Like, I don't know! Because I'm not from that tribe. I can't speak to that. Or, they would be talking about my tribe, and they would be like but you are [tribe]. And I'm like, I'm one person. One. I can't speak for a whole tribe. What the heck? Let me just share with you my experience, but don't go saying like that's how all [tribe] are.

When asked if he generally felt supported by faculty, Noah responded negatively and also described feeling tokenized by faculty. He stated,

No, I didn't feel supported. I occasionally felt that they were sort of irritated with my presence and if they weren't irritated with me, they sort of tokenized me in the sense of 'Noah, you know, we're going to talk about Native Americans today.' Or, 'you know, I read this article about a Native Americans. You should read it.' Things like that can sort of weigh you down.

While probably well intended, it is unlikely that faculty point out every White student when a White author or historical figure is referenced. It reiterates for students of color, and people of color more generally, that White is thought to be the default. While not a common theme, it was both interesting and disheartening that Noah perceived his professors to be irritated by his presence. He noted always being the person to speak up, correcting false information and pushing back against stereotypes.

One of the most glaring and specific examples were those given by Lynnly. At the time

of her interview she was a current student athlete. She was 21 and from a tribal community in the northeast region of the country. She spoke about many challenges that she experienced as the only Native player on her Lacrosse team, a game that originated in Native communities. Though playing a traditionally Native game, few if any of her teammates had knowledge of the game's origins. After providing a bit of education in that area, coaches seemed to tokenize her from that point on in ways that were very unsettling for her. As she recalled these experiences it was evident that they had deeply impacted her on an emotional level.

In one example Lynnly spoke of what scholars might define as *performative allyship*. Performative allyship has been defined as when someone who is not from the marginalized group attempts to show solidarity with those from a marginalized identity. However, the ways in which they do so can prove to be lacking in support and, in some cases, do harm. Gestures are often carried out to benefit themselves by showing that they are a good person (Kalina, 2020). Lynnly noted an experience around Indigenous Peoples Day, when she was asked to do a recorded or live post from her team's social media account. Of that experience she recalled,

And I felt like it was more like a publicity stunt for him because obviously if you have a Native player in your team and you have a player that is of interest to the sport, it makes them look good...and it makes him look like a good person for doing that. However, that's not the way that it made me feel because on Indigenous Peoples' Day, the only person who wished me happy Indigenous Peoples' Day before I told them what day it was, was my trainer.

In this instance, Lynnly seemed to feel that her identity was being strategically used in ways to make her team, coach, and institution look good from a diversity lens. However, the lack of intentionality around it made it fall flat for her when she realized most people on the team were unaware of the holiday or the significance it held for her.

She described another instance whereby a coach persuasively asked if they could give feathers to the non-Native lacrosse players. Of this she said,

I was approached my freshman year, right before the spring season, to have an introduction to what lacrosse is, where it comes from, and to have this sort of plaque that would sit in our lockers that would recognize the game, and feathers would be given out to girls to sort of acknowledge their resilience that week or if they're working hard or if they did a really good job that week in some aspect. If it was a game, if it was a practice,

if it was just like that you cheered someone up, you helped someone up, you did something to support them, you got a feather. And I was a little skeptical about it because, to me, it reminded me of when people put a headdress on a mascot because the way people say like, ‘Oh, we’re acknowledging and we’re honoring the people.’

Lynnly expressed concerns and reservations about this idea with her coach. She seemed to articulate that, out of a Native community context, it seemed inappropriate if others were not from Indigenous cultures. She viewed the significance of the feather and types the things they might be given for to be diluted in this case. She noted that the conversation happened prior to folks leaving campus, right before the onset of the pandemic. Once she returned, feathers were placed on lockers anyway.

She went on to describe her response to seeing these after she expressed concern.

And when I saw that, it made me so mad that I wanted to scream in the space, and I wanted to tear them all down. But I was like, "You know what? No. I can't do that. Because that's just going to be another retaliation. That's just going to be how we're already seen.

Lynnly had been asked by an administrator if she wanted to submit a bias report or if she would like someone to speak with her coach. She preferred for neither to happen, insisting that being the only Native person on the team, the coach would automatically know who submitted the complaint. She was afraid she would have increased physical demands, additional laps, or tougher practices out of retaliation. She expresses this concern again here in this example and also the fear of how Natives are seen. When I probed further about the perception she alluded to, she said she didn’t want to be seen as a hothead or angry Indian. This also highlights a problem that severely marginalized students face. When they are “one of the only” it is easier for folks to pinpoint a plaintiff leading them to fear retaliation. This suggests that occurrences like these may be more frequent than data indicates as many incidents go unreported.

Conclusion

Scholars have pointed out that Native students tend to be the most understudied population on college campuses (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Minthorn & Marsh, 2016; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Not until more recently has research focused on persistence and retention factors stemming from institutions. Earlier works focused almost

exclusively on cultural clashes and the insufficient preparation from tribal schools (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). However, there is a need to create a more robust picture of how Indigenous students experience campus climate. While there is a growing body of research on minority student experience, particularly as campus racial incidents surged within the last five years (Bauman, 2018), work on Native student experience pales in comparison to other populations. This study responds to the call for more in this area in an effort to enhance considerations for working with and supporting Native students at predominantly White institutions. The limited body of research on this topic has indicated that invisibility and isolation are dominating factors in how Indigenous students experience college campuses (American Indian College Fund, 2019; Peters, 2018; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellowbird, 2017). One work by Masta (2018) dives into examples of the microaggressions that Native students face and how they are intrinsically connected to persisting colonialist narratives. Data from the present study bolsters previous findings while adding a nuanced understanding of how invisibility is experienced and the role in which a binary understanding of race plays.

Participants in this study indicated experiences with microaggressions in and out of the classroom. While many interactions were among peers, some interactions occurred between participants and faculty members. While most of the microaggressions encountered fell within what would be categorized as microinsults or microinvalidations, far fewer students experienced microassaults, indicating the ways in which persisting ideologies around race operate in more covert ways. Microinvalidations most commonly experienced were deeply intertwined with erasure myth, or the common mythology that Indigenous peoples all but cease to exist (Logan, 2014). In asserting their identities or experiences, students in this sample were met with disbelief and in some instances stronger push back which challenged the existence of Native people entirely. In my interview notes, I made a habit of writing down the perceived emotional state of participants when there was a noteworthy shift that went beyond simply conveying information. What became apparent was the racial fatigue they experienced in frequently confronting these types of interactions. Manifesting in ways that impact mental, emotional, and physical well-being, racial battle fatigue has been defined as the accumulating stress experienced by individuals of underrepresented groups that stems from encounters with frequent microaggressions and racism (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2011).

The types of microinsults experienced by participants were often connected to harmful stereotypes about Native people. From the incidents they described emerged two prevalent stereotypes they confronted on campus. First, was what I call the “free ride” narrative. It is the assumption that all Indigenous peoples are government dependent or automatically derive significant benefits tied to a racial category. It was often assumed that participants in the sample received free college education and one student was asked about funds received from casino activity. A second common assumption was that Native peoples have not evolved alongside the rest of society in terms of how they generally live. While microassaults were far less prevalent, those described within this sample highlight the falsehood of a post-racial society, illustrating more overt intimidation experienced by underrepresented students. The table below provides an example of how microaggressions were identified and coded based on the taxonomy developed by Sue et al. (2007). It also identifies the implied messages and illustrates additional layers of coding that were thematically applied.

Table 3

Microaggression Categorization

Taxonomy	Example	Messaging	Applied Themes
Microinvalidation	'oh, that's in the past, like you guys aren't here.'	Native Peoples no longer exist	Erasure
Microinvalidation	And then that conversation went to 'so are you, like, Indigenous?' And I was like, yeah, I'm Indigenous. And he said 'well, you don't really look like it.'	All Native people have specific physical features	Stereotyping
Microinsult	'Tribes fighting is like dogs fighting, that's just what they do.'	Native people are inherently violent, savage	Stereotyping
Microassault	And we were trying to go into this fraternity house party. We were trying to go in there and they said that they didn't let people of color into their house.	People of color are inferior	Racism; Discrimination

Note. This table applies taxonomies as described in Sue DW, Capodilupo CM, Torino GC, Bucceri JM, Holder AM, Nadal KL, and Esquilin M. 2007. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice." *The American Psychologist* 62 (4): 271–86.

Participants in the sample also emphasized feelings of isolation that primarily stemmed

from a lack of representation and cultural mirrors in their majors. Many perceived themselves to be the only Native identified student in their classes and/or discipline. Sometimes feelings of isolation were exacerbated when the curriculum focused on marginalized communities. Additionally, the diversity between tribes and the emphasis on community added another dimension of isolation for some participants; one that goes beyond simply finding other Native students. The way in which Noah described the differences between his experiences and those of another Native student from his state pushes back against the idea that Native people represent a monolithic culture.

Alongside experiencing microaggressions that invalidated Native people as a whole, Native students were often racially miscoded by others, thus becoming lost in a binary framing of race. They also were attentive to the distribution of concern and resourcing for other marginalized groups and spaces on campus. Invisibility predominately presented itself in these three manners. I expected more discussion of the absence of Native people within the curriculum but fewer students alluded to these challenges. Those that did noted that other groups tend to get mentioned in the classroom while Native populations do not. While this did not emerge as a dominant theme, I would argue that it is still imperative that faculty are aware of this impact. Erasure myth is reinforced by the invisibility of Native people within every level of education. Based on the interactions described by participants, it is what their peers *do not learn* that influences how they experience the institution.

Though tokenism is discussed by researchers focusing more broadly on minority student experience (Allaire, 2019; Billings, 2020), it was not a significant discussion in the existing literature on Native students. Students in this sample faced dual challenges of feeling mostly invisible except in the rare instances that Native people were referenced. In those scenarios they experienced a level of attention that made them uncomfortable as often the only Native student in their class. Some participants reported being expected to speak on behalf of a whole people group or tribal community. Recalling the more overt experience faced by Lynnly highlights the emotional impact tokenization and appropriation can have on a student's emotional well-being. It also points to an institutional incongruence and challenge faced by many practitioners of diversity, equity, and inclusion work. That is, a hyperfocus on underrepresented populations that is felt a small percentage of the time, paired with unshifting social climates that are experienced the majority of the time.

As institutions are but microcosms of the larger society, these are certainly not problems that can or will be changed overnight. Many institutions have implemented diversity education as part of their orientation process and offer ongoing, albeit elective, opportunities to further learning outside of the classroom. However, like Emily's classroom experience, I have rarely encountered diversity modules that included examples or curriculum specific to Native people. Given the experiences of Native students, it is imperative that such training is expanded to ensure the inclusion of this population. Institutions might also consider ways to incentivize faculty, staff, and students to go beyond the required modules in order to engage deeper learning about various marginalized identities. Curriculum for faculty and staff should include strategies to effectively include Native students while avoiding tokenism. Faculty should also be equipped with ways to intervene when microaggressions occur in the classroom as failure to do so can lead to mistrust. While Indigenous campus community members should be involved in reviewing and approving curriculum, it is not recommended that they be exclusively responsible for delivering such content. This practice often leads to the tokenization of professionals. Instead, institutions could consider 'train the trainer' initiatives that allow allies and majority DEI practitioners participate in content delivery.

The challenge too with institutional climates is that most students are within the institutions for a short period of four years. Additionally, each year institutions welcome a new freshman class of students who may or may not have encountered varying levels of diversity. Those in education fully understand that the work can feel like a wash, rinse, repeat, meeting the same challenges over and over again. Education which confronts invisibility, erasure, and stereotypes start first within the k-12 system by ensuring that full, accurate, and critical histories are taught. Secondly, local tribes in particular, should be consulted on the curriculum developed which references their own people as much of their history stems from an oral tradition.

Outside of tribal colleges and geographic areas where numerous tribal communities are represented, Native students may not make up a large population on a given campus. However, for the sake of those on their educational journey, and the communities they come from, it is imperative that resources are allocated to recruiting this population as well as scholarships, aid, and the means for them to attend. As indicated in previous sections, this sample of 12 represented a quarter of Indigenous students on campus. Nevertheless, for some students, finding a community, no matter how small, becomes a critical part of their success.

In the next chapter I discuss the significance of having a Native center for the participants in this sample as well as some of the challenges encountered within the space. The introduction of the chapter starts by giving a brief overview of the center's establishment and moves on to discuss the ways in which Indigenous students on campus utilize and engage with the space. A novel finding was that the center was not entirely immune from some of the climate issues previously described. This contrasts all of the work on cultural centers which are described as places where students can find reprieve from daily microaggressions. Even so, students still focused primarily on the positive aspects of what the center provided them during their time with the institutions; many attributing their persistence to having such a space on campus.

Chapter V

Native Cultural Centers: Impacts and Challenges

Background and Context

Research has indicated that cultural centers provide needed support, community, and engagement for underrepresented students (Keels, 2020; Patton, 2010). Within these spaces underrepresented students access academic and social support among peers and professional staff. While many underrepresented faculty may voluntarily support these spaces and find a sense of community therein for themselves, a lack of institutional support often results in these faculty taking on student retention work. This was evident in an oral history conducted with a formal faculty member.

I initially asked the participant to tell me a bit about them self and their prior role at the institution. The individual, who I will call Paul, had been a faculty member in the College of Liberal Arts for approximately five years before accepting a position at another institution in the early 2000s. During his time with the institution, Paul recalled being one of three faculty who identified as Native. I also asked him what about the Native community stood out to him during his time there. He said,

I think for me what stood out was how little recognition there was of Indigenous peoples in the region and there was, I guess, a real blind spot in terms of how diversity was regarded. So, I found that Indigenous peoples were kind of an afterthought in a lot of the policy making, in a lot of the support.

Paul later articulated that outside of his primary teaching and research role he, and a few other faculty members dedicated a great deal of their time to establishing an American Indian Studies program and creating a sense of community and support for Native students. However, he also noted the toll that took on him personally and professionally, stating,

But the difficulty for me became this kind of burnout and feeling overextended and feeling like I was one of three Indigenous faculty on campus who were doing the work. And the university didn't really know how to support people like us at that time. So, it felt to me at times a very hostile environment. But it was also a fairly isolated environment, and so that was the reason a lot of us, we tried to create a sense of

community. We tried to bring out students and tried to create courses that would reflect some of those student needs, especially around Indigenous peoples

At a point in the conversation, I asked Paul to reflect on the climate while he was at the institution. He expressed a sense of frustration stating,

...so, I was angry a lot of the time at the institution. I felt at times that you couldn't be, as another faculty member would say at times. you can't be Indigenous on this campus. You can't fully express yourself. We can't...we got shut down for drumming on campus regularly, got the cops called up for smudging in the office... like that kind of stuff. And so, it didn't feel very inviting at times.

Paul also talked about not feeling as though the community was supported by upper-level administrators. During his time with the institution, he felt that one administrator's approach to diversity was to center employment and the opportunities majority students stood to gain. He said,

I was always a bit disappointed because he had this huge platform, but he would always talk about it as marketing. And so, it's if you know more about Indigenous cultures and peoples, you'll get better jobs. And to me, it undermines some of the things that we're trying to do because it's also about relationships. And engaging in these diverse settings is actually a strength. So, I was always disappointed at the approach...And so, you know, for me... the upper administration didn't quite get it. And so, it had that kind of top down effect.

Paul's time overlapped with another faculty member who gave an oral history. I'll call her Lori. Between the two conversations what stood out was the impact of support from upper-level administration. While the focus of this chapter is the examination of a Native center and its impact on students, it is first important to understand the context in which the space exists and the establishment of the center itself. There seemed to be a clear shift in how support from administration was perceived which aided in the establishment of the space. At the time of the study, the center had been established for approximately five years. Lori indicated that the establishment of the space was no small endeavor and was, in fact, decades in the making. First coming to the institution nearly thirty years ago as a graduate student, she recalled both how she experienced the campus upon arrival and the long period of advocacy for this type of resource. She recalled,

Well, I remember the first week I was on campus, I came looking for the Native American Student Center or information about a group in support of Native students or a student organization and couldn't find any. So, I went to the dean of students office, not really at the time, understanding anything about the organizational structure of the university. But I just thought the dean of students is someone who would know. So, I just marched myself over there and luckily, I stumbled into the office of someone, who at the time was associate dean of students, and asked the question, 'Is there a student organization or student center for Native students? And she indicated there was not. However, she was quite positive and interested in helping.

Lori went on to develop a Native student recruitment strategy as part of a class project within her graduate studies. She would later share this with administration and admissions personnel in hopes for some sort of positive response or interest. She was disappointed to find that not everyone would be as positive as the associate dean. She indicated that admissions personnel at the time explained that the diversity recruitment in which they currently engaged was focused on one group and even that was an obligation due to equal opportunity policy.

Looking to those who might be more supportive, Lori went back to the associate dean of students who suggested that she might combine her efforts with other students who were also asking for space and resources. At that time the only cultural center on campus was for those students who identified as Black and/or African American. Additionally, institutional records indicated this center was, at least in part, supported by donor gifts in its early years. Lori, along with students from other cultural backgrounds, formed a multicultural advisory group with the goal of at least forming a multicultural space. She recalled a multicultural office being established in 1994, a year after her arrival.

Alongside the advocacy of a few dedicated faculty, staff, and students, Lori, attributed much of the Native center establishment to a supportive administration that arrived nearly twenty years later. She said,

But I felt like up until the arrival of our current president, a leader who made diversity and inclusion a priority, a clear priority and a public priority, and an actionable priority. That's the first time I felt like the university was interested, the university as an entity was interested in supporting us as a community...

She also went on to describe the support she felt from the senior administrator over diversity and inclusion and the role they played in supporting the establishment of a new center. Lori stated,

I was on the search committee for that position. And then once we hired her, she really endeavored to find out what we needed as a community and help us. At least try to realize some of our goals through attaining some of the resources that we've been asking for 20 years, namely a space.

I had asked Lori if she had been in meetings when the request for a space was being negotiated. She said that while she was not in many of those meetings, she was kept apprised by the senior administrator for diversity and inclusion. She noted that this individual petitioned several areas on campus for space that was unutilized. These requests were effectively denied. Soon after, it was announced that space had been granted for the establishment of several new identity spaces on campus. Among that list, Native students were nowhere to be found. Disheartened, the Native community approached the division housing these centers in attempts to understand why their requests had been denied. Lori explained,

We were told by leadership in that division that there weren't enough of us to have a space, to justify a space. So, you know that made us feel even worse.

She speculated that the same rationale may have been the reason for the center remaining without a full-time director for almost two years.

Lori later went on to talk about the way in which the center has provided a sustained presence for the community on campus and aided in attracting new Native students. She also talked about the ways she, as a faculty member, utilizes the center. She noted that she has frequently used the space for meetings and to get writing done. She also uses the space as a place to stop in between meetings, and other faculty duties, to grab a casual cup of tea or coffee with other Indigenous community members. She stated, "I know it's a place I can go and get work done, but also connect and have the pleasure of seeing other people and catching up."

Lori also talked about her favorite times in the space. She focused on celebratory times like the annual powwow as well as the cultural graduation ceremony held within the space. She emphasized how special it was for the students, and the community as a whole, to connect that space back to students' families, stating,

...opportunities to share the space with our community on campus at the same time as tribal communities, particularly at powwow when we all ate together, it just seemed like

this is what it's all about. And in our cultural achievement ceremonies, when we had the families of our students gathered there in celebration of graduation ... that we all participate in some way and to connect with families in that space, it's just really special.

Towards the end of our discussion, I asked if there was anything else that I should know and she ended with the following:

One positive aspect of the center...is that the center provides a visible presence on campus for a group that may otherwise seem invisible...It's still an issue, I think. But to have the space and to have activities and the ability for others to see in the university community that we are here, and we are active and that we count. We may be small, but we are mighty. And it's important.

While such spaces tend to revolve around student activity, it became clear in the discussion with Lori that the center served as a grounding space for the whole of the Native community on campus. From the conversations with both Lori and Paul it too seemed evident that administrative support is critical to ensuring such resources exist for Native students. The rest of this chapter identifies ways in which students utilize such a resource as well as additional themes that emerged from our discussion of the center itself. These included finding an engaging community, the center as an affirming space, ways in which they utilized center staff, center attribution, faculty engagement, and finally the way in which invisibility continues to function within the space.

This last finding is interesting because it runs counter to the existing literature on centers. However, literature is lacking that directly addresses Native centers on predominantly White campuses. Despite occasional experiences with colonialism and microaggressions within the space, participants still largely regarded the space as a reprieve from the dominant climate and as having a positive impact on their campus experience. What emerged is that as a minority among minorities, the space allowed Native students to more easily find each other and provide for one another a community of support. Additionally, they were able to find faculty who understood their cultural backgrounds and were genuinely invested in their holistic well-being.

Center Engagement

Students in the sample were asked questions about the ways in which they utilized the space and why they chose the space for particular uses. They were also asked how often they

used the center in both the eligibility survey and interview. Eight of the twelve participants reported using the space several times a week. The other four reported using the center every day suggesting it was a significant space in their daily lives on campus. Many participants noted uses such as studying, lounging, and hanging out with friends. They also engaged in center programs, held student organization meetings therein, and helped plan major community events such as powwow. Some students found on-campus work opportunities within the center as well. For instance, Jamie was a Native student who found employment in the center but also used the space socially. When asked about the ways in which she utilized the center she said,

So, I worked there, but the other purposes I would use it for is just as a safe space to go to, to hang out, to feel comfortable. It was one of the few places on campus that I knew I could always go to and feel like I wasn't being a burden, like I was in a safe spot where, you know, I wouldn't be kicked out or I could be with people there.

Like Jamie, Casey also expressed using the space for social purposes. He was a current student at the time of his interview and a forestry major. He noted that the center offered a level of comfortability and a place to feel at home. He stated,

It's a good place for socializing. And it's nice to be able to talk to people, meet people. Sometimes you go in there and it's someone you haven't met yet. There's a TV. You can relax, you can watch TV, you can get away. Even though you're actually on campus. You can get away from the things that are stressful during the day. It's a good place. I live off campus and it's a good place to relax during the day. If you need to feel at home or somewhere you don't want to be sitting with most people you don't know. I can sit there, wait on classes, things like that. And it's just nice. It's comfortable and I enjoy it.

Dakota also used the space for social activities, saying, “For meetings, for studying, talking with others. And we’d play games sometimes. And I remember having a movie night. We would watch movies there.”

For many students the center offered a sense of social comfortability that they might not otherwise feel in many spaces on campus. Though centers continue to face the opinions and claims that such spaces promote self-segregation (Renn, 2011, Torres-Baez, Feliz, & Medoza, 2021), Keels (2020) argues the opposite. Her research indicates that underrepresented students spend most of their time on campus navigating predominately White space and tend to have more diverse friend groups than their peers (Keels, 2020). Students' schedules hardly allow them

to spend the majority of their time in centers, but centers do provide momentary reprieves or “strategic disengagement” from less than welcoming environments (Keels, 2020).

Like Dakota, many students also talked about using the center as a study space or space to do homework. Emily mentioned these uses and though she continued to frequent the center, she noted the impacts of COVID19 on her use of the space. Emily said,

I'm a theater major, so I have all my classes in that building which is the building that the Native center is in. So, I would find myself there are a lot of times in between classes and to eat lunch. So, I would say I was there for three hours throughout the day, pre Covid.

And then when Covid hit, I would just go in there to do [school] work every other day.

Noah also used the space to study and have group meetings. He stated,

I would go there to study. I would invite others into the space to meet me, to study if I was working on a group project or something. I hated the library to begin with. I thought it was pretty disgusting. And everybody always wants to go there. And so, whenever I had a group project or something I needed to work on. I'd say, 'I know a place'. Let's go to the center. So, I would use it for those kinds of things. I'd use it to relax, have lunch. I think most often I had a break in classes and would just go stop in to see who was in there to, you know, just have downtime and laugh... That was sort of a place of refuge most of the time.

In addition to studying, Kendra noted using the space to hold office hours as she was a TA. She mentioned that she also used those opportunities to educate others on campus about the center and the community, saying,

Yes, so studying, hanging out. When we had Native student organization meetings. I think I told you where I mentioned earlier that I was a TA. I used to hold office hours in there so people would know where it was and so people would be educated on it. And so, I think. I used to for a lot of reasons, but those were the majority of them.

Participants in this study utilized the space for many reasons. They used it as a study space, a social space, a place to hold student organization meetings as well as other school related meetings. They laughed, they relaxed, and conversed with each other. Most notable are the reasons they articulated for choosing the center for those activities. As Jamie noted, it felt like a safe space for her. Casey articulated that the space made him feel at home. Noah mentioned that the space was a reprieve for him.

In the previous chapter, students described the general campus climate. Their experiences included microaggressions that they experienced within interactions with peers and faculty alike. While they could certainly choose a number of other spaces on campus, this particular space allowed them a place where they experienced those things less frequently and where they were able to connect with those with whom they had increased affinity. This supports research from both Patton (2010) and Keels (2020). Keels (2020) in particular, makes an important point about theories and narratives around college transition and their shortcomings. She notes that many of these theories suggest that completion of degree is in part dependent on whether students become acculturated to campus and feel committed to and connected to the university or college (Keels, 2020; Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 1993). However, many campuses may not boast a social environment that facilitates feelings of commitment and connectedness. In her book *Campus Counterspaces*, a participant who was a Black woman shared that she had been turned away from a fraternity party. Similarly, one of my participants noted a similar experience in the last chapter, indicating a more widespread problem with racism among Greek life. Participants in the current study indicated finding a place where they felt socially connected and supported. This sentiment is further supported in the upcoming section as it discusses the dominant theme of community which emerged within the data.

Combating Isolation Through Community Building

While students spoke about feeling isolated on campus as part of their broader experience, the ability to find and foster community seemed to alleviate this to some extent. Some students like Steven indicated a more direct connection to combating isolation while others indicated sharing important milestones within the center and the sense of home which that created for them on campus. In the excerpt below, Jamie credits community, in the social and visible sense, to the institution's ability to recruit her brother who attended after her. Her statement highlights how important community is in the ability to both attract and retain Native students. She said,

And just also to have all these other people, not necessarily just Native people, but also advocates, community advocates join the group, other community groups gathering with the Native community to have conversations, to talk and to raise cultural awareness and to just educate people. And sometimes just honestly, just to be together was such a

positive experience for me. And a lot of that, honestly, I've taken back with me and has been very positive also in my home community. So, some of the reasons that my brother decided to go there was because of the things that he saw happening with either the student org or because of the community he saw there.

Nathan spoke about familial events that he and his wife held within the space. He noted that the center was like a second home and in other parts of his interview he spoke about the ability to bring their young son to programs and more casual community engagements. Nathan's reflection in particular, seemed to paint a familiar picture in terms of his feelings towards the space and the community. As I looked back at some of his statements, I too noted how intergenerational the space was. This was a place where graduate and nontraditional students could bring children, but also a space that engaged, as Lori mentioned, tribal communities and students' families. When asked about positive experiences he recalled within the space, he stated,

Man, there's a lot that's gone on in there. We announced we were pregnant there after a powwow. We had a baby shower for my wife there. And like I said, man, it's been like a second home. So, when we're not at home, that's kind of a bit of space to call our own.

Nathan's depiction of the space as a second home is an important one and should arguably highlight the value of centers in retaining underrepresented students. As student affairs professionals as keenly aware, sentiments of a second home and family are exactly the types of feelings institutions hope to inspire in those critical first weeks of adjusting to campus life. In addition to adjusting to new schedules and living arrangements, students

"...must also adjust to much less contact with family and friends. This vacuum leaves college students searching for new sources of social support—the people who will anchor who students think they are and who they want to become. Thankfully, a flurry of orientation activities offers opportunities for first-year students to become acquainted with the vast array of extracurricular activities..." (Velez, 2020, p. 97).

However, as has been demonstrated, for minority students a feeling of home is not always found within the greater campus community.

Participants within this study often reported being able to find a sense of community within the center. For some, this offsets feelings of isolation they experienced elsewhere on

campus. Emily, for example, expressed being able to find a sense of community quickly in those networks she found in the center. She stated,

It [center] means a lot to me just because from day one, I was able to find a community of people I was able to talk to about anything and just find comfort...in academics and socially.

These types of communities within the larger campus have been referred to as micro-communities and positively impact marginalized student success. Ja'Dell Davis (2020) wrote that while underrepresented students are “not completely insulated from the effects of negative campus interactions” micro-communities provided the needed support so that students “...stay on the path toward graduation” (p. 64).

Stephen spoke most directly to how finding community within the center combatted feelings of isolation. In earlier parts of his interview, he discussed entering college after experiencing loss. He described isolating himself to an extreme degree in the beginning of his trajectory. He wanted to simply get college over with and was not engaging outside of his classes and necessary school work.

It really broke me out of that isolated shell that I was putting myself into. Because, I could just walk into a room and still feel like I was isolated, but knew that there were people that I was comfortable with and comfortable with telling that I was feeling down. Or, I wasn't having a great day and talking about that with them. I knew they would walk into the room and I knew I would feel comfortable and I would feel fine, like spilling whatever was on my mind to them. And, not feel like that's going to go to someone else or they're going to feel weird or they're going to be like, I don't want to talk to him anymore because he's a little too much. I just never felt that there. I would have been the same way that I was the first two years that I was at school. Just very isolated, very alone and like not putting myself out there because I didn't want to be there anymore.

When Stephen was asked what the center meant to him personally, if anything at all. He said,

It meant community, intimate family to me and my comfort and my safe space. It really meant a lot for me because of how I guess I can admit to myself, like how scared I was, like to be like at the institution in some sense and I guess maybe scared is the wrong word, but discomfort that I had in a lot of the spaces, and so...it just gave me a space that I could go into and be myself and build. Build that comfort of me being myself, so when I

walked out of that room, nothing changed. And so, I think for me it was just like a support, a family, a community and a comfort for me. And it was almost like the little push under my butt that I needed to be like, you got this. And I had the people that are also there, saying you got this. And so, I think that's a big thing for me. Sometimes I really do need that other person to be like, you know, you've got it.

As noted in the previous chapter, isolation for many students in this sample stemmed from a lack of cultural mirrors in their classrooms and majors and being the only Indigenous person in many other spaces across campus. For some students, feelings of isolation resulted from other factors impacting their adjustment to campus. This can be seen in Stephen's example. However, students were also able to find a counterspace that alleviated feelings of isolation and provided significant social support through community building. For some students it was about simply being in the space with others. For others, community took on a familial-like network of people and constituted a second home.

While tribal communities should be viewed as having distinct cultures, most Indigenous studies scholars point out that there are some common threads among American Indian cultural values (Horse, 2001; Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Among them, community is a salient one (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Scholarship has indicated that the reinforcement of such cultural values may play a significant role in easing feelings of isolation among Native students (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). Shotton, Yellowfish, and Cintron (2010) also argue that "If integration can be achieved with a subunit population of minority students of a similar ethnicity, then the disintegrative effects of attending a large university can be eased for American Indian students" (p. 51). Data from the present study bolsters this last finding via the alleviating effects of community building among those whom students shared common experiences and backgrounds.

Centers as Affirming Spaces

In addition to finding community, students also were able to find an affirming space on campus within the center. Within the literature on cultural centers this is common finding as many of these spaces hold and support programs that celebrate the cultural identities of the students they support (Hord, 2005; Keels, 2020; Patton, 2010). It is important to demonstrate this finding for Native students who are less likely to have needed infrastructure due to lower

enrollment numbers. Native students confront stereotypes and erasure narratives that are so deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of society that they are rarely considered racist or politically incorrect. When confronting constant microaggressions, and in some cases more blatant racialized incidents on campus, underrepresented students need places where their identities are affirmed and where they can recharge from racial battle fatigue (Keels, 2020). Research has indicated that academic preparation alone does not holistically address gaps in academic performance by race (Keels, 2020). It is argued that this is because minority students do not have access to the same social and cultural capital at predominately White institutions (Keels, 2020; Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2006).

In addition to other types of support that centers provide, students described the center as an affirming space. For some students it was described as being a safe space from microaggressive interactions they experienced in other areas of campus. Other students talked about culturally affirming programs held by the center. Others found affirmation in not having to explain themselves or simply finding peers who had experienced similar interactions on campus and understood their feelings. When asked about positive experiences on campus as it related to her identity, Jamie responded,

So, of course, you know, being a part of the first powwow and honestly, just being a part of the Native student organization was such an awesome experience for me and definitely helped grow me as a person and helped me definitely fit in at the institution.

Other students also indicated major center programs as affirming and as combatting invisibility of Native peoples on campus. For instance, Nathan stated,

...Our first powwow I was a part of, that was awesome. I have a blast every time we have a powwow. And then Indigenous Peoples Day finally got recognized. I think it's just odd to me that we have to ask people to recognize it but to me those are positive experiences, because, you know, we're asking for recognition on campus, letting people know we're still around...

Nathan also had the following to say when asked what the center meant to him personally:

Oh, it's my safe space on campus. It's a place I know I can go and feel at home, you know myself, and not feel judged or attacked.

Similarly to Nathan, Nora spoke of the center as a place to escape judgment and added that it was a place that she didn't have to attempt to be more White coded. She said,

I think the biggest benefit is just being able to walk into a room and have like a breath of relief that it's not somewhere that you'll be judged, it's not somewhere that you have to like try to be more White coded, and it's somewhere that you can have a community that will do their best to understand you.

Nora's sentiment alludes to the frequency in which minority students feel the need to code switch in order to navigate the dominant culture which is privileged over their own in most settings.

Code switching is defined as "the temporary "switching on" or adjustment of behaviors to optimize the comfort of others in exchange for a desired outcome" (McCluney et al. 2021). The ability to "be oneself" for minority individuals is arguably tied to a decreased need to code switch in order to be accepted. But in many settings, it is a mechanism for survival. In a study conducted by Pew Research Center, Black college graduates felt the need to code-switch more than other groups with Latinx individuals expressing the next highest need. However, this data did not report on neither Asian nor Native people. While additional research is warranted to determine the effects of code switching on Native students, participants in this sample described the center as a place where code switching did not feel required as a means to fitting in.

For students like Emily the center provided a space where her feelings and experiences were affirmed and validated. Other students in the sample expressed similar sentiments or expressed "not having to explain or defend themselves." Many students spoke about being able to vent or decompress with peers in the center about something they had experienced and never having it questioned. Emily's statement below captured this most holistically. She said,

I think the biggest benefit is having an inclusionary space. Just because being Native American in general, there is the constant feeling of being left out most of the time. And it was nice at a predominantly White school... It is very nice to just, like, have a setting where you could talk about certain things that would probably make most people uncomfortable. Because at least in the center... there's someone in there who understands exactly what you're talking about. And you wouldn't have to explain to them, like, this is racist. Just being able to talk, and like never having to explain myself in that way. I feel like that's a very hard thing to do, especially for friends I know who are not Native or are White. They don't understand what it's like in a way to be discriminated against. So,

when you try to tell someone about a certain situation, they almost don't get it. Like, what was the problem?

Similarly, to Nathan, Noah noted that the center provided a sense of pride, particularly as it related to increasing visibility and representation. He stated,

Even if I had absolutely nothing to do with the establishment of the center or the day-to-day operations of the center, I took pride in it. Because seeing [center name] on the nameplate or on a directory...like yeah, we have a place and seeing others walk up to the door and say to themselves, American Indian center. It was like each time I saw that, it was like, you know another point. Because so easily Native Americans are forgotten about. In everything. But it was a reminder that we are there. Native students are there. For the majority, even if they don't see Native students. I think they see Native students based on these stereotypical assumptions of what Native Americans look like. Even if they don't see those things, they know Native Americans are there going to school with them in their classes and their dining halls, and that matters a whole lot to me, and it was something that I took tremendous pride in.

Statements from students in the study support arguments that call for the centering of both Native students' cultures and their shared experiences of systemic colonialism within the academy. Spaces which affirm and center their experiences and cultural background are able to apply a strengths approach to supporting their success rather than working from a deficit model (Fish & Syed, 2018). Within higher education, colonial narratives continue to thrive and Western culture and value systems are privileged above others. Native cultural centers provide affirming spaces on campus which allow students to more easily see themselves reflected within institutions.

The Role of Faculty Engagement

As reported in the previous chapter on Native student experience, Native students confront stereotypes and microaggressions not only from peers, but faculty as well. For some students in this sample those encounters lead to a sense of mistrust or discomfort with certain faculty members. In addition, when faculty diversity is lacking, students may rarely see themselves reflected among those teaching. "Minority college students...learn from faculty who do not represent their backgrounds, and attempt to obtain support from administrators who lack

an experiential understanding of the families and communities the students grew up in” (Fischer, 2008; Keels, 2020, p. 18).

Recalling Lori’s narrative about her faculty experience, it is apparent that minority faculty too utilize cultural centers to find community on campuses. Charles Lawrence (2002) has argued that such counterspaces are places of refuge for students and faculty alike. The use of centers by both students and faculty allows for the development of organic student-faculty relationships and the ability for students to engage with those professionals who understand their cultural background on some level. Several students in the current study noted they often utilized those faculty they met in the center more often than those in their own discipline. This is an important finding as it more concretely demonstrates the ability of centers to facilitate meaningful relationships with faculty, even outside of their discipline. Faculty relationships can provide a sense of mentorship and social capital which can be critical to a student’s persistence (Ceglie & Settlage, 2016). This is demonstrated by several responses from participants. When asked about feeling support by faculty and instructors, Noah replied,

Overall, no. It was sort of a frustrating experience, specifically in my program. Having to you know, always be that guy in class to raise his hand and say, ‘what you're saying is incorrect’ or ‘what you're saying is offensive.’ Specifically, in regard to Native Americans or tribal communities or indigeneity. Among those very few faculty members and staff that were part of the Native American and Indigenous Community, I did feel very supported and like I said, I wouldn't have done as well as I did without them.

In Noah’s statement he seems to describe faculty engagements in the classroom that cause harm, leading him to more often seek out those who understand his background and hold a level of competence around indigeneity. Dakota also expressed feeling more supported by faculty within the Native community. However, her rationale was concerned with receiving personalized attention she was not getting from faculty who taught classes. She said,

I would say all of the faculty in the American Indian Studies Department have been really nice...but some of the... I understand how it's hard, the bigger classes, you don't feel as supported by your professors.

Nora seemed to echo a similar sentiment regarding both the classroom environment and a lack of tailored attention.

With most faculty, I didn't. I felt that they prioritized their research, or they had more old fashioned views and they made that very clear in their teaching, specifically with politics, even in my animal science courses. I don't know how it would come up, but they made it very obvious. So, I did not feel supported, but I did find about five professors that were very supportive and made up for all the rest of them... With an American Indian studies professor, I was able to actually talk about the like the political events happening in Bolivia that were really troubling to me, and he understood, so it was a breath of fresh air. Finally, Elena spoke about the organic nature of the mentor relationships that emerged for her, noting the consistency of the faculty she met in the center and how helpful that was for her. She still communicates with some of them now that she is on her career path. She said,

A lot of my faculty mentors who I still talk to today are faculty that I met in the cultural centers and it kind of happened organically. I didn't seek out to find a mentor and they didn't seek me out. It's just these faculty members understood the importance of student to faculty relationships and the importance of mentorship, and they were very consistent. Yeah, they're very consistent with their communication and always reached out to me. A lot of these faculty members had a good feeling of when their students were not OK or they needed help. And so that's how a lot of the faculty members became role models during my academic career, because they were always there when I needed them.

Faculty engagement within the center played an essential role in student success. Students benefited from organic relationships that emerged through interaction with faculty within the space. Through these relationships they found those they could consult with who understood their cultural backgrounds. They gained mentorship, some of which continues through their professional experience. Their remarks emphasize the importance of faculty participation within these spaces. However, it also emphasizes the need to improve cultural competency among non-Native faculty members so as not to increase the minority tax on marginalized faculty.

Staff as a Student Resource

In my own experience serving as a professional within a cultural center, I have come to find that most people view such roles very narrowly. Like other scholars, I have heard administrators and faculty alike inaccurately described the work and resources therein (Torres-

Baez, Felix, & Medoza, 2021). Very often, the description of this work given by others is programming and events. While this is certainly a portion of the work, it is hardly a holistic picture of all that is carried out by centers and their staff. Additionally, programs consist of co-curricular learning opportunities that engage critical thinking around difference. This academic scholarship tends to exist at the margins in universities in courses around racial and ethnic studies. As Keels (2020) points out, there are a limited number of these courses, a limited number of texts that can be covered in one course, and a limited number of electives that students can take if their major differs. Keels (2020) and Nunez (2011) have argued that

Racial-ethnic studies courses have been and are the lifeblood of academic counterspaces, where, while engaging in core intellectual activities, racial-ethnic minority students reduce their feelings of cultural isolation on campus, develop critical cultural identity, and build supportive student-faculty relationships (Keels, 2020, p. 159).

American Indian Studies programs specifically have been identified by scholars as spaces which center the education of Native students, incorporate more full and nuanced histories and cultures, and provide mechanisms through which to actively recruit Native students (Champagne & Stauss, 2002). Scholars suggest, however, that curriculum must expand beyond the boundaries of academic programs alone.

In addition to programming and educational events, some center staff are scholar practitioners, continuing to publish DEI, social justice, student development, and student affairs related research. As many of these spaces are resourced with less stable funding, some center staff spend a significant amount of time pursuing grants and fundraising opportunities to meet increasing demands in the face of shrinking budgets (Torres-Baez, Felix, & Medoza, 2021). As Torres-Baez, Felix, and Medoza (2021) point out, the demands on centers to help marginalized students navigate and persist increased in the wake of COVID19 all while facing long standing attacks which challenge their value.

I view much of the work of centers through a case management lens. In my own experience, students with an acute need often come to center staff first because of trusting relationships that exist. They may experience a housing insecurity, food insecurity, financial aid issue, or mental health crisis that needs to be addressed. Though center staff cannot meet all of these needs and are not credentialed counselors, they act as a hub for many underrepresented, often first-generation students. For this reason, professionals in these roles tend to be well

networked on campus as it is crucial in connecting students to appropriate resources. Despite the role they play in student retention, "...cultural/identity centers are not seen as integral parts of the institution; upper administration tends to think of cultural/identity centers as an optional component to university campuses" (Torres-Baez, Felix, & Medoza, 2021, pp. 115-116). Institutions seem more preoccupied with recruiting black and brown students without an equal emphasis on their retention and success.

Students in this sample were explicitly asked about the ways in which they utilized center staff or for what reasons they sought them out. Several students mentioned funding support they received or found through the center. Others mentioned social support from center staff and many students utilized staff for letters of recommendation for both scholarships and graduate school. Emily discussed being connected to academic supports via the center when she found herself struggling to manage personal and academic responsibilities, stating,

[I sought] help getting the emotional support animal. And then seeking out help for scholarships and being recommended to the academic resource office when I was going through hard things.

Steven emphasized financial resources and social support in his response. He said,

So, definitely you, for the grant and the scholarships for sure. Other than that, like I guess talking to [staff] and like talking to you, just having conversations that were needed for me.

Jamie, who had been a student worker in the center utilized staff for recommendations and to address holistic student community needs. She responded,

I asked a director to write a letter of recommendation for me toward the end of my college career. I reached out to different members a couple of times just to talk with me about the issues that were going on. There were times where we [student community] just needed some general help with some stuff, and I was able to reach out to staff to help out with those things as well.

Hope, who was a Natural Resources and Conservation major indicated that she received help from center staff in her pursuits of attending graduate school. Additionally, she talked to center staff about navigating interpersonal issues.

Yeah, help for a winter class, help with applying to graduate school, help with my personal issues, roommate issues... I feel like just to chill out and have a conversation, take a breather and help clear my mind a little bit and not freak out.

Nora was another student who mentioned academic support as reasons for seeking out center staff. She responded,

I did seek out support for talking about my negative experiences and sometimes just academic support, or like knowing what resources are available for students or sometimes recommendation letters.

Casey was another student who emphasized the funding report he received from the center. These particular funds were secured by center staff and were able to go beyond the calculated cost of living, thus allowing students to receive additional support during COVID19 that went beyond financial aid already received. When asked about reasons for which he sought our center staff support, he replied,

Native scholarships, grants, housing, curricular activities that we could do, help with some of the classes and trying to get in touch with certain people, things like that.

You in particular, stepped out of your way to help me with that grant last semester. That was big. That was a very big deal. And I was very thankful for that. An affiliated faculty definitely helped me out. She got me hooked up with the man who is my landlord now.

He's an incredible man. That helped me big time with living arrangements and things like that.

Staffing for this particular center was curiously absent for almost two years. However, once in place, and as demonstrated by student response, proved critical in helping Native students navigate campus resources. Participants relied on center staff to become informed about other offices as well as grant, scholarships, and other financial support. Students sought out staff for social support, interpersonal conflicts, housing needs, academic support, assistance applying to graduate school, and recommendation letters. As many Native students are also first-generation college students, professionals within these spaces provide a form of capital that may not exist within a student's background; that is having the experience and know-how to navigate institutions and the resources therein. Practitioners within cultural centers have indicated that their personal and/or professional experience with intersectional identities informs their work and what they reflect on when serving students (Torres-Baez, Felix, & Mendoza 2021).

Centering the various identities that students hold helps them increase the accessibility of campus resources for underrepresented students (Torres-Baez, Felix, & Mendoza, 2021).

Impacts on Retention

The limited scholarship on cultural centers has emphasized the impact on retention for Black and Latinx students, though often anecdotally. Though qualitative research has demonstrated the value add through interviews with students, few studies have presented data in which students give clear attribution. While Native students in the present sample were not asked how the center contributed to their own persistence, several attributed their success, at least in part, to having such a resource. I reject the notion that these resources alone define the success of any marginalized student. As administrators and educators are already aware, many factors can play a role in whether a student continues and ultimately graduates college. However, the way in which students attribute success to these spaces is important to highlight given the attacks they have and continue to face. Attribution or impacts on retention were most often expressed in response to the question, “what does/did the center mean for you personally, if anything at all?”

Noah, as we can recall, had recently graduated with a master’s in political science. He was a few years older than the average undergraduate when he entered the institution in an accelerated bachelor to master’s program. Fitting the profile of what is often referred to as a “non-traditional student,” he was already married and had come to the area with his wife who was also in an intense advanced degree program. Like other participants, he was asked about the resources he looked for when evaluating and choosing an institution. Noah responded,

Being in school in the beginning, I wasn't really looking for those things. But in retrospect, I don't think I could have succeeded without them, without finding them. I tend to be very independent. I like doing things my own way. I'm an introvert. I like being by myself. So, I didn't think I really needed that. But being thousands of miles away from home and in a new place not knowing anyone except for my wife was very isolating and hard to relate to people, so, I didn't necessarily go out looking for a Native American Indigenous community but once I found them, it was perfect. And I definitely needed that.

Graduate students, and non-traditional students alike, often enter the institution at a later stage in life with families, children, jobs, and a list of other responsibilities. While they may not be as focused on the social aspects of college, research has indicated that underrepresented graduated students often experience a low sense of belonging when pursuing their degrees at predominately White institutions (Miller & Orsillo, 2020). Further, compared to majority students, “they are at a higher risk for attrition” and take a greater amount of time to complete their degrees (Miller & Orsillo, 2020, p. 202; Sowell, Allum, & Okahana, 2015). Recommendations within existing literature focus on addressing a sense of community at the departmental level and while that is no doubt necessary, cultural centers might consider holding space and programs specific to graduate students as an added resource on campus.

Emily was a student who spoke about the center as providing affinity around shared experiences. More specifically, she described the center as a space where she could safely vent or express frustration without having to constantly explain herself or feel invalidated. She noted that when sharing racialized experiences with non-Native friends, they would fail to see an issue with what she went through or would often reduce her experience to ‘politics’. In her interview she attributes some of her decision to stay at the institution to being able to find a space and community where she felt understood and validated. She stated,

I think having the community center where other people who are the same ethnicity and being able to talk about those things any time of the day and not being like, oh, you're so political or just like understanding, that is really nice. I think about me and it's probably the reason why I didn't leave because I was thinking about transferring to VCU just because there is more diversity and it's closer to home for me.

Similar to Emily, Elena had been thinking about transferring to another institution. She had already transferred once and described the isolation she felt as a transfer student. While more institutions are actively improving the integration of transfer students, programs for this population are typically less robust compared to those provided for incoming freshmen. Elena expressed strong feelings about this experience coupled with being a minority student at a predominately White institution saying,

A part of me, when I first got there, I felt so alone. A lot of people say freshmen feel the most depression. Oh, no, it's the transfer students. Just because we don't come in with the class, we come in with random people from all over the world, we don't have like those

dorm buddies going to the first freshman year classes as us. I had literally nobody. And I'm very, very grateful that I'm outgoing and not scared to make friends, because if I was shy, I would have had the worst time of my life, which I did. But it would be a lot worse. I honestly almost did not stay. I was going to transfer again. I was going to be a double transfer; I was going to be a double transfer and go back to [school]. But I was embarrassed. I can't double transfer; they'll make fun of me. I was like, yea, I can't go back. But also, a really big reason why I did not transfer back was because towards the end of my sophomore year, when the winter started, that's when a Native alum took me to get coffee and donuts. And that's when I found out that there was a Native community and there was a Black community and there is an Asian community. And there are like other communities in this big student center that puts on programs for students of color that allows them to be themselves. And so, if it wasn't for me getting to know that side of campus, I would have been stuck on the other side with the buildings and the dining halls and I would have left.

Finally, Steven reiterated the impact the center had in his overall engagement in college life. He had spoken prior about the isolation he felt upon entering college and an unwillingness to engage because of life events he had recently faced. He recalled,

I think it changed my entire college experience honestly, like I think if it wasn't for me, like taking that step and being like, this is what I'm going to do. I'm committed. I'm going to come into this room and I'm going to be here and I'm going to be a part of the culture.

Like I would have just continued to just let my college experience pass by.

Steven noted how finding a sense of community, belonging, and support aided him in engaging outside of the center as well. This supports findings from both Keels (2020) and Lozano (2010) who have suggested that engagement within affinity groups can give students both the confidence to succeed among dominant culture and the “recharge” needed to face less than welcoming environments.

Earlier scholarship on Native student retention has primarily focused on external factors. Lopez (2018) reviewed contemporary literature narrowing down the four major areas that are said to contribute to their success. They included family support, tribal community support, academic support, and institutional support. While institutional support is one noted of the four areas, there is limited work examining the role of campus climates for Native students and how

climates are mitigated. For students in this sample, the center as a form of institutional support played a significant role on their persistence as some had noted prior intentions to transfer. The themes become interconnected as students reference other findings within their attribution such as combating isolation in Steven's case or finding an affirming space in Emily's. Keels (2020) rightly points out that centers alone are still not enough but contribute a great deal to underrepresented student experience. She states,

...although counterspaces were supportive, in the absence of substantial alleviation of financial distress, these students yet risked joining the ranks of those who leave college with debt and no degree. However, even with these caveats, without counterspaces, historically marginalized students are left to their own individual coping resources to navigate a system that is dominated by implicit unwritten cultural and political rules (Keels, 2020, p. 165).

Ten of twelve students in the present sample emphasized the importance of financial aid and noted the unlikelihood of their ability to attend college without it. Thus, the recruitment of Native students likely hinges on the ability to pursue a degree without taking on a great deal of debt while their retention includes the intersection of multiple factors not excluding their ability to navigate and persist within less than ideal climates. While students spoke in primarily positive terms about their center experience, they also noted microaggressions that occurred within the center itself. The next section examines this phenomenon and how students made sense of their experiences.

The Long Arm of Settler Colonialism

This study highlights the colonialist and erasure narratives that Native students regularly confront on college campuses. They face stereotypes in the classroom among both faculty and peers. Stereotypes and narratives most often deny their very existence while others portray them as unevolved. Students in study often sought out the Native center on campus to escape negative interactions, recharge with a trusted community, or find others who understood their experiences. In most instances they reported being able to find a reprieve. However, interview questions also asked participants to reflect on any negative encounters in the center. Counter to current literature on cultural centers, the space was not entirely immune to the same types of microaggressions experienced outside the space. It was portrayed as less frequent, however.

Previously noted, much of the work on cultural centers examines Black and Latinx spaces, leading one to wonder if there are potential differences in how majority populations engage with these spaces. When asked about negative encounters with the space Nora replied,

I remember I was getting ready to leave to go to class, and a student came in [to the center] and they were like, wow, you look really Native. And they asked me where I was from, and I said I explained how my family's Bolivian and Indigenous and they said that that doesn't count. And that only people in the U.S. are Indigenous, which is why I don't say Native American, I say Indigenous. Um, and they made a point to... one of the pictures of all the Native students they made a point to pick apart every single student and invalidate their identity as Native.

Here Nora recalls being invalidated within the center itself. As an active member of the Indigenous student organization, and a known member of the community, she also worked for the center for a semester. When I followed up to ask about the person opposite her in this interaction, she said that they were not a known community member but an unknown patron of the space. The center in question very intentionally included global Indigeneity in its development and does not limit participation to Native American students. Being on a public campus, it is open to everyone. Majority and other non-Native students alike are free and welcome to use the space. This is true of the other identity spaces on the campus as well. In this instance, the initial validation of Indigeneity seemed to hinge on Nora's phenotype and whether they aligned with the other student's expectations. However, Nora's identity was later invalidated based on narrow definitions of Indigeneity that were not at all supported by the center's values.

Steven reported a similar experience of having his identity challenged within the space. He described an individual calling into question his Indigeneity based on both his phenotype and the validity of North American Indigeneity as a whole. He said,

There was this kid who was in the center, and I think he was just eating lunch and we were just sitting there, and I don't really know how the conversation started, but, you know, I think he was just kind of inquiring about what we do here and who we were. I was like we just have meetings and we kind of run our organization out of here and everything. And then that conversation went to 'so are you, like, Indigenous?' And I was like, yeah, I'm indigenous. And he said Well, you don't really look like it. And at that

point that's where the conversation went downhill. I was thinking, what is this kid talking about? And I just try to keep my... I'm not going to get upset. And then he just started talking about Land Bridge theory or people walking between continents. And maybe that's what your people did and then trying to describe the facial features of a typical Indigenous person and then trying to tell [name] who is Cambodian, you look more Indigenous than him [me].

Noah also reported occasional negative interactions with the space. His recollections consisted of observing the ways in which non-Native students interacted with the physical space. Noah stated,

...from time to time, I would come in there and there would be non-native students in there using it for whatever reason. I mean, certainly students can go in there to use it as a study space who aren't Native. But I witnessed a lot of students using the place as a matter of abusing the space. Making fun of tribe tribal names, making fun of books on the shelves or just things that you shouldn't do. Whenever I would see that it would evoke the same feelings that I felt at the powwow, just sort of shock, outrage and then sort of being heartbroken that people think it's OK to do those things. And not just by White students to clarify that it was students from other cultural centers too who would get kicked out of their space for being too loud or a space that I assume that they identify with and they would go to the American Indian center because they assumed it would be empty and it was a place that they could just sort of let loose like a playground.

When I asked how he made sense of these experiences, Noah replied,

Ignorance. I think the invisibility of Native Americans in general, and especially in this state, the way we talk about it. And, like I said earlier, my own experience when we sort of talk about Native Americans here is Pocahontas and Jamestown, right. And I think that's true for much of the East Coast. Thanksgiving, Plymouth Rock, those are the ways we talk about that. And I say we in the sense of American contemporary culture, the way students are taught in school. And very early on, it becomes you don't associate those tribes with actual people. Until you realize that they are still around, are still thriving. It becomes very easy to sort of co-opt that name and turn it into a joke. You know, I think the example that comes to mind is like the Vikings, right? When we think of the Vikings, we think of the horns and like Greenland, we don't see those anymore. We don't see

Vikings. Vikings aren't around anymore. So, we laugh when we talk about Vikings. That sort of excuses that behavior, and I think because of assimilation, the sort of forced cultural erasure. We have done the same thing to Native Americans. They're no longer here. They're like the dinosaurs, they're gone. And that's sort of, I think, in a lot of people's minds, excuses that kind of behavior because there's nobody around to offend. I don't need to say it under my breath because nobody's going to get mad at me.

Noah's understanding of his own experience draws on the prominence of invisibility and erasure myth which seemingly continues to function within the center on occasion. In the example he gave, he notes that these behaviors are exhibited not solely among majority students, but other non-Native minorities as well. This is not surprising given the extent to which erasure myth permeates the collective memory around national identity. Logan (2014) suggests that national mythologies are the narratives that are more palatable and comforting to citizens because it allows for the "denial of the true costs of colonial gains" (p. 149). Likewise, as others have indicated, comparative to other identity groups, it has never become socially unacceptable to be openly racist towards Natives (Hirschfelder & Molin, 2018; King 2016). They are rarely the authorities on their own identities and experience, they are for consumption, they are Halloween costumes, and they are mascots (Hirschfelder & Molin, 2018; King 2016). Scholarship confirms, as Noah suggests, that this is all socially acceptable due the prominent narrative around the non-existence of Indians.

Lori, one of the Native faculty with whom I conducted an oral history, also mentioned a negative interaction she had in the space. She stated,

...I walked in and there was a student, a male student at one of the tables, and he was the only person in there. His back was to me, and he turned around and he said, 'There's going to be a meeting in here soon. So, we're going to be using this space. I'm sorry.' As if to say I couldn't use it. And I remember I was just coming to work because I said, 'that's fine, because I've got some work to do and I'm just going to sit right over here. So, you go ahead and have your meeting.' I went over and sat down and sat at my computer and I worked there for another hour and a half and no one ever showed up. So, I thought it was interesting that apparently there was no meeting and that he was attempting to shoo me away from a space. I'm only guessing, but I had never met him before and I'm not aware that he identifies as Native or an ally. But I do know I had seen him in there before

for sure. He was a frequent visitor to the center. And in the few times that I'd seen him in there before, he had not interacted with me or others that I had seen. He was just in there working, which is fine. I mean, that's an option.

But anyway, it just it struck me as odd that someone not in our community and I don't mean to just say just Native, but someone that clearly hasn't been involved in activities there or engagement in any sort of way would try to sort of take possession of the center and claim it as his own sort of space to try to prevent others from coming in. I thought that was very strange.

While participants who shared these experiences did not seem to have expectations for the space to exclusively host Indigenous identified persons, they did seem to express frustration when engagements with non-Natives in the space mirrored those they were attempting to find reprieve from. This raises questions around the language attributed to centers as 'safe spaces' particularly when navigating spatial negotiations within public space. In addition to theoretical understandings of how invisibility and erasure function, literature on white space also offers potential insights when reflecting on these encounters. For instance, one such work points out that White residents often move into diverse neighborhoods not to engage meaningful relationships with their neighbors, but to access and consume more diverse forms of entertainment and cuisine (Brunsma, Chapman, Kim, Lellock, Underhill, Withers, & Wyse, 2020; Burke, 2011). Brunsma et al. (2020) writes that "Whether cognizant of it or not, White people in White spaces interact in ways that bolster their positions and normalize their White racial identity." While the space being considered is adequately named and identified as Indigenous space, it exists within a campus and dominant culture that is predominately White. The interactions therein bolster the idea that "racial meanings are attached to spaces at both the institutional level and the interactional level" (Brunsma et al. 2020).

As a Native administrator on a college campus, it is not uncommon for me to receive emails from those affiliated with campus and those external to campus regarding quests into their Native identity. The romanticization of Native culture results in it being one of the few marginalized identities that majority individuals readily wish to adopt, again consumable by all (King, 2016). In past conversations with directors of other cultural centers, most confirmed that this was not something they regularly experienced, if at all. With the growing popularity of

genetic testing like 23andMe, there seemed to be an influx of these requests for such assistance. Lacy, a non-Native ally shared the following experience from an incident report she gave:

So, a lady came into the center and she said she had a twenty-three and me commercial DNA test that had told her that she was fifty percent Native American. And then she said she wanted to know what tribe she was from, and she didn't have any family information. And so, I was there with two other students, and we were trying to explain to her that basically, if you don't have the familial connections to it, there's not really much you can do in terms of identifying where your ancestors are from, because it's kind of information lost to the void. And she got, like, aggressive about it. And she was very upset that we couldn't help her find where she was from. We were basically saying, like DNA tests, one, are not all that accurate because my roommate is from Uzbekistan. And it told her mom that she's thirty percent Native and she's from Uzbekistan. So obviously she's not Native, which calls into question all DNA tests saying that you're Indigenous, because as far as I know from the people in the Indigenous community that I've talked to, it [tribal affiliation] is a cultural thing that you inherit from your family. And it's not something that you can prove with a DNA test. And so, we were trying to explain that to this lady and she was not having it. And then she got very upset and started leading a tirade against the Indigenous student center on Facebook and leaving negative reviews on the Facebook page. And she was like, I'm going to contact the administrators. And she had a whole fit about this. And the people that were involved with it were... I don't know if traumatized is the right word, but it was not a good experience and that was definitely something that I wish had not happened.

Lacy describes an experience that alludes to the identity tourism that happens around claimed Native heritage. While I do not find it to be the place of others, myself included, to confirm or deny someone's Native heritage, this example does present both a unique and problematic challenge for Native centers. That is, the presumption that a center's function, and the students therein, are somehow responsible for assisting people in validating their claims of Indigeneity. Students in any cultural center are there to study, find social support, and to simply be allowed to exist. In my personal discussions with non-Native center directors, this was not a common experience for them nor for the students within their centers. This experience in particular, calls into question considerations for planning these types of spaces and how we

mitigate such occurrences through a combination of perhaps community ground rules, posted signage, location considerations, and standardized ways to respond to these requests.

Conclusion

Findings from this chapter demonstrate the value that Native centers add to the experiences of Indigenous students on predominately White campuses. Navigating environments where erasure, invisibility, and stereotypes persist, Native students find an affirming sense of community within these spaces. Participants within the study used the space for a wide range of purposes including study space, a point of connection to find other Native students and faculty, attending programs hosted by the center, a place of refuge from less than welcome environments, holding student organization meetings, and socializing with other community members.

Though not entirely immune to microaggressive interactions, students in the sample generally regarded the space as one where they could be themselves in a safer environment. Students describe having their experiences validated by others rather than having them reduced to ‘politics.’ They found comfort in the sense of community the center provided, regarding the space as a ‘home away from home’ where familial and milestone events were shared. The space provided the needed support to combat feelings of isolation on campus. Additionally, they found affinity with those from similar backgrounds, which was often missing among class peers and those teaching their courses.

Seemingly less frequent, those negative encounters within the center often mirrored microaggressive behaviors that students experienced within the broader campus community. Students articulated having their identities questioned and invalidated and others reported witnessing what they considered to be disrespectful behavior towards art, material culture, and references to tribal communities within the space. Contrasting existing literature, this proved to be a novel finding. While not always cognizant of theories of erasure or invisibility, students were aware of these dominant narratives in society. This was evident in how they made sense of these negative interactions. Other reports included co-opting community space for individual use and the expectation for students to assist in proving and documenting Indigenous identity. This finding warrants further exploration to determine if Native centers are less insulated from campus climate issues due to the persistence of erasure narratives, romanticization of potential

Native heritage, and the fact that these ideas have remained widely socially acceptable (King, 2016). Additionally, administrators might consider differences and strategies of those Native centers that are able to successfully avoid these types of interactions.

Despite the reach of these interactions into the center itself, several students still attributed some of the success to having this type of space on campus. While some students did not necessarily look for these types or resources in their evaluation of institutions, they credited the center with providing the social and community support they needed to persist. Others specifically noted having intentions to transfer prior to finding the center and the resources and community of support therein. Like other research on cultural centers, this project is qualitative and centers student voice. Future work might include a mixed method approach which attempts to quantitatively analyze persistence data of those students who engage center resources and those who do not. However, it would be unwise to privilege those who succeed without identity centers. As Keel (2020) has noted, students are connected to their racial and ethnic identities to varying degrees and there will certainly be those for whom it is less salient in their college experience. However, for those whose social identities become a prominent factor in how they experience and navigate campus, such spaces can be a critical source of support. Success for these students should not be devalued just because there are those who may succeed without support.

Another significant finding which provided a more nuanced understanding of the benefits of these spaces is the reliance on faculty relationships built within the space. Faculty, like Lori, indicated using the space for writing and meeting with others. She also indicated attending center programs like powwow and graduation. The general presence of faculty within the space and their support of center initiatives led to, for many students, organic relationships which they heavily relied on to support their success in college. It is unclear if those faculty were even aware of their impact or the degree to which students utilized them over those in their discipline. However, many of the students did attest that they felt more comfortable going to those faculty whom they met in the center as opposed to those in their academic department. Sometimes this was due to negative interactions with departmental faculty and other times it was simply because they felt a heightened sense of trust among those who demonstrated understanding of their cultural backgrounds.

The work of identity centers is quite robust and goes beyond programmatic efforts. Staff in these spaces play a pertinent role in linking students to critical services and resources. Each participant in the study indicated having sought out center staff for a variety of reasons. Their descriptions indicate the importance of staffing in these spaces and the role that staff play beyond programming. For these students staff connected them to financial support including scholarship and grant opportunities. Students obtained assistance with housing insecurities, social support, and connecting students to academic resources. They received support in applying to graduate school and acquired recommendations for both scholarships and graduate applications. In addition to the one-on-one support that center staff provide, scholars note that these professionals serve as cultural capital on campus and play a significant role in transformational equity work within their institutions (Torres-Baez, Felix, & Mendoza, 2021; Yosso 2005). Thus, staff are critical to not only the success and retention of historical underrepresented populations but to expanding university missions which are increasingly including diversity, equity, inclusion, and social transformation.

Chapter VI

Discussion and Conclusions

“When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in to a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul and not just individual strength, but collective understanding to resist this void, this nonbeing, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard” (Rich, 1986, p. 199).

Research Contributions

The quote above is one from American poet Adrienne Rich, who was known for highlighting the inequities experienced by women and lesbians. As she reflects, invisibility is something that has been and continues to be experienced by many marginalized identities. I find this excerpt most fitting for understanding the intense invisibility felt by Native students within higher education. As the present study has shown, Native students, particularly on predominantly White campuses, confront the widespread belief that their communities have all but ceased to exist. Though they know this to be untrue, they find themselves having to defend that existence, and by extension their own identities, in and out of the classroom.

While research documents invalidation as a common experience among other minority students, it tends to center on refuting the lived experiences of others (Martin, 2019; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008) rather than denying the existence of an entire group. Erasure myth is almost exclusively experienced by Indigenous people and, as indicated by students in this study, is quite prevalent within a predominantly White institution. While it is a common narrative in society more generally, those coming from Indigenous communities may be more insulated from such ideologies in earlier stages of their education. Once they step into a predominately White space, however, the pervasiveness of this narrative, and how often they confront it, can have not only emotional and psychological impacts, but can negatively alter their relationship to people and other resources they should be able to access on campus.

In addition to confronting narratives of erasure and identity invalidation, they face negative stereotypes which portray them as both unevolved and reliant on benefits which most of them do not receive. They may be taught by faculty who seem ill equipped to intervene, or in

some cases, are involved in microaggressive interactions themselves. This can lead to a lack of trust among those faculty members within their own disciplines. These experiences coupled with an absence of cultural mirrors among faculty and peers can also result in heightened feelings of isolation among Native students.

The portion of this work which examines Native student experience adds to the deficient amount of literature focused on this campus population. Furthermore, it brings to the forefront campus environments as a contributing factor impacting persistence and retention. Most research has focused on a deficit model placing the onus on what students and communities are lacking (Fish & Syed, 2018). The second portion of the present study, which examines specific institutional supports, helps us to better understand the ways in which Indigenous students utilize and benefit from Native cultural centers. It demonstrates the place-making and community building that happens within these spaces which provides Native students various types of capital needed to be successful in college.

In addition to the social support they garner from these spaces, they are able to find the sense of home and belonging that student affairs professionals deem necessary in those first few weeks of college. They are also afforded the opportunity to connect with affiliated faculty and professionals who mirror their cultural backgrounds. While work on Black and Latinx centers have indicated the importance of faculty connections, little exists in the vein of exploring how these spaces facilitate faculty/student relationships for Native students. Faculty affiliated with the center were critical to Native student success as participants indicated significant reliance on them over those in their academic departments. Organic mentorships emerged through faculty presence at programs and through their more general use of the space.

Individuals who participated in the study were able to combat feelings of isolation through center involvement. Feelings of isolation experienced by Native students have been documented within existing research and this too proved to be a challenge for students in the present study. However, many of them attributed their persistence with being able to find community, social support, and an affirming space where others understood their experiences. While the center cannot be expected to single handedly transform campus climates, it offers students a sense of community, support, and indeed refuge that was lacking prior to its establishment. Aiding in student retention, it also provides services to students that are, all too often, an overlooked population on campus. Additionally, its existence increases both the

awareness of and the support for the Native community through dedicated staffing, budgets, and programming. Having both the experience of being a student, and now faculty, Lori explained that the center provided a mechanism for the sustained engagement of Native students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, she believed that while still a challenge, programming carried out by the center made more visible a community that often felt invisible.

While several participants referred to the center as a ‘safe space’, they also offered contradicting evidence that these spaces are entirely free from negative encounters centered around their Indigenous identity. Though they generally regarded the center's atmosphere as a positive one, participants also shared times when their identities were invalidated within the space itself. Some patrons expected Native students to serve as a guide in determining tribal affiliation. Scholars have not presently noted these types of challenges within the literature. However, what has been noted is the romanticization of Indigenous identity, which is likely a factor contributing to these types of requests.

Given romanticization is highlighted by other research (Aldred, 2000; American Indian College Fund, 2019; Berkhofer, 1979; Fulford, 2006), I had anticipated it being a more common theme in participant responses. However, only one participant alluded to this experience. Though an outlier in the data, the participant, interestingly, spoke about the experience as positive as opposed to negative. It was as if being romanticized by others validated and confirmed their Indigeneity. This points to other ways that colonial narratives shape Indigenous identity development. Leavitt, Covarrubias, Perez, and Dryberg (2015) have argued that the lack of contemporary and evolved depictions of Native people in film and media

... undermines self-understanding by homogenizing Native American identity, creating narrow and limiting identity prototypes for Native Americans, and evoking deindividuation and self-stereotyping among contemporary Native Americans (p. 39).

In the next section, I provide an analysis and reflection on what I perceive to be the major successes and challenges based on participant responses. Drawing on critical Indigenous perspectives, I start by focusing on the potential reasons why invisibility and erasure might extend into a space meant for reprieve. I then turn to the positive aspects and what the center provides Native students, applying Fish and Syed's (2018) Ecological Systems Perspective. Through these frameworks, I argue that the space provides a microcommunity (Keels, 2020) that centers both the historical relationships between Native people and Western education and

Indigenous connections to culture (Fish & Syed, 2018). However, because they have been under-studied, we have much to learn about best practices within Native centers and the degree to which they are shielded from impacts of erasure narratives, invisibility, and stereotypes.

Reflections and Theoretical Analysis

Native students who reported microaggressive interactions within the center made sense of their experiences as stemming from erasure and invisibility. Erasure myth (also referred to as the myth of the vanishing race) is derived from the widely held belief that Native peoples were mostly eradicated (Logan, 2014; Wark, 2021). This was articulated by Noah when he posited that like Vikings and dinosaurs, the way in which others speak about Indigenous Peoples is to relegate them to the past. This analysis was also presented by Nathan who said,

Most people think that Natives are in storybooks and in history books. Extinct. Not a thing anymore. That the center is more of a museum to them with a table in it. That they can chill and you know, since there's no, quote unquote adult sitting in the room watching them, making sure that they behave, they're going to act a fool like. They don't show respect because they don't think there are actually Natives around.

Here, Nathan's sense-making around these interactions points to the impact which maintenance of colonial mythology has on Native student experience. It reinforces Veracini's (2010) arguments referenced in earlier chapters which hold that colonization is not a point in time but a process and ideology to be maintained. Within this process is the ongoing reinforcement of certain narratives that require Indigenous populations to be in a constant state of disappearing (Veracini, 2010).

Though representing a small population, we know that Native students are physically present in the space as the majority of participants indicated that they utilize the center several times per week. However, recalling both Nora and Steven's experiences, students' identities were validated or invalidated based on expectations that centered stereotypical physical features. Hope also viewed interactions as stemming from the inability of others to identify Native students in the space, suggesting it was "because there is no one way to look." In reality, there is "no one way to look" for any race or ethnicity. However, for Native students in particular, several factors arguably contribute to how invisibility permeates the space. One is the association

of Indigeneity with race and ethnicity alone. Second is the scarcity of modern images and representation of contemporary Native peoples.

In his outline of Tribal Critical Race Theory, Brayboy (2005) emphasizes the political aspect of Indigenous identity and Native Peoples' unique relationships to state and federal governments. Other Native scholars have advanced models that articulate major components which constitute a People (capital P) (Holm, Pearson, & Chavis, 2003). The Peoplehood Model positions place, language, ceremonial cycles, and sacred history as the major attributes which distinguish unique Indigenous Nations. While race and the experience of racism are salient for many Native peoples, race may be less salient for others of mixed descent. Regardless of how they phenotypically present, both groups are likely to confront colonialist attitudes, and both represent citizens of Nations with unique relationships to government and struggles for sovereignty. This is particularly true in the southeast region of the U.S. where initial colonial contact and Jim Crow policies shaped the make-up of Indigenous communities (Lowery 2010). I outline these points to demonstrate that Indigeneity is not something that is readily seen or identifiable. Yet as Brayboy (2005) has noted, most of American society views Native people exclusively as a racialized group, ignoring the legal and political status. In the case of Native students within this sample, race was used to further erasure narratives by invalidating their own identity claims, even with the center itself.

Leavitt et al. (2015) point out that images of Native people, even within contemporary film and media, are often derived from the 18th and 19th centuries. While their work focuses on the impact which this has on Indigenous people and their identity development, these are the same images consumed by non-Natives as well. These images shape how the bulk of society interprets and perceives Native identity. The mechanisms through which this happened are referred to as omission and commission and are said to stem from colonist objectives (Davis-Delano et al. 2021).

Omission, as it suggests, is the lack of representation of Native peoples in everyday contemporary life (Davis-Delano et al. 2021). Commission occurs when settler populations “appropriate, generate, and control signifiers of Indigeneity for themselves including generating stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples to legitimate settler colonial interests, policies, and practices (Davis-Delano et al. 2021, p. 1). Omission deals primarily with the quantity of images and representation while commission deals with the content and messaging around a particular

identity (Davis-Delano et al. 2021). Combined, the overall objective is to legitimize the continuance of settler colonialism (Davis -Delano et al 2021). Omission legitimizes settler possession of land by suggesting that there are no Indigenous Peoples left to claim the land (Davis-Delano et al. 2021). Commission legitimizes genocide, use of force, assimilation, and paternalism by deploying stereotypes and images that portray Native peoples as either violent savages or unevolved and childlike (Davis-Delano et al. 2021, p. 2). While these mechanisms have a macro function of reinforcing settler colonial policy and practice, they also influence micro level interactions between Natives and non-Natives. The false notion that Indigenous identity is an exclusively race based one, coupled with a lack of modern depictions of Native people, lends itself to non-Natives assuming that they can confidently identify (and by extension validate or invalidate) “real Indians.”

Based on participant responses, we know that colonialism functioned within their experiences in the classroom and other campus spaces. Omission and commission were present in microaggressions they experienced and the types of stereotypes they faced. However, within the center, they found affinity with those who not only came from similar cultural backgrounds but could relate to those experiences stemming from colonialism. This mitigated the overall experience for several who expressed a profound sense of isolation. These findings provide further support for a more recent ecological systems model presented by Fish and Syed (2018).

In their discussion, they take us first through Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) original model which he developed in response to “context-free” developmental research (Fish & Syed, 2018, p. 388). This model positions the individual at the center of the model with historical and cultural factors having a lesser impact on individual development, thus existing in the outer dimensions.

Fish and Syed (2018) go on to argue that due to the historical relationships between Native peoples and western institutions *and* the contemporary experiences of Native students as being deeply enriched in colonial narratives, historical context must be centered for Native student development. Keep in mind that their argument is not perpetuating the idea of Native peoples existing only within a historical context. Nor does it position them as unevolved. Rather, they argue that “history and culture are inextricably connected to the remaining levels, making it impossible to ignore the role they play in the educational development of Native Americans” (Fish & Syed 2018, p. 391). One example they provide is the legacy of boarding schools and

how conflicting it may be for some to pursue a Western education which was originally used as a tool for assimilation (Brayboy, 2005; Fish & Syed, 2018; Grinde, 2004).

To further exemplify this, they point to limited literature on Native student experience, campus incidents which promote colonialism and stereotypes, the psychological effects of historical loss thinking, and literature on self-continuity, which is the “ability to connect past selves to future selves” (Fish & Syed, 2018, p. 392). Fish and Syed (2018) state that while culture is essential to the development of the self, self-continuity can be difficult to maintain for Native students, namely because, within western institutions, their cultures are thought to exist in the past. For some Native students, the cultural values and ways of being they hold may be at odds with those of western institutions as well (Brayboy 2005; Fish & Syed, 2018).

By restructuring Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) original model, Fish and Syed (2018) offer one that better demonstrates Native student development. They argue that understanding their experiences as rooted in history and culture, moves us away from deficit model approaches and guides ways in which institutions can shape themselves to better support this campus population. Some suggestions they offer are the validation of the experiences of Native students in both the historical and contemporary sense (Fish & Syed, 2018). Arguably institutions should also proactively contend within their unique institutional histories and positive ways to move forward. institutional valuing of Indigenous culture, knowledge, and ways of being. Additionally, they suggest one of the best ways to affirm community, values, and culture, is to involve tribal communities and families in the Native student educational process and experience (Syed & Fish, 2018).

Like this reenvisioned model, Native spaces on college campuses acknowledge and validate the ways in which Indigenous students contend with colonialism while also centering their cultures, knowledge systems, and ways of being through programming. As Lori noted in her interview, they bring together communities, families, and tribal leaders to engage in center programs and student campus experiences. Many Native student centers include “elder in residence” programs which allow students to learn from revered members of their own communities within the college environment. Centers are oriented around an asset approach rather than a deficit approach to Native student development, emphasizing the rich cultures and experiences from which they come and leveraging those during their college trajectory.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study highlights the experiences of Native students and the impacts of cultural centers on their overall experience, it consisted of a small sample at one institution in the Southeast United States. Though we cannot generalize from these accounts, they present administrators and student support personnel with a nuanced understanding of the types of climate issues Native students face on campus as well as the types of resources which might aid in their retention. Native centers may be more vulnerable to microaggressive interactions due to the persistence of erasure and invisibility faced by this population. However, they also clearly provide the much needed support to counter systemic colonialism within institutions of higher education.

There are certainly other factors that could be at play and should be taken into consideration. These include things like regional and state histories and climates and how these shape interactions within institutions and with Indigenous people. Center models, locations, missions, and even reporting structures may also play a role in how these spaces are perceived by the majority population on campus, thus impacting the experiences of Native students who utilize them. Future research might seek to analyze Native centers across multiple institutions. Comparative studies could also prove useful in uncovering unique challenges for different identity centers. Additionally, as the mission of many centers has come to include social justice education (Keels, 2020) it would be interesting to learn how majority populations engage with and view their roles within these spaces. Finally, while many participants attributed aspects of the success to what they gained by having a center, I hold with others who note that minority student success does not solely hinge on these spaces (Keels, 2020). Financial support is imperative for students and families to achieve the goal of degree attainment without taking on an excessive amount of debt.

Implications for Higher Education

It is important for administrators to understand that Indigenous students often experience their academic programs without finding cultural mirrors among faculty or peers, making these types of institutionalized support a significant part of their success. It is also key for those in higher education to be able to recognize and identify the ways in which settler colonialism manifests within their institutions. As mentioned in this study, clear and actionable support is

necessary from the upper levels of administration in order for these spaces to both exist and be well resourced to carry out their missions. Campuses should avoid leaning on a ‘return on investment’ argument when considering institutional support for this demographic. This rationale is an extension of the functioning invisibility that students, and Native citizens more broadly, consistently confront. Additionally, while some universities dedicate a significant number of resources to global outreach initiatives, many simultaneously fail to recognize the impact which Native graduates have on tribal communities within their own state. Graduates have the potential to infuse various forms of capital into their communities which may support both economic advancement, nation building, and tribal sovereignty.

In times of shifting political climates, the value add of cultural centers is often challenged. As some researchers have noted, they have continually had to reinvent themselves to survive these attacks and impacts on how they are resourced (Keels, 2020). Negative views of support for minority students often lack historical context and are one sided. As others have noted,

Affirmative Action that “benefits” people of color is attacked, while that which benefits White women (the group which has benefited the most from affirmative action), the children of alumni (often called “legacies” which is, in and of itself, telling of how institutions think about these students’ entitlement regarding potential admission to an institution), athletes who raise large sums of money for institutions even as they fail to graduate at record levels, and veterans of the United States Armed Services is either naturalized and made invisible or celebrated (Brayboy 2005, p. 432).

Policy makers, as well as institutions, must contend with the fact that such support mechanisms are not there to give minority students an advantage over others, but to provide the social and cultural capital, support, and networks that majority students and families often take for granted. The inequities while in college are the extension of both a legacy that historically prohibited many minorities from attending college *and* the how financially inaccessible college continues to be for many families. Centers and other student support services level the playing field a bit. Even this does not remove the fact that in every other space they will continue to be the “the only” and navigate hostile social interactions. Seeking reprieve from such environments is not an act of self segregation but one of self preservation (Keels, 2020). Furthermore, as has been pointed out, the gathering of a homogenous group is only deemed problematic and self-

segregating when that group is non-White (Keels, 2020; Tatum, 1997). When White students group together, this is seen as normal.

Finally, without mechanisms that promote retention, creating access for marginalized groups falls short of institutional goals. For Native students being able to find, see, and support other Natives on their college journey; to meet with Native faculty and other professionals; to see positive images of themselves and have their identities validated and affirmed; it is a seemingly small factor that, as demonstrated, has a rather large impact. As Leavitt et al. 2015 states,

Many groups experience relative invisibility (e.g., Latino Americans, gay and lesbian, and working class individuals), but what differentiates Native Americans is that they uniquely experience absolute invisibility in many domains of American life.

Specifically, they are rarely (if ever) seen as contemporary figures in the media, which means they are absent from depictions of mainstream public spaces, such as schools and hospitals, and from many professional positions, such as teachers, professors, doctors, and lawyers (p. 41).

As Native students set out to pursue some these professions, Native centers on predominantly White campuses seek to remedy that experience.

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Appendix A
Student Interview Questions

Protocol 20-920 Version 1.0

Student Interview Questions
Semi-structured
Leaving room for probes and follow up questions

Demographics

1. In an effort to learn more about your background, can you tell me a little about yourself.
2. Where did you grow up?
3. Have you lived in other places?
4. Where did you live the longest?
5. What was it like growing up there? What was/is your community like?
6. What was life like at home?
7. Can you describe your family dynamic?
8. Who predominantly raised you?
9. What is the marital status of your parents?
10. How many siblings do you have?
11. What do your siblings do (school / profession)?
12. What was the highest educational degree completed by your parents?
13. What do your parents do (professionally)?
14. What do you estimate to be the combined income of your parents or your household?
15. How old are you?
16. How do you identify in terms of gender (when filling out forms and around friends/family)? *If there is a difference, probe as to why.*
17. What is your current class standing (freshman, sophomore etc.)?

Race / Ethnicity / Indigenous Identity

(this is separated from general demographics as there is a more intentional focus on this area)

18. How do you identify racially or ethnically (when around friends / family and when filling out forms)? *If there is a difference, probe as to why.*
19. **For those that identify as Native / Indigenous:** What is your tribal affiliation?
20. All: How does your stated identity group or community define inclusion criteria?
In other words, according to you, your family, and your peers, what defines someone as _____(state the race/ethnicity they gave).

College Going Decisions / Family and Tribal Support

21. What motivated you to attend college?
Have you always wanted to attend college?
Did family, friends, teachers, or anyone else influence your decision?
Were you expected to attend college?
22. How many colleges did you apply to?
23. What was the application process like?
24. Were there challenges during the application process?
25. Are family, friends, and (tribal) community members generally supportive of you attending college?
26. In regards to attending college, were there any times you did not feel supported by family, friends, or your (tribal) community? Can you tell me about those?

Institutional Support and Academics

27. Were there specific things you looked for in an institution to support you personally and / or your academic success?
Can you tell me about things you looked for when evaluating colleges?
28. Do you feel like you have those things?
What institutional support do you feel you have here (for example: university resources, staff, offices, programs, financial support etc.?)
29. Is there anything lacking that you feel you would benefit from personally or academically? Can you describe what else you might benefit from?
30. How are you paying for school (parents, scholarships, financial aid, loans)?
31. How important are scholarships, loans, and other financial aid in regards to paying for college?
32. What is your general perception of faculty here? Do you feel supported by faculty and instructors?
33. Have you had any positive experiences with faculty?
Can you describe these?
34. Have you had any negative experiences with faculty?
Can you describe these?
35. Have you sought out faculty mentors or do you feel like you have any faculty members that are particularly supportive of your college experience and success?
If yes: Can you tell me about ways in which you feel supported by this faculty Member? What do they help you with specifically?
If no: Is there a reason you haven't sought out a faculty mentor? Do you feel like you have any supportive faculty that you can turn to if needed?
36. Do you feel like you were academically prepared upon entering college?
If no: Why not?
37. Do you feel like you have struggled academically at all during your time here?

If yes: Can you describe what academic challenges you have faced?

Identity Experiences In higher Ed

38. Drawing on your own experiences, what is it like to be insert participated stated race/ethnicity in general (within society and most settings)?
Probe: Can you give examples?
39. Drawing on your own experiences, what is it like to be insert participant stated race / ethnicity at this university?
Probe: Can you give examples?
Generally on campus?
What about in the classroom or your major?
40. Do you feel as though you fit in at this particular institution?
If No: Why not? Do you believe this impacts your desire to continue here at all?
If Yes: In what ways do you feel you fit in? Do you believe this impacts your desire to continue here at all?
41. Have you had any negative experiences at this institution based on identities you hold?
If yes: Can you tell me about those?
42. Have you had any positive experiences at this institution based on identities you hold?
If yes: Can you tell me about those?

Center Use

43. Do you utilize the Native / Indigenous Community Center on campus?
44. How often would you say you frequent this space?
Probe: Several times a week, once a week, several times a month?
45. In what ways do you utilize the space or for what kinds of purposes (study, hangout, seeking resources, homework, programs, etc)?
46. What makes you choose this space for these things? What makes it optimal for you?
47. Do you utilize other identity or cultural centers as well?
If so, which ones and for what purposes?
If not, why not?
48. Do you use other student centers on campus? For instance the [state center names]?
If so, what do you use those spaces for?
If not, why not?

49. Have you attended programs hosted by the center? If so, how many would you say you attend each semester?
50. Have you sought out support from center staff in any way? Can you give examples?
51. Besides using the physical space, can you describe any other ways in which you engage with the Native center or any of the other identity/cultural Centers?
52. What does the Native / Indigenous Community Center mean to you personally, if anything at all?
53. What do you personally believe are the benefits of having such a space?
54. What, if any, positive experiences have you had with the Native / Indigneous Center?
Probe: Can you describe in detail any of these experiences?
Probe: How do you interpret these experiences? In other words, what do you think contributes to these positive experiences?
55. What, if any, negative experiences have you had with the Native / Indigneous Center?
Probe: Can you describe in detail any of these experiences?
Probe: How do you interpret these experiences? In other words, what do you think contributes to these negative experiences?

Understanding Indigenous Identity

All

56. What do you think of when you hear the terms, Native, Indigenous, or American Indian?
57. What makes someone Native or Indigenous? What, in your opinion, defines someone as Native or Indigenous?

Conclusion

58. Is there anything else I should know in regards to how your identity impacts your campus experience?
59. Is there anything else I should know in regards to your experience with this center or any of the other identity based centers on campus?
60. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B

Oral History Questions

Protocol 20 - 920 Version 1.0

Oral Histories Guiding Questions

1. Can you tell me your name?
2. What is or was your role on campus?
3. How long have you been with _____ (state institution)?
4. What stands out to you or what do you remember most about the state of the campus when you started? (climate, physically, or anything that stood out to you upon arrival).
5. To your knowledge was there a Native presence on campus when you arrived (faculty staff students)?
6. What was the campus climate like for Native students at that time?
7. What about the climate for Indigenous faculty and staff when you arrived?
8. What groups existed (student groups, faculty/staff caucuses or otherwise)?
9. When you began your time here what resources existed for Native students, faculty, and/or staff?
(centers, programs, scholarships, recruitment efforts, retention efforts, etc.)
10. Since your time here, can you take me through a timeline of things that existed for Native students (recruitment and retention)?
11. Since your time here, can you take me through a timeline of things that existed for Native faculty or folks affiliated via Indigenous research.
12. How has student engagement changed over the years, if at all?
In other words, can you describe a trajectory of student activity and any ebbs and flows?
13. How has faculty and staff engagement changed over the years, if at all?
In other words, can you describe a trajectory of activity and any ebbs and flows?
14. What significant changes stand out to you over the years?
15. Are there things that I haven't asked about that you feel are important to note or share?

Questions serve as a guide only. Conversation should become organic and probes are appropriate