Those Who Came Before: Learning from Native American College Alumni About Walking the Path of Persistence

Jacqueline Schram
Marquette University

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Schram, Jacqueline, "Those Who Came Before: Learning from Native American College Alumni About Walking the Path of Persistence" (2023). Dissertations (1934-). 2717.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/2717
THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE: LEARNING FROM NATIVE AMERICAN COLLEGE ALUMNI ABOUT WALKING THE PATH OF PERSISTENCE

By

Jacqueline J. Fontaine Schram, B.A., M.S.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School, Marquette University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2023
ABSTRACT
THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE: LEARNING FROM NATIVE AMERICAN ALUMNI
ABOUT WALKING THE PATH OF PERSISTENCE

Jacqueline J. Fontaine Schram, B.A., M.S.
Marquette University, 2023

The very low college success rate of American Indians and Alaska Natives has inspired a scholarly literature that seeks to explain this outcome and, more recently, to account for why some Native students persist in college. Few studies, however, look at Native students who actually have graduated from college, and these rarely reflect Native voices or examine the life histories of Indigenous students. To achieve a broader understanding of successful educational trajectories, this qualitative exploration moves beyond the category of students currently attending college and examines the lives of five Indigenous Marquette University alumni. Employing an archival oral history method to honor the oral-based traditions of Indigenous people and preserve and make accessible the stories for current and future generations, the rich descriptions of the experiences of these alumni will help to illuminate how, against the odds, they persisted in a four-year, predominantly white, urban, private institution. The path to college and post-college experience are inextricable parts of these alumni stories.

The findings of this project to a significant extent map onto the extant literature that suggests college persistence is related to cultural self-identity, the support of family and community, the presence and influence of mentors and role models, and the desire to give back to home communities and Indigenous people. Not stressed in the literature, however, is the powerful sense of self-determination that all five alumni exhibited and which enabled them to map out the resources they needed to succeed in college with a keen eye and an openness to discovery. This finding suggests an institutional responsibility to provide a roadmap for incoming Indigenous students so they are not exclusively responsible for surveying the campus environment for resource outposts that will scaffold their success.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jacqueline J. Fontaine Schram, B.A., M.S.

I am very grateful to Sagkeeng First Nation and the ongoing commitment to band members endeavoring to pursue their educational dreams in other corners of the world. Miigwech to the counselors at Sagkeeng Education Authority, who provided administrative support along my way – notably to Chocky who always offered encouraging words.

Many seasons have passed since then, but there have been constants in my life on this doctoral journey, even as the earth renewed again and again. From the beginning, my husband Ron, of nearly 38 years, watched and wondered from the sidelines with a quiet respect for the heady task underhand but was always ready to wrest me from my books when I needed a respite. Miigwech for never letting me forget to laugh and your abiding love and care.

My boys, Sage and Hudson, were early on in my studies a significant part of the fun-loving rambunctious energy in our home until they ventured out into the world on their own. I have tried to lead by example in this and other pursuits my boys, but I am so proud to know you have your own strong compasses to follow. Miigwech for having your true north directed toward our family home. Gizaagi’i’n.

For me, Canada will always have a magnetic pull. They are my homelands and where my people and relatives reside. But no prairie, farmland, forest, or river could divide. I have always felt the reach of my mom and dad. They are amongst the strongest, most resilient and inspiring people I know. Their experiences in Indian residential schools threatened to harden their hearts forever, but they easily managed to offer their only girl a flourishing love. Miigwech mom for just trusting that I’ll be okay, instilling in me a spirited independence, and sharing lessons of Indigenous ways of knowing. You are a guiding light. The luminescence helped when my world dimmed with my dad’s passing in 2021. The sorrow of that loss is never far away. But the lessons and love he shared with me over our regular visits over the phone when we couldn’t be in person ground me still and spurs me to step foot on the wide trails he blazed. Miigwech dad for all that you continue to teach me.

The stretches of time are short between my thoughts of one of the most influential women in my early life. Esther Seidl was like a mother, a sister, a friend. Combined, she is my touchstone of how one should be with others in the world. Miigwech for letting me be a part of your world when you were here, Esther. It is no wonder you bonded with another woman who also came early in my life, my stepmom, Morgan. Miigwech for being there always lovingly.
alongside my dad. Your combined genuine interest in my world has been a constant companion all these years. It is something to behold now seeing you forge your own remarkable legacy.

There are other notable women who have impacted my life. Miigwech Rana and Mary for taking me under your broad wings and fanning my greatest desires to serve Indigenous students and initiatives. The leadership you have demonstrated in every aspect of your professional lives is one I feel blessed to have witnessed and grown under.

To members of my original doctoral cohort that are such sweet friends today I say miigwech to you Tyra and Maggie for your steadfastness and lightheartedness on what was sometimes a very heart heavy journey.

To my dear friend Sherrill, who always asked after my heart and mind as I was wading through this endeavor. Miigwech for accompanying me and dropping those random lines that sometimes ended with a Canadian “eh” to entrench the reminder not to take it all too seriously.

Although my academic life was never part of our regular conversations, miigwech to my loving friend Richanda for helping me make peace with my world. Our shared insider humor made for laugh-out-loud moments that always started my day off in a good way.

There have been new stars that have entered my skies and I know they will always be in my galaxy. Miigwech to you dear Alex for always “checking in on the strong ones.” Watching you take on the world with the biggest heart and most genuine intention to make things right stirs so much hope in me. Alongside an amazing roster of faculty who support our Indigenous students at Marquette, I see the Indigenous philosophy of seven generations in action. Miigwech Bryan, Jodi and Sam for your unparalleled exuberance and kindnesses. I will remain in awe of how you do it all.

To those Indigenous students who have come and gone from the lands Marquette stands on, miigwech for your trust in letting me care for you and for teaching me. I miss you, but I still feel your embers here. The warmth provides the fuel for me to support a new generation.

The tirelessness of you, Dr. Lowe, throughout my doctoral program and this dissertation will forever be etched on my soul. Even when I was on the verge of exhaustion for not being able to put the right words together, you managed to breathe life into the process through wise counsel. Because of your encouragement, I set out again and again, keystroke by keystroke. I am filled with immense gratitude for your support through it all. Chi-miigwech for our critical conversations and instilling in me the reminder to give back in the ways you so generously modeled.
To Dr. Ellwood and Fr. LaBelle, who have served so cheerfully as my dissertation committee members, I say miigwech. As solitary as this dissertation work has sometimes felt, you both bring to light the imperative of a team. Your thoughtful review and questions at pressure points have been so helpful for me to see the trees and forest.

To Jo Ann, Rick, Sharon, Armando, and Noemy who sat with me time and again on this passion project, none of this would have been possible without youse. I am overwhelmed still by your generosity and openness in sharing your life stories. It was a tremendous privilege to be let into your worlds that revealed so many things. The collective narrative power is sure to inspire those Native students yet to come. Chi-miigwech to you all.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** .............................................................................................................. i

**CHAPTER ONE**

I. **INTRODUCTION** ...................................................................................................................... 1

II. **LITERATURE REVIEW** ........................................................................................................... 4

**CHAPTER TWO**

I. **METHODOLOGY** .................................................................................................................. 43

II. **LIMITATIONS** ..................................................................................................................... 49

**CHAPTER THREE**

I. **JO ANN SCHEDLER (BSN ’82) ORAL HISTORY** ............................................................... 52

**CHAPTER FOUR**

I. **RICK TOURTILLOTT (BS ’87) ORAL HISTORY** ................................................................. 71

**CHAPTER FIVE**

I. **SHARON TOM (BA ’92) ORAL HISTORY** .......................................................................... 88

**CHAPTER SIX**

I. **ARMANDO ZARAGOZA (BS ’12) ORAL HISTORY** ............................................................ 113

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

I. **NOEMY SANDOVAL (BS ’14) ORAL HISTORY** ................................................................. 131

**CHAPTER EIGHT**

I. **ANALYSIS** ........................................................................................................................... 153

II. **CONCLUSION** ................................................................................................................... 178

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ..................................................................................................................... 183

**APPENDIX A: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION FORM** ......................................................... 194
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW INFORMATION FORM ......................................................195
APPENDIX C: AUDIO RECORDING RELEASE AND CONSENT FORM ........196
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE ...........................................................................197
APPENDIX E: GRAPHIC RECORDING OF AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA
NATIVE ALUMNI EXPERIENCES AT MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY ....................199
APPENDIX F: ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION DONOR AGREEMENT FORM
..............................................................................................................................200
APPENDIX G: MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY IRB DETERMINATION ..............201
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Walking onto the grounds of Marquette University for the first time, I was struck by the sense of place. Anchored in the heart of urban Milwaukee, it seemed a bucolic respite with historic buildings, steeple, ivy, and the promise of a quiet intimacy that would nourish the spirit. Even more, the light post banners lining the main Avenue – featuring Father Jacques Marquette (1637-1675) and an Indian in a birchbark canoe – suggested an institutional identity and consciousness intimately connected to the original peoples of this land.¹ But looking closer, the faceless Indian cut a lonely figure on the landscape and, even with an oar in hand, appeared not to be the guide of his destiny. On my journey of seeking out Indigenous contemporaries at Marquette, I wondered if this 17th-century depiction was a modern-day reality.² It was not until I started listening for stories, tapping into the Special Collections and University Archives and peeling back the Indigenous alumni record, that I found the company I had been missing. Like what the image of the lone Indian in the canoe inspired in me, I longed to know more of those who came before me. I am compelled to raise the volume of these ancestral voices and (on the page) bring them into community with one another so they might help change the traditional deficit narrative of American

---

¹ The banner design was pulled from the official Marquette University seal created in the early 1900s. The scene was originally imagined by Wilhelm Lamprecht in the 1869 painting “Father Marquette and the Indians”, which depicts the Jesuit exploration of the Mississippi River in 1673.

² Indigenous peoples are used throughout this paper interchangeably with Native Americans, Native, American Indians, and Indian. Community refers to the participant’s tribe.
Indians in higher education, sharpened primarily by statistical evidence of their leaving.

The exploratory effort looks to scholars like Tierney (1992a), who says the struggle to include Native voices in research with enough “thick description” is essential to drawing a more holistic picture of their student experience. In a field known mostly for quantitative research, this dissertation will attend to the research gap by making way for the rich descriptions of Indigenous peoples’ experiences and persistence in higher education that Tierney and others advocate. It asks how, against the odds, Indigenous students succeeded in graduating from college, and it will investigate this question through an archival oral history method that will illuminate Indigenous vantage points of completing a degree program at a single institution. Recognizing these stories of persistence are embedded within a larger context of life experiences, the inquiry will also include the journey to university and the trajectory of alumni lives after graduation.

These oral histories of Indigenous alumni will add to the written history of Marquette University (Jablonsky, 2007) and serve as the lifeblood of this dissertation in separate narrative chapters. Although my hand will be visible in the retelling, I will not polish these histories to a varnish. It would abrade the texture that Marquette University specifically and higher education institutions generally need to contemplate to invigorate their practices and policies around pre-college engagement and campus support systems for Indigenous students. Weaving the individual story strands together will be necessary work in a
separate analysis chapter to reveal general patterns of interrelatedness and the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that helped these alumni succeed.

It is not insignificant the project will allow dedicated time for Indigenous alumni to reflect on their past and some of the pathways taken, perhaps for the very first time. What will unfold is their life story map around making it to and successfully through college. Beyond other studies that narrowly define college success, this story collective will reveal success as a flourishing of the human spirit. As living documents, these narratives will serve as a special commemoration of personal milestones and can take on a social life in the participants’ families and communities, evoking parallels to the momentous ceremonies for Indigenous people that mark their spiritual naming and rites-of-passage. The stories these graduates tell will also serve as critical cultural records for current and future Indigenous students to unfurl and use as teachings for their educational passages. They could provide lessons and inspiration for academic achievement and as active connections between past and present to become part of a relational framework. In this way, knowledge is passed on in an act of giving back. But other efforts are activated. These Indigenous narratives could imbue a rich humanities perspective in educational curriculum, as well as scholarly and public research. Of critical importance is that for tribal communities, consortiums and organizations, Indigenous oral histories of college achievement could further advance educational priorities and advocacy. In addition to the potential practical and spiritual value of the dissertation, it will fill not only a methodological gap in the literature, but also a substantive one.
Although scholarly interest in the attendance and persistence patterns of Indigenous college students continues to grow, existing literature focuses narrowly on current college students, leaving a gap in understanding college experiences from an alumni perspective – from those who actually persisted through college completion. Some of these experiences have been taken up in disparate forms like the alumni evaluation of Penn State’s College of Education historic American Indian Leadership Program (Goins, 1994), autobiographies (Eastman, 1916; Garrod & Larimore, 1997; and Garrod et al., 2017) and a sourcebook on how to serve Native American students (Lowe, 2005). But with few exceptions (Wilson, 1983; Rindone, 1988; Davis, 1992; Brown & Kurpius, 1997; Waterman, 2007; Reyes, 2019), college alumni rarely figure into the center of research studies. The opportunity to explore pathways from their vantage of completing a degree program at a single institution will contribute to closing this research gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Through the eyes of a 17th-century Puritan girl, Caleb’s Crossing, Geraldine Brooks (2011) provides a sensitive rendering of the first Indian ever to successfully traverse the college terrain. Embodying the spirit of the Wampanaog (meaning people of first light), Caleb Cheeshateaumuck graduated from Harvard College in 1665 (Wright & Tierney, 1991). Though in the genre of historical fiction, Pulitzer Prize winner Brooks draws upon rich primary and secondary sources, as well as Wampanoag tribal materials to bring Caleb to life. The reader is transfixed from the moment he appears in the story holding a book
for the first time “as if gentling some fragile-boned wild thing” (Brooks, 2011, p. 37) to “seeing” him finally promenade as a graduate through the school hall as a “great curiosity, the savage plucked from the wilderness and tamed so thoroughly into a scholar” (Brooks, 2011, p. 286). Caleb stood as a testament to what was entrenched in Harvard College’s Charter of 1650 – the mission to educate Indians – and swept in an early promise of higher education for American Indians when African Americans would be denied access for nearly two centuries. Other colonial colleges would follow Harvard’s lead. Dartmouth’s charter of 1769 was explicit in its purpose to educate and instruct Indian youth and at William & Mary the Brafferton was constructed in 1793 as “a good house and apartments for the Indian master and his scholars.”

Contrary to their missions and charters, Harvard ceased admitting Indian students in the late 17th century, and the other colonial colleges admitted very few (Wright, 1988, 1991, 1995). Even with the enormous increase of private and public colleges and universities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, enrollment of Indian students was negligible. From archival Office of Indian Affairs/Bureau of Indian Affairs (OIE/BIE) records, Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) show that Indian school industrial training purposefully constricted pathways to higher education. Directives to keep higher education curriculum out of Indian schools hushed personal aspirations. As recently as 1932, a Bureau of Indian Affairs survey disclosed there were only 385 Indian students enrolled in college and as few as 52 Indian graduates (Szasz, 1999, p. 135).

---

3 William & Mary website, accessed June 1, 2019. 
https://www.wm.edu/about/history/historiccampus/brafferton/index.php
Nearly 30 years later, the number of graduates rose to only 66 (Szasz, 1999, p. 134). Since then, graduation numbers have risen dramatically though unsteadily. By 2016, there were 129,000 American Indians and Alaska Native (AI/AN) enrolled in college. They made up 0.7 percent of the total college enrollment – an enrollment trend that was the same in 1976. AI/AN are awarded fewer bachelor’s degrees (than all other racial or ethnic groups) with a six-year graduation rate of 39 percent compared to 64 percent for white students.

In this light, the national imperative for colleges and universities to examine their practices and policies around educational access and achievement for Indigenous students is clear. Some scholars argue the efforts would have the far-reaching implication of “capacity-building” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 5) for First Nations communities as a whole. Brayboy et al. (2012, 2014) uniquely expand the concept of “capacity-building” to “tribal nation building,” which is infused with a more vigorous spirit of liberation from colonized structures in order to advance the economic, political, cultural, health, and educational success of tribal peoples. Scholarship rarely captures this internal driving force of Indigenous students who stay the course of college. It includes a compilation of achingly tender personal essays penned by Dartmouth graduates that reveal voices like Ricardo Worl (Tlingit) who understood the expectations of him to act

---


on his commitment to family and community after graduation (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). ChiXapkaid and Inglebret (2007) also draw out the voices of students in their college guide for American Indian and Alaska Native students who reveal strong desires to go to college and succeed so they can return home and help their communities. In Guillory and Wolverton (2008) and Guillory (2009) the motivation of 30 Native American students at three land grant institutions to persist in their studies to graduation was reported to stem, in part, from the prospect of “giving back” to their tribal communities even in the face of overwhelming circumstances like debilitating poverty.

If not for the explicit goal of strengthening their own tribal communities, graduating from college will put within reach for these students the life-sustaining financial rewards associated with college-going efforts (IHEP, 2007; Baum, 2013). Research shows that a college degree almost always correlates with higher earnings over a lifetime (Carnevale et al., 2011). Achieving anything less exacerbates the American Indian and Alaska Native status of having the highest national poverty rate by race (United States Census Bureau, 2013).

From the pool of those of who managed to access college and persist to graduation like Caleb, there is much to learn. Lomawaima (2000) reasoned that through American Indian boarding school (oral) histories (Lomawaima, 1987; Haig-Brown, 1988; Johnston, 1989; Adams, 1995; Lomawaima, 1995; Bell, 1998; Child, 1998) the path has been long cleared for scholars to know how to respectfully listen and analyze alumni stories. But still the literature on higher

---

7 And still others followed that reinforced the argument (Fear-Segal, 2007; Fontaine, 2010 and Fortunate Eagle, 2010).
education has barely tapped student experience and has either erased American Indians and Alaska Natives, viewing them as a statistically insignificant group (Tierney, 1991) or with few exceptions “relegated [them] to footnotes in books about other minorities in the United States” (ibid., 309). Not even peripherally do authoritative texts on the history of higher education (Perkin, 1991; Geiger, 1999) capture Indigenous student experiences. The gap in effort inspires a need to surface and examine the small body of literature that does exist. This review of the literature will trace the history of how scholars have attended to Indigenous higher education, probe the limitations of this work and underline the need for illuminating the experience of American Indian and Alaska Native college graduates.

American Indians have been inexhaustibly studied outside of higher education. The interest was fueled in the mid 19th through to the early 20th century by an urgent call from the scientific community to collect evidence of what was perceived to be a “vanishing savage” from primordial lands (Gruber, 1970). Native North Americans were caught up in the practice of salvage ethnography, which was at the core of the emerging discipline of American anthropology. The tradition of these in situ collection efforts persisted long enough for the preeminent Standing Rock Sioux historian, theologian, lawyer and activist Deloria (1969) to observe in *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* that every summer something like an ill wind blew in “anthropologists and other friends” to root and roost on reservations for their summer research. However, endeavors in research specifically on Indigenous students in higher
education, and especially on their personal experiences in their own voices (Tierney, 1992a), was not vigorously undertaken. That it fell more on the far margins of scholarly interest (Berry, 1968; Pavel, 1992; Lomawaima, 1995; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Reyhner, 2001; Demmert, 2001; Demmert et al., 2006) has been a long-standing lament (Tierney, 1991; Carney, 1999; Fox et al., 2005; McClellan et al., 2005; Larimore et al., 2005; Brayboy et al., 2012; Shotton et al., 2013; Willmott et al., 2015). Willmott et al. (2015) reviewed the scholarship over a twenty-year period from 1991 through to 2011 and found that the research on Native college students was confined to four leading higher education journals that produced a total of 36 articles from a pool of 2,683. With a wider lens, two broad themes are visible in the literature on American Indian and Alaska Native students: lack of persistence in college and successful college persistence or achievement (Huffman 2008b, 2010). The lack of persistence has been attributed to personal attributes, cultural mismatch, and inadequate institutional commitment to retention. If students persist in college, factors shown to be associated with this success include family and community support, cultural identity and the desire to give back to strengthen Indigenous home communities.

**Lack of Persistence**

**Personal Attributes**

The colonial construction that Indians were savages and needed to be aggressively assimilated in the image of civilized whites (Wright, 1988; Adams, 1988, 1995; Wright, 1995) is a specter that endures in the educational literature. Deyhle and Swisher (1997) found in their expansive review of research on
American Indian and Alaska Native education (including higher education) that up until the 1960s, students were predominantly perceived and characterized as problems with an innate deficit. In a review of the literature on Indian (pre-college) education and his longitudinal cross-cultural research amongst six Southwest tribes, for example, Havighurst (1957) proposed that while Indian children were as innately capable as whites, their distinct culture and lack of motivation precluded school success. In a book dedicated to the predominant theoretical perspectives on American Indian education, Huffman (2010) suggests that early studies were potently impacted by federal policies in the 1950s and 1960s that terminated Indian tribes’ status and relocated their members to urban areas to effect assimilation. As Native people struggled with displacement from traditional homelands, “It was a small step for [urban social scientists] to conceive of Native people as culturally deficient and in need of greater acculturation with the mainstream of American society” (Huffman, 2010, p. 166).

Cultural deprivation or deficit models, like the popularized “culture of poverty” model (Lewis, 1966), developed to describe generational poverty, also hung thickly in the air to lend currency to deficits in the dispossessed.

Interest in “problems” specific to Indian college students arguably began with Artichoker and Palmer (1959), who observed research much more weighted towards elementary and secondary education. Bridging this gap with a study of mostly Sioux Indian students (n=72) enrolled in all four-year South Dakota colleges (in 1957), the authors uniquely acknowledge that their personal experiences shape the interpretation of data and recommendations. Though not
revealed in the study, Artichoker is an enrolled Lakota (whose father attended the Haskell Indian Industrial Training School) and was rising to prominence in Indian education at both the local and national levels. Palmer was a faculty member at the University of South Dakota and helped organize Indian Youth Conferences. Notwithstanding their personal and professional identities, the intention to “[s]pecifically ... isolate and analyze the problems of Indian college students ... that stem from the fact of their unique heritage” (Artichoker & Palmer, 1959, p. 6) was surprisingly deficit oriented. Employing two standardized questionnaires that allowed for intragroup (bilingual and English-only Indian students) and intergroup (Indian students and non-Indian students) comparisons, the researchers found distinct differences in the perception of problems in college around certain themes. Indian students identified more problems in college overall than non-Indians, especially around college adjustment, finances and social life. For bilingual students (meaning those who retained a traditional Indigenous language), a disproportionately greater number of problems were perceived to be troublesome, including feeling their identity was more of a “handicap” (Artichoker & Palmer, 1959, p. 14) in interactions with people. Some solutions to address these distinctively “Indian” problems openly critique if not degrade students, parents and home reservations. The authors suggest, for example, that students would receive the motivation to learn both from special remedial summer programming and even boarding school residencies because they interrupt the negative influence of their parents who are disinterested in the education of their

---

8 Other researchers would take up a more strident deficit posture around Native languages by arguing a direct relationship to college failure for their speakers (Zintz, 1963).
children. The authors also surmise that some of the financial stress expressed by Indian students could be headed off by a quick rate of assimilation into college life. This way, they argue, the distortion of financial need versus want (stemming from a reservation culture of deprivation) could be leveled out. Additionally, while Artichoker and Palmer (ibid.) disavow a wider avenue of study they felt might never be sorted out – that Indians are “culturally-disorganized” (Artichoker & Palmer, 1959, p. 34) or (more positively framed) personally experience a diverse cultural reality depending on their level of acculturation and/or assimilation - they suggest that Indians ultimately have to change or be changed for college problems to be ameliorated.

In a brief report on the tenure of Indian students over 33 years at Southern State Teachers College in South Dakota, the foundational premise around Indian college students more sharply cuts towards a deficit orientation (Ludeman, 1960). In the preface, W.W. Ludeman (1960), who was president of the college, affirms the sweeping assimilatory efforts of federal Indian policy that used higher education as a lever to ‘wean’ Indians from reservation life and ‘totally rehabilitate’ them as a people. He documents (from the years 1925-1958) how many Indian students maintained enrollment from one to twelve quarters or more (with three quarters equalling one year of college) and the average grade point average in each of the quarter groupings. That only nine students of the total sample (n=112) over the entire 33 year study time frame persisted for four years or more falls short of the overarching federal goals for Indians that education converts them and which Ludeman (1960) supports. The report made no
observable qualitative inquiry into any student constituency’s college experiences and only very shallowly referenced those Indian students who persisted the longest as ones who assumed the highest positions in a professional field. With no links to evidence, it made for a disorienting leap to the hammering conclusions that reservation life provided a “short background” (Ludeman, 1960, p. 334) for Indian students who exhibit a “serious inferiority complex” (Ludeman, 1960, p. 334) and demonstrate “attitudes of dependence” (Ludeman, 1960, p. 335) that inhibit college persistence. The implication is that Indian students just need to get with the college program and pull up their bootstraps.

At a private university with a prominent Indian education program, Boutwell et al. (1973) set out to test the hypothesis that there were no differences between American Indian and non-Indian college students in response to other studies that found American Indian college success is hampered by their less competitive nature and strong commitments to family that pressures them to leave college for home. In a random sample of 110 students (where sixty-eight percent identified as American Indian), Boutwell et al. (1973) administered a quantitative survey that looked at the perceived value of education, problems in college, grade-point averages, attendance, and experiences of racial climate. The results showed significant differences between Indian and non-Indian student populations on three items: Indian students connected more schooling to leading a more enjoyable life, (but) chose to miss school more often and perceived more racial discrimination at the university. From these, Boutwell et al. (1973) hypothesize that Indians “partially” become “red apples” (i.e., assimilate
culturally white attitudes and values) to succeed in college because they attributed more value to education than their non-Indian student counterparts and left behind their home reservations to attend school to participate in aspects of white culture. The “red apples” term aside, the authors err in the presumption that Indians do not value a system of education on their own terms and fail to acknowledge the courage these students showed by crossing significant cultural divides – from home to a western college setting.

In a report covering the years 1963-1972 by Kohout and Kleinfeld (1974), staying in school was a challenge that Alaska Native students seemed to be winning considering that those who entered college for the first time (at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, Alaskan Methodist University and Sheldon Jackson College) quadrupled. But even though their academic needs were being met (through special remediation courses, for example), Alaska Native student college success in terms of grade point average was reported to be far below that achieved by non-Native students. The authors stop short of exploring why there was a disparity in college success between student populations, but suggest from individual case studies (only referenced and not included in the report) that Alaska Native students have non-academic issues to be addressed that sharply ring deficit in nature, like a lack of direction, lack the discipline to resist negative social pressures and inability to make the connection between their life goals and a college education.

The problematic personal attributes presumed in Indian students continue to surface long into the literature. In their study examining Indian college student
retention, Falk and Aitken (1984) take-up the perceptions of both Indian students (n=125) who received financial assistance from the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (MCT)\(^9\) and eleven college personnel as to what factors matter most. For Indian students, obstacles to completing a degree were statistically found to be extrinsic (lacking adequate financial, parental and friend support). As with Ludeman (1960), college personnel in this study felt that Indian students harbor an innate deficit to foil college graduation. More specifically, in this case, Indian students were believed to lack the personal motivation to graduate. On this point, as part of their recommendations, Falk and Aitken (1984) validate the personnel perception in their call for students to persevere and that best practices around college retention would include regularly reminding them.

A tectonic shift is observed in the Indian higher education literature when explanations of poor college achievement for Indians move from a unidirectional “blame the student” view to a more bidirectional one. Scott (1986) is most instructive. The study acknowledges the literature that assumes an assimilation model for Indian student success, but mostly veers from that path by implicating the university as the reason for the difficulties experienced by Indian college students, especially those with deep cultural attachments. Finding that over a four-year span, the persistence of “cultural Indian[s]” (Scott, 1986, p. 392) significantly differed from the general student population, the university was called upon to make it more amenable for them to stay.

\(^9\) MCT is a consortium of six member reservations in northern Minnesota and includes Bois Forte, Fond du Lac, Grand Portage, Leech Lake, Mille Lacs, and White Earth.
Cultural Mismatch

The jagged way in which higher education institutions and Indigenous students sometimes come together is expressed in the literature as cultural incompatibility. In the literary world, we see this conflict as an actual life and death struggle for Caleb Cheeshateaumuck. Crossing over to English ways robbed him of life within one year after graduation. It brought fierce condemnation from the uncle that Brooks (2011) imagines for Caleb. Taking a boy from his Indigenous homelands weakened his spirit, Tequamuck said, because it “pulled it between two worlds” (Brooks, 2011, p. 293), his culture of origin and the dominant white culture. This idea of “two worlds” is conceptualized by scholars in a similar dramatic tone. Wright (1995), in a broad historical review, empathetically employs the metaphor to describe the torment of homesickness for Indian youth upon entering Colonial colleges. Thelin (2011) describes Indian students in the Colonial colleges as “trapped between worlds” (Thelin, 2011, p. 30). Although some scholars argue these metaphors are tropes that blunt the richness and complexity of students all along the educational spectrum (Henze & Venette, 1993; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997), others deploy “two worlds” in novel ways. From their observations over four academic years of Native students in a university access program Walsh-Bowers and Johnson (2002) use the Onondaga Nation phrase “feet in two vessels” to convey the imbalance Native students experience when immersed in a contrasting culture like college settings and the resulting stress. “[O]ne boat, the canoe, carried Native traditions, values, and beliefs, while the other boat, the vessel with sails,
carries the dominant white culture” (Walsh-Bowers & Johnson, 2002, p. 83). In intimate moments of stirring self-reflection, some Indigenous scholars also lay bare their challenges of maintaining vibrant Indigenous identities when crossing over into the academic world (Wilson, 2008; Faircloth, 2009). To persist in higher education, Drywater-Whitekiller (2010) sees students like shape-shifters in how they must actively bridge their culture to the mainstream. In all these ways, culturally resonant descriptions of balancing dramatically different worlds seem more to help build a complex picture of experiences rather than subtract from it. However, this way of formulating cultural mismatch does not take into account how institutions fail to acknowledge and support marginalized Indigenous students.

Suppose the two worlds are unreconciled for students. In that case, survival in higher education is deeply compromised. The research scholarship on Indian higher education references survival less like what Brooks (2011) eventually unfolds for Caleb and more as students persisting longer in the system. Carroll (1978) is an exception. In the preface to his study of students at the all-Indian Haskell Indian Junior College, he notes that because Indians live on the “margin[s] of two societies” (Carroll, 1978, p. 11), they might develop feelings of inferiority and self-defeating behaviors that lead to despair and even suicide.¹⁰ Even at Haskell, where there was some opportunity for students to

explore Indian history, values, traditions and use their language(s), Carroll (1978) infers an overall pattern of cultural marginality. However, there is no accompanying backstory here to lend support to his observations. Comparing only the ACT and GPA scores (from an undetermined sample) of the first-semester freshman identified as traditional Indian and non-traditional Indian, he hangs the study’s conclusions on “educational anomie” (Carroll, 1978, p. 14), especially for more traditional students, on a whisper-thin thread. Moreover, the description of students as operating “in a limbo between two cultures” (Carroll, 1978, p. 14) in the marked absence of their rich stories infers an aimlessness. The study shows strength in its admission of weakness – that future research should better define marginality by a more thorough study of students in home and school environments.

Sometimes differences in college experiences between Native American and white students due to cultural incompatibility are surprisingly not found at all. Using the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) with a sizeable undergraduate sample (n=544) to assess the investment effort in academic activities (such as active learning, contact with faculty and cooperation with peers) Cole and Denzine (2002) found no significant difference between the two student groups measured, except that American Indian students indicated more college satisfaction. Plenty of gaps in our understanding of the personal responses, though, are due to the study's quantitative nature. That the survey instrument was developed only to get at college outcomes (i.e., graduation) shades our full view of the American Indian participants and how their
backgrounds and pre-college experiences might have played a role in their positive engagement with the university.

From qualitative interviews over five years, Huffman (2001, 2008) is able to offer more in-depth insights on American Indian college students and even intragroup differences. For those students classified as culturally traditional, divergent educational outcomes were documented. Estranged students who held stalwartly firm to their traditional culture and vociferously resisted assimilation went through a quick succession of stages that led to disengagement and most withdrawing from college. Transculturated students too experienced painful early periods of alienation, but actively studied academia's rules of engagement and relied on their ethnic identity to adroitly tack back and forth between worlds to eventually become full and successful participants in college. For all students, though, Huffman (2008) found that feelings of alienation brought on by isolation, cultural discontinuity and racism were a unifying theme of their college experiences. Recommendations for changes in educational practices to retain Indigenous students emerged from the study. It is a thread that connects studies both before and after Huffman.

Institutional Shortcomings to Retention

A more direct critical tone around institutional efforts to support Indigenous students emerges in the literature with Lin et al. (1988), who observed the persistent downward trend of American Indian student academic performance from elementary school to college. The study was intentional about moving from the conventional deficit tack of research that connected school difficulties to
individual student factors like psychology or culture. Using a quantitative survey method, they looked at the school environment as a factor in academic performance and found that American Indian students at a four-year predominantly white institution (n=616) valued a college education more than white students even though their GPA was lower overall, but felt significantly more targeted hostility on campus and a greater sense of isolation. The study is pointedly critical of the institutional failure to attend to the adverse climate experienced by Native students in order for academic performance to be improved, but neither the discussion nor conclusion link either (campus climate or GPA) to the calamitous step of leaving college altogether.

A paper commissioned by the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force that examined the history of Indian higher education found that students continue to face the same educational obstacles documented in an unprecedented 1969 Senate Subcommittee Report on Indian Education (Wright, 1991). Among those major barriers to staying in and graduating from college was an “unsupportive institutional climate” (Wright, 1991, p. 6) like a lack of trusted role models on campuses and an infrastructure unable or unwilling to respond to cultural conflict. Institutional exemplars featured in the paper shared a commitment to honoring the distinct cultural identities of Indian students through multiple means.

---

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) take up the discordant experiences of Indigenous college students and reimagine the college ecosystem to more widely redress their personal and cultural estrangement with an Indigenous framework called the “Four R’s -- Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility.” They argue in their academic paper that if universities committed to adopt such a posture, they would set out right to increase their knowledge of First Nations students, begin to appreciate the distinct cultural differences and build a more conducive place for learning. The process would include developing a more relevant curriculum, implementing policies and practices that specifically respond to First Nations cultural knowledge and experiences, and altering the faculty and student paradigm so more reciprocal human relationships are enacted. A shared responsibility for participation in higher education in the Four R’s model would be achieved through initiatives within and outside university borders that increase power and access to knowledge for both First Nations students and communities. Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) acknowledge that universities will not be rushing to take up what they see as drastic measures of reform, but they press on with some urgency in the call because of what is at stake – the empowerment of First Nations people. At the core of their critique of higher education institutions is that they perennially fail First Nations people both in Canada and the United States, evidenced by enrollment and completion statistics, and then shroud experiences with deficit language “such as “low achievement,” “high attrition,” “poor retention,” “weak persistence,” ...” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 3). The strong overtones of blaming the victim, they contend, justify the institutional focus on usual student
support initiatives that only do service to assimilate the Indigenous student. But Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) suggestion to abandon academically-related and even culturally specific solutions altogether (like those presented by Murguia et al., 1991; and later, Brown & Kurpius, 1997; Pavel, 1999; Reyes, 2000; Guillory, 2009; Adelman et al., 2013) pushes out of view the possibility that what is needed to support the successful endeavor of college for a diverse Indigenous student body is the widest variety of interrelated institutional efforts.

Unlike the dark tone of Wright (1991), who brings urgency to a full list of institutional change strategies, an American Council on Education research brief on American Indian experiences in higher education by O'Brien (1992) is patiently optimistic. Highlighting the growth and success of tribally controlled community colleges, her brief recommends predominantly white institutions “might” look to them for learning to create a positive institutional climate for students, especially in the face of precipitous drop-out rates in the first year. Hope to gain clarity around students' educational experiences as promised at the outset in this brief though dims because the reader is left to wrestle with statistical vignettes without interpretation. What we do learn is that “experiences” refer exclusively to the overall demographic picture of how Indian students perform in college – not to a direct student translation of college life.

A much more critical look at the departure of American Indian students from college found that change in institutional actions and policies will never be a sea change if harmful models like social integration that ignore human diversity continue to be employed by white college administrators (Tierney, 1992a, b).
Analyzing administrator discourse over two years, Tierney (1992a) found that some perceived American Indian student resistance to twist and bend towards the institution (at the expense of their cultural identity) as a weakness and the reason for “their” “problem” in college. Even if American Indian students are academically successful, negative perceptions of them can still figure prominently. In his case study of two American Indian graduating seniors in a predominantly white institution, Steward (1993) found that having different interpersonal engagement patterns could potentially be misinterpreted and even maligned by campus administrators, faculty and staff. Instead of attributing strength to how a student creatively assessed and navigated campus environments, one of the study participants, for example, who was quieter and reserved, risked being seen as withdrawn, disinterested, and worse, incompetent. The institutional rewards for this student were projected in the study to be less favorable than the other student who was more outgoing. The findings foreshadowed the rich ethnographies of Indigenous students in Ivy League universities whose strategic behavior on campus to be (in)visible helped them persist but did not afford them the control of how they were perceived (Brayboy, 2004). The choices these Indigenous students made for themselves were portrayed as a form of activism and, in follow-up work, was fleshed out as an innovative strategy of resistance to structural barriers (Brayboy, 2005).

A quantitative study that compared the experiences of American Indian and white students in a mainstream college (N=409) found significant differences in responses around institutional support (Pewewardy & Frey, 2004). Unlike the
white student sample, no American Indian students disagreed with survey items that asked if universities should offer multicultural courses that build competencies around racial understanding and increase support services for minority students. The survey did not ask if students perceived institutional support. Nevertheless, the authors argue there is institutional responsibility to attend to their climate in order to redress the historic underrepresentation of American Indian and Alaska Native students in college. But a slide back into a deficit description of how “American Indian students appear to have the greatest difficulty with retention…” (Pewewardy & Frey, 2004, p. 48) reverses the overall critical tone toward the university system.

In varying degrees, these studies shake out troubling institutional climates for American Indian and Alaska Native students. In all, they cast a long shadow, especially in light of sobering enrollment figures. Compared to other groups, American Indian and Alaska Native students continue to show a statistically imperceptible increase in achievement of higher education degrees in recent years.12

**Persistence or Achievement**

**Family and Community**

Throughout history, education for Indians delivered by others meant enforced detachment from the cultural strongholds of family and community that traditionally served as foundational systems of support for learners. Although

some research suggests college success has more to do with prior academic achievement (Kleinfeld, 1978), career maturity of Native students (West, 1988), career guidance, especially in the first semester (Hoover & Jacobs, 1992), or high aspirations and confidence in abilities (Brown & Kurpius, 1997), family and community rise as persistent themes for Indian student success in higher education environments.

In a 1973-74 study, Kleinfeld (1978) examined Alaska Native student success in terms of academic preparation, goal orientation and ease in college campus environments. Responses of Alaska Native “freshmen” (n=50) were compared to non-Native “freshmen” (n=42) in semi-structured interviews. The study found that academic success for Alaska Natives was linked most to strong pre-college skills, but there were also significantly higher academic outcomes for both Alaska Native and white college students if they lived in dormitories that animated their feeling of belonging on a large campus.\textsuperscript{13} Not raised by Kleinfeld (1978) is that these community-based living spaces did not seem to assuage the unwelcome and prejudice felt by nearly half of the Alaska Native students sampled in the study. Murguia et al. (1991) more decidedly found a positive relationship in his study of junior and senior Hispanic and Native American students (n=24) at a Southwestern university. Here membership in strong peer enclaves engendered a feeling of constancy and peoplehood, which helped

\textsuperscript{13} In response to the disparity in college enrollment and graduation record for Alaska Native students, Kleinfeld et al. (1987) make a call for innovative ways to increase their success in a paper that documents a unique post-secondary counselor program in a central Alaska school district. Although external to the university system, they found it to be central to student persistence. The system of satellite counselors in Alaska villages stood as a proxy for both the community and parents.
mitigate the disintegrative effects of a large campus, especially during the first year. Lending further support to how a surrogate cultural community (in campus structures like the Native student organization and Native house) can help protect against alienation are in some of the personal stories of Native American alumni from Dartmouth captured by Garrod and Larimore (1997) and Garrod et al. (2017).

In a regional study with a mixed methods approach that used five-part opinionnaires and individual interviews, Wilson (1983) endeavored to draw out the positive factors related to the college academic achievement of Wisconsin Indian students, primarily from urban areas who attended both public and private universities. She found that parent and family support during their time in college were commonalities among the entire cross-section of Indian students and alumni in the sample – those who were currently enrolled, those who had graduated within five years of the study and those that graduated more than five years beyond. Moreover, students ranked parents and family as keys to completing college (second only to obtaining adequate financial aid) because of their encouragement and belief in the value of a college education. Wilson (1983), though, did not explore how universities could build out this pathway in the study recommendations jointly made with respondents.15

14 214 opinionnaires were usable from the 860 that were mailed out. The five sections of the opinionnaire elicited demographic details, student opinions (on their schooling experiences (including racism), parental support of education, ethnic identity, academic preparation, and educational and career goals), adaptation to college, degree of acculturation, and ranked factors that respondents felt contributed to their college completion.

15 Calling up some of the content captured in the opinionnaire, Wilson (1983) did recommend that the realm of influence of Indigenous community elders on youth be examined.
Rindone (1988) found that parents and family combined are the single largest factor contributing to Navajo student achievement. His study sample of alumni, specifically Navajos (n=200) who had at least a four-year undergraduate degree obtained anywhere from 1983-1986, also shared a high level of motivation and commitment towards their academics that doubly secured their college success. However, Rindone (1988) did not anticipate nor discuss how ethnic identity figured into achievement. It is a missed opportunity, especially since fifty percent of the study participants indicated their families were traditional Navajo and the Navajo language was predominant in their home environments.

Another alumni study looked at the personal history and characteristics of enrolled members of Great Plains tribes (n=10) (namely Crow, Northern Cheyenne and Blackfeet) (Davis, 1992). Like Rindone (1988), the study found that family support was the most important factor in student success. More specifically, most graduates stated they were motivated to bring pride to a family member, had family members who valued education and had a family involved in their educational journey. While Davis (1992) observed personal motivation in Indian students to achieve academically, the suggestion that their success is often predicated on what happens before entering college has the unfortunate effect of releasing the responsibility that higher education institutions have towards those in their care.
A study (n=991) with a cross-sectional design set out to uncover and describe factors that worked to help or hinder academic success across the educational spectrum (from high school to college) from the perceptions of American Indian females via extensive interviews collected over two years from 1989-90, who grew up and resided on five Northern Plains reservations across three states (Bowker, 1992). Although an all-Indian population, the sample was very diverse in character and represented very different life experiences. A portion of the sample offers an unvarnished view of deeply challenging home environments, a multitude of personal problems and often uncaring if not hostile school places. In spite of these obstacles, often shown in the literature as risk factors to leaving school early, Bowker (1992) found that over half of the women graduated from high school and often college and that significant support from multigenerational female family members and those outside the immediate family stood out not just as a common feature in the interviews, but reported to be the “single most important factor” (p. 276) to their educational success.

Interested in Indian college student success, Benjamin et al. (1993) interviewed first-time, full-time American Indian freshman (n=166) entering a mid-sized Southwestern state university in the fall of 1984 and 1985. The cohort’s six-year study period showed low levels of persistence, with 26 students or 16 percent of the total sample graduating. Recognizing the study fell short in the representation of cross-cultural diversity (only Navajo students agreed to be participants), Benjamin, et al. (1993) nevertheless did surface the intrinsic need of persisters to maintain strong connections to home, honor familial and
ceremonial obligations, and uphold their traditional cultural traits. In this way, the study turns what is often viewed as a distraction to persistence into cultural competencies for college success. However, the study’s only call for action reads limply in that higher education should value diversity more.

In a small-scale qualitative study of upper level and graduate Alaska Native students (n=7), nurturance that emanated from family (both emotionally and financially) was one of the most important factors identified to incubate college success (Reyes, 2000). Uncommonly, student recommendations for future Alaska Native college students were included in the study. Among them was to keep family connections. Family and community connections, in fact, are argued to be lifelines for students in one of the first Indigenous based theories of retention introduced by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) as the “Family Education Model.” The model was born as a collaborative development among five post-secondary institutions, but primarily Tribal colleges. It widely diverges from the currently operating mainstream higher education model in that it calls for a bridging of relationships with families so they can serve as equal partners in support of their children as students. The model’s intensive level of student-centered commitment to encourage persistence makes it hard to imagine its implementation beyond a Tribal college and any hope for clarity on how it might puzzle into mainstream institutions is left unfilled.

Jackson et al. (2003) recruited Native American college seniors (n=15) in good academic standing from four-year colleges in the Southwest to draw out, in one-on-one interviews, the perception of factors that helped them persist in
college and the kinds of obstacles they faced along the way. Participants were from and lived on reservations for most of their schooling lives and had parents who were both Native. The researchers assumed these characteristics contributed to a stronger ethnic identity and would present opportunities to observe more cross-cultural problems in college transitions. Both family encouragement and structured social support on campus dedicated to Native American students came through as readily apparent “surface themes” related to persistence. “Deeper themes” uncovered in the analysis, though, showed students wrestled with thoughts of succeeding in a college off the reservation, perhaps compromising their ethnic identity, and then not fitting back in with their family, friends and home community. Jackson et al. (2003) acknowledge the determination and exceptional resilience of students who faced down serious obstacles to pursue studies while maintaining the parallel commitment to home ties. They encourage further research to uncover other innate abilities that help Indian students adapt to college and even boldly turn outside campus walls to suggest tribes better align their messages to Indian youth that going to college does not contradict their identity or compromise their tribal membership. But in suggesting ways students could be assisted on their educational journey, Jackson et al. (2003) end up pardoning campuses from the work they should be vigorously taking up. Institutionalized racism, for example, was reported to be a problem for students on their campuses. That Jackson et al. (2003) advocate instead for human resources (like peers, counselors and mentors) to help Indian students talk through their experiences and deal with their conflict implies the
problem is intrapersonal and that a lethal campus climate is unchangeable. The missed opportunity to explore the positive innate factors they already sift out in the study, like ethnic identity, to help moderate an incongruous campus culture is more vigorously taken up in the next section of research literature.

Cultural Self-Identity or Ethnic-Identity

In an early Indigenous memoir, Ohiyesa (meaning “the Winner”) or Charles Eastman (Santee Dakota Sioux) sweeps the reader up in a journey that moves from the American plains first to Dartmouth College in 1887 and then Boston University in 1890, where he graduates with a degree in medicine. On this journey, Charles declared to have never lost sight of who he was – “I am an Indian” (Eastman, 1916, p. 195). Cultural self-identity has been observed to be a field of rigorous study for over a century (Berry, 1999), but the research literature on how ethnic identity impacts Indigenous college persistence is a more recent endeavor.

In an extensive review of the Native American educational research literature spanning early childhood to college, Demmert (2001) found mixed results (identifying only Kerbo, 1981 and Huffman et al., 1986) on how cultural identity impacted college student experiences. In Kerbo (1981), the relationship between academic success (operationally defined by strong college GPA) and cultural factors was tested in a sample of Native American (n=102) and white students (n=151) enrolled across four Oklahoma universities. Compared to whites, Native American students reported a lower college GPA. The strength of Native American cultural identity was measured by only two items: knowledge of
their traditional language and whether they or their parents lived on a reservation. The significance of language did not show in the statistical modeling and was removed from the study’s analysis altogether, making the overall conception of cultural identity even shallower. From results of the survey instrument, Kerbo (1981) identified predictors of Native American GPA: “percent of white blood,” “number of white friends,” “percent of whites in high school,” and “identity conflict,” and concluded that Native student academic achievement is best predicated on their strong relationship, integration and identification with whites. He draws on studies of children and self-concept (not cited in the text) to help illuminate these findings and suggest that Native students might similarly derive a feeling of confidence via social integration and thereby do better academically in college. The study is unflinching in how it hooks success for Indian students on the coattails of white students.

In contrast to Kerbo (1981), Huffman et al. (1986) found that for Sioux students (n=38) at the University of South Dakota and Black Hills State College, traditional cultural identity (more expansively measured by the capacity of an Indigenous language, participation in traditional ceremonies and permanent residency on a reservation) served as a protective factor and heightened personal confidence in abilities, which translated to academic achievement (operationally defined by college GPA). The achievement of white students (n=48) showed a significant relationship to high school GPA. The finding supports the study’s observation that white students experience a more seamless transition to college because the setting is “simply an extension of the
educational social institution of their culture” (Huffman et al., 1986, p. 32).

Underplayed was the finding that integration and college participation showed no relationship to college GPA for both white students and Native students. For Native students, the implications loom large, but were not raised in the study’s discussion. Colleges should focus more on supporting Indigenous students’ abiding ethnic identity and less on assimilating them into an artificial campus culture.

In other investigations like Bowker (1993), self-confidence and pride in identity (even if more assimilated to the dominant culture) were linked to college success. Details from Bowker’s original work (1992) cited above more fully unfold in her book (Bowker, 1993), where the interview data is presented in 30 individual profiles (10 of whom were college graduates) and we learn that a portion (288) of the (991) American Indian female sample attended college for at least two years.16 In both publications (1992, 1993), Bowker finds no discernable lynchpin for students’ success or failure. But in response to the research literature that found Indian students are alienated from school and “drop out” because of internal conflicts around fitting into two different cultural worlds (though no citations are provided), Bowker notes (1993) she designed survey questions to attend to the relationship of self/tribal identity and school success. Bowker (1993) distills from the narratives that women who identified with either Indian heritage or white culture did better in school than those with no ethnic identity attachments at all. Unfortunately, the “finding” (Bowker, 1993, p. 182)

16 Of the 288 women, 31 percent received associate degrees, 57 percent completed bachelor degrees, 10 percent finished masters degrees, and 2 percent were awarded doctorates.
seems to be a composite of all the student profiles, leaving the college graduates indistinguishable in the mix, effectively compromising its generalizability. Furthermore, the narrative segments that Bowker uses to generate her “finding,” though helpful in understanding the deep complexity of women’s lives, do not relate to the college setting or their connection to college persistence.

Huffman (2001) asserts that the strength of ethnic identity shapes the college experiences and outcomes for American Indians. But in his study of predominantly Lakota college students (n=69) at a small midwestern university over five years, he found that for those who strongly identified as culturally traditional, successful academic outcomes depended more on whether a student could overcome initial acute alienation and willingly move between two different cultural worlds – American Indian and mainstream. Even though Huffman (2001) portrays these students as choice-makers in their own story, he does seem to slide closer to a deficit-based explanation of why some leave college altogether. He describes the “estranged students” for example, as not having the “social-psychological means to explore the trappings of unfamiliar cultural surroundings” (Huffman, 2001, p. 30) or the ability to comfortably move about in a predominantly white collegiate milieu.

Still in the context of high rates of college attrition of Native students, Huffman and Ferguson (2007) examine the “personal valuations” of upperclassmen (n=101) about their college experiences over five years with a particular focus on extrinsic (reservation versus non-reservation background) and intrinsic factors (cultural conflict, disposition toward education, and cultural
traditionalism). Students with reservation backgrounds were found to have a stronger connection to traditional culture and experienced greater cultural conflict in college but reported more positively on their college career overall. The study suggests that wrestling with cultural conflict for these students increased a sense of pride in cultural heritage that helped them to persist. Remarkable in how it destigmatized the reservation backgrounds of Indian students, the study is remiss in acknowledging the double burden weighed on Indian students. Instead of only having to achieve academically, Indian students who are culturally traditional must also “wrestle” (Huffman & Ferguson, 2007, p. 68) to preserve their cultural autonomy to secure their rightful existence on campus.

In psychology, minority ethnic identity is also considered central to the psychological well-being of racial and ethnic minorities. Here it is said to derive “from a sense of peoplehood within a group, a culture, and a particular setting” (Phinney & Ong, 2007, p. 271) and has been uniquely examined by the **Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)** (Phinney, 1990, 1992; Phinney et al., 2007; and Phinney & Ong, 2007). The MEIM has been employed to study American Indian adolescents (Newman, 2005; Schweigman et al., 2011) and more rarely American Indian college students where ethnic identity was found to be associated with academic identity. Okagaki et al. (2009) sampled American Indian (n=67) and European American (n=95) undergraduate students from two tribal colleges and two state universities to elucidate a connection to their ethnic identity, orientation towards school and perception of parental support on their educational journey. For American Indian students, the study found that they
valued education and (more than white students) its practical benefits, reported a stronger connection to their ethnic identity than white students, and equal to white students identified parental support as instrumental to a positive academic identity. Similar to Huffman’s “transculturated” students, American Indians in this study felt that they could both academically achieve and stay true to their ethnic identity. Curiously, Okagaki et al. (2009) do not pick up any thread related to a major feature of their sample; 72 percent of the American Indian students and 73 percent of the European American students were female. Around the time of this study, American Indian and Alaska Native females surpassed American Indian males in college representation by 21 percentage points when in 1978 there was parity in enrollment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). This enrollment landscape required at least a nod, but even more so a full call for research. For the benefit of American Indians and communities alike, as the next section implies, the power of both men and women with a college education is needed.

Giving Back

In a quantitative study that included an estimated 90 percent of all Indian students enrolled in South Dakota colleges, Artichoker and Palmer (1959) were able to shed some light on reasons for going to college.17 Almost half of the mostly Sioux student sample shared that they wanted to be of “future assistance” (Artichoker & Palmer, 1959, p. 17) to their people. The notable finding by

---

17 For some context, the total enrollment in South Dakota state higher education institutions was documented to be 8,157 in 1949-50 and 14,621 by the Fall of 1959 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993).
Artichoker and Palmer (1959) was an early forerunner to what would eventually become a more prominent theme in the Indian higher education literature – *giving back*. Unlike the idea of service or volunteerism, giving back is described as an inextricable part of the Indigenous value system (ChiXapkaid & Inglebret, 2007). It is also said to demonstrate reciprocity between the individual and their Indigenous community that advances tribal nation building (Brayboy et al., 2014). Reyes (2019) takes on the theme of giving back to get at its meaning for Native students and how they activate it. Her qualitative study of Native Hawaiian, Native American and/or Alaska Native college graduates (n=11) reveals a constellation of stories that shows giving back is multifaceted. What they hold in common is that study participants wanted to redress colonization’s ongoing effects and found they could serve their communities through achieved higher education expertise in work domains like health care, technology, communication, agriculture, and political and judicial advocacy. Instead of an alienating institution, higher education is spotlighted as a positive force for Native peoples and communities, drawing Native students back to their roots.

While scholars may undergird the idea of giving back with common defining features, there are gradations in how they connect it to college persistence. Some are more suggestive. Danziger (1996) studied Walpole Island First Nation band members, drawn from a sample (n=67) who attended Walpole Island First Nation is a First Nation/Indian band/reserve in southwestern Ontario, Canada that borders Michigan. Like the other 600+ Canadian First Nation/Indian bands, it is a governing unit with lands “reserved” for them under Canadian federal law – the Indian Act (originally passed in 1876).
college and university programs between 1965-1994, and found these alumni were influenced by their families to pursue higher education and had “duty-bound” (Danziger, 1996, p. 240) feelings to return home to them and the community upon graduation. Indeed, much of this educated pool of students shared their newly acquired educational skills for the wider good of Walpole Island First Nation, with only 6 percent of the sample reporting they consistently worked off the Reserve. Waterman (2007) also examines the college experiences of Indigenous students and their trajectories after graduation. In her study of Haudenosaunee\textsuperscript{20} alumni (n=12), intentions for going to college that surfaced did not initially include a formed conception of how education would help their people. But along the journey, while maintaining close community and family connections, these students discovered purpose in their educational pursuit. Like Danziger (1996), all the study participants in Waterman (2007) were determined to be either back home or working with Native people or other minority populations.

Other literature focused on Native American educational experiences implies more directly that their motivation to give back affects their college persistence (Huffman, 2011; Bingham et al., 2014). Huffman (2011) examines college perceptions among American Indian students (n=86) at a South Dakota university. Significant amongst his findings were that students who reported they were going to return/live on a reservation after college demonstrated a stronger traditional cultural affiliation and had aspirations to serve their people with their

\textsuperscript{20} Also known as the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, which includes the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora Nations in the state of New York.
higher education experience. Invoking and extending his transculturation theory, Huffman (2011) infers that these students were better equipped to persist in college and were more oriented towards serving Native community needs because of their foundational cultural identity.

Bingham et al. (2014) explored Indigenous women’s lived experience in college and the influences of their cultural identities. Their qualitative study included students at a Canadian university (n=9) and a college in the southwestern United States (n=11). The authors identified several themes in the interviews, including a desire to honor Indigenous culture through “cultural preservation” and “service to Indigenous communities” (Bingham et al., 2014, p. 620). Participants expressed a desire to return to their home reserve/reservation communities after college to reactivate their connections to traditional cultural knowledge and activities and serve either as a role model or in a career that would help the community or Indigenous people overall. Pursuing a career that would assist Native nations infused a sense of purpose in the participants. They saw education as a lever to help them honor their commitment to community.

Bingham et al. (2014) recommend tangible solutions for institutions to empower Native students like investing in culturally responsive student centers with resident Native elders, building connections to Native women in the community who might serve as role models, tailoring career counseling, and introducing personal counseling. Responding to participants in the study who reported

---

21 Huffman defines transculturation as “the process of [an American Indian student] learning the cultural nuances found in mainstream higher education while retaining and relying upon their cultural heritage to forge a strong identity and sense of purpose” (Huffman, 2011, p. 2).
feeling disconnected from their home communities during their educational experiences and wanting to return to give back, Bingham et al. (2014) suggest that universities design programs to help (re)build those linkages.

Although a guidebook for American Indian and Alaska Native students to achieve college success, ChiXapkaid and Inglebret (2007) weave in some instructive student voices and profiles to show how giving back figures into the motivation to succeed in college. While the education scholars generate a unique Indigenous model to encapsulate the Indigenous higher education journey, they do not link to any academic research that shows a relationship between students wanting to give back and their academic persistence.

Articles by Guillory and Wolverton (2008) and Guillory (2009) present the findings of Guillory’s (2002) dissertation that found (through focus group interviews with mostly junior, senior and a few graduate Native students (n=30) enrolled at higher education institutions in Washington, Idaho and Montana) the consistent theme of giving back as motivation to finish college, second only to family importance. Through student voices, the original study documented the motivation to persist in college because of an abiding commitment to their families and communities even in the face of profoundly challenging campus experiences, living out an ethic deeply ingrained in an Indigenous philosophy that prioritizes the communal over the individual. As if to acknowledge the tenuousness of Native students staying and graduating college, Guillory and

\[22\] At the core of ChiXapkaid and Inglebret’s “Circle of Success” model is “cultural identity” (ChiXapkaid & Inglebret, 2007, p. 152). Community, tribe, family, and individual serve as insulation to this core. The exterior ring of the circle depicts the Indigenous student college pathway and includes preparing, enrolling and returning to the community to serve.
Wolverton (2008) and Guillory (2009) move beyond Guillory (2002) to present distinct institutional retention strategies that could help Native American students stay the college course.

Finally, in a qualitative study of senior students (n=19) with diverse tribal backgrounds at three institutions with a primarily Native student body, Drywater-Whitekiller (2010) found that persistence is related to the pre-entry characteristic of a strong cultural identity. In addition to identity, family and community prominently surfaced in student narratives as reasons that propelled individual college achievement and enkindled the drive to give back and promote positive change in their Native communities. The strengths-based framework of cultural resistance that Drywater-Whitekiller (2010) employs provides a lens for the findings that serve as an antidote to early cultural deficit studies. The claim that Native students already have the intrinsic and extrinsic capacity to meet their needs, though, has the prospective consequence of freeing an institution from the responsibilities to provide the necessary support for Native students.

For Indigenous students (and some alumni) in these studies, the ethic of giving back is reported as an intention to persist in college. The inspiring and culturally resonant oral narratives capture the powerful student desire to give back to their people and communities, but no research set out to specifically test its positive effect on college persistence to graduation. Neither do they draw out and fully explore how giving back (such as serving as a role model or mentoring youth) is defined by Indigenous students. More observable is that these studies
on persistence surface the metaphor of giving back only as motivation to succeed.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Overview

Stepping into the past of Indigenous alumni to gather up strands of their life stories to understand what led them to pursue college and helped them persist is a personal engagement that honors Indigenous cultural ways of listening, learning and teaching through the oral form. An inspirational model for this work is Archibald (2008), an Indigenous educator from the Sto:lo First Nation of the Lower Fraser River in British Columbia, Canada. In her process of uncovering and sometimes reawakening Northwest Coast elder oral traditions and learning to make meaning from them, Archibald invokes the metaphor of a cedar basket. Sto:lo women are known for their baskets. Each strand of the basket is distinctive on its own, but when woven together in a design Archibald says creates “story meaning” (Archibald, 2008, p. x) and reveals something about the maker and their “relationships with family, community, nation, land, and nature” (Archibald, 2008, p. 2). Individual alumni stories of their college experiences will be as distinctive and layered, but also be expected to emerge from the same kind of nexus because this relationship framework in Indigenous knowledge systems is the way to think about the individual in the world – as

---

23 Cruikshank (1994) provides a distinction between oral tradition and oral history. Oral tradition can mean “material” saved from the past or a “process” that preserves and relays information intergenerationally, but oral history more specifically is the method of recording a first-person narrative about their life experiences (Cruikshank, 1994, p. 404).
24 Cedar for First Nations people of the Northwest Coast is a life-giving force. It provided the materials for everyday life, including their monumental art, and continues to figure into their artistic, spiritual and ceremonial traditions.
interconnected. The collection of these stories, when interwoven, like the Sto:lo basket, will bring some understanding of the patterns underlying college persistence.  

Participants and Indigenous Protocol

This project hinges upon alumni who will be receptive to sharing aspects of their life stories. Unlike Garrod and Larimore (1997) who curated their participant pool of current Native American Dartmouth students and graduates to best reflect the diversity of their cohort, which included consideration of tribal affiliation and geography, my endeavor is more straightforward – to engage Indigenous alumni whom I personally know or will know of from my connections in the Indigenous community and are likely to have compelling lived experiences. This purposive non-random sampling technique is an appropriate research method in the academy to distill and describe phenomena (Bernard, 2002, pp. 180-184). Invitations were made via email, telephone or in-person (if they were located in the metro-Milwaukee area). While some alumni have lived or currently live on or near their Indian reservation or Alaska Native homelands, this residency feature was not be a precondition for their participation. So that I can more responsibly translate their stories, I limited my sample to 5 alumni. I have access to and a strong rapport with most of these alumni developed by way of their attendance at Marquette during my employment there, our joint service work

25 Throughout her dissertation, Tachine (2015) weaves in student stories about their journey into college as freshman. She employs the metaphor of the story rug, which intimately connects to her own rich cultural tradition of Navajo rug weaving. Similar to how Archibald (2008) conceives her story basket, Tachine (2015) centers the narrators’ stories in a single thread but weaves them together in a Navajo story rug to create a collective story.
in the Milwaukee Indian community or mutual connections. They are persons whom I know culturally identify as American Indian/Alaska Native and graduated from Marquette University with an undergraduate degree anywhere from the 1970s to the present day. This expanse of time gave me the opportunity to include those alumni whose Marquette experiences were potentially influenced by the presence of a dedicated American Indian counselor/advisor on staff and an Indian mascot and nickname that officially represented the institution.

For those I come to be privileged to work with on their oral histories, I carefully documented biographical information and tribal affiliations in the way each participant self-identifies (see Appendix A). To begin the project relationship in the right way, I acknowledged the generosity of the participant for their gift of time, as well as intellectual and emotional labor by making an offering or *bagįjįge* following my own Anishinaabe teachings. The offering implies the beginning of a reciprocal relationship that is based on respect and responsibility and includes a curated collection of gifts tailored to each alumni.

All attempts were made to interview participants in-person, but efforts and accommodations are necessary to ensure their participation is made as

---

26 Maxine Smallish (Oneida) held the inaugural full-time position of American Indian Counselor from 1976-1985. Two others followed her in a half-time role (Donna Beckstrom from 1985-1988 and Lori Larsen from 1988-1991) and then unevenly filled by four different staff members for brief segments of time and eliminated altogether in 1993.

27 Marquette has a long and complicated history of Indian mascots and nicknames. “Chief White Buck,” personified by a white male student, dominated the campus scene in 1954. That same year, the institution adopted the “Marquette Warriors” nickname (and kept it through 1993). From 1961-1970 the caricature “Willie Wampum” (mis)served the student body and eventually compelled a core group of Indian students to petition for its dissolution (Thiel, 2011). Indian students in the mid-late 1970s proposed recasting the mascot. Their “First Warrior” was eventually adopted from 1980-1986. See also [https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=hist_4101_5101](https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=hist_4101_5101)

28 In Anishinaabemowin or the Ojibwe language, Anishinaabe means an Ojibwe, Indian or Native. Ojibwe is a heritage language ascribed to the Algonquian language group used by speakers in Canada, North Dakota and the great lakes region.
convenient as possible. I established one-on-one meetings, arranged necessary technology and travel to some of them. In the pandemic climate, a digital platform was made available as an alternative method of engagement if requested. Before each session, I obtained permission to voice record the interview (see Appendix B and C), but I also took notes during each interview to help record research revelations, physical body language, emergent questions and any clarifications that can be addressed in the follow-up interviews.

I am acutely aware that I was building (upon) relationships based on mutual trust. But these people are also my relations in the sense that we have overarching cultural ties and histories that bind. We also share the experience of persisting in college perhaps through a combination of personal attributes, familial and cultural supports, ethnic identity, and/or personal drive to give back to our community as identified in the literature. As a good relative, I have inherent responsibilities throughout all aspects of this project. I needed to honor participant choices and personal power to set an interview cadence or even withdraw from the proceedings at any time, even though it might have introduced setbacks for my established academic timeline and goals. Additionally, while each alumnus was encouraged to attach their given names to their stories, I respected their autonomy and choice to remain anonymous. If they agreed to be identified, I have a considerable obligation as both relative and researcher to be true to the spirit of their story when written, adhere to the basic ethical principles of doing no harm and maximizing the possible benefits as a study participant.
Research Design

Acknowledging the groundbreaking work of Garrod and Larimore (1997) and Garrod, et al. (2017) in their edited collections of Native student voices at Dartmouth College, this project departs from the autobiographical method where an individual provides a narrative account of their own life. It instead examines Native American/Alaska Native student persistence in systems of higher education through an archival oral history method and most distinctively features only alumni voices. Generally, the term oral history refers to any talk about the past. The archival oral history method is more specific and defined by Trimble et al. (2008) in the highly regarded American Indian Oral History Manual as “a planned process for recording and preserving first-person information and making it available to others” (Trimble et al., 2008, p. 15). Quite different from autobiography, the archival oral history method uses in-depth interviews by someone who inspires the narrator to share their life story. In academia, I might be considered a novice in oral history methods. But in relation to my people, listening for teachings is a foundational cultural norm in which I am well versed.

Memories of some Marquette University alumni around educational experiences have been recently ignited in personal and more public conversations with the researcher.29 However, these memories have not been more fully accessed or documented systematically. The alumni experiences having bearing on this oral history project are life before, during and after college.

---

29 See for example Appendix E where American Indian and Alaska Native alumni served on a panel to share their college experiences with participants in a YWCA Unlearning Racism™ series hosted by Marquette University on February 23, 2021. The alumni panel was graphically recorded by art educator and graphic recorder Sherrill Knezel of Meaningful Marks.
A semi-structured protocol allowed for the mutual conversational exchange and the most flexibility in responses demonstrating respect for the story that unfolded, but an interview guide has been developed (see Appendix D). These questions borrow from the ethnographic interview in its use of the sort of “grand tour” probe that “simulates an experience” (Spradley, 1979, p. 86), as well as “mini-tour” questions that get at “smaller aspects of experience” (Spradley, 1979, p. 88) to discover factors that connect to college persistence. When appropriate, pertinent Marquette University archival materials (that included correspondence, newspaper accounts, photographs, diary entries) were also in hand during the interviews to use as visual aids that might trigger additional memories and reflection.

My goal was to interview all participants at least two times. I expected the first interview to be the longest (from two to three hours). Appropriate technology was used to transcribe the audio (either live or recorded) to text. I offered the narrator summaries of their stories for review and editing before every interview. Specific details may be changed, but elaborations on a topic may also be desired. In this action, I am also honoring an Indigenous methodological research practice of “relational accountability” (Wilson, 2008, p. 77) by showing respect for the power of the research participant and being accountable to them by giving back with the openness to grow, learn and be humbled from the interaction. Sharing my synthesis of their stories before every interview helped check for (mis)understanding and moved me towards building a worthy outcome that will be useful to them, Indigenous peoples and tribal communities.
If consent is granted, these first-person recordings will be donated to the Department of Special Collections and University Archives institutional repository following the project and be made publicly available (see Appendix F). The effort would join other important examples of Native American oral history repositories.30

Unfurling the Stories

Like autobiography, the memory bearer in this oral history project was centered. But here, their story was influenced and intervened by me, the researcher as interviewer. The stories then did not just speak for themselves. My questions gently guided and created an interactive exchange that some historians call a “shared authority” (Abrams, 2016, p. 27) over the process. I also translated these remembered experiences to text mostly in the 3rd person, effectively narrating a life through my own eyes with a focus on educational persistence. I hope these stories of persistence might raise the profile of Indigenous students in higher education systems, but also provide a framework for understanding contemporary educational issues for universities hosting them.

LIMITATIONS

Since I was intentionally sampling a small number of alumni who graduated at different times, this study could not capture the Marquette University Indigenous experience at any moment in time, let alone a full history of the institution’s treatment of Indigenous students and whether or not it improved

30 Arizona State University has compiled a library guide for Native American Studies of oral history collections. See https://libguides.asu.edu/c.php?g=263762&p=1761977
over time. Additionally, I was not be able to make general observations about differences in educational experiences between alumni from a reservation (or who spent significant amounts of time on a reservation) and those alumni from an urban or non-Indigenous environment. Finally, explanations for college persistence defy generalizability as well.

In addition to limitations associated with sample size, oral histories are seen as fallible in scientific traditions. They do not produce raw data sets from which facts can be reliably mined because memories are sometimes long detached from the events and experiences they are surfacing. The result, among other inaccuracies, can be a distortion of exact dates and sequences of events in the story. Nonetheless, oral histories are much more than compositions of factual statements. They are creative enterprises where memories are reworked and vital to understanding experience. From an Indigenous perspective, memory and the oral transmission of knowledge are foundational to our distinct traditions and who we are as a people. I would argue that the weakness of this oral history project is more associated with me as the listener, transcriber and interpreter of these stories of survivance.

I recognize that I am not entirely objective in this project. As an Indigenous person, I share a cultural intimacy with these alumni, and they also inspire me. Unlike the few Indigenous students whom America’s earliest colonial

---

31 Arguably, the story would begin with Josiah A. Powless (Oneida), who graduated from Marquette in 1904. See https://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/indians.php
32 Vizenor (2008) defines Native “survivance” as something greater than survival. It is “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” (Vizenor, 2008, p. 1).
colleges sought out, contemporary alumni traversed a campus terrain not built with them in mind. Consequently, I might be rooting for them too much and risk distorting their truths. I had to resist leading them to what I hope would emerge in their life stories and come out well on paper (that I know they and others will read) or discouraging them from sharing aspects that might not fit my preconceived lens of their success. Relying on the established interview protocol (Appendix D) and carefully probing the narrator in any follow-up questions helped avoid slanting the stories.

On the page, these life stories of college achievement do not help me offer predictive universal claims, but hopefully demonstrate a spirit of giving back to current and future Indigenous students by capturing and sharing motivational lessons of persistence. While the project could be faulted for what acclaimed mixed-blood Anishinaabe writer and poet Vizenor (1992) who emphasizes what is lost when researchers put oral stories to paper, I intended to record the voices so they could be accessed and heard, which helps mitigate this criticism. At bottom, these first-person narratives represent only a small range of college experiences and are not be generalizable to the Marquette Indigenous experience, let alone the whole body of Indigenous alumni in the United States. Nonetheless, they are an important addition to a collective story of academic success against the odds.

33 Characters in his novel address this transformation of the oral because the process runs counter to how Indigenous stories are intended to live. “Written words [are] the burial grounds of shadows” (Vizenor, 1992, p. 7) because in the transcription, they become “dead voices” (Vizenor, 1992, p. 7). Blaeser, an enrolled member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and former Wisconsin Poet Laureate, interprets Vizenor as saying that oral stories become constrained by “the artifice of the written language” (Blaeser, 1996, p. 13).
Jo Ann introduced herself in her language. Her Munsee name is *the rising mist in a ray of sunshine woman*. Jo Ann received this name five or six years ago from a younger member of her tribe. Jo Ann is Mohican Munsee. She was born on the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation in 1946 and is the oldest of four siblings. She is a mother of two, has eight grandchildren, and feels blessed by a great-granddaughter. Jo Ann emphasized that she is a proud graduate of Marquette University. A military plane flew overhead around this time in the interview as if to pay homage to Jo Ann, an army veteran.

Jo Ann’s grandfather Pearl Konkapot and grandmother, Lida May Konkapot Gardner, built a house on the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation in the early 1940s. Jo Ann’s father, the youngest of five children, inherited the house. It was where Jo Ann lived as a small girl. Her parents attended the Lutheran Mission Boarding School on their reservation – one of the eleven Indian boarding schools in the state of Wisconsin. It was helpful for them to stay close to home Jo Ann says, but she wished she knew more about their school experiences. “At the time, we didn’t think – I didn’t think of even asking them.” She does know the boarding school ended at 8th grade. Her mom finished up there, but her dad only went to 3rd grade and did not learn to read.

The reservation was remote and, at the time, offered few if any employment opportunities. “My father worked in logging camps and my mom did some of that too. He [also] worked on roads – whatever jobs they could find.”
On the heels of federal policy that terminated support of tribes, the Indian Relocation Act (1956) enticed many tribal members to leave the reservation for urban areas with the promise of jobs. Jo Ann’s family became part of that movement. Before she formally started school, her parents decided to relocate to Milwaukee.

So, I grew up traveling between Milwaukee, and on weekends if they had a car that worked and didn’t break down, we drove up to the reservation and to be there for, you know, our connection with family and everything. But, many of our family also were in Milwaukee ‘cuz they were going through the same thing, of course, a lot of tribal nations ended up sending people to all big cities to work, to find a place to work.

In Milwaukee, Jo Ann’s father got a job with Grede Foundry. He moved the family to various places on the north and south sides of Milwaukee. Jo Ann attended the 8th Street Grade School on Michigan Street. Her mom would walk her there. She remembers her view from their place on North 12th and West State St. It was a boarding house. Jo Ann’s mom was the caretaker. They lived in two big rooms and had to share a bathroom with all the other families living in the house. “When I looked down the road [there] was Marquette University [and] Gesu Church. That was my view. Never in my life did I ever think I’d be going [or knew] there’s a university over there.”

During these early years, Jo Ann was unaware of her family’s economic struggles. “I never thought we were poor, didn’t think about it, but looking back [brings some realization about] how poor we were, that, we just didn’t have our own place at all, we really had to share with other families and groups.” They also did not have a lot of extra money for personal things.
We got to choose from a catalog every year – every summer – two outfits that you could get for school. So, I remember I would switch every other day those outfits, and one day, someone [in school] said to me, “don’t you have any other clothes to wear?” And I thought, you know what, I guess I don’t. One of ‘em had a big hole in the arm, and I’d push it up so you couldn’t see the hole…I remember other young girls that, yeah, they had cute outfits and different things and little socks and, you know, but – but I was clean.

Jo Ann also remembers having fun in grade school, and like later in life, being of service. “I was a lieutenant in the safety crossing guard, so I was kind of a leader in school, I guess.” Eventually, Jo Ann and her family moved to 11th and National on the south side of Milwaukee. It was a much busier road with street cars. At this location, her aunt and family had a flat, and for the first time since arriving in Milwaukee, Jo Ann’s own family had the opportunity to spread out in their own flat right next door. It even had a private bathroom. Jo Ann’s dad continued his work at the foundry, but her mom changed posts and went to work as a nursing assistant at a psychiatric hospital in Wauwatosa to help support the family. It was hard, Jo Ann says. She remembers that they split their heavy schedules – her dad worked during the day and her mom at night.

Jo Ann distinctly remembers the ethnic makeup of this community. It was largely Polish with some American Indian families settling in. Kosciusko Jr. High School was within walking distance, and it would become Jo Ann’s new school. As in grade school, she remembers participating in co-curricular activities. The school needed members for their band, and Jo Ann rose to the call. “[It] brought me to a good group of kids who studied and worked hard.” There were others who “would getcha into trouble. I know. I hung out with them for a while.” Jo
Ann’s parents were able to pay a small fee for her to participate in the band program. She committed herself and all that it offered. Jo Ann even remembers walking to events in the city if she could not afford the bus to get there. She was later invited to play in an All-City Band and the Drum and Bugle Core at South Division High School (where she graduated in 1965). Jo Ann says that getting into music early and finding role models in high school were foundational to setting her up for success.

High school counselors, though, did not play a prominent role for Jo Ann. It was the teachers that Jo Ann remembers because of the support they offered. One teacher wrote her a note about a group of Native people in the city working on setting up a festival on the lakefront (pre-Indian Summer Festival). Their interest was to support the professional development of Native youth through a new competition called Miss Indian Milwaukee. Jo Ann, along with some others, was encouraged to enter and she took up the challenge. She was 17. The Milwaukee Public Museum was involved, Jo Ann says. They set up the questions for the contestants who would be judged on their responses. To the question, “who was Chief Oshkosh?” Jo Ann remembers replying, “beer.” She recalls her response with much light heartedness today but allows that up until that point she had a lack of opportunity to learn much about her tribe and traditions.

Around this time, urban Native people started working collectively and becoming more active – setting the stage for their increased visibility. An old fire station on West Bruce Street became the heart of this work. Jo Ann remembers
the diversity of Native people behind these efforts, including Miss Indian Milwaukee. A planned highlight of the program was a powwow dance demonstration. It posed a problem for Jo Ann as a contestant. “I did not know how to dance because as a tribe and being a Lutheran Christianized tribe that was bad to have Powwows and stuff, and it was all kind of beaten out of the boarding school people and all that.” Jo Ann remembers that the program organizers took extra time with her and her Native companion contestants to mentor and teach them to dance with the big drum. It was “a lot of what we did not know.”

The preparation and overall experience for Jo Ann left her with the indelible impression that “mentoring is important.” It all came together on the evening of the competition. She remembers the crowd that swelled. Jo Ann called up her talents in the high school band and played the drums for the talent portion. She wore an outfit of white buckskin that her mom created and sewed with the help of other Native families. Her parents and tribal community were proud of her participation and strong showing. Jo Ann made first runner-up. The visibility of the program was impactful, Jo Ann says, because at the time there were not a lot of role models. It was all “cowboys and Indians and the Indians were the bad people.” Personally, “it was a very positive thing – meeting other positive young women and having a group of Native people in the community supporting, saying, it’s okay. This is who you are.”

Jo Ann left her youth behind at 21 when she married and started a family. She would soon have two children and eventually took a job with Milwaukee
County as a hospital attendant in the operating room. It was a good place to begin her professional journey. About four years after she started, the County began to offer scholarships for employees that got accepted into a college nursing program so they could increase their pool of nurses. “I decided I needed to, you know, I’d like to do that. I – my mother was a nursing assistant, I thought, wow, I’d like to be a nurse.” Jo Ann’s ambition created a lot of strife in her marriage. “He thought it was stupid, why did I wanna do that.” Undeterred, Jo Ann began looking around at area Nursing programs and talking with different admissions officers. Like what she faced with her husband, Jo Ann hit walls. “I would say the recruiters that I talked to were not very helpful, ‘cuz I was an older student.” It inspired Jo Ann to enroll part-time at Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC).

The reason I went back to school is ‘cuz I did talk to the recruiter at Marquette, and they said, oh, I’m nuts, I’m too old. Oh your transcripts, this and that and whatever. And I guess it got me angry. It got me – it made me upset that some people did not tell me what I needed to do [to get into school], first of all. Then, second of all, I was not, you know, good enough, or could not get into Marquette.

Jo-Ann continued to work full-time and managed to do well in school.

“[For] a couple years I went to school and I got A’s and I – then I came back [to Marquette] again. Marquette was trying to bring in low income people, minority people. I did get into Marquette [then] with very kind assisting people.” By this time, Jo Ann’s marriage had broken down. She found inspiration in Maxine Smallish, the inaugural American Indian Counselor Marquette hired to work with students like her.
I think I remember seeing her picture in the paper and then that helped encourage me. Here’s a Native woman, who had 10 children or whatever [chuckling] she had a lot of children, she was divorced, and she went on to school with one of her daughters and [then] became a counselor. I thought, you know what? If she can do that, I can do that.

Accepting enrollment into the Marquette nursing program in 1978 came with scholarship support from Milwaukee County, but Jo Ann also applied for financial aid. Unfortunately, the Stockbridge-Munsee tribe could not financially support her educational endeavors because they were not economically diversified, nor did they have gaming income at that time, Jo Ann says. But educationally, she knew the community backed her. The tribal philosophy of education was strong. She traces it back to the mid-18th century when her ancestor Chief John Konkapot emphasized the importance of acquiring an education to survive. In order to understand the surrounding settler community and thrive, “we needed to learn, we needed to know, we needed to read so we [could], as a people, grow.”

Jo Ann’s own educational start at Marquette would come with hardships.

My ex-husband kept the house, I moved out, my kids stayed there. It was a very [hard] – I had no – I had a vehicle for a short time, but I couldn’t afford it, so I walked to school, [I lived] across the [16th Street] viaduct. I don’t know how I made it, except for I did have support from Maxine, from some of my professors, and of course, the nursing program was awesome. I wanna cry thinking of all of that, you know. So anyway, I made it to Marquette.

The Nursing program at Marquette was instrumental in Jo Ann’s forward momentum. The degree program was set up in such a way, she says, that allowed her to graduate in four years. It laid out her classes and clinicals for her entire program and had built-in support all along the way.
Jo Ann came to see success through the eyes of the nurses she worked with outside of Marquette and wanted the same for herself. When she had more than three days off from school, Jo Ann had a guaranteed job (with health benefits) that provided the best clinical experiences she could get. She would work in the County system wherever needed. Jo Ann remembers receiving encouragement from other nurses when she was on the job. They were always vocal about their pride in having a Marquette nursing student amongst them. When a surgeon heard the news of her being in the ranks, Jo Ann remembers being invited to the operating room to watch an active surgery. The offer made her feel like a valued part of a team. Jo Ann says it is so special about the health profession. The people in it are so supportive of young people entering the field that they will do what it takes to help draw them in and keep them there.

Support was especially needed during this challenging time in Jo Ann’s life. She was financially stricken and emotionally burdened by the separation from her children. “[It] was hard. [I was] a divorced woman, with two young kids. It was a hard thing, back and forth.” Being with her children was a priority, but it was complicated. “You know, getting to my children and doing [things with them] was hard, ’cuz I needed to come to them. I guess I look back at that and know how hard that was for them [too]. They sacrificed my time with them to – for me to do what I was doing.” She knew they were trying to manage their emotions and the extreme disruption of home life. Despite it all, Jo Ann takes consolation. Her children had one primary home in which to live and could stay in the same school system where they eventually graduated.
Jo Ann’s own educational pursuits at Marquette involved collaborating with and supporting other Native students. In Marquette Hall, there was a room they could gather as a distinct and separate student community. She remembers one young Stockbridge student (John Miller) in this mix, but that he stayed only for a short time and graduated from another university. He has since become a strong leader in her community and continues to work for the tribe. But with John, Jo Ann saw the sharp cultural disconnect for Native students like him at Marquette. It was a big jump from a tribal community to an urban environment and school with a small Native student body. Maxine was there to support them all, but she could not prevent those who wanted to step out.

Maxine was very influential in Jo Ann’s student experience. Although she did not yet know the history of her tribe’s traditional clan mothers, Jo Ann felt lucky to have a strong woman leader in her midst. She remembers how instrumental Maxine was in moving initiatives and also helping galvanize the students around developing a “symbol” for American Indians at Marquette that would better represent them. Jo Ann was president of the Indian student group at this time, and she sat in planning meetings and interviews both on campus and within the Indian community as the idea was formed. The symbol would become known as the “First Warrior,” and a student would occupy the role during the Marquette basketball season. “I was there listening to the elders in the community when they were very excited about having a First Warrior as a Native student as a symbol.” Jo Ann was part of the student delegation that connected with a Ho-Chunk tribal member, Barbara Blackdeer, to make the outfit of the First
Warrior. Mrs. Blackdeer and her husband also presented Jo Ann with an eagle feather when the outfit was completed. They instructed the feather to be placed with the First Warrior outfit. Jo Ann was humbled to be a part of this process and dedicated herself to learning the cultural protocols associated with this sacred gift.

Outside of the Native student body and activities, Jo Ann was aware she was an older, non-traditional student with children. Nonetheless, she felt accepted in the campus community and was especially at home in the nursing school. She bonded closely with another student who was non-Native from a very poor family. They supported each other and studied together through their program. “She was a good friend and partner, all the way through that experience. That was important.” It was critical to her success and tempered the extreme wealth disparities she was beginning to see for the first time at Marquette. “Some of the other students would say, ‘oh, I went off – we flew off to the Virgin Islands for our Easter break’ and whatever, I’m like, wow, that is amazing. I had to go back to work.” Jo Ann was grateful to Maxine for filling the gap sometimes by identifying small grants for students to purchase essentials. For one birthday, Jo Ann remembers friends from the hospital took her “out to dinner at a very fancy restaurant, which I never could've afforded. So, if anyone can help buy a student [or] by sending them a little something – a little bit of help, boy, you don’t know it – it does make a difference in their life” because of the encouraging message it signals.
Jo Ann remembers in one of her nursing classes that they had to look at their life experiences and identify stressors. “I – it was high on a stress scale.” Jo Ann shares that while she did not carry historical issues like alcohol or drug addictions, she knows now she was stressed and traumatized by her poverty and personal life situation. “And so nowadays, we know about historical trauma and at that time, I was just learning about what does that mean [and] what happens” when stress is present, extreme and persisting. Instead of reflecting more on her mental health, Jo Ann expressed relief and gratitude that her children were able to overcome their own childhood trauma. Though she did not link these life experiences to why she joined the roster of peer counselors at Marquette, it was an extra-curricular program Jo Ann took on to receive the training to work with students and mentors. “And that was fun, I got to meet with several people. I think it helped me, I was always learning how do you work with and talk to people.” She remembers one of the counselors in the program being an exceptionally kind and caring guide. Jo Ann would carry all these lessons and how they were delivered long into her nursing career.

Another member of the Marquette community who left an impression on Jo Ann as kind and caring in their teaching and mentoring was Dr. Hennessey of Children’s Hospital. She led Jo Ann in a nursing clinical. Some of the classes she had to take outside of nursing too might have been out of her comfort zone, but she always found one-on-one support in faculty and felt those experiences rounded out her Marquette education.

I guess looking back, it shocked me I even made it there. The part of it is, is class by class. Small goals met at a time, each time, and
not being overwhelmed by that and – because you know there’s a big – there are things you have to accomplish, but you have to get through it bit by bit. And I guess I have a hard time believing I passed everything, one or two classes might not have been great, but I – I made it through, and I felt they were very valuable. The other thing is, I was a Lutheran, I was raised a Lutheran going to a Catholic college, but it didn’t seem to be a matter, because I felt that everybody was kind and caring and to me, it doesn’t make a difference what type of religion, as long as we all know we care and take care of each other as human beings.

When Jo Ann graduated, she capped it off with a party. She remembers not having the money to throw it on her own, so she arranged it in a local park and asked everybody to bring a dish to pass. Her father (who died in 1972) could not rejoice in her Marquette success, but her mom was there. Jo Ann felt it was important to say, “Hey everybody, I graduated,” not in a showy way, but to share her joy, gratitude and example of persistence to those yet to come. “If you share that and tell people, that’s just showing, hey, that lady over there did it or, you know, somebody in my family did that. So I think that was important to share it and [it] kinda says, hey, if that old lady can do that, maybe you can too.”

After graduation in 1982, Jo Ann took a part-time position as a “med-surg” nurse (medical surgical nurse) for Milwaukee County. She was intrigued by the prospective exposure to a broad range of experiences in this role, but Jo Ann could also pay back her scholarship by returning to the County for at least three years of employment. After observing and caring for some of the med-surg patients in her unit, Jo Ann was drawn to the issue of alcohol and drug abuse. She had a personal connection too. Jo Ann reveals that her own father had a problem with alcohol. She recalls seeing him detoxing when she was young and
not understanding what she was witnessing at the time. Since her nursing degree did not provide the training needed for this specialization, Jo Ann set out to gain more knowledge. She applied for another part-time job on weekends in Alcohol and Drug Abuse (AODA) Detox and Rehab at two different hospitals (DePaul and St. Anthony’s). She was hired and became an in-house resource, even for some staff to come to her for guidance with their own family members struggling with the issue. Knowing how alcohol impacted her family, Jo Ann felt deeply responsible for lives in this role and connected people to what they needed if she could not directly serve them.

The County at this time was trying to diversify the clinical supervisor roster in their hospital. It was a yearlong internship. Jo Ann applied and got accepted. She was the first and only person to go through the program because of subsequent leadership changes. Here Jo Ann was able to test a variety of nursing roles and discovered her interests and gifts. While she was looking to move into a supervisory role after completing her year, only a Clinician II (just above an RN status) was open in Milwaukee County – the jail. The position reported to the County Sherriff. Just two nurses were working in the jail at the time in what was a seriously outdated facility with dangerously overcrowded conditions.

This was the old Milwaukee County Jail – overcrowded, lots of problems, horribly old. So, with my little experience of Med-Surg and with working my part-time jobs of alcohol and drug abuse and detox and better understanding of all that, working at the County Jail really fit in for me.
Jo Ann brought a strong background and experience to the role. Being “a darker skinned woman,” she says, offered her a distinct entrée point with the inmates, who were a little more trusting of her at the outset. Jo Ann estimated that 90% of the prisoners were African American, Latino and Native. But regardless of her identity, she still faced a myriad of challenges not for the faint of heart. Jo Ann and her two colleagues had the overwhelming responsibility of managing the care of all the inmates. A few she recognized as her relatives. She and her colleagues made rounds three times a day and made diagnostic recommendations to assist a doctor who was not onsite.

You basically did your rounds throughout the whole jail. [It was a] real eye-opening experience because I was a pretty quiet person at the time. I learned – I learned that, first of all, really be prepared and watch your surroundings [for] safety issues, whatever. During the time I was at the jail there were several breakouts, attempts to injure people. I was almost attacked, luckily, I wasn’t. Some of the other nurses were hit in the face or attacked.

No matter what came her way, Jo Ann always listened to the inmates, felt genuine concern, and delivered kindness and care. She knew her genuineness resonated outside the jail. “I remember walking down the street one day and the inmate was in a taxi or something, he’s yelling, hey Nurse, hey Nurse, hi!”

Approximately eighteen months after her college graduation and while serving in this role at the jail, the husband of one of Jo Ann’s relatives, an army recruiter approached her about army service. He suggested she apply to be a nurse. Intrigued by the opportunity and drawn to the need to fill a critical shortage of nurses, Jo Ann applied for the role and received a direct commission as a second Lieutenant in the Army Reserves in 1984. “That was pretty cool,”
she said. She did reflect on feeling bad for her children because she would have to leave for two weeks for basic training. But she reassured herself by acknowledging they had their dad and were in high school then.

Logistically, Jo Ann had to manage her nursing job and then commit to training and engagement once a month for one weekend and then two consecutive weeks once a year. All the while, Jo Ann was attentive to her commitment to the County. She had to work for them for another eighteen months or so to pay back the scholarship she received. Jo Ann reflects on how she showed flexibility in her skills on a job that demanded attention to quickly changing conditions and a level of fearlessness. Jo Ann even helped to advocate for more mental health services and resources for prisoners. Her advocacy led to more nursing hires and more support for them on the job. Timing though was providential. There was finally an opening for a Clinical Nurse Supervisor. Jo Ann applied for it and returned to the County hospital in that capacity, where she worked for a physical medicine brain injury unit. Jo Ann remembers strong supervisory support from Paula Lucey (another Marquette nursing graduate), who was a leader, always sending her encouraging notes and sharing kind words. She was a role model for all times. Jo Ann also remembers a very supportive nursing pool and felt good about where she landed.

As far as her commitment to the Army Reserves, Jo Ann stayed for 20 years. She traveled in-state, across the country and outside the borders too. Panama Canal and the politically unstable (at the time) Ecuador were profound experiences for Jo Ann. She felt like she was working amongst her relatives but
also in conditions that made her feel grateful for her living situation. “You come home with a huge appreciation of your own, you know, [like] safe drinking water [and] safety because when we did go out to see in the village or marketplace, every store had people standing at the store with machine guns outside.” In all this work, Jo Ann had the chance to meet various wonderful people working in health care from all over. She is grateful for the talented colleagues she worked alongside and would come to know as friends.

Fifteen to sixteen years into her service, Jo Ann met her future husband in 1995, Jonathon Schedler, a Lutheran Minister and social worker. Jo Ann good-naturedly kidded Jon about all the roles she occupied but that she would consider retiring from the Army to spend more time with him to build their relationship. Jon strongly encouraged her to keep doing what she loved. It was a fresh relationship start for Jo Ann and a refreshingly nurturing one. They would soon get married at the home she purchased on Legend Lake. The financial stability she built for herself and then shared with her husband was different from how she started college – poor and without a true-life partner in her endeavors. Today, she is so grateful to have the chance to leave something behind for her children.

Jo Ann had some unfinished personal business. Before she turned 60, she wanted to complete her master’s degree. She was already in the role of inaugural director of her tribe’s new health clinic (that opened in 1999), but her internal drive kicked in like it had during her undergraduate years. In order to serve in her professional role as best as possible, Jo Ann felt like she had to
advance her knowledge. She researched programs and, at the age of 57, enrolled in the MBA program at Cardinal Stritch. But a year or so into her part-time studies, Jo Ann received orders for active duty. She had to officially pause her status in the program because she was required to serve for one year in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Jo Ann had been at the clinic already for three years and had helped make it operate smoothly. It was why she felt comfortable retiring from her job altogether so she could go on active duty unencumbered.

"We started out at Fort McCoy in the middle of winter, like in February [and] we were packing up to go to Kuwait." She was assigned to a combat support hospital. She had been in training already for a couple of months when President Bush declared victory. "And we're, like can we go home now?" But her group was not dismissed – there was prospective extra work for them to do.

So now it's spring coming, and we're still there. And I remember John – he brought everybody. The kids and everybody came to visit us and he said we looked like – we looked like a bunch of sick dogs, 'cuz we all had our vaccinations to go overseas and, you know one young woman died from that. She had some kind of underlying illness that they didn’t know about, and she died. So, we had one casualty, just waiting to get called we had a funeral, a memorial there.

Jo Ann's group was luckier than others, however. They got to go home, and, because of their active duty, they were qualified to receive all the army's health benefits. Thinking she could pick up where she left off in her academics, Jo Ann discovered the university discontinued her program. She had to regroup and transferred what credits she could to a Master of Science in Management at the same university – Cardinal Stritch. Jo Ann ultimately met her goal of achieving her graduate degree just two weeks before turning 60. She hosted a
small party for her family to celebrate with her, and this time was able to pay for it. Like her first graduation milestone, Jo Ann's children were alongside her.

In 2004, Jo Ann retired from the Army. She was awarded a meritorious achievement for her service. But she didn't retire from her tribe, she says. Instead, she continued to give back. Her legacy, love of people, nature and service, inspired her to serve in an interim capacity for a few essential roles on her reservation and a volunteer capacity for tribal committees and Indian Summer Festival in Milwaukee. She also shared her nursing knowledge as an instructor at the College of Menominee Nation.

When asked to describe her strengths, the first words in Jo Ann's mind are persistence and determination. These sustained her through college, not “high knowledge” of anything she says, in her genuinely humble way, but because she was “always learning.” Underlying these strengths was an unconscious “not knowing I can't [do something].” If someone said to her, “you can't do that,” Jo Ann would immediately ask herself, “well, why not?” “Words count,” she says. She takes these golden lessons into her mentoring situations with young people, including her own children. Mentoring her children was always a high priority for Jo Ann. Leading by example, Jo Ann always encouraged them to further their education despite the great odds. Like Jo Ann, her daughter graduated from college as an older student. Jo Ann's son became a deputy sheriff and has retired successfully from that life-long profession. Her grandchildren have exceeded all expectations in postsecondary life – one has a doctorate, and another a master's degree.
Jo Ann leaves our interview by sharing a teaching she has gained over the years. It is about gratitude. She used to say her blessings were luck. “But it’s not luck,” she says. Looking back on her story, it is clear Jo Ann has worked hard to prioritize her beloveds – her children, her husband, and her home nestled in nature on her tribal lands. It is right where she is happiest.
CHAPTER FOUR

RICK TOURTILLOTT (BS ‘87) ORAL HISTORY

Rick introduces himself as a 1987 graduate of Marquette University and a Native American. His parents are tribally enrolled; his father is Menominee and his mother is Stockbridge-Munsee. They moved from northern Wisconsin to Milwaukee and started their family on the northwest side. As far as he knew, Rick recalls that they, along with his uncle’s family who lived about a mile away, were the only Indians who settled in that neighborhood. They maintained residence in this part of Milwaukee for as long as Rick was living at home, never really “being integrated with the urban Native American community.”

But the connections to their home reservations were unsevered. He referred to his “mom’s mother” who lived on the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation, and Rick remembers attending Catholic masses in Gresham when they visited. His grandparents’ house was not far from the powwow grounds. “So I remember going up there during that weekend and jumping rocks across the river to get to it and just watching it.” Later, while in college, Rick would return with his family to the August powwow. Although Rick never got to know his grandfather, he knew he served in World War I, was a respected member of the tribe and organized the Civil Defense team in Bowler, Wisconsin. Rick’s paternal grandparents lived in neighboring Neopit – a community on the Menominee reservation. When Rick visited them, Father Marcellas, a St. Anthony’s Church priest, left an impression. Rick always had questions for him and through these conversations, he got to know him.
On other occasions, the family went up to the Menominee reservation for tribal board meetings. Rick’s father served on the governing body of the Menominee Indian Tribe. It was a very active time for the tribe, Rick says, because of their work on the implications of the Menominee Restoration Act (1973), which restored the tribe’s federal status. Some political and social unrest within the tribe also required tending. Rick remembers his dad heavily involved in meetings regarding the takeover of the former Catholic Novitiate (1975) by Menominee tribal members. That he also served in the Army shaped him into a strong role model for Rick. But his mom, too, is revered. “She worked hard. They [both] worked for, being able to provide for us, and that’s something that is very, very important.”

Besides knowing his dad attended a Catholic grade school in Neopit, Rick has little knowledge of his parents’ early educational histories. For Rick and his siblings, though, they were committed to a Catholic education. His father was self-employed (with Clark Gas) and his mother worked and retired at Master Lock. “They worked quite a bit and they were middle – essentially middle class – and I know my dad it was a bit of a struggle at times to be able to afford the Catholic education that they gave us kids.” Out of his brothers and sister, Rick is the firstborn. He started school at St. Sebastian Catholic School and was then enrolled in Christ King Parish School until 1978, from 3rd through 8th grade.

The transition to Christ King School (after his family moved closer to this location) was bumpy at first. It started when Rick’s identity was revealed to the student body.
Every fall a particular grade studies [Native Americans]. In Wisconsin, you have to study Wisconsin history, I think in third or fourth grade. I don’t know if it was my parents that told them or maybe I just raised my hand and said that I’m Native American.

There were repercussions.

There was a little bit of, I guess that’s my fighting period, you know, with kids teasing, a little bit of bullying, but the fact that I was Native American and, well, I guess I got into a couple scuffles on the playground, but I think I – I stood up for myself and that soon stopped.

School life soon settled to a comfortable rhythm for Rick where he enjoyed sports and participated in Cub Scouts. When it was time to consider high school, most of his peers went to Pius XI Catholic High School or Marquette University High School (MUHS). Rick was at a crossroads. He chose MUHS, but worried how his family would pay for it all.

Rick might not ever have made it to high school at all after a near fatal accident that summer. He was hit by a car while coming out of his driveway on a bicycle. “I got caught up underneath it and I remember staring at the back wheel, when my brother finally got [the driver] to stop.” Rick was lucky. The attending pediatric neurosurgeon at St. Joseph’s Hospital, Dr. David Dunn, diagnosed a concussion and released him the next day. But a relationship was sparked.

I told him I was interested – you know, I liked science, and I was interested in, maybe going into the medical field. And so, he mentored me. From that time in grade school all the way through high school. I’m forever grateful for that. I was, yeah, I was pre-med here and at Marquette, but then ultimately, I just decided to stick with – with Biology. And he – Dr. Dunn, was also so – so he was a neurosurgeon, he actually went to Marquette High School and Marquette University, graduated from Marquette Medical School, and he was also in the Vietnam War as a surgeon. He was
a big impression, about, you know, getting good grades, going to a really good high school and college.

Dr. Dunn helped Rick and his family out financially by paying for tuition for a couple of semesters at MUHS. But Rick also applied for work study to help offset even more costs. It allowed him to earn a bit of money, while working in the Jesuit Residence, and go to school.

In addition to working, Rick continued in the Boy Scouts program and was an engaged student. He swam in his freshman year and played trombone in band and orchestra for all four years. “I had just a great time, fun time, you know, being in the band, being, you know, whether it was playing at a football game or a basketball game.” Being Native American, Rick said, “wasn’t really outwardly demonstrated I guess, during those years, as much as they were with my college years.” But he remembers rising to correct stereotypical thinking. “I do remember actually someone, you know, asking if I had a tipi at one time. And, you know, politely telling him no, we didn’t live in tipis, and as being woodland Indians, we were in longhouses or wigwams.” MUHS offered a summer enrichment program at the Pine Ridge Indian reservation that might have helped mitigate this kind of narrow thinking amongst the student body. Rick never participated “for some reason.” A co-curricular experience for seniors though was mandatory. All students would take two weeks out of their studies to engage in a service project. Rick and a good school friend “did a service project at a group home for adults with mental health struggles, primarily schizophrenia, and so, that was a really great experience, enriching experience.” The work inspired his Eagle Scout project. He built gardens for residents in the program
and earned his Eagle Scout rank in July of 1982. He was ready to soar to the next stage in his life.

Although Rick’s parents did not have four-year college experiences, it didn’t curtail their encouragement.

My parents didn’t go to [college]. I think my dad had some tech school stuff after high school and they just impressed upon us kids if that’s something that you want to do, they encouraged it. So, I was – I was the oldest and, went to college.

Rick only applied to Marquette University. He describes getting in as very straightforward.

If you went to Marquette High School, you turned in a paper application to one of the Jesuits. He was part of the admissions committee. He’d go to a meeting at Marquette University right down the road and come back, and the next day and, [say] hey, you got in.

But it always came down to the tuition and the question “how do you pay for this.”

Rick’s father (through their parish) was connected to the executive secretary for the president of Marquette University, who introduced them to the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) – a federally funded program that provides counseling and academic support for low income and first-generation college students to graduate from college.

We went down there. We were introduced to the EOP staff, and I remember Sande Robinson was one of the probably earliest ones I got to meet and then Howard Fuller, and so then I applied through that [program].

Rick was accepted into the program. Part of the program offered the opportunity to live on campus the summer right before a student entered Marquette as an undergraduate student.
There was a summer school program where I think you took a couple courses [including] a math class and a language – English class. And so that helped, actually, because when freshman year fall semester rolled around, you knew where everything was [and] you could help other – your freshmen – your co-students. You knew about this place, and where to go and what you had to do, and so, it kinda gave me a leg up. We actually lived in the dorms, McCormick Hall, that summer[and] helped ease the – any kind of transition that one would have going into college.

Rick describes the whole program as a rich support network with great staff.

Rick also met Maxine Smallish, who was installed to serve Native students, but

Rick notes he more regularly accessed what EOP offered.

Because I was, from the get-go, firmly entrenched in that from their summer program all the way through [college]. And of course, we had requirements to meet and check in with them. That’s who I really tapped into.

Rick began a busy college student life. He was in band for the first two years at Marquette (1982-83). He also discovered the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) at the end of his freshman year when a student across the hall from him was part of the program. It seemed to be a natural fit for him to join.

After talking with an advisor, Rick learned how he could be in ROTC and the Reserves simultaneously. He could earn money each month (while serving in Reserves), which would scale up even more in his junior and senior years. The opportunity was a clear pathway to bring in more financial support.

I joined that process and became an Army Reservist. [It] brought in another area of studies where you got a minor in Military Science and so I think it was a healthy balance between outside curricular activities and studies. I think I was a better student at the end.
But the ROTC program had other benefits. “I guess it gave me – well, it gave me tools to be – to be a leader. It taught me a lot about leadership. So that – yeah, that helped quite a bit.”

Being in ROTC at Marquette was visibly defining. “On Thursdays, it’s a big day for people that are enrolled in ROTC. You’re in your battle fatigues, you’re doing your classes, and so you wore your uniform that day.” Rick stood out one day in particular.

Another moment in my Marquette experience that got a little notoriety. It just so happened that I’m crossing the street and I see a vagrant harassing Father Naus [who] stepped in because that vagrant was harassing some female students and the guy was attacking Father Naus. And I stepped in between them, and he started attacking me and I gave him a kick. Knocked him into the street and then, by then, campus safety came, and it took, like, six people to subdue him. But that was in the paper. I got razzed that day.

Rick said that just recently some college friends reminisced about this time. In good fun, they wondered if Rick received a positive citation from the police for his actions protecting Father Naus. Rick did not and said he “didn’t need anything.”

In his sophomore year, Rick lived with another EOP student in the dorms.

We had a great wing on Schroeder 10 North and then I got to meet Dan and Tom. They were from a Marist High School in Midlothian, Illinois. And then down the hall was Brad, and he lived out in the Nashotah area, and then I got to meet Jeff, who was from Baltimore, his parents went to school here. So all those guys became – we all became housemates together, the last two years of our schooling here. And, lifelong friends – lifelong friends.

They gave each other personal nicknames. Rick was bestowed a distinctive one.

“I totally accepted the nickname of Chief. And it’s being used today.”
Unlike high school, being Native American figured very prominently in Rick’s college experiences.

I was a sports spectator having watched the Marquette Warrior basketball team. We all, all my college buddies, roommates, loved – loved basketball. This is an excellent tradition. I mean, that was only a few years after the '77 championship. I was in band the first two years and, while I was in band, that was when I got to meet Mark Denning through the Native American Indian Student Association and I was at the basketball games as a member of the band and he was out there on the floor. He was getting ready to graduate, so, he brought me on. I – I did some dancing while he was the First Warrior. I did some dancing with him and then I got to try out for that and there was only one person trying out for it so …

Rick was the natural successor, and from 1983-1986 he was the third and last First Warrior. The very public role was a significant part of Rick’s college life both on and off campus during the academic year from November to March.

Rick even traveled with the team. While he did work on the weekends during his sophomore year at a local restaurant near his family home, Rick says it was not difficult to fit in his cheer duties. “It also gave me some opportunities to see some really great basketball games.” Rick did not have any traditional dancing experience except for participating in intertribals at some powwows he attended with his family. In his preparation for duties, Rick had Mark Denning as a guide.

“I was very fortunate to – to follow in, and being mentored, and follow in Mark Denning’s footsteps. He was definitely a big role model.”

---

34 The university adopted the role in 1980 after the American Indian Student Association (with guidance from Maxine Smallish) proposed an alternative to the “Warriors” moniker in favor of a new Indian symbol they named the First Warrior. The symbol would be physically represented by a current Marquette American Indian student wearing traditional Wisconsin tribal regalia. Athletics classified the First Warrior as a volunteer cheerleading position.
Rick strongly expressed that the First Warrior was represented authentically from the regalia to the dances and that it was not a mascot but a cultural symbol. He vividly recalls fulfilling this role with reverence and respect. But there were times when he took some creative license on the basketball floor.

I do remember Marquette was a big rivalry in state with UW Madison. They’re known as the Badgers and my uncle one year gave me a badger pelt. So, I typically wore that underneath the roach. I remember in particular one time we were playing the Badgers, I decided to do a sneak up dance. And so, I put that badger pelt right on half court, and I did the sneak up dance and culminating in the slaying the badger and raising it up and it got really the crowd going.

The Milwaukee Indian community was watching and sometimes made their voices heard.

I do remember one other time I – Mark – when I was dancing with him, when he was still First Warrior, we would do some face painting and we never heard anything about it good or bad or that. But one time, after he – he left and I was the First Warrior, I did some face painting and, I don’t know, wouldn’t ya know, but there was actually some members of the Milwaukee Native American community calling Maxine and ‘what’s he doing wearing this paint? That’s not right! That’s not correct!’ and it was like, oh boy.

Rick heard about the criticism through Marquette administrators and staff and dutifully made a course correction. He never wore face paint again.

Rick “cherished” his time as the First Warrior. But some of his most indelible memories include those off the court. Community requests for visits from the Marquette University First Warrior to places like schools and nursing homes, especially around certain holidays like Thanksgiving, were fielded by the administration and then dispatched, at first to Mark. Rick accompanied Mark to see how it all played out.
So I kinda – I borrowed his script. Okay. I don’t know if the school had – gave him a script before that, but I essentially borrowed everything what he did. So, yeah. You gotta give Mark that credit. What we typically did is, we would come in, we wore, you know, basketball shorts, a tee shirt and we showed ‘em that we didn’t wear all this regalia all the time, and we, then took it out of the bag, described what it was and put it on, and then we talked about the – what a powwow was. We talked about some of the dances and we’d do various dances, told ‘em how the step was, played the music for that. And then asked [and] answered questions.

The intention of this work was to help dispel myths around American Indian identity and share what it was like to be an Indian in the present. “I think that was – to me it was more important doing that, community outreach, or what it means to be an urban Indian, than being on the dance floor, on the basketball court.”

The community engagement repertoire stuck with Rick long after college.

My – really my biggest memory at Marquette is how fortunate this experience of being First Warrior, and then dancing on the court and going out to the communities. Because I ended up actually doing that for my sons, you know, in third grade, they did a little unit on Native Americans, and I took that same script that I did in college and did it for them for their grades.

Reflecting on whether any struggles arose for him during his time at Marquette, Rick shared that “from the very beginning” he only has fond memories. He also felt supported by his family during this time. They would come to Marquette basketball games or Rick would go home. During his sophomore year Rick worked about a mile from home and would always take the time to visit his parents after his weekend shifts, sometimes getting a ride back to campus. Every summer, too, Rick would return home to live and work. They even welcomed Rick’s roommate one summer when their off-campus house was not yet available for occupancy. “My parents were gracious enough they opened
it up to my roommate, one of the roommates, Tom, to stay with us for, like, three weeks, so that was nice.”

Looking back, Rick wonders what the college experiences were like for someone who came directly from a reservation and did not have the kind of support he had in his own life. Maybe he missed what other Native students were going through at the time. “Maybe that was something that I just, didn’t realize.” But there was not a big pool from which to draw comparisons. Rick only knew a handful of Indian students at Marquette and the American Indian Counselor. It was a small community, but when he was president of the Native American Student Association in his senior year, they helped out with UW-Milwaukee’s fall powwow. It felt like a “banding together.” It only bolstered his identity, which was never a struggle for Rick. “I had all these activities, the – my friends, this First Warrior, being in ROTC and it was just a great fun time. Enriching experiences.”

Rick’s memories are pained only when the university officially dropped the Warrior name.

“I – I kinda struggled at times in the early beginning when Marquette dropped Warriors, because I believe Marquette was doing it right. Yeah, sure, some of the licensing was taken a little bit too far with that image, but we were certainly better than what some high schools were doing and some colleges were doing. In my upbringing with the Army, Warriors is an admirable term; it’s an honor term; it’s the – the Stockbridge – the Mohican veterans, you know, we have a patch that’s translated into “warrior”.

Army service in Rick’s family runs deep. Rick’s father served in the Army, doing his basic training at Fort Hood, where his older son is currently stationed. A family picture of his dad when he was assigned to a transportation battalion in
Germany stands out prominently in Rick’s mind. He was in a full Plain’s Indian headdress.

I’m sure they knew that he was Native American and he got roped in or asked to do – to talk to the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts about being a Native American. I’m sure, pretty much the same thing that I did during my college years.

In his fifth and final year at Marquette, Rick lived at home. Once he graduated, in the spring of 1987, he knew a whole new world would open up. In the fall, Rick was scheduled to leave for four months for his officer training in Kentucky. To tide things over, he took a job that summer at a department store in security. Here Rick met his future wife, Chris. They got to know each other over the pay phone while he was away in training of that year. He wore his dress blues to propose to her later that year on Christmas Eve. Rick’s career crystallized too. When he got home from training he started out at Chr. Hansen (in West Allis) as temporary employee on a six-month contract. He was then hired full-time permanently in research and development as a microbiologist. His biology major paid off. He stayed for 29 years. Over his career, Rick worked in areas of production, took on supervisory roles and even served as acting plant manager in other areas of the country. In 2001, Rick became the safety manager for the company and enjoyed travel opportunities domestically and internationally.

Rick’s stability and success were also reflected in other aspects of his life. Although he only signed an eight-year contract with the Reserves, he continued service for 25 years. He was commissioned as a Reserve Officer and joined the 84th Division in Milwaukee. This division was responsible for basic and advanced
training sites for new soldiers in the Army in a time of need. For almost his entire Army career, Rick was at the Milwaukee site in an armored unit. He felt the power of memory in this role because his dad, too, was in a transportation unit that drove tanks.

In Army Reserves, the enlisted serve one weekend per month with a mandatory two-week Active-Duty period yearly. In 1996 and 1998, Rick was selected from his division to be on a training team at West Point Academy. It was a rewarding experience for Rick to train the cadets, but also a coming home in a way. The academy is located on the original homelands of the Stockbridge-Munsee.

Seeing that for the first time, it’s just, like, this is what my ancestors lived, and there’s a – I know there’s a Memorandum of Work between West Point and Stockbridge-Munsee Nation, collaboration and archaeological exchanges and all that. Mahicannituck River is our homeland. The Stockbridge-Munsee and so, that was really just awesome to do that, be able to teach out there.

Some years later, Rick made certain to arrange a visit to West Point for his Boy Scouts troop. As a Lieutenant Colonel now, Rick was able to secure visit passes. They “walked from gate to gate” to take it all in.

In 2006, Rick received a call from the Reserves in Milwaukee to tell him he was going to Iraq for one year. He arrived there on April 1, 2007, after receiving some training for the deployment. The Reserve divisions were filling staff positions in a 3-star command in Iraq called the Multi-National Security Transition Command Iraq. The program was designed to get the Iraqi Army, forces, police, and national police up and running to support Iraqi leadership in protecting their people. Rick acknowledged that this is what he trained for. It was a “wow, wow”
moment for him, he recalls. He knew it would drastically change the dynamics of his life. Rick was married and had a young family. Even with all the unknowns, Rick knew he had to go where the Army needed him. He took his wife Chris out to lunch to break the news. Their son Nathan was just in kindergarten and Mathew was in 5th grade. When Rick was in ROTC, the U.S. was in the midst of the Cold War. Regional conflicts, like what he was just called up to serve, were not imaginable back in his college days of ROTC. The theme of coming full circle once again surfaces in Rick’s life. His son Nathan is currently on active duty preparing for Cold War military action.

Another family photograph is clear in Rick’s memory.

I always admired, you know, looking at the few pictures that we had of, like, my grandfather. He was young, he was, like, 18, 19, in his World War I uniform. I carried his picture with me every day when I was in Iraq.

Rick’s wife was in another part of the room when he shared this poignant memory. “That, and my family,” he quickly added. The two looked at each other knowingly and laughed.

When Rick was in the Reserves, there was one descendent of the Stockbridge-Munsee he knew. They shared some time and experiences. In his Iraqi unit, Rick was the only Native American. But Rick said he could relate to the Iraqi. There were commonalities. “Over there, its tribal. It’s clans, so it’s something that [I] could relate to.” Rick was comfortable enough to share in some Native traditions. Rick's parents sent their "peace pipe" overseas for Rick to share a ceremonial smoke with the Iraqi. “So as foreign as that place and that land might have seemed, there was some familiarity to it.”
When Rick left for Iraq, his older son Matthew was transitioning from Cub Scouts to Boy Scouts. Rick had a pack leader role in the organization. But Rick was going to miss his son’s rite of passage. It made it easier knowing his brother-in-law, who was also a pack leader, would be present at the camp festivities with Matthew. During the camp experience, Rick got a call in Iraq from them about a fish Matthew caught. Rick remarks on the stark technological difference compared to Desert Storm.

Our troops would have to wait in line at a phone booth and maybe get 15 minutes, if that, talking to, you know, a spouse or their families. I had my own cell phone that had a New York telephone number. All they had to do was call, long distance between – and we even Skyped.

But the distance between Rick and his young family could not always be easily bridged. Rick’s younger son Nathan was born with apraxia, where the pathways that govern speech were not fully developed. Today “he talks his head off” Rick chuckles. But no matter how hard he has worked in this life, Rick says, “I had it easy” compared to Nathan. Rick paused. When he speaks again, it is about Chris taking on so much when he was deployed, including a home addition. The memory of all this stirs up tears in Rick. He also gratefully reflects on his parents’ strong support of his family when he was gone. “My parents would take our kids and go on trips and, you know, go to State Parks and go out to La Crosse and, you know, all over the state, and that helped.”

Towards the end of his tour, his unit was getting close to the fighting. They received some heavy artillery for days. But Rick was going home. He landed in the United States when he heard his station received rocket fire and
lost two comrades. One of them was a Major he knew and worked alongside in
their off time to support Iraqi Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. Rick is still emotionally
impacted by the tragedy. “It was difficult at the end. Really difficult at the end. I
was fortunate to get home – finally get home.”

The day when Rick returned home to Milwaukee, Chris made sure they
drove by the boys’ school, Mother of Good Counsel. Each window was filled with
one letter of the alphabet. You could read the message on the windows across
the whole front of the school. It was something like, “Welcome home Mr.
Tourtillott.” The memory still chokes Rick up.

In his final years of service (after some Army reorganization), Rick was
stationed at Fort Sheridan in Illinois to help train those going to Iraq and
Afghanistan. The connection to his own family’s past was reignited once again.
His grandfather got mustered out of Fort Sheridan, where he completed his final
duty for the Army in WWI. “What goes around comes around,” Rick says. Rick
finished his own duty in 2010. Today, his son is facing deployment to eastern
Europe. This news sits right at heart center for Rick.

Service figures prominently in Rick’s life, especially his participation and
volunteer work with the Boy Scouts organization. In college, Rick would even
help out with the Boy Scout troop at Christ King when his brother was a student
there. Over the years, he served in various roles, eventually becoming the
advisor for the Eagle Project activities. His son Matthew went on to be an Eagle
Scout like Rick. They traveled with the troop on "high adventure" trips together
for weeks over the years. Rick still gets called to camp service today to help with
the boys on their achievement merit badges, like rifle, shotgun, and wilderness survival. All things he picked up in the Army.

Rick says he did not come to serve the Indigenous community directly until about six years ago. His father is on the Indian Council of the Elderly (ICE) board in Milwaukee. Rick was invited to be master of ceremony for their annual veteran’s program held at the Congregation of the Great Spirit (a Native American Catholic parish of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee). It will be his fifth one the next time it is held. The Archdiocese also asked Rick to moderate an important program hosted by the Congregation of the Great Spirit to welcome a Mohawk speaker on the miracle attributed to Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Native American Saint. “So, I’m really now finding my – my niche.” Rick thinks if he lived closer to his reservation, “I’d probably do more with the veterans up there.” Recently, his tribe, the Stockbridge-Munsee, did invite him as a keynote for their graduating seniors of the area. In turn he offered to come back to Marquette University to engage with the current Native student body. It will be another important homecoming.
Sharon Tom introduced herself in her language and translated it to English. “Hi everyone. My name is Sharon Tom. I am Diné from New Mexico. My clans are Salt People, born for the Folded Arms People, the Hairy Goat Clan, and my paternal grandparents are of the Sage Brush Hill Clan.” Sharon was born on the Navajo Reservation in a small remote community called Borrego Pass. But her family moved around. They lived in other areas of the Navajo Reservation, as well as Albuquerque. Borrego Pass, though, always drew them home.

Sharon described herself as very curious as a girl. People around her would say she was very smart and very vocal. She thinks she just “loved to learn and took a lot of initiative to do new things, learn new things.” From a young age, Sharon was preoccupied by books.

I was a voracious reader. I could spend hours reading. You would always find me with a book. And my mother really encouraged that, and I think that’s what really helped me with my academics, is just being able to read a lot of different types of books. She didn’t restrict me, so I was really reading adult material early on, really, really hard biographies that a typical 11-year-old wouldn’t read, history books and stuff like that.

Television largely did not encroach on Sharon’s life. Reception in the rural areas where she lived was poor. It was more the outside world that interested her and whatever she could find in a book. Gallup (just outside the Navajo reservation) had a great public library that Sharon was able to access. Going there was a regular part of life with her mother. “I have fond memories of the public library in
Gallup because every time you would go in it was a very peaceful, calm experience. The smell of books would just really get me excited.” Sharon and her mom would go separately into the stacks. Sharon was free to scour the shelves and source selections from young adults and beyond. Octavia Butler, the librarian, left a lasting impression. Sharon describes her as unfailingly welcoming to all the Navajo patrons. Octavia’s classical music playing in the background inspired Sharon to check out similar music. It would later make the rotations on her own record player while reading. Together, Sharon says, the activities were “always a calming experience for me.”

Sharon’s reading interests varied widely, but she tapped a lot of adult material early on, from biographies, international politics, and subjects in history like WWII and the Holocaust. One of her teacher’s interests in space also influenced Sharon’s reading choices. She remembers drawing some attention from her family and others for her reading prowess.

At one point I think I tested so well that they wanted to know what I had – [my mother] had done to me. Did she send me to a camp or whatever. She's like, ‘No. We didn't have a TV. All she did over the summer was read.’ I guess my test scores were out of the – I mean, outside the scale or outside the normal, and I think my family always encouraged me with that. They would tease me, but I think they were proud of me that I was really into academics.

In a familial and cultural context, education was deeply instilled in Sharon from an early age. While her father did not graduate from college, Sharon says that “he always encouraged me to pursue my education.” Sharon’s mom encouraged her as well. Sharon stated that her mom, a graduate of the University of New Mexico, “was the only college-educated person in our family [and] was our
trailblazer. She kinda forged a path for me. And so, the expectation was always there, that I would always go to college. There kinda wasn't any question."

Never did Sharon think of joining the military, like a lot of her classmates, or attending junior college. Instead, “I knew that I would pursue a four-year college education.”

Sharon shared that the Navajo hold education in very high esteem and most especially higher education. It is “a form of advancement for our people. I think that at an early age, that was kind of enforced and instilled in us, you know, that education was a ladder and to pursue it.” It calls up for Sharon an instance in her first professional job where a non-Native man stopped by her office one day. In the meeting, he asked her, “What is it about you Navajos? Why do you have all these degrees? What is it you eat and drink? We can't get our own kids to finish high school or go to college.”

Sharon's precollege life was dictated by the location of her mother's employment as a teacher. “I kinda grew up as a teacher's daughter,” Sharon says. At times, Sharon found all the moving around difficult because of the uneasy adjustment to new people and new institutions. She found that she thrived most at the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school on her reservation because the student body was all Navajo. She took comfort in that familiarity.

I think going to school in my community school really helped me, too, because I had family members who worked there, I had cousins who were also attending. So it really, I guess was an extension of home. I had a lot of relatives, people I was related to by clan and by blood. I knew a lotta people in my community, I grew up with them.
Sharon received a dual education in Navajo and English at this school. The presence of elders in class bridged connections to her Navajo language and culture. These elders were community members and grandparents who worked as aides. Sharon's maternal aunt was the Navajo language specialist at the school and is today one of the experts in the community. Sharon vividly remembers her aunt coming into her classroom to teach the reading and writing of Navajo. Sharon and her classmates all learned those skills at an early age. Even though Sharon was fluent then, she has to work on it today.

Sharon’s mother attended boarding school in Gallup, New Mexico, from 4th grade through high school. The family was very poor, according to Sharon. Though she did not explicitly say so, Indian families facing deprivation due to the inescapable press of colonialism on their lives sometimes sent their children to boarding schools with the hope they would receive a modicum of care. But the experience, Sharon says, was very negative. “So I think for her it was very traumatic in a lot of ways.” Sharon feels that the whole of this experience influenced how she did not want her daughter to take up the Navajo language.

My mother decided at an early age, I think also because of her traumatic experience in the boarding school, that she didn't want me to be encumbered with having to translate from Navajo to English in college. Because she said that was the biggest drawback for her [having] a hard time grasping topics and reading the material because she had to constantly translate it from Navajo to English for herself to succeed. And that was a real drawback for her when she got to college. And so, when she saw that for her, she said I really want my daughter to be primarily an English speaker, so she doesn't have as many problems as I do, or as I did.
English then was to be Sharon's first language and over the years, speaking Navajo went idle in Sharon's repertoire. Today, though, she practices with her mom and the children in her life.

Sharon's experience at Crownpoint, a boarding school on her reservation, was different from her earlier school experiences, in part because it was a boarding school, and for a time, she resided there. Her mom was pursuing a graduate degree full-time and could not "really watch her" so staying at the school was the best option for her care. But Sharon remembers the transition to Crownpoint as not too hard for her, mainly because there were other Native students. A significant change for Sharon was that she would soon advance a grade.

And that actually was a great transition for me because I felt I was with people I was similar to, in terms of learning. The curriculum was a little bit tougher, and I – I think I enjoyed it a lot more. And I also liked the socialization with other kids, 'cuz I was an only child for a very long time. So at that point I was an only child, so for me, getting to know other students, you know, I was a young teen, or just becoming a teen, so for me it was all about peer groups and, you know, hanging out with my friends after school. And then also, the boarding school afforded field trips and different activities on the weekend. I think we had a skating rink on campus, movie nights [and] we did field trips to different places. I think that afforded me more interaction with other people.

Sharon says there were also many emerging and available precollege camps for Native students on the landscape. These experiences were formative events in her life. One of Sharon's teachers recommended her for a summer leadership program called Navajo Boys and Girls State. It was a new program developed by prominent educational leaders Bob and Ruth Roessel from the
Navajo Nation with Dr. Annie Wauneka. Sharon was one of two students from her school selected to attend this weeklong program just after her freshman year. Dr. Wauneka was a Navajo community leader and a role model for Sharon. Her work, which included advancing awareness and education around tuberculosis, was recognized by President John F. Kennedy in 1963, who awarded her the Congressional Medal of Freedom for life service.

And just being around her, I mean, she was just a formidable person, I mean, and I talk about her a lot because, at that time, she was a very revered Navajo leader, and she was female. So I – I come from a family of very strong women. I think for me, I really admired her and, she really encouraged us to pursue our education. She said that’s – the survival of our people is for you to go out and gain the skills and come back and help your people. And, I think for me, I know, eventually I do wanna go back to my community and start living there and working there. ’Cuz that’s my ultimate goal. Once the children have gotten a little bit older, taking them back and living back in my community and making improvements. There’s a lot to be done.

Sharon also participated in the Nizhoni Camp sponsored by the Navajo Nation with Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona. Along with other students, she was invited to live on campus. “We kinda had a lot of college readiness workshops, field trips, so it kinda gave us a taste of what college life would be like.”

On Sharon’s journey to college was her 11th-grade English teacher, John Carey. He was a lawyer but taught English and Mock Trial at her high school and challenged students with Supreme Court cases they would have to read and discuss for assignments.

That was another level of reading – technical reading. It was way beyond my years but, I mean, he really thought we were mature
enough to read those and be able to argue points and debate each other on different writing, Supreme Court writings and opinion.

One-on-one, Mr. Carey (as Sharon referenced him) suggested she get the *New York Times* book review and read from the top seller list. He also suggested authors who won the Pulitzer Prize for literature. These books “you probably will encounter in college,” he said. Sharon took his guidance seriously and discovered extraordinary writing. She remembers being blown away by Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *100 Years of Solitude*. “It just went on from there, different books that he would encourage us to read.” Sharon would take advantage of the time to read on the long rides to and from school, where she was the first and last on the bus. She even took on plays like Chekhov and the writings of Elie Wiesel.

I did a lot of reading like that, really hard reading. They weren’t really pleasant topics, though, at times, but I just was like, I always wanted to learn. I was a voracious learner, you know? I think that’s kinda what propelled me to say, ‘okay, you can go to college. I think you – you have the curiosity to do it, but I’m not so sure I had the maturity.

Although a significant literature emerged from the Navajo and about the Navajo, in Sharon’s early days, this was not common. There were Native authors like N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko. However, Sharon did not encounter Native authors until the end of her college years. “As far as Navajo culture, I mean I lived it. I felt like I didn’t need to read it.”

At home, Sharon was living with a lot going on. “My – my father was an alcoholic, so he drank a lot.” Reading was her escape and plotting “to get away from that whole situation” became a priority for Sharon. Although she was
offered a University of New Mexico scholarship, a college out of the state became her imagined wings. Sharon and some friends traveled to Albuquerque to attend a college fair during the fall of senior year. Marquette University had a booth there. Sharon’s interests centered around journalism. She was involved with her high school newspaper and had a strong affinity for writing and formatting articles for the paper and working with computers. New technology like Apple came into the world and made the profession even more exciting for Sharon. What impressed her most about Marquette was their journalism program and the caliber of instructors.

Sharon’s anticipation grew, and she started sharing her college plans with teachers. Everyone voiced encouragement. Mr. Carey, whom Sharon highly regarded as a supportive figure, hoped she might join the ranks of his alma mater – Worcester College in Massachusetts. He was ready to make inquiries and write a recommendation for her, but Sharon thought the east coast was farther than she wanted to go. The Midwest was closer and more within her perceived comfort. So, she followed her first instinct and applied to Marquette University. “Once I got accepted, it seemed like the ball just started rolling. Things just fell into place and, you know, I decided to just go – go for it” even without ever visiting the campus or the state of Wisconsin.

Sharon’s confidence in her academic goals would not be shaken even when she endured some peer teasing about what she was trying to accomplish. “For the most part,” Sharon said, “I was really unbothered by it sometimes [because] I was so focused on what I was doing.” The support she received in
the broader community amongst teachers and family helped her thrive. They embodied the Navajo saying, “go far [and] keep going.” At the same time, Sharon was living out a Navajo philosophy of self-determination. “T’áá hwó’ ají t’éego,” you've gotta do it yourself – no one is going to do it for you.” But as Sharon got closer to leaving home, she had some trepidations. “I was really sad and really nervous about what I was going to encounter, ‘cuz I hadn't visited the campus. But I was – I was really determined. I would say that was, bottom line, kinda how, I guess what drove me.” A going away party was held for Sharon before she left to take this next big step.

[As] a community when people found out I was going off to college, they were just really supportive. [They had] a wonderful going away party before I left. Just people gave me wonderful gifts, just really encouraged me. They were proud of me, so I felt I had their support behind me as I was leaving and I was determined not to fail because I had a lot of people looking up to me and I really didn't want to disappoint people.

To get to Marquette University, Sharon traveled across country with her mom, a (sister-like) cousin that she grew up with and her baby brother (who was around three or four years old). They traveled in a used pick-up that saw better days and had a borrowed camper in tow to make the trip.

I got more and more nervous as we were getting close to Wisconsin. It was just a completely different environment. It was so green. I never experienced that before, just being in a completely green environment. No dust. No nothing. Humidity, I remember, it was in August when we moved. Encountering the Midwest humidity, that was something else, too.

The travelers arrived in Milwaukee at night in 1987. The “horrible smell of hops in the air” was a pungent greeting. Sharon immediately questioned her
choices. Arriving at their rundown Holiday Inn in the heart of the city on Wisconsin and N. 27th with “hookers on the street corner” induced a pile of nerves and an escalating fear. It was a huge culture shock, especially coming from a rural reservation. From this vantage point, “my mom was, like, if this is the rest of the campus, you have the option to go home. We can just go home.” Sharon chose not to turn around.

The next day was move-in. The BMWs and Mercedes pulling up to the curb to drop off their students is scorched into Sharon’s memory. She arrived with her family in a beat-up Ford, feeling like the “Beverly Hills Billies” with a camper of soaked cardboard boxes from a pouring rain the night before. Even against the backdrop of “other students bringing in their items, you know, beautiful luggage and perfectly packed stuff” Sharon and her mom are able to laugh about it today, but the experience left scars that were stitched up with an unyielding standard – Sharon would never let her children and the children in her life experience such glaring economic disparities. “It’s something that now I work really hard not to – not to allow.” So, when Sharon recently dropped off her niece at ASU, she ensured she had everything she needed.

I just wanted her to have a different experience than I did. [I'm] always checking in on her to make sure she has the latest and greatest so she doesn't feel a need or want [when] she’s trying to acclimate and get into her college education.

Sharon’s precollege and college experiences (good and bad) similarly informed the care of her daughter. Sharon made sure she took advantage of precollege programs in middle school. Together, they explored career and
toured Harvard, Stanford, Columbia and local universities so they could critically assess campus climate and determine if it was a good fit.

I really wanted her to feel that comfort level that I didn’t have. And to really know the campus and say, yeah, I think I can make my home here. Whereas I just went cold turkey. I didn’t even know what I was walking into. So, I said I would never allow my relatives to ever experience that, or even people that I know. So even today, I always encourage people, if you have an opportunity, go to that campus, just go check it out, see if you like it, see if you feel at home there.

At Marquette’s orientation, while Sharon was checking-in, her mom happened to meet a future lifeline of support, Donna Beckstrom. It was a first name basis at the start. Sharon does not know how they found each other, but to this day feels that it was not just chance. She was shocked to learn that Marquette even had an American Indian Counselor. “That's just how uninformed I was.” Donna was immediately welcoming and mothering. It helped Sharon's mother feel better about leaving her daughter in this foreign place, but it did not stop the tears for either of them when they left each other.

Sharon knows her mom and cousin were very sad and worried about her when they left her in Milwaukee. They wanted her to be okay because getting back to family if anything went wrong was a world away. Sharon, at that point, had never been on a plane, so imagining that kind of transportation to return home was very unlikely. In retrospect, Sharon does not know if she would have picked Marquette based on what she teaches her relatives. She wants them to feel immediately supported by people and resources and really know the campus. “Can they make a home there?” should be a guiding question for
families, Sharon says. She did not feel that at Marquette. To this day, she encourages others to visit prospective campuses because of the risk she took.

Sharon selected O'Donnell, an all-girls dorm, for her freshman home. She was assigned a single room, which was not what she expected. It struck her as odd, and as she got to know the other girls of color, she observed that they, too, had single rooms. “Then I – later on, I think I understood, having worked in administration, I kinda saw maybe they – they planned it that way. I don’t know. It’s hard to say, but it didn’t – it seemed planned.” But she says it was a “godsend” really because she could just come home and relax and be herself. As an only child for most of her childhood, she relished the space and made it her own. Sharon did get out to meet friends on her floor and dorm, though, pretty quickly. She was practiced in socializing as the new girl because of her many different schooling experiences.

Her first impression of the Marquette campus proper was that it was beautiful. Sharon also felt encouraged that Donna was there for her. However, early on, she was forced to manage “ignorant questions” like “do you live in a tipi?” or “do you have your college paid for?” Muting this chatter, Sharon branched out to find students she could relate to and found the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). Even though she was not part of EOP, she “felt more comfortable with them. They came from, you know, communities of color.”

Eventually, Sharon discovered other Native students and became involved with the Native American Student Association. The organization became her lifeline to the Native community alongside Donna, who took her under her wings.
One of the first events Donna took her to was the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee powwow just down the road from Marquette.

At that time, Navajos – I didn't know a lot of Navajos who were doing powwow. Now it's more predominant, but at that time we didn't go – we didn't grow up with that culture, so that was a complete culture shock for me.

Sharon got to meet a lot of new people from different tribal communities. Donna even took her to the powwow in Chicago on Navy Pier. Sharon absorbed all the experiences and the new communities she entered. She describes herself as a “sponge” who loved the view beyond campus. Sharon was curious about the other tribes and picked up all the tribal newspapers at the powwows. She was also curious about the other Native students. Donna was the connector and Sharon embraced the opportunity.

For the most part, Sharon's expectations were met transitioning from high school to college. Marquette was rigorous. Now, though, she thinks perhaps she was not ready for it all. Sharon also grappled with the Catholic philosophy at Marquette. It was “a little bit jarring.” So too, was the presence of “church people” living on campus and teaching. Sharon also set a high bar for her course load the first semester.

I think there was a lot that I needed help with, in terms of, you know, prioritizing things and the amount of reading that was involved. Even though I was quite a reader, I didn't realize how much reading each class would take, having the discipline, I think, to do that type of coursework. And then I was so naïve I took 16 credits my first semester, which was a lot and I don't think I was necessarily prepared for that as well. I think I should've eased into it, but I didn't have any academic counselors at that time to really help me transition from high school to college in that respect, not like there are at most universities now.
Feeling more at home at Marquette for Sharon did not happen until she “really got wired into the Native community that was there.” It included a small body of Native students and the Native American counselor. Donna was “really pivotal to feeling more at home and at ease,” both on campus and off. Donna opened up her home to Sharon. “So, I got to meet her family and, once she found out I knew how to make fried bread, she's, like, ahh, you definitely are coming over to make fried bread for me.”

Tragedy, though, would strike Sharon in her very first semester at Marquette. Her father passed away. Although Sharon's parents were estranged since she was a senior in high school, Sharon and her father shared an undeniable connection. She was going to leave Marquette at one point because she felt her family needed her back home. But in the end, Sharon decided to finish up the semester and year. Sharon does not think she would have made it if she were not connected to the right resources, including the caring people around her. When the news about her dad came to her, Sharon was working in the office of the Dean of Students. She remembers the demonstrable empathy from the Dean and the staff. They arranged for a grief counselor that very first day the news was received. Donna was on hand too. After Sharon's family arranged for her to fly home, Donna's husband drove Sharon to the airport. Upon her return to campus, the office connected Sharon to all the help that might be needed to support her, like a grief survivors support group. Although she did not take up the offers, Sharon did lean on people. Donna was instrumental in taking care of her.
Sharon’s first semester was understandably tough. She withdrew from one class but kept her fierce determination. Her father’s voice swirled in her head: “Don’t quit, not on my account, so keep going, don’t quit. We’re not quitters.” There was always an expectation from him to go to college. “You can’t not go to college,” he would tell her. Then, as if willing it to happen, he would say to Sharon, “you are going to get your degree.” He knew the value of an education, especially being married to Sharon’s mom. The awareness of joblessness for people in the community without a degree, Sharon says, fueled his urgent emphasis on higher education. So she knew she would not fail when she called up his voice. At some point, Sharon declined all the regular check-ins for support. Everyone honored this and stepped back a bit. Sharon is sure that without this kind of personal cushioning, though, she would not have made it through that year.

When Sharon talks about the support she received from family and friends to pursue and persist in college, there is one relative who distinctly motivated her. Before going to Marquette University, a cousin of Sharon’s mom came to visit. He said to Sharon directly, “it’s a long way to be from home and I don’t think you are going to make it.” Sharon was so taken aback by the directness and spirit of this comment. No one had ever said something like this to her before. When things got tough in her course of studies and she got discouraged enough to want to go home, she would call up these taunting words and say to herself “I’m going to prove that guy wrong.” When Sharon graduated, she remembers telling her mom that she wanted to find him to thank him. It was his words that helped
her persist. Coming full circle, that relative came by recently to visit Sharon.

Before taking leave, he said, “Sharon, you made it.” The validation, in a way, closed a negative feedback loop for her. She uses this story for her niece and her daughter when she knows they are in a rough patch and encourages them to take what they need from it for their lives.

Sharon had stayed in Milwaukee the summer after her first year. She wanted to explore the area and get better acquainted with the place that would be her home for the next four years. As a bank clerk, she could afford a sublet with a friend before moving back into the dorms that fall. That academic year, Sharon ended up staying close to where she first arrived in Milwaukee near N. 27th and Wisconsin Avenue. For more than half the year, Sharon was by herself until the office of residence life paired a non-Indigenous student with her. It was an adjustment because Sharon had spent little time with someone who did not share her cultural or racial background. The two could not have been more different. Sharon was more of a “social butterfly” and had many friends come to her dorm. Her new roommate stayed in a lot but became a part of Sharon’s circle by default. For the most part, though, Sharon was outside in the world, going to school, working and keeping busy with other activities.

This Sophomore year was different for Sharon. Her confidence had grown, and she began to feel more at home at Marquette. Sharon resumed her part-time office role to support the Dean of Students. She was also recommended for an internship with a journalism organization at Marquette, the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Center, by Dean Murphy in the College of
Journalism. Here she was able to be mentored by Karen Lincoln Michel (now the president of *Indian County Today*). But Sharon also carved out time to get involved in student organizations. When she heard about the Marquette Integrated Leadership Council (MILC), which was addressing racial justice issues, she began attending their meetings and got to meet other students from underrepresented backgrounds. Concerned with the visibility and awareness of Native students on campus, Sharon also found an alliance with the American Indian student organization and joined their meetings too.

They were really interested in making the university address certain racial issues on campus [and to] just bring more diversity awareness, number one, to the campus ‘cuz there were very, very few students of color, so just bringing out the issues related to that. There might have been a couple of incidents on campus, I can’t really remember specifically, but there was protests about that. Just some fights that broke out. I also think a lot of the students really weren’t aware of any other cultures besides their own, and that kind of tied into my involvement with the American Indian student organization. Just bringing our issues [to the forefront] and getting them to be part of the bigger platform at Marquette [in order to have the institution] recognize that there were issues that we face as well. We were probably at the lowest percentage of students on campus, so we weren’t very visible, and just trying to let them know we are here. There are tribes here. There are Native communities in Milwaukee and Wisconsin that you should be aware of and just trying to bring those things to light.

Around the same time, racial tensions exploded in northern Wisconsin, with treaty rights at the center of the fights. People were reaching out to get the local Native perspective. Sharon worked to get speakers on campus to address the issues.
Sharon was also becoming more connected to the Multicultural Center at Marquette. It was a hidden-away place in the union where students of color gathered for meetings. Donna would advise Native students here too. There was a comradery amongst Marquette counselors, who pulled in Sharon and other Native students when there were special speakers on campus or conferences of interest. She was invited to other local universities and colleges for events too. Sharon says it felt good to be a part of the Milwaukee Indian community.

For the remainder of her time at Marquette, Sharon maintained close ties to these groups. She helped to organize around specific campus issues, shed light on the absence of diversity at Marquette, and planned events on campus to bring awareness of differences. By her junior year, the Native student organization had established a showcase called Native American Awareness Week. It brought in Native speakers from around the country who were in film, authors of notable books and musical performers. Sharon may not have held a formal position or office in these volunteer student organizations, but she held strong in the background, putting in the work to support their mission. “And people would volunteer me to make fry bread. Yeah, so we basically would have fry bread or taco sales to generate more funds for speakers or activities that we would like to do as a group.”

A major event Sharon reflects on was being part of the Native student committee that developed a campus powwow. She devoted her time to this effort in her sophomore, junior and senior years. Johnny Logan was the
foremost student organizer because of his connections in the Milwaukee and Wisconsin Indian community. It became a “big affair” that grew over time and required a lot of student planning. It included a traditional feast for those in attendance. However, due to some of the institutional barriers the powwow committee faced around hosting campus events, they had to work extra hard to find sanctioned solutions. Even though the powwow seemed worth it to put Marquette on the community map, Sharon reflects now on the costs.

[I] wouldn't encourage many student groups to do that, 'cuz there's a lot of time and effort that goes into it, and I think kinda takes away from your studies a little bit. So, it was a challenge at times. I don't think [though] we could've done it without the counselors that were there.

Things got tougher when Donna left Marquette University for Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) halfway through Sharon's time as a student. She says the student organization floundered a bit in Donna's absence, so they organized and lobbied the university to hire for the vacant position.

[We worked] with the Native community, the local Native leaders, to come and talk with Marquette administrators about what was important for Native students at Marquette, why they were not seeing high enrollment numbers in comparison to other colleges. They were not working harder on recruitment and retention at Marquette, so really bringing those things to light.

The institution told students they were up against a budget shortage. While they received a half-time counselor (Lori Larsen), whom Sharon recalls was Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe, she eventually left Marquette too. Following in Lori's wake was a short succession of counselors or advisors that stayed for just months at a time.
While the Native student population on campus did not reach the numbers of other groups, Sharon says there was a distinct presence that needed to be supported. She impressed upon the administration that instead of just photos and anecdotes on a pamphlet for marketing purposes, turn the investment into concrete support for Native students. Sharon always felt that Marquette fell way short of how much they invested in recruiting and retaining Native students and said as much to the administration. It was a tension with which she always wrestled. The feeling was exacerbated by what she saw happen to Native students when they came to Marquette.

I know they didn't like to hear it, but I felt very strongly about that, and I felt like they really did need to put more resources into recruitment and retention. Yeah, you bring the students here but what are you doing to retain them? Because I can say, honestly, I think – I saw half the students leave after they got here or got to Marquette. They left for various reasons; they didn't stay. You know, they had challenges that they were going through, but, you know, they just felt – I think they didn't feel they had the support at Marquette to continue, and they left.

Even though Sharon describes herself as less than a model college student, she stayed the course. “I think I just did enough to get by and I think I didn't take my education as seriously as I should have. I was more involved in what I was doing than really concentrating on my studies.” Nonetheless, Sharon was deeply curious and always trying to expand her knowledge and skills. In addition to taking a class for credit at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, Sharon also worked in the Mac Lab at the College of Journalism to build her graphic design skills. One of the projects she worked on was for a Native community non-profit. Sharon turned the “Wisconsin Tribal Business Directory”
into an independent project for credit. The experience would come in handy after college. But so would the interviewing skills she learned on the job her senior year for a Milwaukee health initiative examining drug and alcohol issues in the community. She went all over the city and interviewed American Indian youth for the grant. Sharon worked through the summer for the organization. They liked Sharon's interview style, and after developing a good rapport with the grant administrator, she stayed on to do additional interviews and some write-ups. All this work outside of Marquette enriched her experiences as a student. It opened the aperture of her lens on the world and allowed Sharon to see Marquette as only one piece of a much larger urban setting.

People would often refer Sharon to different organizations, and she would let herself be drawn into what she gauged were worthy efforts. At another point in her senior year, she and a friend started working on an idea for a Milwaukee-area newspaper as part of a national publication called *News from Indian Country*. Sharon pursued it in another Independent Study for her academic program. Resources would not materialize for the plan, though, and it fizzled. Sharon acknowledged that this is fortunate due to the large time commitment that the project would have required.

Sharon reflects on how many different directions she was drawn into during her college years. As forward-thinking as her engagement was outside the classroom, it came at a cost – time to graduation. “You know, I was kinda dragging my heels and not wanting to get done.” One of the Native American counselors became worried about Sharon's schedule and introduced her to a
cousin who was a state-level official. He kindly acknowledged all the good work she was doing but said in a matter-of-fact way that education was critical and that her having a degree was more important. “You need to graduate.” Those words struck at her core, and she kept them blazing in her mind for the remaining time at Marquette. “I ended up walking [at commencement] with the rest of the students, but I had to stay an additional year to finish up classes in order to get my degree. So that was really kind of, a good kick in the butt for me to finish.”

The advice did not curtail her passion for working on behalf of Native students.

I ended up working part-time in the admissions office, and I basically volunteered to work on that. Well, they paid me to do that, but they created a position, so I worked part-time [about] 20 hours a week [during] my final year at Marquette, because I was only going to school part-time at that time to finish up, and they hired me to work on Native recruitment.

In this undergraduate admissions role, Sharon invited Native American students to campus, connected with the tribal education offices to share information about Marquette and traveled to area high schools and conferences to recruit. She also served as a mentor for the local chapter of the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES). Although Sharon did not have a STEM background, she helped AISES students with science fair projects and hosted them and their families on campus. The university soon offered the job full-time to Sharon. She turned it down without hesitation. “I felt a calling to go home and just be at home, be in the Southwest again, whether it was working with my own tribe [or others].” But there were other reasons. Working for Marquette opened her eyes.
Just trying to work with the politics of the institution and, I would say some institutional racism at Marquette, I wasn't motivated to continue on with them. Although I did see the need to do that work, I just didn't feel motivated to continue on working in that capacity because I wasn't interested in having to fight at that level constantly and, just in talking with other counselors, you know, just with a common theme when they would talk about working at Marquette or working with Marquette.

One of the counselors Sharon developed a very close relationship with after Donna left was Oilda Martinez. Oilda was hired as an assistant dean of Student Affairs and served primarily as the counselor for Latino and Asian Pacific students at Marquette. “She is the one person I would say, one of my main mentors at Marquette. She would really encourage me to finish school.” Similar to Sharon’s relationship with Donna on and off campus, Oilda was instrumental in helping her navigate the politics at Marquette as a student and employee. Oilda has continued to play an important part in Sharon’s life as a mentor, encouraging her to obtain her master’s degree. She even watched over her daughter attending a school in Oilda’s hometown. To this day, Sharon considers her family.

I communicated with her regularly and she’s always been a part of my life throughout my professional career and after college. When I started my family, she was always a part of that. And then when my daughter graduated, she came to the reception she had up there. So, it was neat. It was neat to see it all full circle, and I wanna make sure I mention her, because she was really, really important to me through my last few years at Marquette. She really encouraged me; she really mentored a lot of students at Marquette, and really tried to advocate for us as well with the student leaders, with administration and to our – about our groups as well to the administration. Especially the times when we didn’t have a Native American counselor, she kinda took on that role.
Sharon deliberately built a professional network for herself before graduating from Marquette. At a Native American Journalist Association (NAJA) conference, Sharon met the community relations director from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community and established a rapport. Keeping in touch with her when Sharon moved to Phoenix after graduation, she was offered a brand-new role for the Salt River tribal newspaper. Sharon became the first full-time editor of *Au-Authm Action News*. It was her first official job after college. It met her professional criteria: working with a tribal community and in her field of study. It also aligned with Sharon’s philosophy: she talked a lot about her love of editing.

I have a great respect for the power of words, you know, not only creatively but also, you know, technically. There’s a lot of information that gets passed from one person to the next, so, I’m always interested in that whole process. And I think that’s one thing I really enjoy. And then, I think just being able to dissect something and make it better is my biggest thing, too. How to improve it. How to make it more readable, you know, for an average person. How to make it more interesting. Does it make sense, you know? I think those are the biggest foundations for me.

The newspaper was already being published, but the community wanted to bring it in-house. Sharon would be part of the seminal effort. It was an exciting time to work for a community that was building and diversifying its tribal enterprises. The newspaper covered much ground with everything going on in an active community. Sharon was always on the go, wore many hats and utilized all her skills gained at Marquette. It was an ideal first job, Sharon says. She ended up staying in the role for three years. Sharon feels like the paper not only generated much interest from the tribal community but also instilled in them a
sense of pride. It was the community’s publication now. Other tribes came to
look at it as a model. Those tribes asked Sharon to advise them on how to
develop their newspapers. In her subsequent career, Sharon continued to
employ her skills in communication, helped develop community publications for
other tribal entities and also built relationships.

When Sharon looks back at Marquette and remembers where she came
from, she sees the challenges and triumphs as things that helped form her. She
says those experiences really put her through the fire.

[But] I would say I’m very determined. I would say determination is
a big thing for me. I don’t know if that’s something that’s very
cultural, too. I mean, we [Navajo] are kind of, just come from a
culture of go-getters, you know. So just having that self-
determination, self-initiative, not counting on people to do things for
me, I think was a big skill.

Even with her community behind her, this ethic helped Sharon manage the high
stakes of college. She shares with the children in her life to always explore and
try things out. If it does not work, she tells them that it is okay. However, these
words of wisdom did not apply to Sharon and her graduating from college. In the
words of her father, there was no other option.
Among Ojibwe people, there is a greeting protocol. One makes their introduction in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe language), which includes their bestowed spirit or ceremonial name. Armando Zaragoza obliquely acknowledges this cultural tradition when he starts the interview by saying he was not given an “Indian name,” but that a tribal elder referred to him as “one who asks many questions.” It fits, Armando says, because of his curious nature and love of learning. What is an uneasy fit for Armando is his last name. Zaragoza was inherited from his Mexican father, whom he never knew. But Armando knows well his Indigenous lineage through all his grandparents, whom he takes care to introduce by way of their tribal affiliation. He is an enrolled member of the Bad River tribe like his maternal grandfather, Robert Curtis. Armando’s great grandparents, Robert’s mother and father, were enrolled Bad River and Keweenaw Bay (Ojibwe) Indian Community. Armando’s maternal grandmother was Stockbridge-Munsee, and her mother was enrolled Oneida.

Armando’s cultural identity flourished at the Indian Community School (ICS) in Milwaukee – a private, faith-based K-8 school that incorporates Indigenous knowledge and ways in all aspects of the curriculum. He spent most of his school years there through 8th grade. “[The] school really helped me understand what it meant – or what it means to be Native American.” But ICS also seeded the idea in Armando that he could succeed in school. It first sprang from a guidance counselor.
I wasn’t doing so good, you know, with grades and kind of acting up, maybe acting out, not being, I guess what you’d call it, a good kid, maybe getting in trouble or not taking things serious in school, and the guidance counselor at the time scheduled a meeting with my grandpa and me, and not that it scared me, but, my grandpa was somebody I respected. We met together and [from] that point the guidance counselor – he kinda pushed me in a different way. Pushed me to kinda see I gotta take things serious, at an early age in grade school, and kind of get my act together, so that way I can, be better and be different than, than acting up or not getting good grades and make something of myself.

Instead of it feeling punitive, the conversation opened up possibilities for Armando. It reshaped his capacity to see himself differently. Armando emerged from that meeting knowing he had to act differently to be successful, and it would become his mission.

The change in Armando was noticeable to those around him. In his 8th grade and final year at ICS, Armando’s peers and teachers nominated him to be the Eagle Staff carrier. It is a significant responsibility to personally steward this sacred cultural symbol, and although Armando accepted the honor, he was initially reluctant. He remembers being very self-conscious in these years, and the official role required him to follow Indigenous cultural protocols in a very public way – opening every school gathering and special event with the Eagle Staff for the whole year. Reflecting on the ICS community that saw something in him beyond what he could see in himself raised uncharted emotions for Armando.

I had a lotta outside support in that [people saw] things in me that told me, you know, I do good things and … they wanted me to make something of myself. They seen something in me I didn’t see, something my mom and [step]dad couldn’t tell me. So when I
think about the outside support, I think of, you know, those people that pull me to the side and, and help me see that, just the good things. And just to expand on my mom and [step]dad, they – they didn’t make it to functions at the school or plays or outside activities and things like that.

Armando took a long pause. There is sadness as he turns over the memories.

Thinking about it now, and I haven’t thought about any of these things in [voice trails]. Maybe I block it out. I probably block it out now, but, yeah, if it weren’t for these outside teachers, guidance counselors, my grandparent, I probably wouldn’t be where I’m at today. Because each of those [people] played an impact in my education, in my life.

This expression of gratitude for support is a recurrent theme in Armando’s story.

After 8th grade, ICS offered its student body a full scholarship to attend a private high school of choice. Working with his guidance counselor, Armando applied to the Catholic coeducational St. Thomas More High School in Milwaukee and was accepted. His world was starting to take a starkly different shape from his family’s.

My mom and [step]dad, I don’t even think really finished high school, and I’ve only had maybe an uncle have some college education, and it took him a while to get there. I think I’m first in my family to go into [and] come outta high school, go into college, have a college degree. [I’m the] first in my family to do that, to accomplish that.

Without the full scholarship, attending a college prep high school would have been a pipe dream. His large family with four brothers and a sister was poor. They survived a tough existence on Armando’s mom’s annual salary of thirteen thousand and supplemental government assistance. It was always a struggle.

Armando saw that it was not any different around him. Like his own home, his
neighborhood was saturated with drugs and alcohol. “We lived in neighborhoods that were bad,” and it precipitated Armando’s parents deciding to move to the Menominee reservation. “They felt, like, that would be a better, an opportunity for them to get away from the, the city life and the violence.” It was another turning point for Armando because he decided to stay behind. “So my [maternal] grandfather [Robert] kinda sacrificed himself to, you know, let me live with him throughout my high school years.”

Robert was one of Armando’s biggest champions in life, and he emerged even more prominently at this time. He stood in the gap left open by his parents and would always say to Armando, “I want you to be better than me.” But Armando quickly capped that memory with “I could never be.”

I feel, like he’s not my dad, but he – there’s nothing closer to it, a father figure, and he sacrificed a lot for, for me. [He] was a big supporter and wanted me to go to school and get a good education and be smart and just kinda pushed me to make something of myself, because coming from a family that [didn't] have many good, I guess, good role models or good figures to look up to, we – I didn’t have that.

The recollection draws back a curtain on Armando’s life.

There are things that I don’t tell many people. I’m ashamed of, in a way, because, you know, my mom and dad were always there but, they were always drunk or, you know, drugs was an issue growing up, you know, just being around that environment all the time. So I don’t tell many people that, but it’s part of my story, it’s part of – it’s the challenge that I overcame. It’s the things that I don’t wanna live like that plays a part in why I work so hard, too.

Armando is quick to add that he loves his parents, would give his life for them, and does not blame them because he senses they have untold stories of suffering, but the instability made space for others outside his family home to
lend his trust. It was not like he was actively pursuing role models. “I think good people just came in my life at different points in my life, to push me along the way.” Robert showed himself to be what Armando needed and offered to keep him in the city for all of his high school years. He “sacrificed himself,” Armando says. It would not be wasted, but it took some time.

Armando’s trials at St. Thomas More began before he even entered the doors. His standardized test scores were “below average” on everything, and as a result, he was placed in all the lower tier classes and stayed there for a couple of semesters. Armando felt the stigma and the sting of where he was academically. He told himself that he may not be where he should be, but he was motivated to learn and excel and show that he could compete with the “best in the school.” “I’m always comfortable with saying I never was the smartest person in the room, but my work ethic, my desire to work hard and learn propelled me to keep my grades up and be able to excel.” Regular monthly check-ins too from the Indian Community School helped motivate him to keep his GPA up and maintain his scholarship eligibility. In a matter of a few semesters at St. Thomas More, teachers recognized Armando's efforts and lifted him up and out of the C tier.

Armando also had to confront novel experiences in student circles. It was a culture shock transferring from an all-Indian school. He did not expect to field daily insults and misconceptions around his identity like “what is an Indian?” and assumptions that Indians just get everything for free and at that time, I think that was a big thing, because I’m going to school with these kids that their
parents have to pay thousands of dollars every semester or every year and then here’s me, this Indian kid gets a handout, I felt like they thought – a handout. But I don’t think they understand what it took to get there. It took a lotta hard work. I don’t think they understand the struggle of what Native people sometimes have to go through.

Armando tried not to get emotionally weighted down. Perhaps it would have been easier to retreat, but instead he strategically subverted the stereotypes for his own use. He shared what it was like to be Indian.

I embraced their stereotypes, but also with the intent to educate them. If you are going to call me Chief, then I’m going to give you an Indian name – you’re gonna be an Indian, you know, so I embraced the things that they didn’t understand, but also educating them on what it meant to get an Indian name or what or what it meant to be part of a tribe or what it meant to grow up [Indian], and I guess trying to just give a little light – shed light on, my culture.

If you were considered part of his “clique,” then you were part of his tribe, “the Last of the Chippewa.”

Armando is generous with the memory of his peers. He gets that Indians are mostly unknown to non-Indians, which gives way to a lot of misunderstanding. Instead of making enemies, he took on allies. Kids Armando did not like at first “because they said nasty things” became some of his best friends in the end and “embraced my culture, so, that’s something I’m proud about.” He met his goal to help them understand what Indians had to undergo to survive. For Armando, he did more than survive. At the end of his high school career, he graduated with a 3.8 GPA and was 19th in his class of 119. These rankings are seared into his memory. Armando attributes the totality of his
schooling experiences and how hard he worked to succeed educationally to his eventually making it to Marquette University.

When I talk about Marquette University and, when I talk about what it took for me to get there. You know, it was a struggle, I guess, so thinking about it now, I just think – I think about, wow, I did that. I did that! And, it – I guess, it’s even making me a little emotional now, just thinking about it, ’cuz it was no, no easy journey.

Armando shares a story about his beloved (maternal) grandma as a way to begin his college story dreams. Armando was one of her first-born grandchildren and special to her because of it. The love he had for his grandma was fully returned. What darkly shadowed her life, though, was one of her sons. He was in prison. “I didn’t wanna see my grandma sad, so I would always promise her, you know, I’m gonna grow up one day, be a lawyer. And to be a lawyer, you need a lotta schooling.” He held onto that promise until he got to college. Almost in defiance, he has not closed the door on the possibility. “I still can be a lawyer” he says.

While he felt like he could go anywhere for college, his family was back in Milwaukee. “I couldn’t leave family, I was – we’re close [and] not being close to, you know, brothers or my sister, my mom and dad, just didn’t feel right.”

Marquette University was a great option so he could live at home and make it more financially affordable. He put in a few different college applications, but Marquette was the target. He was accepted. Armando’s experience upon arrival was similar to high school. Academically, it was a culture shock. It was hard. His inner voice was saying, “am I going to make it? Can I do this?” He felt alone even though he was surrounded by people. He did not expect college to be so
hard. He thought it would be more fun. “I did not have fun” Armando declares. His mom was supportive of his choice not to work when he went to school so he could focus. Armando was aware that some of his peers worked, but he knew instinctively he had to figure out how college worked and be diligent in his studies. He studied all the time. The realization came that maybe becoming a lawyer was not for him. He had to make money much sooner. He remembers talking to his grandma about the dream breaking down. She said, “you don’t have to be a lawyer. You can be whatever you want.” The pressure valve was released. But still, Armando felt like he had to work harder than anyone else to keep up. Armando organized his classes in a block in the morning so that he would not have excess time at Marquette. If there was a gap, he spent time in the libraries.

At home, his brothers saw him studying all the time and knew “not to mess with him.” He would read his class materials over and over again (three or four times), rarely missed class and took a lot of notes. His personal investment in school was clear to anyone who knew him. It was his life, and he made sure to mitigate setbacks that might throw him off track. If a subject did not come easy, Armando was going to strive to learn the content. He says again, like a mantra, that while he was not the smartest, he could work harder than anyone. College English rose quickly to be a serious struggle for Armando. He was more of an idea guy and putting them down on paper in a mechanical way with the correct grammar plagued Armando. But he was unafraid to ask for help from faculty outside of class. He also sought out extra help from Marquette resources like the
writing center. He knew he needed support and single-mindedly sought it out to receive it.

As if this experience was not challenging enough, Armando’s confidence was shaken even in those subject areas that came easy for him. Math was his dependable superpower, but college calculus took him by surprise. He remembers the “rude awakening” of a C+ grade on his first exam. “I was disappointed in myself.” It was as if his self-motivation and self-initiative failed him because they did not see him through this first test of college life. He was accustomed to receiving A grades. Armando realized then that college success was going to take more than he currently had in his repertoire. He had to recalibrate his study and exam preparation techniques in this postsecondary environment. But he also scanned the landscape to see who could help him on his path to educational success. Armando would come to build helpful connections with a few strong students that were more advanced in his weaker subject areas. He learned from them. “I’m thankful for those people that I met throughout college. I wouldn’t call them friends, but they were just more willing to help.” Other people, too, came into his life at the right place and time. He felt “lucky” for these serendipitous connections. In the interview, he laughs about how he “grabbed onto whatever I could to be successful. Or whoever it was, I grabbed on and didn’t let go because I needed it.”

In a more serious tone, Armando is philosophical about his past. “Even though I didn’t get a good hand in life, I had a start and was beyond blessed.” But he is very self-aware. No one was in the background pressuring him.
It was all self-motivation. Nobody cared about my grades, my mom, you know, my mom and them. They were there and they were glad that I was going to school, but nobody cared [or said] “you gotta get an A.” They were just, I was just proud to be there. They were proud that I was just there.

Armando could have continued to receive C grades and stayed just above the passing line until graduation. No one would have been the wiser – except for him. He could not live by just coasting. So, he sacrificed a social life with friends and family time for school. Each semester was a new puzzle.

I had to figure it all out all over again. Figure out how to use my time wisely. I knew that I always just had to put in extra time, especially with reading. I’m a slow reader, I’m still a slow reader, so I knew a lotta my time was gonna be spent reading, and if not reading, it was reading it over. I’m positive I read things three or four times, just because I felt like I had to work that much harder.

From an academic perspective, Armando’s freshman year was the hardest. He took all the required courses in the College of Arts and Sciences but did not really know what he wanted to pursue yet. He quickly learned that it was not a foreign language. Not much scared him, but this language requirement threw him. He took two years of Spanish in high school and knew he could not possibly face it down at the college level. Armando would do anything to avoid having to complete the requirement. It was what made him transfer over to the College of Business for his sophomore year. As good fortune would have it, Armando finally hit his stride in the College of Business. “It fit who I was” and finally gave him some space to take a breath and slow down a little bit. It also avoided the language requirement. “That sounds so crazy that that’s how I
thought. I was so scared to have that four credit Spanish course, so I just felt, like, man that just adds so much pressure.”

Armando took lessons with him, though, from that first year in Arts and Sciences. The biggest one was that it helped crystallize his feelings around social welfare and justice. Armando knew he had to incorporate this practice into his daily and professional life. He wanted to help people and needed a business curriculum that would build upon his innate strengths. The College of Business had many pathways to explore. Armando feels he could have been successful at many of them post-graduation. They were all interesting subjects, and he reveled in the choices. Accounting would come to be his strong suit. He passed those exams in the high 90s to perfect scores. But he began to wonder how he could help people at a desk. “It scared me away from the accounting program. Maybe because I didn’t want to [just] be behind the books, behind the scenes, and how can I help from behind the scenes?”

Armando fondly remembers stepping out in front to help serve a cause. Every summer in his younger years he would go up to the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation to stay with his grandma. Here he actively pursued community service for elders. It was on his own time beyond what was required in his high school. Armando would get dropped off at the tribe’s elderly center at 8:00 a.m., where he would work the day until the afternoon around 3:00 p.m. or 4:00 p.m. Armando felt a great sense of pride in how people shared their appreciation for his service whether it was cutting lawns, serving food or helping with daily enrichment activities the center offered. So, when he got to college, from a
personal and business mindset, elders figured in very prominently. They fit in so naturally to his life experiences and who he was as a Native American. Elders come first in our values, he says.

At Marquette it was important for him to incorporate his cultural values and Ojibwe language whenever he could. In the College of Business he felt at ease in sharing who he was as a Native person. It turns out that entrepreneurship and human resources would be key platforms to do so. In these classes, Armando took the opportunity to develop a vision and mission for his own staffing firm to support in-home care for the elderly. The two went hand in hand, Armando says. He could be his own boss and help elders at the same time. Armando pitched his idea of an in-home health care service for elders for a class project. He called it *Miigwech Staffing* (translated to Thank You Staffing in the Ojibwe language). Armando says he was not a strong speaker or presenter, but clearly his story and idea had a gravitational pull.

I involved the facts or the facts about industry for elderly, and then I also was able to kind of teach the class a little bit about what it means for me to be Native, or how I felt what it meant, what my values were at the time, and respecting elders [who] we hold highly in our culture. People just gravitated towards the idea. It wasn’t me going to someone else’s idea and say “I’m interested in working with you on your idea” it was others coming to my idea, saying you have a really good idea, and I wanna help you make it, help you make a business plan for it.

Three other classmates put aside their own business plans and volunteered to join his team. It was a respectable class project result, he says, that brought him a lot of pride. Like in high school, Armando was educating his peers about being Native. Only this time, he did not feel the pressure of being put on the spot. College kids were more open, he says.
The successful momentum Armando was driving in his college program could have understandably been derailed by two life-changing events. In 2011, Armando had a son with his partner. It was his senior year.

[The] only social life I had at that time was with his mother and I guess for my grandpa, he thought that maybe having a kid would distract me or maybe that I wouldn’t be able to handle college or would drop out or something. So I know that scared him, so it was hard for – hard for my grandpa to accept that I was having a kid, but for me, it didn’t change anything. I know I wanted to still finish out school – it was school [that] was the number one thing – number one priority.

Armando acknowledges the energy he spent on school was at the expense of time for his young son and family. The reflection is especially poignant when he shares a devastating loss that late fall.

I was so in the book my last – my last experience with my [younger] brother. I was studying for an exam the next day and, he came in and sat with me and my head – my nose was in the book. But I can still remember him being in the room with me and just kinda asking me questions and kinda half answering them so that way I can focus on my book – my exam, my studying. And then, that’s the last time I talked to my brother, before he was murdered. And, so, there’s that regret. I can never get back any of that time that I lost out. Losing my brother was so traumatic, and it also propelled me to keep going in life ‘cuz I know my brother. He wanted me to be smart. He always respected studying and he understood what it meant to me. And I always – after he passed – I always felt, like I just gotta work that much harder now; I can’t give up now. So I used losing my brother as another crutch, another motivation to keep studying.

In a state of shock, the following day after learning the news, Armando went to campus to take his scheduled exam. He felt like giving up but thought otherwise.

“I have to take it; my brother woulda wanted me to take it.” Armando shared the
news with one of his business professors whose class he missed earlier that day. He strongly encouraged Armando to take some time away and offered assurances that the professor giving the exam would understand. Armando’s resolve was firm. He requested instead some accommodation to take the exam alone. The professor he confided in proctored the exam for him and, from that day forward, became a huge support to Armando. He met with Armando once a week outside of class to listen and support him and tell him not to give up.

Armando is able to look back on that time with more clarity. He says he gained a lot of weight that year and “was depressed, I think at times, because of my brother passing, and I just didn’t acknowledge it.” His professor was a “safe place” for Armando to express all that he was feeling and going through. They didn’t talk about school life. They talked about life. Armando credits him for keeping him going and grounded.

When asked to reflect on what pulled him through college, Armando’s response is layered.

I’ve been scared of failure. I’ve been scared to – I’ve been motivated by trauma. Trauma, to be honest, is – it felt like the trauma that I experienced helped me focus on the school to escape, if that makes sense. I feel like if I didn’t channel it to something else, I felt like I’d fall or I would break down. I felt like, if school – going through school was something that I was able to kinda distract myself, from everything around me, from my environment, from the things that went wrong or from the challenge that I faced throughout life. I felt like school was a way to escape it. So it’s self-motivation, but it’s also the only healthy way that I could’ve handled that trauma – just focusing all that energy into doing stuff for school, doing good things for school.
Armando graduated from college with honors. It came with so many sacrifices and some feelings of regret. He wonders whether it was worth it. “I don’t know if – I don’t know, still. I don’t know if I have an answer for that.” He knows he can’t change anything or get back the precious time lost with his family, his grandfather and especially his brother. But the question of why he didn’t schedule more time with them continues to gnaw at him and he asserts that “school’s not life – education’s not life.”

After college, Armando says he still had lessons to learn. “I needed to work at coming out of my shell. I felt, like, in college I was really insecure; the only thing I had good going for myself was getting good grades, but I lacked confidence.” He knew he had to build some skills and correct some perceived weaknesses, like social interaction, public speaking and presenting an idea. Armando accepted invitations to serve Milwaukee Native community educational boards immediately following graduation in 2012. During this time, he also served in two administrative roles in Human Resources before taking on the role he occupies today in Indian gaming compliance to help people serve their own tribal communities around economic development. The tables are turned. Now Armando is the resource. “Everything I have been through I use today.” He also knows that he has the skills to become a successful business owner, but that dream is on hold for the time being.

I feel like I serve people every day. I serve not only in the home [where] I serve my kids, I serve my family when I can, [and] I serve people. I work with Native people. I am doing, you know, kinda what I wanted to do, but in a different aspect. I’m using all those skills though that I needed to do, to run my own business. I’m using those skills to serve people. I feel like that was my whole
plan. I wanted to serve people and – and do it from a business aspect, and I'm doing that very thing. I [just] don't have my own business. But I'm content with serving Native communities.

In the shadows of these accomplishments and successes are all the old struggles Armando has historically wrestled. He remains conscious about having to work on being a “people person” and “putting on a show.” In one small revealing moment, Armando wonders what he would have gained professionally if he had the life to develop these skills earlier on. Would he have gotten an early promotion in his current role? Where would he be now? He can't say for sure. What he does know is that he has to work on being content with his life.

I struggle with the idea sometimes of being content because I'm always on edge or I'm always waiting for the next traumatic experience. I'm always waiting for how do I show value or how do I get that A.

The self-awareness prevents him from considering advancing his education. Armando says he does not know how to take it easy or “cap speed something” when it comes to school. He realizes that he was never satisfied with his achievement if it was less than an A grade. Not fully trusting that he knows how to dial it down to achieve some life balance is a scary thought for him.

Armando's practical nature resurfaces too. School costs time and money. But to advance in his profession he says, a graduate program or a Juris Doctorate in Indian law may be a necessary step. While he likes the feeling of progressing through something, for now Armando is focusing on family. He has two boys now and they figure prominently in his decision-making. Even though they want for nothing, Armando feels like he has much to do on their behalf.
If he is restless at times, Armando is able to quiet himself and step back to acknowledge all the people that helped him along the way. He would not have made it without them, he says. “I struggled mentally with depression and everything like that. But I’ve made it out. I know for sure, for a fact, just thinking about it, I wouldn’t have made it without those people.” Professors who invested their time in Armando, as well as some staff and peers, are unforgettable to him. He does not have any friends from college, but if he saw them today, he would say, “I appreciate you.”

For Armando, life always showed a storm coming. Be patient, he would tell those students coming behind him. Every day is a new day. If there are challenges that seem insurmountable, “ask for help.” It could mean life or death. He would also advise finding a “healthy way” to deal with stress, like working out, finding a hobby, making friends, being a part of good influences, and never forgetting who you are. “I’m Native American. I’m Ojibwe. I’m Bad River.” Remember too who came before, Armando says. Whatever we are going through, “we think it’s the hardest thing in the world,” but the previous generation experienced a struggle too.

Break that chain. That’s what I feel like I’m doing. Breaking the chain. I’m not going to repeat history with what happened to our people or what happened to my grandparents, their parents. [Life] put them in a spot where they just had to survive. And I’m trying to change that. I’m trying to break that.

Armando did not get a head start in life, but he is finishing the race. He is not first, he says. It is more important to him that he is finishing. He survived. He brings it all back to his boys. They lost their mom unexpectedly a few years ago,
so Armando is all they have, and he intends on being a dad first. School no
longer defines him, but it helped shape him and put a path out in front of him.
CHAPTER SEVEN

NOEMY SANDOVAL (BS ’14) ORAL HISTORY

In her Navajo language, Noemy introduced herself by sharing her clans. The greeting translated to English this way. “Hello. My name is Noemy Sandoval. I am Dine – Navajo. My mother’s clan is The One Who Walks Around and my father is from Costa Rica. My grandfather is The Towering House Clan on my mother’s side. My grandparents are from Costa Rica and Italy as well.” All her grandparents were fluent in their respective languages, Navajo and Spanish, but neither were spoken in Noemy’s home. Today, Noemy can understand some of both. Noemy’s parents met while attending New Mexico State University. Her father moved from Costa Rica (leaving his parents behind) to attend college where he received a degree in engineering. Noemy’s mother stepped out of college before finishing.

I always kind of ask her, why not? And her answer to me is always, she didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know what she wanted or she didn’t – she didn’t really feel like she knew what kind of career path, or something, that was meant for her. And then, she had become pregnant with my older brother, I think when they were in college. And so then, once she got pregnant and became mom, that was her love, so she – she’s the best mom.

Noemy and her two brothers were born and raised in Baahaali near Gallup, New Mexico. The picture she draws of her parents is a study in contrasts. Noemy describes her mom as “very caring and nurturing.” She deeply admires her mom for these character traits, especially learning from the family that her grandmother was emotionally distant. Contrary to how her mom grew up, she is a comfort to Noemy and her brothers. “My mom always wanted
to, sort of do the opposite of what my grandmother modeled. So, I appreciate my mother’s strength for that.” Noemy’s dad cuts a more complicated impression.

Growing up, my dad was — he was always fun and, you know, I enjoyed being with him, too, but there were those times where I was also terrified of him, and frightened by him or, wouldn’t know what kind of mood he would be in and kind of, like, the feeling of walking on eggshells.

Noemy has come to a greater understanding of her dad as she gets older.

You have these cycles of generational trauma, intergenerational trauma, and everything stems from something. [I] see that a lot of people’s pain can manifest in a lot of ways and whether it’s directly or indirectly targeted at you or something, that it’s not actually personal, because it’s something within them that needs healing.

Noemy’s brother Adrian is nearly three years older than her. He is described with loving reverence. “I emulated him, and I still do. I look up to him so much, and he’s always kind of been this pillar for me. And, I’m really blessed to have him as a brother.” Noemy says that they have always protected one another. Their relationship was never bumpy, even if sometimes Noemy would feel competitive with him in the face of a challenge. A challenge Adrian would consistently present to Noemy was around duty to homework. She remembers his work ethic vividly. Whenever they traveled for their school basketball games, Adrian did his homework on the bus or before they actually went on the court. She followed his modeling. “He didn’t have to tell me, you know, Noemy, you should be doing your work, or you should do your homework before we — we play and so that we don’t have to worry about it when we get home.”

Noemy’s younger brother is eight years her junior. She describes Seth as “amazing” and “her light.” He was a big baby at birth, Noemy says, who caught
the attention of everyone at the hospital. He became the center of Noemy’s world. In his early years, Noemy set up a seat for him at the back of her old bike where they could ride around the “rez.” “And I always – I learned a lot from him, too. Just, patience and taking care of, helping raise him.”

The lives of the Sandoval family followed a pretty regular pattern, Noemy says. Christmas was often celebrated in Costa Rica.

It wasn’t every single Christmas, but those were always special times for me having the privilege to ride on a plane from a really young age and going to a beautiful country. That was so different. Like, going from the desert to the tropics. But that was always really fun, being at my abuela’s house. My abuela and abuelo. And they were from a small town as well in Costa Rica called San Vito. And it’s really close to the border of Panama.

Aside from these trips, Noemy and her brothers grew up mainly with their maternal side of the family. Noemy would spend summers with cousins who lived in the area and at her grandfather’s house. She says they were always outside from sunup to sundown, creating imagined lives with scrap materials from her dad’s workshop in her grandfather’s barn. It was a time that Noemy remembers feeling really free, so much so that her parents often had to call around for her to come home some evenings.

Noemy’s grandfather was a rancher, so she learned to ride horses as a little girl and helped to care for the sheep, goats and cows.

We would also practice some traditional ways, too. We would butcher when it was time to and even eating up, like all of the different foods utilizing every single part of the animal. And, a lot of that taught me so much to just appreciate the land and appreciate the earth and appreciate all living beings that we’re connected to and we have to give back to.
Recalling this teaching brings Noemy’s aunt Gloria to mind. She was a devoted caretaker of animals too. Noemy loved spending time with her and slept over often. Fun was always in store with her aunt, Noemy says.

When she was trying to teach me about money, I had play money … so, I would pay for my night stay, and then I would pay for, like, she would make me these tamales in a can. We would warm those up and, you know, those would be, like, a dollar or something or, you know, there was little prices to things, like, we’d watch movies and so we’d have, like, the price for the movie and the price for the popcorn and stuff and Oreos.

Gloria would take their time together on the road, too, as early as when Noemy was in kindergarten. The occasions would be for conferences related to Gloria’s work with the United Way, AmeriCorps and other community-based entities. “I had no idea what was going on, but I always had little things to keep me busy. Like, I would doodle or color [and] write stories.” Later in life, Gloria would encourage Noemy to keep up this writing practice and even helped her with it when needed throughout her education. Noemy shares that Gloria keeps two of her early writing examples still pinned up in her home.

When Noemy got older, Gloria would become a haven. On Sundays, Noemy would run over to her wanting to stay to avoid church. Sometimes her resistance would win the day, but on other days her father’s command for the family to attend church would rule. Noemy grew up Catholic, but also with Navajo traditional ways. While it was a blended way of life, Noemy says, it was Catholicism that scarred her. “Looking back at it now I’m, like, man, I can see where a lot of my own, like, self-shame and self-guilt and all of that kind of stuff, like, stems from.”
Noemy’s school experiences reinforced Catholic teachings. She attended Gallup Catholic School up to eighth grade and then Gallup Catholic High School through graduation in 2010. When Noemy talks about these school years, her intensive engagement in sports figures in prominently. She was the only girl to play soccer in middle school and had to join the boys’ team in eighth grade. It was special for her, Noemy says, because her brother was a senior and played on the same team. Noemy also loved and played basketball both in and outside of school. “On the Navajo Rez it is what you do.” Playing with cousins and competitively at school and with her traveling teams occupied a lot of her time. Noemy also enjoyed running track. It had a compelling cultural aspect too.

I think running is such a special part of who I am and a special part of my culture and my heritage as well. Because, in my Kinaaldá, which is a [Navajo] coming-of-age ceremony, that’s what I did every morning, getting up and running before the sun, and that’s kind of a traditional way of greeting the day, you know, getting ready, getting your mind right for the day, and also a form of prayer as well. And so I really valued running a whole lot.

Moving out of her girlhood marked some changes. Noemy describes herself during this time as “complicated.” “I had my school life, and I was really involved with a lot of school things, but I also would kind of act out, I guess … having, like, that shadow side, or something.” She caused some trouble for herself by sneaking off at night to hang out with boys and friends. It was a youthful release Noemy says, and today embraces that independence and spiritedness but realizes it caused friction at home. That homelife, though, was already fraught.
My homelife wasn’t always the best. My – my parents’ relationship wasn’t always good. [It] was kind of a toxic environment, emotionally. So, I did experience, like, some emotional abuse in the household, and I would always – actually, my aunt [Gloria] lived right next door to us, and she still does, but she was also my – my escape, too. I would go and hang out with her a lot.

Noemy spent so much time with her aunt that her husband, to this day, sees similarities in behavior, ways of speech, and spirit. Noemy is very proud to acknowledge that Gloria had a strong hand in raising her. In the Navajo kinship system, this is a cultural norm. “Your aunts and your uncles are also your mothers and fathers. Everybody raises you.” Noemy loves “having that feeling of everybody working together and looking out for one another and raising one another, too.”

Noemy’s high school felt like family too. It was “a whole lot of fun,” small and tight knit. The drawback, she acknowledges, is that it did not offer wide choices in academics, art, or special interest clubs. Noemy did, though, join the choir and student council, where she became president in her junior and senior years. In addition to sports, these extracurricular activities gave Noemy something to look forward to in an environment that lacked academic rigor, especially around the sciences. The school did not even have a laboratory, which Noemy feels had consequences for her college experiences. There was also a high rate of turnover of teachers, she says, and those who came in were often brand new to the profession. Despite these deficiencies, she really “cherished” her high school time because of the family aspect she felt. Noemy’s AP English teacher had much to do with creating the climate. “She was kind of the mom of the school basically. I just loved her.”
In her last year of school, class electives were even more limited. Noemy's options were weightlifting, yearbook, or drama. None were particularly appealing, but she selected drama. It was a personal risk for her.

I can be very shy around a lot of other people and new people, and it's kind of hard for me sometimes to get out of my shell. I can be pretty introverted at times and maybe that just comes with me growing up, too, as being, like, observational, I would say. That's kind of my – my style is, I'm very laid back and just kind of like to see what else is going on around me.

The drama class went to state that year. Noemy contributed by dramatizing a monologue. They did not win anything, but she is proud to have made it through the experience.

On the horizon for Noemy was a drama set on a much larger stage – college. The Sandoval siblings lived with a quiet expectation of higher education.

It was never something that we talked about. Like, you're going to college, or you're going to do this and you're going to get, you know, this, that and the other. I think it was always just sort of there. Like we just sort of knew that that's where we were gonna be going.

Both of Noemy’s grandparents on her mother’s side attended Indian boarding schools. Noemy learned through family oral history that while her cheii would run away from his school, her ama sanai always wanted to get an education. She was from a very rural area called Black Mesa.

My grandma, even though boarding schools were not the best at all, there was still a drive for her to get an education because she didn’t – she didn’t want to stay at home and be married to somebody she didn’t know. And so that was – like hearing that, I was always really interested about that because of her, like, [wanting] to go to school to get an education, regardless of the horror stories that were coming out of there.
Noemy and some family members speculate about her grandmother’s deeper motivations to venture off to boarding school. “I think deep down she had the foresight of okay, we’re gonna have to learn their game in order to be successful” in the larger white world.

Noemy’s brother (like her dad before) paved the way in her immediate family. Adrian participated in College Horizons – an organization dedicated to increasing Native Americans, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians in college. For two summers in high school, Noemy would follow suit. Her experiences took her to Duke University and Yale University. Both were big precollege experiences, a bit scary, she remembers, but so helpful to give her a taste of what was to come.

In Noemy’s extended family, several members also modeled successful educational pursuits in law. Because of them, Noemy first thought she might become an attorney. However, a profound experience in high school changed her course for good. Noemy secured a shadowing placement with a pediatrician, Dr. Garcia, in a Gallup Indian Medical Center clinic. Here Noemy’s passion was flamed. She loved children. Making the clinic experience even more indelible for Noemy was an invitation to watch a birth via c-section. Up until that point, she had never even worn surgical scrubs. “I remember a lot of the physicians, the surgeons, who were in the room and all the scrub nurses and all the tech were kinda looking at me and joking, like, are you gonna – are you gonna faint?” By the end of the day, Noemy said she had a “smile from ear to ear” and gained the confidence medicine would be her life’s work. Her knowledge of the federal
government’s Indian Health Service’s reputation in the community reinforced the calling.

Getting healthcare through the Indian Health Service growing up, I always felt like it was never the best experience. Like the physicians that they had there didn’t really know or, I felt like they didn’t want to know the people or the culture that they were providing for, even though they were working within an Indian Health Service system and the majority of their population is Navajo.

However, to serve her community with the necessary skills, Noemy first had to leave home to get her training. So, with her brother Adrian, Noemy embarked upon a college tour of the Midwest. Adrian was already at Creighton University in Omaha so he knew a bit of the landscape. Noemy knows she could have comfortably slipped in there as a student, but she wanted to be more than Adrian’s little sister. She was ready to spread her wings. The last stop of their journey was Marquette University. It was her first time in Milwaukee. Noemy does not remember anything specific about the campus (only that it was cloudy, cold and that she was underdressed) or even if they received a guided introduction, but she does distinctly remember it feeling like it was “homey” and “small town.” It was also a basketball school, and that, too, felt warmly familiar. “There was this one picture that I had taken by the Marquette University sign in front of Raynor Library. I extended my arms out and I just, I don’t know, I felt like it was where I was supposed to be.” At home, Noemy relied on her College Horizon experience and her aunt Gloria to get her materials in order to apply to Marquette and the Gates Millenium Scholarship for full tuition support. She was successful on both counts. Noemy says it was a “culture shock” when she first
moved to Milwaukee. “But I knew that it would help me grow in certain ways, that if I had stayed home – close to home, close to comfort, that I wouldn’t be pushed to grow.”

Going to college was a planned course of action, so Marquette seemed to match Noemy’s expectations when she arrived that fall in 2010. The CommUNITY floor in McCormick Hall (the designated freshman dorm) was a welcome placement.

It gave me the opportunity to break out of my shell a bit more, because I know that I’m more reserved and kind of quiet and can be shy and, so, living on that floor, the whole purpose was to have diverse students from all different backgrounds to live on the same floor, to learn from each other and be around one another.

CommUNITY had a special curriculum and joint student activities, including an overnight retreat before classes. It was a strategic component. The experience helped ease Noemy into college life. She was able to build relationships with other students, some of whom would become confidants for the duration at Marquette and remain her friends today.

I think if I had been in any other dormitory, I would have felt even more isolated and alone, but because it was – the whole purpose was to get to know one another and have different meetings, we also attended, like, a class together as well.

Outside the cocoon of CommUNITY, Noemy remembers facing down tiresome situations amongst the larger student body.

When I would tell people that I’m Diné I would have to say Navajo or in the beginning I wouldn’t even say Navajo, I’d just be, like, Native American because people don’t really know tribes. So, it would be a lot of education. [Some] of the first comments I would get would be, like, oh I never met a Native person before or [them] asking if I grew up, you know, with tipis and stuff.
On the days Noemy needed some grounding from back home, she would wear select family pieces of iconic turquoise jewelry. “I remember one of the other students, she’s like, ‘Oh, Noemy, you look so Native today’ or “you look more Native today’ and I’m just, like, I’m Native every day.” These troubling interactions sometimes forced Noemy to go underground so to speak.

Just to avoid those comments, I wouldn’t really, like, identify myself if people were to ask or I wouldn’t even, like, say that I’m Navajo or from back home – from the reservation, ‘cuz then I knew it would come with, like, more questions, and then education and telling them there are over 560 something plus tribes throughout the United States and having to go through the explanation and teaching part of it. Which, at times does get exhausting [and] I don’t want to continue to keep doing that all the time.

Living on the CommUNITY floor was another Native student who came from a reservation. She and Noemy grew close very quickly. They could often unpack their on-campus experiences with a relatable Native sense of humor. “Native humor that a lot of other people don’t get, and even if you are Native but you grew up in a city, the humor is a little bit different.” Where Noemy felt alone was in adjusting to her academics. She initially declared psychology as her major but added many science courses to her schedule to prepare for a pre-med track. Noemy knew it would be an “uphill battle” because of her lack of access to a strong science program at the high school level. “I never had taken lab before, so the laboratory [at Marquette] was a very different environment.” To compensate for her disadvantage, Noemy joined students from CommUNITY and with students from her science classes to study and also found tutoring services with the help of a peer. But she was self-conscious.
In the beginning when I was really struggling it would take me a long time to finish things up, and I felt like everybody else was just flying through their first courses, 'cuz it was kind of, for the most part, a refresher for them. It sort of felt, like, it wasn’t a big deal, their classes weren’t, like, a really big deal or anything. So I think that was also why I didn’t go out a lot or connect with people, because I was afraid of, like, oh, what would they think of me taking too long or, like, struggling.

Staying in her dorm room to study in the wee hours became her new safe space.

“I just would really seclude myself. I would just be by myself a lot. At times I knew I – I didn’t really, like, fully fit in or belong, or at least I felt like that all of the time.”

The loneliness of that first year still hits Noemy with a palpable sadness. Beyond studying, any free time she carved out was spent immersed in movies and shows. Noemy never reached out to her immediate family or her longtime boyfriend (now husband) to share what she was experiencing. She knew they supported her college endeavor, but if they called, Noemy veiled her personal state of things. “The funny thing is, I wanted them to think that I was okay. So I didn’t really share a whole lot of my struggles with them. I would just kind of sound like everything was fine.” While her older brother Adrian was just a day’s drive away at Creighton University in Omaha and always figured prominently in her life support system, Noemy kept her emotional distance. “I knew he was busy and we’d – we still haven’t really talked about it, but I think he sort of had the same feelings as I did in college.”

For Noemy, it was a staff member at Marquette she attributes to helping her stay the course. “I don’t know if I would have finished at Marquette” without that key support. Noemy feels like this relationship, her friendship with another
Native student and a few key faculty kept her “sane.” Even with them though, she admits it was hard to reveal her troubles.

I think it’s just my pride or ego that I don’t want to have the perception that I am struggling. I know it is hard for me to ask for help sometimes. Even still, it’s difficult for me. I know people are there for me and they are there to help. But, I don’t know. I don’t know what it is within me that, I’m like, no, I can do it myself. Or I’ll figure it out. But sometimes I think it – a lot of it does come from my dad that he – he always kind of has this saying oh, I’ll figure it out or I’ll do it. He’s very prideful in that too of not necessarily asking for help. So I think that kind of rubbed off on me.

A cousin, though, emerged as a lifeline for Noemy. April Tsosie, a recognized artist, was living in Chicago. Noemy would often take the train down to visit her hoping to leave some of her worries behind. Some of those worries that first year involved writing assignments for classes. Noemy credits a teaching member of the English department for helping to break down her fears. Before that, she remembers “looking at a blank page and just being terrified because I [didn’t] even know where to start.” In his class, Noemy says she learned to just start writing. “I mean, I still have a lot of that perfectionism, but I let a lot of it go. So, that was big.” In the second semester of that English class, Noemy remembers bringing her grade up to a full AB.

After her first year, Noemy switched from the College of Arts and Sciences to the College of Health Sciences to officially take up a biomedical sciences major. She developed a close friendship with a student in that college by this time and they both thought it would be good to journey through the program together. But unlike what she experienced in Arts and Sciences, Noemy faced an entirely different climate.
I always felt a lot of the science professors were just very intimidating. I didn’t feel the warmth I did with the arts and sciences professors, like people in psychology or sociology. They were a bit more welcoming and approachable. Whereas I felt with the science professors, it was harder for me to kind of connect with them.

The directness of her new advisor in the College of Health Sciences, Dr. Linda Vaughn, was particularly tough to reconcile that first year. Noemy was mentally ready to take the most challenging science classes of the pre-med track, but Dr. Vaughn advised her to take the courses for non-health science majors to fill her major requirements. “She saw my grades from the first year in, like, biology and chemistry and, you know, they were low C’s. I did pass them but, yeah, they were definitely not as great.” Noemy went against her recommendation and took the hardest tier of biochemistry in health sciences. Her friend was in the class and offered encouragement, but Noemy decided to audit it halfway through. She tried the class again another semester and completed it, but did not pass. In the end, Noemy switched to the biochemistry class meant for non-health science majors.

I know my advisor was always kind of, like, why did you do that? Why did you do that to yourself? I wanted to challenge myself and I wanted to try and prove to her that even though she thought I couldn’t do it, that I could do it in the end. But, it ended up not really working out.

In some of the most difficult advising sessions with Dr. Vaughn, Noemy kept her swirling pool of emotions at bay.

I do remember her telling me that one time, you should – you should really be in the nursing school or nursing program and I don’t understand why you’re trying to pursue a medical degree when your grades aren’t really there. That was hard to hear. But, I was mad afterward. I was, like, I’m gonna prove you wrong.
Sharing the memory springs tears to Noemy’s eyes. The encounters were too short for Dr. Vaughn to make pronouncements about her future. “In the back of my mind, I was just, like, you don’t know my story or where I’ve come from. That’s all you see on paper, my grades, but you don’t really know me.” Later, in her junior or senior year, Noemy would take a class Dr. Vaughn was teaching. Noemy remembers it changed things between them.

I could see she kind of, like – she didn’t outright say anything to me about it, about, like, oh, now I see your work ethic and your determination and stuff, but she just felt different to me. Our interactions felt a little different after that.

After Noemy graduated, she reached out to Dr. Vaughn for a letter of recommendation. It was granted.

Where Noemy was able to build her confidence and comfort at Marquette was in a student cultural organization that had been dormant for some time. It was the end of her sophomore year. Together with her Native friend from CommUNITY, they reactivated the Native American Student Association (NASA). Here Noemy felt like she could be herself. “That was definitely helpful to have a group and having friends support me in the group.” One of the first events she helped cohost under NASA was what they named “We are Still Here.”

That was really special because Laree and I would both get really fed up with people always asking questions or having to educate, and it’s, like, okay, well why don’t we just put on an event so that we don’t have to keep explaining this so students can come and educate themselves and have the opportunity to learn, like, no, we didn’t all grow up in tipis.

Before arriving on campus, Noemy was unaware of the history of Marquette.
I didn’t know that Marquette had been, like, the Warriors at one point and that there was that whole history of changing the name and changing the mascot. So I was, like, wow. There is a big history and, like, presence of Native students at Marquette causing some – some ruckus. It felt good to be a part of that history as well.

Over the next few years, the organization spearheaded many cultural and teaching events. Noemy played a significant part in this work and would end her undergraduate career as NASA’s president.

For all her time at Marquette, Noemy relied on a few key personal strengths to get her through.

My own self-determination I know that sometimes it can hinder me, but other times I know that it pushed me through, as well. And to be able to be vulnerable in spaces that I felt comfortable. Yeah. I think those – those were the – the big ones of just me trying to work hard and doing what I could and no matter how long it took me to get something done, I was gonna do it. Which is still kinda my motto. I don’t care how long it takes me to get somewhere, it’s all about the journey and the process anyway.

Noemy knows that her experiences would not have been the same without her openness to developing and maintaining meaningful relationships. She would advise those who come after her to find those people to support them in college where they can be completely themselves. She says it is critical to have a network (big or small) of people you can reach out to when you really need it. “Surround yourself with the people you can call home.”

Noemy graduated from Marquette in four years and moved to Omaha, Nebraska, in the summer of 2014 to be with her brother who was still in dental school at Creighton University. She immediately started her applications to medical schools. Instinctively, Noemy knew she would not be accepted based
on her academic portfolio but wanted to see and feel what she was up against in the future. She saved one of her rejection letters for inspiration. As an alternate pathway, Noemy thought she could follow her brother’s lead in a post-baccalaureate program at Creighton, which he used to get into dental school. Noemy eventually met with a program director at Creighton, but learned they were no longer honoring direct admittance from the post-baccalaureate program to medical school. She was advised instead to apply to master’s programs as a more promising step towards medical school. Noemy’s course was somewhat derailed, but she would set out on the recommendation.

In the meantime, Noemy needed to work to help support herself and her family in Omaha. Noemy, with her long-term boyfriend, was now living with her brother Adrian, his girlfriend, and her younger brother Seth in a house purchased by her dad. No longer the little brother in the back seat of her bike, Seth was now enrolled in a private college preparatory school. Since Gallup Catholic High School closed near their reservation, Noemy’s parents sought a good education for Seth and for him to be close to his siblings. With her parents back in New Mexico, Noemy’s role grew more serious in helping to raise Seth. She could see the impact of a difficult homelife on him.

When I left for college, Seth was basically by himself in the house with my parents and, I know their relationship really – it affected all of us in so many different ways, and when my younger brother first moved to Omaha, I could see it. He was very, very introverted and it was really difficult for him to kind of interact with other people and my older brother and I would try and get him to talk a bit more or just be a little bit more interactive, ’cuz I know back at home, he would just sort of bury himself in books or try to escape in – in that way. [In Omaha] he did. He – he got involved with this [new] high
school and he started making friends, even though, you know, moving to a whole ‘nother town that’s a lot bigger than Gallup and not really knowing a lot of people, I’m sure it was a big change for him as well. But [he] ended up getting out of his shell. He’s an awesome little kid. I – I love him so much.

It was a busy household in Omaha, but Noemy stayed on track with her dream of medical school. After taking the MCAT exam for the second time to better her score, she applied only to Midwestern University (in Arizona). Noemy was accepted to the two-year Master of Science program in 2015 and qualified again to receive full financial support from the Gates-Millenium scholarship. At Midwestern, like at Marquette, Noemy built some solid relationships. Most of the students in her program were on a similar path – trying to get into medical school. Noemy even explored the kind of medicine she might pursue.

I ended up having a really great mentor there and working in the lab environment and getting to know [its] ins and outs a bit more and working on a solo project. It was really cool to be able to say that no one else knows this project more than I do.

Like the rhythm of her post-undergraduate journey, Noemy took a year to plan her next steps after graduation in 2017. In the gap year, she took the opportunity to help her brother Adrian (now working as a dentist on the Zuni reservation) and sister-in-law with childcare. They just had their first daughter. It was a special bonding time for Noemy and her niece. Today, she has two nieces. Noemy tears up talking about them. “I think they’re beautiful and they have so much to teach us because they are so innocent and wise too.” As “special” as her time was with her brother’s family, it did not put medical school out of sight. At first, Noemy did not look beyond her home state to find a school focused on Indigenous health. She applied to the University of New Mexico but
was encouraged by her great friend from Marquette to also apply to Loyola University Chicago. Ushma was in her final year of medical school there and talked with the deans at the school on Noemy’s behalf. Noemy ended up not getting an offer from New Mexico. Instead, she returned to the Midwest to take up her spot at the Stritch School of Medicine at Loyola in the summer of 2018. It was a crowning achievement for Noemy. “That was a fun phone call to get.”

Noemy’s experience at Loyola though has been unmooring. She didn’t pass three of her classes in the first year. While she continued in the program, she had to take remediation for all three. Noemy passed one of the exams and has to retake the other two classes.

Medical school is no walk in the park. It kind of brought back a lot of memories of college, but it also didn’t break me down that much, either, because I had been in the position before. I had gone through and not passed and having to retake courses and having to repeat things, so it wasn’t – it didn’t really break my spirit that much.

She takes comfort in knowing she is not the only one. Others in the program were experiencing similar setbacks and even greater ones. For “some of the other students, I know it was their first time not passing the course.” Noemy ended up passing the courses she had to retake and it allowed her to move on to her second year of medical school.

The pandemic hit during this time and Noemy had to face a whole new set of new challenges when the school moved to virtual learning. Keeping her motivation high and doing courses entirely online was difficult.

Instead of interacting with patients and having those patient interactions, we had mannequins that [were] mailed to all of us and we had to record ourselves doing the whole physical exam on this mannequin that you see at the department store. The ones that are just a half mannequin that is hanging up and has shirts on it and
stuff. So, it was – it was interesting. And then, you know, navigating, like, small groups and stuff like that, like, on Zoom. [The] different learning education also [was] really isolating, too, because you’re not on campus, you’re not around other students and, it doesn’t have the same feel or environment. It was really hard to motivate yourself to study. It’s like rolling out of bed and walking to your desk.

The study in her apartment has an array of plants lined up on a multitiered shelving unit. The natural medicine of plants is of interest to her. When she was around eight, her grandmother passed away. She remembers spending special times with her but did not learn until later that she was interested in medicine and practiced traditional healing. “Not that she was a well-known medicine woman or anything, but just within the family.” Noemy has a clear vision of wanting to incorporate this traditional knowledge into her medical practice someday. “I find plants and what the earth gives us is so healing and powerful.” She distinctly remembers a slide show from an American Indian Physician Association Conference she attended that started with “here eat this root it will heal you.” The presenting doctor went through the history of medicine that started with a root, moved to potions and then pills. We need to get back to the root, Noemy says because medicine is given to us by the plants.

Our ancestors knew that. We had that knowledge, and we knew how to care for ourselves and care for the land and that all got stripped away. And now, it’s like trying to get back to that again because the earth is so in need of us, in need of our healing, in need of our connection because we’ve become so distant and lost from that.

The strained learning environment could have distanced Noemy from medical school, but she did not lose track of her goals. She passed all of her classes. The next step was board exams. The looming schedule of these
exams caused Noemy to hit a wall. She realizes that bottling up her emotions from undergrad and not processing those experiences impacted her. Finally, one of her mentors from her courses broke the dam. Noemy describes Dr. Father DiMarco (a Jesuit Priest and medical doctor) as having a soft demeanor and being a good listener. He was also kind and asked all the right questions to get at the root of things. He recognized Noemy was struggling. “I would try to put on that face of everything’s fine, everything’s okay, when, in reality, it wasn’t.” Dr. Father DiMarco asked if he could refer Noemy to a psychiatrist. Her initial reaction was to say no because of the stigma of needing mental health resources. Noemy was also aware it might end up on her record and knew that some medical school residency programs would view this kind of personal treatment as a negative. Dr. Father DiMarco told Noemy that she could take the time to make her decision but that if it wasn’t now, he predicted it would unavoidably interfere later in her medical training.

Noemy decided to take one year off (from 2021-22) to focus on herself. She used the time to prepare for the next big journey. “I was, like, well, as a medical student, I have the least responsibility [right now] and I would rather have more time, to be able to focus on [my health] now and get myself well, so that I can be there for other people.” During this break, she decided to see a psychiatrist. The mental health intervention dramatically changed the course of Noemy’s life because she was so close to leaving the exhausting rigor of medical school behind. Her psychiatrist helped her through it all and got Noemy to a place of readiness to step back in. As a result, she will soon be in her clinicals
and on the slow road back home to New Mexico, where her dreams of serving her people will become a hard-won reality. She is steely focused.

I’m always reminded that my family will tell me I’m a very determined person and whatever I say I’m gonna set out to do, no matter how long it takes me or what type of journey I decide to take myself on that eventually I’ll get to where I say I’m gonna go.

It calls up a scenario for Noemy from her childhood. It was a community Easter egg hunt. One time a "golden egg" was hidden, and whoever found it would win a special prize. Noemy remembers turning to her aunt with a fierce determination and saying "I'm gonna find that golden egg." And she did.
CHAPTER EIGHT

ANALYSIS

Weaving it All Together

In Ojibwe traditions, these winter months mark a revered time as snow settles across the land and the north winds blow. Richard Wagamese, an award-winning First Nations writer, penned the enduring reminder. “The months of snow and frost are called the Storytelling Moons and it’s the time of year when legends, teaching tales and traditional stories are shared around the fire. Stories were once my people’s university and everyone got to go.”

Today, things are askew under a moon foreign to the Anishinaabeg calendar system. Universities are hardscapes and (for those that are predominantly white institutions) control the stories and who has access to them. This project resets the axis where Indigenous voices are once again the storytellers. Their memories promise potent teachings to enlarge our understanding of college persistence.

Early Years

Not all alumni pictured themselves in college immediately following high school. Except for Noemy (BS ‘14) and Sharon (BA ‘92), they had no familial footsteps to follow. Jo Ann (BSN ‘82) was already married and raising children before the opportunity presented itself. That her parents did not finish high school or that she had limited college preparation at South Division High School in Milwaukee Public Schools did not figure into Jo Ann’s line of sight.

---

Other alumni may have been on the college path but harbored the worry of how they would finance the journey. Rick (BS ’87) shared that while his parents did not have college educations, they did not discourage him or his siblings. “They just impressed upon us kids if that’s something that you want to do, they encouraged it. So, I was – I was the oldest and went to college.” But Rick was very attuned to how hard they worked and struggled at times to pay for the Catholic education he had already received. For him, then, the idea of college seemed likely to push the boundaries of affordability. Rick only applied to Marquette University. It was a straightforward process.

You turned in a paper application to one of the Jesuits. He was part of the admissions committee. He’d go to a meeting at Marquette University right down the road and come back, and the next day and, [say] hey, you got in.

Upon hearing the news, Rick immediately asked himself how it would all get paid. His elite private Marquette University High School helped connect him to the Educational Opportunity Program at Marquette. Rick was accepted into the program, and it would help cushion his stay, not just financially but all around.

Like Rick, Armando (BS ‘12) was attending a private college preparatory faith-based high school in Milwaukee. The Indian Community School provided a full scholarship for him to attend St. Thomas More High School. The desire to attend college was already a long-held aspiration and while it may have played into his natural order of things, moving away from home was not. “I couldn’t leave family, I was – we’re close [and] not being close to, you know, brothers or my sister, my mom and dad, just didn’t feel right.” Equally important, living at home was also a financial necessity given his desire to attend Marquette.
Noemy and Sharon shared more than the same tribal affiliation. Both took part in immersive pre-college programs while attending schools near or on their reservation that were dedicated to readying Native students for higher education. They served as formative experiences. Sharon always knew she would go to college, and her parents voiced their encouragement. “The expectation was always there, that I would always go to college. There kinda wasn't any question.” For Noemy, going to college was more of a quiet expectation, but she set her sights early.

It was never something that we talked about. Like, you’re going to college, or you’re going to do this and you’re going to get, you know, this, that and the other. I think it was always just sort of there. Like we just sort of knew that that’s where we were gonna be going.

For both Sharon and Noemy, the geographic distance did not figure into their decision making. From this alumni pool, they traveled the farthest to Marquette, leaving their reservation homelands and an entirely different biome far behind.

College Years

The response to life at Marquette comes through in different ways in these alumni stories. For everyone, except for Sharon, the university was a benign backdrop. It was a surprise finding considering the breadth of literature that documented institutional shortcomings in relation to Native student experiences (Lin et al., 1988; Wright, 1991; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Tierney, 1992a, b; Steward, 1993; Huffman, 2001, 2008; Pewewardy and Frey, 2004; Brayboy, 2004, 2005). Rick and Armando nonetheless experienced college differently. Rick shared that his college life was greatly enriched by friends and meaningful extracurriculars. “It was just a great fun time,” he said. Armando, on the other
hand, expressed most emphatically that he “did not have fun.” College for him was like carrying a burden basket. She struggled with the weight of his academics, his well-being and how life as a student threw everything off balance. As a commuter, he figuratively carried these burdens on his back to and from campus. He would ask himself, “am I going to make it? Can I do this?”

As a non-traditional student, Jo Ann, too, lived off campus. Her personal life had taken discomforting turns by the time she entered Marquette, and the fallout would impact the whole of her experience as an undergraduate nursing student. On top of her student schedule, Jo Ann tried to find as much time to spend with her young children who lived with her estranged husband. It was a struggle. The memories stir up an emotional response in her and she holds back tears. “I don’t know how I made it.”

Unlike how the others describe Marquette, Sharon’s narrative reveals a wariness from the earliest moments of her arrival. For example, that she would receive a single-room dorm assignment like the other incoming girls of color seemed suspect. Sharon implies a hidden policy of segregation at work. By the end of her undergraduate career, she was much more forward in her critique. Sharon felt “institutional racism” simmering at Marquette and openly called for more meaningful efforts to recruit, support and retain Native students. When Noemy arrived at Marquette nearly 20 years later in 2010, at least the resident life program had evolved to reflect what student affairs professionals consider a

---

[36] In earlier times, many Native people counted large woven baskets with a strap or tumpline as essential for daily life because they served as moveable storage vessels. Examples in museum ethnological collections refer to these as burden baskets.
high-impact educational practice. The CommUNITY floor in a freshman dorm operated for students interested in living with and learning about diverse cultures. Noemy found a safe haven in this space, and it helped lift some of her shyness around others. An isolated dorm room might have led to an entirely different outcome.

The outcome for all the alumni in this project was educational success. However, most still expressed a sense of wonder at the accomplishment. Like Jo Ann, Noemy held back tears. Without key support, she says, “I don’t know if I would have finished at Marquette.” Similar stirring self-reflections weave through the other stories. Sharon and Armando shared deep uncertainty about whether they would have made it through without the right resources, especially after each experienced a devastating loss of a family member during college. How did they all make it to degree completion? Some factors reflect what is already in the literature: cultural self-identity, the desire to give back to the community, family and community support, and mentors and role models. However, the distinct story strands, like plaits in the weaving process of a basket, are more pliable. It makes way for variation like the importance of college friendships in persistence and how family support is more a spoke in the wheel rather than the linchpin for college success. Most strikingly, Jo Ann, Rick, Sharon, Armando and Noemy share a little charted characteristic of self-determination in their college pursuits.

Factors Contributing to Persistence

“I’m Native Every Day”: Cultural Self-Identity

37 The McCormick Hall application to the CommUNITY floor included an agreement to participate in a required curriculum for the first year. The floor was in operation at Marquette from 2005-2017.
From every alumni story in this project, it is clear that cultural affiliation informs personal identity and, similar to findings in the literature, serves as a source of pride (Bowker, 1993). Like Eastman (1916), who said he never lost sight of who he was as an Indian while making his way on the college path, it was the same for Armando who adhered passionately to his personhood at all times. “I’m Native American. I’m Ojibwe. I’m Bad River.” Even though no one expressly stated that cultural self-identity helped college persistence, Jo Ann, Rick, Sharon, and Noemy, like Armando, showed unshakable connections to their roots. It was an undercurrent in their everyday lives. Sometimes it flowed with more force. One of the verbal exchanges Noemy had with a non-Native student early on at Marquette may have been brief, but it delivered blunt-force trauma. Noemy appeared to move into defense mode, using words as her weapon – “I’m Native every day.” The clenched fist stance brings to bear that self-identity is more than cultural accouterments to slip on and off. It is as natural as blood coursing through veins. It is also a connective cord to blood relatives – parents, grandparents and earlier ancestors. In the introductions to their life stories, Jo Ann, Sharon and Noemy used their languages to situate themselves in the world in relation to their people and tribal communities. At Marquette, they intentionally recreated a smaller version of that world around them, frame by frame, to weather storms and made college a place they could stay. Strong peer enclaves have been shown to engender feelings of belonging and lessen the despairing effects of alienation (Murgia et al., 1991; Garrod and Larimore, 1997; Garrod et al., 2017). In her Miss Indian Milwaukee experience Jo Ann reflected
on the power of being in a group that shared your cultural identity. “It was a very positive thing – meeting other positive young women and having a group of Native people in the community supporting, saying, it’s okay. This is who you are.” The American Indian Student Association (AISA) at Marquette served in the same way for Jo Ann. It was an opportunity, she said, for Native students to come together, learn from and support each other. With the American Indian counselor at the helm, the students bonded over initiatives that would promote their presence on campus.

Armando’s experience at the Indian Community School was as identity-affirming and forging. It gave him an Indigenous lens on the world through which he saw everything. In college, Armando took advantage of whatever opportunities he could to incorporate his cultural identity into coursework. The business plan, an Indian staffing agency for elders he developed for his entrepreneurship major, was a showcase example. Armando shared that he relates closely to the struggle generations of Indians before him experienced. He knew the colonial past and wanted to break free from its chains by not repeating it. “I’m not going to repeat history with what happened to our people or what happened to my grandparents, their parents. [Life] put them in a spot where they just had to survive.” Persisting in college was a conscientious effort to change his family storyline. From the college experience, Armando gained even more self-reliance and the opportunity to give back to the Indian community.

Rick grew up in Milwaukee removed from the Indian community. His visits to the reservation and his dad’s active role in Menominee governmental affairs
made a strong impression on him. These life experiences and any cultural teachings he might have received at home were enough for Rick to know who he was – “I’m Native American. I’m Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican and also a direct descendent of the Menominee Indians in northern Wisconsin.” On a few occasions in his boyhood, Rick felt he had to defend himself against stereotypes. Otherwise, from his narrative, Rick’s cultural self-identity never rose to be a proof point. Even at a college with a troubled history of racist mascots and where his identity was made visible in the most public way, Rick states plainly that he experienced no struggles from the very outset. His self-assuredness helped on the basketball court when he assumed the role of the First Warrior.38 If there were racist taunts from raucous college spectators during the halftime performance, Rick did not mention them. A vellum seemed to be in place that made him impervious to distractions. He felt great honor to carry out the work inspired and institutionalized by American Indian students in the class before him. Rick says he “cherished” the role on the court and most especially off when he reenacted it for Milwaukee audiences. There is little doubt of Rick’s commitment. According to Mark Thiel (2011), a former archivist at Marquette, the totality of these unpaid engagements at Marquette basketball games and in

38 The American Indian Student Association drafted a proposal to drop the name of “Warriors” to “First Warrior” and have the new Indian Symbol more appropriately represented by a current Marquette American Indian student in traditional Wisconsin tribal dress (Smallish, 1978, Memo to Scott). In an open letter, Smallish stated the new symbol would be a salute to American Indian students at Marquette and statewide (Smallish, 1978, Letter to Indian Community).
the Milwaukee community during the academic year took up a substantial amount of time.\(^{39}\)

Some days Noemy stood on the opposite end of the spectrum when she would avoid bringing attention to her Native-ness. Invisibility along the margins of campus life has been shown to not always being negative (Brayboy, 2004). It was not for lack of pride or weakness in her cultural identity but a conscious act of self-preservation. The thoughts of answering questions around being Navajo, what Diné means or correcting the problematic monolithic view of Native Americans in general sometimes just exhausted her. Noemy says she just “[didn’t] want to continue to keep doing that all the time.” Like the alumni before her at Marquette, Noemy was part of a lonely field of Native students, Native faculty and Native staff in a college that offered little Native curriculum. The responsibility to educate the campus community about Indigenous peoples’ past, present and future at any given moment was too large to be shouldered by so few.

As Sharon settled into Marquette, she discerned the chasm-like gap in knowledge about Native people. It was starkly different from her earlier school experiences, where she had Navajo peers and the Navajo community around her. In addition, Sharon had to absorb the cultural discontinuity of having Catholicism and the Marquette Jesuit community, or “church people,” as she referred to them, an embedded part of campus life. But it never rose to the level

\(^{39}\) In a report on activities of the First Warrior, the representative student was present at the majority of basketball games and averaging 15-30 appearances during the Marquette academic year (Scott, 1987, Office Memorandum).
of conflict Huffman and Ferguson (2007) report for those students who had reservation backgrounds and were on predominantly white campuses. Sharon, in fact, moved between and within campus structures on wings, describing herself as a “social butterfly.” It was not without the astute perception of what she faced: an uninformed campus body around her cultural identity:

Students really weren’t aware of any other cultures besides their own, and that kind of tied into my involvement with the American Indian student organization. Just bringing our issues [to the forefront] and getting them to be part of the bigger platform at Marquette [in order to have the institution] recognize that there were issues that we face as well.

“People You Can Call Home”: Friends, Family and Community

For those Native students considering college, Noemy offers poetic guidance. “Surround yourself with the people you can call home.” Even from afar, Noemy felt her family’s supportive presence. But it was Noemy’s network of close confidants at Marquette that proved her salvation. When she first arrived at Marquette, another Native student in her dorm was one she could relate to on a deep level. Noemy says they would unpack and commiserate over their daily campus experiences, sometimes with their particular insider brand of humor. It had an insulating effect from the overall culture shock she felt. “Native humor that a lot of other people don’t get, and even if you are Native but you grew up in a city, the humor is a little bit different.” Rick, too, shared the importance of friendships in his college experience, though his circle of dorm/housemates who became “lifelong friends,” helped more to make his college experience fun rather than served as a lifeline of support to persist.
Unlike Waterman (2000) who found that Haudenosaunee study participants established base of support outside of campus (that included their family, Native friends and the Haudenosaunee community), Noemy and Rick wrapped themselves in campus-based friendships. Sharon too was very comfortable amidst a variety of social networks at Marquette and developed many friendships through those connections. Although Jo Ann was a non-traditional student, she felt quite at home in her college and amongst the other Native students on the campus. She also nurtured a strong friendship with a nursing program peer who was important to her college success. “She was a good friend and partner, all the way through that experience,” Jo Ann said. Armando made mention of friendships, but only to highlight that he did not take time away from his studies to develop any in the traditional sense on or off-campus. What Armando did build around him were connections to students who helped him through difficult coursework. He learned from them. “I’m thankful for those people that I met throughout college. I wouldn’t call them friends, but they were just more willing to help.” Although he keeps in touch with no one at Marquette, Armando knows that if he saw some of his college peers today, he would express gratitude for their past support.

These alumni reflections on friendships, or student relationships in Armando’s case, and how they impacted college persistence is not prominently surfaced in the literature. Instead, a more central research finding is how students attributed their college persistence to family encouragement and involvement (Wilson, 1983; Rindone, 1988; Bowker, 1992; Davis, 1992;
Benjamin, et al., 1993; Reyes, 2000). An educational model designed to support the persistence of Indigenous students in college environments is even predicated on the direct and active role of families (HeavyRunner and DeCelles, 2002). From the stories of Marquette alumni, we see that families perceived the value of education, but they were not foregrounded as energetic sources support.

The support Armando received from his family came primarily from financial and emotional nurturance (Reyes, 2000). After living with his grandpa through high school, his parents reopened space for him in the family home so he could make Marquette more affordable. His mom supported his plan not to work through college so he could limit distractions and study full-time. While Armando’s mom never motivated or encouraged him to do well academically, like “you have to get an A,” he felt her pride in him just being in college. Jo Ann’s experience was different. She was on her own and had to work through college at every opportunity. Although her Mohican Munsee tribe had a strong belief in the importance of education, and she felt their support in her endeavors, they did not have earmarked funds like they do today to help carry the college goals of community members. Jo Ann struggled financially to pay tuition and support herself. It was a lethal mix that continues to disproportionally jeopardize many Indigenous students’ opportunity to completing college (Huffman, 2008; Brayboy et al., 2012), but Jo Ann persisted. She received strong encouragement from the nurses she worked with in the hospital system outside Marquette and found one-on-one support in the peer counseling program and amongst faculty in the Nursing program.
Noemy knew her parents expected her to attend college and supported her college journey, but it was from a distance. It was enough. Noemy never reached out to them to share her experiences, even when college was most trying, so as not to raise alarm. “I think it’s just my pride or ego that I don’t want to have the perception that I am struggling. I know it is hard for me to ask for help sometimes. Even still, it’s difficult for me.”

Before Sharon left for college at her sendoff party, she felt the encouraging arms of her family and community around her. “They were proud of me, so I felt I had their support behind me as I was leaving.” Serving as a solid reminder to persist, Sharon says, “I was determined not to fail because I had a lot of people looking up to me and I really didn’t want to disappoint people.” Her reflection connects up with the literature that shows college success is related to students wanting to bring pride to their families (Davis, 1992). At Marquette, Sharon may have still felt the hands from home on her back in support of her college journey and her dad’s voice in her ear at the most difficult of times, but she forged her own path. She, like Jo Ann, relied on foundational relationships with strong women at Marquette whose institutional role was to support Native and underrepresented students. These matriarchal-like roles were more crucial to their college persistence.

For most of the alumni, student structures that served as a surrogate cultural community (Murgia et al., 1991; Garrod and Larimore, 1997; Garrod et al., 2017) also supported college persistence. While Sharon did not have an official role in the American Indian Student Association, she was an active
member. It was a home base of sorts from her sophomore to senior year, as well as portal to new connections and experiences with tribes different from hers. It was not until she “really got wired into the Native community that was there” that Sharon truly felt like Marquette could be home for her undergraduate years.

Rick, Jo Ann and Noemy became more invested in the leadership of the American Indian Student Association/Native American Student Association by serving as president during their time. While their work might have contributed to the aspirational mission of the university to be diverse and inclusive, the volunteer commitment was more an example of effort to support the Native student community. In the Dartmouth stories that Garrod and Larimore (1997) and Garrod et al. (2017) assembled, the Native student organization served much in the same way. The student organization helped to reinforce cultural group identity and amplify their voices. It was also an important vehicle to engage the larger Milwaukee Native community. Rick describes the reach of NASA to the Native student body at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as a “banding together.”

Giving Back

In harmony with the literature (Garrod & Larimore, 1997; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; ChiXapkaid & Inglebret, 2007; Guillory, 2009; Huffman, 2011, Bingham et., 2014), home communities for some alumni figure poignantly into their narratives as reasons for going to college and returning home after graduation. Noemy, for example, was inspired to personally change the non-Indian face of healthcare providers on the Navajo Nation. Her goal was
animated by a tribal nation building spirit (Brayboy et al., 2012) in that her community figures centrally. Noemy wanted to return home to help deliver medical services in a meaningful, culturally responsive way to ensure that the inherent dignity of her people is honored.

Getting healthcare through the Indian Health Service growing up, I always felt like it was never the best experience. Like the physicians that they had there didn’t really know or, I felt like they didn’t want to know the people or the culture that they were providing for, even though they were working within an Indian Health Service system and the majority of their population is Navajo.

Becoming a medical doctor to give back to her community has been a powerful motivator for Noemy’s persistence in college no matter the time and effort. “I don’t care how long it takes me to get somewhere, it’s all about the journey and the process anyway,” she said.

Sharon felt the calling of her southwest home while at Marquette. It rose to a crescendo by the end of her degree program. At that point, she had shaped an undergraduate career on and off-campus that served the needs of the Native community through journalistic endeavors. Her passion for the work delayed her graduation by a year, but it did not sideline her immediate post-college steps. Sharon got a job that met all her goals of working for a tribal community, even though it was not her own. More than a job, Sharon used her journalism degree to serve as the inaugural full-time editor of the Salt River Indian Community’s newspaper to set up a model of empowerment. She helped the tribe’s sovereign efforts to move operations of the paper in-house and was instrumental in shoring up its overall success. As a result, other tribes would come to look at the tribal enterprise as something they might replicate in their communities. Although
Sharon has since moved on from this role, she is still in the southwest. But it is not quite home. The pull to the Navajo Nation is strong and so too is the desire to give back.

I know, eventually I do want to go back to my community and start living there and working there. Because that’s my ultimate goal. Once the children have gotten a little bit older, taking them back and living back in my community and making improvements. There’s a lot to be done.

Giving back for Armando was his guiding compass. He always wanted to help lift Indian people up. While his high school summer experiences on the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation working at the elder’s center allowed him to more than realize his high school service goal, the expertise Armando gained in college was part of his overall life plan to give back to Native communities. “I’m using those skills to serve people. I feel like that was my whole plan. I wanted to serve people and—and do it from a business aspect, and I’m doing that very thing.” Armando feels like the tables are finally turned. He is the “resource” leader, which for now means helping Indian people in an industry that promotes tribal self-sufficiency.

Jo Ann’s leadership showed early. In an official way, it was recognized when she retired from the military. She was awarded meritorious achievement for service.

Jo Ann brought her service ethic back home, so to speak, in expansive roles for the Milwaukee Indian community (as a co-founder of Indian Summer Festival), higher education (as a mentor to nursing and Indigenous students) and her tribe (on government council and committee work) that meets every sense of giving back.
For Rick, who is an enrolled tribal member but did not grow up on his reservation, giving back shows up in his early life stories as volunteerism. Community service hours were a mandatory element of his high school experience. Rick also obtained the prestigious rank of Eagle Scout, the highest achievable in the Boy Scouts of America Program, for his extensive service. Although he is finding meaningful ways now to directly serve the Indian community, giving back did not rise in his story as the motivation to persist in college.

The knowledge and skills these alumni gained in higher education are part of a metaphorical sacred medicine bundle. For the Indigenous keeper, material bundles are deeply personal wrappings that hold special items collected or gifted and are considered sacred. The materials connect to essential teachings that help in a person’s journey on earth, ground them to their Indigenous roots and serve as good medicine to live a balanced life. Sometimes these bundles are shared in ceremony with community, widening the impact of their power to help in healing and knowledge building. Before federal legislation was enacted, medicine bundles were unscrupulously collected or unjustly confiscated across Indian country and placed in museums and other holdings, effectively caging their power for good. The mandatory repatriation of these materials to the communities gives back the power to those from whom they were taken. The

---

40 Public Law 101-601, 25 U.S.C 3001, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) mandates museums and other federal agencies to consult with Native American tribes and expeditiously return sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony to culturally affiliated groups.
college journey of these alumni and their return to Indigenous communities to
give back their bundle of knowledge is another important coming home.

“Words Count”: Mentors, Role Models and Other Influences

The affirmation and encouragement from human resources emerged
centrally in the persistence of these alumni through college. More than a readily
apparent or “surface theme” (Jackson et al., 2003), Marquette’s American Indian
Counselor comes through the stories of two alumni almost like a north star. For
those who filled the counselor role at Marquette, she was a guide, a mentor and
a maternal figure who helped the students process life experiences and cushion
some of the challenges they would face. For Jo Ann, Maxine Smallish was a
woman of influence before she even met her. After seeing her in a newspaper
announcement, Jo Ann learned that she was older than the traditional student
when she went back to college, a divorced woman and a single mother. Her life
story was so relatable to Jo Ann that she was able to see herself in a new way.
“I thought, you know what? If she can do that, I can do that.” During her time at
Marquette, Jo Ann watched Maxine with admiration for her strong leadership as
she traversed institutional and community waters on behalf of the Native student
body. When Jo Ann served as president of the American Indian Student
Association, she learned even more from Maxine when they moved the First
Warrior initiative from a proposal on paper to the public arena.

By the time Sharon entered Marquette in 1987, there was a new American
Indian Counselor, Donna Beckstrom. Similar to how Jo Ann referenced Maxine,
Sharon spoke of Donna with deep reverence. Donna, said Sharon, was “really
pivotal to feeling more at home and at ease” both on campus and off. Even
more, she was like a mother to Sharon, so when Donna left the institution for
another one down the road, Sharon and the small Native student body
immediately lost their grounding. They needed an institutional anchor to hold
them steady through college and collectively pressed the institution to fill the
vacancy. In the interim, Sharon says she found solace in a staff member, Oilda
Martinez, who counseled students from other identity groups. Sharon benefitted
from her mentorship while navigating a dual role as a student and part-time staff
at Marquette. It turned out to be a lifelong connection. Oilda came to be like
family for Sharon. “I communicated with her regularly and she’s always been a
part of my life throughout my professional career and after college.”

Marquette had long discontinued the specialized American Indian
Counselor position when Noemy arrived in 2010. So, it was fortunate there was
a living-learning community for her to land in that first year. It provided the
necessary footing until she found support from a Native peer, made other close
friends and built relationships with key staff and faculty. These people were
Noemy’s mental, intellectual, emotional, and social netting that helped her
persist. Weaving this infrastructure together was entirely her own initiative and
what she blanketed herself in throughout her time at Marquette.

If Rick had something like a campus family, it was EOP. Although he
knew Maxine, her support role as the American Indian Counselor was not one he
regularly tapped. EOP provided the necessary academic and social support
infrastructure Rick seemed to need at Marquette. He does, though, regard
another Native student as a strong role model. Mark Denning handed the reins of the First Warrior role over to Rick. They spent time together in that transition. The cultural knowledge Rick gained in this exchange was invaluable. “I was very fortunate to – to follow in, and being mentored, and follow in Mark Denning’s footsteps. He was definitely a big role model.” Rick met Mark when he played in the band for Marquette. He carried this interest from high school, where he played trombone all four years. Combined with his pursuit of ROTC, the influences of these extracurriculars on Rick were positive. He was a highly engaged student who gained leadership skills and provided what Rick says was a “healthy balance” with his academics.

Armando found his bracing in quiet study spaces in the library, writing centers, and with faculty and academically strong peers in order to sustain his success at Marquette. In addition, a faculty member took the time to help Armando after he tragically lost his brother and stayed with him in a mentorship role until graduation. Honoring the memory of his brother propelled Armando to stay on course when he could have understandably stepped out of college.

I know my brother. He wanted me to be smart. He always respected studying, and he understood what it meant to me. And I always – after he passed – I always felt, like I just gotta work that much harder now, I can’t give up now. So, I used losing my brother as another crutch, another motivation to keep studying.

Like Armando, Sharon’s unexpected loss of her father while at college initially created deep uncertainty for her future. The tragedy ushered in a lot of staff support to help Sharon deal with the grief and worry for her family. But her dad’s voice came to her at the very right time. “Don't quit, not on my account, so
keep going, don't quit. We're not quitters.” The words animated the spirit of the Navajo saying, “go far [and] keep going” and together helped forge the will in Sharon to persist. Words of encouragement from outside Sharon’s close network also left a mark. Sharon’s academic counselor introduced her to a relative who was a state-level official. At the time, Sharon was dragging her feet in school, delaying her graduation timeline. The advice she received was the injection of fuel Sharon needed. While all her good work in the campus community was acknowledged, he was direct in saying it would be at the expense of a degree and the importance of what that achievement would bring to her future. Sharon took these words to heart.

“No One is Going to Do it For You”: Personal Attributes

Not all words related to the college goals of some alumni in this project were perceived to come from a well-meaning place. However, they each turned what could have been a negative drag on their persistence into motivation. When Sharon announced her college plans to her family, a relative said she would never make it to graduation. Those words would have knocked the breath out of most. Sharon says she always remembered that interaction. It inspired a mantra she used when things were tough at Marquette. “I’m going to prove that guy wrong.” When Sharon returned home, she found an opportunity to thank him for helping to inspire her to persist in college.

Noemy experienced a similarly defining moment when she was already at Marquette. In an advising session, it was recommended that she abandon her dream of becoming a doctor. Noemy remembers leaving with bottled-up
frustration from what felt like a one-way conversation. She gets emotional still when talking about it. “I was mad afterward. I was, like, I’m gonna prove you wrong.” Noemy accomplished her goal and even received a letter of recommendation for her medical school application portfolio from this tough-talking advisor.

When Jo Ann first attempted to get into Marquette, the admissions counselor was less than encouraging, if not disparaging. Jo Ann heard, “Oh, I’m nuts, I’m too old, oh your transcripts, this and that and whatever. And I guess it got me angry.” She remembers how the judgment hit her because “words count,” she says. Jo Ann refused to be dismissed as not good enough and set out on another path of entry. It took her a couple of years of studying at the local community college, but she was accepted into Marquette’s nursing program. Jo Ann’s determination was hard-wired. If she heard, “you can’t do that,” she would immediately ask herself, “well, why not?”

These oral histories impart something more than grit in one key sense of the word. Grit abrades, wears down and reshapes a hard surface. If using grit to reference the strength of individual character to achieve a goal, then we get closer to some understanding. Still, it does not go far enough. There was an internal flame that propelled these alumni to persist in their college pursuits that was shaped by their Native identities. We feel the energy from the heat in their voices – a powerful sense of self-determination that does not bend towards the institution. “Persistence and determination,” Jo Ann says, is what helped her through college, not “high knowledge” of anything. Even if the struggle of their
lives in college shook their confidence, the alumni in this project believed strongly enough in themselves and had the intrinsic motivation to achieve their goal of graduating.

I’m always reminded that my family will tell me I’m a very determined person and whatever I say I’m gonna set out to do, no matter how long it takes me or what type of journey I decide to take myself on that eventually I’ll get to where I say I’m gonna go. (Noemy)

I was – I was really determined. I would say that was, bottom line, kinda how, I guess what drove me. (Sharon)

It was all self-motivation. Nobody cared about my grades, my mom, you know, my mom and them. They were there and they were [just] glad that I was going to school. (Armando)

Fear also informed Armando’s motivation. After receiving a low grade on his first college exam, he could not help but be disappointed in himself. He feared failure. Armando is introspective on its genesis and points to the trauma in his life. “The trauma that I experienced helped me focus on the school to escape if that makes sense. I feel like if I didn’t channel it to something else, I felt like I’d fall, or I would break down.” Working hard with a singlemindedness to succeed throughout his school years became a natural part of his behavioral repertoire. The habit carried him through college, and by the time Armando graduated, it was with honors. He says he may not have been the smartest, but Armando felt he could outwork anyone. There was honor in that struggle.

The dedication to college success came with many sacrifices, Armando says. School was his life. It was at the expense of family time, and he is not entirely sure it was worth all the struggles. Jo Ann is regretful too; she missed
time with her children to attend college. “They sacrificed my time with them to – for me to do what I was doing.” Nevertheless, Armando and Jo Ann engaged their will at every turn. Jo Ann persisted by achieving incremental wins class by class.

Small goals met at a time, each time, and not being overwhelmed by that and – because you know there’s a big – there are things you have to accomplish, but you have to get through it bit by bit.

Even though Noemy had rich pre-college preparatory experiences, she was thrown off kilter by college science classes and felt like she was much farther behind than her peers. To right herself, she employed a retreat strategy the first year – spending a significant amount of time in her dorm room to study and shield herself from any judgment.

I don’t know what it is within me that, I’m like, no, I can do it myself. Or I’ll figure it out. But sometimes I think it – a lot of it does come from my dad that he – he always kind of has this saying oh, I’ll figure it out or I’ll do it. He’s very prideful in that too of not necessarily asking for help. So I think that kind of rubbed off on me.

To outsiders, the behavior might be seen as unhelpful to college persistence, but Noemy acted in congruence with a Diné cultural standard that Sharon relayed. “T’áá hwó’ ají t’éego” translates to “you have to do it yourself – no one is going to do it for you.”

New Strands to Weave In

Resource mapping is a discovery that lies outside the literature reviewed for this project. Except for Rick, who was part of an educational program that built in institutional support for their students even before they started their first
semester, others had to locate and piece together campus resources independently. Like an archeologist’s first careful steps walking a site to glean hints of human habitation, the narratives reveal that most alumni surveyed the campus landscape with interest, a keen eye and an openness to discovery.

For Sharon, it was serendipitous that her mom met the American Indian counselor on move-in day, but from then on, she nurtured the relationship as a lifeline. Sharon also strategically reached for pockets of Native and other underrepresented students and organizations to get more comfortable on campus and erode its unfamiliar edges. Marquette did not have an official Native student center, so exploration required personal initiative.

Armando said every semester was different. “[He] had to “figure it all out all over again …” and looked around to whoever might help him be successful. Once he found the human resources, Armando said, “I grabbed on and didn’t let go because I needed it.” Noemy also moved into the discovery process when the arms of support from CommUNITY were insufficient to help her academically. She found a Native staff member who provided close counsel, developed supportive relationships with a few faculty, joined study groups from her classes, and utilized campus tutoring services.

Even though the Marquette nursing program structured student schedules for all four years and had an ecosystem of support, Jo Ann still buttressed her academic journey. She used the library for concentrated study hours, signed up for peer counseling services and bonded with a regular study partner. An institutional structure also promised success for Rick on his academic journey,
but he did not silo himself in EOP. When he learned of the ROTC program from another student, he acted on his curiosity. Rick would come to balance the time commitment alongside his academics, but the program provided him extra financial support and an opportunity to build skills in leadership. “I think I was a better student at the end,” Rick says.

CONCLUSION

In large part, the oral histories of these five Marquette University Native alumni can be mapped onto the literature that suggests college persistence is related to cultural self-identity, family and community, and mentors and role models. Although none of the alumni voiced reliance on their identity to persist, as we find in the literature, it served as a significant source of pride and the root for some to return home and give back their bundle of knowledge gathered in college. But “home” in these stories is not always in reference to reservation homelands. It is broader and responds to the needs of Native people wherever they may be.

For all but Armando, cultural self-identity was reinforced through active participation in an organized Native peer group formation. The Native student association engendered feelings of family and community, serving as critical socio-cultural support throughout college. Cultural differences within this group made no apparent difference to any of the alumni. If anything, it strengthened the whole. As Rick said, when they joined efforts with Native students from another educational institution, it was a “banding together.”
Otherness came more into play for the alumni in this project when they felt forced to respond to a bungling tack of questioning about their identity from a naïve student body. Malice was never perceived as the intent of these interactions, though, and it provides some insight into the overall character of these alumni as polite and patient stewards of their own people’s history and Native people in general. Since I shared the connection of cultural identity with the alumni in this project and have an insider view of the struggle in Native lives, I did expect them to trouble more of their experiences with non-Native students. With one exception, they were also uncritical of how the University served them. Only Sharon emphasized institutional shortcomings. It is possible my current professional role at Marquette introduced a filter so that the characterizations of the institution alumni might have otherwise leveled were softened. But maybe not. At least in Rick’s case, there was no trouble at all. “From the very beginning,” Rick said, he had nothing but fond and fun memories of his time at Marquette. In any case, I hoped these alumni would regard me as a relative who was a gentle questioner and quiet listener so they could unfurl their stories with more abandon in what might have felt like an unnatural staging for social interaction – a semi-structured interview. In all, there was a forthcomingness, especially around the sharing of deeply personal experiences like family tragedies, aching stretches of loneliness, stirring hard-won struggles, and, in Sharon’s case, sharp observations of serious gaps around institutional support for Native students.
Not surfaced in the literature, but notable for a few alumni in their stories, were enduring college friendships that contributed to persistence. Even for Armando, who wistfully relayed he did not develop what could be defined as friendships, he gratefully acknowledged the support peers lent at critically important junctures on his college journey. More prominent in the stories of all alumni while they were at Marquette were institutional mentors and role models that included caring staff, faculty and peers. Some of those relationships developed into familial like bonds, present still today, and were vitally important to persistence.

A little mapped discovery that was especially instrumental in the persistence of all these alumni through college was self-determination. For some alumni, like Armando and Jo Ann, it served as armor that helped them defy the storyline in the scholarship of commuter students as being at risk for leaving college early. Other alumni were lit by a fiery motivation to prove people wrong who said they would not achieve their goals. For all alumni, the self-determination to persist included efforts to discover institutional support by turning over stone after stone. By resource mapping in a landscape not shaped for them, the alumni were the geographical surveyors of their own success. Through their own strength, discipline and creativity they harnessed their internal resources and tapped external ones that enabled them to persist and graduate. Not all Indigenous students who come to Marquette will have this internal drive or skill set, but a roadmap that delineates resource outposts can offer them a strong
start. Considering the overall picture of Indigenous student underrepresentation in higher education, it is incumbent upon institutions to provide one.

The stories of Marquette alumni offer compelling insight on roadmap markers that would have helped them flourish. The lessons for higher education best practices transcend the time framework of this study. An undergraduate/graduate admissions counselor with a dedicated role assignment to Indigenous students is an imperative institutional anchor who would offer consistent overall guidance, link eligible students to academic and student support programs, as well as bridge critical connections to internship/scholarship opportunities. The counselor, as part of an institutional team, could help shape an iconic culturally responsive precollege visit experience for Indigenous students to illuminate campus life more fully. A themed Living Learning Community (LLC), offered as an optional place for admitted freshmen to land and gather, that is adequately funded and resourced with staff and key faculty, programmed in culturally meaningful ways, guided by a traditional elder or Indigenous Knowledge Keeper, and connected to mental health supports would soften a jarring arrival for Indigenous students and help assuage community longing. At the very least, a dedicated student gathering site in the campus environment is necessary to provide a sovereign meeting space for the Indigenous student body and offer a respite for commuters in the group. In the spirit of reconciliation, a place-based Indigenous course requirement would do much to redress the burden and obligation students feel in educating their peers
and campus community about their own Indigenous history, culture and tribal sovereignty.

Even though the alumni in this project have in common college success, each has distinct strands to their story that offer important lessons for those students yet to come. However, making generalizations on how Indigenous students (can) persist in college would require many more strands being woven together. It should not deter the imperative of future efforts. Hopefully, these intensive oral histories will provide inspiration.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


[Paper presentation]. 32nd Annual National Indian Education Association Annual Convention. https://www2.nau.edu/jar/AIE/Family.html#Note1


APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW INFORMATION FORM

Interviewee/Narrator Name:

Date of Interview:

Recording Format:
Digital (specify app):
Length of Interview:

Audio Recording Release and Consent Form Signed (date):
☐ Unrestricted
☐ Restricted (provide details)
Interview Transcript YES ☐ NO ☐
Reviewed by Interviewee/Narrator
YES ☐ (date_________) NO ☐

Interview Abstract:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minutes</th>
<th>Brief Statement of Themes Discussed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C: AUDIO RECORDING RELEASE AND CONSENT FORM

__________________ (interviewee) agrees to the audio recording of their interview.

Thank you for your participation and generosity of time in sharing your memories and/or knowledge. By signing this form, you are giving permission to be recorded and that you understand the audio recording may be used for scholarly, research and educational uses, or in any manner deemed in the best interests of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives (“Archives”), Raynor Memorial Libraries, or Marquette University. Additionally, by signing this form, you understand that the audio recording will be donated by the researcher to become part of the permanent collection of the Archives.

You acknowledge and hereby grant to the Raynor Memorial Libraries all right, title and interest in and to the audio recording, including any copyright interest you may hold in the audio recording, in any and all media now known or hereafter developed. Notwithstanding the foregoing, you shall not be restricted in any way from retelling, publicly performing, memorializing in print, film or other media, or otherwise exploiting, the subject matter underlying the audio recording.

You hereby release the Archives, Raynor Memorial Libraries, and its assignees and designees, including Marquette University, from any and all claims and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of the audio recording including, but not limited to, any claims for defamation or violations of my rights or privacy and/or publicity.

Interviewee Signature:

_______________________________________________ Date: __________

Access or Use Restrictions
Accepted on behalf of the Marquette University Department of Special Collections and University Archives by:

_______________________________________________ Date: __________

Archivist, Department of Special Collections and University Archives
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Pre-College Years
1. To help me build a fuller picture of your life, would you go back in time to share some of your story before you entered college?
2. What are some experiences you could describe that really stand out in your memory?
3. How would you describe your young self during these years?
4. If there were some people more present in your life than others what comes to mind about them that you could share?
5. How would you describe those people who might have been your role models and what they meant to you?
6. Would you share some of your school experiences during these pre-college years?
7. In what ways would you say that formal education played in the life of your family and/or your community?
8. If you were encouraged to go to college, could you share how those stories played out? If you were not encouraged, how did you come to decide to go to college at all?

College Years
9. How did your expectations of college match your experiences upon arrival and differ? How did that change over time?
10. Thinking about your time at college, could you share some of your experiences while on your journey?
11. How would you describe the kind of college student you were?
12. Would you say that your cultural identity (being Native) figured into your college experiences and how?
13. If you needed comfort during your time in college, how and/or where did you find it?
14. What are some of the personal strengths you drew on that helped you persist in college?
15. Who comes to mind as someone who helped you to persist in college?
16. Could you describe the ways your family was involved in your college journey and areas you were more independent of them?
17. Is there anything more you would like to mention that you think helped you persist in college?

Post-College Years
18. Your life story continued after graduation and I hope you could share some of your experiences in the transition and years following?
19. What opportunities, if any, has your work given you to impact the Indigenous community?
APPENDIX E: GRAPHIC RECORDING OF AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE ALUMNI EXPERIENCES AT MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY
APPENDIX F: ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION DONOR AGREEMENT FORM

By my signature below, I hereby give, transfer, and assign my recorded oral history interview conducted by Jacqueline Fontaine Schram on _______________ as an unrestricted gift to Marquette University. I assign all rights thereto to the University, including copyright and literary property rights in the contents, insofar as I hold such rights.

Interviewee Signature:

________________________________________________________________________ Date: ____________

Address:

Email:

How does interviewee choose to be identified?

Male □ Female □ Non-Binary □

Does interviewee want personal name published with interview? Yes □ No □

Marquette University hereby accepts the recorded oral history interview to use and retain pursuant to the educational and historical purposes of the University. The gift will be maintained in the Department of Special Collections and University Archives.

Signed: __________________________________________ Date: ____________
Archivist, Department of Special Collections
APPENDIX G: MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY IRB DETERMINATION

Email to Jacqueline Schram
Received 1/12/22

HR- 3971
Title: Those that Came Before: Learning from Native American College Alumni about Walking the Path of Persistence
marquette.kuali.co/protocols/protocols/612a5acdae00fd00356152f4

This protocol as submitted does not meet the definition of "Research" and/or "Human Subject" as defined in 45 CFR 46.102 -or- Marquette was determined to not be engaged in this research project. As such, IRB review by Marquette's IRB is not required at this time.

This email is your documentation of the IRB's decision. It can also be found in the activity log section of the protocol within Kuali.

Please contact Jessica (jessica.rice@marquette.edu) if anything changes or you believe this determination was made in error.

IRB
Office of Research Compliance
Email: orc@marquette.edu