

AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES WITH EMBODIED
CULTURAL CAPITAL IN ALASKA'S PUBLIC POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Victoria Jolene Solis Miller

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) learners' experiences with embodied cultural capital while pursuing a higher education degree in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions. The theory guiding this study is Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital concerning AI/AN adult learners' degree attainment. The sample population for this study was AI/AN adult learners enrolled in or who recently graduated from public postsecondary institutions in Alaska. The central research question guiding this study was: What is AI/AN learners' experiences with culture in postsecondary institutions? The research design included semi-structured interviews triangulated with artifact analysis and a focus group. Data analysis was conducted using reflective analysis, epoché, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. Coding was used to identify emerging themes among all three data collection sources. The primary themes were identity, responsibility, affirmation and healing, and advocacy for and preservation of culture.

Keywords: American Indian/Alaska Native, higher education, degree attainment, culture, postsecondary, cultural capital, Bourdieu

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Dedication

First and foremost, I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior; without Him, nothing is possible. I also dedicate this dissertation to my husband, who has supported me in every step of my education and managed countless household chores and projects while I studied. To my children, Ashely, Tyler, Elijah, Tyann, Caleb, Trevor, and Ambyr, and my grandchildren, Madison, Andrew, Jenni, Odin, Darryll, Isabelle, Archer, Lincoln, Oliver, Coulson, and Maverick, may you pursue knowledge throughout your lives.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Copyright Page.....	4
Dedication	5
Acknowledgments.....	6
Table of Contents	7
List of Tables	12
List of Figures	13
List of Abbreviations	14
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	15
Overview.....	15
Background.....	15
Historical Context	16
Social Context.....	18
Theoretical Context.....	20
Problem Statement	22
Purpose Statement.....	23
Significance of the Study	24
Research Questions	24
Central Research Question.....	25
Sub-Question One.....	25
Sub-Question Two	25
Sub-Question Three	25

Definitions.....	25
Summary.....	28
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	30
Overview.....	30
Theoretical Framework.....	30
Related Literature.....	32
Native Ways of Knowing - Then.....	33
Assimilation and Colonization.....	35
Boarding School Mandates.....	36
Intergenerational Trauma.....	38
Social Barriers.....	40
Place Diversity.....	40
Health and Wellness.....	43
Student Status.....	47
Cultural Competence.....	51
Underrepresentation.....	53
Misrepresentation.....	55
Deficit Perspectives.....	58
High-Context Learners in Low-Context Institutions.....	59
Native Ways of Knowing - Now.....	61
Degree Attainment Gap.....	62
Summary.....	65
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....	67

Overview.....	67
Research Design.....	67
Research Questions.....	69
Central Research Question.....	69
Sub-Question One.....	69
Sub-Question Two.....	69
Sub-Question Three.....	69
Setting and Participants.....	69
Setting.....	70
Participants.....	71
Researcher Positionality.....	71
Interpretive Framework.....	72
Philosophical Assumptions.....	73
Researcher's Role.....	76
Procedures.....	78
Permissions.....	79
Recruitment Plan.....	79
Data Collection Plan.....	81
Individual Interviews.....	82
Artifacts.....	85
Focus Groups.....	87
Data Synthesis.....	89
Trustworthiness.....	90

	10
Credibility	90
Transferability	92
Dependability	92
Confirmability	93
Ethical Considerations	93
Summary	94
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	95
Overview	95
Participants	95
Results	100
Identity	101
Responsibility	102
Affirmation and Healing	104
Advocacy for and Preservation of Culture	107
Research Question Responses	111
Sub-Question One	112
Sub-Question Two	114
Sub-Question Three	116
Summary	117
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION	119
Overview	119
Discussion	119
Interpretation of Findings	119

Implications for Policy or Practice	122
Implications for Policy	123
Implications for Practice	123
Theoretical and Empirical Implications	124
Theoretical Implications	124
Empirical Implications	125
Limitations and Delimitations.....	128
Recommendations for Future Research	129
Conclusion	130
References.....	132
Appendix A: LU-IRB Approval	154
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letters	155
Appendix C: Participant Screening Questionnaire	157
Appendix D: Consent Form(s).....	158
Appendix E: Open-Ended Interview Questions.....	161
Appendix F: Interview Protocol Template	163
Appendix G: Open-Ended Focus Group Questions.....	165

List of Tables

Table 1. American Indian/Alaska Native Elicaraq Participants	96
Table 2. Themes, Sub-Themes, and A Priori Codes	100
Table 3. Artifact Analysis	112

List of Figures

Figure 1. Traditional Native Knowledge Systems.....33

List of Abbreviations

American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN)

Community Health Aide/Practitioners (CHA/P)

Culturally Responsive Education (CRE)

Culturally Responsive Schools (CRS)

Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD)

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FMNI)

Low-income, first-generation (LIFG)

Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)

Liberty University Institutional Review Board (LU-IRB)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Release of Information (ROI)

Self Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-regulated Learning (SRL)

Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Less than 25% of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) adult learners attain a postsecondary degree (Pilar, 2018). Nettles (2017) projected that the AI/AN learner population is unlikely to attain their projected degree attainment goal. Chapter One discussed the degree attainment gap in which AI/AN students remain a statistic (Pilar, 2018). Issues within the education system contribute to the low percentage of AI/AN adult learners attaining a degree from postsecondary institutions (Buxton, 2017; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994; Peck, 2021; Walters et al., 2019). Despite multiple attempts to integrate cultural knowledge systems in Western classrooms, teachers struggle to integrate learners' knowledge funds (Volman & Gilde, 2021) into the mainstream classroom (Cherng & Davis, 2019). This chapter described the background and contexts used to surmise the relevance of this study. The problem and purpose statements provided evidence of the need for this study, followed by an explanation of who would benefit from this research. Chapter One and the chapter summary include this study's guiding research questions.

Background

The history of AI/AN learners is tumultuous and arduous, filled with accounts of assimilation, forced boarding school, and gross negligence (Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Godlewska et al., 2020; Stanciu, 2021; Szasz, 1974; Winstead et al., 2018). While reparations continue to be made, AI/AN adult learners continue to be underrepresented (Admiraal et al., 2019; Barnes-Najor et al., 2021; Norris et al., 2020; O'Leary et al., 2020; Volman & Gilde, 2021) and misrepresented in mainstream academia (Banks, 1989; Deloria et al., 2018; Hooks, 1994). There is a disconnect between AI/AN cultures and the dominant culture in higher education.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) is described in the historical, social, and theoretical contexts, demonstrating relevance for understanding AI/AN learners' experiences with culture in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions.

Historical Context

AI/AN learners are one subset of high-context culture populations with high attrition and completion rates in higher education that are lower than any other ethnic group (Pilar, 2018). The negative impact of place diversity hinders AI/AN students' educational participation and success (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018). Additionally, decades of deficit perspective practices (Buxton, 2017; Keefer, 2017; McDuff et al., 2018; Peck, 2021; Savage et al., 2011) contribute to ongoing systemic oppression (Davis & Museus, 2019; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994). Other social determinants include high rates of substance use, poverty, domestic violence, suicidal ideation and attempts, and death by suicide (Bills et al., 2021; Burrage et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2020), which interfere with AI/AN learners' academic success. Lastly, continued attempts by the educational system to expect students with culturally different backgrounds (Taba, 1964) to succeed in a system of andragogy that was developed for non-Native students were explored (Roessger et al., 2020). While the problems specific to the AI/AN population hinder their degree attainment in postsecondary schools, the history of AI/AN learners has not always been this dismal.

Before compulsory school laws were implemented and America became a nation, AI/AN learners were educated by family members and elders (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Szasz, 1974). Appointed elders were the bearers of traditional knowledge and wisdom who shared their teachings. Young people learn through "observation, emulation, experimentation, and independent reasoning" (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013, p. 21). The federal government took

control of the sovereign nations by declaring the need to cultivate Native people in the early 1800s (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018).

After Alaska was sold to America in 1867, the education of AI/AN youth became a focus of Western society (Hirshberg et al., 2019). The origination of the range of barriers began with state and federal legislative acts signed into law that failed to see the value of AI/AN students' culture as part of the learning experience (Ahmed, 2019; Cherng & Davis, 2019; Fullerton, 2021; Stanciu, 2021; Stanton, 2014). Legislative acts resulted in assimilation practices (Aguilera et al., 2007; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; Stanton, 2014) that continue to affect current generations as intergenerational trauma (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013) and result in ongoing systemic oppression practices (Banks, 1989; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994; Peck, 2021; Savage et al., 2011; Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019). It was not until the lawsuit *Hootch v. Alaska State-Operated School System* was settled out of court that Alaska was required to build secondary schools in rural Alaska where there was a minimum of eight (later, 10) students in residence (Hirshberg et al., 2019).

Between 1879 and 1900, close to 400 boarding schools were opened across the country (The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2020), and AI/AN learners were forced to attend (Aguilera et al., 2007; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; Stanton, 2014). Assimilation and colonization began in earnest (Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Godlewska et al., 2020; McDowell Group, 2001; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Stanciu, 2021; Szasz, 1974; Winstead et al., 2018) with Richard Pratt's plan to eliminate AI/AN culture from boarding school students (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018). Decades of intergenerational trauma following the U.S. government's attempt to erase AI/AN culture continue affecting current generations of AI/AN learners today (Freeman et al., 2019). In some cases, AI/AN

peoples experience residual social issues that hinder their efforts to succeed in postsecondary education (Bills et al., 2021; Burrage et al., 2016).

AI/AN learners' experiences with education are an example of the American school system devaluing AI/AN embodied cultural capital in exchange for Americanized cultural capital (Szasz, 1974). This concept disagrees with Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about exchanging capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). However, Edgerton and Roberts (2014) stated that due to Bourdieu's abstract theory of cultural capital, American society had misinterpreted cultural capital to align more with the idea of cultured capital or obtaining culture through participation in the arts and other highbrow activities. This misinterpretation was expanded throughout this research study as a possible contributor to Pilar's (2018) degree attainment gap.

Social Context

Knowles' theory of andragogy does not consider non-dominant cultures (Anderson & Boutelier, 2021). This exclusion negatively affects adult learners from high-context cultures (Anderson & Boutelier, 2021; Nafeth, 2021; Pfeifer et al., 2020; Weissman, 2019) and those who experience biographical (Wu et al., 2021), sociological (Bills et al., 2021), and geographical constraints to higher education (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018). Meanwhile, the lasting traumatic effects of assimilation (Ficklin et al., 2022; Freeman et al., 2019; Gregg, 2018), combined with deficit perspective practices (McDuff et al., 2018; Peck, 2021; Savage et al., 2011), contribute to ongoing systemic oppression (Stanciu, 2021). The result is high attrition and low education completion rates among AI/AN students (Pilar, 2018).

Attempts to incorporate culture into mainstream education have been ongoing and evolving since the 1960s (Norris et al., 2020). However, these efforts are minimal at best, and the United States continues to struggle to effectively blend Western and AI/AN cultures into

education systems (Nafeth, 2021; Smith, 2020; Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019). Furthermore, AI/AN students represent a small subset of the nation's student population and are typically omitted from research. The numbers are bleak when AI/AN students have been included in academic statistical measures (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Pilar, 2018). Exclusion from research studies and the power imbalance that comes with a history of oppression is exacerbated when AI/AN (and other minority) students are expected to fit into mainstream adult education programs through the misguided understanding of the value and exchange rate of Bourdieu's (1979/1984) cultural capital. This pressure to fit a population's non-dominant culture into the mainstream culture through educational practices fails to view the indigenous culture from a strengths-based perspective (Askew et al., 2020).

Educators and administrators might benefit from this study in several ways:

1. Developing awareness of AI/AN educational history, cultures, and challenges surrounding academic success is the first step toward developing culturally relevant curricula or enhancing the current curriculum that uses the four commonly used approaches to cultural inclusivity.
2. Understanding the difference between low-context (Western) and high-context (AI/AN) cultures may improve student-teacher relationships.
3. Understanding the damage done to AI/AN peoples and embracing Bourdieu's cultural capital theory might motivate teachers to draw students into the learning experience while understanding the value of AI/AN learners' cultural capital.

Through increased educator knowledge and improved student-teacher relationships, proper culturally relevant education (CRE) can be accomplished and may positively influence AI/AN adult degree attainment.

Theoretical Context

Literature related to adult education typically reflects andragogy, a term initially coined by Alexander Kapp, who emphasized the adult learners' "inner qualities" (Loeng, 2018, p. 629). Although slightly different, Kapp's concepts of the adult learner leverage Knowles' theory of andragogy (Knowles, 1975, 1977, 1978). Although Knowles distinguishes pedagogy, the teaching of children, from that of andragogy, teaching adults, scholars must dig deeper to understand the theoretical underpinnings of Knowles' work.

For example, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy was the Academy of Labour's first director, thus pioneering the adult education movement in Frankfurt, Germany. From 1923 to 1929, Rosenstock-Huessy was named vice-chairman of the World Association for Adult Education (Cristaudo et al., 2015). These organizations and the roles Rosenstock-Huessy held add credibility to the adult learner concept. Thus, andragogy has breadth and depth across the globe and varies among cultures and countries where andragogy is practiced (Loeng, 2018; Note et al., 2021; Savicevic, 2008). Edward Thorndike and Eduard C. Lindeman also contributed to the concept of andragogy with their ideas regarding streams of inquiry (Knowles, 1977; Lindeman, 1926/1970). Knowles, however, leveraged Eduard Lindeman's philosophies of adult education when he created the theory of (North American) andragogy (Knowles, 1977). Lindeman (1926/1970) distinguished traditional higher education and life learning, stating the latter was what a college-educated man required to separate education for a vocation from education as a life experience.

The theory of andragogy contains the premise of the adult learner. However, the more appropriate theoretical underpinnings of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2017) are Hall's theory of cultural identity (Hall, 1976;

Nafeth, 2021) and the theory of funds of knowledge/identity [FoK/I] (Volman & Gilde, 2021). Hall's theory of cultural identity set the stage for differentiating between cultural needs and diversity and the limitations of institutions. For an organization or institute of higher education to perform well requires a business-like structure that contains timeframe limitations, consumers, and employees. Hall (1976) described this discrepancy in his example of the Industrial Revolution. In England, factories were bound by time, while preindustrial workers needed only to work long enough to "pay off their debts and keep body and soul together" upon achieving those goals, the workers quit (Hall, 1976, p. 5).

In more recent studies, Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2017) examined the theory of cultural capital "as an influence of class culture on social privilege and individual outcome" (p. 11). Unlike Hall's (1976) example, Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2017) identified a strong connection between cultural capital and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Through this lens, the more cultural capital a people group attains within an institution of higher education, the more economic capital is gained. This use of cultural capital becomes a power struggle in which non-dominant peoples fight to "counter dominant paradigms by speaking the language of the dominant group" (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2017, p. 13).

Some scholars saw the integration of culture in mainstream education systems like Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2017). Such scholars note that leveraging students' knowledge and understanding of their roots is about getting them to do what they are accustomed to and not what society wants (Volman & Gilde, 2021). However, such criticism of FoK/I fails to see its value. Volman and Gilde (2021) learned through their quantitative study that teachers found FoK/I practices positively affect students' engagement in the classroom, attitude and behavior toward learning, confidence levels, and ambitions. These elements of student response to their

cultural knowledge and identity being deemed an asset instead of a deficit (Buxton, 2017; McDuff et al., 2018; Peck, 2021) are added benefits that further underpin Bourdieu's cultural capital theory.

Problem Statement

The problem is that AI/AN cultural capital has been, and continues to be, devalued in curricula and instruction in education (Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Szasz, 1974; Walters et al., 2019), resulting in less than a quarter of AI/AN adults nationwide attaining an associate degree or higher, with the most significant gap visible at the bachelor's degree level (Alfaiz et al., 2020; McDuff et al., 2018; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Pilar, 2018; Szasz, 1974; Walters et al., 2019). As a result, it can increase the likelihood of AI/AN individuals remaining in lower socioeconomic (SES) brackets than their non-AI/AN peers (Keo, 2019). National trends and state-specific examination of degree attainment found AI/AN adults achieving higher education degrees at a much lower rate than White adults (Pilar, 2018). Furthermore, degree attainment for Native Alaskans has not exceeded two percentage points since 2000 (Pilar, 2018). Research shows that AI/AN students typically learn about their culture, language, and heritage from family members (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Rampey et al., 2021), historically described as Native Ways of Knowing (Landis & Fries-Gaither, 2009). Furthermore, research shows a significant difference between Western and AI/AN cultures (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013). At this stage in the research, AI/AN learning preferences was referred to as Native Ways of Knowing, which was generally defined as intergenerational oral storytelling that aids individuals in understanding and maintaining "the necessary balance between the human, natural, and spiritual realms" (Landis & Fries-Gaither, 2009, para. 5). This difference is exacerbated when AI/AN learners participate in western school systems.

Teachers are the secondary source of education for students learning about their culture (Rampey et al., 2021), yet Walters et al. (2019) reported a lack of indigenous representation among educators. Non-Indigenous teachers or those ignorant of the Native Way of Knowing may struggle to understand the importance of culturally responsive education (CRE). This lack of understanding leads to the failure to integrate students' cultural knowledge and skills into the curriculum (Cherng & Davis, 2019; Hirshberg et al., 2019; Volman & Gilde, 2021). Additionally, non-Indigenous educators may perpetuate the problem through deficit perspective practices (Buxton, 2017; McDuff et al., 2018; Peck, 2021). Thus, educators cannot be discounted regarding their impact on AI/AN adult learners' attrition and completion rates in higher education.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand AI/AN learners' experiences with embodied cultural capital while pursuing a postsecondary degree in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions. Pilar (2018) reported a disproportionately low rate of minority adult learners who complete a degree or attain a graduate degree (i.e., master's or doctorate) compared to the number of White or dominant culture learners. Bourdieu (1979/1984) described embodied cultural capital as one's internalized sense of culture. According to Bourdieu (1979/1984), embodied cultural capital is devalued in education. Historically, American school systems have perceived AI/AN culture to have little to no value (Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Szasz, 1974). Buxton (2017), McDuff et al. (2018), and Peck (2021) have found supporting evidence in their research that embodied or internalized, non-dominant cultural capital continues to be perceived as having a significantly lower rate of value than that of the dominant culture.

Significance of the Study

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory is the appropriate theoretical framework for this study. Cultural capital emphasizes integrating students' culture into mainstream educative practices as assets that positively impact learner outcomes (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Merculieff & Roderick, 2013; Volman & Gilde, 2021). This study added to the existing literature by providing AI/AN learners' reflections on their experiences with culture in Alaska's higher education programs.

The empirical significance behind this study was that existing literature fails to include AI/AN learners in research because they make up a small percentage of the population (Pilar, 2018). Non-Indigenous representation (Peck, 2021; Savage et al., 2011; Walters et al., 2019) and misrepresentation in education materials (Banks, 1989; Hooks, 1994) gives insufficient and inaccurate information about this population. Capturing the lived experiences of AI/AN learners who have participated in Alaska's higher education programs can add to this population's lack of statistical data.

If this paradigm shift can occur, Alaska's public postsecondary institutions may perceive AI/AN's cultural capital as an asset and an integral part of their programs. The result can be the modification of curricula and instruction in bachelor's degree programs that more closely aligns with culturally appropriate teaching practices. Their efforts may help close the degree attainment gap and boost AI/AN SES. This study's research design, population, and purpose may also assist postsecondary administrators, policymakers, and curricula developers in understanding AI/AN learners' experiences with embodied cultural capital in postsecondary institutions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Central Research Question

What is AI/AN learners' experiences with culture in postsecondary institutions?

Sub-Question One

How do AI/AN learners remain connected to their cultures while pursuing a postsecondary degree?

Sub-Question Two

How do AI/AN learners see their obtainment of a postsecondary degree impacting their future SES?

Sub-Question Three

How does embodied cultural capital help AI/AN adult learners overcome the challenges they face when pursuing a postsecondary degree?

Definitions

1. *American Indian/Alaska Native* – Refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment (Norris et al., 2012).
2. *Andragogy* - Any intentional and professionally guided activity which aims at a change in adult persons (Knowles, 1978).
3. *Assimilation* – Involves [voluntary or forced] absorption into the dominant society (Godlewska et al., 2020).
4. *Colonialism* – The policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another territory or people, occupying the land with settlers, and economically exploiting the land and the people. It usually involves domination, assimilation, and marginalization of Indigenous peoples. (Godlewska et al., 2020).

5. *Cultural Capital* – ‘Cultural competences,’ which can be embodied (internalized and intangible), objectified (cultural products), and institutionalized (officially accredited) . . . (1) entails appreciation of ‘highbrow’ cultural tastes and (2) cultural capital is ‘conceptually and causally’ distinct from other knowledge or ability involving technical skills or competence (i.e. human capital) (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).
6. *Cultural Competence* – A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross et al., 1989).
7. *Culturally Responsive Education* – Curriculum and instruction that generally validate the cultures and languages of students and allow them to become co-instructors of knowledge in the school setting (Belgarde et al., 2002).
8. *Culturally Responsive Schools* – Schooling [that] assumes that a firm grounding in the heritage language and culture indigenous to a particular tribe is a fundamental prerequisite for developing culturally-healthy students and communities (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021).
9. *Deficit Perspective* – A propensity to locate the source of academic problems in deficiencies within students, their families, their communities, or their membership in social categories [such as race and gender] (Peck, 2021).
10. *Embodied Capital* – Social origin (inasmuch as inherited social capital—name, family connections etc.—governs its real profitability) and also, no doubt, geographical origin (through embodied properties such as accent and also through the characteristics of the labour market) and sex (Bourdieu, 1979/1984).

11. *First-Generation Student* – An individual whose parents or guardian did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Joint Committee on Printing, Congress, 2021).
12. *Habitus* – The generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (principle divisions) of these practices (Bourdieu, 1979/1984).
13. *High-Context Culture* – Refers to the information that is internalized by a person (Hall, 1976).
14. *Inclusion* – A place where students with disabilities are valued and active participants are provided the support needed to succeed in the school's academic, social, and extra-curricular activities (McLeskey et al., 2015, as cited in Reese et al., 2018).
15. *Low-Context Culture* – High reliance on written communication and absence of non-verbal cues (Nafeth, 2021).
16. *Low-Income Individual* – An individual from a family whose taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of an amount equal to the poverty level determined by using criteria of poverty established by the Bureau of the Census (Joint Committee on Printing, Congress, 2021).
17. *Native Ways of Knowing* – Meaningful stories that are shared orally from generation to generation to help each person understand and maintain the necessary balance between the human, natural, and spiritual realms (Landis & Fries-Gaither, 2009).
18. *Pedagogy* – The art and science of leading children (Knowles, 1978).
19. *Place Diversity* – A contextual understanding of individuals, families, and communities based on their geographical location (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018).
20. *Self-Directed Learning* – A process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals,

identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975).

21. *Self Determination Theory* – A motivational theory that states that satisfying the basic psychological needs of 1) feelings of autonomy, 2) feelings of involvement, and 3) feelings of competence help people to develop optimally and feel satisfied (Admiraal et al., 2019).

Summary

Understanding adult AI/AN learners' experiences in postsecondary degree programs is crucial to understanding and working towards closing the degree attainment gap. The problem was that less than 25% of AI/AN adults attain an associate degree or higher (Pilar, 2018). Intergenerational trauma (Freeman et al., 2019; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013), lack of AI/AN representation among students and teachers (Walters et al., 2019), and misrepresentation in educational systems (Banks, 1989; Hooks, 1994) exacerbate the identified problem. Society tends to exclude this population from research and literature; this study sought to understand AI/AN learners and their experiences in higher education (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020). Knowing the AI/AN population are not appropriately represented and continuing to omit them from research demonstrates adherence to systemic oppression practices, with which AI/AN people groups are already familiar (Davis & Museus, 2019; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994; Szasz, 1974). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of AI/AN adult learners' encounters with culture while pursuing a postsecondary degree. This research study added to the existing literature about AI/AN adult learners. The researcher designed this study to assist postsecondary administrators, faculty, and curricula developers in viewing AI/AN cultures as an asset to existing higher education degree

programs. Furthermore, assist schools with integrating AI/AN culture to influence the degree attainment gap.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) adult learners face significant historical and current challenges that interfere with their access, attrition, and completion of postsecondary education programs. Chapter Two situates this study within the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and investigates the current literature surrounding the ongoing issues inside and outside of the classroom, making it difficult for AI/AN students to attain a postsecondary degree. A description and synthesis of Native Ways of Knowing are presented in historical and modern contexts providing a foundation for understanding the detriment caused by the devaluation of AI/AN cultural capital. This chapter focused on issues in three broad categories: assimilation, barriers to postsecondary education, and cultural competence. The final section of this chapter investigated the degree attainment gap, linking AI/AN learners' issues to the dismal projections for degree attainment. Furthermore, a gap in the existing literature was identified, demonstrating a need for this study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which is described as a form of capital that can exist in three states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. These forms of capital can increase in corresponding types of value: internalized value [embodied], monetary value or quality of material objects or goods [objectified], and intellectual or qualification status [institutionalized] (Richardson, 1983/1986). To understand the types of capital that Bourdieu identified and how capital is used in this research study, an understanding of each form is appropriate. The formal definitions of Bourdieu's types of capital can be found in the Definitions section of this report.

Cultural capital is a common concept in education (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Chet et al., 2020; Rudick et al., 2019). Bourdieu determined that one of the best-kept secrets of the education system is the hierarchical classification of learners in which embodied cultural capital has no value in the classroom (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Unless the culture in question is of a specific class, this system is best described by what Bourdieu labeled habitus (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Chen et al., 2020).

Habitus internalizes external social and cultural behaviors (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Chen et al. (2020) discussed this habitus in an illustration of university students donning sports team regalia and becoming fans of the institution's team players in their research of reverse transfer students. This analogy is appropriate and what one might consider low-stakes conformity. However, this research viewed habitus through the lens of Rudick et al. (2019). They discussed habitus as a hierarchical system in postsecondary schools in which incoming students must conform to the institution's norms to succeed. Complying with this expectation means that learners from non-dominant cultures sever ties with their heritage, homes, families, and communities (Luedke, 2020).

This hidden meaning of cultural capital and habitus in the education system aligns with and appears to be a continuation of the historical genocide and colonization of AI/AN peoples. These individuals are engaging in schools similar to Pratt's boarding schools, where their AI/AN culture is ignored and erased (Szasz, 1974). Americanizing AI/AN cultures mean removing learners from their homes, communities, and culture. Forced assimilation stated that AI/AN cultures had no value (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Curl et al., 2018; Szasz, 1974). Additionally, AI/AN learners were required to devalue their native dress, teachings, language, religious beliefs, and knowledge in exchange for Western culture or risk harsh punishment

(Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Szasz, 1974). AI/AN learners experienced what Curl et al. (2018) referred to as cultural conflict; they were disconnected from their heritage and family customs due to being Americanized.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital informs this research study. It provided a foundation for an increased understanding of the lived experiences of AI/AN learners pursuing higher education degrees in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions. Understanding participants' lived experiences in postsecondary degree programs can reinforce the value of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the value of non-dominant cultural capital within Westernized higher education. Schools need a clearer understanding of the value that AI/AN cultures add to curricula, instruction, and college education experience so AI/AN learners can feel a sense of belonging in their learning environment. The cycle of assimilation, misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and high attrition rates continue to rise, and the degree attainment gap is also increasing.

Related Literature

This literature review represented an investigation into the AI/AN peoples' history with learning and three broad categories of determinants of AI/AN adult learners' success in postsecondary education. Within each category, specific subthemes were identified to describe the connections between past and present events and issues contributing to the degree attainment gap. The themes and subthemes examined in this chapter included an investigation into assimilation and colonization, boarding school mandates, intergenerational trauma, social barriers, diversity, health and wellness, student status, cultural competence, underrepresentation, misrepresentation, deficit perspective practices, and high-context learners in low-context institutions. The degree attainment gap affects more than the AI/AN population; however,

AI/AN learners are impacted more by this phenomenon than any other race or ethnic group (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Nettles, 2017; Pilar, 2018). Therefore, this literature review examined the connection between the themes and subthemes described above, AI/AN adult learners' history with learning and education, and the degree attainment gap.

Native Ways of Knowing - Then

Before assimilation and colonization practices began, AI/AN youth learned from their families and communities (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Szasz, 1974). Parents, grandparents, and community elders taught AI/AN youth using traditional learning practices using demonstration, hands-on practice, and storytelling (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Szasz, 1974). Figure 1 is an adaptation of Barnhardt and Kawagley's (2005) catalog of teaching and learning qualities that AI/AN people associate with the traditional indigenous education system.

Figure 1

Traditional Native Knowledge Systems

Traditional Native Knowledge Systems	
-	Holistic
-	Includes physical and metaphysical world linked to moral code
-	Emphasis [is] on practical application of skills and knowledge
-	Trust for inherited wisdom
-	Respect for all things
-	Practical experimentation
-	Qualitative oral record
-	Local verification
-	Communication of metaphor and story [is] connected to life, values, and proper behavior
-	Integrated and applied to daily living and traditional subsistence practices

Note. Adapted from “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Alaska Native Ways of Knowing,” by R. Barnhardt and A. O. Kawagley (2005) *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 36, p. 8.

Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) went so far as to describe how the Native Ways of Knowing were devised. For this study, I have grouped the categories in Figure 1 into more narrow descriptions associated with the development of the Native Ways of Knowing described by the authors. The developmental types include observation, adaptation, obtainment, and utilization (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). The developmental categories in this section were listed in order of the Figure 1 categories. The brackets around the Native Ways of Knowing qualities in Figure 1 represent the definite separation in the original Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) document.

Observation

The first category in Figure 1 represents observation. It is the observation of whole beings, entities, and life. The link between the physical and metaphysical world indicates scrutiny of the abstract quality of life and what lies beyond the physical. Additionally, the importance of seeing a connection between knowledge and the application of knowledge requires seeing beyond the classroom. This connection describes what is typically referred to as transferable skills in the dominant culture.

Obtainment

The second category from Figure 1 represents obtainment. To have trust in inherited wisdom, one must be willing to obtain that wisdom through listening and observing the teachings offered. Furthermore, it is through being studious and witnessing the modeling of respect between people. Another aspect of respect can be found in people's regard for the earth and its beings. It is through obtainment that an individual can learn to demonstrate respect.

Adaptation

AI/AN people have demonstrated resilience and adaptation for many years. They have survived through experimentation, passing down oral teachings, and verifying generational teachings. They have also adapted to life and societal changes through the morals and lessons contained in the native tradition of storytelling. As a result, the researcher categorized the third section of Figure 1 as adaptation.

Utilization

The last bullet point from Figure 1 was utilization. Although the Native Ways of Knowing are steeped in history, they continue to be useful in modern society. The Native Ways of Knowing are integrative and applicable to daily life. Practicing life skills associated with historical survival needs like berry picking, hunting, or fishing for subsistence, apply to the daily life of someone who identifies as AI/AN. Likewise, engaging in modern activities like punching a time clock, replying to an email on a smart device, or repairing a snow machine, are examples of AI/AN people applying skills to daily living.

Assimilation and Colonization

The degree attainment gap (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Pilar, 2018; Thompson et al., 2020) can be attributed, in part, to the assimilation and colonization of AI/AN peoples (Aguilera et al., 2007; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; Godlewska et al., 2020; Stanton, 2014; Winstead et al., 2018). Assimilation was implemented through the 1819 Civilization Fund Act. A dual education system was created with one track used to civilize AI/AN learners who were considered uncivilized, thus not allowed to attend the other education track. The alternate education track was used only for children who identified as White or mixed race and were deemed civilized (Gifford & McEachern, 2021). Under the guise of educative

responsibility, AI/AN children were forced to separate from their homes and communities to attend boarding schools developed and staffed by European and Christian missionaries who were determined to Americanize Indigenous youth (Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Stanciu, 2021; Szasz, 1974; Winstead et al., 2018).

AI/AN learners were forced to sever ties to their roots, required to choose Western cultural practices, and forbidden to practice their Native culture (Szasz, 1974). For AI/AN peoples who were not the age of traditional compulsory learners, Americanization was forced upon them through the General Allotment Act of 1887. This legislative act granted citizenship to AI/AN individuals, contingent upon their agreement to practice the habits of the dominant culture (Stanciu, 2021). The 1819 Civilization Act and the General Allotment Act of 1887 are two examples of cultural devaluation (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) and the dominant culture's demands for an assimilative exchange of cultural capital.

Boarding School Mandates

The devaluation of AI/AN cultures and learners' expectation to exchange their cultural capital for Westernized educational practices began in the American classroom. The development of boarding schools and mandates that AI/AN children attend them began in 1879 with the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (Szasz, 1974) with the primary goal of Americanizing AI/AN youth (Gregg, 2018; Szasz, 1974). Nearly 400 boarding schools have been identified across 29 states (The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2020). Although some believe there were benefits to the American government's determination to civilize AI/AN people (Gregg, 2018), the damage incurred by the boarding school mandates is evident (Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Herron & Venner, 2022; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013).

In examining the link between substance use and AI/AN individuals' diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder, Herron and Venner (2022) found that cultural practices were beneficial in helping the population recover from these disorders. Their research included using a tool developed by Walters et al. (2002) that was created to incorporate aspects of AI/AN culture to promote the healing process. Walters et al. (2002) also found a connection between the AI/AN population, trauma, and culture. However, it should be noted that while they agree there is a connection, Walters et al. (2002) equated cultural traditions to oppression, as evidenced by their reference to historical trauma summarized as "stress."

Walters et al.'s (2002) study depreciated the assimilation and colonization practices against AI/AN individuals. Gregg (2018) believed two benefits could be associated with boarding school mandates. First, he suggested that boarding schools provided safety and inclusive benefits to AI/AN students who were typically victims of bullying and racism in public schools with low AI/AN student numbers. Secondly, he believed the boarding schools gave Indigenous students a reprieve from the erratic and rapid change occurring on the reservations. The difficulty with this worldview is the excessive evidence that states otherwise.

Gifford and McEachern (2021) described John Kilbuck's intent to destroy Yup'ik beliefs and traditional practices because he believed them to be atheistic and oppositional to the Gospel. To help him succeed in this agenda, Kilbuck joined forces with the 1819 Civilization Fund Act, which partnered with religious missionaries (like Kilbuck) to devalue and erase AI/AN culture. Eight years prior, Mercurieff and Roderick's (2013) research resulted in similar findings and associated the historical assimilation practices as a significant factor in the low numbers of AI/AN learners completing degree programs. Walters et al. (2002), Gregg (2018), and Herron and Venner (2022) referenced historical trauma as a stressor when discussing boarding school

mandates. However, Walter's et al. (2002) and Herron and Venner's (2022) research showed a link between mental illness, substance and alcohol use disorders, and the historical trauma that resulted from the boarding school mandates that AI/AN people were forced to endure. Gregg (2018) also reported adverse effects related to the boarding school mandates, though he was the only one in the literature to find positive outcomes. As part of this transcendental phenomenological study, the associations between the devaluation of AI/AN cultures and academic success were described in greater detail throughout this literature review.

Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma affects AI/AN communities, families, and students' academic success (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Godlewska et al., 2020; Hirshberg et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2021). Although Native Ways of Knowing still exist, scholars state that they are intimately related to the trauma passed down from generation to generation (Abidogun, 2013; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013). Mercurieff and Roderick (2013) described the trauma associated with practicing devaluation of the AI/AN culture. Boarding school attendees had to devalue their cultural roots, language, traditions, and belief systems to have any value to the boarding school staff. Abidogun (2013) referred to this self-devaluation process as being dismantled. The dominant culture creates an education system that non-dominant cultures must participate in, and in their expectation, the dominant culture breaks down all other learning systems.

Herron and Venner (2022) discovered a link between AI/AN individuals' experience with trauma and subsequent substance use. The researchers described one aspect of trauma exposure as discrimination (Herron & Venner, 2022), which can be directly linked to assimilation and colonization practices that AI/AN endured and continue to experience (Stanciu, 2021; Szasz,

1974). Therapy and emotional healing are two ways intergenerational trauma can be mitigated (Sue et al., 2019). However, to spur a paradigm shift that encourages cultural competence and increases the valuation of AI/AN cultures, Singh (2019) stated that re-education is necessary. Research shows that the culturally responsive school (CRS) model expands AI/AN cultures and promotes the healthy development of culturally minded learners (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021). In Canada, researchers realized that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) adolescents' poor mental health and suicidality were linked to colonization (Crooks et al., 2017). The solution was to increase cultural connections in the school systems. Crooks et al. (2017) reported that enculturation goes beyond adding generic cultural information into the curricula and instruction, a modern caution against the four approaches to integrating culture into academia, as described by Banks (1989).

Other schools are following suit. In the American Midwest, a high school that typically sees many graduates attend prestigious universities aimed to bring equity and equality to their disciplinary practices that had a disproportionately high African American student population (Bal et al., 2018). A postsecondary education program in Alaska implemented culturally responsive practices by incorporating AI/AN elders for student support (Gifford & McEachern, 2021). Non-traditional education programs are also striving toward a CRS model. The Community Health Aide/Practitioners (CHA/P) program, which certifies individuals to provide healthcare and healthcare education to Alaska's residents, recently created culturally relevant education modules (Cueva et al., 2018). The CHA/Ps complete the modules and then disseminate the information to their patients. While these are excellent examples of positive change in how education is conducted, there are problems with CRS.

First, CRS-based education programs are limited in number. Their failures are due, in part, to policies that oversee and dictate measures taken to improve the learning environment, such as admissions testing that imply a disparity between privileged and disadvantaged students (Coates & Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, 2019). Second, efforts to develop schools where students from non-dominant cultures can feel empowered in their ways of knowing have proved marginal at best (Banks, 1989; Buxton, 2017; Peck, 2021). Freire (1970/2017) said it best in his plea to the oppressed, in which he challenged them to repossess their rights. To end further dehumanization, educators in postsecondary institutions must value AI/AN students' embodied cultural capital. Educators must understand that embodied capital of all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, enhances the learning experiences of students and teachers. Brayboy and Huaman (2016) believed CRS efforts need to continue.

Social Barriers

Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy reminds educators that adult learners bring life experience and knowledge to the classroom (Knowles, 1978). This theory is reinforced by Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2017) which expands on the value of learners' cultural contribution to the learning experience. However, suicide, substance use, mental illness, and harsh environmental factors contribute to the low mortality rate and low SES, interfere with, and at times deter, AI/AN adult learners from completing higher education programs (Bourke et al., 2020; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Joyner-Matos & Islam-Zwart, 2021; Keefer, 2017; McKinley, 2020; Owusu-Agyeman, 2016).

Place Diversity

Although the definition of rural is subjective, research shows disparities across life domains exist at a higher rate for people who live in non-urban locations (Bennett et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, place diversity is a phenomenon often glossed over when examining the issues associated with geographical location (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018) or misunderstood based on varying definitions of rural (Bennett et al., 2019). Recently, a United States presidential election illuminated rural Americans' disempowerment and disenfranchisement (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020). Access to digital tools, such as laptops, smartphones, and the internet, is in short supply among people who live in rural and remote areas of the country (Curtis et al., 2021). The disparity in digital access leads to the inability to access telehealth services, the only type of medical service readily available during the COVID-19 pandemic (Manca & Delfino, 2020). Even with the modifications to healthcare regulations that increased access to care regardless of a patient's physical location, rural Americans still experienced significant barriers (Curtis et al., 2021).

One example of a remote community is the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region, located in southwestern Alaska. Depending on weather conditions, the area is sometimes inaccessible by plane or barge. Once there, inter-village travel is limited. The river acts as an ice road in the winter and a water passageway in the summer months. The only other passage mode outside the river is via air (Gifford & McEachern, 2021).

According to Owusu-Agyeman (2016), the determinants of completing higher education programs are not specific to a particular region or community. However, the low degree attainment rate affects AI/AN learners more than any other race or ethnicity (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Pilar, 2018). Additionally, this population faces a wide range of barriers that impact their attempts to attain a degree. Consider the global COVID-19 pandemic that recently highlighted the socioeconomic divide and its impact on education.

Italy was one of the first countries to respond to the global pandemic by closing its schools to mitigate the number of COVID-19 cases. When the novelty of expanding the use of technology in remote learning wore thin, educators realized that only a small number of high school students had access to technology devices (Manca & Delfino, 2020). However, one does not have to go as far as Italy to witness such issues. For example, communities in the rural contiguous United States had significantly reduced access to broadband (Zahnd et al., 2021). Outside the contiguous United States, people make up geographically isolated communities and are disconnected from resources commonly available in urban areas (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020). Remote communities with significant AI/AN populations have even less broadband access, increased poverty levels, and a more substantial gap in academic success (Zahnd et al., 2021).

Living in rural Alaska has multiple cultural benefits. There are opportunities for subsistence living practices, intergenerational living, and the historical pride that comes from maintaining village communities in which generations have lived. However, there are also challenges to place diversity, which negatively interferes with attaining a postsecondary degree. Intergenerational living is ordinary among AI/AN families, and younger generations have responsibilities that they may not otherwise have if they lived in the contiguous United States. For example, young people are called on to haul water, shovel snow, and gather wood for their parents, grandparents, and local elders (Lopez, 2018; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013).

Multi-generational living may primarily be an example of close family ties and the habitation practices of this collective population. However, Morton et al. (2019) found couch surfing among young adults between 18-25 years old to be a common solution to homelessness. Findling et al. (2022) learned that nearly half of their study's AI/AN participants experienced

housing issues, contributing to multi-generational living. Multi-generational living in single-family homes represents another challenge associated with place diversity experienced by AI/AN individuals, especially with health and wellness disparities (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018; Hathaway, 2021).

Health and Wellness

Although the determinants described above have negatively impacted generations of AI/AN learners, health issues also harm AI/AN degree attainment efforts (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018). Exorbitant rates of substance use, domestic violence, and suicide occur among AI/AN individuals in Alaska (Thompson et al., 2020). These disparities challenge the healthcare workers in rural areas and stretch them to their limits (Wexler et al., 2017). There is a lack of access to health care and increased mortality rates (Bennett et al., 2019). Increased allowance for telehealth services amid the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital access barriers to healthcare providers among AI/AN living in rural communities (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018; Hathaway, 2021).

Substance Use

AI/AN people are one of two subsets of the U.S. population that have been disproportionately affected by the opioid crisis (Komro et al., 2022). Less than 25% of the people who died from opioid overdoses reportedly lived in rural America. AI/AN peoples (combined with the Asian and Pacific Islander populations) made up only 1% of that number (Altekruse et al., 2020). However, Altekruse et al. (2020) identified other factors related to opioid use that represent the AI/AN population. For instance, individuals with no college education represented more than 1/3 of deaths due to opioid overdose. Pilar (2018) stated that less than a quarter of

AI/AN individuals attain a postsecondary degree, reinforcing Komro et al.'s (2022) findings regarding the disproportionate effect on this population.

Some believe the high rate of substance use among AI/AN peoples are associated with childhood trauma (Herron & Venner, 2022). This hunch correlates with the amount of trauma this population experienced (Aguilera et al., 2007; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Godlewska et al., 2020; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Szasz, 1974; Winstead et al., 2018). Gregg (2018) linked substance use among AI/AN individuals to the trauma associated with forced boarding school attendance. Efforts to decrease substance use among AI/AN people are often thwarted due to societal discrimination practices, leaving this population disproportionately representative of high rates of substance use (Findling et al., 2022). Incorporating culturally relevant techniques into healthcare has effectively reduced this number, implying that CRE may improve completion rates in the American education system (Walters et al., 2002).

Domestic Violence

In 2018, the Department of Health and Social Services reported higher than average rates of domestic violence experiences among AI/AN people (Thompson et al., 2020). Domestic violence contributes to the degree attainment gap, as evidenced by the need for family support to succeed in postsecondary education. In a recent study focusing on influential positive factors related to AI/AN learners' persistence in higher education, Lopez (2018) found that family support is one of the emerging themes related to AI/AN postsecondary persistence. Retention rates increased when AI/AN adult learners had strong family support and connections to their loved ones (Lopez, 2018). Such relationships are relevant to the Native Ways of Knowing associated with the AI/AN pre-compulsory learning model (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005).

Not all AI/AN adult learners lack family support due to family members' disagreeing with the learner's decision to participate in higher education. Domestic violence, particularly against Indigenous women, is another example of the ongoing devaluation of non-dominant culture (Ficklin et al., 2021/2022). When AI/AN women go missing, rarely are their stories tracked by the U.S. Department of Justice (Ficklin et al., 2021/2022); this is another example of assimilation and colonization. The justice department's tracking system varies; one way for missing females who identify with Western culture and another for those who identify as AI/AN. This description is similar to the dual education systems Gifford and McEachern (2021) reported were in operation following the 1819 Civilization Fund Act. Unfortunately, almost 90% of AI/AN women have been victims of violence. Violence is not specific to AI/AN women; one-third of their male counterparts are the victims of some form of violent behavior (Ficklin et al., 2021/2022).

Suicide

Another social issue contributing to the degree attainment gap among AI/AN learners is suicide. Death by suicide among AI/AN people is considered a health disparity, especially among those who live in rural and remote settings (Wexler et al., 2017). Healthy family and social relationships act as protective factors against suicidal ideation and completion (Burrage et al., 2016; Bush & Qeadan, 2020). However, the high rates of domestic violence are indications of unhealthy family relationships (Ficklin et al., 2021/2022). Additionally, the history of assimilation and colonization and the ongoing cultural conflict between Western and AI/AN cultures (Aguilera et al., 2007; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; Godlewska et al., 2020; Stanton, 2014; Winstead et al., 2018) adds to the likelihood that AI/AN peoples consider suicide a viable option to problem-solving. Compared to the domestic violence

rates against AI/AN women (Ficklin et al., 2021/ 2022), suicide is a more prominent problem among AI/AN males (Philip et al., 2016). This comparison is a reminder that the degree attainment gap is not gender-specific.

With nearly half of individuals who identify as AI/AN living in rural, remote, or tribal communities (Thompson et al., 2020), it is safe to say that social workers and other mental health therapists are necessary for these areas. However, most mental health workers in these communities are non-Native and struggle to maintain significant client caseloads (Wexler et al., 2017). Research shows that national policy changes are necessary to develop new and improved approaches to rural healthcare (Bennett et al., 2019) and that trauma-informed practices are essential when working with AI/AN people (Rides At The Door & Trautman, 2019). This cultural conflict adds to the intergenerational trauma. Many AI/AN people have been directly or indirectly traumatized by the dominant culture's mandatory boarding school assimilation practices (Thompson et al., 2020). This culture war is another reason closing the degree attainment gap is vital to the AI/AN community. Suicide occurs at exorbitant rates (Bush & Qeadan, 2020), and those affected might be more likely to seek help from an AI/AN social worker than a non-Native worker. The challenge of getting AI/AN adult learners to complete their degrees is multi-faceted (Thompson et al., 2020) and tends to be repetitive.

For example, an AI/AN learner may struggle in college because they feel like they or their attempt to attain an education is a financial burden on their family. In other cases, AI/AN learners may feel like they are letting down their family or community if they are not home to help with the chores that come with living rurally (Lopez, 2018; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013). Likewise, the AI/AN learner may feel disconnected from their Native culture and the Western culture on campus, resulting in the burdensome feeling being exacerbated by a sense of distance.

A recent study by Bush and Qeadan (2020) was conducted to increase understanding of the positive effects of social support (a protective factor against suicide) on AI/AN youth ages 10 to 24. Without protective factors in place, AI/AN learners become disengaged and can become suicidal. Suicidal ideation, attempts, and completion add to the ever-widening degree attainment gap (Burrage et al., 2016). This cycle needs modification to increase degree completion and decrease the strength of barriers against this population.

Student Status

AI/AN learners have an increased need for financial assistance and have less access to opportunities for advanced courses and college preparation material (Pilar, 2018). Like all cultures, some AI/AN learners are the first in their families to attend college. First-generation students often have a steep learning curve in college life, and they lack the necessary role model(s) to help them navigate a community unlike the one in which they were raised. Additionally, a student's socioeconomic status may have a negative impact on their postsecondary success (Altekruse et al., 2020). This section focused on the AI/AN learners as first-generation students and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. In some cases, the first-generation learner also comes from a low-income family. Bassett (2019) referred to this learner as low-income, first-generation (LIFG). The researcher also used this acronym as necessary when the learner types overlap in this discussion.

The First-Generation Learner

Being a first-generation college student may leave AI/AN learners feeling overwhelmed and isolated as they fumble through the many steps associated with being a college student. This is especially true for AI/AN learners who attend primarily White universities, as the value of their cultural capital may diminish in this non-Native environment (Xiong & Jacob, 2019).

Without a parent who can guide them through the preparatory steps to get into college, expecting AI/AN learners to successfully enter this new arena, much less experience it through completion, seems unrealistic. First-generation learners often demonstrate subpar academic performance and have higher dropout rates than learners whose parents have college degrees (Wu et al., 2021). In the late 1900s, first-generation college students were considered distinctly different from those whose parents preceded them in postsecondary education (Terenzini et al., 1996). One constant regarding first-generation students is that scholars continue to examine this population's level of persistence and where this group falls on the continuum of degree attainment (Quinn et al., 2019; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Lee et al. (2010) discovered that the number of AI/AN adult learners skyrocketed along with school funding in the 1960s and 1970s. However, research shows that those same learners often took more than the typical four years to complete their degree programs, and many dropped out before graduating (Lee et al., 2010). Less than nine years later, the graduation rates are still low for LIFG students (Bassett, 2019). In 1996, over 40% of adult learners who completed a bachelor's degree were AI/AN. Unfortunately, that number dropped to 37% in 2016 (Espinosa et al., 2019). Enrollment and completion rates among AI/AN learners continue to decline. In 2017, less than a quarter of AI/AN youth had a parent with a bachelor's degree or higher, less than half of their White counterparts (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021).

Typically, the issues that first-generation learners face in college result in non-matriculation of future AI/AN learners (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021), as evidenced by the declining percentages of this population enrolling and graduating from four-year degree programs (Espinosa et al., 2019). Mercurieff and Roderick (2013) described the importance of integrating the Native Ways of Knowing into mainstream college classrooms.

Like Gifford and McEachern (2021), others are attempting to do this in programs housed within non-tribal colleges. Bassett (2019) found the issue within two main areas – the individual and the institution.

Bassett (2019) described the individual problem as having three tenets – the first being poor planning by the student, which may also include misaligned plans or the student following the procedure outlined by their parent. Unpreparedness for college is the second component that Bassett (2019) claimed lies within the individual student who fails to complete a degree program. Finally, the third issue Bassett (2019) identified was imposter syndrome or lack of confidence in self as a student. While each of these issues appears to be a plausible reason why a first-generation learner might struggle or fail out of college, Bassett (2019) may have viewed this aspect of the LIFG problem from a deficit perspective (Peck, 2021) or devaluation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). After all, it is not the learner's fault if their primary and secondary schools did not adequately prepare them for postsecondary education.

Furthermore, if an LIFG learner attends a sub-par school before being admitted to college, it is only logical that they would feel like they did not belong among more prepared students. Research shows that minority students typically need remedial education to keep up with their dominant culture peers (Xiong & Jacob, 2019). It may be more appropriate to examine the issues within the institution, whose faculty and staff may admit first-generation learners under the assumption that they can succeed. Changing this view of the learner as the problem requires educators and the institutions they work to see value in what the learner brings to college upon admittance.

Bassett (2019) also found three areas of improvement for institutions that admit first-generation learners. She identified the issues as high and increasing costs, administration and

policymaking, and lack of knowledge about the needs of the LIFG student. Secondary and postsecondary schools must work together to ease LIFG learners' transition to postsecondary schools. Studies show high school graduates believe their secondary school curricula did not prepare them for college-level work (Abraham et al., 2014). Postsecondary institutions must eliminate their expectations that LIFG learners navigate registration, advising, campus culture, and school grounds by themselves (Bassett, 2019). Instead, they must realize the opportunity to close the degree attainment gap (Pilar, 2018) when they are on high school campuses recruiting students (Abraham et al., 2014).

Socioeconomic Status

AI/AN people face complexities with place diversity and student status, not only a lack of healthcare resources (Bennett et al., 2019; Findling et al., 2022; Wexler et al., 2017), domestic violence (Ficklin et al., 2021/2022), and suicide (Burrage et al., 2016; Bush & Qeadan, 2020; Philip et al., 2016). Low socioeconomic status and poverty levels are challenges that AI/AN adult learners must overcome to succeed academically (Bassett, 2019). Urban classrooms are typically diverse and tend to face economic challenges. Researchers are currently examining ways to address this economic challenge to meet the specific learning needs of each student in these environments (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). For example, an urban Minneapolis school district sought to address the achievement gap and disproportionate numbers of minority students, including AI/AN learners, receiving disciplinary actions and who failed to meet academic standards (Richards-Schuster et al., 2021). However, this investigation has not historically been the case for impoverished minorities in rural areas (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). Another factor to consider for students from low-SES families is that teachers often come from

different backgrounds and are unfamiliar with how to meet the needs of low-income learners (Ahmed, 2019; Thompson et al., 2015).

Like most statistics, the data is limited regarding AI/AN people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The research demonstrates that the AI/AN population has a high poverty rate (Morton et al., 2019). A subset of this group is young adults between 18 and 24, whom Morton et al. (2019) learned were couch surfing due to being homeless. These same youths are in the typical age range of traditional college students. According to Curtis et al. (2021), AI/AN learners who are not homeless do not fare much better. Most of their AI/AN research participants had no access to basic devices, such as laptops, smartphone data plans, and other digital accessories typically required for college courses.

When AI/AN learners have a home to live in (Morton et al., 2019) and the digital devices (Curtis et al., 2021) needed to participate in school, some feel their desire to attain a college degree adds to their family's burdens (Burrage et al., 2016). To offset the cost of college, AI/AN learners may work to help fill the gaps between what their parents can contribute and their financial aid package (Field, 2017). The challenge with this solution is that the learners may miss out on college opportunities, such as internships or extracurricular activities, because they are working. Financial constraints that originate from low SES exacerbate the AI/AN learners' feelings of isolation and disconnection from both cultures – the one they were born into and the one they are trying to assimilate (Field, 2017).

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence has evolved since 1989 (Cross et al., 1989; Georgetown University, 2019). The National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC) states, "There isn't a single, agreed-upon definition for cultural competence" (Georgetown University, 2019, para. 1). More

recently, cultural competence has become a popular term as the United States continues navigating conversations about the rights and freedoms of various subsets of the American population (Singh, 2019; Sue et al., 2019). This study generally defined cultural competence using Cross et al.'s (1989) core principles and original definition. Cultural competence is "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (Cross et al., 1989, p. iv). AI/AN learners often face circumstances that lead to underrepresentation and misrepresentation (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Shaw et al., 2021). In education, curricula and instruction have historically been unaligned and incongruent with the cultures of minority students (McDuff et al., 2018; Szasz, 1974; Taba, 1964). Such circumstances leave students from non-dominant cultures segregated and separated from their peers (Banks, 1989; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Shaw et al., 2021).

The devaluation of cultural capital in exchange for donning the dominant culture is displayed in various ways throughout education, such as deficit perspective practices (Buxton, 2017; Keefer, 2017; McDuff et al., 2018; Peck, 2021), underrepresentation (Admiraal et al., 2019; Barnes-Najor, 2021; Hirshberg et al., 2019; Volman & Gilde, 2021), and misrepresentation (Banks, 1989; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994), and ultimately the degree attainment gap (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; McDuff et al., 2018; Pilar, 2018). However, these issues cannot be accurately examined without first understanding the cultural incompetence that contributed to them, the multiple atrocities against the AI/AN population, and the degree attainment gap – a continuation of assimilation and colonization in the classroom.

Underrepresentation

Hirshberg et al. (2019) stated that fewer than five percent of teachers in Alaska are AI/AN, making up less than a third of the state's residents who identify as AI/AN (Y-K Region CEDS Committee, 2018). Keefer (2017) reported that almost 90% of U.S. teachers are White and most come from middle-class backgrounds. The number of teachers who fit a similar description and graduate from one of Alaska's universities is slightly higher, which means most teachers are from the "lower 48." Little minority representation in the teacher role may lead to monocultural classrooms (Joyner-Matos & Islam-Zwart, 2021), making it difficult for AI/AN learners to see the purpose of attaining a degree. Furthermore, turnover rates for teachers from the contiguous United States reach over 50% in some areas of Alaska (Hirshberg et al., 2019). Adams and Farnsworth (2020) reported that the low number of teachers in rural areas could be attributed to multiple social issues and the isolation of living in remote areas.

Underrepresentation and high turnover rates negatively affect the student-teacher relationship, which is essential for a student's success (Leahy & Smith, 2021; Smith, 2020). One of Aguilera et al.'s (2007) recommendations for increased academic success for AI/AN learners was to improve relationships between students and their teachers.

Bourke et al. (2020) examined the reciprocal engagement between learners with low socioeconomic status and instructors in postsecondary education in Canada to better understand the student-teacher relationship's benefits with this subset of the student population. Their findings reinforced Augustine's worldview of the student-teacher relationship that the teacher was responsible for making a personal connection with his students and re-engaging them if their interest in the learning material waned (Smith, 2020). Bourke et al.'s (2020) findings also reinforced Freire's (1970/2017) plea to marginalized people groups to initiate taking back their

freedom. In Bourke et al.'s (2020) study and Barnes-Najor et al.'s (2021) research, the need for teachers to learn about their students, understand the barriers they face, and modify their curricula and instruction to address these challenges is critical. Through the teachers' willingness to learn, they could engage with their students and empower them to identify and work through the barriers they face (Bourke et al., 2020).

According to Smith (2020), the United States has struggled to develop and implement educational practices that effectively meet the cultural needs of Native American students (Aguilera et al., 2007; Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019). Lopez (2018) reviewed existing literature examining factors relating to AI/AN postsecondary persistence. He studied Tinto's model of college dropout, Bean's model of student attrition, theories related to minority students' persistence in college, and theories specific to AI/AN college persistence. Several of these theories have been used as foundational models to create and justify postsecondary programmatic planning to retain minority students and decrease attrition rates (Lopez, 2018). However, according to Lopez's (2018) and Pilar's (2018) reports on the existing degree attainment gap, it is evident that these theories and their subsequent use to increase the number of AI/AN learners who complete postsecondary degree programs are deficient.

Federal and state legislation have repeatedly undermined the value of Native people groups and their educative needs (Aguilera et al., 2007; Hirshberg et al., 2019). The damage incurred is the impetus behind the intergenerational trauma experienced by current AI/AN generations. The history of marginalized Indigenous people groups shows that culture must be part of the education system, enveloped in the theory of andragogy (Knowles, 1977), and built into the assessment process (Aguilera et al., 2007; Hirshberg et al., 2019). Furthermore, the value of AI/AN cultures must be increased to ensure equality and equity in the classroom. How

postsecondary education systems incorporate culture into curricula and instruction may not be the deciding factor in AI/AN learner success, but it can be influential (Lopez, 2018).

Misrepresentation

Barfels and Delucchi (2000) predicted the increase of minority students in higher education. Knowing that diversity was on the horizon, researchers, scholars, and educators would have done well to modify the system sooner and incorporate resources to be prepared for the issues that AI/AN students face (Burrage et al., 2016). However, educator practices continue to represent a devaluation of AI/AN culture and a disconnection between Native Ways of Knowing and Western teaching styles (Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019). The disconnection is what Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) identified as a difference in word choice and definition. Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) described Indigenous people as wanting an education, knowledge, and skills that transfer to living life, whereas settlers (dominant culture) want schooling through institutionalism and the civilization of learners.

Belgarde et al. (2002) described CRE as learning material that validates students' cultures and presents them with opportunities to become co-instructors in the classroom. As stated previously in this study, CRE is a healthy mirror of Native Ways of Knowing. The responsibility of CRE and instruction is on educators and the education system. While AI/AN learners could bring their cultural worldviews into the classroom, Freire (1970/2017) explained that doing so would be the non-dominant students' demand for their freedom. CRE (Belgarde et al., 2002) is an essential component of developing culturally responsive schooling and pedagogy that McCarty and Brayboy (2021) described as a means to revitalize and sustain AI/AN culture.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of indigenous representation among educators (Hirshberg et al., 2019) and the student body (Nedegaard et al., 2018). Non-Native educators' lack of

knowledge about AI/AN cultures has caused a stalemate in CRE production (Walters et al., 2019) that contributes to the turnover rate of Alaskan teachers (Hirshberg et al., 2019). When AI/AN culture is portrayed in textbooks and curricula, the information lacks historical accuracy. Banks (1989) described four approaches to cultural integration in the classroom that fall short for various reasons.

The contributions approach typically consists of ethnic heroes or holidays being included in the classroom on a limited basis. The ethnic additive approach offers more inclusive learning material but is written and explained through the dominant culture lens. In contrast, the transformative approach properly integrates dominant and non-dominant cultures represented in the curricula. Finally, the decision-making and social action approach draw on the transformative approach. It incorporates opportunity and expectation for learners to determine how they might respond to social issues while supporting their decisions with possible actions. The latter two methods have merit and are examples of CRE. The problem with them is that to include these concepts in current mainstream curricula, a paradigm shift regarding the value of cultural capital in the classroom must first occur.

As described above, a progressive blending of the four approaches is recommended by Banks (1989) as a way of moving from a low-context cultural curriculum and instruction to an inclusionary approach. Such a progression would aid in balancing what Paulo Freire (1970/2017) described as the imbalance of power in education:

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into "containers," into "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher

she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. (p. 44-45)

This combination of underrepresentation and misrepresentation results in a division between minority learners and majority educators influencing engagement (Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994; Stanton, 2014).

The United States' attempt to fully incorporate AI/AN culture into curricula and instruction models has been unsuccessful, as evidenced by the postsecondary results and intergenerational trauma (Godlewska et al., 2020; Hirshberg et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2021) of the boarding school mandates (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Szasz, 1974). Brayboy and Castagno (2009) identified the culturally responsive school (CRS) as a model that could be used to educate Indigenous youth (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; McCarty & Brayboy, 2021). However, the commonly used model is the ongoing expectation that learners who identify with a high-context culture must learn to fit into and learn from institutions that utilize low-context cultural norms (Barnes-Najor et al., 2021). As previously described, this exchange of cultural capital is assimilative and brings power imbalance into the modern classroom (Freire, 1970/2017). Rahman (2013) also noted the presence of the dominant culture superseding that of AI/AN students. The lack of CRS and autonomous AI/AN learners demonstrates the education system's failure.

Alaska's education system has a degree attainment gap filled with difficulties, injustices, and expectations from segregation and instability (Barnes-Najor et al., 2021; Hirshberg et al., 2019). Additionally, most of Alaska's secondary students do not meet proficiency levels for reading, writing, or math (Youth.gov, n.d.). Some academic institutions have made efforts toward CRS (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021). However, colonization and assimilation continue to

have a stronghold on AI/AN student success (Freeman et al., 2019; Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013). Intergenerational trauma (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Godlewska et al., 2020; Hirshberg et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2021), lack of representation, misrepresentation (Admiraal et al., 2019; Hirshberg et al., 2019; Volman & Gilde, 2021), and deficit perspective practices (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Buxton, 2017; Keefer, 2017; Peck, 2021) are just a few examples of the stagnate educative practices still in place in postsecondary education.

Hilda Taba based her pre-service teacher education on a culturally responsive curriculum (Taba, 1964; Taba & Elkins, 1966); she strove to educate teachers on the importance of incorporating marginalized students into the mainstream classroom population. Similarly, Bourke et al. (2020) found significance in creating and delivering course material that included a social justice perspective that met students' unique needs. However, such curricula may be challenging to employ if most teachers are unfamiliar with AI/AN learners' unique needs. Some states have found this mismatch of cultures in the classroom to be resolved with the idea that rural communities develop their staff of rural teachers. Unfortunately, the barriers associated with rural residents' attempts to attain a postsecondary degree have impacted these goals (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020). According to Freire (1970/2017), the answer lies not in integrating the oppressed into the mainstream system but in redesigning the system to allow for autonomy, much as Banks (1989) suggested in his description of the transformative approach to multicultural reform.

Deficit Perspectives

Deficit perspective practices and achievement gaps align with the historical culture of inequality in the classroom (Peck, 2021) and the social injustice of inequity still present in

American schools (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020). Deficit perspectives include determining a student's academic shortcomings and pinning the fault on a category or categories of which the student is a part (Keefer, 2017). For example, rural living incites many problems related to health and wellness due to a lack of access to healthcare (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018; Hirshberg et al., 2019). Some educators consider impoverished families and community deficits as they engage with students (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020). Students living in disadvantaged communities experience similar issues (Reese et al., 2018), mainly in rural communities with primarily AI/AN populations (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020). When faced with teachers who practice deficit perspectives, students are not expected to succeed, are offered fewer academic opportunities, and face continued oppression (Peck, 2021). Students' cultural capital is often devalued by teachers unfamiliar with and unwilling to learn more about the cultures represented (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020).

Deficit perspective practices (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Buxton, 2017; Keefer, 2017; McDuff et al., 2018; Peck, 2021; Savage et al., 2011), misrepresentation in curricula (Banks, 1989; Hooks, 1994; Taba, 1964), and minimal representation in school faculty are not new issues for marginalized groups (Keefer, 2017; Nedegaard et al., 2018). Despite decades of ethnic movements across the United States, curricula have experienced little evolution to fully integrate culturally relevant high-context and low-context learning experiences (Banks, 1989; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994).

High-Context Learners in Low-Context Institutions

Trumbull and Nelson-Barber (2019) confirmed a cultural disconnect between AI/AN learners, their language, and the testing practices in Western school systems. Advocates of AI/AN learners and traditional teaching claim there is more to education than textbooks. The

disconnection between AI/AN culture and the Western classroom is present because AI/AN peoples' traditional education includes values (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018). Nevertheless, the disconnect goes beyond language barriers and tests. Instead of learning by the school year calendar with a new teacher every nine months, AI/AN children were traditionally taught through relationships (Landis & Fries-Gaither, 2009). Learning occurred daily without passing periods, school bells, and being sent home at the end of the school day. Children lived with their parents and grandparents, who doubled as their teachers (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Landis & Fries-Gaither, 2009).

Issues with racism and stigma are common in higher education (Chen et al., 2020). More granularly, systemic oppression practices are demonstrated in education systems through additional avenues, including the student-teacher relationship and curricula. Educators ignorant of the differences between high-context and low-context learners (Hall, 1976; Nafeth, 2021) tend to demonstrate cultural incompetence. This lack of knowledge among teachers (Cherng & Davis, 2019; Duff, 2019; Leahy & Smith, 2021) further impacts how teachers interact with AI/AN students. Student-teacher relationships, an educative tool that Augustine found essential for students' success (Smith, 2020), become severed when non-Native teachers are unwilling or unable to connect with their students from AI/AN cultures (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020).

Curricula have long since failed to represent Indigenous (and other minority) people groups accurately or equally (Banks, 1989; Cherng & Davis, 2019). When non-dominant cultures are incorporated into the learning material, it is typically through the lens of the dominant culture (Admiraal et al., 2019; Banks, 1989; Johnson et al., 2017; Volman & Gilde, 2021). This power imbalance is seen in Hirshberg et al.'s (2019) article, part of the literature

cited throughout this research. In the case of Hirshberg et al.'s (2019) research, the situations faced by AI/AN students were described through the lens of non-AI/AN authors.

People who identify with high-context cultures take different approaches to various aspects of life than those with low-context cultures. This differentiation is evident in teaching practices (Merculieff & Roderick, 2013; Szasz, 1974) and communication (Hall, 1976).

Typically, high-context individuals talk around a specific issue or subject to allow the listener to intuit what they are saying. Meanwhile, low-context individuals depend on direct instruction (Hall, 1976).

What could potentially happen is that a high-context individual, such as an AI/AN adult learner, attends a low-context institution bachelor's degree program with a culturally incompetent professor. The AI/AN learner may hedge the topic of discussion. Without knowledge of the AI/AN high-context culture, the professor may engage in deficit perspective practices (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Buxton, 2017; Peck, 2021; Savage et al., 2011). The professor might suggest that the AI/AN learner drop the honors-level course and enroll in a less challenging course if the learner does poorly on a quiz or exam instead of challenging them to persevere or teaching them how to study. This type of student-teacher interaction perpetuates the cycle of systemic oppression (Davis & Museus, 2019; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994), thus contributing to the degree attainment gap (Pilar, 2018).

Native Ways of Knowing - Now

Barnhardt and Kawagley's (2005) Native Ways of Knowing teachings continue to be passed down generationally. Unfortunately, the cultural conflict between high-context learners and low-context institutions does not allow Native Ways of Knowing to seamlessly partner with the dominant culture in higher education institutions in Alaska. In 2013, a partnership was

formed between two universities in Alaska, and more than a dozen faculty members strategized ways to integrate AI/AN cultures into postsecondary classrooms (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013). This strategic planning session began with the committee members reviewing a list of teaching and learning methods ascribed to the Native Ways of Knowing philosophy, like that of Barnhardt and Kawagley's (2005) description outlined in Figure 1.

Limiting indigenous teaching practices to the periphery of the education system, or worse yet or failing to incorporate culturally responsive curricula and instruction completely can result in diminished respect for cultural diversity. Moreover, it can increase the likelihood of disconnection between AI/AN learners, their peers, and teachers (Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019). Sohn (2021) conducted a phenomenological study in which he researched the development of student-to-student relationships in postsecondary education. Through the professor's modeling, learners reported an increase in feeling safe in the classroom environment and an appreciation for diversity and the diverse perspectives of their peers. The representation of culturally responsive education, as described in Sohn's (2021) study, is an example that mirrors aspects of the qualities described in Barnhardt and Kawagley's (2005) description of indigenous teachings (see Figure 1).

Degree Attainment Gap

The government established the degree attainment goal for the United States following the Great Recession in 2009 in a decision that set at least 60% of Americans between the ages of 25 and 34 to obtain either an associate's or bachelor's degree by 2020 (Nettles, 2017). The degree attainment goal was divided by race, ethnicity, and sex categories, and it has benefited Asian Americans and White females. However, a degree attainment gap became visible despite the degree attainment goal for other groups (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Nettles, 2017; Pilar, 2018).

Projections for attaining an associate's or bachelor's degree vary by race and sex. Furthermore, the goal of attainment is fluid for some. According to Nettles' (2017) research, Asian Americans and White females will reach the goal of attaining a postsecondary degree before 2020. However, the general White population is not expected to earn a college degree until 2027, seven years past the goal mark. More discouraging is the projection of people groups who are not likely to achieve a degree by 2060. This list included disproportionately the African American population (specifically males), AI/AN males and females, and the Hispanic population (Nettles, 2017). As dismal as these projections were, they aligned with the existing degree attainment gap described by Pilar (2018).

Though Pilar (2018) did not speak directly to the national degree attainment goal, he reported similar trends for the AI/AN population. The degree attainment gap, most comprehensive at the bachelor's degree level, is a factor that results in AI/AN individuals lagging behind other ethnic groups in SES (Alfaiz et al., 2020; Zahnd et al., 2021). Ironically, SES is one of the barriers to degree attainment (Bourke et al., 2020; Field, 2017). Pilar (2018) described that the degree attainment gap is not only affecting the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) degree programs. However, using STEM as an example is pertinent because of its unique description outlined in Alaska's Board of Regents' current plan for improving the state's economy (Board of Regents, 2022).

Alfaiz et al. (2020) described the benefits of attaining a STEM degree, including learners' opportunities to practice critical thinking, creative problem-solving, and professional development. These examples of quality education allow students to develop transferable skills that can be used in the workplace (Board of Regents, 2022; Zahnd et al., 2021). Alfaiz et al. (2020) reported a lack of funds allowing AI/AN students to participate in extracurricular

activities and programs as a barrier to STEM program participation and completion and their ultimate benefits of higher-paying careers. This barrier directly relates to what research shows regarding AI/AN learners who are LIFG (Bassett, 2019). In Bourke et al.'s (2020) research, low-income adults' curriculum and instruction needs were highlighted as an issue in learning experiences, reinforcing the importance of CRE.

In addition to financial barriers, Zahnd et al. (2021) cited a lack of access to broadband as a determinant of postsecondary education degrees. Meanwhile, Joyner-Matos and Islam-Zwart (2021) cited monoculture classroom experiences as a reason for AI/AN underrepresentation in STEM fields and careers that lead to higher SES (Norris et al., 2020). This is another link to the idea that devalued cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) affects AI/AN learners' degree attainment. According to Alfaiz et al.'s (2020) research and the goals identified by Alaska's university system's Board of Regents (Board of Regents, 2022), STEM students must possess the ability to think critically, solve problems, and grow professionally. Yet, research also showed that AI/AN learners are typically subjected to deficit thinking practices (Buxton, 2017; Davis & Museus, 2019; Keefer, 2017; McDuff et al., 2018; Peck, 2021; Savage et al., 2011), ongoing systemic oppression (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994), and social barriers (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018; Botha & Coetzee, 2016; Kieran & Anderson, 2019) that prohibit them from demonstrating the skills they have. Furthermore, even if the social barriers were resolved and AI/AN learners had access to the funds necessary to participate in STEM programs, the intergenerational trauma is repeated in low-context learner environments. Consequently, Native Ways of Knowing are considered historical practices and not incorporated into mainstream higher education programs.

Summary

AI/AN learners have experienced forced assimilation and colonization (Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Godlewska et al., 2020; Stanciu, 2021; Szasz, 1974; Winstead et al., 2018) since compulsory school laws were implemented (Hirshberg et al., 2019) under the guise of the federal government taking responsibility for AI/AN education. The outcomes include intergenerational trauma (Herron & Venner, 2022; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013) and social problems for this population (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018; Botha & Coetzee, 2016; Kieran & Anderson, 2019). While intergenerational trauma and social problems stem from historical events, current issues, such as systemic oppression (Davis & Museus, 2019; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994), deficit perspective practices (Buxton, 2017; Peck, 2021; Savage et al., 2011), misrepresentation (Banks, 1989; Cherng & Davis, 2019; Hooks, 1994), and underrepresentation (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Shaw et al., 2021) of AI/AN peoples in the classrooms of the American school systems influence AI/AN learners' academic success. These issues contribute to the attainment gap in which AI/AN adult learners have the lowest completion rates for postsecondary education degrees (Pilar, 2018).

Studies have been conducted regarding integrating AI/AN cultures into Westernized curricula (Cherng & Davis, 2019). The United States has attempted to incorporate culturally relevant learning materials to bridge this divide between Indigenous and Western people groups (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Banks, 1989; Smith, 2020; Taba, 1964). However, these attempts have not materialized in postsecondary success (Banks, 1989; Hall, 1976; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Nafeth, 2021; Smith, 2020; Szasz, 1974). In other cases, the attempts have not withstood the test of time (Taba, 1964). The continued failure to see the value of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) and the power imbalance between low-context and high-

context cultures remains (Freire, 1970/2017; Hall, 1976). Unfortunately, the degree attainment gap continues to widen with little hope of AI/AN learners completing the degree attainment goal for their ethnic group (Nettles, 2017). Furthermore, research into this gap has been limited due to AI/AN people groups being omitted from studies because of their small sample size (Pilar, 2018). The theoretical value of this transcendental phenomenology added to the existing literature on AI/AN adult learners and the degree attainment gap. Additionally, this study demonstrated the practical value of integrating Native Ways of Knowing into postsecondary institutions toward increasing the number of AI/AN learners achieving a higher education degree.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) adult learners while attending a postsecondary school in Alaska to attain a degree. Chapter Three includes a detailed description of transcendental phenomenology and explains why this research method is appropriate for this study. The research questions that guided this study were also described. Furthermore, information related to the site and participant selection was also described, including the researcher's positionality. The philosophical assumptions and researcher role provide details regarding potential bias and prejudice and why the researcher chose this topic. The procedures section detailed the recruitment plan, data collection plan with three methods, and subsequent analysis plans. This section also provided the approach for demonstrating trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in conjunction with ethical considerations.

Research Design

The researcher utilized a qualitative design to examine the lived experiences of AI/AN adult learners in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions to earn higher education degrees. A qualitative research approach was the most appropriate for this study as it meets the characteristics outlined in Creswell and Poth's (2018) definition of this design type. Qualitative research situates studies within a theoretical framework and seeks to understand human problems and social situations. Denny and Weckesser (2018) described qualitative research as a design type without an agreed-upon definition that doubles as a process. Similar to Creswell and Poth's (2018) description of qualitative research, the goal is to gather the perspectives of human

subjects. Denny and Weckesser (2018) saw qualitative research as the "why" behind the cognitive processing and behaviors of those studied.

This study focused on capturing the essence of the participants' college experiences from their unique perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994/2011). Additionally, this research study met Creswell and Poth's (2018) description of a qualitative approach that includes the researcher as an observer in the world, what Moustakas (1994/2011) calls being a human instrument and exploring a phenomenon that incorporates the participants' voices in the final written report. This qualitative study used a transcendental phenomenology design (Moustakas, 1994/2011). This study met the criteria for transcendental phenomenology because the scope of this study was to ensure participants had an opportunity to describe their lived experiences with culture while pursuing a postsecondary degree (Moustakas, 1994/2011).

Using interviews, artifacts, and a focus group as data collection, the researcher delivered "two descriptive levels of the empirical phenomenological approach" (Giorgi, 1985, as cited in Moustakas, 1994/2011). The two levels consisted of original data described by the identified participants and the structures of each experience developed through data analysis methods and interpretation of the participants' accounts (Moustakas, 1994/2011). Moustakas (1994/2011) warned researchers that when using the transcendental phenomenological design, they must set aside their biases and assumptions about the participants and their experiences using the *epoché* process. The researcher used reflexive journaling to ensure she did not transfer her beliefs and biases onto the participants or into the written reports of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994/2011). Reflexive journaling gave the researcher a personal space to reflect on triggers, biases, and feelings related to the research study. Additionally, the researcher practiced member checking and allowed participants to review the transcribed reports of their experiences. Member

checking ensured the accuracy of the transcription and credibility of the data (Moustakas, 1994/2011).

Transcendental phenomenology is rooted in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, who believed in the participant's subjective experience (Moustakas, 1994/2011). Moustakas reported that Husserl recommended leaving the experience with the phenomenon's root as told by the participants. This phenomenological design also has roots in Kant's and Hegel's philosophies. It was more formally structured by Hegel's ideas which "looked to [the participants'] perceptions and intimate experience with the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994/2011, p. 26).

Research Questions

I used the following central research question and sub-questions to guide this study.

Central Research Question

What are AI/AN learners' experiences with culture in postsecondary institutions?

Sub-Question One

How do AI/AN learners remain connected to their cultures while pursuing a postsecondary degree?

Sub-Question Two

How do AI/AN learners see their obtainment of a postsecondary degree impacting their future SES?

Sub-Question Three

How does embodied cultural capital help AI/AN adult learners overcome the challenges they face when pursuing a postsecondary degree?

Setting and Participants

The setting for this transcendental phenomenological study was Alaska's public higher

education institutions that offer associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate programs. Based on the term "AI/AN adult learner," participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and identify as American Indian or Alaska Native. The sample population included AI/AN adult learners who were in the process of obtaining a postsecondary degree from one of Alaska's public higher education institutions or had obtained a postsecondary degree on or after January 1, 2018. Additional parameters surrounding participants will be described later in this chapter.

Setting

Alaska has multiple higher education options, including a multi-campus public university system, one private university, a tribal college, and several faith-based, for-profit, and technical colleges (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013). The specific setting for this research study was the statewide public university system with multiple campuses. Attrition in postsecondary education is high, and completion rates are low for AI/AN learners (Pilar, 2018). The completion rates have plummeted at the public university in the last 10 years (Yatchmeneff et al., 2021). The private university, tribal colleges, faith-based, for-profit, and technical colleges were excluded from this study due to organizational differences that set them apart from the state university system. By narrowing the setting to only the public university system, the participant pool allowed for an appropriate sample size of participants with similar experiences.

The University of Alaska (UA) higher education system was established in 1917 and serves over 20,000 students. Within the system are three universities offering online and in-person courses for approximately 500 unique programs, including certificate and endorsement programs and associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate programs. Each university is responsible for maintaining its accreditation status. The three primary universities span the entire state of Alaska, meeting the geographical needs of students in 13 communities.

Although Alaska is the largest state in the U.S., covering over 665,000 total square miles, the state's population is relatively small. The United States Census Bureau (n.d.) projected Alaska's total population to be 733,391 in 2022. The AI/AN population within the state is 111,575. Of the AI/AN population, only 15% of the UA student population identify as AI/AN. The researcher used pseudonyms for each UA public university using elements found in nature (Fireweed University, Mountain River College, and Snow Canyon University) to ensure participant confidentiality.

Participants

Participants in this study included 11 AI/AN adult learners. Five participants were actively enrolled in a public postsecondary university and had been students for a minimum of two semesters to attain a higher education degree. Six participants were alumni of the same public postsecondary university system and had completed their respective degrees on or after January 1, 2018. This number of participants was appropriate for a phenomenological study in which all subjects have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pseudonyms were used for participants to ensure confidentiality, and each participant's pseudonym was matched with the corresponding postsecondary school that the student attended.

Researcher Positionality

I had a strong interest in the outcome of this research, and my motivation for conducting this study was social constructivism. Creswell and Poth (2018) described social constructivism as a concept in which someone seeks to understand "the world in which they live and work" (p. 24). This search for understanding was examined through multiple, complex perspectives to identify emerging themes surrounding the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994/2011). Chesterton (1909) wrote:

That peril is that the human intellect is free to destroy itself. Just as one generation could prevent the very existence of the next generation by all entering a monastery or jumping into the sea, so one set of thinkers can in some degree prevent further thinking by teaching the next generation that there is no validity in any human thought. (p. 58)

Chesterton's words align with Creswell and Poth's (2018) discussion about using transformative works to address issues faced by marginalized people groups. However, I believe social constructivism also represents the necessity of this research project to ensure "one set of thinkers" is prevented from "teaching the next generation that there is no validity in any human thought" (Chesterton, 1909, p. 58). The first step in ensuring AI/AN adult learners' experiences in higher education programs were understood (Moustakas, 1994/2011) was to listen to their lived experiences.

Interpretive Framework

With transformative frameworks as a motivation to give participants a platform to share their experiences, this research aimed to create a discussion so that change could occur (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As an adult education program instructor serving AI/AN adult learners, I am passionate about giving students a voice in my classroom. As a researcher, I wanted to understand what AI/AN learners were experiencing in Alaska's public higher education system. Knowledge is power, and there are no better teachers on this subject than AI/AN learners who have experienced the process of working towards a postsecondary degree.

Less than one percent of Alaska Natives work in higher education (Walters et al., 2019). Keith et al. (2016) and Adams and Farnsworth (2020) found a significantly low college completion rate among AI/AN students, and Pilar (2018) reported less than 25% of AI/AN students completed a higher education degree. Coined the degree attainment gap, this

differentiation between AI/AN college graduates and non-AI/AN college graduates has not improved by more than two percent since 2000. It was significant at the bachelor's degree level (Pilar, 2018). The AI/AN students who attain a college degree must overcome multiple barriers (Bourke et al., 2020; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Joyner-Matos & Islam-Zwart, 2021; McKinley, 2020; Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019; Xiong & Jacob, 2019). Furthermore, Trumbull and Nelson-Barber (2019) found that the United States' continuous attempts to create multicultural environments within the nation's school system had been unsuccessful (Hall, 1976; Merculieff & Roderick, 2013; Nafeth, 2021; Smith, 2020; Szasz, 1974).

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are the "certain beliefs" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 15) that a researcher brings to their study. As outlined in the Researcher Role section of this chapter, my perspective was that of a human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), gathering the details of each participant's lived experience to identify commonalities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I sought to understand multiple participant views [ontological assumption] (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I employed epoché and "refrain[ed] from judgment" to ensure I had set aside biases and presumptions about the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994/2011, p. 30). Additionally, I attempted to distinguish and describe attributes related to AI/AN learners' experiences with culture within the UA system. Lastly, I practiced reflexive journaling as a way of debriefing following participant interactions and member checking to ensure the accuracy of the research report.

Although I examined each participant's report for commonalities among the group, I also listened to each experience in its entirety as a singular episode. Moreover, I followed Moustakas' (1994/2011) second process of transcendental-phenomenological reduction by repeatedly

returning to the source of the experience. Through this process, I derived "a textural description of the meanings and essence of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 2011, p. 31). Finally, I engaged in the imaginative variation step and developed a structure of the essence of the individual experiences (Moustakas, 1994/2011).

Ontological Assumption

My ontological assumption or belief "in the nature of reality" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20) was grounded in the Christian worldview that states, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time" (*The English Standard Bible*, 2011/2016, 1 Tim. 2:5-6). However, I realized that institutions' administration and faculty had differing opinions and efficacies surrounding integrating aspects of ethnicity and culture into curriculum and instruction. As a result, it impacted the outcomes of AI/AN adult learners' experiences in their degree attainment pursuits. Experiences in which AI/AN adult learners have been the victims of social problems (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018; Botha & Coetzee, 2016; Kieran & Anderson, 2019), assimilation (Freeman et al., 2019; McDowell Group, 2001; Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013; Szasz, 1974), systemic oppression (Davis & Museus, 2019; Freire, 1970/2017; Hooks, 1994), and deficit perspective practices in the classroom (Buxton, 2017; Peck, 2021; Savage et al., 2011) may have resulted in them feeling eschewed by God, man, and the education system. This assumption reminded me that in conducting research, I needed to be mindful of the participants' views of reality regarding their lived experiences and set aside any biases or presumptions I had.

Epistemological Assumption

The root of the epistemological assumption is the researcher's quest to understand what

knowledge is and the connection between the researcher and the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To gather this information, the researcher inquires about human subjects. As a first-generation student from a minority culture, I was eager to inquire about the cultural impact that influences AI/AN students. In part, my goal in this research study was to learn how the participants I recruited had been influenced by their culture to continue striving toward completing a postsecondary degree. By entering the human subjects' natural setting, the researcher can learn inside information from the participants by drawing on their insider knowledge. This connection and level of inquiry allow the researcher to acquire a unique understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

It was imperative to glean from participants their perception of knowledge and experience regarding their participation in public postsecondary institutions of Alaska and the influence their experience had on the degree attainment gap. I aimed to "spend time in the field" to learn from the participants to understand the phenomenon using Moustakas's (1994/2011) processes of epoché, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). Time spent in the field consisted of participant interviews, collecting descriptions and stories related to identified artifacts, and three participant focus groups, followed by coding and compiling the data to understand the essence of their subjective experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Stake (2010) described the epistemological assumption as a "distinction" based on a perception of knowledge that is personally "constructed" versus one of "discovery" of what the world is (p. 56). This explanation reinforced the importance of the qualitative researcher attempting to get close to the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Axiological Assumption

A researcher's axiological assumption is their position in the study or the values they

bring to the narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When describing one's axiological assumption, a researcher must describe their "social position, personal experiences, and political and professional beliefs" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). This concept of positionality ensures the researcher makes known their worldview and how it shapes their interpretation of the human participants' voices in the study, as this worldview is the lens through which they examine the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Matta, 2021).

My axiological assumption related to this research study was unique. I was an adult learner from a high-context culture and am now an instructor of primarily AI/AN adult learners in a non-UA program. As an adult learner who was never expected to attend college, I was unapologetically passionate about ensuring disadvantaged learners achieve their academic goals. Likewise, I am committed to accurately and equally depicting learners' cultures in the classroom. It has taken me many years to reach this level on my academic journey. While I have many things yet to learn, my life experiences and knowledge from my upbringing, including my culture, work, and school history, continued to help me navigate the university classroom as a student. The path that God had put me on had not always been easy, and I took pride in leaning on Him and trusting His ways. My Christian walk and adult learner experience have taught me that only God is the ultimate creator. We were created by Him and in His image; it is no earthly man's place to say that someone's culture is a deficit or disadvantage. The Bible says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (*The English Standard Bible*, 2011/2016, Gen. 1:27).

Researcher's Role

My role in this research project was that of a human instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although my educational background was shaped by psychology, counseling, and creative

writing degrees, education was my first love. I was a first-generation Latina college graduate with two master's degrees who was never expected to pursue a Ph.D. My formative years through high school graduation were considered disadvantaged as my family had a low socioeconomic status. I attended predominantly White primary and secondary schools with no Latinx representation and curricula that demonstrated Banks' contribution theory (Banks, 1989). My positive and negative student experiences motivated me to understand the AI/AN adult learner experience in higher education related to postsecondary degree attainment.

I had lived in Alaska for more than a decade at the time of this research study. Nine of those years had been spent in Bethel, a hub community located in rural Alaska. In 2017, The Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) reported the Bethel population as 6,151 residents, an increase of less than 100 since the 2010 census report (Y-K Region CEDS Committee, 2018). Eighty-three percent of Bethel residents identify as AI/AN. In 2016, nearly a third of Bethel residents (31%) were in the lowest wage range, earning less than 5,000 dollars per year, whereas less than 20% of state residents fall into this category. Additionally, only 11% of adults in Bethel had a bachelor's degree or higher (Y-K Region CEDS Committee, 2018).

I believe that God has a plan for each of us that includes the liberty to grow and learn. I conducted this research study through my Christian lens and as a first-generation Latina college graduate, which resulted in personal biases and assumptions. I identified a bias in thinking that AI/AN adult learners should not let anything stop them from attaining a college degree. To address that particular bias when discussing participants' experiences and their arduous path to earning a postsecondary degree, I refrained from assuming they were making excuses for allowing obstacles to slow them down in reaching their academic goals. To demonstrate

trustworthiness and limit ethical dilemmas, I remained aware of these biases and assumptions and chose not to allow them to influence my data collection and analysis.

My role as a human instrument in this transcendental phenomenology design was to describe each participant's higher education account. The end goal ensured I provided them with "the experience of really feeling understood" (Moustakas, 2011, p. 10). Additionally, I analyzed the data using Moustakas' system of analysis. Moustakas's system includes identifying participants' significant statements and horizontalization of the information while ensuring a textural description of each experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994/2011).

Procedures

After successfully defending the proposal in Fall 2022, the researcher submitted the research plan to the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (LU-IRB) for approval. Initial approval to recruit 10-15 participants pursuing a postsecondary degree from the UA system was granted on September 2, 2022. However, a lack of interest from potential participants resulted in requests to modify the sample population. Study modifications included increasing the sample size from current students pursuing a bachelor's degree to current students and alumni of the UA system who were actively pursuing or had obtained an associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree on or after January 1, 2018. Final LU-IRB approval was granted on October 11, 2022.

The goal was to recruit 10-15 participants and obtain their voluntary agreement to participate in the study. Two hundred and two potential participants completed the screening questionnaire (see Appendix C). Twelve participants met the research study criteria, and 11 participants completed the consent form and study activities. Details regarding participant solicitation, data collection and analysis plans by data source, and an explanation of how the

study achieved triangulation are described below.

Permissions

Upon LU-IRB approval (see Appendix A), the researcher engaged in the recruitment plan using modified LU-IRB-approved materials. According to Alaska's public postsecondary institutions' regents' policy (Board of Regents, 2006) surrounding students' freedom of speech, this study did not require college or university permission for participants to participate. The recruitment plan was the next logical step to begin this research study.

Recruitment Plan

Adult learners actively enrolled in and pursuing a postsecondary degree at one of Alaska's public university schools or who had obtained a degree from the UA system on or after January 1, 2018, were the population from which the researcher obtained the sample pool. The researcher utilized the purposeful sampling technique for this study because the aim was to identify participants who were best suited for providing information about the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample population consisted of AI/AN adult learners engaged in or recently graduated from Alaska's public universities to obtain a postsecondary degree. Non-AI/AN adult learners and AI/AN adult learners who had obtained a certificate or occupational endorsement, graduated from a degree program before January 1, 2018, and AI/AN adult learners pursuing a postsecondary degree outside the state public university system were excluded from this study.

The sample size for this study was between 10 and 15 adult learners. These individuals identified as AI/AN and were actively enrolled in one of Alaska's public university postsecondary degree programs or had graduated from the UA system with a postsecondary degree on or after January 1, 2018. This was an appropriate range for sample size because

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that the purpose behind a suitable sample size is to collect a wide range of information about the phenomenon. While the sample size for a phenomenological study can range from three to over 300, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended between 5 and 25. The goal of identifying participants was two-fold. First, selected participants had to be able and willing to provide extensive details about their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994/2011). Secondly, it was essential for saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Saturation is a critical component of qualitative research because it demonstrates the validity of the data collected (Hennink & Kaiser, 2019). This research element has been commonly used in the grounded theory approach to support adequate data collected to create a theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hennink & Kaiser, 2019; Saunders et al., 2018). However, saturation is also used in other qualitative approaches to determine when the researcher can end data collection (Hennink & Kaiser, 2019). When saturation has been reached, it confirms there is no need for additional data collection or analysis (Saunders et al., 2018).

Each participant was required to be enrolled for a minimum of two semesters or graduated on or after January 1, 2018. The researcher used purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to select the sample pool of participants. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this study because it coincided with the variety of postsecondary schools where individual participants made up the sample pool. Creswell and Poth (2018) described this approach as beneficial because it allows the researcher to amplify variations when the study begins and increases the opportunity for results that reflect unique perspectives. Likewise, snowball sampling was appropriate as potential participants informed others who met the study criteria.

The researcher used a modified version of Liberty University's consent form (see Appendix D) for this study. The investigator recruited participants using social media and word-

of-mouth descriptions of the study using the Social Media Recruitment Letter and a verbal recruitment script (see Appendix B). Informed consent was obtained from all selected participants. The AI/AN Adult Learner Consent Form (see Appendix D) contained the principal investigator's project title, name, credentials, and described the study's aim. Information regarding risks, recording of interviews and the focus group, collection, use of artifacts, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the study were included in the consent form. All participants were asked to participate in a comprehensive list of activities as part of the research study.

Data Collection Plan

Data collection began after the researcher had gained all necessary approvals. Additionally, the researcher obtained the highest level of informed consent before collecting any data from participants. The data collected included semi-structured interviews, artifacts, and a focus group for this study. Using multiple data sources for this phenomenological study allowed the opportunity to report the phenomenon's essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994/2011) and each participant's lived experience.

The data collection approach started with individual semi-structured in-depth interviews while simultaneously collecting artifacts, followed by three focus groups to allow for scheduling conflicts. Individual semi-structured interviews occurred via the Zoom technology platform to alleviate issues and expenses regarding travel. Follow-up and clarifying questions were asked via email to accommodate participant schedules. The request for artifacts and the subsequent discussions about them occurred concurrently with the individual interviews. The second interview question focused on the participants' selected artifacts and added depth to the lived experience reports of participants. The focus group was the final step in the data collection

sequence and was used as a form of member checking and allowed for a deeper dive into concepts and themes that emerged during the interviews.

Individual Interviews

Individual participant interviews were a vital and common source of data collection in qualitative research studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gray et al., 2020) and specifically in phenomenological studies (Moustakas, 1994/2011). For this reason, participant interviews were appropriate for this research study. Moustakas (1994/2011) described in-depth, individual interviews as the cornerstone of transcendental phenomenology. Gall et al. (2007) stated phenomenology to be "reality as it appears to individuals," further solidifying the importance of interviews as an appropriate data collection method (p. 491). The researcher used a modified version of Creswell and Poth's (2018) interview protocol (see Appendix F) to allow for reflective note-taking during the participant interviews.

Due to geographical constraints, the investigator scheduled in-depth participant interviews with each participant via the Zoom software platform. Links were provided to each participant to ensure the interviews occurred and that participants could participate from a comfortable location. Participants were also allowed to divide the interviews into shorter segments to reduce fatigue and interference with their family, work, school, and subsistence activities. The researcher asked each participant to consent to recorded interviews to allow for the content to be referenced during the data analysis stage of the research process.

The interviews were semi-structured and addressed the research questions of this study. The purpose of the first interview question was to invite the participant into the research study and begin establishing rapport consistent with the AI/AN culture. The subsequent research questions were open-ended and meant to ask each learner about their lived experiences obtaining

a postsecondary degree in Alaska's public university system. The sub-questions were directly linked to the problem statement; less than a quarter of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) adults nationwide attain an associate degree or higher, with the most significant gap visible at the bachelor's degree level (Pilar, 2018).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself in the manner customary for your culture. Ice-breaker Question
2. Tell me about the artifact you selected that holds special meaning regarding your culture and your pursuit of a postsecondary degree. CRQ / Observation
3. What aspects of your culture do you see in the curricula used in your degree program?
SQ1 / Observation
4. Describe the cultural connections you experience with college professors, advisors, and other faculty and/or staff. SQ1 / Obtainment
5. Describe the cultural connections you experience with your classmates. SQ1 / Obtainment
6. Describe the primary school experiences that prepared you for college. SQ2 / Adaptation
7. Describe the secondary school experiences that prepared you for college. SQ2 / Adaptation
8. Tell me about any remedial education courses you are taking or have taken since enrolling in your degree program. SQ3 / Adaptation
9. Describe your challenges as an AI/AN adult learner in a public postsecondary education program and how your culture helps you face/overcome those challenges. SQ3 / Adaptation

10. How often can you/do you include elements of your culture into your college assignments while adhering to the assignment instructions? SQ3 / Utilization
11. How would you describe your academic success as an AI/AN adult learner in a public postsecondary education program? SQ3 / Utilization
12. What else would you like to add to our discussion about your experience in your degree program at this public university? Clarifying Question

In the AI/AN culture, it is common for individuals to provide detailed introductions that include the names of their parents, grandparents, clan, and home village. It was appropriate to begin initial interviews in the manner described above in the CRQ to establish rapport with participants from this culture. Questions two through eight provided insight into the lived experiences of AI/AN participants in alignment with sub-question one as it relates to the ever-widening degree attainment gap (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Johnson et al., 2017; Pilar, 2018). Additionally, questions nine through 13 allowed participants to describe the differences in learning experiences for AI/AN and non-AI/AN college students from their AI/AN perspectives related to student readiness and remedial education requirements (Xiong & Jacob, 2019). This was a critical question as pedagogical practices typically assume students are ready to learn along with similarly aged peers, resulting in standardized curricula (Glassner & Back, 2020) that may not be a good fit for learners from minority cultures. Before the interview process began, the researcher requested that the committee members review the questions and their relevance to the research problem. Furthermore, the researcher completed any necessary and recommended revisions before conducting participant interviews.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The researcher used reflective analysis to reflect on the degree attainment gap in the AI/AN adult learner experience in Alaska's public postsecondary education degree programs. The reflective analysis process allows the researcher "to reveal both their surface features and essences" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 472). The researcher began a reflective analysis of the participant interviews with Moustakas' (1994/2011) epoché by setting aside personal biases and assumptions and "refrain[ing] from judgment" to ensure a true understanding of the phenomena from the perspective of each participant.

The second step in the analysis process was transcendental phenomenological reduction. The researcher described each participant's lived experience using transcendental-phenomenological reduction to ensure each experience was captured in its completion and created a "textural description[s] of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 2011, p. 31). The researcher included texture in the descriptions to allow for a fully developed and rich report of what each participant experienced. Furthermore, the researcher frequently and regularly returned to the participants' responses to ensure accurate descriptions.

This process, imaginative variation, included uncovering the "meanings and essences" of the phenomenon as it was experienced by the participants (Moustakas, 2011, p. 98). In this step, the researcher allowed time for reflection so that all possibilities could be explored related to the phenomenon. Additionally, the researcher developed structural descriptions to ensure a solid understanding of how each participant experienced culture while pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Artifacts

Gall et al. (2007) described two kinds of artifacts, also defined as "material culture" (p.

286), created by people groups throughout history. The artifact type used in this study was practice-oriented material culture, identifiable by the associated meaning of an existing artifact (Gall et al., 2007). The researcher requested participants to bring a tangible artifact to their scheduled individual interview as part of this research study. The researcher asked that the artifact they selected be representative of special meaning related to their lived experience with culture during their postsecondary education journey. During the individual interviews, participants were asked to share a story or memory behind the artifact and why they selected the specific item. This portion of the interview was video and audio-recorded to capture facial expressions, emotion, and a visual of the artifact for later analysis.

Artifact Data Analysis Plan

The researcher used reflective analysis to reflect on the degree attainment gap as it pertained to the AI/AN adult learner experience in Alaska's public postsecondary education degree programs "to reveal both their surface features and essences" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 472). The researcher began a reflective analysis of the participant artifacts with Moustakas' (1994/2011) epoché by setting aside personal biases and assumptions and "refrain[ing] from judgment" to ensure a true understanding of the noema from the perspective of each participant (p. 30).

The second step in the analysis process was a transcendental phenomenological reduction. The investigator described each participant's lived experience in relation to the verbal report of their artifact using transcendental-phenomenological reduction. This process ensured each experience was captured in its completion and created a "textural description[s] of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 2011, p. 31). The researcher frequently and regularly returned to the participants' responses to ensure accurate descriptions. The

researcher also included texture in the descriptions to allow for a fully developed and rich report of what each participant experienced.

Lastly, the investigator developed structural descriptions to ensure a solid understanding of how each participant experienced culture while pursuing a postsecondary degree as represented by the artifact they had selected. This process, imaginative variation, included uncovering the "meanings and essences" (Moustakas, 2011, p. 98) of the phenomenon as the participants experienced it. In this step, the researcher allowed time for reflection so that all possibilities related to the phenomenon could be explored.

Focus Groups

Upon completing the individual, in-depth participant interviews, the researcher scheduled three focus groups with the participants. Using a focus group as a data collection source was appropriate to allow the participants an opportunity to "state feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that they would not express if interviewed individually" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 245). Furthermore, focus groups were effective for the confirmation and expansion of themes and patterns that emerged during the interview analysis process, as well as acting as a form of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). The dates and times for the focus groups were determined in advance and scheduled via the Zoom platform to ensure as many participants could participate regardless of their geographic locations and schedules. Consent to record was obtained before the start of each meeting.

Focus group questions and the rationale for including them are described in the next section. The researcher requested the committee to review and suggest revisions before the scheduled focus groups to ensure the appropriateness and relevance of the questions. Participants were encouraged to participate in the Zoom groups using real names or pseudonyms and having

cameras on according to their comfortable level. Nine of the 11 participants engaged in the scheduled focus groups. Pseudonyms were used when compiling, analyzing, and reporting the focus group data.

Focus Group Questions

1. Think back over your college experience and share your fondest memory. CRQ
2. Describe your current student status, whether you plan to complete your degree program, and how your culture influences that plan. CRQ
3. Describe the cultural integration you expected from your degree program. SQ1
4. How is your experience with culture in college reflective of what others forewarned you about? SQ2
5. What have you learned about yourself as an AI/AN individual while being in college?
SQ3

The focus group questions described above were asked in each of the three focus groups. The focus group questions used were relevant to this research study in that they added depth and breadth to the participants' lived experiences. Additionally, the questions allowed each experience to be "perceived and described in its totality" (Moustakas, 2011, p. 31). Asking the questions in a focus group setting allowed for "variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes" (Moustakas, 2011, p. 31) while ensuring triangulation of the information received. By capturing the participants' varied perceptions, the focus groups allowed a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2015).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The researcher used reflective analysis to reflect on the degree attainment gap as it pertained to the AI/AN adult learner experience in Alaska's public postsecondary education

degree programs "to reveal both their surface features and essences" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 472). The investigator began a reflective analysis of the focus group with Moustakas' (1994/2011) epoché by setting aside personal biases and assumptions and "refrain[ed] from judgment" to ensure a true understanding of the noema from the perspective of each participant (p. 30).

The second step in the analysis process was a transcendental phenomenological reduction. The researcher described each participant's lived experience using transcendental-phenomenological reduction to ensure each experience was captured in its completion. This created a "textural description[s] of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 2011, p. 31). The researcher included texture in the descriptions to allow for a fully developed and rich report of what each participant experienced. The investigator frequently and regularly returned to the participants' responses to ensure accurate descriptions.

This process, imaginative variation, included uncovering the "meanings and essences" (Moustakas, 2011, p. 98) of the phenomenon as the participants experienced it. In this step, the researcher allowed time for reflection so that all possibilities related to the phenomenon could be explored. Additionally, the researcher developed structural descriptions to ensure a solid understanding of how each participant experienced culture while pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Data Synthesis

For data synthesis, the researcher followed Moustakas' (1994/2011) example of a phenomenological study in which the researcher provides synthesis statements and transcripts outlining each participant's reported experience. Upon completing all data collection and analysis plans, the researcher reported on each participant's lived experience and included a cohesive, descriptive synthesis statement. Each participant was allotted a reasonable timeframe to review

their synthesis statement and reported on the accuracy and essence captured. Each participant was asked to provide necessary corrections or additions. As part of the final report, collected and analyzed data was separated into sections by the research questions and sub-questions.

Themes confirmed further delineation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) generated using an excel spreadsheet along with in vivo and inductive coding processes (Saldaña, 2021). Participant quotes and vignettes were incorporated into the sections as supporting evidence of the themes. A synthesis of each participant's emergent themes and reflections was conducted to create a collective report containing the essence of what the participant sample experienced (Moustakas, 1994/2011).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established the foundations for trustworthiness in qualitative research designs. Analogous to what Schwandt et al. (2007) described as "scientific understandings," the components of trustworthiness were necessary for "making sense of or understanding one another" and experiencing confidence in such understanding (p. 12). The following sections describe how this study ensured trustworthiness in the research.

Credibility

Credibility was the primary element in substantiating trustworthiness. This element was demonstrated to guarantee that the study was conducted in the way it was intended. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated credibility "is satisfied when source respondents agree to honor the reconstructions" (p. 329). This study achieved credibility in four ways: (a) triangulation, (b) purposeful sampling, (c) member checking, and (d) peer scrutiny.

Triangulation

The researcher implemented data triangulation by collecting multiple data sources to describe and understand the essence of AI/AN adult learners' lived experiences in Alaska's public postsecondary education system. The researcher used individual interviews, artifacts, and focus groups as appropriate methods for transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994/2011). These data collection sources were used to obtain thick, rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences and the effect of those experiences on the degree attainment gap (Pilar, 2018). Theory triangulation was achieved through Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1979/1984).

Purposeful Sampling

The researcher used purposeful sampling to ensure "information-rich" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 178) reports for this transcendental phenomenological study. Purposeful sampling entailed describing the lived experiences of AI/AN adult learners who participated in Alaska's public postsecondary school system to obtain a postsecondary degree. This sampling technique allowed the researcher to recruit participants who could communicate their challenges and triumphs in higher education. This sampling method also allowed the researcher to identify and release potential participants who were not interested in sharing detailed information regarding their experiences.

Member Checking

Member checking consists of the researcher allowing participants to review statements and comments to ensure accuracy (Gall et al., 2007). This aspect of trustworthiness was also an opportunity for participants to make corrections to statements and descriptions that were not accurately recorded or failed to relay the essence of their contribution to the study (Moustakas,

1994/2011; Shenton, 2004). Engaging in member checks allowed the researcher to reflect on reports made by participants in the data collection activities. Another aspect of member checking is verifying "emerging themes and inferences" (Shenton, 2004, p. 68) as they were identified during the research project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As cited in Shenton (2004), Van Maanen expressed the importance of this step during the data collection process, as verification is considered information obtained and examined at the time of collection.

Peer Scrutiny

Scrutiny and feedback from the researcher's committee members, peers, and other academics were requested to ensure trustworthiness. The feedback and review from others allowed the investigator to respond to possible challenges and questions about the research project, data collection, and emerging themes and patterns. Shenton (2004) referred to peer scrutiny as a researcher's chance to get a new vantage point. I welcomed the scrutiny, which allowed me to amend and improve my research and develop a strong understanding of AI/AN adult learner experiences in Alaska's public postsecondary school system.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability replaces external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher provided "sufficient information about the context" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 124) to ensure transferability in this study. Sufficient information ensured that other future researchers have the foundational knowledge to conduct similar studies.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained the value of demonstrating dependability in qualitative research. Proving dependability in qualitative research is established through a thorough written description of the research design and its implementation (Shenton, 2004). The

research plan was explained, and how it would be executed to demonstrate dependability. Furthermore, each step taken in the fieldwork was described to allow future researchers to replicate the study. Additionally, the researcher requested that the committee review the research plan to ensure that the most effective methods and data collection sources for transcendental phenomenology were used.

Confirmability

One of the primary concerns regarding confirmability is how researchers acknowledge their biases that prompt decision-making and adoption of methods in the research process (Shenton, 2004). Confirmability is described in Moustakas' (1994/2011) description and definition of the epoché process when conducting a phenomenological study. The researcher engaged in three activities to demonstrate confirmability for this research project. First, the researcher created a data-oriented audit trail to outline the procedures, data (both raw and analyzed), and the final report. The purpose of this audit trail was to provide transparency regarding the complete project. The researcher also employed data triangulation and convergence of evidence as described above. Finally, the investigator gave a detailed description and admission of any weaknesses in the techniques and limitations of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were considered throughout the research study. First and foremost, the researcher obtained LU-IRB approval before proceeding with any steps in the research plan. Before engaging in participant interviews, artifact collection, or the focus group, the researcher ensured informed consent was documented and regularly discussed. All sites and participants were assigned pseudonyms that were used for the duration of the project to ensure confidentiality. Electronic data was stored on the researcher's password-protected computer in

folders that depict each participant's name and pseudonym. All data related to this research project was held for LU-IRB's required three-year timeframe in case the research project is extended or added to for future research. Participants will be informed before the three-year expiration date, and additional, necessary consent will be obtained.

Informed consent was obtained through participant consent forms (see Appendix D) and reviewed as necessary throughout the study. Participants were educated on their voluntary status to participate in the study and informed that they could decline to answer any questions and request removal from the study at any time. Disclosure of potentially harmful information was described using composite stories to ensure participant identification remains confidential. Additionally, the researcher's role as a licensed professional counselor (LPC) in Alaska, which made me a mandated reporter, was explained at the outset of the informed consent process.

Summary

For this research project, a transcendental phenomenology research design was appropriate for demonstrating theoretical and literal replication surrounding the lived experiences of AI/AN adult learners who participated in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions pursuing a higher education degree. In-depth, individual interviews, artifacts, and focus groups were used to collect data appropriate to Moustakas' (1994/2011) descriptions of transcendental phenomenology. These data collection methods allowed the researcher to describe the essence of participants' lived experiences with thick, rich descriptions. The data analysis strategies and subsequent reports added to the existing literature on the degree attainment gap concerning AI/AN adult learners.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter provided a tabular and narrative description of 11 participants who consented to be part of this study. Individuals were identified by the term "Elicaraq," a Yup'ik word which is translated as "student," and a number (example: Elicaraq 1) to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity. The numeric aspect of the pseudonym indicated the order in which each participant was interviewed. Pseudonyms were developed to identify the postsecondary institutions. The results of this research study were presented using a priori coding, emergent themes, subthemes, and artifact analysis. The participants' responses to the research questions guided this study. Chapter Four concluded with a summary of the findings, textual and structural descriptions of each participant's lived experience as a student in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions, and a description of the essence of the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) learner experience in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions.

Participants

This study included 11 participants who experienced the phenomenon of being an AI/AN learner in one of Alaska's public postsecondary institutions. Table 1 contains detailed information regarding each participant's degree type, student status at the time of this study, and postsecondary institution they attended. All the participants were over the age of 18, had been enrolled in a public institution for at least two semesters, and were actively working toward an associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree or had graduated from a public institution with one of the aforementioned degree types on or after January 1, 2018. The researcher provided brief introductions using direct quotes, when possible, in this chapter and subsequent

chapters while maintaining confidentiality to allow their stories to be added to the existing literature on culture and college education.

Table 1

American Indian/Alaska Native Elicaraq Participants

Elicaraq Participant	Degree Type	Student Status	Postsecondary School
Elicaraq 1	Bachelor's	Current	Mountain-River College
Elicaraq 2	Master's	Current	Mountain-River College
Elicaraq 3	Master's	Current	Fireweed University
Elicaraq 4	Associate	Current	Mountain-River College
Elicaraq 5	Associate	Current	Mountain-River College
Elicaraq 6	Bachelor's	Alumna	Fireweed University
Elicaraq 7	Master's	Alumna	Fireweed University
Elicaraq 8	Bachelor's	Alumna	Mountain-River College
Elicaraq 9	Bachelor's	Alumna	Mountain-River College
Elicaraq 10	Bachelor's	Alumna	Mountain-River College
Elicaraq 11	Bachelor's	Alumna	Fireweed University

Elicaraq 1

At the time of this study, Elicaraq 1 was a second-generation college student pursuing a bachelor's degree from Mountain-River College. Elicaraq 1 changed majors just weeks before participating in this study. She described her reasons for the new direction as:

[Originally], I want[ed] to be a high school teacher. The further I got along in my degree, it just became a lot harder . . . to focus and keep the motivation to finish my degree, and just in the last several weeks, I changed my major.

Elicaraq 2

Elicaraq 2 was pursuing a master's degree at Mountain-River College and "about to complete my second year." At the time of her interview, Elicaraq 2 had completed all her coursework, including three written exams she turned in on the day she met with the researcher to interview. She exuberantly described her capstone project and reflected that "all I have left right now is my oral exam and then submitting my project."

Elicaraq 3

In her first semester of graduate studies at Fireweed University, Elicaraq 3 had completed a bachelor's degree at the same university less than one year prior to her interview. She described her "journey to discover my culture" as "recent" due to family circumstances beyond her control. A first-generation learner, Elicaraq 3 explained that no one in her family who had come before her had "sought college education because it just left such a bad taste in everyone's mouth."

Elicaraq 4

Prompted by a new job to pursue a postsecondary degree, Elicaraq 4 said, "I knew when I was in high school, I wanted to get a higher education." Although she could not complete her studies following high school, Elicaraq 4 described the delay as positive and timely. She said, "I had the encouragement from my supervisor, and then the support of my family. So, it was a good time to start . . . I will have my associate degree in December."

Elicaraq 5

Elicaraq 5 had two children in college, a child in junior high school, and another in elementary school at the time of this study. Meanwhile, she was working toward her associate

degree from Mountain-River College with an anticipated completion date of December 2022.

When asked what she planned to do after obtaining her degree, she said:

I've been really thinking about continuing, but same time [audible sigh] I'm so nervous . . . I've been waiting for this since we started in 2018, and I've been just like wanting to get to this part . . . By December, I'll be getting my AA degree and half of my bachelor's. Yes. So, I'm really picking my brain [laughing]. My brain's really thinking to [go] further but [at the] same time, my kids need me.

Elicaraq 6

Elicaraq 6 had completed a bachelor's degree four months before participating in this research study. In part, she attributed her academic success to the collective cultural connections she experienced at Fireweed University. When considering culture and her college journey, Elicaraq 6 described her program as the following:

Predominantly White male, and so I had to interact with . . . a different peer group than I was used to . . . I had to be able to walk in both worlds. My cultural world on campus and the Western world on campus.

Elicaraq 7

Elicaraq 7 described her academic journey as a 10-year process that reached a climax in 2020 following her completion of a bachelor's degree. She stated:

And then a part of me crazy, crazily said, it's Covid, might as well, there's nothing else to do. We're all staying home. So, I went on, crazily, for my master's and just got it in May of this year.

Elicaraq 8

In 2020, Elicaraq 8 earned a bachelor's degree from Mountain-River College. She completed her studies with some courses online and others on campus. Elicaraq 8 described this hybrid experience as one that allowed her to "continue working and continue working towards my educational goals at the same time."

Elicaraq 9

Elicaraq 9 described herself as a 2021 graduate with a bachelor's degree who took a circuitous route to accomplish her educational goals. She described her experience as different from others:

[I wasn't] the typical university student. They're [instructors] not encountering mid-20s students that are, you know, 18, 19, 20s . . . These are, you know, anywhere from 28- to 50-year-old students. We've been around the block, we've done some things and you know, we don't need to be told to shush.

Elicaraq 10

A Covid-19 pandemic graduate and mother of young children, Elicaraq 10 said she was "pretty sure it [graduation] was in May 2020." She became interested in college during elementary school when she became interested in learning more about her teachers. "I used to ask my teachers where they came from, I was very curious about how they ended up in our village." An opportunity to participate in the summer high school program "created [a] door to new things, and traveling, and the possibilities of being able to explore."

Elicaraq 11

When asked about her motivation for pursuing a postsecondary education, Elicaraq 11 said, "I think growing up I was at a point in time where, my parents just felt really strongly that

in order to get a good job, you had to get a college degree." Despite a self-proclamation of being "very independent" and disliking being told what to do, she found herself attending college out of respect for her parents and their influence regarding education. She stated:

I think it was that kind of influence from my parents . . . It just so happens that what I want to do and what I have an interest in now, you do need to go to college. And so that's kind of why I've also chosen to do even more school, I guess.

Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study and the theoretical framework in which it is positioned contributed to developing the research questions. Through data collection and subsequent analysis, the researcher began to see themes and subthemes emerge. In total, four primary themes presented themselves, including (a) identity, (b) responsibility, (c) affirmation and healing, and (d) advocacy for and preservation of culture. Each theme contained one or more subthemes also described in this section. As themes and subthemes emerged, it became apparent that the pairings also reflected the Traditional Native Knowledge Systems described in Chapter Two. Table 2 displays the connections between themes, subthemes, and the a priori codes developed in Chapter Two.

Table 2

Themes, Sub-Themes, and A Priori Codes

Primary Themes	Sub-Themes	A Priori Codes
Identity	Name Land Acknowledgement	Observation
Responsibility	Grandparents – Teach Grandchildren – Learn	Observation
Affirmation and Healing	External Validation Cultural (Re)connection	Obtainment
Advocacy for and Preservation of Culture	Current and Future Generations	Adaptation and Utilization

Identity

Identity emerged as the primary theme during data collection. Most of the participants in this study identified as Yup'ik, and introductions typically included a brief autobiography telling where the individual was born or raised, names of their parents and grandparents, and information about their clan. As Elicaraq 9 said, "I will introduce myself in the way that I've learned in the Yup'ik culture." During data collection, two sub-themes emerged, name and land recognition.

Name

Student identification, or student ID, is one of the first pieces of identification a postsecondary learner is given upon registration. The ID is typically comprised of a string of alphanumeric characters and is used to purchase textbooks, register for courses, and borrow textbooks from the university library. In American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) culture, a person's name is often gifted to them or handed down from previous generations. Elicaraq 5 said, "My Yup'ik name [was] given to me by my mother. She named me after an elder lady, her grandmother's sister." Elicaraq 7 shared, "I am named after my great-great-grandma and also my grandma, but the Yup'ik name that I grew up [with is] after both of my great grandmas. "

Land Acknowledgement

The second subtheme that originated from the theme of identity was land acknowledgment. Every participant interviewed mentioned the geographical location where they were raised or where their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents lived. Given the small AI/AN population and the history of colonization and assimilation, making geographical connections is standard practice. Several companies across the state demonstrate cultural awareness by including land recognition at the start of ceremonies, conferences, and in staff

email signature lines. Additionally, when speaking to someone "from the Outside" or someone who is not familiar with the many rural parts of Alaska, geographical descriptions help ground the speaker and listener. For instance, Elicaraq 1 introduced herself: "I am from Quinhagak, Alaska, which is about 80 miles south of Bethel."

Relocating is also common among AI/AN families who may move to another village community or make a larger intrastate move for school, work, or to care for family members. In such situations, the length of time in a community appeared relevant to participants who had experienced such a move. As Elicaraq 8 said, "My grandma's from Kwethluk, and my grandpa's from Napakiak, and I've been living here in Bethel since 2013." When Elicaraq 9 introduced herself, she stated, "I have lived in Bethel almost all of my life...But I lived for a short period of time for six years in Arizona. But I've been back in Bethel since 2004, and Bethel will always be my home."

Responsibility

Ten of the 11 participants often spoke of their grandparents, especially grandmothers. Some were named after a grandmother or great-grandmother, and several participants described spending time with them or learning bits of wisdom passed down over the years. The initial code that seemed to be the best fit was family or even grandparents. However, as the researcher continued to review the interview transcripts, it became clear that the meaning behind the references to grandparents was deeper. Elicaraq 1 discussed the connection between the artifact she brought to her interview, her grandmother, and her desire to pursue postsecondary education. She noted:

My late grandmother was a really talented skin sewer. So, she'd make a lot of these parkas for members of the family, like fancy parkas with the family patterns as trim. So,

she, she passed away in the '80s so I never got to know her. I'm sorry. (crying) Okay, so I guess learning how to sew. I didn't think I'd get emotional (crying). Learning how to sew - it's helped me to connect with her [grandmother] in a way.

The other interviews were similar with rich descriptions of interactions with grandmothers.

Through these descriptions, sub-themes emerged. The responsibility lies with the grandparents teaching and with the grandchildren learning.

Grandparents – Teach

Elders, and more specifically, "culture bearers," as Elicaraq 2 described them, play a significant role in passing down teachings and wisdom to younger generations. Oral storytelling continues to be a respected tradition among AI/AN tribes, and other traditional activities, like skin sewing, a craft the elders teach to younger generations. The artifact Elicaraq 1 identified as having a special meaning related to her AI/AN culture and desire to pursue a postsecondary degree was a pair of mittens. She described learning how to make the mittens out of tanned deer hide and beaver from an elder and how that experience brought her closer to her late grandmother and inspired her desire to obtain a degree that will allow her to teach others someday. She said:

While I was learning how to make these mittens, I was also able to make them with an elder. I guess another reason on top of learning from an elder and learning the certain techniques of sewing skin, on top of that, my late grandmother was a really talented skin sewer . . . One day, I hope to be that kind of grandma and like make stuff for my grandkids or nieces and nephews. Yeah. And in that small way, I – it would be fun to teach others how to sew and the certain techniques that were passed on to me.

Grandchildren – Learn

Similarly, the younger generations grow up being taught to respect their elders and heed the knowledge passed down to them. The lessons teach them to provide for their families monetarily, through subsistence living, and by example. Elicaraq 7 chose a manaq stick as her artifact and shared:

It's used for ice fishing or jigging. We use this as a tool to fish for multiple species of fish. I chose this artifact because so much in life, we've been handed different tools and taught different ways to live and survive. And I actually taught myself how to tie the lead line to the string. And when I first made my first one, I tied it incorrectly and it broke right away.

She explained that she chose her manaq stick to represent culture and her college experience as a symbol of learning from her ancestors and crafting a tool that fits her as an individual. "It also relates to (sigh) knowing that what I make or what I create will work for me more so than somebody else."

Affirmation and Healing

The desire for affirmation and healing emerged as a primary theme throughout the data analysis process. This theme reaffirmed the research cited in chapter two of this study regarding the continued negative effects of inter-generational trauma experienced by current students and recent graduates. Elicaraq 7 described learning to make a manaq stick as part of her educational journey which "has brought me along with healing and learning at the same time . . . A lot of it I've had to learn on my own very similar to how I learned how to make this manaq stick."

Internal and external validation and cultural (re)connection were identified as sub-themes.

Internal and External Validation

The subtheme about validation presented itself during the focus group activities. Three focus groups were conducted and captured the voices of nine participants. When asked what participants have learned about themselves as an AI/AN individual while being in college, the discussion in focus group #1 turned to a sense of belonging. Elicaraq 3 said:

I think one thing I'm in the process of learning [is] the fact that I don't have to measure my Indigenous-ness by, you know, my degree of blood, or by my hazel eyes. I can stand in my skin as I am, and I am the things that I am. I don't have to sell myself; I don't have to prove that. I'm still working on that because it's been a setback to try to justify why I belong in this program, doing these things, studying these things.

Elicaraq 4 reiterated Elicaraq 3's statement by adding, "We're so so smart. I don't know how to say this, but...nothing should stop us from getting a degree. You know what I mean?"

Meanwhile, Elicaraq 8 linked what she has learned about herself in college to Alaska Native history, historical trauma, and what it means to her to be a student by sharing:

I learned a lot about the history of this region and some of the historical trauma that happened out here, and that really just made me reflect on a lot of negative things that we see in the community, and even within my family, that it's all just a result of historical trauma which really just started making me think. You know, what am I doing, and what is my family doing to try to heal from that? And how can we help other families and other individuals heal from that too?

Elicaraq 3 summed up the conversation with this statement, "I'm enough...I'm enough of all those things, and I belong here."

Cultural (Re)connection

Two of the eleven participants identified as adopted. Of the two, Elicaraq 3 shared that she was adopted to a non-Native family. While her academic journey was one of healing, as several of the other participants also verbalized, Elicaraq 3 explained, "my journey to discover my culture is a recent one." Despite her biological grandfather's attempts to obtain "some sort of legitimacy in the eyes of the law or his community," he was unsuccessful and subject to discrimination and struggled due to his American Indian heritage. Yet, Elicaraq 3 described herself as "lucky enough to come along later and not be steeped in that," and while she admitted to still being angry about how her grandfather was treated, it served as a motivator to continue her education. She said:

I have the luxury of not having the history and the pain that came with it, because I didn't see him in pain. The stories now, I have his things, and when I sit with them, I feel so peaceful . . . I want to do something for him that he couldn't do for himself. I want to do that for myself as well because in pursuing this degree, I get to educate myself about my Indigenous roots. I also get to make a statement for him, that we're here, we're good enough, we can do all the things everybody can do, and we deserve to be here. We deserve to have all the opportunities that everybody else has and that includes a higher education.

Another participant demonstrated an eagerness to participate in the study. Upon screening in, she quickly completed her individual interview but did not have an artifact to share as requested by the researcher. Although this participant and another provided their artifacts later due to needing time to decide on or locate one, Elicaraq 6's described her artifact as "a gift" she received from a school-affiliated program. She stated, "I am not someone who felt close to my

culture growing up . . . Please accept this [image of this] bear claw as my artifact. It helped me reach my goal of graduating."

Advocacy for and Preservation of Culture

Through my analysis of the collected data, I originally thought this theme could be parsed out to include subthemes of the current and future generations. However, the two were repeatedly discussed in tandem, making it difficult to find a logical point of separation. There were continual references from all participants regarding their education pursuits being part of their advocacy for the current generation and preserving their AI/AN culture for future generations. None of the participants interviewed described their degree attainment as something they were doing solely to benefit themselves. In fact, Elicaraq 11 shared that her educational journey evolved from one of independence and "where I could do my own thing" to a journey that is:

Less about myself and wanting to help others and revitalize identity, Yup'ik identity, because looking back at myself and understanding how things have helped me and my family and wanting that for others, being able to be in a position where I can do that.

Current and Future Generations

As described by all participants, the value of education, the educational journey, and the effects of learning and degree attainment were important reasons for pursuing a postsecondary degree. They spoke vehemently and broadly about how they want to ensure their academic success benefits their families and communities and be established as a trailblazer for those to come after them. The researcher included a description of this subtheme from the point of view of each participant to show the diverse perspectives.

Elicaraq 1

After finishing my bachelor's degree . . . I plan on coming back to school with the secondary post-bac teacher licensure. And with that I'm able to go into Native classrooms and like, be able to teach in rural Alaska during the internship year where I'm like a student teacher.

Elicaraq 2

So, um, I went back to school because I'm teaching sexual health and healthy relationships to Indigenous youth. We focus on Indigenous youth in our curriculum. It's like it strives to be culturally relevant to Alaska Native and Native American people . . . so that's why I came back to school to learn how to do that [and] figure out ways that I could do that in respectful and effective ways.

Elicaraq 3

[My] project . . . will take me out to some Indigenous villages in Alaska. I will be researching, studying, interviewing, videoing, [and] recording traditional foods, the recipes, their importance, and the folklore behind it, the medicinal uses. And I kind of created this curriculum for myself. I did this to reflect what I ultimately desire to do, which is to go back to my own tribe and help put together traditional recipes because they were only just federally recognized.

Elicaraq 4

I will have my associate degree in December . . . I have not decided yet if I would want to pursue my bachelor's degree . . . I've got a couple more months yet to decide. How my culture factors into my plan is . . . I currently work with young children. So, everything in my life that I have learned goes into my work. Everything about my culture, I also want

to pass on to the families that I work with . . . I want to be able to connect with them, and we can do that through our culture.

Elicaraq 5

So, it takes persistence, and perseverance, and I'm just happy that I was able to fight for this to continue to further my education . . . and I learned so much just from being in this program and being able to utilize our Alaskan values, especially with everything that we're learning and to compare everything that we're reading with our lives, what we've got to or what our grandparents have gone through, so it made so much sense, and I really appreciate how we view Alaska Native values, especially in this college . . . how much knowledge we've gained and how myself and my kids can say . . . I could say spiritually cut this line and say no more trauma passed down. But we're gonna be successful. We're gonna live a happy life from this year, here on, you know, forward. That's the best way I can explain [it] . . . and I'm just so grateful, and I've been really encouraging Alaska Natives, and the people that I know, to further their education. If people can . . . just focus on furthering their education and just believe, they can. They can do it. They can do anything as long as they believe.

Elicaraq 6

So, um, I plan on going forward with my education. Either a master's in project management or law school. I think education is very important, and what it means to my culture is, I show up for my people. I'm educating myself for my people to better our lives as a whole, not only mine and my family's, but my community. And I want to share that knowledge that I've learned along the way with everybody in my tribe, so my culture

has a big part in it. I don't know where I get this drive from or why I went this route, but I feel like it's a calling beyond myself.

Elicaraq 7

And just because I do have my degree – degrees – I always say that doesn't make me any more or any less than another person. And I'm always, I feel for the rest of my life, will always be a learner. Despite any degrees given or held, I will always be a lifelong learner and to pass that on to other people, because that's a cultural belief. To pass on what I know is helpful or could be helpful for one or many, to pass that on and also encourage them and like, stand by them. Not above or below but stand right alongside them to see them through things.

Elicaraq 8

[In my work] there's so much talk about how to integrate, like traditional knowledge and Indigenous knowledge with Western knowledge, especially within health organizations where the medicine that we provide is primarily Western. But how do we incorporate more traditional knowledge into the care that we provide? And how do we create more, I guess, efficient integration of Western culture working together with traditional and Indigenous culture? And I really want to see successful integration of both [kinds of] knowledge and that we provide really good care to the people, because I mean, this is my community . . . that's what I'm working towards and getting a degree definitely can help strengthen me as an employee and potentially as a leader.

Elicaraq 9

They would do their best to bring Native teachers if they could . . . but it wasn't always possible . . . Our classroom is created with healing in mind and traditional teachings in

mind. And you can try to communicate that upfront to a professor. And if they're willing to listen, it is amazing . . . and they were coming to our classroom to teach us, but we had a system in which we did things and we had to educate them on how we did things. So it was almost like we had to educate them on what they were coming into, but thank God they were willing to learn and we had fun. We had a lot of fun.

Elicaraq 10

I've never been in a position where there's so much politics involved, and this position has a lot of politics. So, I was thinking maybe I could just start with a certificate program in rural development or tribal government. I might pick a class or two and explore that and see if that's where I want to go for another degree or even early education is kind of an interest. So, I have a couple of options . . . You know, there's no social workers' association in this region, so that been kind of like something that's on the back of my mind . . . Maybe after or through taking classes that might be something too.

Elicaraq 11

My desire to help people achieve health, the way they think is right for them, has not changed. The method of how that is achieved though has, which is why like even in undergrad, I changed my degree . . . to be in a position where I can help people prioritize themselves, and in our culture, in a way they see fit.

Research Question Responses

Participant responses to interview and focus group questions were integral to answering the research questions utilized in this study. Additionally, the artifacts each participant selected and shared in their interviews informed the answer to the central research question: What are AI/AN learners' experiences with culture in postsecondary institutions? Although the researcher

included brief details about a few artifacts in the previous section, more details were outlined in this section with Table 3.

Table 3

Artifact Analysis

Participant	Artifact	Connection to Culture and	Pursuit of Postsecondary Degree
Elicaraq 1	Mittens	Elder teaching	Desire to pass on this knowledge as a teacher
Elicaraq 2	Coffee mug	Yup'ik traditions	Strength and family support to pursue a master's degree
Elicaraq 3	Book	Family and tribal history	Reminder of educational opportunities
Elicaraq 4	Uluaqs	Traditional fishing and hunting	Family support to pursue education
Elicaraq 5	Eskimo dolls	Family tradition; Native art	Proof of intelligence
Elicaraq 6	Bear claw	Hunting and Native art	Program graduation gift
Elicaraq 7	Manaq stick	Subsistence	Healing and learning
Elicaraq 8	Headdress	Celebration and ritual	Academic achievement
Elicaraq 9	Beaded amulet	Native art; Gift from an elder	Traditional teaching in the classroom
Elicaraq 10	Ivory hook earrings	Native art	Dreams about future education
Elicaraq 11	Family picture	Subsistence	Family support to pursue a postsecondary degree

Sub-Question One

How do AI/AN learners remain connected to their cultures while pursuing a postsecondary degree? This question described the thread that kept AI/AN learners connected to their cultures while pursuing a postsecondary degree. Colonization and assimilation practices resulted in the physical and cultural separation of AI/AN learners from their homes, families, lands, and traditional practices (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Curl et al., 2018; Szasz, 1974). The effects of the trauma associated with colonization and assimilation have been passed from

one generation to the next through the loss of traditional practices, internalized oppression, and the loss of Native languages and dance (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Godlewska et al., 2020). In place of these culturally relevant activities are substance use (Herron & Venner, 2022), mental illness, and suicide (Bourke et al., 2020; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Joyner-Matos & Islam-Zwart, 2021; Keefer, 2017; McKinley, 2020; Owusu-Agyeman, 2016). Despite these injustices, the participants in this research study pursued a postsecondary degree while maintaining a connection to their culture.

The level of connection participants felt to their cultures during their postsecondary education is best described as being on a continuum. At one end of the continuum, AI/AN cultures were incorporated into the curriculum on a limited basis. Elicaraq 1 described the connection to culture as being "kind of hard to see because a lot of my professors, they're not Indigenous." Elicaraq 6 had similar experiences in which she recognized Alaska Native cultures in the learning material through an Alaska Native studies course that "talk[ed] about the different Indigenous people that we have in Alaska." Having pursued a degree described as "pretty science heavy," Elicaraq 11 said she found the integration of culture to be "very minimal...maybe history or health status or maybe just talking about certain aspects of the culture."

At the other end of the continuum were participants who enrolled in degree programs that emphasized the AI/AN cultures and included elders in the classroom as part of the instructor teams. Elicaraq 2 participated in such a program and described her experience like this:

So, like most of my professors are elders or like older and have some sort of standing in Indigenous learning, Indigenous knowledge, keeping Indigenous knowledge sharing. And the way all of my classrooms are set up is really like they're not teaching. They're sort of like there to facilitate.

Elicaraq 9 had a similar experience in her program, "We had elders in the classroom from [various] region[s] all around the state, and it was very beneficial."

Elicaraq 8 expressed the importance of sharing perspectives as necessary for overcoming the challenges associated with cultural integration. The sharing of perspectives is a concept she "learned a lot about" during her college education. Although Elicaraq 8 was aware that some people are unable to see the perspectives of others "for reasons (readiness, motivation, experiences, etc.)," she appreciated learning how to be open to the cultures of others through participation in "group discussions, and each student appli[ing] the knowledge to themselves or relat[ing] to it in various ways. I want to see more of that happening in my community, sharing knowledge and perspectives to build connections."

Sub-Question Two

How do AI/AN learners see their obtainment of a postsecondary degree impacting their future SES? This sub-question was relevant to this study because AI/AN learners comprise a large percentage of first-generation learners (Bassett, 2019; Espinosa et al., 2019) who typically take longer than their non-Native peers to complete a four-year degree program (Lee et al., 2010). Meanwhile, AI/AN individuals are often impoverished, homeless, couch surfing, (Morton et al., 2019) or unable to afford the necessities of college life, such as a laptop (Curtis et al., 2021). These challenges make their college degree attainment that much more difficult to achieve.

Five of the eleven participants (Elicaraq 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8) identified as first-generation learners and started college education after 20 years old. However, the topic of socioeconomic status in each of the interviews and all three focus groups was not specific to the individual.

Instead, the participants described their academic success as being necessary for their families, tribes, and local communities.

Regarding family, Elicaraq 5 said, "Another wonderful memory is to have my spouse and my family members supporting me through this. It was a tough time, but we all got through it together. We're doing this for them." Elicaraq 2 described her educational journey as filled with excitement and intimidation due to not knowing what to expect. She expressed how she could "not even being able to predict in any way how this program would change my perspectives of not only myself, but my family, my community, everyone around me."

Other participants related to Elicaraq 2's sentiment and described the importance of a college education as going beyond self and family to their communities. Elicaraq 10 described degree attainment as part of a larger picture:

We're all part of this bigger purpose and whatever that is, you know, it's just unfolding.

Even when I look at challenges or when I am faced with challenges like right now in my life and everything there is always that testing and that faith. You know, we're working and connecting because of this bigger purpose.

Elicaraq 1 said she learned from her mother that obtaining a college degree was part of paving the way for future generations by speaking up for herself and others. She said her mother, always instilled the following:

Made sure to tell us in our family [that] if we experience being ignored or talked down to, that we need to speak up and talk to the professor, and like um, or like, go to the students' rights place . . . Because we also belong to the university setting, no matter what other people say about where we come from or whatever they thought. Like we need to make space for us so that the ones after us won't have such a hard time feeling like they belong.

Sub-Question Three

How does embodied cultural capital help AI/AN adult learners overcome challenges when pursuing a postsecondary degree? This sub-question is situated upon Bourdieu's (1979/1984) theory of cultural capital and was foundational in answering the central research question in this study. The purpose of including this question was to emphasize the value of embodied AI/AN cultural capital in helping learners achieve their goal of obtaining a postsecondary degree. AI/AN cultures have historically been eradicated from academic programs by elevating the dominant culture over non-dominant cultures (Curl et al., 2018). Thus, the dominant cultural model of education ascribes to what Bourdieu (1979/1984) referred to as a hierarchical classification of learners that continues in modern classrooms excluding the non-dominant cultures. However, the participants in this study expressed how they incorporated their culture into their learning experiences even when their respective professors failed to do so.

Elicaraq 9 spoke of a semester that she and Elicaraq 10 took together that "could have broken us. It was so tough and so hard because it was so demanding." She described their finished project as "a labor of love. It was absolutely beautiful, and we celebrated like heck when it was done . . . It helped us realize that we could do hard things."

Elicaraq 6 said she learned through her experience that she is resilient and has tenacity. She noted:

Show up for my people. Because if other people, if other Alaska Natives, whether they're from my tribe or not, if they see me climbing the career ladder or the professional ladder, if they see me doing that, then they see that someone that looks like them, and they're going to do it too.

She described her ability to overcome adversity in a public university as grit. She continued:

I have a lot of grit and determination and resilience, you know? I'm never going to give up, and I'm a warrior. So, I'm ready to fight for what I want. And someone could tell you no, and you can go and find the next person. [If] they tell you no too, you keep going until you find someone that tells you yes, or they show you a way to get what you need. I never give up, and I've always been that way.

Elicaraq 1 echoed Elicaraq 6's statements. She said, "I learned that I can do whatever I want as long as I put my mind to it. I can reach the goals that I set for myself." In the process, Elicaraq 1 said:

[I] already knew that my culture was different, but I never appreciated it as much as I should have until I went away from my home . . . I had come to appreciate my language more because it was so different from [other] languages. And I come from beautiful people. I come from a beautiful land, and I've learned to be proud of who I am.

Summary

The themes and sub-themes discovered in the raw data collected indicated that despite continued attempts to eradicate and devalue AI/AN cultures from educational institutions, AI/AN learners continue to demonstrate resilience and perseverance in attaining postsecondary degrees. Furthermore, they lean heavily on their cultures to overcome challenges in the process. Four primary themes were identified during data analysis: identity, responsibility, affirmation and healing, and advocacy for the preservation of culture. Additionally, each theme produced subthemes that further expanded on the participants' responses to interview and focus questions. The central research question and three sub-questions were answered. The central research question was, "What are AI/AN learners' experiences with culture in postsecondary institutions?" AI/AN learners' experiences appear to vary along a continuum that generally excludes culture

except in culture-specific courses to cultural integration that includes elders being part of the classroom. The first sub-question, "How do AI/AN learners remain connected to their cultures while pursuing a postsecondary degree?" AI/AN learners take responsibility for incorporating their culture into their course assignments whenever possible. The second sub-question, "How do AI/AN learners see their obtainment of a postsecondary degree impacting their future SES?" AI/AN learners see beyond their individual SES and instead see their postsecondary degree obtainment as instrumental in benefiting their families and communities. The last sub-question, "How does embodied cultural capital help AI/AN adult learners overcome the challenges they face when pursuing a postsecondary degree?" Embodied cultural capital is a necessary element in AI/AN learners' academic journeys and acts as a source of healing from intergenerational trauma and a way of modeling resilience and strength for future generations interested in obtaining a postsecondary degree.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native learners who were enrolled in or had graduated from one of Alaska's public postsecondary institutions in pursuit of a higher education degree. This chapter reviews research findings, discusses the interpretation of findings, and discusses the study's outcomes concerning the literature discussed in Chapter Two. Theoretical, practical, and empirical implications of this study are discussed, followed by a description of this study's limitations and delimitations. The chapter closes with a final summary.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the study's findings considering the emergent themes and subthemes. Research study results were achieved using Moustakas' (1994/2011) transcendental phenomenology methods. Eleven female participants engaged in semi-structured interviews and shared with the researcher an artifact that represented their culture and desire to pursue a postsecondary degree. Of the eleven participants in the sample, nine of them took part in three focus groups to further discuss their experiences with culture and college. The findings of the participants' experiences add to the existing literature regarding the embodied cultural capital of adult learners who identify with non-dominant cultures in dominant culture postsecondary institutions. Bourdieu's (1979/1984) theory of cultural capital, specifically embodied cultural capital, guided this research study.

Interpretation of Findings

In general, the participants described positive and negative examples of their experiences with culture while pursuing a postsecondary degree. Data collection included individual

interviews, focus groups, and artifact analysis. Coding the data resulted in four primary themes and subsequent sub-themes being identified and interpreted. This section contains a summary of the thematic findings, as discussed in Chapter Four, followed by the researcher's interpretations of the findings. Implications for policy or practice and theoretical and empirical implications are also described below.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Four primary themes were discovered and linked to a priori codes during the data analysis process of this research study. The four themes deemed relevant to the eleven AI/AN participants were (a) identity; (b) responsibility; (c) affirmation and healing; and (d) advocacy for the preservation of culture. The themes and sub-themes provided richness and insight into the participants' lived experiences as AI/AN learners in public postsecondary institutions in Alaska and informed the interpretations described below.

Timing and support improve the possibility of success. Most of the participants in this study identified themselves as non-traditional students. They were older than typical college students, and some had families to support. Others participated in academics through non-traditional means (e.g., distance delivery). Many of them were also first-generation learners. Additionally, some described taking circuitous academic journeys in which their pursuit of a postsecondary degree happened much later in life.

While their non-traditional paths to higher education might appear to be a failure or near-failure to some, each participant described their academic achievements as successful. Obtaining their degrees was not about 'if' but 'when.' Their degree would start or resume when the timing was right for themselves and their families. Barnes-Najor et al. (2021) discussed the relevance of family and community support in AI/AN populations. The participants spoke of the support of

parents, grandparents, co-workers, their children, and fellow AI/AN classmates that motivated them to pursue their degrees and kept them motivated when they encountered life events that challenged them inside and outside the classroom. It is within those familial and social relationships that AI/AN peoples grow and thrive.

Cultural coexistence is vital for postsecondary students. The interviews and focus group discussions were rich with the participants' descriptions of culture. They recognized and spoke about their Native heritages through sharing who had gifted them their Yup'ik names and describing the communities they called home. Many of them introduced the researcher to their families through storytelling and bringing homemade artifacts that represented their cultures. Yet their knowledge of and focus on their embodied culture did not limit them in their recognition or appreciation of other cultures.

The data analysis revealed the participants' desires to integrate and co-exist with other cultures in the public university system. They analyzed the fact that postsecondary institutions, and society beyond those institutions, are made up of many different ethnicities and cultures. Their desires were not to have the existing dominant culture assimilate to the AI/AN cultures the participants' represented but for all cultures to learn and experience academic success together.

Academic success requires space for healing. The history of assimilation and forced colonization of AI/AN people and their subsequent negative effects (Barnes-Najor et al., 2021; Findling et al., 2022) have left their marks on AI/AN people in the forms of substance use, homelessness, mental illness, violence, and suicide. The AI/AN individuals who have survived the boarding school mandates or have indirectly experienced the effects of them need more than a postsecondary degree to thrive in society. They also need mental and emotional space to heal from these travesties.

Meanwhile, advancing in socioeconomic status often requires a higher education degree. To accomplish their academic goals, some AI/AN learners push themselves forward despite signs and symptoms of intergenerational trauma. Most participants described their desire to be seen and heard as Indigenous women in the classroom. This meant they sought opportunities to incorporate their culture into assignments. In one instance, a participant created an interdisciplinary studies degree program that would allow her to reconnect with her culture and her family's history. All participants reflected on the healing and hope that infusing their academic studies with their languages, histories, and Indigenous selves brought them. Their efforts reminded them they were 'enough' and were deserving of their place in the university system.

Future generations need accurate and adequate classroom representation. Research shows cultural underrepresentation and misrepresentation exist in postsecondary institutions (Pilar, 2018). The women who participated in this study repeatedly verbalized that a significant factor in their pursuits of postsecondary degrees was to be a model for future generations. Many of them shared that it was challenging to be a first-generation learner since they needed a role model in whose footsteps they could follow. One participant shared that she was a second-generation learner whose mother had instilled in her that education was not just for the individual but for future generations. Participants expressed taking their responsibility seriously to show little AI/AN girls that they, too, can succeed in college.

Implications for Policy or Practice

Previous research conducted within Alaska's public postsecondary system (Board of Regents, 2022) described baseline measures identified in 2022 and requisite action plans for improving the percentage of AI/AN students enrolled in and graduating from Alaska's public

postsecondary institutions. However, aside from identifying the goals of providing diversity, equity, and inclusion among staff, faculty, and students and identifying Alaska Native success as a primary initiative, details on how the UA system planned to achieve its goals were lacking (Board of Regents, 2022). To add to the existing literature, the researcher identified implications for policy and practice, including theoretical and empirical implications that may prove beneficial in the UA system reaching its targeted goals.

Implications for Policy

The sub-themes external validation, cultural (re)connection, grandparents–teach, and current and future generations were all indicative of policy implications. Alaska's public postsecondary institutions may benefit from enhancing their current teaching model. Participants enrolled in and graduated from the Mountain-Village College described positive experiences in programs where elders (i.e., grandparents) held the role of teacher, facilitator, and advisor. Inviting AI/AN traditional teachers to be part of the faculty and staff of the UA universities may provide opportunities for increased enrollment of AI/AN learners, conjoint healing and learning to occur, and allow AI/AN learners to internalize the external validation they reported in interviews and focus groups that they are seeking.

Implications for Practice

Many organizations across the state of Alaska are becoming increasingly common for staff to include a land acknowledgment in their corporate signatures. These acknowledgments can be a part of opening ceremonies to recognize colonization and assimilation's continual impact on the AI/AN people (Godlewska et al., 2020). The UA system may benefit from incorporating land acknowledgment into its universities' culture. This would be a positive step

toward recognizing AI/AN cultures and going above and beyond Banks' (1989) minimal contributions to cultural integration often seen in schools across the United States.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This transcendental phenomenological study resulted in findings that have theoretical and empirical implications for Alaska's public postsecondary institutions, their faculty, staff, AI/AN learners, and their family members. The theoretical framework in which this research study was situated is Bourdieu's (1979/1984) theory of cultural capital, specifically embodied cultural capital. The thematic findings of this research study address the gap in existing literature regarding AI/AN learners' experiences with embodied cultural capital in public postsecondary institutions.

Theoretical Implications

The internalized value of AI/AN learners' culture is a necessary component of their pursuit of a postsecondary degree. Typically, the education system aligns with the dominant culture represented among the staff and student bodies, creating a hierarchy of cultures (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Chet et al., 2020; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Rudick et al., 2019). Likewise, the non-dominant cultures are expected to exchange their culture for that of the dominant culture represented on residential and e-learning campuses. This hierarchy and cultural exchange expectation is a continuation of colonization and assimilation described by Szasz (1974) and Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018).

The participants' lived experience stories reinforce the value of embodied cultural capital that Bourdieu (1979/1984) described in his theory as a means of enhancing AI/AN learners' postsecondary degree experiences. The voices of the participants add to the existing literature that typically focuses on the traumas their ancestors have faced through assimilation and

colonization (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Szasz, 1974) and gives hope to future AI/AN generations. Without their personal experiences, these 11 AI/AN college students and graduates would not have been able to represent their cultures and honor their families with their self-determination. Meanwhile, they have provided insight to university faculty and staff about the importance of embodied cultural capital to ensure academic space for healing, learning, and multiple cultures to co-exist.

Empirical Implications

Several studies have examined AI/AN history regarding assimilation and colonization (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Curl et al., 2018; Szasz, 1974) and their effects on the populations regarding intergenerational trauma (Gifford & McEachern, 2021; Godlewska et al., 2020; Hirshberg et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2021) and academic success (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Nettles, 2017; Pilar, 2018). Other studies described social barriers (Bourke et al., 2020; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Joyner-Matos & Islam-Zwart, 2021; Keefer, 2017; McKinley, 2020) that interfere with and prevent AI/AN learners from obtaining postsecondary degrees. These factors and others, like health and wellness (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018), first-generation student status (Xiong & Jacob, 2020), and socio-economic status (Bassett, 2019) affect the likelihood of AI/AN learners pursuing a college education and their obtainment of a degree.

The participants in this study shared their experiences with maintaining a connection to their culture while pursuing a postsecondary degree in public universities with many students who represent the dominant culture. Additionally, they described how their cultures provided a safeguard and traditional knowledge to help them overcome challenges with higher education. The empirical implications of this study are necessary additions to the literature since education

reform continues to emphasize the need for cultural awareness in classrooms while basing policy on assumptions that preservice teachers lack the knowledge to effectively teach various cultures (Cherng & Davis, 2019). Furthermore, lived experiences of AI/AN learners told in their voices, as indicated by direct quotes, are not typically seen in the existing literature due to researchers regularly omitting AI/AN learners due to their small sample size (Pilar, 2018).

This research study represented two of the three primary universities within Alaska's public postsecondary system, Mountain-River College, and Fireweed University, respectively. Seven participants were associated with Mountain-River College; four were current students at the time of this study, and three were alumni. Four participants were associated with Fireweed University; one was a current student at the time of this study, and three were alumni. Regardless of the postsecondary institution within the UA system the participants attended (or were attending), all 11 participants described the need for healing and learning to happen in tandem to allow AI/AN learners to do what Elicaraq 6 described in her interview. She expressed being able to:

Able to walk in both worlds for our people. Walk in and know our culture, but also walk in and know the Western culture. There are rules in society, and we must play by those rules or work to change them.

However, the two universities represented in this study reportedly provided unique programs that resulted in participants experiencing embodied cultural capital differently from one another. For example, Mountain-River College learners reported that some courses they took were culturally relevant with culturally competent instructors. In those courses, Alaska Native voices were "actually prioritized," and professors worked "to amplify those voices in really big ways." Fireweed University learners described a different experience indicating a need to

enhance the curricula and instruction through embedding AI/AN culture. Although a few participants reported being able to incorporate their AI/AN culture into their assignments, others explained having to take on a more active role in maintaining a link between culture and college experience. Elicaraq 3 said, "I kind of created this curriculum for myself." When asked if she saw elements of her culture when pursuing her degree, Elicaraq 7 shared that she had "actually almost quit just because there was no connection, and I'm all about connection. Because I myself practice through my lens as an Alaska Native Yup'ik woman and use my cultural practices, beliefs."

Cultural competency and awareness are necessary for educators working with dominant and non-dominant cultures. Educators who know and can demonstrate cultural understanding in the classroom are more capable of teaching diverse student populations (Cherng & Davis, 2019). Culturally responsive schools (CRS) can better promote their learners' healthy development and culture (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021). Based on reports of the participants in this research study, it is evident that Alaska's public postsecondary institutions and their AI/AN learners would benefit from enhancing the curriculum and instruction. Accurate and adequate representation in the texts and learning materials would allow AI/AN learners to relate better to the content. Participants in this study voiced their belief in representing their tribes and blazing a trail for future AI/AN generations. Representation is necessary for AI/AN learners to obtain postsecondary degrees.

Additionally, the public university system's student body would benefit from proper cultural integration where students from dominant and non-dominant cultures can co-exist in their learning experiences while learning from and respecting one another's heritage. Providing AI/AN learners with an on-campus center where they can participate in culturally relevant events may provide the safety and affirmation that some students need. However, maintaining a

separate on-campus center indicates the continuation of assimilation and colonization (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Curl et al., 2018; Szasz, 1974) through systemic oppression (Davis & Museus, 2019). This study echoed the importance of cultural integration in public postsecondary institutions.

Addressing the social barriers that impede AI/AN learners' pursuits of postsecondary degrees requires them, their support networks, and institutes of higher learning to work together. Elearning is necessary for AI/AN learners who have family obligations or live in their village communities without a satellite campus. However, rural Alaska poses additional challenges to eLearning (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Bennett et al., 2019; Curtis et al., 2021; Zahnd et al., 2021) that require educators to understand and work with their students to maintain connections to the learning community as well as eLearning systems (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas, etc.). Creating cohesive learning communities for AI/AN learners who participate in distance-delivery programs increases their support network and mitigates the health issues AI/AN individuals are at high risk of experiencing (Komro et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2020; Wexler, 2017). Recognizing and responding to the needs of high-context learners in low-context postsecondary institutions may reduce the degree attainment gap regarding AI/AN learners.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study contained limitations and delimitations that impact transferability. Limitations demonstrate potential weaknesses of the study that are uncontrollable. For example, more than 200 screenings were completed by individuals expressing interest in participating in this study, yet only 11 individuals were eligible based on the study criteria. All 11 participants identified as female. The sample demographic represented resulted in the study excluding the AI/AN male perspective on culture and pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Delimitations, or identified parameters that the researcher established for this study, resulted in a narrow scope regarding the topic. Participants were required to have been enrolled in a minimum of two semesters in an Alaska public postsecondary institution. This criterion may have excluded students experiencing or who had experienced a single semester with insight regarding embodied cultural capital while pursuing a degree. By recruiting participants who were enrolled in or recent graduates of Alaska's public postsecondary institutions, the AI/AN learner perspective was exclusive to one university system. AI/AN learners attending public colleges or universities in other states were unable to add their lived experiences to the data collected in this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study explored the lived experiences of AI/AN learners' experiences with embodied cultural capital in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions. The findings of this study resulted in the following recommendations for future research. The participants were recruited from the public university system in Alaska and were required to be current students or graduated on or after January 1, 2018. Future research on AI/AN learners and embodied cultural capital while pursuing a postsecondary degree may prove beneficial if participants identified by similar criteria are recruited from public universities in other states.

Eight of the eleven participants identified as Yup'ik, and two identified as Inupiaq, all but one participant had strong ties to rural Alaska. Considering there are other American Indian tribes across the United States as well as other Indigenous peoples, future researchers could recruit participants from other tribes to add to the literature. Collecting data on other American Indian tribes may prove effective in identifying other themes or expanding on those identified in this study.

Finally, this study was not created to focus only on the lived experiences of female learners in Alaska's public postsecondary institutions. Instead, only female participants were screened; potential male participants were screened out due to their demographic responses or lack of engagement following completing the screening process. Future research focused on the AI/AN male perspective may provide additional insight into how public universities serve learners from this non-dominant culture or how they can better serve this population.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand AI/AN learners' lived experiences with embodied cultural capital while attending Alaska's public postsecondary institutions. The theory that guided this study was Pierre Bourdieu's (1979/1984) theory of cultural capital, specifically embodied cultural capital. This theory informed the related literature by drawing connections between the historical assimilation and colonization experienced by AI/AN people, the continued systemic oppression that exists today, and the need for postsecondary institutions to embrace non-dominant cultures within their programs, including curricula and instruction. The purposeful sample for this study was 11 participants who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, were 18 years or older, and were enrolled in an associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate program at one of Alaska's public postsecondary institutions or had graduated from a degree program at one of these institutions on or after January 1, 2018. The central research question was: What is AI/AN learners' experiences with culture in postsecondary institutions? Three sub-questions also guided this study: (SQ1) How do AI/AN learners remain connected to their cultures while pursuing a postsecondary degree? (SQ2) How do AI/AN learners see their obtainment of a postsecondary degree impacting their future SES? (SQ3) How does embodied cultural capital help AI/AN learners overcome their challenges when pursuing a

postsecondary degree? The data collection activities included individual, semi-structured interviews, artifact analysis, and focus groups. Four primary themes and several sub-themes emerged during the data analysis phase and were linked to a priori codes identified during the literature review phase of this study. The themes and sub-themes were identity with sub-themes – name and land acknowledgment (a priori code: observation); responsibility with sub-themes – grandparents – teach and grandchildren – learn (a priori code: observation); affirmation and healing with sub-themes – external validation and cultural (re)connection (a priori code: obtainment); and advocacy for and preservation of culture with the sub-theme – current and future generations (a priori codes: adaptation and utilization). The participants in this study attended two of the three public institutions located in Alaska. Their experiences with embodied cultural capital appeared on a continuum ranging from no cultural connection to significant cultural connection during their postsecondary degree journeys, with one institution providing a more culturally responsive environment than the other. All participants in this study described experiences related to having to take responsibility for tying their culture into their studies with a desire for these dominant cultural institutions to enhance their programs with non-dominant cultural aspects to validate their AI/AN learners' sense of belongingness.

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Appendix A: LU-IRB Approval**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 11, 2022

Victoria Miller
Patricia Ferrin

Re: Modification - IRB-FY22-23-109 American Indian/Alaska Native Learners' Experiences with Embodied Cultural Capital in Alaska's Postsecondary Institutions: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Victoria Miller, Patricia Ferrin,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY22-23-109 American Indian/Alaska Native Learners' Experiences with Embodied Cultural Capital in Alaska's Postsecondary Institutions: A Phenomenological Study.

Decision: Approved

Your request to include individuals who graduated from one of Alaska's post-secondary institutions on or after 1/1/2018 as opposed to between 9/1/21 and 9/1/22 has been approved. Thank you for submitting your revised study documents for our review and documentation. Your revised, stamped consent form and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study in Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letters

Social Media Recruitment Letter

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to understand the lived experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) adult learners' pursuit of a higher education degree in one of Alaska's public postsecondary institutions as it pertains to the degree attainment gap. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, identify as American Indian/Alaska Native, and be currently enrolled in an associate, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree program at one of Alaska's public postsecondary schools for at least two semesters or have graduated from one of Alaska's public postsecondary schools with one of the above degrees on or after 1/1/2018. Participants will be asked to participate in an in-depth, individual semi-structured 45-60 minute interview that will be audio/video recorded for the purpose of discussing their experience at the postsecondary institution and bring to the interview an item that represents their culture and desire to pursue a postsecondary degree and participate in a recorded 45-60 minute focus group with other study participants. Participants will also engage in transcript and data review to ensure the accuracy of their lived experience reports.

If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please contact me at [REDACTED] or email at [REDACTED] for more information and schedule an interview. A consent document will be emailed to you within 48 hours upon receipt of the completed screening survey. Participants will receive a \$25 gift card to a local business as compensation for participation when the study is completed.

Participant Recruitment Verbal Script

Hello Potential Participant,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. The purpose of my research is to understand the lived experiences of adult AI/AN learners enrolled in a higher education degree program at one of Alaska's public postsecondary schools. If you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, identify as American Indian/Alaska Native, and be currently enrolled in one of Alaska's public universities pursuing an associate, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree programs for two semesters or have graduated from a public Alaska university with one of the above degree types on or after 1/1/2018. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an in-depth, individual semi-structured 45-60 minute interview that will be audio/video recorded for the purpose of discussing their experience in a bachelor's degree program and bring to the interview an item that represents their culture and desire to pursue a postsecondary degree, and participate in a recorded 45-60 minute focus group with other study participants. Participants will also engage in transcript and data review to ensure the accuracy of their lived experience reports. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate? [Yes] Great, could I get your email address to send you the link to the survey? [No] I understand. Thank you for your time. Have a wonderful day.

A consent document will be emailed to you within 48 hours. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to participate in the study. Participants will receive a \$25 gift card to a local business as compensation for participation when the study is completed.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

Appendix C: Participant Screening Questionnaire

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of AI/AN adult learners who have participated in one of Alaska's public postsecondary schools to attain an associate, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree. This questionnaire is intended to document potential participants' demographic information, confirm AI/AN status, and establish your perceived ability to describe and reflect on your experience as an AI/AN postsecondary student to determine the goodness of fit for this research study.

1. First and Last Name: _____
2. Contact Information (email address & phone number): _____
3. Age: _____
4. Do you identify as American Indian/Alaska Native? Yes/No
 - a. If yes, which tribe are you affiliated with: _____
5. Are you currently enrolled in a postsecondary program in the state of Alaska? Yes/No
 - a. If yes, which postsecondary institution are you enrolled in: _____
 - b. Have you been enrolled for at least two semesters? Yes/No
6. Have you graduated from a postsecondary program in the state of Alaska on or after 1/1/2018? Yes/No
7. Academic Major(s) if applicable: _____
8. Academic Minor(s) if applicable: _____
9. Anticipated degree attainment date: _____
10. Describe your post-academic goal(s): _____

Rate your ability to reflect on your experience in a postsecondary school.

1. I feel very confident/somewhat confident/not confident at all about recalling details of my postsecondary school experience.
2. I feel very confident/somewhat confident/not confident at all about my ability to provide detailed descriptions about how it feels to be an AI/AN college student.
3. I feel very confident/somewhat confident/not confident at all about my ability to provide detailed descriptions of my Native culture and its influence on my education.

Appendix D: Consent Form(s)

The AI/AN Adult Learner Consent Form

Title of the Project: American Indian/Alaska Native learners' experiences with culture in Alaska postsecondary degree program: A phenomenological study

Principal Investigator: Victoria J. Miller, Ph.D. Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, identify as American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), be enrolled in one of Alaska's public postsecondary institutions for the purpose of obtaining an associate, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree, have been in your chosen academic program for at least 2 semesters or have graduated from one of Alaska's public postsecondary institutions on or after 1/1/2018. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to interview 10-15 college students who identify as American Indian and/or Alaska Native (AI/AN) individually and in a group setting. My goal in talking with the students is to find out from them what it is like to be an AI/AN learner while pursuing a college degree in a mainstream, primarily non-AI/AN college community.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an in-depth, individual semi-structured interview that will be recorded to discuss your experience in a postsecondary education program. The initial interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes.
2. Bring to the interview an item that represents your culture and desire to pursue a postsecondary degree.
3. Participate in a recorded focus group with other study participants. The focus group will take between 45 and 60 minutes. All participants will be invited to participate in the focus group. If all participants wish to participate in the focus group, participants will be selected by purposeful sample with 3-5 participants in each focus group.
4. Participants will also engage in transcript and data review to ensure the accuracy of their lived experience reports.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include an increased understanding of AI/AN adult learner experiences with culture in Alaska's public postsecondary degree programs.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased, and only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- As a mandatory reporter, [REDACTED] please note that any reports related to child abuse, child neglect, abuse or neglect of vulnerable adults, or intent to harm self or others will be disclosed to the proper authorities to ensure the safety of all involved.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated with a \$25 gift card to a local business for participating in this study. Compensation will only be provided to participants who complete all tasks involved in the study as outlined in this consent. Mailing addresses will be requested for compensation purposes in the event the retailers do not provide electronic gift cards that can be sent via email. Compensation will be sent to qualifying participants via email or postal mail.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the education program in which you are enrolled. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Victoria Miller. You may ask questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [REDACTED] and/or at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Patricia Ferrin, Ed.D., at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, [REDACTED] or email at [REDACTED].

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix E: Open-Ended Interview Questions

Central Research Question

What are AI/AN learners' experiences with culture in postsecondary institutions?

Opening Question

1. Please introduce yourself in the manner customary for your culture. Ice-breaker Question

Questions Related to the Central Research Question

2. Tell me about the artifact you selected that holds special meaning regarding your culture and your pursuit of a higher education degree. CRQ / Observation

Questions Related to Sub-Question One

3. What aspects of your culture do you see in the curricula used in your degree program?
SQ1 / Observation
4. Describe the cultural connections you experience with college professors, advisors, and other faculty and/or staff. SQ1 / Obtainment
5. Describe the cultural connections you experience with your classmates. SQ1 / Obtainment

Questions Related to Sub-Question Two

6. Describe the primary school experiences that prepared you for college. SQ2 / Adaptation
7. Describe the secondary school experiences that prepared you for college. SQ2 / Adaptation

Questions Related to Sub-Question Three

8. Tell me about any remedial education courses you are taking or have taken since enrolling in your degree program. SQ3 / Adaptation
9. Describe your challenges as an AI/AN adult learner in a public postsecondary education program and how your culture helps you face/overcome those challenges. SQ3 / Adaptation
10. How often can you/do you include elements of your culture into your college assignments while adhering to the assignment instructions? SQ3 / Utilization
11. How would you describe your academic success as an AI/AN adult learner in a public postsecondary education program? SQ3 / Utilization

Closing Question

12. What else would you like to add to our discussion about your experience in your degree program at this public university? Clarifying Question

Appendix F: Interview Protocol Template

Interview Protocol Project: AI/AN Student Experience with Culture in a Postsecondary Institution		
Time of Interview:	Date:	Place:
Interviewer:		Interviewee:
Interview Type: Initial/Follow-up		Length of Interview:
Interview Questions		Reflective Notes
Please introduce yourself in the manner customary for your culture.		
Tell me about the artifact you selected that holds special meaning to your culture and your pursuit of a higher education degree.		
What aspects of your culture do you see in the curricula used in your degree program?		
Describe the cultural connections you experience with college professors, advisors, and other faculty and/or staff.		
Describe the cultural connections you experience with your classmates.		
Describe the primary school experiences that prepared you for college.		
Describe the secondary school experiences that prepared you for college.		
Tell me about any remedial education courses you are taking or have taken since enrolling in your degree program.		
Describe the challenges you face as an AI/AN adult learner in a public postsecondary education program.		
How often can you include elements of your culture into your college assignments while adhering to the assignment instructions?		
How would you describe your academic success as an AI/AN adult learner in a public postsecondary education program?		

What else would you like to add to our discussion about your experience in your degree program at this public university?	
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Appendix G: Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. Think back over your college experience and share your fondest memory. CRQ
2. Describe your current student status, whether you plan to complete your degree program, and how your culture influences that plan. CRQ
3. Describe the cultural integration you expected from your degree program. SQ1
4. How was your experience with culture in college reflective of what others warned you about? SQ2
5. What have you learned about yourself as an AI/AN individual while being in college?
SQ3