

# The Spirit Essence of All We Do: Cultural Identity and Success

## Learning Objectives

Read to answer these key questions:

- What is my cultural identity?
- How is success related to my cultural identity?
- What is the history of higher education for Native American and Indigenous students?
- How has education changed since the 1960's?
- What is the role of family and home in your success?
- What are some obstacles to college and career success?
- How can I overcome these obstacles?
- What personal strengths are related to my culture?
- How can I successfully navigate my own culture and the culture of higher education?
- How can I improve my health and wellbeing?
- What are some tips for learning from the Native perspective?

## Career Success: Jo Harjo, Poet Laureate, Muscogee/Cree

Joy Harjo, the United States 23<sup>rd</sup> Poet Laureate, is the first Indigenous American to hold that honor. She is also an author, playwright, musician, philosopher, professor, mother, and grandmother. She completed her bachelor's degree at the University of New Mexico and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Iowa in its creative writing program.



Joy Harjo is an active member of the Muscogee Nation, and her writing features Indigenous symbolism, imagery, history, and social issues such as imperialism, colonialism, and violence toward women.

She is the author of many volumes of poetry and books that explore Indigenous subjects: *The Last Song*; *She Had Some Horses*; *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*; *What Moon Drove Me to This*; *Secrets from the Center of the World*; *In Mad Love and War*; *Fishing*; *A Map to the Next World: Poetry and Tales*; *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems*; *In Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*; *An American Sunrise*; *For a Girl Becoming*; *Soul Talk*, *Song Language*; *Crazy Brave*; and *Poet Warrior*.

Joy Harjo is also a talented musician who received the Native American Music Award for best female artist of the year. She plays the saxophone and flute, sings, and has her own band, Poetic Justice. She tours with a group called Arrow Dynamics.

Here are some well-known quotes from Joy Harjo:

*The most powerful poetry is birthed through the cracks in history, through what is broken and unseen.*

*All cultures and peoples turn to poetry during times of celebration, transformation, and challenge—those times when ordinary language cannot carry meaning beyond our understanding.*

*When I began to listen to poetry, it's when I began to listen to the stones, and I began to listen to what the clouds had to say, and I began to listen to others. And I think, most importantly for all of us, then you begin to learn to listen to the soul, the soul of yourself in here, which is also the soul of everyone else.*

*Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.*

Learn more about Joy Harjo: Joy Harjo, Biography, at <https://biography.com/writer/joy-harjo>

**W**elcome to college! Whether you are a first-year student just entering college or are returning to college after a break, we hope that the material in this textbook will be useful and valuable. This textbook is designed to help you succeed in college and accomplish your dreams. This new learning environment will give you the tools to expand your knowledge, broaden your perspective, redefine your future, and gain a better understanding of your personal strengths. Topics include college and career success along with Native perspectives.

This textbook is based on the premise that students are more successful if they take pride in their culture and build on their personal strengths. Most Native peoples believe that there is a spirit essence in all things that we do and in all things in nature. Remembering your spirit essence will help you to connect to your past and your present. This focus will allow you to honor your family and community while also honoring your college education.

Many of you come from traditional communities, others come from urban settings, and you may also be one of the first to attend college in your family. We understand that the college environment can be foreign and will challenge you to use your resources to be successful. This book is dedicated to helping you to do just that!

### **Beginning in a Good Way**

Begin your college journey with reflection on your goal of a college education. The journey through education is like a ceremony which begins with enrollment in college and ends with graduation. Ceremonial practices are a link from the past to the future. In traditional ceremonies, the journey begins with blessings of protection, success, and good luck. Beginning in a good way often includes a traditional prayer to the creator, the universal life force. In the Cree language the universal life force is called Mamawi Ohtawimaw. This prayer acknowledges that we are all connected and what distinguishes humans from other life forms is our ability to reason, which is useful in providing what we need to survive. In exchange for the gift of reason, humans are given the responsibility to look after mother earth.

### **Celebrate Who You Are**

There are many names for the Indigenous peoples of North America depending on where you live. In the United States, the terms Native American, American Indian, and Alaskan Native are used, although Native American is becoming the generally accepted term. In Canada, you may use the terms First Nations, Indigenous, Aboriginal, Metis, or Inuit. The term First Nations refers to a specific group of Indigenous peoples, whereas the term "Indigenous" is being used more often to describe all peoples native to the land now called Canada. You may find in this textbook that the terms Indigenous and First Nations are used. They are being used with no disrespect to any peoples that might prefer another term.

In addition, each nation uses their own term in their own language to describe themselves. For example, Cree use the term Nēhiyawī and the Athabaskan use the term DEN-ay/Dene. Some older generations use the term "Indian" to describe themselves, but this term is becoming less acceptable to younger tribal members. However, wherever you call home, our goal is to help you to become a successful college/university student.

### **Journal Entry #1**

What name do you use to describe yourself? (Native American, American Indian, Alaskan Native, First Nations, Indigenous, Aboriginal, Metis, Inuit, or other) What is your tribal name? Write at least one sentence about being proud of who you are. Remember that you can be empowered by taking pride in yourself and your community. You may be asked to share this information with other students in your class.

All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The Earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it.

Chief Joseph, Nez Perce



Photo courtesy of First Nations University of Canada.

## Getting Started

As you engage in the orientation and intake process of your college, one of the first questions you will be asked is, "What are your educational goals and what is your major area of study?" Many of you will be ready to answer these questions because you have considered your future and feel ready to make a commitment; others are still unsure about your future and which field is of most interest to you. This textbook will help you to explore your career options and select the career that matches your personal strengths.



Photo courtesy of Navajo Technical University.

Some of you have parents, aunts and uncles, or friends that have completed a college degree, while others do not know anyone in their community who has attended college. If you or your family has not attended college, it is even more important to ask for help from counselors or advisors at your college. Asking for help is not a weakness; it shows that you want to be successful.

This new world of higher education opens the door to a diverse and complex world, one that may be very different than your community back home. This new world will present challenges along the way and you will need to figure out how to best navigate through college successfully. There is no right or wrong answer. You are about to embark on your own unique journey. Explore and enjoy your process.

## College Success

Most students attend college to make a better life for themselves, their families, and their communities. Unfortunately, neither the United States nor Canada can boast about higher education success and completion rates for Native American and First Nations' students. Both the United States and Canada are striving for improvement and have had increases in completion rates over the past 10–15 years, but improvement is still needed. The National Institute for Native Leadership in Higher Education reports that for every 100 Native American students entering high school, only 60 will finish, about 20 will enter college, and only three will receive a bachelor's degree.<sup>1</sup>

The Postsecondary National Policy Institute provides this data for Native American and Alaskan Native students:<sup>2</sup>

- In Fall 2020, Native American students made up 0.6% of all postsecondary enrollment.
- In 2020, 22% of the 18–24-year-old Native American population were enrolled in college compared to 40% of the overall U.S. population.

- Native American students are more likely to attend public institutions over private institutions.
- 89% of all Native American college students attended a Tribal College/University in the fall of 2018.
- 41% of Native American college students who started college in 2012 graduated within 6 years compared to 62% for all college students.
- In 2019, 25% of Native Americans over the age of 25 had an associate degree or higher, compared to 42% of all those over the age of 25.

The data clearly shows that Native American and Alaskan Native students are not graduating from high school, or completing higher level degrees at the rate of the national average, although some improvement is noted. The data also reflects that the Native American and Alaskan Native populations are younger than the national average, and therefore, it is important that we improve educational success for these populations for the betterment of the country and for their communities at large.

According to the Chiefs Assembly on Education, Palais des Congres de Gatineau Quebec, Canada, in 2012<sup>1</sup>:

- First Nations youth are the fastest growing demographic in Canada, with 30% of this population under the age of 30.
- 36% of First Nation students graduate from high school compared to the Canadian graduation rate of 72%
- Aboriginal people have a lower educational attainment than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, with 43.7% not holding a certificate, diploma or degree compared to 23.1% for the Canadian population.
- Poverty and low funding for Aboriginal schools create a serious challenge for 55% of First Nation schools.

Again, we see the parallels for First Nation students with Native American and Alaskan Native students. The school systems in both countries are challenged with improving curriculum and instruction for these younger aged populations.

## Journal Entry #2

You have just read about the low completion rates for Native American and Indigenous students. You have made the courageous decision to attend college. What steps can you take to be one of the students who successfully completes his or her education?

## The Unfortunate History of Higher Education for Native American and Indigenous Students

Why have Native American/Alaska Natives and First Nation students struggled with formal education? Historically, in both the United States and in Canada, White institutions are not trusted by Native peoples for a variety of reasons relating to the colonial period.

*Thus, education policy in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States developed from a racist colonial ideology that positions Indigenous peoples as brutes, wild, and "savage." Education in these countries was used as an instrument of the White settler-state to eliminate Indigenous peoples whether by Christian or secular education. The policies growing out of this ideology explicitly suppressed Indigenous ways of learning, and because of this, higher education for Indigenous peoples in these*

*countries rooted in Indigenous knowledge has only recently developed. Since education in general was used as a tool for cultural and linguistic genocide, Indigenous peoples in all four of these countries have been rightfully suspicious of White settler education, which may be one reason higher education has been slow to develop.”<sup>4</sup>*

In the United States, the boarding schools were often traumatizing institutions to native communities.

*“[Captain Richard Henry] Pratt opened the Carlisle Indian School in 1879. School officials closely monitored student behavior and punished students for speaking Native languages and practicing tribal tradition or religions. Pratt’s arrogant and paternalistic plans sought elimination of Native peoples’ cultures and identities under the guise of Indian education. While many boarding schools did not conform entirely to the Carlisle model, nearly all Native students were subjected to a two-pronged assault on their tribal identities . . . stripped away all outward signs of Indian children’s association with tribal life, (cut hair, changed names) and the . . . school’s pedagogy was intended to eliminate the traditional culture from Native youth and restructure their minds and life ways.”<sup>5</sup>*

More recently in Canada, the federal government has recognized, and apologized for the devastating effects the residential school system has had on First Nations communities. On June 11, 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper acknowledged, “Two primary objectives of the residential school system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, ‘to kill the Indian in the child.’ Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.”<sup>6</sup>

Early European colonists not only had the idea that they were masters of nature, but that they were a superior culture, and Indigenous cultures had to be assimilated into this superior culture or be exterminated. It included the idea that “Western civilization represented the highest development of humankind . . . where Western Europeans understood themselves to be at the cutting-edge of history with everybody else requiring instruction to be brought up to speed.” This idea was supported by various Christian denominations and included a moral mandate to remake other cultures to conform to their world view. Soon after the arrival of the Spaniards in Mexico, schools were set up to indoctrinate Indigenous children in Christianity and teach them the ways of Western European culture. Obviously, these new ideas did not match the world view of Native American populations.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”  
Martin Luther King



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Across the Americas the goals of education were assimilation of Native American cultures. In the United States, compulsory education laws forced Native American children to be removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools. In order for children to become “productive citizens,” they were prohibited from speaking their Native

language and often punished if they did so. The purpose of these schools was to erase their culture and to teach them how to live in the White man's world. In effect, they taught Native people how to be White. This often led to cultural disintegration in which Native Americans lost their culture and were still not fully accepted into the dominant White culture resulting in a loss of identity, increased social problems, and the feeling of being misunderstood in both worlds. Because Native American children began to lose their language, communication between children and parents and grandparents became limited, resulting in these children being cut off from their heritage and culture. In the process, these children viewed education as irrelevant, painful, and something to be avoided. This systematic destruction of thousands of years of Native American culture, language, history, and spirituality lead to the self-destructive behaviors of alcoholism, drug addiction, and self-hatred that still haunt Indigenous populations to this day, from the tip of Alaska, to the tip of Tierra del Fuego.

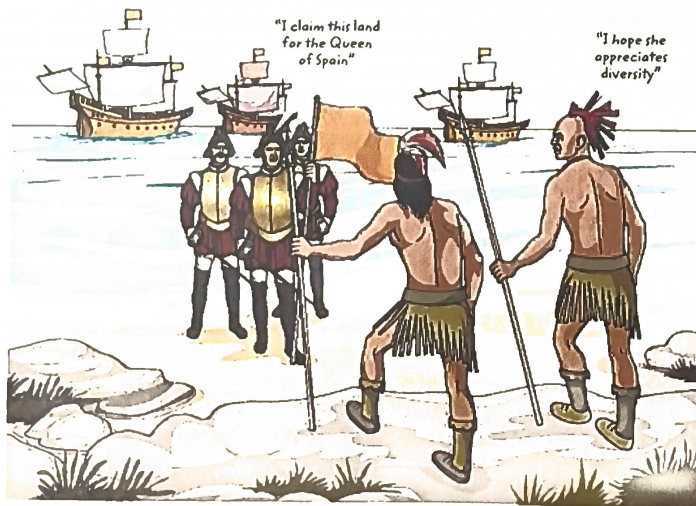
Dillon Platero, director of the Navajo Division of Education, described a typical student named "Kee."

*Kee was sent to a boarding school as a child where-as was the practice-he was punished for speaking Navajo. Since he was only allowed to return home during Christmas and summer, he lost contact with his family. Kee withdrew from both the White and Navajo worlds as he grew older because he could not comfortably communicate in either language. He became one of the many Navajo who were non-lingual-a man without a language. By the time he was 16, Kee was an alcoholic, uneducated, and despondent without identity.<sup>8</sup>*

Removing Native children from their parents and community is especially damaging since traditional Native teaching and child rearing comes from parents, grandparents, and extended family members. Examples of the teachings of the Iñupiaq were "knowledge of language, sharing, respect for



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others, cooperation, respect for elders, love for children, hard work, knowledge of family tree, avoidance of conflict, respect for nature, spirituality, humor, family roles, hunter success, domestic skills, humility and responsibility to the tribe." These values would enable Indigenous children to maintain a positive self-identity and to find their place in the world. These children knew who they were and how to live in the world. They accepted the responsibility of becoming a contributing member of society. The accomplishments of the children were viewed as accomplishments of the family.

When Columbus arrived, there were several million Indigenous people living in what is today Canada and the United States. In Mexico alone, there were between 10 and 30 million Indigenous people speaking over 256 distinct languages! In the United States, at the beginning of the 20th century, the numbers decreased to 200,000 because of new diseases introduced since 1492, the introduction of guns that were used in warfare, starvation resulting from the killing of the buffalo and other game, and forced movement of Native Americans to reservations that were on less desirable lands. Alcoholism, drug addiction, diabetes, heart disease, and mental illness have taken a great toll on the Indigenous nations of the Americas. European colonization is often called the "American Indian Holocaust."<sup>10</sup>

### **The Rebirth of Education and Cultural Identity**

It wasn't until the 1960s, during the civil rights era, that there was the realization that Western education was not working neither for Native students nor for society in general. This era was the beginning of education built on the premise of self-determination. Native American groups such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) began to speak up for the First Nations of America. Self-determination and resiliency were stressed as important tools or "weapons" against the mental and spiritual colonization of the Americas. Resiliency is based on the human characteristic of surviving at any cost. Resilient people and communities use their cultural, linguistic, and spiritual heritage to negotiate and overcome the roadblocks that a dominant society puts in front of them. Resiliency comes from within the individual, but it must be fostered from outside: from the extended family that is the community.

In 1973, the Canadian National Indian Brotherhood introduced the concept of "Indian control of Indian education" that tied education to self-determination and self-government. In both the United States and Canada, the policy of self-determination is based on the value of preserving tribal culture and giving tribes the responsibility for self-government and education. Children must feel that they are a part of their family and tribe. Story telling is an important part of Native American and Indigenous education and provides a foundation for cultural identity. Self-determination in education reflects the desire of Native American and Indigenous people to break free from colonization and to determine their own future. It is a continuing challenge to provide education based on an appreciation of diversity and incorporating Native and Indigenous values and culture.

With this unfortunate history in both the United States and in Canada, it is no wonder that Native communities distrust these systems. Over the past 30–40 years, there has been instrumental change in the United States and in Canada's views on Indigenous education, and the role of First Nations involvement in improving these systems has been enhanced by laws. Both countries have embraced tribal colleges and universities, but funding is often inadequate.

It is easy to understand why Native and Indigenous communities are suspicious of these institutions and what influences they may have on their children, who often must leave home to attend. Although many families are supportive and wish for their student's success in the college and university world, they fear that their children will lose part of their heritage. You might also fear this.

### **The Importance of Family and Home**

Many students come to college with a strong tradition of valuing family and home. For most Native students, family and home are important values that provide support, but can create stress for you while in college. Your parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents,

"You must be the change you want to see in the world."

Mahatma Gandhi

and relatives may be very excited about your college attendance. They may be so excited because they may think you are the "one" who made it. Your success is important to your family. And even though it is great to have this kind of support and hope for your future, this can create stress for you. College does create stress for everyone and you may have times that you doubt your capability and your ability to succeed. The pressure of not wanting to disappoint your family can be great at times. It is important to discuss these feelings with your family or college counselor or adviser.



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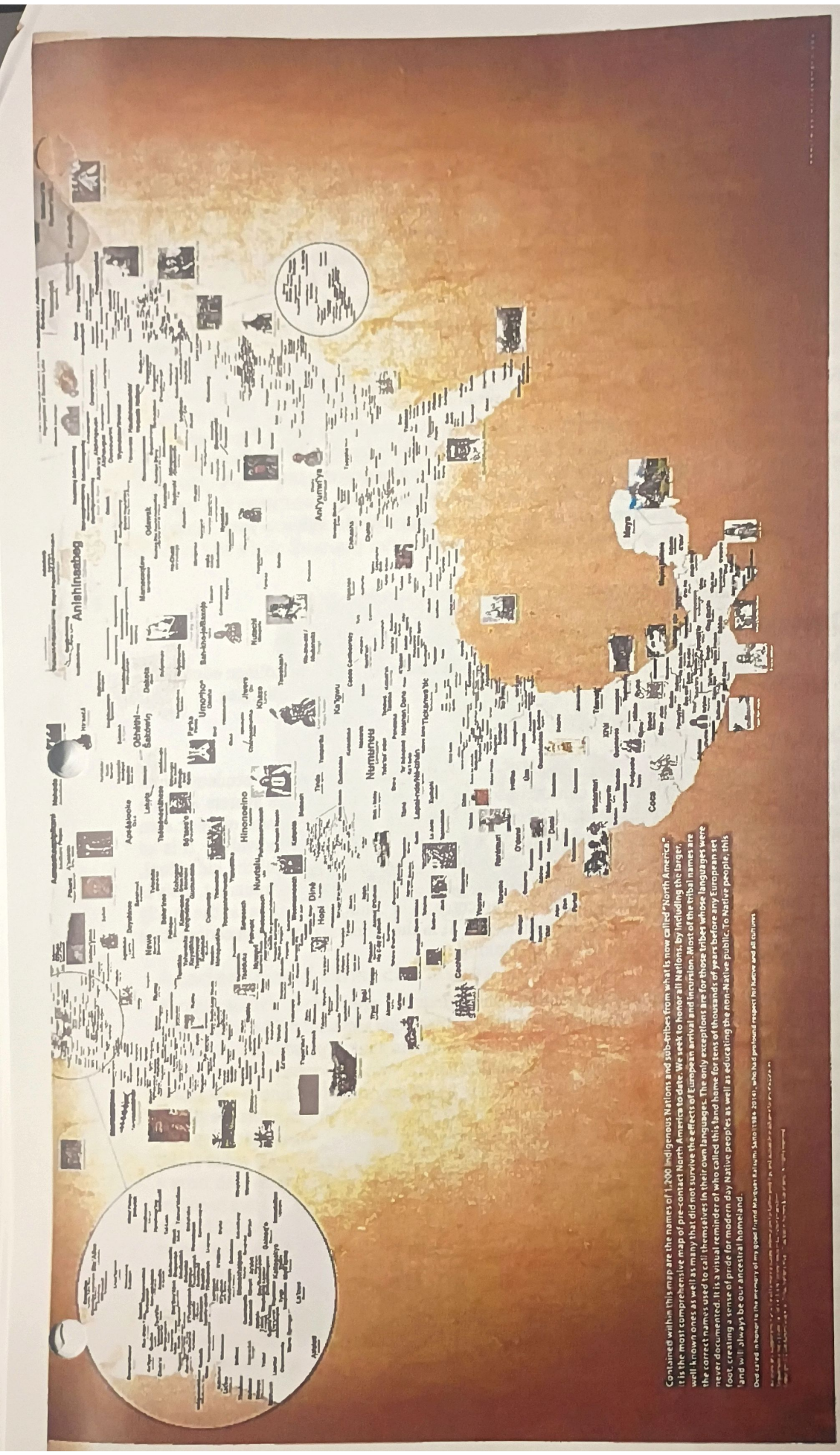
Conversely, if you are one of the first to attend college in your family, your family does not always understand what you are encountering and how these encounters may impact the person you are. Family sometimes fear the "new person" you will become. Perhaps, they think you will not want to come home, be close to your culture, or that you will become "White" in your thinking and in your actions. Again, this can present a source of stress for you as you learn to walk in the world of higher education and your world at home.

Many Native and Indigenous students, especially those whose college is some distance from home, miss home. You miss the food, the family, the friends, the community, and the ceremonial life of home. Being mindful that college and university study does come to an end, and knowing that you will be home again can be helpful to remember. Knowing that your institution is most likely based on Eurocentric values, missing class to attend to family and community events can be challenging. Attending a ceremonial event that goes far into the night and makes you late for class, may not be understood by your professors. It is these types of experiences that can create more stress for you as you progress through higher education.



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Contained within this map are the names of 1,300 Indigenous Nations and sub-tribes from what is now called North America. It is the most comprehensive map of pre-contact North America to date. We seek to honor all Nations, by including the largest, well-known ones as well as many that did not survive the effects of European arrival and invasion. Most of the tribal names are the correct names used to call themselves in their own languages. The only exceptions are for those tribes whose languages were never documented. It is a vital reminder of who called this land home for tens of thousands of years before any European set foot, creating a sense of pride for modern day Native peoples as well as educating the non-Native public. To Native people, this land will always be our ancestral homeland.

Dedicated in honor to the memory of my good friend Marjorie Katum (1988-2014), who had profound respect for Native and all cultures.

### Journal Entry #3

Take a moment to reflect on home. What does home mean to you? Is home the house you live(d) in or is it the community you grew up in? Does your family understand your goals and support you in attending college?

As described earlier, Native American and Indigenous students have cultural values based on community and cooperation, and not so much on the individual. Many students feel as though their college degree will allow them to return to their communities and "Give back to the community." Others feel that by becoming educated they may be able to make societal change that will benefit their family and tribal communities. Others may just want to improve their career prospects and create a better life for themselves and their families. For many students it is important to define why you are in college. What is your reason for wanting to earn a college degree?

### Overcoming Obstacles

There are many types of obstacles that you may face as you begin your college education. It is important to be aware of them and to develop successful coping strategies.

### Cultural Differences

The college/university setting can present many challenging situations for students coming from Native and Indigenous cultures because the institutional value system is often based on Eurocentric curriculum, culture and climate, quite the opposite of your own families' value system. For instance, higher education is based on the individual. It is an environment that focuses upon the success of the individual, the goals of the individual, and the needs of the individual, and therefore creates a competitive environment. This is often an alien concept for many students who come from traditions that value the family and community foremost, before the individual.<sup>11</sup> It is the difference between cooperation and competition, two opposite modes of thinking.



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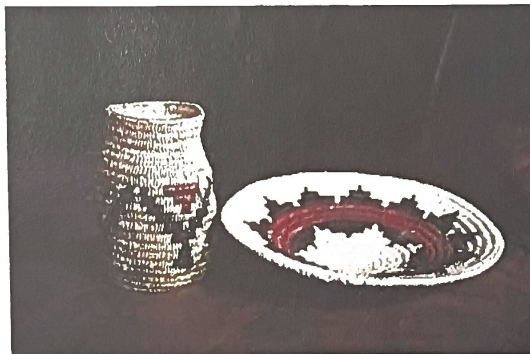
Beliefs and definitions of what time represents can be another area of cultural conflict. The institution is built upon the concept of time management, planning an exact schedule for your weekly study routine, and planning each semester's course selection to help you reach a timely goal of completion and graduation. Native and Indigenous communities often joke about "Indian Time," but in reality it is a part of the social structure of Native life. Things begin when all have gathered and it ends when all is done. The Native belief that things will happen as they should is often in conflict with the institutions' definition of time.

Native students are often attending institutions with very few other Native students enrolled and feelings of alienation occur. This feeling of "I don't belong here or I haven't seen anyone else who looks like me in days" can create feelings of loneliness and estrangement. For those students coming from traditional communities, life away from home can be lonely, and if the institution does not provide a way for you to connect with a support network, conflict can arise."

Another example of cultural conflict has to do with communication styles. As stated, the institution is a community based on individualism and competition. Therefore, in White society, a strong value is placed upon the individual who makes direct eye contact, questions, and contributes in class with assertiveness, and is comfortable challenging others' opinions that may differ from their own. For many Native and Indigenous students, this just doesn't fit within their own cultural norms based on cooperation, kindness, and acceptance.

"I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed."

Booker T. Washington



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### Academic and Financial Issues

Another source of challenge for many Native students is the need for academic preparation and for added financial support to get through college. You are not alone. Students of all cultures and backgrounds are often disappointed to see that they are required to take lower level coursework before taking college level English and math courses. There are placement exams and state standards you are asked to meet, many of which are not culturally sensitive and do place burden on you to take prerequisite preparatory courses. And college is expensive. It's expensive because it takes your time and energy to be successful. It takes time from your ability to work and supplement your education, and it takes a great deal of stamina to stay the course, one that we want to help you to complete. You will need motivation and stamina to complete any required courses and to apply for financial aid. Once you have received your financial aid, you will need to learn to manage your money so that you can stay in college. Keep your goals in mind and take the steps needed to accomplish them. Remember to ask for help along the way.

The challenges presented here are meant to help you to understand some of the experiences you might encounter. We believe that you can overcome these obstacles and challenges and in the next section we will share with you some theories that just might help you along the way.

"You already possess everything necessary to become great."

Crow

## Personal Empowerment through Culture

Taking pride in your culture is important because it serves as a foundation for learning. You are more likely to be successful if you approach learning with an understanding of yourself, which includes a sense of belonging to your family and tribe, and an understanding and appreciation of your culture and history. Since colonial times, the story of the Native American experience has been a sad one in which the colonizers attempted to destroy Native culture, language, and religious practices and assimilate Native Americans into the dominant culture. Fortunately, there is a cultural renaissance beginning to take place in Native American societies today.

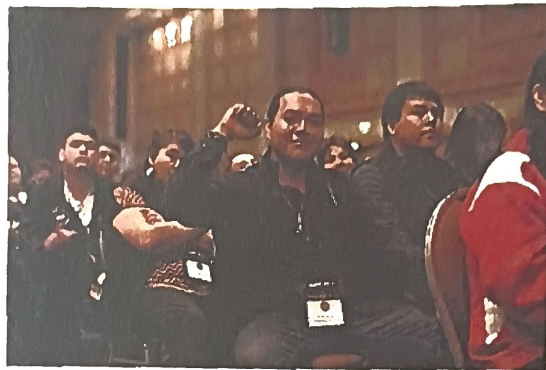


Photo courtesy of Navajo Technical University.

"Out of the Indian approach to life there came a great freedom, an intense and absorbing respect for life, enriching faith in a Supreme Power, and principles of truth, honesty, generosity, equity, and brotherhood as a guide to mundane relations."

Mourning Dove Salish

"I am going to venture that the man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures, and acknowledging unity with the universe of things, was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization."

Chief Luther Standing Bear, Lakota Sioux

Teaching has always been an important part of Native American culture, but was done in a different way than in our schools today. Children were taught by experiential or "hands-on" learning, storytelling, and examples from the elders. Children were taught values and beliefs through stories and practical skills were learned first by observation and then by practice. Teaching was the primary responsibility of the women and the elders, but the extended family and whole community took part in teaching children. Extended family included blood and ceremonial family. Children represented the future of the Tribe or Nation. Children learned the skills that they needed to survive in the natural environment and also how to become contributing and respectful member of the community. Today, our modern society expects parents (many times single mothers) and teachers (sometimes good, sometimes bad), and law enforcement to rear our children.

The world changed when Christopher Columbus first set foot in what he thought to be India. This set in motion a series of events over the past 500 years that would challenge the survival of Native American culture and populations. It is interesting to read about his first encounters with Native populations. In 1492, when Christopher Columbus first arrived in the Americas, he commented on the goodness of the Taino Indians in the Caribbean Islands. He stated that the Indians were "very gentle and without knowledge of what is evil nor do they murder or steal. They love their neighbors as themselves."<sup>15</sup>

When the colonialists arrived, they found that the Indigenous population had a good understanding of their natural world and a unifying set of beliefs governing the world and the relationship of all things in it. They had a system of knowledge that included morality, ecology, spirituality, and philosophy. They possessed accurate knowledge about the plants and animals in their environment. They also had knowledge of astronomy and complex astronomical cycles. They had ceremonies, stories, and customs based on the constellations and the rhythmic cycle of nature.

For example, the value systems of nations such as the plains Cree, Dakota, Blackfoot, and Ojibwa include respect, obedience, and humility. These three teachings are represented by the three center poles of their home, more contemporarily known as the

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"teepee." The three center poles lean on and support each other to create a strong foundation for the home. The remaining poles and cover are all supported by those three foundation poles. The first pole represents Respect, which means giving honor; they give honor to their elders and to strangers who visit their community. They honor the basic rights of all others as they honor all life, especially mother Earth. The second pole represents Obedience, which relates to right and wrong. It means that they listen; they listen to their fellow students, their teachers, their parents, and to their traditional stories. Obedience means they listen so they can accept wisdom and guidance from others. The third pole represents Humility, which means they are humbled when they understand their relationship with creation. They are not above or beneath others and this understanding of their harmonious relationship helps them to value all life. All life is equal.



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Spirituality is based on the connectedness of all living and nonliving things and the relationship of humans to each other, to plants and animals and to the air, water and land. Duwamish Chief Seattle stated: "We are all related . . . whatever befalls the earth, befalls man."<sup>14</sup> Because of the interrelatedness of all things, there are rules for moral behavior since the actions of one person affects all others. Moral behavior includes respecting the environment and acting responsibly and respectfully. Respect for the elders, those persons who have survived the difficult course of life and have earned their wisdom, is a cornerstone of Indigenous cultural and spiritual tradition. Animals and plants are considered part of the family and treated with understanding and respect. If an animal is killed for food, it is necessary to respect the animal. They recognize that resources were limited and must be available for future generations. Indigenous people throughout the American continent are instructed to learn about the natural environment and respect it; they were the first ecologists.

Indigenous spirituality is very different from Western religion, which was introduced during the colonial period. In Western religion, it is believed that human beings were given mastery of the world in the Garden of Eden. Human beings are seen as the only creatures "created in God's image." They viewed nature as resources to be developed and used. Respect and care for the natural world is alien to Christianity because the world is seen as inherently evil, and will be destroyed on Judgment Day. On the other hand, Indigenous people see humankind and all other living things as created equally.

Another difference in the world view of Indigenous people is the concept of what is "alive." In Western thought, animals and plants are the only things that are alive and humans are the only living things that are imbued with a "soul" or "spirit." But in Indigenous spirituality, trees, rivers, rocks, mountains, animals, water, and fire, all have a spirit. Thus, they too deserve to be respected, and taken into consideration. In many Indigenous languages there are no gender differences; the differences are animate and inanimate. Onondaga elder, Oren Lyons says, "We don't call a tree a resource, we don't call fish a

"Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect. We are a part of the earth and it is a part of us."

Chief Seattle

"We must protect the forests for our children, grandchildren and children yet to be born. We must protect the forests for those who can't speak for themselves such as the birds, animals, fish and trees."

Qwatsinas,  
Nuxalk Nation

"With all things and in all things, we are relatives."  
Sioux

"All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The Earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it."  
Chief Joseph, Nez Perce

resource. We don't call a bison a resource. We call them our relatives. But the general population uses the term resources, so you want to be careful of that term—resources for just you?"<sup>15</sup> Since animals and plants were created before humans, they were considered relatives or elders deserving of respect.

Part of self-determination is the recognition of the value of all tribes and working together to improve education and opportunities for all Indigenous people. When Hernán Cortés conquered the great Aztec capitol, Tenochtitlán, he had only a few hundred soldiers. He was able to conquer this great nation by forming alliances with different tribes and then getting them to fight among each other. It is important for Native Americans and Indigenous people to work together to accomplish mutual goals. In education today, this idea includes respecting fellow students, the learning community, and members of different tribes.

One of the key tenets of the Declaration of Independence of 1776 is "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." However, these rights were only for White men with property and excluded women and people of color. The history of the United States documents these groups and their quest for equal rights, self-determination, and empowerment. Indigenous people are empowered when education is built upon a foundation of appreciating diversity and the unique contributions of tribal cultures. As we move forward to realizing democracy for all groups, it is helpful to remember Martin Luther King's famous quote in 1963, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Across the Americas, Indigenous populations are striving toward equal rights and rebuilding their identity based on their cultures and communities. As they take pride in their heritage, they not only become more successful, but they are in a position to contribute to the greater good of society. Lakota Chief Luther Standing Bear asked, "Why not a school of Indian thought, built on the Indian pattern and conducted by Indian instructors? Why not a school of tribal art? Why should not America be cognizant of itself and aware of its identity? In short, why should not America be preserved? . . . In denying the Indian his ancestral rights and heritages the White race is but robbing itself. But American culture can be revived and rejuvenated by recognizing and appreciating a Native American school of thought. The Indian can save America."<sup>16</sup>



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Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of Indigenous people is a respect for the environment and an understanding of the place of human beings in the ecosystem. There is a famous Cree prophecy, which goes like this: "When all the trees have been cut down, when all the animals have been hunted, when all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover that you can't eat money." Do we deplete

our resources or try to maintain the quality of living for future generations? Will technology be used to destroy the planet or to improve the human condition? We can benefit by combining the insights of both cultures.

Lakota Chief Sitting Bull has suggested that "Native people should take what is good from the White man's culture and reject what is bad. For this to happen, Native American people should understand their history and be grounded in their own communities and cultures."<sup>17</sup> Luther Standing Bear, a leader for the Lakota tribe, has suggested that "education of the future must incorporate what was valuable in the old ways while becoming members of modern American society. The new generation of Native Americans can maintain the sense of family and community in order to bring stability and success to their communities."<sup>18</sup>

"A people without history  
is like the wind over  
buffalo grass."  
(Sioux)



Photo courtesy of William Bright of Connors State College.

For Native American people to reclaim their identity and place in society, it is important to transcend the culture shock and harmful effects of Euro-centric colonization. The future is self-determination; it is the preservation of tribal life and culture. It is taking control of your own future for the sake of future generations in your tribe. It is important to maintain the positive in the traditional ways in which there was a sense of confidence based on knowledge of one's culture that allowed people to treat each other with respect and civility. It is also critical to acknowledge the traditions that once served an important function in your community, but in today's world, may be counter-productive to your tribe's future. Education that includes tribal knowledge and traditions is the force behind self-determination.

Education of the future must incorporate what was valuable in the traditional ways while becoming members of modern American society. "When we leave the culture shock behind, we will be masters of our own fate again and able to determine for ourselves what kind of lives we will lead."<sup>19</sup> The new generation of Native Americans who are grounded in their knowledge of history and tribal culture can achieve success and become role models for their communities. To achieve this goal, they must understand who they are and their unique place in their family, community, and the world. It is a process of self-discovery.

"Like the Thunderbird of  
old I shall rise again out  
of the sea; I shall grab  
the instruments of the  
white man's success, his  
education, his skills, and  
with these new tools  
I shall build my race into  
the proudest segment of  
your society. "  
Chief Dan George, Salish

## Journal Entry #4

Think about the obstacles you might face while attending college. What steps can you take to overcome these obstacles?

What are some of the strengths of your culture? How can your culture empower you to complete your education?

## Cultural Traditionalism

Cultural Traditionalism is a concept that describes how closely one adheres to traditional culture. Native students living on reservation lands or within First Nation reserves would probably have a greater degree of cultural traditionalism, living daily life among their communities and participating in cultural events regularly. While those Native students living in urban settings, away from their traditional community, may be somewhat more assimilated to the greater society and not feel as culturally traditional. In a study conducted by Terry Huffman, he found that "culturally traditional students used their strong sense of ethnicity to form a firm social-psychological anchor."<sup>20</sup>

Even though the cultural traditional students were more aware of the cultural conflict they encountered in higher education, they had a solid sense of cultural identity and stronger confidence and were able to negotiate the conflict successfully. Thus, they were overall more successful college students.<sup>21</sup>

According to Huffman, "... successful performance in college requires dual operation at an American Indian cultural level and a college mainstream level." The transcultured students are able to function across two cultures and have the ability to successfully navigate both worlds without diminishing their own cultural affiliation.<sup>22</sup>

Family as a support network and maintaining home involvement is very important to traditionally cultured students. It makes sense that Native and Indigenous students derive much of the strength of their identity and confidence from maintaining a support network at home with family and community. It is sort of like going back to well for nurturance, especially during those challenging times when cultural conflicts arise. Your task will be to find ways to include your family in your college experience, explaining to them the experiences and challenges you face as you move through college.

## Finding a Safe Place

We have now seen that successful Native and Indigenous students are those who are able to navigate the terrain of two distinct worlds as they bridge the gap between their own culture and that of the college/university setting. We also know that those students with confidence in self and strong feelings of culture have an anchor from which they can draw strength.

According to Dr. Mario E. Aguilar, in a research study he conducted called *The Ritual of Kindness*, he suggests that a healthy aspect of this transculturation is to learn to create your own unique Third Space, a safe space. He explains that the First Space is where you live or where you have come from, and the Second Space is where you must learn to negotiate [college].<sup>23</sup> Learning to adapt as needed within the two realms can be challenging, but with practice and introspection, you can develop a healthy place that he calls the Third Space.

Give some thought to how you will create your own safe place between your own culture and that of the university environment. Once you learn to trust in your culture and gain strength from knowing who you are in this world and why you are in college, you will be invigorated and increase your chances of success.

## Suggestions for Successful Learning from the Native Perspective

While acknowledging that we are all unique individuals and learn in different ways, here are some suggestions to consider for increasing learning success. The ultimate goal of learning is the well-being of self, family, community, the land, and the spirits. Education is a gift that increases your opportunities.

- One of the best ways to learn is to engage all the senses, including visual, auditory, touch, movement, smell, and taste. Chapter 6 contains many examples of using all the senses to improve study skills.

- Each chapter includes a section titled “Stories from the Elders.” What can you learn about success from these stories?
- Build on your experience. How does the material you are learning relate to your personal experience? How is it connected to what you already know? How is it different from your experience?
- The talking circle is used for discussion in each chapter. Everyone in the circle learns to listen and respect the views of others.
- Part of learning is the concept of teaching a person’s heart. This refers to learning that occurs inside a person and includes the realization that all people need significance, competence, power, and virtue. The elders often say, “Think with your heart.”
- For good mental health, it is important to maintain the sense of belonging to your family, friends, community, and tribe.
- Every human being has a desire to succeed. Invest your time in learning and build on your success.
- Adapting to two different worlds with different views of time can be challenging. Think about how you can use the benefits of both the traditional and modern world.



Photo courtesy of Angie Hedges, Chief Dull Knife College

## Journal Entry #5

Using some of the ideas from the above sections on personal empowerment, and suggestions for learning, write five intention statements about your success in college, careers, and life. I intend to . . .

## Stories from the Elders

You have just read about the challenges faced by Native American and Indigenous students as they begin college. As you read this story about Wesakechak and Crane, think about the obstacles that Wesakechak faced as he traveled to the Moon and how he used his ingenuity to come up with creative solutions that allowed him to travel to the Moon and back. Note that Wesakechak was successful because he asked questions and asked for help when needed.

“When an elder speaks,  
be silent and listen.”  
Mohawk

“When the legends die,  
the dreams end: there is  
no more greatness.”  
Shawnee

## Wesakechak and Crane

This story is written by Larry Gauthier, as told to him by Colin "Buster" Sanderson, an elder of the Canadian Woodland Cree, and Larry's grandfather.

Kiyas maga, (long time ago), in the days of our ancestors, when man could talk with animals and learned from them, Wesakechak was lying in the grass looking up at Moon. He was thinking how nice it would be if he could ride Moon; he would be able to see the whole world. He began to think how he could get up there. He

was thinking of all kinds of ways to get to Moon. First he thought he could walk. He began to walk . . . and walk . . . and walk. After hours of walking Moon did not appear any closer. As he walked, he began to think that maybe he needed to try a different way to reach Moon. Finally he came upon Crane. He saw Crane's big wings and began thinking. "Crane," he asked, "can you take me to the moon?" When Crane did not look up, Wesakechak added, "I will give you a great gift." "Ok," said Crane, "hold on to my legs and I will fly you to the moon." Wesake-

chak held on for dear life as Crane flew higher and higher. They flew and flew and after a while Wesakechak felt his arms beginning to hurt. It

was taking so long he thought they would never get there. Finally just when Wesakechak was about to let go, they crashed into Moon and fell asleep because they were so tired.

Having done all the work, Crane was still asleep when Wesakechak woke up. Wesakechak looked around and noticed Crane's legs had stretched so far, they did not go back to their original length. It was then that Crane awoke and asked, "Where is my gift, Wesakechak?" Wesakechak replied, "Look at your legs, Crane. With those legs you can walk deeper in the water to forage for food. You will never be hungry." Crane was very happy and flew back to the earth eager to try her new legs.

Wesakechak was so in awe of the great beauty of Mother Earth and stars that he wanted to stay on the Moon forever. But soon Moon began shrinking. Wesakechak began to wonder how he was going to get down. He tried calling Crane, but she was too far away from Moon and no one could hear him. Moon soon fixed the problem for Wesakechak. Moon shrank so much she disappeared. Wesakechak tumbled toward the earth. Wesakechak got scared and looked for a nice soft place to land. He spotted a lake and called out to the lake to catch him. He landed softly in the water but sank down to the mud. Even though he was all covered in mud, he thanked Lake for saving his life. Lake replied that water always gives life . . .

"Out of the Indian approach to life there came a great freedom, an intense and absorbing respect for life, enriching faith in a Supreme Power, and principles of truth, honesty, generosity, equity, and brotherhood as a guide to mundane relations."

Mourning Dove, Salish

## Notes

### The Woodland Cree

The Cree nation stretches from the East side of the Hudson River and James Bay, to central and south Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Central Alberta, and parts of Montana and Wyoming. The Cree have slowly integrated into Western society and become involved with various industries in joint or full ownership ventures. Traditionally Cree men were hunters and gatherers while the women were nurturers and caregivers. Women had responsibility for the home. The Elders were the repositories of knowledge; they held the nation's histories and passed on this knowledge to the children. Thus, children represented the future of the tribe. Today approximately 65% of Cree are moving from reserve lands to urban centers in Canada. In the far north, many of those still living on the reserves continue to maintain a strong connection to the land. While many modern Cree have incorporated Catholic and Anglican religions, many still observe traditional ceremonial practices. Native American / First Nation spiritual and cultural practices were outlawed by the federal government and these practices had to go underground to survive.

Today a spiritual and cultural rebirth is occurring, where many young people are learning the language, culture, and spiritual practices. The Cree are considered the most populous nations of Native Americans and cover the largest geographic area in North America.

### Talking Circle

Use these questions for discussion in a talking circle or consider at least one of these questions as you respond in a journal entry:

1. Wesakechak had a need to explore and get to the Moon. He contracted the help of Crane to accomplish his goal. Who are some people on campus and in your community that you can ask for help when needed? Who are the people in your college world that can help you to create your safe space?
2. Crane provides a service to Wesakechak and in return is paid with the gift of long legs. These long legs helped Crane to walk about the water and provide for his sustenance in life. What will be the pay-off be for you as you complete your educational and career goals? What impact will this have on your family and your community? How can you create "long legs" or greater resiliency in your life?
3. The story ends with the concept that "water always gives life." Giving thanks to the Earth and all creation for life is an important value to most Native and Indigenous peoples. This is a universal theme among many cultures of the world. Consider your own beliefs and values as they relate to these concepts. How will your beliefs and cultural values impact your ability to reach your educational and career goals?

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25. Several reviewers added comments and ideas for this section including Larry Gauthier, Director of Student Success Services at the First Nations University of Canada; Mario Aguilar, Lecturer at the College of Education at San Diego State University; and Carmen Moffett, Director of Indian Education, Gallup, New Mexico.