Factors Contributing to Their Success:

Experience of Manitoba Aboriginal Students in

Post-Secondary Education

By

Kimberly J. Embleton

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University of Manitoba

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Abstract

This study examined the experiences of Aboriginal students at a university in Manitoba in terms of what supports kept them registered and what institutional factors contributed to their success. The aim of this research was to inform educators, administrators, and students of the needs of Aboriginal learners at the post-secondary level and what supports and experiences fostered these learners' success. This research included the gathering of data from eight Aboriginal students who were registered in undergraduate university programs in Manitoba. The findings suggest that Aboriginal students who are assisted with setting clear academic and career goals prior to post-secondary enrolment, are provided with adequate academic preparation before entering post-secondary studies, are able to access the specialized approaches and supports currently available, and are able to form meaningful and reciprocal relationships with faculty and peers at university or college are more likely to succeed. The conclusions of the study are two: (1) that advisement dialogue prior to enrolment and upon registration needs to be expanded; and (2) that Aboriginal students must be provided with increased opportunities to develop self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Aboriginal students, post-secondary, preparation, supports, success, relationships, instructors

Acknowledgements

Dedication

To Natasha – my friend and my sister.

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Chapter 1:   Introduction

For nearly a decade, I have been fortunate enough to work within the field of Aboriginal education as a teacher, curriculum developer, and administrator. I have seen First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students of all ages walk into a school with the hopes of changing their lives for the better, and discovering (or re-discovering) new things about themselves, their communities, and the world within which they live. I have been blessed to be able to get to know these students as individuals and to walk with them on their journeys, even if only for a short time.

Unfortunately, I have also seen Aboriginal students struggle with issues and challenges that seem unnecessarily difficult. In many of these instances, the students who began with such exciting and hopeful goals were left feeling as if they had no choice but to give up and return to the life that they had hoped to change. Working within an Aboriginal adult learning and training centre which focuses on holistic education that addresses the physical, emotional, spiritual, and academic needs of each student, I know that with the right supports and approaches, Aboriginal students can and will reach their educational goals. However, numerous academic studies and current statistics indicate that the needs of Aboriginal students are not being well met within mainstream educational systems, particularly at the post-secondary level. So how do we, as educators, address this issue on a wide scale? And how can we look at it from an asset-based approach that acknowledges and builds upon the successes that many Aboriginal students have had? This study examined the experiences of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people in post-secondary educational institutions in Canada by giving voice to their stories, needs, and struggles. By examining the success factors of these students at the University of Manitoba, the study aimed to

add to the existing literature suggestions for increasing Aboriginal enrolment and gradua-

tion rates. In this chapter, I begin by situating myself within the study, and take time to

look at the history of Aboriginal education in Canada, as well as current statistical infor-

mation regarding Aboriginal people in Manitoba and post-secondary education across

Canada. Following that, I identify the objective and research questions of the study and

discuss the importance of giving voice to the individuals who participated in creating this

research. Finally, terminology used throughout the work is defined.

Situating Self

I did not grow up in an Aboriginal community, nor did I know of my Aboriginal roots

until much later in life. For most of my life, I grew up in a two-parent household in an

upper-middle class neighbourhood with good schools, safe streets, and tidy houses with

manicured lawns and two car garages. When I was eleven years old, two things happened

to me that forever changed my life: I met my best friend and my mother got sick. The

first event, which is a quite joyful memory, introduced me to the warmth and beauty of

the Eeyouch (Cree) culture of Northern Quebec. I found a person with whom I have re-

mained close for twenty years now, who has been my champion, my challenger, and my

sister. I spent many days, weeks, months, with her and her mother, welcomed in as if I

was a second daughter. Over the years they have become an extension of my family, and I

an extension of theirs.

My mother eventually died when I was twelve years old. I lost so much in that time:

pieces of myself, pieces of my family, and a connection with a past I did not begin to un-

derstand or regain for another 12 years. It was during this time, and the years following,

that I grew closer and closer to my best friend and her mother. They continued to wel-

come me into their house, their life, and I learned to find peace and belonging in their ways and beliefs.

There is a joke between myself and my friend, in which we say that she too found comfort in my family, a role model in my father. So we traded bits of ourselves with each other to feel whole. My father is, for lack of a better description, a scientist through and through. I, however, am not. My friend's mother has been a teacher for her entire adult life; my friend has no interest in this area whatsoever. And so, we switched: I went into education to honour her mother, she into science like my father. I focused on Aboriginal education, because it was the only way I knew how to approach things, to see things; this was the way of doing things that made me feel comfortable and confident. I wanted to help others feel this way.

My friend and her mother eventually left Winnipeg for lives back in Quebec, though we remain close. I went to university with the supports and benefits that most non-Aboriginal students have, but with the focus and heart of an Aboriginal person. I studied Aboriginal history, ethnology, spirituality, and development. I learned to be a teacher and to pass on these lessons to others, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It was also during this time that I was able to reconnect with my mother's side of the family after many years of absence. I started to visit my cousins and uncle and auntie regularly, sharing stories and memories with them during our time together. They began to tell me of our family history and our Métis ancestors. They told me these stories with a pride I had not known or seen growing up. And I began to feel this pride too, flowing within my veins. A person I knew once described what it was to have blood memory of something, as if thoughts and feelings and experiences could be passed on like hair and eye colour, from

generation to generation. Perhaps this is what happened to me, that though I did not have the mental knowledge of this connection to the first peoples of this this land, I had the spiritual connection.

As I went through my Bachelor of Arts and my Bachelor of Education, I kept learning about our history and our beliefs, and I found ways of involving myself in the Aboriginal community of Winnipeg more and more. I began to volunteer and work at an Aboriginal adult learning and training centre, which became another branch of my family. The staff and students taught me more about myself everyday than I learned throughout my years of formal education. I developed a passion for helping my community and for making changes to the way we teach others within our schools and our classrooms. It is for this reason that I am involved in this study today, and for this reason that I need to find a way to ensure we all have the opportunity to make choices as to where we go to learn no matter what our background, and that we all have the chance for success within each of those places.

Study Rationale

The Elders have told me that since time immemorial, Aboriginal people have passed on their cultural knowledge and beliefs from generation to generation. Through storytelling and by example, gentle guidance, and non-interference, Aboriginal children and youth learned the skills necessary for cultural and physical survival from Elders and community members. However, after European arrival, this way of teaching was progressively and forcibly replaced by a European religious and state educational system at odds with traditional Aboriginal value systems and ways of life; "from the beginning of contact with European culture until the present...education has been a major area of conflict

and concern," (Corbiere, 2000; Deloria, 1994, as cited in Cajete, 1994, p. 11). The results of this conflict can be seen in the intergenerational effects of the residential school system that are presenting themselves in today's society and within our families. These effects manifest themselves in poverty, abuse, addictions, unemployment, and family breakdown. Within the mainstream educational system in Canada, these cultural conflicts are also leading to extremely high dropout rates among First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students at primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. This has led to anxieties, personal trauma, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy among many Aboriginal people in relation to education and educational institutions (Anderson, 1995, p.15).

History of Aboriginal Education in Canada

Colonial assumptions about Aboriginal cultural inferiority have existed since European people arrived in North America. However, it was when this belief was internalized by Aboriginal people that the images of the colonizers became true, and Aboriginal people also saw themselves as incapable of learning (Silver, 2002). Unfortunately, this assumption of cultural inferiority still pervades many of Canada's educational institutions, and modern education is often seen by Aboriginal people as hegemonic, assimilative, and Eurocentric (Smith, 2001). Historically, the Canadian school system was the major device used to assimilate Aboriginal people into mainstream Canadian society. The approach of the Canadian Government throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century was the residential school system, with a goal of 'assisting' Aboriginal people to aspire to the same standards as those of the non-Aboriginal Canadian society (Smith, 2001, p.81). However, this assistance was offered through aggressive practices, including physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse, and had a

devastating and lasting effect on individuals, families, and entire communities. Not sur-

prisingly, this has created in the minds of many Aboriginal people a "thoroughly negative

perception of formal education," (Silver, 2002, p.12).

The Hawthorne Report of 1966, a federal government report based on investigations

into living conditions of Status Indians prompted by the popular struggle of the Civil

Rights movement and Quebec nationalism, stressed the need for more Aboriginal people

to continue on to post-secondary education (Silver, 2002). The Hawthorne report resulted

in the federal government "white" or policy paper (Silver, 2002) that proposed the

abolition of the Indian Act itself that prompted a backlash by the Indian Association of

Alberta with the Red Paper (Indian Association of Alberta, 1970) and subsequently

"Indian control of Indian Education" by the National Indian Brotherhood and Wabung by

the Manitoba Chiefs (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2010). Recall

that prior to several 1952 amendments to the Indian Act, Status Indians became

enfranchised if they went beyond Grade 8 or became professionals in any field.

Education was in some way the measure of becoming civilized and non-Indian. Post

Indian Control of Indian Education, the federal government policy shifted to provide

post-secondary funding for status Indians. Consequently, as those numbers increased and

became legitimate, post-secondary institutions in Canada increased the numbers of

Aboriginal students enrolled through offering specialized programming and supports.

However, the proportion of Aboriginal youths and adults who have completed post-

secondary studies remains significantly lower than the provincial and national averages:

15% of the total Canadian population has completed university, compared to only 4% of

the Aboriginal population; in Manitoba, these numbers are 13% and 4% respectively

(Brown, Knol, & Fraehlich, 2008). Interest in the area of retention of Aboriginal students

at the post-secondary level is therefore rising, as colleges and universities increasingly

see the need to welcome more Aboriginal applicants and produce more Aboriginal

graduates. Additionally, all too often, Aboriginal people are thought of in terms of their

needs, problems and deficiencies; therefore, taking an assets-based approach to studying

the area of retention of Aboriginal post-secondary students is vital in order to unmask the

many gifts and resources they bring with them to the institutions (Cameron, 2003, p.5).

Aboriginal People in Manitoba

In Manitoba, approximately 15% of the population identifies as Aboriginal, a higher

proportion than any other province in Canada (Mendelson, 2004). Thirty-five percent of

Manitoba's Aboriginal community resides, at least semi-permanently, in metropolitan

Winnipeg and are disproportionately concentrated in the inner city (Hallet, 2006; Silver,

Mallett, Greene, & Simard, 2002 cited in Brown, Knol, & Fraehlich, 2008). Faced with

realities that include poverty, high unemployment rates, violence, housing decay, and

overcrowding, in addition to low educational attainment, many Aboriginal people

struggle to survive within mainstream Canadian society on a daily basis (Brown, Knol, &

Fraehlich, 2008).

The Aboriginal population of Canada is currently growing at a rate six times faster

than the Canadian population as a whole (Castellano, 2002; Preston, 2008). In 2006,

Aboriginal people surpassed the 1,000,000 mark, and between 1996 and 2006, the

population grew by 22%, while the non-Aboriginal population grew by 3% (Preston,

2008; Statistics Canada, 2007). Of this group, First Nations account for 62% of the

Aboriginal population of Canada, the Métis for 30%, and the Inuit for 5% (Preston, 2008;

Statistics Canada, 2007). With a birth rate one and a half times higher than the national

average, the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics estimates that by 2016 one in five labour

market participants will be Aboriginal (Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, 1997; Mendelson,

2004). Projections by the Canadian Political Science Association (2009) reveal that this

statistic will increase to one in four people in the City of Winnipeg by 2020.

Currently, Aboriginal people over the age of 15 years and living off-reserve are

experiencing sharp declines in employment rates (Statistics Canada, 2010). Between 2008

and 2009 in Canada, the employment rate fell faster for off-reserve Aboriginal people

than non-Aboriginal people, widening the gap between the two groups from 3.5% in 2008

to 4.8% in 2009 (Statistics Canada, 2010). Additionally, the unemployment rate for

Aboriginal people over the age of 15 years rose from 10.4% in 2008 to 13.9% in 2009,

compared with 6.0% to 8.1% for non-Aboriginal people (Statistics Canada, 2010). These

numbers indicate that Aboriginal people are continuing to face barriers to full

participation in the national, provincial, and municipal labour markets, and the potential

contribution to the workforce by Aboriginal people is threatened by significantly low

levels of educational attainment (Sheldrick, 2004).

Aboriginal People & Current Post-Secondary Educational Involvement

Many lingering elements of Eurocentric perspectives are carried on today within the

Canadian educational system. Curwen Doige (2003) notes that mainstream approaches to

learning are secular, fragmented, overly objective, and seek to discover definitive truths,

whereas Aboriginal approaches are spiritual, holistic, experiential, subjective, and trans-

formative. Brown, Knol, and Fraehlich (2008) agree, stating that Canadian educational systems are based on competition, individualism, and futurism, and are in conflict with traditional Aboriginal values of cooperation, sharing, group identity, and orientation to the present and the past. Aboriginal people in Winnipeg are more likely than non-Aboriginal people to leave school before the completion of grade 12, to return to school as adults, or to return after long breaks between the secondary and post-secondary levels, all being circumstances which carry additional challenges and barriers (Brown, Knol, & Fraehlich, 2008). What this indicates is that non-Aboriginal people are supplied with more opportunities to attend post-secondary education and/or are better equipped for post-secondary success. Studies show that there is less conflict with language, learning styles, teaching styles, communication modes, and cultural patterns at post-secondary institutions for non-Aboriginal students than for Aboriginal students (Preston, 2008).

Aboriginal learners also face numerous barriers to education as non-traditional students. Many are forced to move into major urban centres from rural or First Nation communities, leaving behind family and established networks of support, as well as spiritual identities tied to the land on which their ancestors have lived for generations. Others arrive at post-secondary educational institutions with inadequate academic readiness, particularly those who were educated in First Nation schools. Low academic levels and poor post-secondary preparation in high school sets many of these students up for failure at the college and university level (Saggio & Rendón, 2004).

Manitoba researchers, Sloane-Seale, Wallace, and Levin (2001) discuss the barriers faced by post-secondary Aboriginal students, classifying them as dispositional, situational, institutional, and/or systemic. These types of barriers can include historical mistrust of

mainstream educational systems as a result of experiences within the residential school
system; family responsibilities and demands; lack of funding for both individuals and in-
stitutional supports and programs; and discrimination from non-Aboriginal peoples and
systems both inside and outside of the institution (CMEC, 2002; Preston, 2008). Addi-
tionally, a lack of self-esteem among some Aboriginal learners, lack of appropriate and
available childcare, inadequate social supports, racism, sexism, dislocation, and a lack of
role models within academia compound to hamper the ability to learn and be successful
as a post-secondary Aboriginal student (Brown, Knol, and Fraehlich, 2008; Jackson,
Smith, and Hill, 2003; Preston, 2008; Sloane-Seale, Wallace, and Levin, 2001).

Purpose of this Study

While it is important to identify barriers faced by Aboriginal learners, the aim of this
study was to identify strategies to support change through an emphasis on Aboriginal
success stories. As stated earlier, my experiences growing up and my experiences work-
ing in the Aboriginal educational community of Winnipeg have developed within me a
passion for creating learning spaces that welcome and benefit all learners. My goal each
day as an educator is to be able to share a moment .in the life journey of a student and
assist them in any way I can. I also hope to learn from them, their ideas, and their experi-
ences at each step. Yet I see so many Aboriginal students struggle needlessly within
mainstream educational systems. In a study of Aboriginal learners in secondary-level
Manitoba Adult Learning Centres, Silver, Klyne, and Simard (2003) concluded that the
main factors contributing to the success of these learners were:

- holistic and learner-centred approaches to instruction;

- strong social, emotional, and practical supports;

- a personalized and non-hierarchical atmosphere;

- dedicated teaching staff; and

- non-judgemental treatment of learners by staff.

In a pilot study I conducted with three Aboriginal post-secondary students in Manitoba, the findings indicated that though specialized institutional approaches and supports currently available were needed and being utilized by the respondents, more important was their need to form authentic personal, respectful and reciprocal relationships with instructors and other students, while also being provided with opportunities to connect with cultural activities, pedagogies and place both inside the classroom and outside of it. To me, these studies show that there are things that can be done to change the current statistics for Aboriginal post-secondary involvement. Unfortunately, many are not being implemented successfully within the mainstream system.

According to Shawn A-in-chut Atleo (2010), National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal post-secondary graduates, Canadian post-secondary institutions would have to graduate 65,000 more Aboriginal people. Therefore, based on these preliminary findings and the identified need to increase the retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal post-secondary students, the objective of this research was to conduct an asset-based study to better understand what factors are contributing to the success of Aboriginal post-secondary students and to inform future academic research. The following research questions drove the study:

- What perceptions do Aboriginal students have of their experiences with faculty and students in and out of class at post-secondary educational institutions that encourage them to persist in their studies?

- What themes emerge from students' interpretations of their experiences in and
  out of class that may lead to higher rates of enrolment and retention for
  Aboriginal post-secondary students?

In this study I examined the current literature related to Aboriginal post-secondary student success and retention and identified the messages and needs being expressed within the stories of current Aboriginal post-secondary students in Manitoba. In addition, I offered recommendations for how to improve the success of these students and for areas of further research.

Giving voice. First Nations author Louise Erdrich once said, "only looking back is there a pattern," (in Karpiak, 2000, p.43). Throughout the history of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal cultures, storytelling has been used as a way to pass on information, knowledge, beliefs, and worldviews from one generation to the next. When used as a tool of research, it can become an activity that allows Aboriginal people the chance to share and participate in a culturally appropriate way. Telling one's story involves self-reflection and can become an opportunity for validation and self-acceptance (Karpiak, 2000). Additionally, the process of sharing a piece of oneself with an active, empathic listener can provide that individual with *a voice*; it can help them to mediate between the inner world of thought and feelings and the outer world of actions and events (Garro, 2004).

Pierre Bourdieu (1999), when encountering marginalized persons given a chance to speak with a non-judgemental listener, stated:

...certain respondents, especially the most disadvantaged, seem to grasp this situation as an exceptional opportunity offered to them to testify, to make themselves heard, to carry their experience over from the private to the public sphere; an op-

portunity also to *explain themselves* in the fullest sense of the term, that is, to con-

struct their own point of view both about themselves and about the world and to

bring into the open the point within this world from which they see themselves

and the world, become comprehensible, and justified, not least for themselves. It

even happens that, far from being simple instruments in the hands of the investi-

gator, the respondents take over the interview themselves. The density and inten-

sity of their speech, and the impression they often give of finding a sort of relied,

even accomplishment, convey, along with everything else about them, *a joy in ex-*

pression (p. 615).

It should therefore be noted that a secondary, though no less important aim of this study

was to validate the multiple experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students by giving

them an individual and collective voice. As the subjects of much research, Aboriginal

people are often characterized as powerless or child-like. I felt it was therefore essential

that respectful research not take this deficit-based position, but instead identified the great

wealth of knowledge and self-understanding within the Aboriginal community as a way

of valuing and thereby empowering a segment of the Canadian population long forgotten

or ignored.

   As well, in weaving my story into this process, I hoped to be able to further under-

stand my place as a storyteller and researcher by constructing and reconstructing my

thoughts and experiences through narrative. This in turn promoted the research process as

a reciprocal event between myself, the participants, and my audience, and became a prin-

ciple means through which relevant cultural understanding was acquired (Garro, 2000).

Terminology

Specific terms used throughout this thesis must be defined. According to the *Canadian Constitution Act of 1982*, "aboriginal peoples of Canada" includes Indian, Métis and Inuit people of Canada (Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada, 1982). However, there are limitations to legal definitions such as this one. First, it does not take into account the range of cultures present amongst Aboriginal people, both within and between groups. In Manitoba alone there are four First Nation cultural groups who traditionally occupy this territory; the Ojibway, Cree, Dene, and Dakota. There are also Métis communities throughout the province, and many Inuit peoples in northern Manitoba, as well as major urban centres. Additionally, the term Indian, though legally recognized, is in fact a misnomer applied to the indigenous peoples of North and South America and a leftover of colonization; the term First Nations is often used in place of Indian. Therefore, the term *Aboriginal* used in this research is used as an inclusive term to encompass all those who self-identify as being of First Nation (Indian), Métis or Inuit descent, regardless of Status (legal recognition) or Treaty (historically-based legal rights) (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012). The term *post-secondary institution* used includes any educational body that provides education higher than grade 12 and which grants credentials in the form of academic degrees or professional certifications (Preston, 2008). This definition includes universities, community colleges, vocational and technical institutions, institutes of technology and applied arts, and career colleges.

Chapter Summary

It is often difficult to look within ourselves to find the reasons for which we make decisions and take interest in certain things. Yet, it is exactly this step that can take research past being something done "to" "other people", to being a part of something larger, more inclusive. In this chapter, I have taken the time to situate myself within this journey. I also outlined the history of Aboriginal education in Canada and provided statistical information regarding Aboriginal people in Manitoba and in post-secondary education nationally. By doing this, I honoured those that have come before me, and those that surround me in our city, our province, and our country. As well, I have stated the objective of this study and the research questions that drove it. My purpose was to better understand the factors contributing to the success of Aboriginal post-secondary students. Additionally, I have also noted the importance of allowing participants to share their stories and of giving them voice, stating it as an additional goal of the study. Finally, to provide clarity, I defined the essential terminology used throughout.

In subsequent chapters, I outline recent studies related to Aboriginal students in post-secondary education, focusing specifically on literature that examines common approaches and themes in practices, limitations of these approaches, utilizing culture within the classroom, and barriers faced by Aboriginal post-secondary students. The theoretical orientation that I used to structure the study will then be set out, as will the conceptual framework of the research. Finally, my methodology, including setting, subjects, and instruments are described.

Chapter 2:   Literature Review and Theory

As a part of my journey of self-discovery, and as a university student for over thirteen years, I have learned the importance and value of looking to others to aid in the development of oneself. Therefore, in this chapter I review the available literature in the area of Aboriginal post-secondary education in Canada and with other Indigenous groups around the world, in order to expand the focus of the study. I begin by examining the common approaches and themes in practices among post-secondary educational institutions for promoting Aboriginal student recruitment and retention, as well as what others are saying about the limitations of these approaches. Additionally, as part of my review I discuss literature related to the importance of culture within the classroom and the institution, barriers faced by Aboriginal students, and current specialized programs. I then go on to explore the importance and influence of relationships on student recruitment and the factors that influence achievement and motivation. The theoretical orientation of is laid out, which describes the cost-reward analysis and the influence of values systems on goal setting.

Literature Review

The "progress of Canadian society, to a large degree, is measured by the extent to which Canada's population obtains post-secondary qualifications" (Preston, 2008, p. 7). And while numbers indicate that post-secondary enrolment and completion rates are increasing, overall Aboriginal involvement is still lagging (Preston, 2008). Yet, Stonechild (2006, cited in Preston, 2008) identifies post-secondary education as the "new buffalo;" providing an analogical parallel between education and buffalo as an organizing resource principle which has the potential to increase standard of living, employment and income

rates, quality of health, and longevity of life. Similarly, Sloane-Seale, Wallace, and Levin (2001) see additional education as able to directly improve life outcomes. However, they also maintain that disadvantage that has continued throughout a person's life cannot be overcome by education or any one social element alone.

The literature available explores the demographic, social, educational and economic trends that explain why Aboriginal people are still lagging in post-secondary attainment (Preston, 2008). Common approaches to increasing enrolment and retention among Aboriginal students are discussed, as well as themes in practices currently being used across Canada, the United States, and in other nations with large Indigenous populations, such as Australia and New Zealand. It examines the role culture plays in supporting Aboriginal post-secondary students, as well as current specialized programming that aims to increase enrolment and retention rates (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada [CMEC], 2002; Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2001). The literature also discusses the barriers faced by Aboriginal students at all educational levels, and the effects of supportive relationships with faculty and classmates on persistence (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Jaime, 2003; Saggio & Rendón, 2004; Schmidtke, 2009; Smith-Mohamed, 1998).

Common approaches and themes in practice. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) (2002) identified common approaches for increasing enrolment rates of Aboriginal post-secondary students in Canada. The first of these is increased government funding, such as the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (now Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development) Post-Secondary Student Success Program, the AB-STUDY program of Australia, and grants, scholarships, and bursaries aimed specifically at Aboriginal people. A second and third approach is the creation of Aboriginal specific

institutions, such as the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (now the First Nations

University of Canada), and specific programs for Aboriginal people, such as the Aborigi-

nal Focus Programs of the University of Manitoba. These types of programs aim to at-

tract Aboriginal people with their course content and community involvement. Programs

with additional supports (specialized recruitment, transition years, widened entrance cri-

teria, non-academic supports, etc.), such as the ACCESS programs in Manitoba, and

community delivery of programming, such as the Brandon University Northern Teacher

Education Program (BUNTEP) are also approaches seen across Canada, though much

more frequently in the West. Finally, CMEC (2002) identifies the approaches of courses

and topics with an Aboriginal focus, increased use of Aboriginal curriculum and alterna-

tive assessments, and the strengthening of Aboriginal literacy and languages, both in tra-

ditional languages and two official languages of Canada.

Themes in practices identified in the literature aim to close the gap between the

needs of Aboriginal students and current post-secondary offerings (CMEC, 2002). They

also focus on the promotion of community awareness in faculty and staff, the recruitment

of under-represented populations, partnerships between Aboriginal communities and

mainstream educational institutions, and student supports aimed at specifically Aboriginal

needs, like environments that alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation (CMEC, 2002).

Additionally, they examine the devolution from mainstream educational administration to

Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education, which can provide the means to overcoming

marginalization and facilitate self-determination (CMEC, 2002). In his study on Indige-

nous People and educational control, Barnhardt (1991, in CMEC, 2002) also identified

major themes in Aboriginal educational institutional goals or practices around the world.

Many of the ten themes he identified are similar to the CMEC (2002) study, but Barn-hard's study also identified the need to integrate local languages, traditional ways of knowing, and spiritual harmony.

Limitations of practice. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (2002) also identifies problems or limitations of practice, finding a lack of information or initiatives that address gender or family issues and responsibilities for Aboriginal post-secondary students. It also expresses the need for more supports for specific groups within the Aboriginal student population, particularly women, women who are parents, men, mature students, students with disabilities, and Métis, non-Status, and Bill C-31 Aboriginal people, all of whom require specialized supports and recruitment strategies or have difficulty accessing funding and programming (CMEC, 2002).

Preston (2008) and the Assembly of First Nations (2011) similarly discuss the limitations of current practices, finding that though programs exist, access to them is declining. Funding for First Nation and Inuit students is decreasing. In 1995-1996, 27,185 students were funded by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada; this number dropped to 25,000 in 2000-2001, and 18,729 in 2009 (Assembly of First Nations, 2011; Preston, 2008). In a report on First Nations post-secondary education, the Assembly of First Nations (2011) states that lack of funding remains the primary barrier for on-reserve First Nations people in accessing post-secondary education. They also estimate that 13,802 students who were ready to enrol or waiting in the backlog of applications did not get any funding in the 2008 school year due to what Preston (2000) calls a jurisdictional grey zone fight over who is responsible – the federal, provincial, or local First Nation governments (AFN, 2011). The end result of this argument over who should pay for these programs and re-

cruitment strategies and how much government monies should be allotted to them is the remaining low rates of Aboriginal post-secondary involvement. In 2006, 23.4% of non-Aboriginal Canadians had a university degree; while only 7.7% of Aboriginal Canadians had obtained similar post-secondary certification (AFN, 2011; Preston, 2008). The performance of Indigenous adults at the university level aged 25-64 in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States is similar. However, the gap between Canadian Indigenous and non-Indigenous adults is nearly twice as large as our American neighbours, who have the smallest gap amongst the four nations (AFN, 2011). While Canadian rates have edged upward over the recent past, the relatively lower levels of completion of post-secondary education by Aboriginal students indicate that their needs are not being effectively met through current practices (CMEC, 2002).

Importance of culture. Researchers conclude that post-secondary education has the potential to transform the lives of Aboriginal people in Canada (Preston 2008). However, in order for this to occur, it is suggested that there needs to exist certain approaches to learning and teaching to assist Aboriginal students in being successful (CMEC, 2002; Preston, 2008; Silver, Klyne, and Simard, 2003; Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2001). By including elements of Aboriginal cultures in the classroom at the post-secondary level, Aboriginal students are able to find strength to continue in their programs of study and ways to connect with both instructors and the material being taught. This is discussed in the National Aboriginal Design Committee's (NADC) (2002) expansion of the work of Malcolm Knowles in the area of andragogy, which differentiates the needs of adult learners. First, they identify a separate definition of Aboriginal pedagogy as based on traditional Aboriginal components of self, which include spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and

physical dimensions of education (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, in NADC, 2002). They

then go on to differentiate Aboriginal andragogy, which advocates the alignment of the

four aspects of every learner: Self, Family, Community, and Nation (NADC, 2002). In the

study, they advocate for all learning to be done within the context of Aboriginal teachings

and cultures, and for the use of the Medicine Wheel as a model for educational program-

ming (NADC, 2002). Additionally, the NADC (2002) recommend that education at all

levels be seen as a process and not just a product; it must involve the learner as an equal

partner, and identify issues of concern to Aboriginal learners.

Also discussing the importance of integrating culture into the learning process for

Aboriginal adults, McLaren (1988, in Amstutz & Sheared, 2000) states that instruction

must not be prescriptive, where students are forced to master content in order to assimi-

late into mainstream society and established structures, but instead be pluralistic and ad-

vocate content that exemplifies diversity, emphasizes teamwork and collaboration, and

challenges the monocultural beliefs and practices of mainstream educational institutions.

Antone (2001) concurs, stating that in order to be in balance as a student, "one must have

positive self-identity," (p. 31). If education is a circle, she argues, Aboriginal people have

historically been instructed in only the Western half of the circle; they must validate and

promote their half to be in balance and journey in a positive way (Antone, 2001). How-

ever, to do this, the educational system must provide programs which "promote self-

worth, dignity, and empowerment," which is done by including Aboriginal cultural be-

liefs, worldviews, and practices (Antone, 2001, p. 32).

Barriers. "Tuition and books are often not the barrier....The barrier is expenses for

daycare, transportation, housing, food, and family expenses," (CMEC, 2002, p. 50). As

previously stated, Aboriginal post-secondary students face numerous barriers to education. Smith-Mohamed (1998) identifies the need of institutions and instructors to address different learning styles, have linguistic and teaching capability, and have an awareness of Aboriginal heritage, culture, and diversity and a knowledge of, and sensitivity to, Aboriginal issues. EKOS Research Associates Inc. (2005 in AFN, 2011) find that barriers to post-secondary education as identified by on-reserve First Nation people are many, and include:

- lack of money and government financial support;

- problems with addictions;

- pregnancy;

- lack of encouragement;

- the need to leave their community;

- lack of academic qualifications;

- lack of interest and preparation; and

- geographical distance.

Supports that are currently available and examined in the literature include those that address the personal, emotional, academic, financial, and social needs of Aboriginal students. However, one study in particular noted that help-seeking strategies were important elements in the achievements of the participants of the University of Manitoba's ACCESS programs; these individuals were able to form their own network or community within the institution, something not all Aboriginals students are equipped to do (Brown, Knol, & Fraehlich, 2008; Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2001).

Specialized programming. According to Sloan-Seale, Wallace, and Levin (2001), initial disadvantages like poorly educated parents, lower incomes, alternative family circumstances, or lack of academic preparation affects Aboriginal post-secondary students significantly, and may cause them to require remedial help and an extra year on average to finish post-secondary programming. ACCESS programs were developed in Manitoba in the 1970s, funded through Manitoba Education and Training, Advanced Education and Skills Training Division, to address the needs of students facing these types of challenges (CMEC, 2002). Aimed at assisting the non-traditional student to access universities and colleges, preference was given to Aboriginal students and those facing social, economic, or cultural barriers. Supports offered through ACCESS programming included pre-university orientation to first year fall classes, individual academic advising, introduction to university courses for credit, tutorials, counselling, childcare and housing assistance, urban adjustment assistance, communication and personal development workshops, and career counselling (CMEC, 2002). In the late 1980s, the ACCESS program was able to raise enrolment and completion rates significantly for Aboriginals students in Manitoba; with only 10% of the Canadian Aboriginal population at the time, the province has the second highest number of Aboriginal university completion after Ontario (CMEC, 2002). Sloane-Seale, Wallace, and Levin (2001) also examine the effectiveness of the ACCESS programs in Manitoba, noting that they provide "equality of condition" for motivated but poorly prepared students. By providing access to the same degrees and diplomas regularly available, with the addition of academic, social, personal, and financial supports, ACCESS programs have been able to support non-traditional students to attain the same high

standards of other students in an alternative environment (Sloane-Seale, Wallace, and

Levin, 2001).

Other specialized programming identified in the literature, in relation to Aboriginal

post-secondary students, is programs offered through community delivery, for example

the northern teacher training programs of the Brandon University and the University of

Saskatchewan. Delivered in communities without access to campus-based educational

offerings, these programs promote direct community and participant involvement in order

to develop innovative delivery techniques for rural and northern regions (CMEC, 2002).

Also noted in similar studies are the effectiveness of tribally operated colleges in the

United States, alternative education innovations based on traditional Maori underpinnings

in New Zealand, and ABSTUDY assistance programs in education, law, and health fields

in Australia (CMEC, 2002).

However, the literature also identifies problems with such programs, including AC-

CESS. Beginning in the 1990s, decreased funding from the federal level left the cost of

running many of these programs solely with provincial governments. To date, ACCESS

programs in Manitoba cannot offer student funding; students must still rely on external

avenues, such as First Nation PSE funding variously administered (i.e., band, tribal coun-

cil, AND), student loans, or employment (CMEC, 2002). Finally, a lack of program fund-

ing in recent years has begun to affect students; less financial supports means many stu-

dents and their families struggle to live on the rates provided, and the number of students

registered has decreased (CMEC, 2002). Overall, the literature seems to indicate that

though specialized programming for Aboriginal students is helpful in promoting enrol-

ment and retention, it cannot be relied upon as the only solution to increasing the Aborig-
inal post-secondary attainment.

Other problems with specialized programming include a lack of supports desired
by Aboriginal students. The supports most frequently identified in the literature as miss-
ing are those that focus on emotional needs and developing a sense of belonging and
community (Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2001). Finally, the CMEC (2002) suggests
that there exists a need for further examination of ways to increase Aboriginal staffing
and curriculum development in these programs, and to address the shortcoming in diver-
sification of subjects and the under-representation of Aboriginal people in certain areas,
such as the health and science fields.

Relationships. Additional studies on the retention of Aboriginal students in post-
secondary educational institutions have focused on how the relationships of Aboriginal
students with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal faculty and classmates are associated with
persistence and success rates among this group of the student population (Jackson, Smith,
& Hill, 2003; Jaime, 2003; Saggio & Rendón, 2004; Schmidtke, 2009; Smith-Mohamed,
1998). Saggio & Rendón (2004), while conducting research on the extent to which in-
and out-of-class academic, social, and spiritual experiences are associated with persis-
tence among American Indian and Alaska Native students at an American bible college,
concluded that family, spirituality, and validation by faculty and staff are the most im-
portant influences on persistence. They identified a number of areas associated with en-
rolment and retention of Aboriginal students, including parental and family support, aca-
demic and socio-economic background, involvement in Christian spiritual practices, and
positive and negative college culture (Saggio & Rendón, 2004). The researchers are clear

in their assertions that low-income, first-generation Aboriginal students do not do well in the sterile, invalidating, and fiercely competitive environments usually present at mainstream post-secondary institutions (Saggio & Rendón, 2004). They also note that there still needs to be research conducted on how these results might relate to students who follow traditional Aboriginal spirituality (Saggio & Rendón, 2004).

Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) also investigated the area of Aboriginal student retention, exploring successful Native American college students' experiences to better understand barriers to post-secondary success and the means to overcoming those barriers. Surface themes which developed from this study similarly include family support, academic background, reliance on spiritual resources, and the perception of care from faculty and staff, but go on to include structured social supports such as clubs, groups, and offices, and the development of self-efficacy and confidence through experiences that lead to more independent and assertive attitudes (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003). Deeper themes developed dealt with passive and active racism displayed by both faculty and students; nonlinear paths to education, in which Aboriginal students experience delays before entering post-secondary studies and take longer to graduate; and a paradoxical cultural conflict which exists for some students, who feel conflicting pressures to be successful in college while trying to maintain their identity as an Aboriginal person and community member (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003).

Schmidtke (2009), looking at the American experience of Aboriginal post-secondary students, noted that instructors have the strongest influence on how Aboriginal students perceive campus atmosphere and on persistence and motivation. This study concludes that instructors' greatest impact occurs in the areas of cultural sensitivity, academic

and personal relationships, instructional methods and design, and sensitivity to student learning styles. Schmidtke (2009) also states that "[s]tudents need faculty members who care about their academic progress, respond to them in a supportive manner, and are willing to help with academic problems," (p.52). Problems with instructors for American Aboriginal post-secondary students are also identified, and include communication habits and differing attitudes, beliefs, and values, which can lead to an impression by these students that their instructors are hostile. As stated by Jaime (2003), the educational system created by non-Aboriginal people is often perceived by Aboriginal students as having "an underlying intent to weed out or fail those who do not look like them or are not from their culture," (p.262). This, along with the demographic, social, educational and economic causes previously discussed as identified in the literature, leads to high rates of non-completion for Aboriginal students at the post-secondary level.

Factors influencing achievement and motivation. For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to investigate the factors that influence achievement and motivation of students and whether there exists a difference among these factors for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. According to van der Sluis, Vinkhuyzen, Boomsma, and Posthuma (2010), achievement motivation is a prerequisite for success in academics. Historically, student motivation has been defined as having goals that direct psychological and physical energy toward the realization of a desired end or ends (Heckhausen, 1991 in McInerney, Hinkley, Dowson, & Van Etten, 1998). In contemporary studies, however, student motivation is more often defined as goals driving academic engagement, dependent upon situational criteria on which a student judges academic success or failure (McInerney et al., 1998).

Generally, there are two types of learning goals found in the literature: mastery goals and performance goals (McInerney, Hinkley, Dowson, & Van Etten, 1998; McInerney, Roche, McInerney, & Marsh, 1997). Mastery goals, also called task-oriented goals, are shown to be related to internal control beliefs, reflective of the student's metacognitive knowledge, strategy use, and academic effort (McInerney et al., 1998). These types of goals are self-referenced, and focus attention on the intrinsic value of learning. Performance or ego-oriented goals are related to beliefs derived from external comparisons, in which the student compares him or herself relative to others or normative standards (McInerney et al., 1998). The focus for performance goals is on the student's own ability and sense of self-worth, shown by doing better than others, surpassing norms, or achieving success with little effort (McInerney et al., 1997). Therefore, performance goals are other-referenced. It is also important to note that in additional to mastery and performance learning goals, social goals can influence achievement and motivation in education. These can include the desire to please family, fit into a peer group, or to preserve one's cultural identity (McInerney et al., 1998).

Maehr's Personal Investment Model also examines student motivation, conceptualizing motivated behaviour as being determined by three global variables: perceived goals of behaviour, sense-of-self, and action possibilities (Maehr, 1984; Maehr & Braskamp, 1986). The first, perceived goals of behaviour, is the motivational foci of activity; in other words, it is how a person defines success and failure in a particular situation (McInerney et al., 1997). Four goal structures, task, ego, social solidarity, and extrinsic rewards, contribute to the motivational orientation of the student, with salience dependent upon the situation. Second, sense of self is the organized collection of perceptions, beliefs, and

feelings related to how the student sees him or herself (McInerney et al., 1997). It is composed of many factors, all also contributing to the motivational orientation of the student. Finally, action possibilities is the behavioural alternative a student perceives to be available and appropriate in a situation, and is seen in terms of sociocultural norms and external factors, such as geographic location and socioeconomic status (McInerney et al., 1997).

While there seems to exist in the literature a debate over whether mastery and performance goals are mutually exclusive, McInerney, Roche, McInerney, and Marsh (1997) note that student motivation and achievement is a product of a complex set of interacting goals reflective of personal, family, and cultural values. They suggest that mastery and performance goals can both be held by a student at the same time, varying in salience, depending on the educational situation and broader social context, and that there exists for students a complex framework of motivational determinants of action (McInerney et al., 1997).

Yet implicit in both types of goals is a focus on individualism and a Western conception of what is important and meaningful. Mastery and performance goals pay little attention to group orientations, something important to Aboriginal and Indigenous cultures (McInerney et al., 1997). They emphasize competition and power seeking, and tend to be forward-thinking and future-oriented. Traditional Aboriginal cultures, however, emphasize the importance of cooperation and social concern, promoting of group success and well being, and tend to be present- and past-oriented. And though there may seem to be a mismatch between the goal orientations of Western educational institutions and students from diverse cultural backgrounds, McInerney, Roche, McInerney, and Marsh (1997)

found in a study of students from five cultural backgrounds, that the motivational profiles
of diverse groups are more similar than different. All groups studied were strongly task-
oriented, ambivalent to competition, and negatively oriented to power; all groups were
affiliation oriented and ambivalent to token reinforcement. Additionally, all groups had a
strong sense of purpose in schooling, and a positive sense of competence and self-esteem
(McInerney et al., 1997). However, the authors do note that these findings may indicate
that some students from Indigenous groups have been effectively socialized into a West-
ern system and that the lack of Western-Indigenous difference may be reflective of the
fact that Indigenous values have been weakened by assimilation and urbanization of stu-
dents from traditional backgrounds and contact with mainstream culture, especially
through mass media and schooling (McInerney et al., 1997). McInerney, Hinkley, Dow-
son, and Van Etten (1998) agree, stating that the perceptions of student success across
cultural groups are remarkably similar. What they suggest is that an emphasis on perfor-
mance or social goal orientations in schools may be culturally inappropriate for both Ab-
original and non-Aboriginal students, and that mastery goal orientations are the best fit
for all cultures (McInerney et al., 1998).

Finally, in another study on student achievement and motivation by Harper
(2007), autonomy was found to be a major predictor of academic achievement. "Auton-
omy is a basic human need having influence on motivation. Facilitating student autono-
my is an essential ingredient of effective programs for maximizing internalized change
and increasing motivation," (Harper, 2007, p. 23). The study states that offering choice is
a central feature in supporting student autonomy, and that meaningful choice promotes
willingness, and willingness increases motivation (Harper, 2007). Therefore, the use of

motivational, affective, and social supports in conjunction with the promotion of autonomy can lead to higher student ratings of mastery classroom goal structures (Harper, 2007). Additionally, Harper (2007) found that student-centred environments promote higher achievement scores and somewhat higher internal motivation levels, particularly among troubled and troubling students. The findings of Dicinto and Gee (1999) in studying at-risk youth concur, showing that student motivation was significantly associated with amount of control perceived by them over learning situations (in Harper, 2007).

Literature summary. Overall, the ideas of other researchers as stated in the literature concur with my own beliefs: that it is necessary to continue to examine what factors contribute to the success of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit post-secondary students and what supports are needed by these individuals in light of the still lower rates of participation and completion in comparison to the non-Aboriginal population of Canada. And, as much of the research is based on figures gathered by Statistics Canada through quantitative methods, it also appears to be essential to begin to examine the voices of Aboriginal post-secondary students qualitatively in order to determine what they say about their experiences, particularly those in a Canadian setting. My research will therefore be designed to study these elements in the Manitoba context from a resource and exchange theory perspective to inform educators, administrators, and students of the needs and experiences of Aboriginal learners at the post-secondary level.

Theory

According to Brade (2001), exchange and resource theory is an appropriate theoretical orientation for examining participation of Aboriginal people in post-secondary education and educational attainment by Aboriginal students because of its focus on motivation

and prediction. Exchange and resource theory developed out of the field of social psychology and family studies in the late 1950s to explain how and why families interact and operate the way they do. Related to phenomenology, these early theories focused on the role perceived rewards and costs play in encouraging and constraining behaviour, as well as the involvement of giving and getting processes in social relationships, and later developed to introduce concepts around the norm of reciprocity and group level exchanges (Homan, 1961; Nye, 1979; and Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). More recent key scholars in this area include Sabatelli and Shehan (1993), Schaffer and Lia-Hoagberg (1994), and Klein & White (1996). However, for the purpose of this study, it is important to also examine other works in conjunction with exchange and resource theory, such as social exchange theory (Foa & Foa, 1974; Lawler & Thye, 1999) and cultural identity concepts (Berry, 1999) to ensure that the ideas and constructs of exchange and resource theory are viewed through a decolonizing lens.

Several assumptions associated with exchange and resource theory should be given particular attention. The first is that *human beings are rational, and make sensible decisions based on the amount of information available to them at the moment and in order to receive the greatest reward at the least cost* (Nye, 1982; Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). I will use myself as an example. I may be presented with an opportunity to return to school. I must make a rational decision, using information available at the moment, as to whether or not to accept the offer. During this decision making process, I will take into consideration the rewards of returning to school (increased knowledge and employment potential, increased earnings upon graduation) and the costs (time and energy both at school and at home, time away from family, less income during schooling) when making my decision.

If I were to accept this premise, I would anticipate that the rewards will outweigh the costs. However, it is important to note that my choices may be made using inadequate information.

How and by whom rationality is defined, though, is important to consider at this point, as exchange and resource theory has traditionally been constrained by a limited understanding of rationality. For many Aboriginal people, decisions are made holistically: by the head, the heart, the body, and the spirit. Therefore, it can be difficult to make an operational distinction between what I perceive as rational and what others perceive as rational. My rational decision making process, as an Aboriginal person, may involve going with my 'gut-reaction', listening to my heart, and praying for guidance from the Creator; my emotions and feelings will play a central role. Indeed, this definition of rationality may appear to contradict traditional western paradigms of neutrality and objectivity that have traditionally been considered hallmarks of rational thought. However, more recently scholars have begun to argue that emotions and emotional processes can enrich or improve rationality and be important signals in decision making processes (Coates, 2012; Lawler & Thye, 1999). Therefore, by using an expanded definition of rationality, exchange and resource theory is, in fact, enhanced.

The second assumption of resource and exchange theory is that *individuals must experience costs in order to obtain future rewards, and they must make a choice as to whether they will adapt to or cope with the associated costs* (Nye, 1979). Again looking at myself as an example, I decide to return to school and will experience the costs associated with this choice (time and energy both at school and at home, time away from family, less income). However, I believe the end result of obtaining a post-secondary qualifi-

cation will outweigh all other costs. I choose to adapt and cope with the new challenges
of being a student in order to gain the reward of graduating from school.

A third assumption is that *humans evaluate costs and rewards differently, based upon
many factors including culture, religion, family background, or socioeconomic status*
(Nye, 1982; Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). In this case, two students are attending the same
university and are both experiencing similar costs (time and energy, time away from fam-
ily, monetary costs). They are both adapting to the costs in order to receive a reward,
however, one student may perceive the reward to be increased earning potential upon
graduation, while the other may perceive the reward to be the feeling of self-efficacy up-
on completing his or her studies.

Again, it is important to consider the cultural component in the definition of costs and
rewards. In exchange and resource theory, costs are seen as punishments or lost rewards.
When one takes the time to consider the historical costs Aboriginal people have already
made in relation to mainstream education systems (loss of culture, separation of families,
abuse and trauma), it becomes clear that many Aboriginal students would not be willing
to 'put up with' as many costs as non-Aboriginal students. Additionally, there may be
some costs that are non-negotiable, such as connection to community and spirituality.
These altruistic behaviours are typically not considered in exchange and resource theory,
but when applied to Aboriginal students, cannot be ignored and can even be seen as re-
wards, for the student, their family, and their community. Also, when using an asset-based
approach such as is the case in this study, it is necessary to consider that what may be a
cost to one person is a reward to another. For example, we can ask: what are the rewards
of withdrawing from post-secondary studies? More time with family? Returning to one's

community and the land? By recognizing these differences, this type of theory becomes

even more empowering for Aboriginal people and a useful tool for understanding deci-

sion making in the context of post-secondary education.

The fourth assumption of exchange and resource theory is that *social exchanges are*

regulated by the norm of reciprocity; that is, more rewards means more reciprocation of

similar rewarding actions to others (Bagarozzi, 1993). For example, I, as a student, have

returned to post-secondary studies and am continually provided with validating com-

ments from instructors. I will then participate more fully in their courses and aim to also

validate the experiences of other students around me.

Relationships are extremely important in Aboriginal culture. They are multi-faceted,

ever changing, and must continually be attended to. They are not only built around the

norm of reciprocity, but also around respect; respect for others' views, autonomy, and in-

terests. The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (Communi-

cation Canada, 1996) stated that the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

people have not existed in balance for hundreds of years; it is therefore essential that the-

se relationships need to be re-established so that any future exchanges reflect the 3 Rs:

recognition, respect, and responsibility (Communication Canada, 1996). Therefore, when

considering this fourth assumption of exchange and resource theory, the nature and struc-

ture of the relationship requires special considerations.

A fifth assumption is that individuals are motivated by self-interest. Schaffer and Lia-

Hoagberg (1994) believe that "humans avoid relationships, interactions, and feeling states

that are dissatisfying or costly and seek out situations and experiences that are gratifying,

pleasurable, or rewarding," (p.153). Klein and White (1996) agree, adding "...individuals

are unilaterally motivated by self-interest – individuals seek things and relationships they
regard as beneficial for themselves," (p.63). According to this assumption, I will choose
to continue to participate in post-secondary programming or not based on my perceptions
of the rewards and costs I will experience or receive from participating in education.

Once more, the idea that humans are solely motivated by self-interests can be trou-
bling from an Aboriginal perspective. As an Aboriginal person, my sense of identity is
based on what I know and think about myself in relation to others, and my self-concept is
made up in part by my belonging and attachment to my community (Berry, 1999). There-
fore, in choosing to continue or not based on my perceptions of the rewards and costs of
participating in post-secondary programming, I would also have to consider the rewards
and costs to my family and community.

Along with assumptions, there are several key concepts surrounding exchange and
resource theory. These include rewards and costs, profit or maximizing utility, and Com-
parison Level (CL) and Comparison Level for Alternatives (CL+) (Comp, n.d.). The first,
rewards and costs, can be best explained by Klein and White (1996), who stated "a re-
ward is anything that is perceived as beneficial to an actor's interests...although costs may
be negative rewards – things perceived as not beneficial to an actor's self-interest – we
should be careful to also include as implicit costs cases in which rewards are missed or
forgone," (p. 65). Nye (1982) adds, "in general, we can learn what is rewarding to people
in society both by observing their behaviour and by asking them what they like or do not
life," (p. 14). The second key concept, profit or maximizing utility, follows the belief that
people are motivated out of self-interest. Profit is determined in terms of the rewards and
punishments associated with an action or contemplated action; it is a ratio of rewards to

costs, calculated rationally in order to determine all possible choices in a situation (Klein
& White, 1996; Nye, 1982).

The third concept, Comparison Level (CL) and Comparison Level for Alternatives
(CL+), is actually two concepts better understood together. Developed by Thibaut and
Kelley (1959), Comparison Level (CL) is the standard by which a person evaluates the
rewards and costs of a relationship in terms of what he or she feels they deserve. It can
also include the comparison of what others in a similar position have and how well you
are doing relative to them (Klein & White, 1996). Comparison Level for Alternatives
(CL+) was developed by Sabatelli and Shehan (1993) and Klein and White (1996). CL+
is defined as how well a person is doing relative to others outside of their position, but "in
positions that supply an alternative choice," (Klein & White, 1996, p. 66). These ideas are
very subjective and may be based on the perceptions of the individual; their judgement
may also be made regardless of whether a better alternative actually exists (Sabatelli &
Shehan, 1993).

Several propositions of exchange and resource theory exist. The most powerful prop-
osition states that individuals engage in behaviours or choose alternatives that maximize
their profit (Klein & White, 1996). This is related to the assumption that humans are mo-
tivated out of self-interest, as well as the concepts of rewards and costs; "humans avoid
costly and seek rewarding statuses, relationships, and interaction and feeling states to the
end that their profits are maximized...or minimize their losses," (Nye, 1982, p. 20). For
example, I may choose to enrol in education because I perceive the rewards to outweigh
the costs of not being educated. Alternatively, I may participate more fully in a course

assignment because I enjoy working with others, learning new concepts, and sharing ideas. I perceive all of these feeling states as rewards.

A second proposition surrounds the ideas of reciprocity. Yogev and Brett (1985) stated that in a marriage, both partners will try to maximize their rewards, and each will consider the relationship more satisfying when the rewards outweigh the costs. In the case of myself as a student, the more I feel myself, my instructors, and my classmates are sharing and gaining in the learning experience, the more stable I will be.

A final main proposition to be discussed in this paper is that, immediate outcomes being equal, humans will choose the alternative that promises the better long-term reward, and long-term outcomes being equal, humans will choose the alternative that promises the better immediate reward (Nye, 1982). For example, I will continue in my studies with the long-term goal of graduating with post-secondary certification because I perceive that this certification will increase future earnings and financial stability. However, I will experience the more immediate cost of time away from my family while completing my studies.

As discussed throughout this section, criticisms of resource and exchange theory exist and should not be ignored. First, it is often difficult to make a distinction between what people perceive as rewarding and what they perceive as costly; these can be very subjective perceptions based on many things, such as past experience, and present circumstances. Additionally, if all actions are rewarding and the reason humans undertake actions are to bring rewards, it would be difficult to explain the times when a person does not appear to act in ways so as to obtain rewards (Klein & White, 1996). This means that the theory does not allow much room for cultural beliefs such as self-sacrifice for the benefit of oth-

ers, something common in traditional Aboriginal value systems. However, keeping these limitations in mind, and adding in elements of social exchange theory and cultural identity concepts, resource and exchange theory can effectively be applied to the study of Aboriginal students at post-secondary educational institutions, particularly when investigating the role relationships between these students, their classmates, and faculty play in retention and graduation rates. It can also be seen as an empowering theory for Aboriginal people, as it believes humans make rational choices given relevant information. In many studies regarding Aboriginal people throughout history and into the present, paternalistic ideas often pervade, such as the belief that Aboriginal people cannot make logical or common-sense choices on their own.

According to Brade (2001) in her study of the relationship between participation in cultural activities and languages by Aboriginal people and educational attainment, systems theory, in which all aspects of a humans life and surroundings are interconnected and that everything is affected when one part of the system is changed, is likely the best alternative in a study of this kind. However, because this theory states that the pieces can only be understood by viewing the whole, it is beyond the scope of this study (Brade, 2001).

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review and theoretical concepts of exchange and resource theory (Bagarozzi, 1993; Brade, 2001; Homan, 1961; Klein & White 1996; Nye, 1979; Nye, 1982; Sabatelli & Shehan 1993; Schaffer & Lia-Hoagberg, 1994; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Yogev and Brett, 1985), the conceptual framework of this study was based on the following explanation. Aboriginal students either coming into or already at post-

secondary institutions face numerous costs in becoming or continuing to be students.

These have been identified in the literature review, and can include: financial loss of in-

come, the inability to meet the many financial, psychological, emotional, relational, and

cultural demands of family, spiritual and social losses of geographic relocation, cultural

loss, and personal isolation.

In order to reach their long-term goal of attaining post-secondary credentials, Aborig-

inal students must feel that the rewards outweigh the total costs. But how do they decide

what rewards have worth and what costs they are willing to accept? Deacon and Fire-

baugh (1988), in investigating family resource management principles, discuss how goal

and standard setting is influenced by an individual's thoughts, feeling, values, and access

to resources. They maintain that the values of an individual are affected by the experienc-

es he or she has throughout life (Deacon & Firebaugh, 1988). Values themselves then

form the basis for decision making; they are essential in defining what has worth, the cri-

teria set for goals, and providing continuity to all decisions and actions (Deacon & Fire-

baugh, 1988).

Values can be absolute, relative, and normative, intrinsic or extrinsic. Values can be

shared within and between families and communities, and gain meaning by how people

feel and think (Deacon & Firebaugh, 1988). Additionally, Deacon and Firebaugh (1988)

assert that all valuing decisions have a subjective and objective component. The subjec-

tive value component indicates a person's goals, and with each goal is a set of value crite-

ria that need to be met (Deacon & Firebaugh, 1988). The objective value component re-

lates to attributes and properties of available resources that are required to meet the sub-

jective criteria. An individual must match the subjective criteria of their goals to the ap-

propriate resources as best as possible (Deacon & Firebaugh, 1988). Goals themselves develop from these values, as well as experiences, knowledge, feedback, and environment. Finally, if values provide the criteria and meanings that guide decisions and actions, it is important to consider the values and value systems held by Aboriginal postsecondary students when investigating how they evaluate the rewards and costs of participating in education.

It was therefore proposed that when Aboriginal students are able to make authentic personal, respectful and reciprocal relationships with instructors and other students during their studies, in turn meeting their value criteria, and while being provided with additional academic, social, personal, and financial supports as resources, they are more likely to achieve their long term goals of program completion and graduation. As pointed out earlier, by allowing Aboriginal students to become equal partners in their educational journeys, and assisting them in exploring and developing their self-identity through involvement in traditional cultural activities within the institution, retention and graduation rates will increase (Antone, 2001; NADC, 2002; Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2001). As well, by developing meaningful relationships with instructors and other students while going to school, the persistence and motivation levels of Aboriginal students will also increase (Schmidtke, 2009).

However, it was also proposed that Aboriginal students who do not receive the supports needed throughout their studies, who are not provided with opportunities to learn in a culturally relevant environment, and who do not make authentic personal, respectful and reciprocal relationships with others within the institution, and therefore are not meeting their value criteria, will perceive the costs to be too high or the resources to be inade-

quate, and will discontinue their post-secondary studies. In these cases, the long-term re-

ward of post-secondary graduation does not outweigh the numerous barriers faced by

Aboriginal students both inside and outside the institution. As stated by Schmidtke

(2009), when Aboriginal students are not provided with the necessary supports and condi-

tions, they may develop oppositional attitudes that might lead to withdrawal instead of

persistence. In both cases, it was also important to note that additional factors such as the

individual's connection to culture and/or spirituality before becoming a post-secondary

student, parental or family support, student background, and the culture of the post-

secondary institution will all be taken into consideration by the individual when he or she

makes their choice whether or not to continue their education.

Therefore, the conceptual framework was as follows: in Figure 1, starting on the

right, the individual Aboriginal student exists in a certain reality which can be influenced

by numerous factors. These can include: their personal and familial value system; the his-

tory of Aboriginal people in Canada and the intergenerational effects of colonization; the

individual's current family status, including educational attainment of parents and other

family members, marriage, the presence of children, income level and source, and loca-

tion of family residence and community; and the level of knowledge of and involvement

in traditional Aboriginal culture. Moving to the bottom of the circle, the student chooses

to enrol in post-secondary education to obtain certification, which is a rational choice

made for differing reasons based on the individual's situation, needs, and overall life

goals. Continuing on their journey, on the left side of the circle, the student is provided

with the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging and self-identity through the for-

mation of meaningful relationships, the availability of resources in the form of academic,

social, personal, and financial supports, and the reflection of self and culture in the insti-

tution, through the integration of Aboriginal content and the emphasis of Aboriginal is-

sues in programs, courses, and institutional mandates. Finally, the student makes a ration-

al decision, based on the calculation of the reward/cost ratio, to continue in their studies

to program completion, graduation, and post-secondary certification (Brade, 2001).

Figure 1

Rewards of Education Outweigh Costs

**Completes Program, Graduates, & Receives
Post-Secondary Certification**

**Develops Sense of Belonging & Self-
Identity**
Influencing factors:
- forms meaningful relationships
- provided with supports
- sees culture reflected in institution

Social Reality of Individual
Influencing factors:
- value system
- historical influences
- current family & SE status

Enrolment in Post-Secondary Studies

In Figure 2, again starting on the right, the individual Aboriginal student exists in a cer-

tain reality influenced by many factors. Moving to the bottom of the circle, the student

chooses to enrol in post-secondary education based on their long-term life goals. Contin-

uing on their educational journey, this time the student does not receive the opportunity

to develop a sense of belonging and self-identity. Instead, they find themselves unable to form meaningful relationships, they cannot access sufficient resources (supports), whether because they are unable to navigate the institutional system or because they are unavailable, and they face an environment within the institution which is at odds with their personal culture. These students are often faced with acts of racism and prejudice, course content which does not reflect their personal needs or those of their community, and an environment that appears hostile and unwelcoming to Aboriginal people. Because of this, the student may begin to develop an oppositional attitude to post-secondary education and a deformation of identity; the new non-Aboriginal value-based material of the educational institution cannot be integrated into the Aboriginal student's value system. He or she then makes a rational decision to withdraw from post-secondary academic studies, as they now perceive the costs outweighing the rewards.

Figure 2

Costs of Education Outweigh Rewards

Develops Oppositional Attitude & Withdraws from Post-Secondary Studies

Does NOT Develop Sense of Belonging & Self-Identity
Influencing factors:
- Unable to form meaningful relationships
- receives insufficient supports
- face environment at odds with personal culture

Social Reality of Individual
Influencing factors:
- value system
- historical influences
- current family & SE status

Enrolment in Post-Secondary Studies

In both figures, it is stipulated that the cost/reward analysis will take place as a result of the experiences the students faces within the institution. It is the outcome of this cost/reward analysis that will be used by the student to decide whether or not to persist in their studies. It should be noted that factors outside of the post-secondary institution may also affect the decision making process of the student. However, any investigation into these factors in depth is beyond the scope of this study.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the literature supporting the need for the study was discussed, and overall it concured with my own beliefs and findings from preliminary studies. First, I

discussed the common approaches and themes in practices in the available literature among post-secondary educational institutions in relation to Aboriginal student recruitment and retention, as well as the associated limitations of practice are described. Also discussed were the importance of culture and the barriers faced by Aboriginal students, as well as specialized programming that has been or is currently being offered, as noted in other related studies. In the chapter I went on to examine literature concerned with the effects of relationships on student success, and the factors influencing achievement and motivation. I then laid out the theoretical orientation of resource and exchange theory that was used to examine participation of Aboriginal people in post-secondary education and educational attainment by Aboriginal students, using myself as a student, to exemplify the ideas. Finally, I concluded with a description of the conceptual framework of a cost-reward analysis based on the value sets of the student used to frame the study.

In the following chapter, I give details on the methodology used in the study, which included qualitative, phenomenological, and, perhaps most importantly, decolonizing Indigenous approaches. Next, details regarding the setting of the study, my recruitment strategy within the chosen educational institution, and the sample of 8 participants are discussed. Finally, the procedures and analyses I employed within the study are described, including the ethical considerations I have addressed in working with Aboriginal people.

Chapter 3:   Methodology

The ways in which we conduct research should not only be important to the institutions supporting the studies, but to all the people involved. Research is alive; it has life, breath, and soul. As with the way I approach education, I also approach research holistically, taking into account the heart, body, mind, and spirit of myself as researcher is provided. The setting of the study, recruitment methods, and sample characteristics are also laid out, with details of the chosen university and its Aboriginal student body. The procedures of the study are also identified, with particular attention paid to ethics, the interview structure, and data analysis. Finally, information regarding the interview instrument follows.

Indigenous Research, Decolonizing Methodologies & Assets-Based Approaches

The purpose of this study was to add to the existing literature new evidence in the study of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit post-secondary student success factors that can be drawn from student perceptions. According to Erikson (1986), qualitative research is concerned with participant perspectives and how individuals create meaning. Therefore, the methodology of choice for this study was qualitative in nature to account for the subjective experiences of the participants. As well, by taking a qualitative approach, I also took a more traditional and culturally appropriate route to collecting information. Storytelling in Aboriginal cultures is the primary way information is passed on from one generation to the next. By listening to the stories of students through interviewing, I honoured this method of learning and sharing. Additionally, the research perspective was based in phenomenology in order to understand the multiple ways participants may interpret their experiences as Aboriginal students at post-secondary educational institutions.

Research of and with Indigenous peoples is predominantly qualitative because qualitative research frameworks can provide "congruence and cultural safety" for the tenets of Indigenous worldviews (IPHRC, 2004, p.14). Denzin & Lincoln (2000 in IPHRC, 2004) outline the movements qualitative research has taken throughout the last century, from traditional (1900-1950) to post-modern (1990-1995). Beginning in the early 1990s, qualitative research began to focus on experimental and new ethnographies, and aimed to move towards "inclusivity of voice, worldview, and culture", as well as the location of the "other" and other "ways of knowing," (IPHRC, 2004, p.15). Since that time, it has moved the through post experimental period and into the current "Seventh Movement", which is marked by increasingly responsive research geared to the "moral imperatives" of the human community," where Indigenous theory and method are both sought and valued (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 1062 in IPHRC, 2004).

This emerging era of qualitative research explored by Denzin and Lincoln (2000 in IPHRC, 2004) is based on historical shifts and breaks that have evolved since early 1900s. It seeks to establish a movement away from grand narratives and towards the creation of a new centre emerging from this "tension-riddled enterprise of research" (IPHRC, 2004, p, 44). They warn, however, that this movement will be "messy", uncertain at times, and experimental; and, as stated by Naisbitt (1982), "those who are willing to handle the ambiguity of this in between period and to anticipate the new era will be a quantum leap ahead of those who hold on to the past," (IPHRC, 2004, p.45).

This qualitative approach was also chosen to add to the large amount of quantitative data related to the retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students in Canada. Other studies mention the need for qualitative approaches to researching Aboriginal student ex-

periences, stating that quantitative approaches: (1) are limited in the number of paradigms that could be used to frame a study (Jackson & Smith, 2001); (2) should be rejected because research involving human subjects from different backgrounds and experiences requires face-to-face interaction (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996); and (3) may have missed information regarding student retention that could be revealed by studying the subjective experiences of students (Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986). However, based on the nature of researching Aboriginal issues and peoples, this study could not be limited to mainstream Western methodologies alone. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), research is active; it has something at stake and occurs within a set of political and social conditions. It is also inexplicably tied with colonialism: the re-arranging, re-presenting, and re-distributing of Indigenous intellectual and physical property to the rest of the non-indigenous world (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Kovach (2009) agrees, stating that research must be reflexive, decolonizing, and embracing of public engagement. Merata Mita (1989, in Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) states, "We have a history of people putting [Indigenous Peoples] under a microscope in the same way a scientist looks at an insect. The ones doing the looking are giving themselves the power to define," (p. 58). This commercial nature of knowledge transfer, the "trading of the other," shows no concern for the peoples who originally produced the knowledge (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

Western research, and the Western cultural archive imbedded within it, believes in the notion of research as objective, as value-free, and as neutral. In the 1960s, however, there developed a shift in thinking away from this positivist approach towards a more critical theory, one that questioned the connections between power and research, and the failure of Western research to deliver meaningful social change for oppressed peoples (Tuhiwai

Smith, 1999). As part of this shift, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that Indigenous peoples

and Indigenous research must understand how their minds have been colonized and begin

the process of decolonization in order to come to "know and understand theory and re-

search from our own perspectives and for our own purposes," (p. 39). However, she also

distinguishes Indigenous research and methodologies from post-colonialism and post-

colonial discourses. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) states that the problem with the idea of post-

colonialism is that it gives the idea that colonialism is done; the colonizers have left.

However, as stated above, colonialism still exists in the minds and actions of many Indig-

enous and non-Indigenous peoples and researchers, and therefore must be recognized and

addressed. Therefore, she suggests Indigenous research should rather be viewed as a part

of the process of decolonization, involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psy-

chological divesting of colonial power.

The field of Indigenous research, according to Tuhiwai Smith (1999), privileges the

concerns, practices, and participation of Indigenous peoples both as researchers and as

the researched. It utilizes the cultural values, beliefs, protocols, and behaviours of the In-

digenous peoples and communities involved, and builds them in to the research as inte-

gral factors, rather than barriers. It arises from their storytelling, their language, their in-

tuition, and their interconnections to other humans, spirits, and inanimate entities (Ko-

vach, 2009). These new ways of theorizing by researchers, whether Indigenous or not, are

grounded in reality and are sensitive towards what it means to be an Indigenous person

today (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). It is through this approach that Indigenous peoples and

communities are able to determine priorities, identify issues, and participate in discus-

sions with other Indigenous peoples. The 'Indigenous theory' behind this approach to re-

search contains a method for arranging, prioritizing, and legitimating what is seen and done through research with Indigenous peoples (Kovach, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) conceptualizes an Indigenous Research Agenda, which constitutes a program and set of approaches that are situated within decolonization. Focusing on the goal of self-determination, the research agenda becomes more that a political goal, but one of social justice, including processes of decolonization, transformation, mobilization, and healing (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). In this agenda, these processes are not goals or ends; they connect, inform, and clarify research, and can be included into both practice and methodology. Another important aspect of Indigenous research are the principles of respect and reciprocity. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) states that a code of conduct for research with Indigenous peoples and communities should be followed. According to her, research approaches must be:

- respectful;

- conducted in person;

- done with the intent to look first, listen second, and speak last;

- generous;

- cautious;

- not harmful; and

- not done in a way that flaunts the knowledge of the researcher(s), (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

As well, sharing knowledge back with Indigenous peoples is central to the goals of this approach, and must be done in an empowering way using demystified terms and plain

language. It is through this dissemination of results that true change can occur for Indige-

nous peoples by research (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Similarly, in *Indigenous Methodolo-*

gies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts, Kovach (2009) states that indige-

nous research must be fluid, reflexive, and based in stories, employed in the way they

were intended: as instructive, historical, and interpretive. She also describes the im-

portance of positioning and incorporating oneself as researcher into the narrative and ask-

ing who *we* are in the research (Kovach, 2009).

"Among the most repugnant aspects of Western research for Native people in the his-

torical context, has been the emphasis of research on negative social issues; described as

the application of a pathologizing lens," (IPHRC, 2004, p. 12). Finally, because Aborigi-

nal people are often seen as "problems", as people with deficiencies and needs that re-

quire help from the outsider, efforts of creativity and intelligence are often focused on

survival and outwitting or bypassing systems and mainstream institutions (McKnight &

Kretzman, 1996). This deficit-based view of Aboriginal People and communities is prob-

lematic for researchers as research becomes focused on social disarray and pathos, rather

than the skills, capacities, and assets of the people being studied (Bishop, 1997; Sue &

Sue, 1990; Peacock, 1996; Poupart, Martinez, Red Horse, & Scharnberg, 2000; Sinclair,

2003, in IPHRC, 2004). Additionally, it can lead to skewed representations, which are

taken and disseminated as truths, consequently resulting in "...a combination of inaccu-

rate research, inadequate education, slanted media coverage, and dehumanizing stereo-

types [which] make even the most 'educated' professional grossly uninformed about

American Indian life and culture," (Poupart, Martinez, Red Horse, & Scharnberg, 2000,

p.15, in IPHRC, 2004, p.13).

Therefore, empowerment must be a central feature of any research involving Aboriginal People. The benefits accrued from research, research agendas, capacity building, knowledge transfer, and cultural vitality all must work to empower those involved in the research process, particularly in research that seeks to rename, reclaim, and remember Aboriginal cultures, stories, and histories (IPHRC, 2004). For this reason, research must be led by priorities created by and for Indigenous people and focus on identifying needs, assets, capacities and abilities, then make suggestions that build upon available resources and harness those that are not yet available (IPHRC, 2004, and McKnight & Kretzman, 1996).

The approach of my study was therefore based on the decolonizing methodologies discussed by Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Kovach (2009), and utilized an asset-based approach for several reasons. First, as a study that was concerned with the stories and voices of Aboriginal students at post-secondary educational institutions, it was vital that the theory and framework used were not only respectful, but effective at recognizing the goal of this research: to improve the educational system for Aboriginal people. Secondly, in order to celebrate the successes that Aboriginal students have made in the mainstream educational system, it was important to document the stories of survival through an Indigenous approach, rather that the failure of others through a deficit model more reflective of typical Western research. Indigenous methodologies allowed for the representing of the story of Aboriginal post-secondary students, and promoted their rights as Indigenous Peoples to represent themselves and gain political and social voices.

Setting

The University chosen for the setting was a research-intensive post-secondary institu-
tion in Manitoba offering graduate and undergraduate programming. Spread across two
urban campuses, the University has approximately 1,900 self-declared Aboriginal stu-
dents registered and offers eleven specialized program areas aimed at Aboriginal stu-
dents, in areas such as education, law, nursing, native studies, engineering and social
work. The following reasons led to this western University being chosen as the site for
this research:

- the University is the largest post-secondary educational institution in the
  province;

- the University has a number of programs aimed at Aboriginal students with
  goals of increasing retention and graduation rates of this part of the student
  body; and

- population projections for Statistics Canada in that province indicate that
  18.4% of people will identify as Aboriginal by 2017, yet only 7.9% of the
  student body of this University is Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 2005).

Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited from this western research-based University.
In order to address the research questions, eight subjects were selected using a purposeful
sampling in order to ensure a variety of experiences were included. Permission was re-
quested from the Directors of the Aboriginal student centres located on each campus to
recruit students to engage in this research through informational posters displayed
throughout the student centre buildings. These posters of invitation contained information

regarding the topic of the research and invited interested students to contact the research-

er via telephone or email. The first eight students who made contact with the researcher

were selected.

Sample Characteristics

Potential study subjects were required to meet the following criteria: (1) they must

self-declare as being of Aboriginal descent (Status or non-Status First Nations, Métis, or

Inuit); (2) they must be currently registered as a post-secondary student at the University

chosen for the setting; and (3) they must be 18 years of age or older at the time of partici-

pation. Subjects could be male or female, and could be in any year of their program of

study (there was no limit to the number of years registered). An initial telephone screen-

ing interview was conducted to ensure the above listed criteria were met before interested

students were selected to participate.

Procedures and Analyses

In order to maintain high standards and ensure the research was conducted ethically

and with academic integrity, no research began before approval was granted by the

Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba (see Appendix

2). This was gained through standard application procedures as established by the Office

of Research Services, University of Manitoba, upon committee approval of the Thesis

Proposal. Informed consent was also obtained in writing from subjects before interviews

occurred.

The subjects were interviewed at various locations throughout the city in which the

University was located, as chosen by the subjects, using a semi-structured interview

protocol to obtain data related to their experiences as Aboriginal post-secondary students

at the University. They described personal experiences inside and outside of the

classroom in regards to instructional approaches and interactions with faculty and

students at the university. These questions were partially adapted from questions included

in Jackson, Smith, and Hill's (2003) study among Aboriginal college students in the

United States, in which a similar assets-based approach is used to examine the

experiences of non-traditional or minority groups at post-secondary institutions, and the

research tools used were effectively adapted to suit the needs and goals of this project.

Examples of experience were requested to corroborate subject responses in order to

address the limitations of self-response (Crippen & Wallin, 2008).

Interviews took approximately 60 minutes to conduct, and were digitally audio-taped

and transcribed by the researcher. All transcripts were then electronically mailed to the

subjects for member checks in order to ensure trustworthiness, at which time the partici-

pants were provided the opportunity to add, delete, or change the information on the tran-

scripts until they are comfortable with the content (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Only two par-

ticipants responded with requests for changes.

As in any qualitative study, data analysis was expected to be the most time consuming

aspect of this research (Drass, 1980). Data analysis took place during and after data col-

lection. Using a reductive approach to analysis, open codes that emerged from the data

were identified by the researcher through several successive reviews of the transcripts. In

order to ensure the initial analysis was not tainted by research bias, the initial open codes

were also examined by a specialist in Aboriginal and Adult Education at the University of

Manitoba to confirm that they were logically and appropriately sorted. After external

evaluation, these open codes were subjected to axial coding using the constant compara-

tive method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This continued until a core category, or underlying concept, was identified. Finally, selective coding was used to refine the categories and select specific data segments to fit into these categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis continued until saturation, when new data did not alter any of the categories. The codes and categories permitted the researcher to identify patterns of attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of Aboriginal post-secondary students at the University of Manitoba.

Instrument

The interview protocols consisted of three sections (see Appendix A). First, basic demographic information was collected regarding the age, length of residence in Winnipeg, highest level of education, and parenthood status of the participants. This information was used to describe and to evaluate the representativeness of the sample.

The second section yielded information regarding the participants' perceptions of post-secondary education prior to enrolment at the University. They were asked to describe the experiences, if any, of close friends and family in post-secondary education, their own perception of self as a university student, and their first experience(s) with post-secondary education, including any barriers they may have faced along the way.

The final section contained seven questions, which explored the participants' experiences at the University. They were asked about their reasons for deciding to enrol at this particular educational institution, and to describe their experiences at the University both inside and outside the classroom. Participants were also asked to identify the kinds of things they found helpful as students, and what advice they would give to others coming from similar circumstances. Next, they were asked what changes, if any, they would

make at the University if they were creating or designing programs. Finally, participants were given the opportunity to add any comments they wished to be included.

Chapter Summary

Preston (2008) suggests that in order for Aboriginal people to overcome the multitude of barriers that weaken their prospects of educational success, post-secondary programs must be innovative, supportive, and empowering for Aboriginal people. Having worked within a community-based, culturally-focused educational institution, I have seen firsthand how these types of programs can assist Aboriginal students to reach graduation and effectively (re)transition into meaningful employment. Additionally, according to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and a pilot study conducted by the researcher in 2010, others have found that Aboriginal post-secondary students in Manitoba have experiences that support these types of approaches to education.

The research questions developed for my study based in the literature and my pilot project outcomes were:

- What perceptions do Aboriginal students have of their experiences with faculty and students in and out of class at post-secondary educational institutions that encourage them to persist in their studies?

- What themes are present in students' interpretations of their experiences in and out of class that may lead to higher rates of enrolment and retention for Aboriginal post-secondary students?

The objective of the research was to conduct a study to better understand what factors are contributing to the success of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit post-secondary students and to inform future academic research. In the next two chapters I outline the findings of my

research and data collection, and offer recommendations for how to improve the success

of these students and for areas of further research.

Chapter 4:   Findings

Over the course of one month in the winter of 2012, I was fortunate enough to sit with

eight Aboriginal people (5 women and 3 men) to individually discuss with them their

thoughts, feelings, and experiences as current university students. The interviews ranged

in time from 35 to 95 minutes, and took place at various locations in and about an urban ʕ

centre in Manitoba. Upon completion of these semi-structured interviews, I began to ana-

lyze the data as I sat with the words of James, Jan, Sheila, Andrea, Aiden, Alex, Sherri,

and Tim (pseudonyms), and transcribed each person's story. Next, in order to begin to

categorize the emerging data, each interview was colour coded and several successive

reviews of the transcripts were conducted. Using the copy and paste features of a word

processing software program, the words and thoughts of the participants were organized

into meaningful open codes and themes using reductive, grounded theory, and phenome-

nological approaches to analysis. Finally, I organized the data in the following sections

and subsections: participant demographics; perceptions of post-secondary education prior

to university enrolment; current perceptions of university; enrolling in university: influ-

encing factors; experiences in the classroom; experiences outside of the classroom; pre-

university experiences and current success; advice for Aboriginal students from similar

background circumstances; and recommendations for changes to university programs and

approaches.

Participant Demographics

Eight university students who self-identify as being of Aboriginal descent (three

males ages 44, 33, and 24, five females ages 43, 32, 23, 21, and 19) volunteered to be in-

terviewed in order to provide data about the experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary

students at a large, research-based university in Manitoba. All participants in this group were interviewed once during a one month period in the winter of 2012. Pseudonyms will be used throughout this paper to ensure confidentiality of the participants.

James. James is a 24-year-old first year university student with aspirations to enter the faculty of architecture. James identifies as a First Nations person. He has lived in the city most of his life, completed his mature grade 12 diploma at an adult learning centre, and is not a parent.

Jan. Jan is a 43-year-old First Nations woman, born and raised in the city, who is in her fourth year of a science-focused ACCESS program. She is not a parent, and before attending university, completed a dual-certificate Health Care Aide/Health Unit Clerk program from a local college.

James. James is a 24-year-old first year university student with aspirations to enter the faculty of architecture. James identifies as a First Nations person. He has lived in the city most of his life, completed his mature grade 12 diploma at an adult learning centre, and is not a parent.

Sheila. Sheila, 23, grew up in a northern First Nations community and moved to the city to attend university after completing high school. She is not a parent and is in her final year of a Human Nutritional Sciences Degree program.

Aiden. Aiden has lived in the city all her 32 years and is a single-mother to two kids, aged ten and five. She identifies as a First Nation woman. In her third year of an extended education program, she previously completed a two-year early childhood education di-

ploma at another college, as well as a mature grade 12 diploma at an adult learning centre.

Andrea. Andrea, 21, has lived in the city all her life, currently in her first year of university and the single-mother of a 17 month old toddler. After dropping out of high school as a teenager, she returned to complete her Mature Student Diploma in 2010.

Alex. Alex, from the city, is 33 years old and has a college business diploma, a Bachelor Degree in Physical Education, and is currently in his first year of an after-degree Bachelor of Education program. He is not a parent.

Tim. Tim, 44, is the oldest participant in the study. He did not relocate to the city for post-secondary studies, but has lived in many different parts of Western Canada throughout his lifetime. He is the parent of a 29 year old daughter, and he has previously earned a partial Mature Student Diploma from an Aboriginal adult learning centre in the city. Tim is currently completing his second year in a Bachelor of Nursing program.

Sherri. Sherri is the youngest participant in the study at 19 years of age. She relocated to the city from a northern First Nations community with her family when she was 11 years old in order to access better educational opportunities for herself and her sister. She is not a parent, graduated from high school, and is in her second year of a Bachelor of Arts program, with a focus on Native Studies.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

		James	Jan	Sheila	Aiden	An-drea	Alex	Tim	Sherri
Relocated for P-S Studies				X					
Age (years)	**19 & under**								X
	20-24	X		X		X			
	25-29								
	30-34				X		X		
	35-39								
	Over 40		X					X	
High-est Level of Ed prior to P-S Stud-ies	**Some High School**							X	
	Senior Years/Mature Student Diploma	X		X		X			X
	Some College								
	College Certificate or Diploma		X		X		X		
Parent					X	X		X	
Year in P-S Pro-gram	**1st**	X					X		
	2nd							X	X
	3rd				X				
	4th		X	X			X		

Overall, this group of participants represent both students who have relocated for university and those that have grown up in the city. They range in age from 19 to 44, with an average age of 30; six noted that they had obtained high school diplomas, two have col-

lege diplomas, and one has a college certificate. Five of the eight participants are not parents, while 3 have children between the ages of 1 and 29. All participants are students at the undergraduate level in the faculties of arts, science, extended education, nursing, education, and human ecology.

Perceptions of Post-secondary Education Prior to University Enrolment

In order to obtain information regarding the types of perceptions the participants had of post-secondary students and studies prior to their own enrolment, they were asked two questions: (1) have you had any friends or family members attend university or college; and (2) when did you decide to attend post-secondary education. The themes that emerged from the data related to these questions included:

- family and peer influence; and

- university preparation and planning.

From the students' answers came data related to family influence, whereby family members were seen as role models, encouraging and motivating the students to continue their educational studies and strive for post-secondary certification. Family also provided essential supports, such as housing, financial aid, and childcare, as well as guidance, motivation, and companionship. Additionally, four respondents spoke of their peers playing an influential and supportive role in their lives as students, both prior to and during post-secondary studies. Peers at the high school level were often seen as part of the deciding factor on whether or not to continue further education, with two students specifically noting they did not want to feel "left out" by their friends who were making plans for after

graduation. Peers at the post-secondary level appear to provide a sense of belonging on campus, as well as support and motivation to persist in times of struggle.

The second theme, university preparation and planning, relates to data describing when students made the decision to continue their studies, with responses ranging from early childhood to much later in life. Five of the students (Alex, Sherri, Andrea, James, and Sheila) enrolled in post-secondary studies immediately after high school completion or in their early twenties, and discussed how family, teachers, and employment influenced their decision making process. Aiden enrolled shortly before she entered her thirties, Jan enrolled in her mid-thirties, and Tim did not enrol until his early forties. For these three students, influencing factors included employment demands and encouragement from family, peers, and instructors.

In response to the first question, seven of the students stated that they were aware of family members having attended either university or college prior to their own enrolment. Three of these respondents have parents who successfully completed post-secondary studies prior to their own university enrolment: James, Alex, and Sherri speak of their parents who successfully attended and completed post-secondary studies:

- "....my mother attended university I'm not sure if she got her degree, my father has his bachelor of arts," (James);

- "....my mom finished an arts degree a long time ago," (Alex); and

- "....both my parents have their masters," (Sherri).

Five respondents mention siblings who were or are currently attending university. Jan speaks of her sister, who attended university and struggled due to a family crisis; "my sister, she's a year younger than me...she was taking her social work [degree]....and then when we lost our brother. I guess she took some time off, the term or something, but she had a little setback in her education." Sheila speaks of her sister, who is currently attending but also struggling at university; "[m]y sister is really struggling and saying it's way too hard." Alex notes his brother, who is also currently attending university and is in the process of switching faculties:

> My brother is switching faculties from engineering to business, 'cause he just wanted to go in engineering because he had some friends in there, [and] I always asked him, he never had any interest in math and in numbers and the amount of work that goes in engineering. Before he went in, he just wanted to do it and he's switched now and he thinks that's where he wants to go.

Sherri speaks of her younger sister, who is doing well at university:

> My sister's in ACCESS and she gets a tutor, she gets academic counsellors, she gets like, personal councillor, she gets all these things and they're preparing her for. She's trying to get into the medical field. She takes these seminars, so she's like, she has like, so many great opportunities and if they can get into that, then I'm pretty sure they'd be set. For life!

And Tim notes his brother, who attended and withdrew from university studies several years ago due to financial difficulties:

My brother actually attended [university]. I had no clue. When I told him where I was going to school and what I was doing, he was like 'Oh yeah, I was there, I should take some courses. I had to drop out 'cause I had no money."

Sheila and Sherri also mention on several occasions extended family members attending college or university, though not all were successful, and Tim is the only participant who has had a child attend (and complete) post-secondary education; "[m]y daughter did, she actually went to Red River College....She was actually living with me while she was in college. She had the babies, well, one of the babies...She graduated in the top 5% of her class." And as stated earlier, when asked this question, the students also indicate that their family members, whether or not they have attended or are attending post-secondary studies, provide personal supports. For example, Sherri states that "my parents, I think, really support me; I live with them, so I don't have to be on my own," while Sheila states, "Oh, well, all along I guess I knew that going to university would mean something for my family....I guess it was important to my parents and important to me, like to do something with myself."

James, Alex, Sherri and Tim all indicate that friends or acquaintances attending college or university with them have provided a sense of belonging and motivation to continue in their studies. Alex asserts that it was his friends at high school who were preparing their own post-secondary educational plans that encouraged him to also continue his education:

I guess having...my friends from hockey, they've always said they were going to go to university....Well, my friends went to university, I went to [college], and

then I had some friends that also went to [college], so you know, we kind of hung

out together. And I didn't know what I wanted to do....[but] I didn't want to be the

one who just didn't go to school, or had to start working, or...so I had people

around me that...had intentions of going to school.

Additionally, Tim states, "Some of my friends from my high school were in my orienta-

tion. So I was escorting them around campus and running into friends from my classes."

In response to the second question, about when participants decided to enrol in uni-

versity, the findings show that the group is split between those that intended to attend

post-secondary studies since they were young, and those that did not make that decision

until later in life. Four participants gave examples stating they had "always intended"

(James); saw it as the "next logical step" (Sheila); "always kinda knew" (Alex); or had it

"drilled into" them (Sherri) since an early age. It should also be noted that James, Alex

and Sherri had parents who have earned post-secondary qualifications, whereas Sheila

was the first in her immediate family to attend further education. The other half of the

group, Jan, Aiden, Andrea and Tim, did not decide until later in life to attend university.

Aiden, the first in her family to go on to post-secondary studies, began to make plans for

university entrance after completing a college-level program and going back to upgrade

her high school credits at an adult learning centre in the city. Tim, having watched his

daughter successfully complete college despite facing numerous struggles, also chose to

continue onto university while attending an adult learning centre for upgrading; "Literally

I went into high school January 4th, 2010. I finished May 5th, 2010, was when I graduat-

ed and I was on campus the next week....I didn't want to waste time." Jan, like Aiden,

made up her mind to go on to university while in a college program, and Andrea had not
even considered post-secondary studies until she had her son in her early 20s; "I don't
know what I was thinking then, but I never wanted to go to university [before I had my
son]."

Current Perceptions of University

In the second section of the interview, the eight students were asked seven questions
regarding their current perceptions of university in an attempt to gather information
related to their decisions around enrolling in university, their experiences inside and
outside the classroom, pre-university experiences and their relationship to their current
success, advice for other Aboriginal students coming from background circumstances
similar to their own, and their recommendations for changes to university programs and
approaches. The following subsections aim to explore the responses of the students in
relation to each question, and the themes that emerged from the data.

Enrolling in university: influencing factors. When asked "what made you decide to
enrol in university," they responded: career goals, proximity, availability of
programming, and parental influence. Five participants chose to attend university because
it aligned with their career goals (2) or because they were making a career change (3)
(one in early life, one in his mid-20s, and one after being in the workforce for over 20
years). For two participants, proximity, the closeness of the university to where they
lived, became part of the decision making process. For two others it was because similar
programs at a local college had waiting lists of up to two years, unlike the university
where entrance was immediate. One participant, Sherri, also noted that her parents, who

had always encouraged her to attend post-secondary, saw university qualifications as more valuable than college qualifications; "[m]y dad thinks it's better to get a university degree than college."

Another influence mentioned by the participants was significant people in their lives, such as teachers and family members. For four participants, teachers first planted the idea of continuing on with their studies at the university level while they were completing other adult learning programs. Jan stated:

> [One of my teachers] would always ask me what I got on my tests in anatomy; 'how did you do?' I said I got 100%. She goes: 'good for you!' And she says, 'you're really smart, you know, I can see you going further at university.' And [my other teacher] said the same thing; they told me always University.... I was always University material.

Similarly, Sheila stated:

> [I]n the school I was in, the high school, all the teachers that I had there were really supportive of me. So, I think that definitely helped me....like they pushed me....it was just hard work and being constantly pushed and never was I just like, feeling lazy about it, you know what I mean?

For Alex, encouragement by his partner at the time played a major role, as did the expectations of his parents:

> My ex was, she is a teacher, so she kinda encouraged me to do that [go back to school]....[and] my parents were both pretty set on me going. They just always

kind of, they always just assumed, they never said 'you're gonna go to university,'
they just assumed that's what I was going to do.

For Aiden and Andrea, particularly, the desire to be role models to their children weighed
heavily on their decision to attend university. For example, Andrea stated, "My son; I'm
getting my education for him."

Other factors in the decision making processes of the participants in relation to at-
tending university were the importance of goals and personal satisfaction in their careers.
Many of the participants mentioned university aligning with their academic and/or career
goals. At the time of the interviews, all eight participants knew what their immediate aca-
demic goals were: to complete their Bachelor degrees in nursing, arts, science, education,
social work, or human ecology. James, Jan, Sheila, and Sherri all mention their desire to
continue on into graduate studies, some immediately and others after working for a peri-
od of time:

- "[my] goals...getting into the program, then getting into my specialization,
  then getting a good relationship with professors, then get myself an advisor
  for my Master's program," (James);

- "my goal is now medicine -- so I've got a significant hill to climb but I'm al-
  most there in the first part," (Jan);

- "I want to be a registered dietician, so after graduation I have to do an intern-
  ship and have to be accepted into it first, so I have applied, the deadline is
  February 1st, I'll hear March 12. And if that doesn't work, I'll continue my
  journey and do a Masters," (Sheila); and

- "I hopefully want to get like, eventually get my PhD in Native Studies and/or law," (Sherri).

Additionally, seven of the eight participants indicate that their current studies align with their career goals. Jan and Sheila both mention making sure they have courses and academic plans to fall back on if their first choice careers do not work out; Andrea, Aiden and Tim note that they want to work in 'helping' fields where they can give back to their communities; Alex wants a career that he can "walk into" immediately after graduation and that matches up with his personal interests; and James states he wants a fulfilling career, and that this "is almost impossible without a degree anymore." Finally, both James and Alex indicate that enjoyment and personal satisfaction in one's career plays a major role in their decision to attend university; "the one thing I know is that [you] have to find what you want to do, what you have interest in....you have to have an interest in it before you come here, I think."

The last section of data collected in relation to the question "what made you decide to enrol in university," can be tied into the transition experienced by all the participants in entering university whether from work or school. For Jan, this transition was much easier than she had expected, however, for most it was difficult. Reasons they gave for these difficulties included having to meet higher expectations than previously experienced in high school, learning on one's own, picking courses by oneself, being unaware of career possibilities, feeling "dumb" and unprepared, not knowing anyone, the large and intimidating size of the campus, not being "good with change", and, generally, feeling "over-

whelmed" with the entire setting and experience. This is well illustrated by the comments of Sherri, who states:

> I didn't really like my first year at all. Um, I don't know, like, when I think back, it's like, it was so scary for me. And I didn't enjoy it at all; I just didn't know anything about it. I thought I was like, 'dumb' compared to everyone else. It was hard to know where you were going 'cause you didn't know where you were, and then once you get there, it's like there are so many people and you don't know anyone, usually, in my classes. And, yeah, I didn't even know ACCESS and stuff existed. And once I did, it was too late for me to try and get in....The whole experience, I guess, was overwhelming.

It should also be noted that the data indicates that there were many things that helped the participants with this transition. Some of these included previous post-secondary experience (1), attending a transition year program (1), previously learned time management skills (1), previous work experience and being focused on career goals (1), taking summer session classes when the campus is not as busy (1), and, most frequently mentioned, participating in the ACCESS Orientation course (3). The three participants who did participate in the Orientation course further mentioned tours of the campus, meeting others, learning study skills, smaller class size, more supports, and being shown how to connect with resources for Aboriginal students as extremely helpful in their transitions.

Experiences in the classroom. Under this category, themes emerged relating to experiences in the classroom with instructors and teaching methods, personal identity and belonging, and peers and classroom experiences. The largest number of responses pertained

to instructors and teaching methods (75). Most frequently mentioned as supportive of positive experiences in the classroom was the importance of developing authentic and supportive relationships with faculty (17). For Jan, it was seeing the personal and sometimes humorous side of her instructors:

> And then some professors are willing to take that extra time to help you succeed, that little step [that] opens the door for this or lays out the welcome mat like Dr. Friesen [pseudonym]. He talked about his grandfather's underwear! It was funny....I can connect with that and I liked those examples.

For Sherri, it is about getting to know her professors as people:

> I enjoy those classes way more than my other classes because I know them and the professors are nice. Well, Alan [pseudonym] seems a little scary to talk to but he is actually very nice and a great professor once you get to know him a bit better. And he's just like, they're very nice and kind they try to help me with any problems I have, so I feel like they're more like my friends, than my professors.

For Tim, it was about connecting with his professors academically and personally:

> The professor in that course was so engaging, he was so turned on that you couldn't help but respond. He was funny, highly intelligent, dangerously intelligent sometimes, and was really excited about what he was teaching....it was just amazing, the level of energy in that classroom was phenomenal....he was just so excited and so engaged about the subject matter. He's like, 'anytime in your career you're having a problem with a course come talk to me. I may not know the

course matter, but I can help you.' And I just thought of that now, it's like, hey! He

was just so approachable.

A factor mentioned across the interviews in relation to instructors was their confidence in their abilities as teachers. This was particularly important for James and Tim. As James states:

> I have to imagine that the qualities that I admire in my profs are um, would have
>
> to be their ability to impart what their message is – the ability to get across what
>
> they want to get across...basic communication...it's very hard to catch them off
>
> their guard....honestly, I find it extremely refreshing. The teaching methods seem
>
> almost designed [for] exactly...how I learn. I always felt that before post-
>
> secondary, everything was, the teachers had actually no power in how they taught.
>
> But in university, teachers have such a way, where knowledge is far more useably
>
> passed down.

Tim specifically made mention of a negative example, in which an instructor made several mistakes and frustrated him terribly:

> Stats itself sucked, the instructor was terrible, she really was...One thing that hap-
>
> pened in the classroom that made me go, WTF?? Someone had asked a question
>
> and she said 'read the notes a few times, then ask me that.' She wasn't terribly in-
>
> telligent, or at least she never gave evidence of it. Like, every class we would
>
> catch her in at least 4 or 5 mistakes....I don't know if her specialty was something
>
> else, and she was just teaching Stats cause it was a course to teach, but she was
>
> terrible. It was horrible.

The need for reciprocity in relationships was also identified across six of the inter-
views. Themes indicated were:

- desires for open conversations within the classroom amongst instructors and
  students;

- the giving and receiving of ideas regarding classroom materials; the express-
  ing of interest by the instructor of student areas of knowledge or experience;

- informal associations; and

- allowing for question and answer periods that are mutually rewarding for both
  instructor and student.

An example from the interviews that stands out comes from Tim, who explains his expe-
rience in one of his courses:

Asking him questions was a rewarding experience. Because he would take you se-
riously; he would give you a relevant answer; and you would get additional in-
formation as a bonus....he had a thing where if you participate, it improves your
grade. And it wasn't like, I'll make your grade better, it was, he explained how to
get a good grade, sit down front, be engaged, engage the professor. The more the
professor's engaged, it's not just...students aren't there to be fed knowledge, stu-
dents are there to get knowledge from the professor, or from our material, or from
wherever we can find it. Students are there to take knowledge, and professors are
there to facilitate that. You know it should be students that are learning and I

didn't really get that until I took that course, which helped me to be more engaged

in other courses later.

However, what also emerges from the interviews is data related to difficulties with in-

structors in the classroom (6). For Jan, Aiden, Sherri and Tim, these difficulties arise

from unclear instructions or having been provided with the wrong information in lec-

tures, and instructors who generally seem "routine," "boring," "awkward," and "zombie-

like" (Aiden and Sherri). Aiden also notes that at times she felt that instructors were be-

ing arrogant and judgemental to her and other students who were Aboriginal or "anybody

other than White." For Jan, effectively communicating with instructors inside the class

was often difficult; "[i]t is like going to the doctor's office and having a language barrier

and two to three minute time limit for your patient."

Teaching methods most frequently indicated as enjoyable or appreciated were the use

of materials relevant to the students' realities and interests (15), dialogue in classroom

settings (10), and academic supports provided within the classroom (1). Classroom mate-

rials and lecture topics that have a "direct connection" to the student's goals (James), that

can "relate to life examples" (Jan), or are "realistic" (Aiden) were indicated frequently in

the interviews when participants were asked about what types of classes they enjoyed.

James, more than the other students, appreciated the use of dialogue and discourse rather

than lecture focused teaching methods, stating it allowed him to more readily absorb the

information being taught and engage with the subject matter. Sherri also noted that hav-

ing her professor bring in specialists in learning and writing to assist students in the class-

room was very important to her:

> Brad [pseudonym], he tries to bring people to talk about things...he brought in a
> reference lady....He really tries to bring other people in to help us learn....And
> plus, like, when we meet them, they're very open for us to come and talk to them
> afterwards.

Also noted frequently, however, was how ineffective and unappreciated lectures were by seven of the students. James, Jan, Sheila, Aiden, Andrea, Tim and Alex all note that they find lectures boring, and in relation to the lack of use of Aboriginal epistemology and pedagogy, not an ideal way for each to learn.

Under the same category, classroom experiences that supported the development of personal identity and a sense of belonging were all mentioned as important in supporting these students in their learning and engagement at university. Aiden emphasized how her Native Studies classes have helped her to grow as an Aboriginal woman; "it has helped shape who I am....I am finding myself through learning, by being there and learning." Tim also discusses his own personal growth, describing his increased sense of confidence:

> If you saw me the first summer and you saw me this term, you would see a differ-
> ence. The first summer I was here I was sitting in the back, I was the quiet one,
> you know, I was just sizing the place up, sizing the teachers up.

Now, Tim notes he frequently sits at the front of the classroom and purposely engages the instructor, as well as other students. Sheila echoes this, stating:

Well, it has changed since I first attended. At first, I was really shy and quiet ....Then, after a while, I just started talking more and it just started to feel a lot more, I don't know, welcoming and comfortable because I talked to a lot more students.

For Sherri, it was the relationships she made within the classroom that allowed her to feel like she was a part of the university:

I took the orientation course during the summer....and I think since then, every-thing has been so much better because I made friends....I started knowing every-one who was there, and like, all the professors....you seem like you belong...[and] I've enjoyed it more.

The three men in the study noted that their academic abilities coming into the class-room were essential in helping them be comfortable, confident, and engaged. James notes how easily he was able to achieve high marks, which to him was a bit of a surprise; Alex talks about being very well aware of his learning preferences and learning style, and how he has perfected methods for working with them; and Tim discusses his stress manage-ment and time management skills and how he uses them in class, particularly with tests. However, three of the women noted that discriminatory behaviours of instructors and peers inside the classroom were damaging to their perceptions of classroom experiences. Jan, Sheila, and Aiden noted that, at times, they felt that they were being excluded, that classmates would "snicker" and "heckle" them when they asked questions, and that these experiences made them feel " a little uncomfortable and paranoid" (Sheila), and "judged" (Aiden).

Under this same category falls data related to peers and classroom experiences, particularly interactions with classmates, group work, and class size. Three students discussed how interactions in the classroom mutually benefited themselves and their classmates. Jan and Tim note that they were often aware their questions in class were shared by others who were too shy or timid to ask. Sheila indicates she discovered many of her classmates shared the same goals as she did, and that "our relationships are definitely enhanced with course work and group work." James finds that friendly competition between classmates is encouraging and welcomed:

> If you sit in the front row, you tend to notice people also sitting up front, so I usually...make it a point to always know everyone I'm competing with, so everyone who sits up front is most likely going to be my direct competitors, so it's easier to make friends with them.

Group work was also a teaching method mentioned that enabled these reciprocal relationships inside the classroom to form. Most students interviewed appreciated group work, particularly in contrast to lectures. While some spoke of it being difficult as new university students, other explained that having participated in programs which taught group facilitation skills before entering university were extremely useful. Tim specifically notes that group work "broadened the base of who we were and....it was really interesting in that respect."

Finally, class size in relation to classroom experiences was discussed by all but one student. Under this theme emerged data relating to both large and small classes, with large classes noted as having 300 to 400 students, and small classes as having 20-30 stu-

dents. James, the only one to indicate he did not have a preference, stated that as he sits at

the front of the room he does not notice how many other students are behind him. How-

ever, the others pointed out that smaller classrooms are more "comfortable" (Jan), al-

lowed them to "talk to my professors a whole lot more" (Sheila), were less "distracting"

and had more room for questions (Aiden), and encouraged more discussions (Andrea).

Alex particularly notes that, "the bigger the group it seemed, the bigger the lecture thea-

ter, the less interest I had," and "[b]igger is too big....Smaller's better."

Experiences outside of the classroom. Under this category emerged themes relating

to experiences outside of the classroom with self, peers and group involvement; interac-

tions with faculty and academic support; and struggles and barriers as a student.

The first theme, self, peers and group involvement, contains data relating to the level

of confidence of the individual, the amount of life skills they have learned, their sense of

humour, and their level of knowledge in university jargon. It also contains data connected

to the students' needs to feel like they belong and their ability to form authentic, recipro-

cal relationships with peers outside of the classroom at university. As well, it relates to

data covering topics like student supports and resources, including those that are specific

for Aboriginal students and those that are not, and includes the Aboriginal centre, Aborig-

inal-specific student groups and cultural supports, and general ongoing student supports

available university-wide.

The second theme, interactions with faculty and academic support, is comprised of

data related to authentic, supportive, and reciprocal relationships with faculty outside of

the classroom, difficulty with these relationships, and accessing academic supports, in-

cluding those offered through the ACCESS program. Finally, the third theme, struggles

and barriers as a student, is made up of data which notes traumatic experiences, discrimi-

natory behaviours by instructors or peers outside of the classroom, issues relating to dis-

abilities, and barriers faced by the students, including family, finances, competition, pro-

gram entrance systems, supplies and materials, and lack of support.

When asked to describe their experiences as a student outside of the classroom, the

answers of the students interviewed most frequently related to themselves, their peers,

and feelings of belonging and group membership (114). Most often, respondents noted

things about themselves that have affected their experiences outside the classroom.

James, Alex, and Tim, in indirect ways, all refer to their high levels of self-confidence

enabling them to make friends and find success. James does this when he states, "I make

runs back and forth for coffee, so they [the professors] were on their way, so I decided to

tag on and talk," something many first year students would be too shy or timid to do

themselves. Alex, in reference to feeling self-assured on his own at university, says,

"[y]ou kind of just have to do your own thing." Tim refers to his confidence level when

he states, "[t]hat's the one thing I learned, is that I'm capable of way more than I thought

possible. I really am, and it's just a heck of a feeling. It really is." In contrast, one student

specifically noted a time when she did not feel confident; Andrea states, "[i]t was just

easier to run away than to go and ask for help," in relation to some academic struggles

she faced early on as a university student. And like confidence, data related to life skills,

or problem solving behaviours, also appear among the interviews, though this time only

with female respondents:

- "I didn't know about boundaries...I didn't learn that until I went to [college].
  And then once I started setting boundaries for some of my friends....[I
  learned] how to say no," (Jan);

- "I guess I learnt a lot of time management skills when I was going to col-
  lege," (Aiden); and

- "[a student group] I'm also in....It's a leadership group that's trying to help us
  get leadership skills," (Sherri).

For Jan, the ability to use her sense of humour in times of academic difficulty is also

mentioned in relation to self and experiences outside of the classroom:

I started having one-to-one meetings with the professor after because he says,

'okay...[what] I want,' he says...'is to see improvement.' I said, 'yeah [I did], by

half a mark!' And he says, 'well at least you still got your sense of humour!'

She also discusses, in reference to her current ability to understand the university system

on the whole, learning about the Grade Point Average system while still a college student;

"I get a letter in the mail that I made the Dean's honor list of 4.12 average... like what's

that? She [my sister] goes...'GPA, grade point average,' and I went 'I don't know what it

is.' I do now."

Second in frequency, respondents made note of their desire to feel like they belonged

and to form relationships with peers that were authentic, supportive, and reciprocal. In

her interview, Aiden talks about finding a place at university where she feels she fits in:

> I guess just being part of, like having something similar...to myself...you know I'm a pretty open minded person, I'm pretty social and stuff like that, but it is just, it is comfortable there. And knowing the people and the other students as well.

Similarly, James speaks of how his feelings have changed over his first year of studies; "but now I'm there [at university] and it's so comfortable, it's like I was supposed to be here or something." However, Sheila, Alex, and Sherri all note that at times they felt isolated from their peers:

- "I didn't know anyone going there. When I got to university...I happened to have my best friend from high school. I basically held her hand the whole 3 weeks there, because I was, I don't know, scared or nervous. Just completely new to me....it was a huge place and I just didn't know what to expect, so if I didn't...I think I woulda had a harder time if she wasn't there," (Sheila);

- There's one [Aboriginal students] with me [in the Bachelor of Education program], that's in a few classes of mine....In Phys. Ed, no...I was probably, I think I was the only one," (Alex); and

- "[l]ike, last year I would just go to my class and then try to go home right away," (Sherri).

All of the students, with the exception of Alex and Andrea, spoke of forming authentic and supportive relationships with peers outside of the classroom:

- "I met them at university, mostly the group I started out with [in] the group design project. We got to know each other from that and now we're

friends....[we] usually go to [an on-campus restaurant] and play pool, talk

over pool," (James);

- "My friend Monica I went to her place the other night....to celebrate her

  birthday....she said, 'it is kind of short notice, but you want to come,' [and] I

  said yeah I'd come. So I ask if there is anything I should bring. I brought pop,

  and chips, and nuts. I went there for an hour or so, then dropped off one of the

  girls; the other had gone home about an hour before. When we stopped I said

  thank you for the invite," (Jan);

- "Yeah, a lot of us were going into the same classes every year," (Sheila);

- "I have built lots of friendships [laughs] that's for sure! Yeah, I have had I

  guess, I feel really grateful that I went to school because I have met so many

  wonderful people, and is that what you mean? Some of them classmates,

  some of them being in the Aboriginal student centre, yeah," (Aiden);

- "Actually [my Mentor and I] take boxing together. She wanted to get more

  exercise and she invited me. I actually see her more this semester. Whenever

  she sees me...she comes to talk to me, or I go talk to her. Things we talk about

  is just random stuff. Like what's going on with her life, what's going on with

  my life, our classes. I feel like we've become almost like best friends or

  something," (Sherri); and

- "I had a mentor who was very, very interesting...he was a good guy, really in-

  teresting and we got together fairly often and yapped and discussed the uni-

  versity and how everything was going and stuff. It was nice. It was somebody

to yap to when I felt I needed somebody to yap to. You know, a little bit of

human interaction," (Tim).

Related to this, James also speaks of his appreciation for the diversity amongst his net-

work of university peers:

There's a lot of variety. One is 18, one is 28. I'm 24, and another one is just turned

26....um, one from mainland China, one from South Korea, and another who just

came back from teaching English in Asia; very diverse....it's far better, yeah,

there's a lot more experiences to draw from.

Similarly, Sherri notes her preference for diversity when describing one of her courses:

There was like, different age ranges too. There was one lady who was retired and

she's coming back to school...I think I liked it better than if we were all the same

age, or if everyone was going to be younger than me. We meet all these different

people and characters...I think it was better that way.

And finally, Tim states:

Interacting with students from complete different faculties, it doesn't usually hap-

pen. It's nice to you know, one student was in arts, one was in science, but at the

back you're like, this is a totally different focus, right? (Laughs) Yeah, it was an

experience.

For Alex, though he preferred to keep his distance from peers at school, he did have a

strong network of support amongst friends at a local gym:

[W]hat I see specifically is, in the gym, we spend so much time together and if we get ready for fights, we're like a closest knit family. We just want success for each other and so, we'll train, like...like last weekend, we...God, I was there Friday night, Saturday twice, Sunday twice, and Monday three times. So if you're, if you do that, like, that's just the weekend. We're there every night together. So if you do that for eight weeks for a fight, with whoever and whoever's gotta fight, you're always there. I spend more time with them than I do with anybody else. Some guys say that they don't even see their wives, or their, you know, girlfriends, and then we replace that, right. So we're so close and you just want success, and then you do that and you celebrate together. And once fights are done, you can take a month off together and you want to be with the person you were with the whole time, so you have some drinks and grabs some wings or, you spend so much time, you're like a family.

For James, Jan, Sheila, Alex, and Tim, reciprocity in relationships with peers at university was also important. James states that he has learned much from the experiences of his diverse group of friends which can be related to his studies; Jan talks of working with her peer tutor to surprise a favourite instructor; Sheila notes that her peers were "reliable" and that they often worked together on assignments; Alex states that it was his friends who often kept him from "giving up" when he did not feel like going to university any longer; and Tim speaks of being "approachable" and having someone with whom he could talk. Jan also relates her creative side to her ability to help and share with other students. She speaks of wanting to inspire her fellow students and motivate them to con-

tinue to pursue their studies. On these lines, she created a multimedia inspirational video:
"I actually did a little video clip on that; it's on YouTube. It's '[My] Wilderness Adven-
ture'...look it up its good...it's a little comical, sort of me fishing out my clothes, my uni-
form." She also frequently writes and published poetry, and gives presentations to new
students about her experiences at university. The value of reciprocal relationships outside
of school is also mentioned in Alex's interview:

> Everyone kind of leads the same [life]. They'll go to their work, you go to school,
> pack up their stuff and they leave it. They leave it at work and at school, right?
> And then they come to the gym, no one, you know, we...if you do, we talk about
> school or work, its jokes, right? No one comes and spills their guts and brings
> everybody down, 'cause it's a fun place to be and we sit, we train until 9 in the
> evening and we'll sit on the mats and just talk for an hour. And hey, we'll go get
> some drinks and...then you're spent, you go home at one and you've just spent
> five or 6six hours with a group of guys and you're going to do it again tomorrow.

However, it is also important to note that half of the students mentioned difficulties with
relationships amongst their peers at school outside of the classroom, or the desire to pull
away from others at times:

- "I hate [the library] – so many people! So I usually spend try to find myself a
  nice nook and read or write or whatever," (James);

- "Well I was always taught not to hang out with the students or friends that
  will cause chaos or rumours, things like that," (Jan);

- "Well, last year I didn't make any friends [chuckles] basically, and I didn't re-

    ally talk to anyone in my classes, except if I already knew them from high

    school or something. It's basically just go there, do your work and then

    leave....I don't know, no one, I don't talk to anyone [in one of my classes]. No

    one says hi to me or anything like that. There's nothing, like, we don't talk at

    all, I don't know, like, if I sit beside them, they don't look at me or anything.

    They're there just to learn," (Sherri); and

- "My first summer, I was sitting in the back of the classroom and these two

    girls that were sitting five seats over and one seat back and they're whisper-

    ing and it's unbelievably irritating and the whole class knew, they weren't

    whispering as quietly as they thought they were and it just was so irritating.

    Those girls, I mean, why bother putting a name on them because they are in

    every classroom," (Tim).

However, despite these challenges, seven of the eight students discussed the importance

of feeling a sense of belonging and creating friendships that were authentic, supportive

and reciprocal outside of the classroom, both at and away from university.

   Under this question was also discussed group involvement. This included data related

to the on-campus Aboriginal student centre (18), and associated ongoing general supports

(7), Aboriginal student groups (10), Aboriginal cultural supports (6), and a negative or

lack of involvement in supports and programs for students (6). Five of the students inter-

viewed access the Aboriginal student centre on a regular basis. For Sherri, it is important

because it provides "an intimate feeling" and is a place where she can meet up with other

students. For Sheila, the people at the Aboriginal student centre are "really supportive"
and "know who I am and what I am going through." While Aiden says, "[m]ost of the
time I'm there. Doing my homework." Andrea struggles to find the words to describe why
she appreciates the Aboriginal student centre, but notes, "[it's] friendly, the atmosphere is
completely different...Everybody I've noticed that walks in there doesn't know what it is,
it's just different." And though Tim's data indicates he is there frequently, when asked
specifically about it he simply states, "I used the computer lab and that was about it. Said
Hi to the staff." And for Jan, Aiden, and Andrea, the ongoing personal and emotional
supports they were able to access through the Aboriginal student centre greatly affected
their experiences outside of the classroom:

- "I'm comfortable sharing with my advisor, my counsellor....[and] my counsel-
  lor there, she gave me a letter of support," (Jan);

- "my personal counsellor, they [have] personal counsellors too," (Aiden); and

- "[talking with the people at the Aboriginal student centre gives you] the reas-
  surance that you can do it, and like, other people have the same overwhelm-
  ing issues and its kinda normal. And that it will eventually go away if you
  keep working through it," (Andrea).

Six students interviewed are members of various Aboriginal student groups on cam-
pus, and these associations make up a large part of their experiences outside of the class-
room. Sheila and Sherri are the most involved. Sheila is a member of the Aboriginal stu-
dents' association, is the Aboriginal representative for the student union, and is part of a

team of current Aboriginal students who help to recruit and orient new Aboriginal stu-

dents. About the recruitment group she states:

> [We're] a group of students that [hired] to help here with recruitment related
>
> events, say a campus tour of high school students, or career fairs that [university]
>
> is part of. Or I went to a presentation at an Adult Education Centre, or any events
>
> they have on campus, like info days, they wanted us to help with stuff.

Sherri is a member of an Aboriginal mentoring group, the Aboriginal students' associa-

tion, and an Aboriginal leadership group. She notes that once she became involved in

one, she was quickly invited to join other groups:

> And I never would've joined [the mentorship group], if it weren't for the [leader-
>
> ship] group....because they initiated [it], they made us; they said 'oh, you guys
>
> should join this group, here's a form, sign up.' Then for the [leadership group], be-
>
> cause I got a B+ in that group, they emailed me and said 'we have this group, we
>
> would like you to consider joining because you did so well in this course.'

Andrea is the next most involved student, and is a member of the Aboriginal mentoring

group and the Aboriginal students' association; "I'm in the [mentoring] program....[I

signed up] through [the Aboriginal centre], it was a sign-up thing...we have meetings

once a month...to go over [assignments and] that kind of stuff." Tim, Jan, and Aiden are

each involved in one group: Tim and Jan in the Aboriginal mentoring group and Aiden in

the Aboriginal students' association. About the Aboriginal students' association, Aiden

states, "I volunteer lots....I volunteer my time with them. They also have their own little

space in the bottom of the university nursing centre there. So, I spend time there too."

Aboriginal cultural supports are also noted by half of the students interviewed as being an important part of their out of classroom experiences on campus. Having access to resources with "traditional values" is important for Jan, while Aiden appreciates the "cultural stuff" offered, which she finds helps her to release stress. Andrea visits with the campus Elder for help with personal issues, and attends pow wows and other culturally-based activities offered on campus when she can. And Sherri notes that she has enjoyed taking part in a class which incorporated traditional Aboriginal games, while she also visits the campus Elder for help with personal issues.

The last section under the theme of self, peers and group involvement is comprised of data which deals with a lack of involvement in or negative experiences with student groups. James is firm in stating that he avoids involvement in anything he feels is not directly related to his field of study; "I'm not really involved, it's...not really something I tend to gravitate towards. I mean, I'll go to lectures, guest lectures and all of that, but honestly, student unions or student groups, [I think they're] pretty superfluous." Jan discusses her preference to remain only peripherally involved in political groups on campus; "I'm not really too politically involved on campus....I vote for them but they say it is time consuming apparently." Due to his gym commitments outside of university, Alex avoids all involvement in students groups and activities; "if I go to school, 'do you wanna come to this,' 'do you want to do this,' 'do you want to sign up for this,' - no, I don't want to do any of that because I've got plans." And for Tim, he feels that though the student groups can be helpful in some ways, they are 'missing the mark' in other areas, specifically helping to orient new students to the campus:

> For me personally, a little bit more information would have been nice....Just some
> of these little tidbits, you know? Like, 'did you know there was a dentist on cam-
> pus?' There's a health clinic [too]....And this is all stuff I've learned in my second
> year. It would have been nice just having that information, you know?

Overall, however, participation in student groups, along with the forming of relationships with peers outside of the classroom, and having or developing a strong sense of self all make up the largest theme in this area.

The second theme in this section is interactions with faculty and academic support. Again, when asked "How would you describe your experiences outside the classroom?" students responded by speaking of their relationships with faculty, the academic supports provided by the university, and about the ACCESS program specifically. The theme of being able to form relationships with others has come up many times in the findings, and it does so again here, in connection to relationships with faculty outside of the classroom (13). The students interviewed discuss how faculty members help with their assignments, provide guidance, friendship and a listening ear, and are encouraging of their persever-ance in times of difficulty:

- "[My professor] says, 'you'll improve. Email me, send me your availability, we'll meet one-to-one.' And he told me in our first meeting that he wanted me to do so well in his course...And then he said, 'don't give up on sociology and I won't give up on you!' I took his second-year sociology; I took health and illness. I got an A in his class," (Jan);

- "He [my professor] just helps me with any issue, anything that I have going

    on. He's just like, willing to talk about it...Yeah, he was one of my professors

    for my native studies class. And then he was a part of the native studies class

    I took in the summer...Like, he's always hanging, just around, chit chatting,"

    (Andrea);

- "My father's actually in the hospital right now, so...I've had to ask them for

    some time away from school and they've all been really good....they've all

    been helpful so far," (Alex);

- "Brad [pseudonym], he's like, I feel like he's my good friend, and he al-

    ways...pretty much I think I talk to him every day when I'm at school," (Sher-

    ri); and

- "The ACCESS program staff are awesome, I love them! I go up and hang out

    say hi and bug them for help. And Brad [pseudonym], not only was he my

    professor for native studies, we were already buddies," (Tim).

Reciprocity also comes up here again in association to relationships with faculty outside

of the classroom. James, Jan, Andrea, and Sherri all indicated a desire for open conversa-

tions regarding similar personal interests; informal conversations where neither staff nor

student was more powerful or had more control; and the sharing of ideas between instruc-

tor and student to enhance the learning experience. James refers to time when he had cof-

fee with professors outside of their class:

I say hi, have a cup of coffee, whatever....[it's] not really regular thing, but once a

month at least....[we talk about] potential designs, uh, mostly I just use the time to

ask for what they do, cuz one of my professors is building prefabricated

home...and we were talking about how crappy the weather is for that, because

you're building a house, and the only way to transfer the house in that area is over

the lakes, so if It's really warm, it's impossible to use the ice.

Andrea indicated that her ability to talk easily with professors outside of class came from

not having to address them formally; "you know, they don't, it's not like you have to call

them 'doctor' or 'professor,' they're just like anybody else." And Jan tells of a time when

she and a fellow classmate created a teaching aid for a professor whose class they en-

joyed:

I even made a puppet for him! He's a big fan of Michel Foucault...he brought a lit-

tle finger puppet to class there one day, and I sat in the front row and I could bare-

ly see that thing. So I told my tutor, I said, 'you know what? I have a good idea!

Let's make a puppet for him.' So I put wiring in there to move the arms; she used a

leg warmer for the neck, because Foucault wore a turtleneck all the time. And she

got the sponge...we both carved it out...like I did the face. And then we sewed the

material on. It was hard...[we] bought the stuff....we both chipped in. And we met

him at Starbucks. You should have saw him! That was his real laugh...not just a

chuckle. He reminded me of an old little boy getting what he wanted for Christ-

mas...he was being himself. [He had] a really down to earth laugh...that was his

true laugh. [My tutor] said, 'you caught that?' And I said, 'yeah, I caught that! I

didn't record it or anything, but I caught that.' And he was so grateful for that pup-

pet; his eyes just lit up! He had no idea that he was getting it. He keeps in his of-

fice now.

In each of these cases, the women felt that they were not only receiving supports, guid-

ance, or assistance from faculty members, but also that they were contributing or giving

back in one way or another.

Also under this category was expressed the difficulty some of the students had in their

relationships with faculty outside of the classroom. For Sheila, Sherri, and Tim, data from

their interviews included references to professors not following through on commitments

of support, the awkwardness of seeking help from an instructor in a certain course, and

the inability of a student to seek out a faculty member because of a lack of trust in her

skills and knowledge as an instructor. Sheila states:

One thing that comes to mind when you brought that up that really bothers me

is...I had a number of professors that I would email them, and they wouldn't reply

back. I don't know, that just really bugs me. One time I had a professor...I was tak-

ing her course, and I never took a course with her before, and, uh, I don't know,

she said I was doing well, and at the end of the course I asked if she would be

willing to write me a reference letter for a scholarship, and she said she was will-

ing to. And she even asked me if she treated me differently because I was Aborig-

inal, and I don't know why, and she said she would be willing to. She said send

me a bio so I have something to work with, and so I did, and then all of a sudden

she disappeared off the face of the earth...she never emailed me back, I tried call-

ing her...and I don't know, I have to go to someone else now, another professor. I don't know why that happened.

Sherri notes:

I have actually gone, had meeting with my Computer Usage instructor, but I find them awkward 'cause I don't know him....I don't like him as a professor. Just the way he teaches....I don't really want to meet with him after, but I do, if I really have to, I will.

Similarly, Tim states:

I couldn't talk to her. I could not talk to her at all. I have a hard time talking to people [like that]. If you're doing a job and you're supposed to be teaching, and you are incapable of doing that job, you shouldn't be doing it. I had such a hate on for her, it was terrible. But it's just because she really wasn't qualified for what she was doing. It just drove me nuts, that they would inflict her on us.

The other five students did not make any comments in relation to difficulties with faculty, and overall, most students spoke of their ability to form relationships with faculty outside of the classroom.

Another area related to this theme is about academic supports and the ACCESS program. Tutors and advisors come up frequently in the interviews of Andrea, Sherri, Jan, and Aiden. Andrea and Aiden both speak of utilizing academic advisors to assist with course selection and program planning. Sherri and Jan both mention their use of tutors on campus to help them with assignments and to prepare for examinations:

- "if you need any help, like, one of the tutors is at the Aboriginal [student cen-

  tre] twice a week," (Sherri); and

- "[I access tutors] through the staff at disability services and here. I was given

  extra money by Student Aid to pay if I needed one….There is also a list of a

  tutors from disability services, but most are mainly through ACCESS....some

  [are also] private," (Jan).

More frequently mentioned, however, are the academic supports provided through the

ACCESS program. Six students refer specifically to their involvement in or interest in

being involved in ACCESS as composing a large part of their experience outside of the

classroom:

- "I'm trying to get into ACCESS so, doing that… I just wanna do, well, I heard

  ACCESS will just like, you have less people in your classes, so there's more

  support," (Andrea);

- "[ACCESS] connected me to everything," (Sherri);

- "Well, ACCESS I applied for, but I didn't even know about it until I started

  university. And I was like, this is like, pretty valuable for me. I applied in

  2007, and then I got rejected because they said I was doing fine on my own. I

  beg to differ on that one, but...whatever. I just kind of gave up on that. But,

  they have been able to provide me support last semester when I needed a tu-

  tor, even though I wasn't, so that was okay for me. That's the only real time I

  needed a tutor," (Sheila);

- "ACCESS...they have an orientation over 3 or 4 weeks. When I started, I was only supposed to go for 3 or 4 days because I did mine...through the summer session school...we are given a month off, but they said it's not mandatory...[however] we did show up to show that we are still interested in coming into ACCESS, so we had to go through that and then that was before we got to our interviews," (Jan);

- "I have pretty good um, positive [experiences] yeah, with the ACCESS programs, I would say for sure there, because they help me out a lot," (Aiden); and

- "Just knowing that there was someplace I could go where if I needed to talk about something there was someone there who was willing and eager to listen. If I was having trouble with my studies, they would give me the number to a tutor, 'here, get a hold of this person, make an appointment and get to it.' Literally, knowing that was there was a huge plus. Meeting all the other people in the Access program, knowing that they're going through the same thing I am and most of them were very approachable you know, most of them were like, if I needed help with something, 'yeah no problem!' If they needed somebody to talk to, or for help I was perfectly willing to help them. It was great, it was greatly appreciated. So that was the huge difference," (Tim).

An additional theme that came out of this section includes data relating to struggles and barriers faced as a student. Jan speaks of facing numerous traumatic experiences in her life, both before and after enrolling in university. Her stories tell of losing her father,

brother, and friend; her sister being diagnosed with breast cancer; abuse inflicted on her

as a child by her mother, a residential school survivor, and sexual abuse inflicted on her

by an unnamed person as a youth; and an ex-partner who "stabbed me 9 times," and was

sentenced to house arrest. These stories speak loudly of the struggles Jan has faced

throughout her life, and the struggles she continues to think about as she moves through

the years of university studies. She also speaks frequently about her learning disabilities,

and how they have made it challenging for her to learn at certain times:

> I got through like a half [assignment] and then that's when my disability kicks and
>
> I guess I start wandering off a little and do other things and then I have to bring
>
> myself back to focus....I just got diagnosed that I have a learning disability....And
>
> it's taken me a long time to accept that....It doesn't mean I'm dumb or anything, I
>
> just learn differently. I have to break things right down to the lowest thing and
>
> then, okay, I see the big picture instead of getting it thrown at me.

Sherri does not tell of such experiences, but instead speaks of discriminatory behaviours

she has encountered on campus by instructors and peers outside of the classroom. She

states:

> I did encounter two separate events. One was, I don't know if they were profes-
>
> sors or just older students, but they were talking about it and they were like, com-
>
> plaining that we had our own building, an Aboriginal building, and they were like,
>
> why do they need their own building, they get all these things, free funding, sort
>
> of stuff like that.... I think I was waiting for my exam, and they were sitting right
>
> at this table and they were being loud. And I just felt awkward. I just tried to, I

didn't really want to listen to it too long, so I just kind of walked away from that
area. And then another time...I'm not sure if this guy's Aboriginal or not, but he
said this like, really racist story , I don't really want to say it, but it's just like, um,
basically, he was saying that this guy's not a good Indian because he doesn't
drink....he was telling it to like, maybe six people and three of them were like
'that's just stereotypes n' stuff,' kinda like, not really liking the story, I guess. And
the other three, like, laughed. It made me feel awkward because I was right in
front of them. It's like, 'I'm right here, how could you say that when you're right
beside me?' sort of thing.

Aiden was one of the only students to mention barriers that affected her when asked
the question regarding experiences outside of the classroom. She tells of feeling disad-
vantaged because she is a single mother, which affects her ability to study as much as
other students, and then also affects her funding and financial situation:

What has helped me? I guess my funding. I'm fortunate to have that right now.
That is a big, like I wouldn't even be going to school if I didn't have the funding,
right? Um, and it is a concern as well...I guess because I only can be funded for so
many years, and I just find that being a single mom and having two children and
going to university, and all that, like...sometimes it's not easy, right? And I don't
know...I'm worried about my funding. And I have tried to get into the faculty of
social work so, that was the plan. And I haven't gotten in yet. I'm still working to-
wards it. I'm still going, [but] it's hard...I find that it is unfair [because]...you go to
the [university] and there is a bunch of younger aged people that don't have any

responsibilities, really. Nothing. And you have this GPA system that you have to

keep up to, so I think that it is kind of a disadvantage for [parents], because we

have all this responsibility in our lives and not...like...this 19 year old.

Pre-university experiences and current success. Still related to the students' current

perceptions of university was the following question: "what pre-university experiences

helped prepare you for success in your studies here and now?" In order of the number of

specific mentions in the interviews, the factors from these pre-university experiences that

are influencing their current success are: personal characteristics, skills, and abilities (12);

high school experiences (9); and motivation and a sense of personal efficacy (6). For

James, Jan, Aiden, and Sherri, having learnt life skills, such as problem solving, time

management and communication, as they grew up is essential in their current success as

university students. For James in particular, having taken part in a community-based af-

ter-school program for Aboriginal teens in which they were taught how to work in groups

and facilitate groups is mentioned frequently:

> I was volunteering at [an organization]...they have a course called teach the
>
> teacher...instruct the instructor...[or] something like that. It teaches how to run
>
> small groups....[to] work with small groups, different learning styles....it was so
>
> easy....It makes you click...allows you to click with anybody, even with someone
>
> with opposing views.....I learned how to better fit into a group dynamic, which is
>
> phenomenally helping me now at school. Um, the ability to go to an entirely new
>
> group of people and almost immediately find a niche.

And, from a quote mentioned previously by Jan regarding being taught in college some of the terminology used at the post-secondary level of which she was unfamiliar, she indicates that being comfortable and somewhat fluent in the jargon of university prior to university enrolment was helpful; "I get a letter in the mail that I made the Dean's honor list of 4.12 average... like what's that? She [my sister] goes... GPA... grade point average and I went I don't know what it is."

Data related to high school and its effect on post-secondary studies shows up frequently in the interviews. Sheila indicates that the pressure put on her by her teachers to work hard in high school, as well as high parental expectations, have helped her in her university studies. Andrea mentions attending a university-based summer camp for youth as influential. Tim mentions two teachers at his adult learning centre that taught specifically for university preparation for which he is thankful:

> I was blessed with the teacher that I had at the adult learning centre I went to...she was very demanding in certain things. She insisted that we use APA and use it correctly. She went in depth into both subjects, I'm pretty sure she was going into stuff that I don't know if it was normally taught in grade 12.... when I got into some of my biology classes here, it surprised me how many of my fellow students had no clue what they were talking about, you know?...if it weren't for [her] I don't think I would be doing as well.

Additionally, feeling motivated and being able to state that they could complete a program or overcome a barrier was cited repeatedly:

- "I think it has to do with like, you find motivation in yourself to do it...like if you don't have motivation to go to university, do well in your classes or anything, nothing else really matters. Like nothing else will fall into place. Because I went in there knowing I am going to go here, I'm gonna finish, I'm gonna graduate, that was enough for me." (Sheila)

- "I think what keeps me going is that, well, I'm determined, for one, to finish." (Aiden)

- "I've never had to quit anything, I've never really quit anything....so, I'm pretty happy....I've been pretty successful. It's just having to jump through the hoops to get up or out of a course, I didn't ever want to do that. So, I figured I would just go to the end and if I fail it, then I'll just take it over. I just never wanted to jump through hoops to start over again." (Alex)

Overall, six comments were made in relation to motivation and personal efficacy. All reflected the need to find within oneself the drive to continue, as well as the importance of feeling capable of reaching ones goals.

Advice for Aboriginal students from similar background circumstances. Themes that emerged from the data in relation to the question "what advice would you give to someone who was coming to university from background circumstances similar to yours when you came to university," include:

- preparation and planning;

- support seeking and group involvement;

- pacing;

- appreciating diversity and allowing for creativity; and

- focus and perseverance.

Overall, all eight of the students interviewed were quick to provide a response, and some more than one. They spoke of challenges they have faced as university students, as Aboriginal people, and as parents, low-income earners, and mature learners. Some offered suggestions that included strategies to overcome these barriers that they discovered later in their studies, while others offered ideas that they would like to see implemented to prevent these types of struggles from occurring on the journeys of others.

Being prepared prior to enrolling in university is seen as essential for Tim and Sheila, and it is what they would suggest to other Aboriginal students considering post-secondary studies. To them, this means being prepared academically for post-secondary level studies, having clear educational or career goal, knowing how to select courses and programs once at university, and knowing how to access the supports and programs available on campus. Tim specifically suggests enrolling in upgrading courses at the secondary level prior to entering university studies to ensure students are prepared academically, even referring to one specific teacher he felt pushed him to a new level of learning:

> If they can, go to the [Aboriginal Adult Learning Centre], and I can't remember
> her name, but check out if there is a short...woman teaching bio and chem and
> take her class!....if it weren't for [her] I don't think I would be doing as well.
> They're [the Learning Centre] really trying to prep you for university. You're a

university student, you're not a high school student, you're not a grade 6 student;

the papers are going to be very different. If you hand in something that could have

been done by a grade 12 student, it's not going to work. I handed in something

that I thought would be fine, for most grade 12 students, and I got a 37....[but] she

went through, there were all sorts of comments on my paper: 'why,' 'where is this

from,' 'give me proof,' 'you need quotes,' 'you need sources,' although she would

let us use Wikipedia - they don't let you use Wikipedia at university....I lucked

out. I had a hell of a teacher for my last year of high school and I know it. A lot of

the people in there had no clue because the teachers hadn't taken the time to

prepare them. And I blame our educational system.

Sheila, in turn, makes a suggestion noting the important role post-secondary counsellors

for First Nation Educational Authorities can play in preparing future Aboriginal

university students:

You know what? This is another thing I want to add...for Aboriginal students that

are sponsored, I definitely feel like post-secondary counsellors shouldn't just be

handling the finances....They should be sitting down with the student

and...helping them decide what courses would be best, and just thinking about

what their options are. Because I found with my cousins that were lost, they were

just taking random courses that they weren't interested in, and they felt like they

weren't working towards something. That's what I think. And I was trying to help

them, like criminology, you have to take these courses first, but they are all [first

year university] courses, like they weren't specific in their program yet, so they

didn't do as well, they didn't like the courses. But if they were to narrow down
their career options, I think they would have done well....And the post-secondary
counsellor in the bands...they have the potential to do that too, or at least arrange
an appointment with the Aboriginal student recruitment officer on campus or
wherever the student goes.

Sheila goes on to also recommend new Aboriginal students entering first year studies
seek out the available supports offered through the university:

Definitely get out there more, like seek that support rather than waiting for it to
come to you. Because I feel like I coulda did so much better my first year if I did
know. Maybe I coulda talked to my guidance counsellor and asked what is there
for Aboriginal students, like who can I contact out there, 'cuz I coulda benefited
from talking to the Aboriginal student recruitment officer, who is always available
for students for a tour, or just letting them know the kinda supports that are on
campus, any programs that help you academically or personally. Or anything like
that. Even if it came to like, how do I get an apartment in Winnipeg? Because it
can be really hard. You know, things like that woulda helped me, and even I'm
learning how to budget my money, and that was a major issue in my first year.
'Cuz I didn't have a whole lot, and I've never lived on my own before, so and that
affects my school work.

Aiden also recommends new students utilize the supports offered by the university:

I guess just to take advantage of all the supports that are offered. Yeah. The
library, the access you can have onto the library from the computers – um, I don't

really use the learning assistance centre, because I have the ACCESS programs, but that place as well. I think I went there once. Um, yeah....It came in time for me. Like, now that it is my 3rd year, I know places and where I am going. At first, it was kinda like I didn't know where I was going, so planning ahead of time and figuring out where everything is. Researching the university would be a really smart thing to do! Or else you will just learn it in time as you are running to your classes.

And Andrea also sees supports as essential aids for new Aboriginal students, referring to her own challenges as a new university student:

Be more active into doing more things at school, like, if you have issues or something, don't just run away. Like I did. I just had, everything was overwhelming and then I kinda stayed at home most of the time. And use your resources...They're there, you just have to go, like, and not be scared to use them....At first it was like, 'no, I'm not going to,' and then...It was just easier to run away than to go and ask for help.

In their interviews, all three refer to their own needs for personal, emotional, and academic assistance as they entered and continued on in their studies, and recognize that seeking out that support early on can be an essential element in the success of new students.

In addition to the supports discussed above, Sherri and Tim also recommend utilizing the specific assistance and introductory courses available to new students through ACCESS programs. Sherri states:

I would say do that orientation course. If they can get into ACCESS, get into

ACCESS, 'cause my sister's in ACCESS and she gets a tutor, she gets academic

counsellors, she gets like, a personal counsellor, she gets all these things and

they're preparing her for – she's trying to get into the medical field. She takes

these seminars, so she's like, she has like, so many great opportunities and if they

can get into that, then I'm pretty sure they'd be set. For life!

Tim agrees, saying:

I think that every student should get that preparation, it's huge. I'm glad that a lot

of the Aboriginal students that comes here get that preparation because they are in

the ACCESS Program. Intro University is essential, it was an excellent

course....Get into the ACCESS program, take as many of the prep courses as you

can, you know, just get 'em done.

Both spoke frequently of their own or their family's involvement in the program, and

refer to its role in helping to guide and aid Aboriginal students.

Involvement in student groups was also recommended by Tim who, when asked for

recommendations, says the following:

One other thing I would tell new students is, don't be afraid to join student

groups. That opens access to different things that may not be available for you

normally. Student groups are very inclusive, I found. We have people in the

Aboriginal students association, but they're not Aboriginal, never have been,

never will be, but they're welcome there, why not? And you know, that gives

them access to coming here [the Aboriginal student centre], and some of the food

that is free that we put out sometimes. All students know that a free breakfast or a

free lunch is a good thing! Stay in touch with the grapevine, you know. 'Cause

you never know what's going on.

He goes on to comment on his own involvement in an Aboriginal student mentorship

group:

That's why I got behind the [mentorship] program, hardcore. They want to

institute a mentor program in the Faculty of Nursing, and I'm like, do it, just do it!

Anybody. It's the Faculty of Nursing. Anybody who declares that they are going,

'cause I think they ask that, I'm not sure, when you're picking out your courses

and that. If you go see an advisor and say I want to get into nursing what courses

do I need? I believe the plan is, they hook you up with a mentor. Somebody that

can prepare you for the fact that they ask you to do more work than is humanly

possible, at least you think so when you first see your workload.

For Tim, seeking the support of other students, whether through student associations or

student mentorship, is mentioned frequently.

However, Andrea and Tim have very different recommendation in regards to course

load and pace. Andrea, the younger of the two, talks of taking time and not rushing:

Take it slow, don't do too much at once....Yeah, don't take a full course load at the

beginning. Like, it's easier to take an extra one, or something after you...like, my

first term I took four [courses] and I ended up dropping out of two and then

failing one. So...I'm in three, but I started with two and then took another one. So

to really pay attention on how they're, how the courses are and what type of

courses are that you're gonna have in one term, especially with him [son - heard in background]. I can't be in my books 24/7.

Whereas Tim, who is the oldest of the eight students interviewed, recommends students decrease their time at university by taking summer courses:

If your sponsor allows it, take summer courses, shorten your time at the university. And the summer courses, there's a lot of them, and its really compressed so its easy not to forget the stuff. You have to cram it in faster, but you retain more of it because you're not focusing on it two months later when you're taking your final exams. I found I love taking summer courses. It's a huge help!

The comments made by these two individuals of different ages reflect their similar focus on time and its limitations as either a young parent or a mature student.

James' suggestion for students coming to university from similar background circumstances as his when he came to university differs from the other seven students interviewed:

Advice to someone from my same background? Um, come into it with an open mind. It's what's different from you that strengthens you eventually, so the more you - the more knowledge you accept, the more experiences from other people you accept, the stronger you become in the end....The most important part of success at university: if you're not creative, you're not even thinking or trying to be creative, then there is really no point to be there. I mean, you can regurgitate everything you've learned, but without the ability to adapt or change after you've

> left the university setting, you're gonna, its gonna be what you are doing will be
> pointless in the world outside....I think everyone is born creative, but
> systematically, that's taken away from us. So, all children are born artists...its just
> the problem is staying an artist when you are an adult. So when you are young,
> everyone loves to paint, everyone loves to dance, everyone loves to sing....it's
> only a lifetime of experiences of being or having that taken away from me that
> changes who you are when you are an adult.

His focus on creativity and developing an appreciation for diversity is original among the
group of students, and reflects his interest in design and architecture, as discussed
throughout his interview.

Finally, for Jan and Alex, staying focused and persevering through times of struggle
are recommendations they would make to new Aboriginal students. Jan says:

> Every year ACCESS has an orientation, so they asked me if I'd like to come and
> speak on the panel. I share my experience to students. If you fail the course, don't
> give up. You know, only you can help you get that dream. It doesn't matter...there
> are some students that have to do a course three times - physics I'm doing for the
> third time. Other times it is taking me once or twice....What I tell them is that not
> give up on their goal - to believe in themselves, that it's a good thing.

Alex similarly talks about his own experiences with being persistent:

> I don't know, just I've never had to quit anything; I've never really quit anything.
> Besides jobs, right? Besides leaving positions and I've never wanted to quit, so
> I'm pretty happy. I've never dropped a class, or I've never...I think I failed a

course at [college] one time. Yeah. But, no, I've been pretty successful. It's just
having to jump through the hoops to get up or out of a course; I didn't ever want
to do that. So, I figured I would just go to the end and if I fail it, then I'll just take
it over. I just never wanted to jump through hoops to start over again.

Whether it was because they saw it as more difficult in the end to get out of a course
than to struggle through it, or whether it was because they remained focused on their
goal, both Jan and Alex speak of working through their challenges and not letting it stop
them on their journeys as university students. And like the other six students, they speak
of many times of struggle in their interviews, and they are aware that others will face
similar situations when they enter post-secondary studies; however, all eight students
make straightforward and clear recommendations for other Aboriginal students coming
to university from background circumstances similar to their own when they came to
university.

   Recommendations for changes to university programs and approaches. The
final question of the interview was, "if you were involved in running the university or
designing programs, what would you do differently to help students like yourself," the
themes that came forth from the data include:

- increasing pre-university preparation (5);

- increasing participation in transitional programming (3);

- increasing programming and resources for Aboriginal students (2);

- addressing discrimination on campus (3);

- assisting with financial supports and addressing financial barriers (2); and

- acknowledging and assisting with family responsibilities (7).

All eight students, when asked this question, acknowledged that there was already much available to students and that they truly enjoy the experiences that they have had at university thus far. However, each had their own ideas on what they would change or introduce to help other Aboriginal university students.

Sheila, Alex, and Sherri focused their responses on ideas that should be implemented at the pre-university or high school level. For example, Sheila does this by explaining her own experience:

> I guess there was always career fairs in high school...I guess I had to start thinking about it when I was in grade 9 or 10. That's when I originally thought about it and knew I was going to go...In high school, I was interested in health and I knew I wanted a career in health, and wellbeing, and just nutrition kinda seemed to stand out for me. So, when it came time to decide on a program in grade 12, I just chose that one as a possibility. And then it took 2 years to finally realize, yes, this is what I want to do. I want to get a Bachelor in nutrition. And then later on down the line, I realized I want to be a dietician, 'cuz that just seemed like the go to person for nutrition, I guess.

Alex suggests that there is a missing piece in the lives of many Aboriginal youth, whether from rural communities or urban and inner-city settings:

> I think students, especially students that are out of reserve, they have no idea the type of doors that courses or diplomas or degrees will open for them. It is kind of,

they're kind of - it's just so closed on the reserve and even when there's students

in the city - that's why I want to work [and] teach in inner city. They don't see a

lot of their friends going to school, their family going to school, and a lot of it too

is, I think, is part of the city living. I grew up in the north end [of the city] and

there's no university out there, the [college] is far from there, [the other local uni-

versity] is even all the way downtown and then when I moved to [another neigh-

bourhood in the south end of the city], I think I was in high school, grade 9 or 10.

[When] you go to school in the north end its - everyone is going to work when

they graduate; and then you go in [the south end] and everyone's brother or sister,

or their parents have gone to school, so they've seen it and everyone just assumes

you're gonna go. You're going to go to [university], or they're going to go away

for school, or even go to [college]. So, it's just a matter, I think a huge thing is just

seeing/being around people who are going to go. And everyone just assumes

you're going to go. Even though they say the numbers aren't, I guess the numbers

aren't as high as I thought, as I think, all of my friends went to university, or peo-

ple that I went to high school with, apparently it's not as high, but I just kind of

assumed people that lived in the area, they all go.

Sherri refers to the need for increased preparation too by discussing her feelings as a new

Aboriginal university student; "I don't think I was really prepared for university...It was

so different and so hard and I really just like, wanted to quit, but I didn't. And then I just

like, I didn't know it was going to be that hard. It was just difficult for me."

The statements made by all three of these students reflect their desire to see changes

implemented at a pre-university level to help Aboriginal students once they are enrolled

in university studies. Sherri, along with Jan, also talks of the need for the university to encourage increased participation of incoming Aboriginal students in already existing transitional programs. The following comment by Sherri illustrates this idea:

> Like, if you click off you're First Nations when you sign up [for University], they send it [Orientation Course Information] to you. But I didn't do that, that's why I didn't do it in my first year...but my sister did, so that's how I learned of that course, 'cause she got the letter, then my parents were like 'Oh my god! You have to join this!' So I did.

Similarly, Jan discusses her time in a transition year program offered for new Aboriginal students; "that was the health transition year program. I thought I was applying to ACCESS. Well as it turns out of you have to go through [that program] get to [into ACCESS] there get to here. That was their first year, so there was a lot of tweeks and there was a lot of changes [in] the program, plus me."

The next theme, increasing programming and resources for Aboriginal students, was reflected in additional answers provided by Jan and Andrea. Jan says simply, "[s]ometimes I find that there is not enough for Aboriginals here," and Andrea agrees, wishing for more programs for Aboriginal students throughout the university. However, she also notes she personally prefers those offered at the Aboriginal student centre, because "it's cozier, you feel more at home than anywhere else." This comment can also be related to the next theme, addressing discrimination on campus, discussed in more detail in the interviews of Jan and Sherri. Jan states, "some professors are understanding, but not all....[i]t is like going to the doctor's office and having a language barrier and a two to

three minute time limit for your patient. For an example." Sherri describes her thoughts

on combating discriminatory behaviours by faculty and students:

> I would also, for the university in general, I would make everyone take the Native
>
> 1200 course, because there's so many racist people that just don't know anything
>
> and if they took that course, they might understand a little bit more about us....I
>
> think it would eliminate some racism....To understand why there are so many
>
> problems. 'Cause I feel like I took it and I didn't know everything. Now I know
>
> more about why people act the way they do and why there's so many problems in
>
> the Aboriginal community....I think most people would get so mad. But I think if
>
> they explain it well as to why some people need to take it, people would under-
>
> stand. Like, for example, one of my friends who is non-Aboriginal, she's going
>
> into environmental studies and she has to take that course, but she's, like, talking
>
> to me and saying 'I don't understand why I have to take this course' and stuff. And
>
> I explained to her something [a professor] told me. Like he goes to other people,
>
> other buildings and he had to do a lot of work to get the [Aboriginal student centre
>
> built]. So he did little information sessions on how the [Aboriginal student centre]
>
> would help. So I think those people, they partnered and made it, so people like her
>
> have to take that course to learn more, so that they'd understand why we need the
>
> [Aboriginal student centre] and stuff.

These comments made by Andrea, Jan, and Sherri in relation to the final interview ques-

tion all illustrate their desire to see changes made at the university to address racism, dis-

crimination, and misunderstanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal faculty and students.

The last two themes, assisting with financial supports and addressing financial barriers, and acknowledging and assisting with family responsibilities, appeared in the data of one student several times in her response to this final interview question. Aiden states she feels family responsibilities have been a challenge for her as an Aboriginal post-secondary student, and she would like the university to take steps to address this barrier. First, she discussed her financial challenges and her struggles to participate in the competitive entrance system of the Faculty of Social Work:

> [L]owering, I guess, the cost for students...because if I didn't have my funding, I don't know what I would be doing to try to get to finish my degree. Like, I am already thinking of that, because if I don't get in, then I don't, only have like a year left of my funding, so then that means I'm gonna have to get a student loan, which means, like, I am going to owe money back. So, I would definitely try and lower the cost.

Next, Aiden makes a recommendation for assistance with other costs associated with being a university student; "[t]ry to...help more with – I find one of the biggest things for me is having access to printing...it is like, so maybe, giving us resources. Um, helping us out as students for that." She also speaks of her hope for an acknowledgement by the university of the additional responsibilities faced by students who are also parents, and the barriers that come along with that:

> Just to have supports for all the barriers that we face, like in going to university.
>
> 'Specially like, I find, I don't know, like maybe not just single mothers, but single
>
> fathers too. But parents in general, I guess...I find that it is unfair that...you go to
>
> [university], and there is a bunch of younger aged people that don't have any re-
>
> sponsibilities, really. Nothing. And you have this GPA system that you have to
>
> keep up to, so I think that it is kind of a disadvantage for us, because we have all
>
> this responsibility in our lives and not as, like how this 19 year old...I just find that
>
> I'm having – I would change something in there just because of the barriers that I
>
> am facing in trying to get into the Faculty of Social Work.

Finally, Aiden recommends the university makes additional accommodations

for students who are parents:

> I think it is more the GPA system, because, like, maybe I don't know, consider
>
> having some kind of a spot for um, single parents? Or parents in general? Like
>
> just, you know, because...they have spots for...Aboriginal, right? As well, they do
>
> have that, but I just think that because there is so many parents that go to school
>
> and they have to struggle with so many other things, than other students.

Her frequent comments related to these themes and in response to this final

question illustrate her desires to see significant changes made for this segment

of the university student population.

Chapter Summary

   Overall, the eleven questions asked about the perspectives of Aboriginal students

prior to university enrolment, and the current perspectives of these students at university,

elicited responses that included information on parental and peer involvement and influence, relationships with faculty and peers, challenges and barriers, suggestions for other Aboriginal students, and recommendations for university program developers. As someone who has worked with Aboriginal secondary and post-secondary students for nearly a decade, it was affirming to hear that so many good things are being done to support and promote the success of Aboriginal university students. However, as will be discussed in the final chapter of this study, there is an opportunity for policy makers, program developers, educators and faculty to generate new ideas for programs and implement new approaches to education in order to increase the number of students who are finding success, and increasingly make post-secondary educational institutions respectful, welcoming learning environments that are effectively meeting the needs of all those who seek to gain an education within their walls.

Chapter 5:   Discussion

According to the conceptual framework as laid out in Chapter 2, Aboriginal students

coming into post-secondary studies exist in a certain reality which can be influenced by

their personal and familial value systems; the history of Aboriginal people in Canada and

the intergenerational effects of colonization; their current family status, including educa-

tional attainment of parents and other family members, marriage, the presence of chil-

dren, income level and source, and location of family residence and community; and their

level of knowledge of and involvement in traditional Aboriginal culture. When these stu-

dents choose to enrol in post-secondary education to obtain certification, which is a

choice made for many reasons based on their situation, needs, and overall life goals, there

are several criteria that need to be met in order for them to be successful. First, they must

be provided with the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging and self-identity

through the formation of meaningful relationships. Second, they must be able to access

academic, social, personal, and financial supports and resources. Finally, they must be

able to see themselves, as Aboriginal people, reflected in the institution through the inte-

gration of Aboriginal content and the emphasis of Aboriginal issues in programs, courses,

and institutional mandates. When these criteria are met, Aboriginal students are more

likely to remain in post-secondary studies and continue on their educational journeys to

graduation and certification. However, when they do not receive the opportunity to de-

velop a sense of belonging and self-identity and instead find themselves unable to form

meaningful relationships, unable to access sufficient supports and resources, and facing

an environment within the institution which is at odds with their personal culture, they

may begin to develop oppositional attitudes to post-secondary education and a defor-

mation of identity. The new non-Aboriginal value based material of the educational institution cannot be integrated into their value systems, causing them to make a decision to withdraw from post-secondary academic studies.

Findings: Meaning, Importance, and Relation to Similar Studies

The findings discussed in Chapter 4 confirm that when Aboriginal students who are coming into or already at post-secondary educational institutions are able to form meaningful relationships with faculty and other students during their studies, in turn meeting their value criteria, and while being provided with additional supports and resources, they are more likely to achieve their long term goals of program completion and graduation. As well, the findings suggest that when Aboriginal students are able to feel a sense of belonging and empowerment as partners in their educational journeys, persistence and motivation levels increase, and they are less likely to withdraw from their studies. Also emerging from the findings is the importance of pre-post-secondary preparation and guidance for both younger and older students alike, and the role clear, focused goal setting prior to enrolment plays in the success of Aboriginal students' journeys. For myself, as an educator who works with Aboriginal students at both the secondary and post-secondary level, these findings tell not only of the experiences of actual women and men living through this, but also of their suggestions and ideas for improving a system they find both stimulating and sometimes challenging. Through an analysis of the words of eight current Aboriginal university students, I have striven to engage with what each individual had to say, and am extremely grateful to them for allowing me to share their experiences in a very profound way.

Perceptions. Following the conceptual framework, we must begin in the Eastern Door, on the right hand side of the circle, where we have the student existing in their own social reality. They are influenced by their value system, as taught to them by their family, peers, and culture; their histories and experiences; their roles in life and their socioeconomic status; and, sometimes most importantly, their culture. The findings of the study emphasize that family members and peers play an important role in the perceptions of post-secondary education and decision making processes prior to university enrolment. As role models, motivators and supporters, family members appear to influence how individuals see and think about university and college. However, it does not appear that failure to complete a program of study or withdrawal from post-secondary education by parents, siblings, or extended family members necessarily negatively affects the way the participants viewed further education or whether or not they chose to enrol. None of the eight students interviewed stated that the struggles of their family members made entering into or persevering in their own studies more difficult; it did, however, elicit remarks of empathy, understanding, and frustration. It is also interesting to note that of the eight students interviewed, half had parents who previously attained post-secondary credentials and half had parents who had never attended college or university. This says to me that students who come from families with little or no post-secondary educational experience are just as likely to consider this route as those with family members who have these experiences. It also seems to say that the ability to support a student in their studies effectively is not dependent upon whether or not the family member had or had not experienced post-secondary studies. For example, Sheila states, "Oh, well, all along I guess I knew that going to university would mean something for my family....I guess it was im-

portant to my parents and important to me, like to do something with myself." Yet, she

also notes she is the first in her family to attend. Though her parents did not go to univer-

sity or college, higher education was still seen as important and Sheila was encouraged

throughout her life to aim for this goal. She was able to internalize this message from her

parents regarding education regardless of their own experiences.

Another angle to this finding comes out of Tim's experience. Tim watched his daugh-

ter attend and struggle immensely in college, balancing being a single mom of young

boys and living in poverty. Yet, her challenges did not appear to deter him from continu-

ing his education. Rather, the experience appears to have encouraged him to also try to

attain post-secondary certification, knowing that if she could make it through, so could

he:

> She [my daughter] was actually living with me while she was in college....it was
>
> quite interesting watching her go through it, stress about her tests and stuff....I
>
> never really stress about tests....I study for them, I go and I do them. Get them
>
> done and over with, then wait for your marks.

It also appears to have built up his level of confidence in his abilities to effectively handle

the level of responsibilities and expectations required of post-secondary students. As he

observed his daughter complete her studies, and as he began his own, Tim demonstrated

that witnessing the challenges faced by others, particularly family members, does not

necessarily negatively influence how Aboriginal students themselves view education.

Alex particularly stands out as an example of the ways peers can greatly influence

whether or not Aboriginal students choose to enrol in university, and this is another im-

portant finding of the study. He states, "[w]ell, my friends went to university....[a]nd I

didn't know what I wanted to do....[but] I didn't want to be the one who just didn't go to school, or had to start working." Throughout this section of his interview, he spends much time speaking of his friends and their plans for continuing their education after high school graduation. And yet, he only briefly mentions his parents when talking about making his decision to enrol in post-secondary studies. This is important because it demonstrates how influential the actions of one's peers can be, particular for youth. For Alex, he did not want to be left out; in his mind, continuing on to college and then university seems to have become an only real option for him.

For James, Sheila, Alex, and Sherri, the findings indicate that planning for post-secondary education can begin early in life. Though the study seems to show that having parents attend university is not an essential element in whether or not an Aboriginal person will attend themselves, it does appear to affect when the person makes the decision. James, Alex, and Sherri all had parents who attended post-secondary educational institutions. Sheila was the only student in this group whose parents did not attend. For the remaining four students interviewed, who did not make this decision until later in life, three did not have parents who had attended post-secondary educational institutions: Aiden, Jan, and Tim. Only Andrea had a mother who had attended and completed college. Therefore, it can be surmised that when Aboriginal youth grow up in a household where parents or caregivers have attended post-secondary education, they are more likely to decide as youth to also attend.

Overall, for the section investigating the perceptions of Aboriginal university students prior to post-secondary enrolment, the findings show that:

family members, regardless of personal experience, influence the way the eight

Aboriginal students saw and thought about university and college;

watching family members struggle in or withdraw from post-secondary studies

did not necessarily negatively affect the Aboriginal students' own perceptions;

Aboriginal students who came from families with little or no post-secondary ed-

ucational experience were just as likely to enrol in post-secondary studies them-

selves, as those with family members who have;

peers can play a particularly important role in whether or not Aboriginal students

continue on into post-secondary studies, particularly when the student is a youth;

and, when Aboriginal youth grow up in a household where parents or caregivers

have attended post-secondary education, they are more likely to decide as youth

to also attend.

These findings confirm those found in other studies discussed in the literature (Saggio &

Rendón, 2004; Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003), which agree that family support plays an

influential role in the enrolment and retention of Aboriginal post-secondary students.

However, they also add to these studies by questioning the importance of the personal

experiences of these family members with post-secondary education and how this does or

does not affect the decision making processes of potential Aboriginal university or col-

lege students.

Decisions. We now move to the Southern Doorway, the bottom on the framework's

circle, where we see the student decide to enrol in post-secondary education. As a whole,

when looking at the findings around influencing factors and enrolment in university, the

reasons the students interviewed stated for deciding to enrol are varied, and include ca-

reer changes, proximity, availability of programming, and parental influence. However, when I look closely at the data, the comments made by two of the eight students interviewed stand out. The first was made by Jan, when asked "what made you decide to enrol in university?":

> [M]y classmate said that we should go to nursing at [college]. I said '[College]? We should go to the [university] already because at least then you get an RN and you get more training and they have more to offer, and whereas it is four years here, at [college] its two but it's a longer waiting list yet.' I didn't end up - I didn't end up going into nursing; my goal is now medicine -- so I've got a significant hill to climb but I'm almost there in the first part.

This response shows several important things: (1) that Jan thought about the difference in qualifications she would attain at college versus university; (2) that the waiting lists for some college programs are deterrents for potential students; and (3) that Jan has a fairly high sense of confidence in her academic abilities, so much so that she further changed her goals to the even more challenging program of medicine. It should be noted also that, previous to university enrolment, Jan completed a dual certificate program from an off-campus college institution. Did this educational 'stepping stone' help to build this confidence? Findings from a study on Aboriginal second-chance learners and labour market policies would indicate that yes, many Aboriginal adult learners prefer to participate in smaller, shorter educational/training programs prior to entering a longer university program (MacKinnon, 2011). This experience of 'testing out the waters' allows them to build their self esteem and confidence in settings that are often designed to be more comfortable and accepting of "second-chance learners," (MacKinnon, 2011, p. 223). The finding

can also relate to those of Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003), who state that the development of self-efficacy and confidence through experiences leads to more independent and assertive attitudes. This idea could also be applied to Alex and Aiden, both of whom completed college level programming prior to enrolling in university.

The other intriguing comment made in response to the same question came from Sherri:

> [M]y parents kind of drilled it into me that I would automatically go there right after high school, I wasn't really like - they wouldn't let me take a break at all, and it wasn't really an option....My dad thinks it's better to get a university degree than college....[and] I heard it's like the best in [the province] and I like, live [close by], and it's the biggest one, so I just decided to go there.

This statement seems to indicate that Sherri may have felt a lack of control in making the decision to attend university, almost as though she walked through the process without fully being a part of it. Unlike some of the other students interviewed, such as Jan above, Sherri appears to have been pushed, at least somewhat unwillingly, by others rather than encouraged. Is she happy with the end result of this decision? Would she choose to make it again? Based on other comments made by her throughout her interview, I would say she is happy; however, it is clear her parents' influence in what made her decide to attend university is much stronger than is expressed by the other seven students, who more frequently listed personal goals, plans for career changes, and proximity.

For half of the participants, teachers were also identified as important factors in the decision to enrol in university. Jan, Tim, Sheila, and Aiden all state that teachers in high

school, adult learning centres, and at college encouraged, or even planted the idea, of going to university. As Jan stated:

> [One of my teachers] would always ask me what I got my tests in anatomy; 'how did you do?' I said I got 100%. She goes: 'good for you!' And she says, 'you're really smart, you know, I can see you going further at university.' And [my other teacher] said the same thing; they told me always University.... I was always University material.

This appears to indicate that encouragement by instructors can build confidence in individuals who may not have previously seen university education an option, and for Jan, this may be partially where her confidence level, as previously discussed, grew from. And when Sheila similarly states, "in the school I was in, the high school, all the teachers that I had there were really supportive of me. So, I think that definitely helped me....like they pushed me," she is agreeing that influence can be derived from significant others like teachers, and not only family members and peers, and this influence builds a belief in self of abilities, skills, and self-assurance.

Another interesting finding to come out of this section is that all eight of the Aboriginal students interviewed had very clear academic and career goals identified either prior to, or early on, in their studies. This finding seems to disagree with MacKinnon's (2011) findings, where more commonly Aboriginal learners did not have definitive goals upon entering training or educational programs. This may indicate, therefore, that having a clear goal at or near enrolment is an essential element in the success of the eight students

in this study. This finding would agree with a statement made by Sheila in relation to the

experiences of her sister and cousins at university:

> When I think about my experience in university, I think of my cousins and sister
>
> that are also going to university. And they had really tough times. My cousin went
>
> for 2 years, she ended up dropping out, she was not doing the work. She just did-
>
> n't know. My sister is really struggling and saying it's way too hard....I found with
>
> my cousins that were lost, they were just taking random courses, that they weren't
>
> interested in, and they felt like they weren't working towards something. That's
>
> what I think.

This idea is supported by the literature presented in Chapter 2, where achievement moti-

vation is discussed. Section 2.1.7 outlines the current beliefs that achievement motivation

is a prerequisite for success in academics, and it is posited that clear goals drive academic

engagement (McInerney et al., 1998; van der Sluis, Vinkhuyzen, Boomsma, and Posthu-

ma, 2010). This is an important finding, as it gives a clear suggestion on how to increase

success and retention for Aboriginal students; an idea that will be more thoroughly dis-

cussed in the concluding sections of this chapter.

Finally, this section brings light to yet another important finding regarding influenc-

ing factors in university enrolment: that, though the transition to university is usually dif-

ficult for Aboriginal post-secondary students, it did not discourage any of the participants

from continuing on in their programs and persevering through to second year studies.

However, all but Jan faced numerous challenges adjusting to life as a university student,

and many witnessed others fail to get through this freshman year as they did. What ap-

pears to have assisted this group of student during this time was previous post-secondary experience, transition year programs, time management skills, work experience, summer session classes, and an ACCESS Orientation course, which provided tours, opportunities to make friends, study skill development, smaller class sizes, and supports and resources for Aboriginal students. In agreement with the literature, this demonstrates that current themes in practice as discussed in Chapter 2 are seen as helpful in combating the challenges and barriers faced by newly enrolled Aboriginal university students (CMEC, 2002).

The findings associated with the question, "what made you decide to enrol in university" together show that:

- participation in previous post-secondary programming, as well as encouragement by teachers at the high school and college level, allows Aboriginal students to build their self-esteem and confidence, which in turn increases their likelihood of success at university;

- most Aboriginal students enrolling in university do so because they are encouraged by others, and not because they are pushed;

- having clear academic and career goals identified either prior to, or early on, in their studies increases the chances of success at university; and

- though the transition to university will most likely be difficult for Aboriginal post-secondary students, with supports and specialized programming, it does not necessarily have to negatively impact their chances of success in their studies.

Helping people decide to attend university is the first step towards increasing the enrol-ment and retention rate for Aboriginal students. Historically, many Aboriginal people did not even consider this an option. The eight students in this study, however, indicate that this trend is changing, and that there are concrete ways to assist them in getting to, and through, first year university.

Inside the classroom. The next two sections, Inside the Classroom and Outside the Classroom, bring us to the Western Door, or the left hand side of the framework's circle. Here, the student either develops or fails to develop a sense of belonging and self-identity based on several factors: can they make authentic relationships with instructors and other students during their studies? Are their value criteria being met by these relationships? Are they able to access additional academic, social, personal, and financial supports and resources? The findings related to experiences inside the classroom emphasize that being able to form meaningful relationships within the classroom with instructors and peers that allow for reciprocity and respect is important to Aboriginal university students. The de-sire for voice, identity, and belonging is stated by all eight participants repeatedly throughout the interviews, and particularly in relation to this question. This may indicate that it is the small, intimate but meaningful connections like those they have at home that create a safety network within the institution, and therefore they search for these in their post-secondary lives. As well, these needs may be influenced by the importance of com-munity in Aboriginal cultures for both survival and prosperity; the individual, the family, the community and the nation cannot be separated, and must be aligned in the learning process (National Aboriginal Design Committee [NADC], 2002).

By being able to see the humorous side of professors (Jan), getting to know professors as individuals and being supported academically (Sherri), and connecting with professors professionally and personally (Tim), the students interviewed were able to personalize the people at the front of the classroom, which for them seemingly broke down the hierarchical power structure often found in formal classroom settings. Jan's statement, "some professors are willing to take that extra time to help you succeed, that little step [that] opens the door for this or lays out the welcome mat," indicates that by showing care and consideration for the students coming into the classroom, particularly with Aboriginal students, professors and instructors can create welcoming and respectful learning environments. This agrees with Schmidtke's (2009) findings, which show that the development of meaningful and authentic relationships with instructors while going to school increases persistence and motivation levels of Aboriginal students. Contrastingly, in a statement made by James regarding his need to trust in the abilities of his professor, it appears that not all Aboriginal students reject power-relations altogether:

> [T]he qualities that I admire in my profs...would have to be their ability to impart what their message is....it's very hard to catch them off their guard....[and] I find it extremely refreshing. The teaching methods seem almost designed [for] exactly...how I learn. I always felt that before post-secondary...the teachers had actually no power in how they taught. But in university, teachers have such a way, where knowledge is far more useably passed down.

What he seems to be saying here is that the difference between a teacher in high school, for whom he had no respect, and a professor at university, whom he does respect, is power. However, it does not appear that he desires to see professors have power over him or

other students, instead he wishes to see them have control of information and how they pass that information along to others.

James, as well as Jan, Andrea, Alex, and Sherri, all also indicate that the content of the information being taught is nearly as important as how it is taught. For example, Alex says:

> Which classes that I enjoyed? I guess the ones that I could mostly relate to my training. So, things that I could use that day, or that week, or maybe in the short term. That was the most interesting for sure.

Likewise, Sherri states, "I enjoy learning in [Native Studies] classes better....I think I probably put more time and effort in those ones than the other ones." For Alex, the course content needed to be relevant to his personal interests and his career goals; Sherri needed to see herself as an Aboriginal person reflected in the content. Together with James` beliefs on power or control of information, these findings indicate that when a professor knows what s/he is talking about, when they "own" the information which they are presenting, and particularly when that information is relevant and meaningful to the students, Aboriginal students are finding ways to connect with both instructors and the material being taught. It can also be speculated by this finding that when material is meaningful, relevant and delivered in an effective way, negative encounters with instructors inside the classroom decrease. As stated in the previous chapter, negative encounters identified by the students included classes taught by instructors who displayed behaviours that were "zombie-like," "boring," and "awkward." Yet when they discussed classes where they felt the material being taught was relatable and well delivered, descriptive words used were "interesting," "rewarding," "exciting," and "engaging." This finding

agrees with the general principles of adult learning, which state that adults are relevancy

oriented and practical (Knowles, 1980). It also agrees with the National Aboriginal De-

sign Committee's (NADC) (2002) expansion of the work of Knowles, which differenti-

ates the needs of Aboriginal adult learners and advocates for all learning to be done with-

in the context of Aboriginal teachings and cultures, and for the use of the Medicine

Wheel as a model for educational programming. This does not necessarily mean that all

information has to be about Aboriginal people or Aboriginal cultures, but rather that it

takes into account the whole person sitting in the classroom – physically, mentally, emo-

tionally, and spiritually, as well as dealing with information relevant to their past, their

present, and their future.

However, it is also evident from the findings that classroom experiences that support-

ed the development of personal identity and a sense of belonging helped some of the stu-

dents in their learning and engagement at university. Aiden states:

> I also learnt a lot about myself through learning, like being in those [Native Stud-
>
> ies and Gender Studies] courses, like, because I guess there is a couple that really
>
> focused on Aboriginal history. Issues and stuff like that. So, I have learned a lot
>
> about myself.

Her words show that she not only appreciates learning content relevant to being a social

worker (her field of study), but also relevant to herself as an Aboriginal woman. Similar-

ly, when Tim says "if you saw me the first summer and you saw me this term, you would

see a difference," he appears to also be saying that learning and participating as a univer-

sity student has allowed him to grow and has increased his self-confidence.

Another intriguing finding is that discriminatory behaviours of instructors and peers inside the classroom damaged perceptions of classroom experiences. This can be illustrated by Aiden's comment: "I guess some of them [professors], I find that they are maybe judgemental towards...myself...or Aboriginal people, or maybe anybody other than white?" Only women made comments related to this category of data; it is unclear whether the men in the group did not experience these discriminatory behaviours, or if they simply did not make note of them in their interviews. However, Aiden's comment shows that while there is a hesitancy to speak of these behaviours ("I guess...maybe..."), they are noticed and extremely hurtful, and these feelings are echoed in similar statements made by Jan, Sheila, and Sherri. This aligns with the findings of Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003), which identify passive and active racism displayed by both faculty and students as negatively effecting the success of Aboriginal students at post-secondary educational institutions. It also aligns with the findings of Schmidtke (2009), who concludes that discriminatory behaviours by faculty can lead to an impression by Aboriginal students that their instructors are hostile.

In addition, the importance of Aboriginal students being provided with opportunities to form authentic and reciprocal relationships with peers in the classroom through the use of dialogue and group work, and with smaller class sizes, is evidenced in the interviews. Getting to know other students, being able to interact with them through discussions and group assignments, and by being in smaller classrooms, allowed these eight students to feel like they have a place and identity as a student in the classroom. Sheila's statement seems to demonstrates this: "we have the same goals...I find our relationships are definitely enhanced with course work and group work, and just kinda helping each other out

along the way." She appreciates having others in the classroom who are both going through the same experiences as her and in the same 'academic direction' as her, and that being able to help one another along the way is important. Her statement also shows that it is the use of group work and similar teaching methods that have allowed these relationships to form and flourish.

It can be seen in this section, which looks at the experiences of Aboriginal students inside the classroom, that:

- the development of authentic, meaningful, and reciprocal relationships inside the classroom with instructors and peers is important to Aboriginal university students and increases persistence and motivation levels;

- when material is meaningful, relevant and delivered in an effective way, negative encounters with instructors inside the classroom decrease and Aboriginal students are able to connect with both instructors and the material being taught;

- when discriminatory behaviours are displayed by instructors and peers, perceptions of classroom experiences are negative and lasting; and

- the use of dialogue and group work as teaching methods within the classroom, and smaller class size, is important, as this is what allows students to interact with each other and with the instructor in more substantive ways.

What the eight Aboriginal students in this study appear to be describing are classrooms which align both with basic principles of adult learning and with their cultural beliefs. They desire settings that emphasize respect, collaboration, dignity, and worth, and allow

them to grow in both knowledge and identity. When universities are able to create these types of learning environments, the findings show that Aboriginal students will be more engaged, driven, and empowered.

Outside the classroom. Still in the Western Doorway, we now look at the factors that influenced these students' experiences outside the classroom. The eight Aboriginal university students interviewed in this study emphasized the importance of having a sense of place, a network of support, 'real' interactions with faculty and staff, and academic assistance while at school. The findings also indicate that facing extremely difficult struggles and barriers is often the reality for Aboriginal post-secondary students, yet the factors listed above, combined with pre-university guidance and personal development, can help to buffer these challenges and assist students in reaching success.

According to Jan, Sheila, Andrea, Aiden, Tim, and Sherri, a sense of place brings comfort and reduces feelings of isolation. Having a safe environment in which to retreat, such as an on-campus Aboriginal student centre, is mentioned frequently in the findings and appears to allow these students access to social, academic, and emotional supports, mainly through contact with other Aboriginal students and staff. However, the ability of these students, as well as Alex and James, to find their place at university and feel a sense of belonging also seems to be dependent upon their level of self-confidence. Tim states, "[t]hat's the one thing I learned, is that I'm capable of way more than I thought possible." For some, this confidence came with them to the university; for others, it grew as they moved through their studies. Either way, the findings indicate that with the help of supports and programs, by having a sense of humour, and by increasingly becoming familiar

with the university through contact, all eight students increased their confidence levels, and as a result, were better able to make friends and find success.

According to Saggio and Rendón (2004), Aboriginal students do not do well in sterile, invalidating, and competitive environments, such as those often found at post-secondary educational institutions. The findings of this study concur with this, however, they also indicate that when students are able to create or access networks of support on- or off-campus, they can counter the effects of these environments and are significantly more likely to be successful. For example, Alex, who frequently referred to a group of close friends he has at a local gym, states, "we spend so much time together....we're like a closest knit family....We just want success for each other." These friends, many of whom are also university students, both support Alex and celebrate with him on a regular basis, as he does for them in return. They inspire him to set high goals, and motivate him to reach them. For the other students interviewed, similar types of supportive, reciprocal friendships were made through connections at the Aboriginal student centre, or through cultural programming and student associations. It should be noted though that the findings also indicate that for a few students, forming authentic relationships with peers at university can be difficult, however, student groups appear to assist in making these connections.

When Jan tells the story of presenting the puppet she made with a fellow classmate to a professor and says, "That was his real laugh...not just a chuckle....he was being himself....that was his true laugh," it is clear that she sincerely appreciated this glimpse into the man behind the professor. This example of an authentic relationship which developed outside of the classroom, where formalities disappeared, indicates that Aboriginal stu-

dents desire to connect personally, equally, and reciprocally with faculty and staff. Alto-

gether, the interviews show that not only are Aboriginal students needing academic assis-

tance from professors, instructors, and support staff, but they are also seeking guidance,

friendship, support, and encouragement. Here again Saggio and Rendón (2004) agree,

finding that validation by faculty and staff is one of the most important influences on per-

sistence for Aboriginal post-secondary students. As well, being able to access academic

supports, from professors outside the classroom or from tutors and advisors, was also

identified as an important factor in the success of these eight Aboriginal students., The

students in this study also appear to need advisors and tutors who are also willing to show

care and concern for their well-being. Advisors were often utilized to assist with course

selection and program planning, and tutors were referred to in all eight interviews. While

those who worked with tutors did so mainly through disability services or the ACCESS

program, all eight students commented on how widely available tutoring services were on

campus. And though the need for these types of supports is most likely not confined to

the Aboriginal student body of the university, Aboriginal students do appear to utilize ac-

ademic supports frequently, which may be reflective of either a lack of post-secondary

preparation in comparison to non-Aboriginal students or that they are more self-aware

and willing to admit they need help.

The literature reviewed in this study suggests that colonial assumptions about Aborig-

inal cultural inferiority have been internalized by Aboriginal people, and due to the ef-

fects of colonization, many face horrific circumstances and challenges on a regular basis

that most non-Aboriginal people in Canada could not imagine (Silver, 2002). This theme

is reflected in the findings through comments made by Jan, Alex, Sherri and Aiden. Is-

sues around family loss, violence, abusive relationships, intergenerational effects of the residential school system, and the effects of colonization are all present in the interviews, particularly in Jan's and Alex's; however, while they are additional barriers that these students face on a fairly regular basis, they do not appear to be causing them to lose sight of their goals or withdraw from their studies. Interestingly, when Jan and Alex spoke of the traumatic or negative experiences they faced, they almost always followed the statement with a reference to a relationship they had formed to buffer the impact of the negative encounter or experience. This further emphasized the importance of building and maintaining authentic, personal relationships with faculty and peers in order to achieve success. For Sherri, while she did not discuss traumatic events frequently, she did note several discriminatory behaviours by instructors and peers outside of the classroom, which appear to be demotivating and hurtful, but not frequent. She states, "It made me feel awkward because I was right in front of them. It's like, 'I'm right here, how could you say that when you're right beside me?'" What this statement seems to illustrate is that hearing the prejudicial words of others is confusing and upsetting for Sherri. It also indicates that Sherri may have been generally experiencing feelings of isolation and loneliness in the large, mainstream university at the time, as her words indicate that she felt invisible as an Aboriginal woman when the situation occurred, and the incident caused additional feelings of distance and separation from others.

Also related to the theme of struggles and barriers came issues relating to disabilities and their effects on experiences outside of the classroom, particularly for Jan. Numerous times in her interview were comments made about her learning disability, such as "I just got diagnosed that I have a learning disability....And it's taken me a long time to accept

that." She spoke of having to work extremely hard to keep up with her classes, having to
repeat courses frequently, and having a difficult time learning to accept her challenges
and the adaptations she has had to make in order to learn effectively. This finding may
show that, as many Aboriginal post-secondary students are non-traditional students on
non-traditional educational paths, the diagnoses of and interventions for learning disabili-
ties are only coming as adults, putting them at an even greater disadvantage than non-
Aboriginal students who were most likely diagnosed earlier in life. However, it should
also be noted that Jan was able to access numerous supports at the university through dis-
ability services and from peers to assist her on a regular basis. With this help, she has
been able to continue to succeed in her coursework and now plans on entering the faculty
of medicine. For Aiden, it was not traumatic experiences or disabilities that have caused
her to struggle outside of the classroom, but rather it is being a single parent, accessing
funding, and trying to keep up in a competitive environment. Sloane-Seale, Wallace, and
Levin (2001) agree, discussing such barriers for Aboriginal students as lack of funding
and family responsibilities, while Brown, Knol, and Fraehlich (2008) expand on this, stat-
ing that Canadian educational systems are generally based on competition and are at odds
with Aboriginal values. Aiden's comments around taking care of her children, being
afraid of losing her funding, and struggling to achieve a high grade point average all indi-
cate that the university system remains, at times, in conflict with the realities of Aborigi-
nal students and hampers their ability to learn and be successful.

A final interesting finding to come out of the section on experiences outside the class-
room is in regards to pre-university experiences and their effects on the success of current
Aboriginal students. Life skills, high school preparation, and motivation all appear to

play a role in how well the eight women and men interviewed are doing as university stu-

dents. For James, it was his participation in an after-school program for Aboriginal youth

that helped him to develop effective group work skills which he uses frequently at uni-

versity; "I was volunteering at [an organization]...they have a course....It teaches how to

work with small groups....I learned how to better fit into a group dynamic, which is phe-

nomenally helping me now at school." For Sheila and Tim, encouragement by teachers at

the secondary schooling level and being taught higher-level academic skills assisted them

to meet the expectations of university programs. And for Sheila, being motivated and fo-

cused coming into university has made all the difference to her experiences:

> If you don't have motivation to go to university, do well in your classes or
>
> anything, nothing else really matters....I went in there knowing I am going to go
>
> here, I'm gonna finish, I'm gonna graduate, that was enough for me.

It seems from her statement and the statements of others that motivation is related to self-

confidence, but also that experiencing a sense of personal efficacy, the ability to succeed

and to make it through, is also important. Brown, Knol, and Fraehlich (2008) state that

adult learning opportunities need to have substantial personal effects on participants.

Sheila's statement also supports this belief; that having clear goals and being able to ex-

perience inner changes in one's sense of confidence and ability is as much a factor in their

success as is any institutional support or program.

In summary, the findings associated with the data related to experiences outside of the

classroom together show that:

- having a sense of place brings comfort and reduces feelings of isolation for Aboriginal students, and allows for access to social, academic, and emotional supports;

- accessing supports and programs, having a sense of humour, and becoming familiar with the university through contact, increases confidence levels in Aboriginal students and allows them to find networks of support and be successful;

- creating or accessing these networks of support on- or off-campus can counter the effects of existing in sterile, competitive university environments which are often at odds with the personal culture of Aboriginal students and helps to buffer the impact of negative encounters or experiences they may face;

- having authentic, meaningful, and reciprocal relationships with faculty and staff outside of the classroom is important to Aboriginal students, and they often seek guidance, friendship, support, and encouragement from professors, tutors, and academic advisors;

- having widely available academic supports through university services and from peers helps Aboriginal students deal with learning disabilities which are often diagnosed later in life; and

- developing life skills, being better prepared in high school, and coming to university motivated and focused all increase the chances of success of Aboriginal students at post-secondary educational institutions.

Much research has been conducted around identifying teaching methods and curriculum

content appropriate for use with Aboriginal students at all educational levels. However,

there still exists room for exploration of their experiences outside of the classroom and

how these experiences effect their success and motivation to continue in their studies at

the post-secondary level. The findings in this section show that this is an extremely im-

portant area of study and it should not be ignored. By taking a holistic look at the friend-

ships, support systems, and occurrences in the lives of these eight Aboriginal students at

university, it is clear that out-of-classroom experiences play an important factor in their

ability to be successful.

Advice from the lived experience of Aboriginal university students. As stated in

Chapter 1, the purpose of this study was to better understand what factors are contrib-

uting to the success of Aboriginal post-secondary students. For this reason, one of the

questions used in the interview instrument was "what advice would you give to someone

who was coming to university from circumstances similar to your when you came to uni-

versity?" How better to understand what needs to be done and find a starting place for

recommendations than to ask those who have lived through it, who know in their minds,

their bodies, their hearts, and their spirits what it is that Aboriginal university students

need. This section will therefore focus on the words and ideas of the eight Aboriginal

university students interviewed, and what advice they would give to others like them.

Lived Experience of Aboriginal University Students

First and foremost, being prepared and planning ahead is seen as vital to achieving

success in university for many of the students interviewed. For example, Tim makes the

comment, "I had a hell of a teacher for my last year of high school and I know it. A lot of

the people in there had no clue because the teachers hadn't taken the time to prepare

them." Because of this, he wants high school teachers to increasingly challenge younger

students academically in order to better prepare them for the realities of university-level

studies. He would also encourage others who may feel their skills are lacking or who

have been away from school for a time to go back and seek academic upgrading. Similar-

ly, Sheila would like to see pre-university teachers and Aboriginal educational counsel-

lors assist students coming into university to set clear goals, choose programs, and access

supports once they arrive on campus:

> I definitely feel like post-secondary counsellors shouldn't just be handling the fi-
> nances....They should be sitting down with the student and...helping them decide
> what courses would be best, and just thinking about what their options
> are....Because I found with my cousins that were lost, they were just taking ran-
> dom courses, that they weren't interested in, and they felt like they weren't work-
> ing towards something....if they were to narrow down their career options, I think
> they would have done well.

What these comments, and others similar to them, appear to be saying is that not only is

there a lack of academic preparation for Aboriginals students in high school, but there is a

lack of guidance. Further, Sheila's comments regarding her cousins' difficulties due to this

lack of focus indicate that Aboriginal students to not have the 'luxury' of floundering or

exploring in their first few years of study. This may be due to financial limitations, return-

ing as older students with increased responsibilities, or being away from communities of

support. By coming in academically prepared and with clear academic and/or career

goals, the chance of success for Aboriginal students increases. Statements such as "seek

that support rather than waiting for it to come to you," (Sheila), "take advantage of all the supports that are offered," (Aiden), and "if you have issues or something, don't just run away...use your resources...They're there, you just have to go, like, and not be scared to use them," (Andrea), all show that the university has done much work to ensure that supports and programs for Aboriginal students are available. However, they also indicate that perhaps some Aboriginal students are hesitant to seek out these supports. Again, this could be due to lower levels of confidence among Aboriginal students, or because these students are unaware of exactly what these programs and supports offer. Whatever the case, their comments show that it is essential not only to encourage Aboriginal students to get involved and ask for help when needed, but to encourage the staff of these programs and support services to reach out themselves in increasingly creative ways. Tim suggests that staff take advantage of the full first year classes to reach new students:

> I think someone from each program going into each classroom, if you can manage it, within the first week, 'cause every classroom the first day, has a lot of people. It's different when you're talking to them or handing them a pamphlet or something like that. Most people don't read pamphlets, you know.

These types of approaches will not only help to connect students with existing services, but may also spark ideas on other types of supports or programs that may need to be created at the university.

Though not mentioned frequently, an interesting finding to come out of the answers given by Tim and Andrea illustrates how age may affect the advice given. While Tim states, "take summer courses, shorten your time at the university," Andrea says, "[t]ake it slow, don't do too much at once." For Tim, this type of advice might come because, as a

mature student in his forties, the amount of time he is willing to put in to training for a new career is less than someone like Andrea, who is in her early twenties. Unlike Tim, Andrea appears to be more concerned about not causing additional stress by taking a hectic full course load. Andrea also has a young son at home who would require significantly more of her time and attention that Tim's adult daughter and grandchildren.

In his advice for other Aboriginal students coming to university from background circumstances similar to his own, James makes an intriguing comment:

> The most important part of success at university: if you're not creative, you're not even thinking or trying to be creative, then there is really no point to be there. I mean, you can regurgitate everything you've learned, but without the ability to adapt or change after you've left the university setting, you're gonna, it's gonna be what you are doing will be pointless in the world outside.

While James uses the word "creative" in his answer, my sense is that he is actually referring to personal growth and transformation. If one is not open to learning new things, to be willing to change, then seeking further education is pointless. In other words, he appears to be saying that students coming into university must be open to transformative experiences that allow for personal development that they can and should take with them as they move through and leave university. This type of idea also agrees with the literature which stresses that adult learning opportunities need to have substantial personal effects on participants (Brown, Knol, and Fraehlich, 2008; Knowles, 1980; NADC, 2002).

Finally, another piece of advice to come out of the interviews relates to focus and perseverance. Jan's statements, "If you fail the course, don't give up. You know, only you can help you get that dream," and, "[w]hat I tell them is...to believe in themselves, that it's a

good thing," seem to be illustrative of the importance for Aboriginal students to know

that there are going to be hard times, struggles, and barriers, however, by keeping their

goals in mind and staying focused it is easier to keep moving forward and have some-

thing towards which to work. And as Heckhausen (1991, in McInerney, Hinkley, Dow-

son, & Van Etten, 1998) argues, having goals on which to focus psychological and physi-

cal energy increases student motivation and achievement.

Looking back on the remarks made by students when asked, "what advice would you

give to someone who was coming to university from circumstances similar to your when

you came to university," it becomes evident that there is not one clear path that all Abo-

riginal students have or should be taking along their post-secondary journeys. However,

the following pieces of advice stand out:

- Be prepared and plan ahead. This includes needed work by pre-university

  teachers in relation to academic preparation and guidance, as well as Aborigi-

  nal educational counsellors.

- Seek out available supports at university. Aboriginal students need to be en-

  couraged to get involved and ask for help when needed, and staff need to

  reach out in creative ways.

- Ensure you are pacing your studies according to your personal circumstances.

  This may include taking summer session courses to decrease the amount of

  time spent at university, or taking a smaller course load to lessen levels of

  stress.

- Be open to transformative learning experiences which allow for personal development. It is this openness to personal growth that will allow a university education to have substantial effects on individuals.

- Identify clear goals and stay focused on them in times of difficulty. By doing so, students will be better motivated and increasingly likely to achieve success in their studies.

These suggestions align well with the literature laid out in Chapter 2, and bring a personal perspective to ideas and thoughts that shared by many educators and educational administrators familiar with adult and Aboriginal education. In a way only someone who has lived through an experience can describe what it feels like, these students have provided insightful and thoughtful advice for future Aboriginal post-secondary students.

Recommendations for post-secondary educational institutions: Aboriginal students speak. The recommendations made in this study by James, Jan, Sheila, Aiden, Andrea, Alex, Tim, and Sherri can be summarized into three general areas: preparation and transition; addressing discrimination on campus; and acknowledging barriers and assisting students in overcoming them. Like the previous section, Advice from the Lived Experience of Aboriginal University Students, I feel the best place to start when formulating recommendations for changes to programming should come from those who are living through it. Again, for this reason, each interview asked, "if you were involved in running the university or designing programs, what would you do differently to help students like yourself?" Following is a discussion on what they had to say.

Once again, pre-university preparation is cited as extremely influential in the success of Aboriginal university students. Sheila and Tim want to see high schools and Aboriginal

educational counsellors better prepare students for university studies academically and
personally. Alex also agrees:

> I think students, especially students that are out of reserve, they have no idea the
> type of doors that courses or diplomas or degrees will open for them....They don't
> see a lot of their friends going to school, their family going to school.

This continued emphasis on getting ready prior to enrolment indicates that these students
either did not have this preparation themselves and wish that they did, or they have seen
others come in without it and fail to keep up with university life. Additionally, Sherri's
statement regarding her own experiences as a new university student seems to also point
to her wishes that she had been more involved in the available transitional programming
at the university:

> I don't think I was really prepared for university...It was so different and so
> hard....if you click off you're First Nations when you sign up [for University], they
> send it [Orientation Course Information] to you. But I didn't do that, that's why I
> didn't do it in my first year.

Her words may indicate regret, but also provide guidance for others yet to come. She ap-
pears to be saying that, though she may still have come to university unprepared, by tak-
ing part in the Orientation Course, the transition would have been easier for her. While
EKOS Research Associates Inc. (2005 in AFN, 2011) assert that Aboriginal post-
secondary students, particularly those coming from First Nations communities, are often
academically and socially unprepared for university, and Brown, Knol, and Fraehlich
(2008) state that non-Aboriginal people are supplied with more opportunities to attend
post-secondary education and/or are better equipped for post-secondary success, accord-

ing to the students in this study, there does appear to be ways for under-prepared students to 'catch-up' to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Low academic levels and poor post-secondary preparation in high school does not necessarily appear to result in failure at the college and university level for Aboriginal students.

According to the CMEC (2002), Preston (2008), and the students who participated in this study, discriminatory behaviours are both realities and barriers for Aboriginal post-secondary students which from inside and outside of the institution. However, the recommendation for increased education of university staff and students on Aboriginal histories and issues may counter and eventually stop these types of behaviours. Sherri says:

> I would make everyone take the Native 1200 course....'Cause I feel like I took it
>
> and I didn't know everything. Now I know more about why people act the way
>
> they do and why there's so many problems in the Aboriginal community.

Her statement seems to show that in learning about Aboriginal people and their realities, both past and present, comes greater understanding, and with understanding can come a closing of the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. However, her words also indicate that some Aboriginal people themselves are unaware of their own histories, and that by learning first about who they are and where they come from comes growth, acceptance, and confidence. This awareness of self in turn can help not only to counter discriminatory behaviours, but also to educate others along the way both inside and outside of the classroom setting.

The final area of recommendations requires universities and other post-secondary educational institutions to acknowledge the barriers faced by Aboriginal students and assist them in overcoming these challenges. This recommendation comes out of comments

made frequently and consistently by Aiden. First and foremost, she would like to see universities, Aboriginal organizations, and government increase the financial assistance available to Aboriginal students; "I...only have like a year left of my funding, so then that means I'm gonna have to get a student loan, which means, like, I am going to owe money back." As a single mother with an extremely limited income, this prospect seems to frighten Aiden, most likely causing her additional stress. As stated earlier, funding for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students is decreasing, and the Assembly of First Nations (2011) and Preston (2008) both agree that lack of funding remains the primary barrier for many Aboriginal people in accessing post-secondary education. And though Aiden is unclear on whether she would like this issue to be addressed by the educational institutions, the funders, or both, she is clear that something needs to be done. As well, Aiden makes another important comment:

> I find that it is unfair that...you go to [university], and there is a bunch of younger aged people that don't have any responsibilities, really. Nothing. And you have this GPA system that you have to keep up to, so I think that it is kind of a disadvantage for [single parents], because we have all this responsibility in our lives.

Here, Aiden appears to be frustrated on several levels. First, returning to school as an adult and a mother is difficult and at times overwhelming. Second, she seems to be struggling to achieve high marks because of her responsibilities. And third, she feels, or has been made to feel, that she is in direct competition with other students, who tend to be younger and who do not have children. In stating these frustrations, it can be assumed Aiden would like something to change, and most likely this would include an acknowledgement by the university that some students have additional responsibilities that cannot

be ignored or set aside, such as family, and that assistance to cope with these responsibili-
ties is required. Also, competitive environments, such as those set up to limit enrolment
in certain faculties, may be hindering the ability of some students to be successful, and
that this needs to change.

Overall, this final section investigating the recommendations made by Aboriginal stu-
dents for changes to university programs and services shows the following:

- Pre-university preparation is extremely important. It is essential that high
  schools and Aboriginal educational counsellors better prepare students for
  university studies academically and personally, and university increasingly
  ensure Aboriginal students are aware of and invited to participate in transition
  year programs and support.

- Discrimination towards Aboriginal people continues to occur on campus. In-
  creased education of university staff and students about Aboriginal histories
  and issues may counter and eventually stop these types of behaviours, and as-
  sisting Aboriginal student to become more confident in and knowledgeable
  about themselves as Aboriginal people is helpful to their success.

- Aboriginal students face numerous barriers to post-secondary education, par-
  ticularly around family responsibilities and funding. Post-secondary educa-
  tional institutions must acknowledge these barriers and assist Aboriginal stu-
  dents in overcoming these challenges, particularly by increasing financial
  supports and decreasing competition in university structures and systems.

I feel that in utilizing a culturally appropriate, holistic approach to research, it is im-
portant that the messages of those who participated in this study are clearly stated in the

findings and the discussion. For this reason, their words, thoughts, and ideas have been laid out here for others to see. Their recommendations, like their advice to other students, are thoughtful and insightful, and because they are based on personal experience, extremely useful to educators and educational administrators alike.

Considerations and Suggestions for Further Research

When examining the results of this study, several considerations should be taking into account. First, there are many factors that effect the educational enrolment, experiences, and attainment of Aboriginal people, and not all could be examined within the confines of this study. Other important factors that may be significant in the success of Aboriginal students, which were not explored here, may include health, employment history, the source of sources of funding, involvement in leisure activities, prior cultural knowledge, and involvement in traditional Aboriginal spiritual activities (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003).

Second, as this study was limited to only eight participants, its validity as a representative sample is questionable. However, though it may not be generalizable to all Aboriginal students at all learning institutions, the consistency within the eight responses suggests that these experiences are common to the students at this university. Further research that included a larger number of participants, participants enrolled in off-campus or alternative post-secondary programs, and participants in other types of post-secondary educational institutions is warranted. Additionally, it would be interesting to focus the participant group to individuals from more specific backgrounds, for example: First Nations students who have relocated for education; Inuit students who have relocated for education; and Aboriginal students coming from urban settings versus rural settings. Al-

so, a longitudinal study that followed Aboriginal post-secondary students from enrolment
through to graduation would be interesting, in order to study if and how rewards and
costs contexts change over time.

Finally, in regards to the reliability of the research methodology, as all participants
were volunteers, it is impossible to state why they chose to participate and why others did
not. They may have volunteered because they were the most satisfied with their educa-
tional programming or, as snowball sampling techniques were utilized, because they were
encouraged to participate by their friends or family members. Also, the Aboriginal ances-
try of the eight participants was based on self-identification, which has a complicated and
complex history in Canada due to the effects of legislation such as the Indian Act. Infor-
mation regarding their legal status and Band membership, or lack thereof, was not ob-
tained. However, as this study sought to use decolonizing methodologies, insisting that
students 'prove' their Aboriginality would be counter-intuitive. Yet, a study which focused
on one particular group of Aboriginal students, such as First Nation status, First Nation
non-status, Métis, or Inuit, could produce further interesting results in the area of Aborig-
inal post-secondary education.

Conclusion

I began this study by identifying my own experience with and researching the litera-
ture related to Aboriginal post-secondary educational involvement, which found that Ab-
original students face numerous barriers and are generally participating at significantly
lower levels than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. My data collection, done by inter-
viewing eight current Aboriginal university students, shows that in spite of these barriers,

some individuals are finding success and are reaching their goals of post-secondary grad-
uation. By focusing on the experiences of students and by taking an assets-based ap-
proach, which asked what is working rather than what is not, I was able to test my hunch
of the positive effects that meaningful relationships, supports, and cultural reflection can
have on the retention and graduation of Aboriginal people. As well, my research shows
that while Aboriginal students in post-secondary educational institutions are faced with
numerous costs to pursuing education, they are also experiencing many rewards, such as
these relationships, and finding success.

Based on the statements made by the participants, my own research conducted in this
study, and my experiences as an educator working within Aboriginal education for nearly
a decade, I make several recommendations. At a broader level, the advisement dialogue
prior to enrolment and upon registration needs to be expanded to include focused aca-
demic and career goal setting, adequate academic preparation, and discussions around
loneliness, cultural conflict, and the high expectations of post-secondary academic pro-
gramming. This dialogue needs to begin at the high school level amongst parents or care-
givers, teachers, guidance counsellors and students. It also needs to be increasingly ad-
dressed by student funders, such as First Nation and Métis educational counsellors, who
historically focus solely on financial supports and not in preparing Aboriginal students to
be successful in their studies. It then needs to continue at the institution with instructors
and professors in undergraduate courses, through student support groups and associa-
tions, and with program counsellors and advisors.

At the institutional level, it is essential that Aboriginal students are provided with in-
creased opportunities to develop self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of belonging. I see

this as being done best in several ways. First, educational institutions must make a con-

certed effort to establish relationships with Aboriginal students early on in their experi-

ences. By having personal relationships with faculty members, whether inside or outside

the classroom, students can begin to see the institution as welcoming, caring, and encour-

aging of their success. Second, structured orientation and mentoring programs for stu-

dents transitioning to post-secondary studies should be increasingly available and more

widely advertised. These types of programs help to mitigate feelings of isolation and fear

amongst new Aboriginal students, increase the visibility of role models on campus, and

assist in developing relationships between students, which also help to encourage success

(Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003). Third, courses which focus on the development of essen-

tial life skills should be required to assist Aboriginal students in developing effective

problem solving skills and build confidence in their abilities as students and as individu-

als.

When considering the development and delivery of any type of support or program, it

is also important that the institution take into consideration the following points. There

can be a risk of creating a false sense of reality and security, as many times students are

isolated from the general student population and the realities of the 'working world' out-

side of the program. As the results of this study show that students seem to have an ap-

preciation for both the more diverse relationships they are able to form with non-

Aboriginal students and staff inside the classroom, but also the not-so-diverse relation-

ships with mostly Aboriginal students and staff outside the classroom, this indicates that

they do not want to be totally separated, but still need some sort of culturally-specific

supports and sense of place (for example, the on-campus Aboriginal student centre) at

least for a time to become confident. It also appears from the interviews that students who are in first or second year need and want these supports, but by the time they are into their fourth or fifth year, they are often choosing themselves to get more involved in their faculties and rely less on the Aboriginal student resources.

Preston (2008) states that in order for Aboriginal people to overcome the multitude of barriers which weaken their prospects of educational success, post-secondary programs must be innovative, supportive, and empowering for Aboriginal people. It appears from the results of this study that Aboriginal post-secondary students in Manitoba have experiences that support these types of approaches to education. My goal for this study was to answer the following research questions:

- What perceptions do Aboriginal students have of their experiences with faculty and students in and out of class at post-secondary educational institutions that encourage them to persist in their studies?

- What themes emerge from students' interpretations of their experiences in and out of class that may lead to higher rates of enrolment and retention for Aboriginal post-secondary students?

The answers I found in the interviews of the eight Aboriginal university students who participated in this study were encouraging. Overall, the students' stories told me that though they are struggling at times and facing numerous barriers, they are also finding people, programs, and supports to help them get past/over/through these hurdles and continue on towards success. They each see the university as a place where they learn and grow emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually, and that they are finding their

place as Aboriginal scholars within the institution. Through the encouragement of significant people in their lives prior to enrolment, by having clear goals and participating in transitional programs, by being encouraged to develop relationships between students, peers, and instructors, and by being provided with courses that are relevant and meaningful, these eight students show that there many ways individuals, families, communities, and educators can increase the rates of enrolment and retention for Aboriginal post-secondary students.

By completing this study and listening to the experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students, I learned much that can be applied to my own practice as an adult and post-secondary educator and administrator. First, I learned that there is an excitement amongst Aboriginal post-secondary students to share with each other and with educators what they have been through and what they have learned. This tells me that they are not only wanting to be a part of the process of "fixing" our mainstream educational system so that it is more open and inclusive, but that they have many good ideas on how this should be done. I have always been told by my own mentors that we need to listen to the community first, for that is where the solutions lie; the words of the students in this study confirm that teaching for me. Their knowledge and insights inspire me.

Second, I learned that there are many Aboriginal post-secondary students who are successful, and that we do not have too far to journey to create a system that can work for students from all backgrounds. When I began my pilot study several years ago, I expected to hear stories about the barriers Aboriginal students continued to face, and how mainstream educational programs were not working. Instead, I heard all about the places, people, and programs that were working. Therefore, going into this study, I focused on these

programs and supports, seeking to find out more about the experiences that were helping Aboriginal students to be successful. I was again excited to see that so much of what universities are doing is appreciated and helpful; this gives us something to build upon, relationships and approaches that can be enhanced, enlarged, and expanded. It gives me a place from which to carry on, rather than a place to start; so much of this important work has already been done – my goal now is to ensure I do my part to continue to move it forward.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

A. Demographic Information

1. How long have you lived in Winnipeg? Did you relocate to Winnipeg for post-secondary education?

2. How old are you?

3. Before enrolling at university, what was the highest level of education you had attained?

4. Are you a parent? If so, how many children do you have and what are their ages?

B. Perceptions of Post-secondary Education Prior to University Enrolment

5. Have you had any friends or family members attend university or college? Please tell me more about this.

6. When did you decide to attend post-secondary education? Please tell me more about this.

C. Current Perceptions of University

7. What made you decide to enrol in university?

8. How would you describe you classroom experiences? (probe with the following, if necessary):

- inside the classroom (i.e., classes you enjoyed or did not enjoy, teaching methods you encountered, interactions with instructors, interactions with classmates, group work, presentations,)

- outside the classroom (i.e., interactions with faculty, library services,

    interactions with students/peers, involvement in programs or supports)

9. What pre-university experiences helped prepare you for success in your studies here

and now?

10. What kinds of experiences have been most helpful to you while in university here?

11. What advice would you give to someone who was coming to university from back-

ground circumstances similar to yours when you came to university?

12. If you were involved in running the university or designing programs, what would

you do differently to help students like yourself?

13. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 2: Research Ethics Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

Office of the Vice-President
(Research and International)
Research Ethics and Compliance

Human Ethics
208 - 194 Dafoe Road
Winnipeg, MB
Canada R3T 2N2
Fax 204-269-7173

APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

January 9, 2012

TO: **Kimberly Embleton**   (Advisor M. Atleo)
            Principal Investigator

FROM: **Stan Straw, Chair**
            Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

Re: **Protocol #E2011:116**
            **"Value Aboriginal Students bring to Post-secondary Educational
            Institutions: Analyzing Assets"**

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by
the **Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board**, which is organized and operates according to
the Tri-Council Policy Statement (2).   This approval is valid for one year only.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the
Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.

Please note:

-     If you have funds pending human ethics approval, the auditor requires that you
submit a copy of this Approval Certificate to the Office of Research Services, fax
261-0325 - please include the name of the funding agency and your UM Project
number. This must be faxed before your account can be accessed.

-     if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with
you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year
approval;   otherwise the account will be locked.

The Research Quality Management Office may request to review research documentation from
this project to demonstrate compliance with this approved protocol and the University of
Manitoba Ethics of Research Involving Humans.

The Research Ethics Board requests a final report for your study (available at:
http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/ethics/ors_ethics_human_REB_forms_guidelines.html) in
order to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.

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umanitoba.ca/research/orec

Appendix 3: Sample Interview Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA | Faculty of Education

Consent Form

Research Project Title:	Factors Contributing to Their Success: Experience of Manitoba Aboriginal Students in Post-Secondary Education
Principal Investigator:	Kimberly Embleton Masters Student, Adult and Post-Secondary Education University of Manitoba Phone: (204) 797-3790 Email: k.embleton@hotmail.com
Research Supervisor:	Dr. Marlene Atleo Faculty of Education University of Manitoba Phone: (204) 474-6039 Email: atleo@cc.umanitoba.ca

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purpose of the research:
The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of current Aboriginal students registered in post-secondary studies at a research university in the Prairies, and what factors are contributing to their success. The aim of this research is to inform educators, administrators, and students of the needs of Aboriginal learners at the post-secondary level and what supports foster these learners' success.

Project description:
This project will include the gathering of data from approximately eight to ten Aboriginal students currently registered in post-secondary educational programs at a research university in the Prairies. As one of the participants, you will be interviewed once for approximately one hour (sixty minutes) at a time and location convenient for you.

Recording devices to be used:
The interview will be recorded with a digital recorder. Interview questions will be provided to you prior to the scheduled interview time via email or Canada Post upon request. The recording will be transcribed on paper by the researcher. All transcripts will be hand-delivered or mailed (either by Canada Post or electronically) to you, the participant, at which time you may add, delete, or change the information on the transcripts until you are comfortable with the content. It will take approximately 30 minutes to review the transcript. You will be given one week to complete transcript checks; should you not respond to the researcher within the noted time frame, it will be assumed that the data in the transcript is correct and they

will be used for analysis.

Description of risk/benefits:
There is minimal risk to participation in this study, no more than one would encounter in their daily life. You are free to <u>not</u> answer questions or to <u>stop</u> at any time during the interview. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time by notifying myself in person, by phone (204-797-3790) or by email (k.embleton@hotmail.com). If you choose to withdraw, there will be no negative consequences for doing so and none of your comments will be used in this study.

By participating in this project, you will be provided with the opportunity to express your ideas and experiences, and to participate in a research study that will contribute to the general state of knowledge of Aboriginal education and may have applied implications of value to society.

Confidentiality:
Any identifying information will be held in strict confidence. This means that only the researcher, her faculty advisor and two committee members will have access to the MP3 recording and transcripts. All written and audio information (audiotapes, transcripts of interviews, consent forms) will be securely stored by the researcher in a locked file cabinet under the supervision of the researcher in her office. The electronic data will be securely stored on a password-protected computer also under the supervision of the researcher in her office. Confidentiality will further be assured through the use of pseudonyms for the participants under study, which will be applied immediately upon your agreement to participate. Findings will be reported by generalized themes and supporting quotations will be stripped of all identifying phrases. All data will be kept until completion of the study, approximately Spring 2013, after which time they will be returned to the participant or destroyed.

Dissemination:
Results of this study will be included in my Master's Thesis and submitted to the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Graduate Studies. Results will be further disseminated through peer-reviewed publications and conferences in order to help Post-Secondary Educational Institutions provide even more effective and targeted supports and approaches for Aboriginal students and programming.

Remuneration:
You will be provided with an honorarium of $20.00 to cover the cost of travel and as appreciation for participation. The honorarium will be provided at the time of the interview.

Feedback to participants:
You will be provided an opportunity to check your transcripts in order to add, delete, or change material, and change the information on the transcripts until you are comfortable with the content. You will be given one week to complete this transcript check; this process will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Should you not respond to the researcher within the noted time frame, it will be assumed that the data in the transcript is correct.

You will be provided a copy of a summary report of the project (approximately May 2013). Please include your preferred method of delivery (circle one: MAIL / EMAIL) and complete the associated contact information in the space provided below for these purposes:

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City: _____

Province: _____

Postal Code: _____

Email: _____

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a participant. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from

their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence, simply by contacting me at the contact information on this consent form. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Researcher:	Kimberly Embleton
	Masters Student, Adult and Post-Secondary Education
	University of Manitoba
	Phone: (204) 797-3790
	Email: k.embleton@hotmail.com
Supervisor:	Dr. Marlene Atleo
	Faculty of Education
	University of Manitoba
	Phone: (204) 474-6039
	Email: atleo@cc.umanitoba.ca

The University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board(s) and a representative(s) of the University of Manitoba Research Quality Management / Assurance office may also require access to your research records for safety and quality assurance purposes.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. **If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.**

Participant's Signature _____   Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____   Date _____