Neechiwaken - Peer Mentoring:

Supporting Aboriginal Students in Academic Community

By

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Abstract

This study examined the self-reported perceptions of post-secondary Aboriginal students who were part of a peer mentoring relationship in the Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) program at the University of Manitoba. PACT supports Aboriginal students transitioning into university life by providing participants with social and academic development, activities, as well as the opportunity to be mentored by an upper-level Aboriginal student. This study asked whether their participation helped them persist in their academic goals and whether peer mentoring as an engagement strategy affects the sense of belonging to the university. The qualitative research design of this phenomenological study permitted a probing of the interview data documenting the experiences of the ten participants, Aboriginal students who had participated in PACT. Among the ways in which participants benefitted from PACT was expressed in themes such as: opportunity to participate in community with other Aboriginal students, networking, overcoming shyness, and getting academic advice.

Keywords: Aboriginal students, post-secondary education, peer-mentoring, student engagement, sense of belonging

Acknowledgements

It is important to me to acknowledge that Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) is not an individual effort and never was. From the earliest stages of its conception, consultation of Aboriginal staff on campus was undertaken and a partnership with the Indigenous Student Centre (formerly the Aboriginal Student Centre) was formed. I have always had a co-coordinator from the Indigenous Student Centre (ISC) for this program and I am very grateful for the ongoing teamwork and commitment of the ISC towards this program. I thank Dr. Justin Rasmussen and Dr. Bret Nickels, ISC student advisors, for their time and genuine commitment to the program. As a thesis project, the writing is from my perspective, but none of it would be possible without the work we three have done together over the years.

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Dedication

For my mother Eleanor who loves me so well and kept asking me how many pages I had left to do (none!).

For my dad and step-mom, Jim and Brenda, thank you for always being proud of me (you keep me grounded!).

For my grandmother Mary who is 92 and kept asking my dad when I would be done (I'm done!).

To the rest of my family, all of my friends, and my co-workers, thank you for believing in me and for your constant support, especially during my final months. I could not have completed this without you!

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Chapter I: Introduction

This study examined the perceptions and experiences of post-secondary Aboriginal students who were part of a peer mentoring relationship through the Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) peer-mentoring program at a large commuter university in central Canada. PACT is a peer-mentoring program offered at the University of Manitoba. Created in 2009 by University 1, it was designed to increase Aboriginal student engagement and build community among Aboriginal students. PACT provides a focal point for this study because it is a program that is currently running and past and current members were available to participate in the study.

By examining how Aboriginal students at this institution perceived the effects of peer mentoring, I sought to identify whether peer mentoring could be used to assist Aboriginal students persist in their academic goals. Vanthournout, Gijbels, Coertjens, Donche, and Van Petegem (2012) define persistence as the opposite of dropping out and "whether or not a student [reenrols] in the same program for the next academic year, be it in the first year of the program, the second year of the program or through an individualized program" (p. 6). This study also examined if peer mentoring affects sense of belonging to the university.

In the themes that emerged, this study demonstrates that peer mentoring can be used as a student engagement method to promote the development of connections among students and may contribute to a greater sense of common identity and sense of belonging on campus. This is consistent with other research that also found that students who were more engaged in their academic and social community were more likely to persist in attaining their academic goals (Astin, 1984; Berger & Milem, 1999; and Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In regards to student engagement, this has been shown to help students assist in their academic persistence. Roberts

and McNeese (2010) explained, "…as levels of student involvement/engagement increase, so does student retention in higher education" (p. 9). In addition, Astin (1984) proposed, "the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development" (Astin, 1999, pp. 528-529). This is supported by Tinto (2010) who said, "For many students, social support in the form of counselling, mentoring, and faculty and peer advising, can spell the difference between staying and leaving" (p. 64).

Based on the above, I suggest that peer mentoring can be used as a way to increase a student's sense of community and belonging in their university, which may aid in their persistence. This is demonstrated in an argument by Bean (2005) who said that "[w]hen students feel like they are part of the campus community, the more likely they are to feel loyal to their institution and persist" (as cited in Roberts & McNeese, 2010, p. 3). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also suggested, "…that students' institutional commitments exert an important and positive effect in shaping their persistence decisions, both planned and actual" (p. 426). Roberts and McNeese (2010) also promote the importance of diversity experiences and learning about the student populations that make up a campus.

Literature about peer mentoring (Goff, 2011; Rawana, Sieukaran, Nguyen & Pitawanakwat, 2015, and Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007); theories of involvement and student engagement (Astin, 1984, 1999; Berger & Milem, 1999, Parscarella & Terenzini, 2005, and Tieu et al., 2010); retention (Tinto, 1993, 1997; Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997, and Guiffrida, 2006) and the factors that influence Aboriginal student success (Hampton & Roy, 2002; Hardes, 2006, Holmes, 2006, Preston, 2008a, and Preston, 2008b) provides a conceptual framework for this project.

This chapter provides terms used commonly in this paper, continues with how I situate myself in this research and how my experiences as an Aboriginal student in post-secondary education (PSE) shaped my research focus. This helps explain the study rationale and purpose of this project. I then move into the Literature Review and start by providing a brief history of Aboriginal education in Canada to explain the past and current challenges of Aboriginal education accessibility and attainment as well as an overview of Aboriginal population statistics that highlight the importance of PSE attainment of Aboriginal people. The common challenges that Aboriginal students can face while obtaining PSE are also reviewed. Student retention and student engagement theories are explained to provide a foundation for this project as well as how peer mentoring is related to persistence, sense of belonging, and the importance of peer relations. I begin with providing definitions for frequently used terms.

Definitions

Aboriginal Person

As per the self-declaration definition used by the Registrar's Office, the University of Manitoba defines a Canadian Aboriginal Person as "a North American Indian or a member of a First Nation, a Metis or an Inuit. North American Indian or First nation includes "Status," "Treaty'" or "Registered" Indians as well as "Non- Status'" and "Non-Registered" Indians" (http://umanitoba.ca/student/asc/media/Canadian_Aboriginal_Self_Declaration.pdf). Since the program studied uses this definition (which is based on the institution's definition), I will use this definition for consistency and to describe the participants. The term "Indigenous" in place of "Aboriginal" may be used periodically as it is becoming more utilized in Canadian research and at the University of Manitoba. Reference to Native American, American Indian, and Alaskan Native students are sometimes used as well based on the cited literature.

Peer mentoring terminology

In PACT, matching upper-year Aboriginal students with first year Aboriginal students forms peer-mentoring relationships. Upper-year students are those who have completed a minimum of twenty-four credit hours and who are in their second year of study or more. First year Aboriginal students are those who are new to the university (the less experienced student) and normally have completed 21 credit hours or less. Students are matched based on faculty goals, similar interests, age, and if specified by a student, gender (if a female/male mentee requests a female/male mentor or vice versa it is accommodated as much as possible).

Crisp and Cruz (2009) define peer mentoring "as a relationship between two or more students whereby one student, only slightly more experienced, takes on a mentor role and provides guidance, instruction, and support to another less experienced student or group of students" (as cited in Goff, 2011, p. 2). PACT does not emphasize the mentor as "expert" or the mentee a "novice". Instead, PACT policy strives to be holistic where all members are considered equal and all members are called Neechiwaken, which is a Cree term for a "friend on life's journey" to reflect that the students learn from and with each other. This term was eventually selected for PACT members because mentoring can be viewed as a traditional activity, and as program facilitator, I wanted the program to include cultural components. Therefore, as the program evolved so did the terminology. "Storytelling, teaching and sharing circles, participation in ceremonies, and role modelling are among traditional Aboriginal approaches to helping…" (Poonwassie and Charter, 2001, p. 67). In the case of PACT, mentors can be viewed as the role models and all members learn from one another.

That being said, for the purpose of this study, I use mentor and mentee terminology because these are the terms most commonly used in the literature. As for formally defining

mentoring, this is not something that has been successfully achieved yet; therefore, I am using the definitions that are used for the PACT program, as they are what participants were provided with in their program manuals. They were created from basic understanding of the terms and not taken from anyone's specific definition. Jacobi (1991) discovered this lack of definition when she could not determine a widely accepted definition of mentoring (p. 505). Jacobi also said, "…descriptions of mentoring programs are so diverse that one wonders if they have anything at all in common beyond a sincere desire to help students succeed" (1991, p. 505). This was still true when Crisp and Cruz (2009) updated Jacobi's work on mentoring and found "that mentoring research ha[d] made little progress in identifying and implementing a consistent definition and conceptualization of mentoring" (p. 526).

PACT definitions are as follows:

Mentor: A mentor is the experienced student in the peer-mentoring relationship that is willing to participate in the reciprocal process of sharing their knowledge, skills, and expertise to facilitate a new student's transition into university life and build on their leadership skills.

Mentee: A mentee is the less experienced student in the peer-mentoring relationship that is willing to participate and assist in the reciprocal process of sharing knowledge, skills, and expertise to build their own leadership skills.

Peer Mentoring: This program recognizes that all students learn from each other regardless of academic stage. Therefore, all PACT students are part of the peer mentoring process and share in the passing on/or transfer of knowledge, skills, and expertise through individual match goals, objectives and activities as agreed upon by all matches.

However, in order to provide some definitional context that relates to PACT definition, I did find one description that is similar PACT's in my review of peer mentor literature. Wong

and Prekumar (2007) define mentoring as "a learning process where helpful, personal, and reciprocal relationships are built while focusing on achievement; [where] emotional support is a key element" (Introduction section, para. 2). Another description I found concluded "for mentoring to be truly successful, it should include the following elements: reciprocity, learning, relationship, partnership, collaboration, mutually-defined goals, and development (Fischler & Zachary, 2009, p. 6). These are all aspects I encourage in the PACT program and I include these descriptions to provide context to the PACT definition.

Situating Self

I have been a first-year Academic Advisor at the University of Manitoba since August 2005 and this position has allowed me to gain perspective about the first year student experience. Prior to working on campus I was a student at the University of Manitoba and completed my Bachelor of Education and an after-degree in Arts (Native Studies) between 1996 and 2003. This means I also have perspective on what it is like to be an Aboriginal student at the University of Manitoba. As a staff member and student of the University of Manitoba, I have been shaped by my experiences at this institution. The reason for including a detailed situating piece is to provide the personal framework for this research. In terms of my post-secondary education career, being an Academic Advisor who focuses on Aboriginal student programming, who liaises extensively with Aboriginal staff and units on campus (primarily the Aboriginal Student Centre and the Access programs), who has worked on committees that explore Aboriginal student initiatives, and who created a post-secondary Aboriginal peer mentoring program on campus, I have the background and experiential knowledge to explore this topic, which has always been a goal of mine. The Aboriginal Student Centre was renamed the Indigenous Student Centre in

June 2015, but the Aboriginal Student Centre name is used throughout for consistency as this is how participants referred to it.

Therefore, when I started my master's degree and began to learn about post-secondary education from a research perspective, I wanted to know how theory could be applied to the PACT program. For this reason, I wanted to take an in-depth look at peer mentoring to see how research can be applied to peer mentoring as an Aboriginal student retention strategy. Developing this research project has been at times a daunting task as my daily work is now incorporated into my daily research, but it is also invigorating and reinforces my commitment to Aboriginal student success. Initially, I did not think it would be possible to do a project that was about a program I developed and managed, but was told it was possible if I could reduce or eliminate any ethical issues such as conflicts of interest or power relationships. This is addressed in the methods chapter.

My journey in post-secondary education has shaped me into who I am today, a teacher, an advisor, a graduate student, a cheerleader for the students I meet, and at the heart of it, a true believer in the gift of education. I do everything I can to support the students I work with to help them achieve their goals, particularly Aboriginal students, because my position allows me to specialize in first year Aboriginal student programming. I have been able to see many Aboriginal students begin their first year of study and maintain relationships with them until their graduation. The shared happiness in their successes or getting through their challenges is what motivates me to do the work I do.

However, doing what I do requires confidence in the work I do and also requires that I feel like I am welcome and belong in these roles. Even after all this time, I still have moments of uncertainty, but I turn that around by thinking, "If I feel this uncertainty after so many years here,

how is it for new students?" This question emphasizes my belief that developing confidence and feeling a sense of belonging to one's campus and community is a critical aspect of student success. Developing a student's confidence and sense of belonging to the university is necessary to get to a place of certainty where one can say, "Yes, I belong here, and yes I can succeed". Each person's experience is different of course, and for me, feeling like I belonged to the University of Manitoba took me many years. I am Cree from Pukatwagan, Manitoba and was adopted at 3 months to a non-Aboriginal family. This is why I am a Loewen, and I was raised to be proud of all aspects of who I am: a Loewen, a Toews, an Aboriginal person, a girl, a woman. I was also raised to be very secure in knowing that my family was my family and for that reason I never questioned my adoptive status. I was, however, extremely shy and needed encouragement to do things on my own. When I got to kindergarten and beyond there was always a teacher telling me to speak up, talk slower, and embrace the intelligence I demonstrated. As I grew less shy I began to thrive in the classroom and I loved school. My schools were racially diverse and being Aboriginal was never something I thought too much about. I was always accepted into my peer groups and my identity was never questioned. All I knew, and wanted to know back then, was that I was Cree (and I wondered if I looked like my biological mother).

By the time I started university my biological mother had found me. Through pure coincidence, I was found when her sister remembered living next door to a family with an adopted Aboriginal girl born in February and born in Brandon. With these minute details, she was able to find my dad who worked at the same school after all those years and she visited him to explain who she was and that I was her biological daughter. I mention my adoption story because being "found" was a turning point in how I thought about my Aboriginal identity,

because now I had to think about it. I initially decided against a meeting. My family was my family and I did not need or want more.

University changed all of that. By then I had gotten used to being mistaken for anything but Aboriginal descent, I did not have any Aboriginal friends, knew nothing about Aboriginal history and had no idea how to navigate the unknown territory of defining myself as an "Aboriginal" person or who to talk about it. I was not comfortable enough to ask questions, too shy to make friends with students "like me" and besides that, I was raised in a non-traditional upbringing so it also felt like there was no one "like me". As an education student these doubts left me feeling alienated from my fellow classmates and for the first time I did not love school so much. I grew up surrounded by teachers (dad, uncles, and aunts) who talked endlessly about the realities of teaching and I could not see how their stories related to the bright eyed, novice teachers who all seemed positive they would work in uncomplicated settings. There was also very little, if any, discussion about Aboriginal education so when I graduated I ended up feeling unprepared for being an "Aboriginal" teacher. I realize now that while I did well in my classes and got positive feedback from my placements, I simply never felt connected to my peers or my faculty.

This is the main reason why I bypassed teaching and kept taking university courses with the intent of obtaining an additional teachable subject in Native Studies. That was the year I made my first Aboriginal friends and the first time I got involved in the Aboriginal student community by joining the University of Manitoba Aboriginal Students' Association (UMASA), and had the best year of my academic career. My Native Studies year was when I finally felt I belonged and this took five years in education, one random year dabbling in the idea of a post-baccalaureate and subbing and then going back to university full-time where I finally gained the

courage to become a part of the Aboriginal student community. This means that it took me *seven* years to feel like I belonged. In retrospect, being raised in a non-Aboriginal family provided me with the support and skills needed to successfully navigate the academic institution and being an urban Aboriginal student who interacted with other Aboriginal students for the first time allowed me to understand myself in a different way. These experiences provided me with my first insight into peer mentoring and the significance of identifying with my peers.

Therefore, when I started working on campus, I came in wanting to find a way to expedite that sense of belonging for first year Aboriginal students. This is how I became passionate about helping Aboriginal students achieve success.

Study Rationale

With the growth of the Aboriginal population in Canada, there is an increased momentum by post-secondary institutions and their respective educators and administrators to further Aboriginal achievement in higher learning**.** Much research has been done on how to support Aboriginal students achieve their post-secondary goals and common factors have emerged that can facilitate Aboriginal student success. These factors have provided Canadian academic institutions some insight into how to develop programming for their Aboriginal student populations, and many colleges and universities offer some component of Aboriginal student programming at their institutions. However, few peer-mentoring programs have been created for Aboriginal students despite the evidence that peer mentoring targeting Aboriginal students are beneficial (Rawana et al., 2015, p. 5). There is also a lack of qualitative studies about the Aboriginal student experience as discovered during the literature process. Therefore, "given the

lack of qualitative studies on the Native American student experience in higher education…it is important to add to the sparse body of knowledge" (Guillory and Wolverton, 2008, p. 63).

For these reasons, I chose to explore how theories of student departure and development could be applied to Aboriginal peer mentor programming and examine if findings would demonstrate that student involvement in a peer-mentoring program helps Aboriginal students persist in their academic goals or affects sense of belonging to the university. In doing so, I contribute to Canadian research that provides insight into peer mentoring for Aboriginal students from their perspective. My research is primarily based on Tinto's integration-commitment theoretical model (1993, 1997), Astin's theory of student involvement (1984), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) who suggested, "…that students' institutional commitments exert an important and positive effect in shaping their persistence decisions, both planned and actual" (p. 426).

Another reason this topic was selected was because when I reviewed the literature I found numerous recommendations that call for more research about the influence of peer interactions of first-year students and opportunities for students to develop a sense of belonging on campus. For example, Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, and Terenzi (1999) recommended that more qualitative research that examines how students are influenced by peers and to what effect, especially for first year students, is needed. They came to this conclusion after examining the interactions of peers and what the benefits were of first-year student peer interactions. Their study also "argues for special attention to opportunities for first-year students to engage with peers in a wide variety of educationally purposeful activities" (Whitt et al., 1999, p. 72). Astin's theory of student development also calls for research at the post-secondary level that looks at "whether different types of student peer groups can be consciously used to enhance student involvement in the learning process" (Astin, 1999, p. 528). Therefore, this study examines an

existing Canadian Aboriginal student peer-mentoring program to add to the topic of peer mentoring, peer influence, and student involvement from the perspective of Aboriginal students. PACT, in fact, is listed in the study done by Rawana et al. (2015, p. 19) and offers an example of a peer-mentoring program that was developed for Aboriginal students.

A focus on the Aboriginal student population is also important because there is a recognized need for institutions to develop Aboriginal student's sense of belonging in university. "At the institutional level, it is essential that Aboriginal students are provided with increased opportunities to develop self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of belonging" (Embleton, 2012, p. 158). The reason developing these characteristics in students are important is because of the hurtful past of Aboriginal education that attempted to eradicate Aboriginal people and their culture and traditions through assimilation using education as a main method to do so. The impact of assimilationist educational practices has had a long and difficult impact on how education is viewed by Aboriginal people. To explain this impact, the history of Aboriginal education in Canada is included in the literature review.

Exploring these themes is also important in relation to the University of Manitoba. This is because by determining whether peer mentoring for Aboriginal students encourages persistence it may assist in their commitment to increase and maintain Aboriginal student enrolment to 10% of the total undergraduate population by 2018 and 15% by 2023 (University of Manitoba, 2013, p 13). It could help their goals because the PACT program already exists and could be utilized in their strategic program planning. At the University of Manitoba (U of M) there is also the recognition that student engagement is important. In fact, the Student Affairs office reorganized its service model and divided *Student Services* into an area called *Student Engagement* to focus their efforts in developing student engagement activities on campus. Therefore, I had a relevant

reason to examine peer mentoring and chose the Aboriginal student population since it is one that I work with regularly. That being said, the purpose of this study was to explore whether peer mentoring. It also examined if peer mentoring as a student engagement strategy affects sense of belonging to the university.

To summarize, this thesis presents preliminary findings on the positive effect of student involvement (Astin, 1984), and student engagement on student retention (Tinto, 1993, 1987), and how a sense of belonging to a university (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, & Alvarez, 2007) can also play an important role. Vincent Tinto is a leading expert on this topic and has delved into the topic of retention extensively and his retention theories are vital to this project, as most of the literature I reviewed referenced his work in some way. In addition to student involvement, student engagement, social networks, and feeling a sense of belonging on campus, are also important to retention. In their article, Eckles and Stradley (2011) support this claim: "[I]t becomes clear that social networks should matter in student retention. Tinto's theory has social integration as a core component, and structural analysis of the student social network provides a direct measure to that integration" (p. 166). This study was also based on recommendations in the literature that calls for more research on how peer mentoring can increase persistence.

This study was completed using a phenomenological method that studied the experiences of Aboriginal university students who voluntarily signed up to be part of a peer mentoring relationship, whether as a new student requesting support from an upper-level student or as an upper-level student wanting to support a new student. Phenomenology was selected because using it for research "with/about/on students enables educators to reflect more deeply on the way how students make sense of their lived experiences, focusing on their feelings, perceptions, interpretations and meanings that they hold toward their lived experiences" (Kim, 2012, p. 631).

Participants are individuals who have experienced the phenomena of peer mentoring and they articulated their experiences through individual interviews, which is how the data was collected. Methodology, including how data was collected, is explained in Chapter 3. The research questions are now presented and they informed the research design and interview questions.

Research Questions

The following research questions drive the study:

- What challenges do Aboriginal students have in university?

- What are the perceptions of Aboriginal students about their experiences as participants or former participants in a peer-mentoring relationship?

- How did being in a peer-mentoring relationship/student community-building program affect their experience as a student?

- Do the themes that emerge show any connection to academic persistence?

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided an introduction to my study that explains the peer-mentoring program being examined, and provides commonly used definitions. I also explain why this topic was selected by situating myself in the research and it explains the study rationale for this project. A brief description of the methodology was also provided, followed by the research questions that drive this study. A literature review is provided next and organized into three areas to describe:

1) The history of Aboriginal education in Canada, statistics on Canada's Aboriginal population, the importance of post-secondary education attainment, and the common challenges and barriers of Aboriginal post-secondary education;

2) An overview of Tinto's retention theory of student departure and Astin's student involvement theory and how it has been applied to non-traditional students, including visible minority and Aboriginal students.

3) What peer mentoring is and how peer mentoring can be used as a method to assist in increasing student retention in relation to student involvement, student engagement and gaining a sense of belonging in university.

Chapter 2:   Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Using the theoretical frameworks of student departure theory (Tinto, 1993, 1997) and student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) I explore whether peer mentoring for Aboriginal students can be applied to these theories. I include criticisms of these frameworks in relation to visible minority and Aboriginal student populations to explain how these frameworks can be applied to the Aboriginal student population. I further explore how peer mentoring has been related to the persistence of Aboriginal students in the literature. The framework of this study is applied against a context or backdrop of an existing Aboriginal peer-mentoring program at the University of Manitoba.

Literature Review

The literature review begins with the history of Aboriginal education in Canada, followed by Aboriginal population statistics, education accessibility issues, and the common challenges and barriers of entering university. The conceptual theories used to frame this project are then described and details are provided about Tinto's theory of college student departure and Astin's theory of student involvement. The last component of the literature review is about peer-mentoring and peer relationships. The data source used for this study is also explained to provide a description of the peer mentor model being examined. A summary of the history of Aboriginal education in Canada is provided next to give context to the importance of Aboriginal student success and degree completion.

The History of Aboriginal Education in Canada

Before the arrival of settlers in Canada, Aboriginal people had their own traditions and educational practices. However, their practices "were influenced and ultimately superseded by western educational systems and beliefs" (Carr-Stewart, 2006, p 7). In 1867, the federal government took control over Aboriginal education with the Indian Act. Within a policy of assimilation the Indian Act took away the control of education from Aboriginal parents and leaders and made obtaining a university degree prohibitive, because it enfranchised any Indian who did. Enfranchisement was a legal process by which Aboriginal peoples lost their Indian status under the Indian Act. "In fact up to 1954, the Indian Act forbade First Nations to undertake university studies or take up a liberal profession, unless they officially renounced their Indian Status…" (First Nations Education Council, 2010, p. 21). Then, as Carr-Stewart (2006) explained, an amendment to the Indian Act in 1894 further imposed the government's policy to not permit parental or community involvement when it came to their children's education (p. 8). This heralded the dominance of residential schools where students were taken away from their homes and communities and prohibited from speaking their language or practicing their cultural traditions "with the goal of replacing the language, culture, values, worldview, institutions, and economics of First Nations with those of the dominant culture" (Hampton & Roy, 2002, p. 2). These assimilation methods resulted in low education attainment and had one of the largest impacts on the education of Aboriginal people because as the Truth & Reconciliation's online book, *Where Are the Children* (2009) states:

> …the attempt to place graduates into white society had spectacularly failed and many
>
> former students had returned to their home communities, much worse off than when they
>
> left; for now they could not speak the language, they had no knowledge of the ways of

living in those communities, and they had been sufficiently indoctrinated to believe that

their parents and other family members were subhuman and inferior. They were ashamed

of who they were and their heritage, but they had no other options for life or livelihood.

(p.2)

This loss of livelihood also created poverty for Aboriginal people who had already lost so

much from colonial policy and the government's attempt at getting rid of the "Indians". When

the 1969 White Paper was introduced by the federal government, a document that outlined a plan

to abolish the Indian Act and fully assimilate Aboriginal peoples altogether, Aboriginal people

reacted by publicly declaring in a variety of ways about what they wanted for themselves; not

what the government dictated. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood responded by creating

Indian Control of Indian Education, a document that outlines their vision for education policy

and recommendations to the government (First Nations Education Council, p.6). This dialogue

between the Canadian government and Aboriginal people has evolved over time, but Aboriginal

rights and the discussion about how Aboriginal people want to be governed and recognized

continues. As for education, how Aboriginal people would like their knowledge to be

disseminated and education to be gained is a dialogue that permeates all aspects of education

from how to include Aboriginal history in the Canadian curriculum at all levels, how to maintain

Indigenous Knowledge and research in the academy, and how to support students and scholars in

their pursuit of a higher education that history said they did not belong to or needed support to do

so. As Marie Battiste explains (2005), "The failures of the past have exposed the shortcomings

of the Eurocentric monologue that has structured modern educational theory and practice" (p.5). I

believe the failures of the past can only be turned right when the accessibility of PSE for

Aboriginal people is equal to that of non-Aboriginal people. This is because even though "there

have been more Aboriginal individuals in post-secondary programs in the past two decades than in all earlier generations…Aboriginal people are still significantly under-represented in enrolment at Canadian colleges, universities and other post-secondary institutions" (Malatest & Associates, 2004, p. 6).

In fact, Aboriginal student enrollment cannot be ignored as it has steadily increased since the 1970s when students began to enroll in PSE in ever growing numbers with band funded enrolment peaking at 27,183 in 1995 (Battiste, Bell & Findlay, 2002). Yet, as Battiste et al. state, despite increasing enrollment, universities have continued to offer "Eurocentric canons of thought and culture" (2002, p. 83) and these issues need to be addressed by institutional programming that enhances the experience of its Aboriginal student populations, because the youth population continues to grow; as does the need for better practices to ensure the success of all Aboriginal students. For this to happen, the government also needs to make amends for their role in assimilation policy. One step the government took was in 2008, when the federal government apologized for its role in the residential school system and it is the children and grand-children of residential school survivors who are now a part of the one of the fastest growing populations in Canada – the Aboriginal population.

Aboriginal Population Statistics and Importance of Post-Secondary Education Attainment

Population Statistics

Statistics Canada reported a growth in the Aboriginal population in the 1996 and 2006 censuses. "Between 1996 and 2006 the Aboriginal population grew at a much faster rate than the non-Aboriginal population at 45% and 8% respectively" (Statistics Canada, 2006), which was nearly six times than the non-Aboriginal population. This population growth indicated that

it would likely continue and this was confirmed in the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS)

that reported that the Aboriginal population increased by 20.1% between 2006 and 2011

compared with 5.2% for the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2013a). The

Aboriginal youth population is also higher than the non-Aboriginal youth population. In terms of

the regional population, Winnipeg, Manitoba has the largest population of First Nations

people with registered Indian status who lived off reserve at 25,970 people and represent 3.6% of

the total Winnipeg population (Statistics Canada, 2013a). The NHS also reported that more than

254,515 Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 represented 18.2% of the total Aboriginal population

compared to non-Aboriginal youth that accounted for 12.9% of the non-Aboriginal population

(Statistics Canada, 2013a). In Manitoba, Statistics Canada (2013a) also reported that there were

41,955 First Nations children, representing 36.7% of First Nations people and 18.4% of all

children in that province.

     Due to this population growth, academic institutions need to increase their efforts in

increasing Aboriginal post-secondary education access for the Aboriginal youth who are now

entering post-secondary institutions for their higher education and career goals. The importance

of post-secondary attainment was characterized well by Blair Stonechild who called higher

education as the "new buffalo". In the past, the buffalo met every need of First Nations people

and today education is the way to "ensure a strong and prosperous future for First Nations"

(Stonechild, 2006, p. 1). Population growth also means that the quality of Aboriginal PSE

programs need to be improved so that Aboriginal students can obtain the quality education

needed "to accommodate the needs of an ever-increasing workforce" (Preston, 2008b, p. 6).

Therefore, universities and colleges must proactively seek ways to recruit Aboriginal students

and have institutional goals to help Aboriginal people obtain their PSE goals. Increasing post-

secondary opportunities for Aboriginal people would have an impact on the economy and has

"the potential to alleviate inequitable social conditions that have been consistently endured by

many Aboriginal peoples" (Preston, 2008b, p. 4). Many Aboriginal communities endure dismal

housing conditions and poor access to clean drinking water. The infant mortality rate is high and

suicide rates are much higher than non-Aboriginal populations. "In turn, obtaining higher levels

of education promotes a multitude of benefits including the promotion of: healthy lifestyles,

healthy social development, positive life choices, and higher incomes" (Preston, 2008b, p. 5).

However, in order to pursue PSE it is also important to review the PSE accessibility issues that

face Aboriginal people as well.

Accessibility Issues

In 2011, nearly 671,400 adults aged 25 to 64 reported an Aboriginal identity on the

National Household Survey questionnaire, representing 3.7% of the total population aged 25 to

64. Of this age group, almost one-half (48.4%) of Aboriginal people had a postsecondary

qualification in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2013b). In comparison, almost two-thirds (64.7%) of

the non-Aboriginal population aged 25 to 64 had a postsecondary qualification in 2011 (Statistics

Canada, 2013b). As the National Household Survey indicates, the educational attainment of

Aboriginal people is still behind that of the non-Aboriginal population and indicates that barriers

exist for post-secondary education attainment.

Some of these barriers are related to accessibility issues. For example, accessibility to

post-secondary education can be affected by secondary school diploma attainment; therefore, a

review of the secondary completion rates of Aboriginal students is required as PSE enrollment

depends upon high school success. Preston (2008b) reported that 45% of Aboriginal youth have

not obtained a high school diploma, which also has an impact on employment opportunities.

"Failure to acquire either a high school diploma or postsecondary certification is more strongly linked with unemployment for Aboriginal people than it is for non-Aboriginal people" (Preston, 2008b, p. 10). High school non-graduation rates also have an impact on Aboriginal enrollment in PSE programs, because these students do not qualify for admission or may think they are not capable of post-secondary studies. These numbers are rising though so that is promising. "In 2011, 60.2% of First Nations people aged 25 to 64 had completed at least a high school diploma" (Statistics Canada, 2013b). On the other hand those numbers were based on the 389, 200 adults aged 25 to 64 who reported a First Nations identity for the 2011 NHS survey and so this number is likely lower as it does not represent the entire population. As for those who do go on to post-secondary education, there are further barriers that can impact students in adverse ways once they are admitted.

For example, most post-secondary institutions are located in urban areas while many Aboriginal people live in rural or remote areas and moving to an urban area to attend university can be challenging on many levels. Another barrier is that secondary education in rural schools may not prepare Aboriginal students for PSE. Rural or on reserve schools are often at a disadvantage for not being able to offer the grade twelve courses needed as prerequisites for university level courses. As Preston (2008b) explained, inadequate secondary preparation "is directly aligned with lack of study skills, program requirements, and academic knowledge… thereby preventing students from entering postsecondary institutions" (p. 11). Fortunately, despite these barriers, the number of Aboriginal graduates has grown.

The cost of PSE is high for all students, but can be higher for Aboriginal students, which is not recognized by current band funding calculations. This is because many Aboriginal students move from rural to urban areas for their PSE and may have additional costs associated with

travel, accommodation, and childcare that urban Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students may not have to contend with (Preston, 2008a). Another problem is that many Aboriginal students may not have family financial support compared to non-Aboriginal students. Also, while there is funding available through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) it can be difficult to obtain because the available funds do not match the number of applicants, which has created a backlog of students waiting for funding. The 2010 First Nations Education Council report on financial accessibility revealed that there was "an unprecedented decrease of 24% in the number of [funded] students between 2000 and 2007 and [a] rise to a lengthy waiting list of 10,589 names (2001 - 2006)" (p. 21). Government student loans would be helpful to supplement their funding, but "a student who receives government support from his/her band is generally ineligible for any other federal or provincial loans" (Preston, 2008a, p.62). The good news is that while there are accessibility issues for Aboriginal people, there is also an increase in youth obtaining educational accreditation. Statistics Canada (2013b) found that for university degrees, the proportion of Aboriginal women aged 35 to 44 who had a university degree in 2011 was 13.6%, compared with 10.2% of those aged 55 to 64. Therefore, educational attainment is increasing slowly. Interestingly, among Aboriginal men, there was no difference in the proportions that held a university degree between age groups with 7.6% for both men aged 35 to 44 and 55 to 64 (Statistics Canada, 2013b).

The above is an Aboriginal population statistics overview and a brief explanation about the importance of PSE attainment for Aboriginal people. Once admitted to college or university, what is the experience like for Aboriginal students? The next section answers this question and describes the challenges that Aboriginal students can face when they enter post-secondary education.

Common Challenges and Barriers of Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education

In the report by Holmes (2006), *Redressing the Balance: Canadian University Programs in Support of Aboriginal Students*, a list of common barriers to PSE is provided "around the problems faced by Aboriginal students in succeeding at Canadian universities. These can be classified as historical, educational, socio-cultural, geographic, personal/demographic and economic [barriers]" (p. 9). Holmes indicates there is a consensus about these barriers, which are also seen in the R.A. Malatest & Associates report, *Aboriginal Peoples and Post-Secondary Education*: *What Educators Have Learned* (2004). Similar barriers are also seen in the work of Hardes (2006) and Preston (2008a, 2008b). Hardes (2006) looks at the retention of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education by examining the socio-economic, educational, and cultural issues affecting Aboriginal students. Lack of academic preparation, coming from isolated or remote communities, or feeling overwhelmed by the size and structure of university life are some of the challenges that she highlights in her research.

For socio-economic issues she recommends there be assistance in housing, child-care, and transportation to university; for educational issues tutoring, academic workshops, and career counseling are recommended; and for cultural needs an Aboriginal liaison is recommended to respond to the unique needs of Aboriginal students.

A U.S. study conducted by Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) also examines the academic persistence of Native American students. Reviewing the qualitative interviews of 15 Native American students they identified several factors that relate to persistence in college including family support, structured social support, faculty/staff warmth and developing independence and assertiveness. "The results indicated a need for stable mentoring and programmatic support" (Jackson et al., 2003, p. 548).

Like Hardes, they identified three factors that affect persistence, which are sociocultural, academic, and personal factors (Jackson et al., 2003, p. 549). For sociocultural factors, feeling isolated on campus, the failure of institutions to accommodate Native American culture, and whether or not they have family encouragement all play a role in the persistence of Native American students. Jackson et al. (2003) found that positive interactions with faculty members strengthened persistence in college (p. 549). To that end, Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997) suggest that "finding mentors and creating support groups would be of great benefit" (as cited in Jackson et al., 2003, p. 549). For academic factors, better high school preparation is recommended in areas of study skills and college preparation because inadequate preparation for post-secondary education "leaves these students ill prepared to successfully navigate postsecondary education" (Jackson et al., 2003, p. 549). And for personal factors, the academic goals of Native American students plays a role in persistence, especially in regards to their self-confidence and what they can achieve. McInerney and Swisher (1995) found that "perceptions of confidence and competence were key aspects to Native Americans' motivation for academic achievement" (as cited in Jackson et al., 2003, p. 549). Other personal factors were whether students have familial or institutional family support, whether they attend full or part-time, and if they were a single parent.

In, *Overcoming the Obstacles: Postsecondary Education and Aboriginal Peoples*, Preston (2008a) identifies similar barriers and specifies five challenges that Aboriginal people can face while acquiring post-secondary education, which are historical, educational, social, economic, and geographical, cultural and pedagogical, and financial obstacles. Some of the historical challenges were explained earlier in the history of Aboriginal education and the impact of residential schools on education attainment.

The negative impact of colonialism, assimilationist policy, and residential schools made generations and whole communities of Aboriginal people wary of education governed by policies that are not their own as they were developed based on the belief in European superiority (Vickers, 2002). In her article, Vickers provides a definition for "the colonial mind" whose main principle is based on the historical placement of superiority over Aboriginal people and their education (2002, p. 242). This is supported in the Malatest report that further states that many Aboriginal people do not enter PSE due to the view that institutions come from an assimilative perspective (2004, p. 5). "To them, the university represents an impersonal, intimidating and often hostile environment, in which little of what they bring in the way of cultural knowledge, traditions and core values is recognized, much less respected" (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 2001, p. 7). Waterfall and Maiter (2003) echoed this in their presentation at a Canadian Critical Race Conference where they explained that "knowledge production" is based on colonial practices that use Western views in educational policy to oversee Indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultures (p. 5).

Tracking the progress of Aboriginal PSE is also problematic because it is often defined by enrolment and retention. This was discussed in a study by Restoule et al. (2013) who talked to Aboriginal students about whether they self-identified when applying to university. They commented that those who did not "essentially provide the university with an inaccurate, namely undercounted, number of Aboriginal students in attendance" (p. 4). The Malatest report (2004) also explains that university data is often based on estimates as not all institutions use the same definition for who can declare as Aboriginal (p. 9). As to why Aboriginal students do not self-declare, Holmes (2006) said, "There is also good reason to believe that self-identification results in considerable under-reporting of the real numbers since, for a variety of reasons, many

Aboriginal students are reluctant to self-identify" (p. 9). This is a challenge for many

institutions, because underreporting makes it harder for institutions to plan programs if they do

not know accurate numbers and it also creates the question of what they can do to encourage

students to do so.

The above provided the common challenges and barriers of Aboriginal students pursuing

post-secondary education.   The next section explains retention theories that affect students in

general and how they have been adjusted to incorporate the experiences of minority or

Aboriginal students.   The following provides the theoretical framework for this project and is

primarily based on the work of Tinto (1975, 1987) and his theory of college student departure

and the work of Astin (1984, 1990) and his theory of student engagement.

Tinto's Theory of College Student Departure

Tinto's theory of college student theory is one of the most widely used retention models

since its inception in 1975.   In fact, there have been "…[m]ore than 400 citations to the model

by late 1994 as well as the approximately 170 dissertations addressing it by early 1995"

(Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997, p. 108).   Hoffman et al. also describe Tinto as being "the

theorist credited with developing the most comprehensive theoretical model of

persistence/withdrawal behavior" (2002, p. 28).   The wide usage of Tinto's work is why his

retention model is being used as the foundation for this project.   His theory (1975, 1987)

proposes that, "students enter college with personal, family, and academic skills and specific

intentions regarding personal goals and college attendance (as cited in Guillory and Wolverton,

2008, p. 60). A wider description of Tinto's interactionalist theory follows.

Tinto's Interactionalist Theory includes psychological, environmental, and organizational

theoretical components. In 1975, Tinto proposed that students enter college with individual

characteristics, one being family background, which includes socioeconomic status, parental educational level, and parental expectations. Another characteristic is individual attributes including academic ability, race, and gender. The last characteristic was pre-college school experiences, including where they attended high school, their high school academic achievement, and social attainments (Braxton et al., 1997, pp. 110-111). He hypothesized that each characteristic could have a direct influence on student departure decisions, the commitment to the institution, and the commitment to the goal of graduation.

According to Tinto (1975) there are two aspects of student's integration into the academic and social systems of post-secondary education. Academic integration consists of structural and normative dimensions where structural integration is meeting the standards of a college or university and normative integration is about an individual's identification with the normative structure of the academic system (as cited in Braxton et al., 1997, p. 111). Academic integration also relates to academic performance and grades because it demonstrates a student's ability to meet the institution's objectives for academic achievement. Social integration relates to how well an individual student conforms to the social system of a college or university. "Tinto posits that informal peer group associations, extracurricular activities and interactions with faculty and administrators are mechanisms of social integration" (Braxton, et al., 1997, p. 111). Finally, commitment to the institution is affected by academic and social integration:

> The greater the student's level of academic integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the goal of college graduation. Moreover, the greater the student's level of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the focal college or university. (Braxton et al., 1997, p. 111)

This suggests that when a student departs college there has been "incongruence between the student's pre-entry attributes, intentions, goals, and commitments to the campus environment" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 60).   Based on this theory, I believe that institutions should encourage student engagement programs to enhance the student experience so students can grow a greater sense of commitment to their institution.   In order to fully commit to their academic goals, students need to feel valued by their institution and quality programs can demonstrate this value. I think that if an institution supports students in their academic pursuits and fosters the importance of student engagement this has the potential to "[increase] the odds that any student-educational and social background notwithstanding-will attain his or her educational and personal objectives… and enjoy the intellectual and monetary advantages associated with the completion of the baccalaureate degree" (Kuh, 2009, p. 698).   Astin (1984), who proposed a development theory for higher education, extensively researched the idea of students committing to their academic pursuits and becoming involved in the post-secondary experience.   This is explained next.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

The theory of student involvement is about the processes that facilitate student development. Astin (1999[1]) describes student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). The theory of student involvement derived from studies on college dropouts and what factors affected student's persistence in college.   In his theory, Astin proposes that a student who studies frequently, spends time on campus, participates in student groups, and interacts with professors

and their peers is a highly involved student (1999, p. 518). To come to this conclusion, he studied the impacts of college on a wide range of outcomes such as place of residence, academic involvement, student-faculty interaction and more.

Based on his research, Astin found that "it is easier to become involved when one can identify with the college environment" (1999, p. 524). He also found that for every positive factor that could increase student involvement in the university experience every negative factor could reduce involvement. In addition, Astin's theory suggests:

> …that the most precious institutional resource may be student time. According to the theory, the extent to which students can achieve particular development goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains. (1999, p. 522)

Ultimately, this means that educators compete for their students' time. Learning theorists refer to this as time-on-task; therefore, effort has a lot do with the concept of involvement (Astin, 1999, p. 518). This suggests that administrators and faculties must keep in mind that policy and practice can affect the way students spend their time and effort on their studies. This can be anything from class regulations and professor's office hours to non-academic issues such as where new buildings are located or what kind of extracurricular activities are offered (Astin, 1999, p. 523).

In regards to living in residence, he found that this had a positive effect on student's efforts and linked it to better retention because these students had more opportunities to get involved in all aspects of campus life. For academic involvement, Astin proposes that in order to achieve the

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[1] Originally published July 1984. Alexander W. Astin, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Los Angeles.

intended effects of student success, "a particular curriculum must elicit sufficient student effort

and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development" (1999, p. 522).

This component of the theory focuses on the active participation of the student in the learning

process, which comes down to the behavior of the student, although motivation does play a role.

"It is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does, how he or she

behaves, that defines and identifies involvement" (Astin, 1999, p. 519).

For peer relations, he found that students who were involved with sororities or fraternities

and student government had a greater than average satisfaction with student friendships. For

institutions, Astin proposes that to achieve maximum student involvement, student personnel

workers should take the opportunity to stimulate students to get more involved in student

organizations, to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities and to interact with new peer

groups (1999, pp. 526-527). In his discussion, he calls for more research about whether different

types of peer groups can be used to enhance the involvement in the learning process. This is the

reason I chose Astin's work as part of my framework. Another reason is that both Astin and

Tinto are frequently referenced in studies about retention. How this all relates to persistence is

that the act of dropping out can be seen as the ultimate form of noninvolvement (Astin, 1999, p.

524).

Astin proposes five components to his involvement theory:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various
   objects (generalized or specific).

2. Involvement occurs along a continuum, which is to say, students have different
   degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different
   degrees of involvement in different objects at the same time.

3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. E.g. Involvement in academic work can be measured quantitatively (how much time) and qualitatively (comprehension).

4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.

5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (1999, p. 519)

The student engagement and involvement theories of Astin and Tinto have been widely used to explain student departure and have also been examined by other researchers about how these theories can be applied to minority and Aboriginal students. This is explained next.

Student Involvement and Minority Students

A study that uses Astin's theory of involvement (1984) and Tinto's model of student departure (1993) was written by Berger and Milem (1999) and is outlined to further explain these theories. This study aimed to broaden the understanding of the relationship between behavioral involvement and perceptual integration into the persistence process. They focus on Tinto's suggestion that students who are successfully socialized "into the campus academic and social systems are more likely to persist" (as cited in Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 643). However, they acknowledge that while Tinto's theory is widely used when discussing student departure they, like other researchers, have revised it to make it more consistent. Braxton and others (1997) specify that what is needed is to make it more consistent is to identify "potential sources of academic and social integration" (as cited in Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 643). Their study examined seven sets of variables to test their modified model of one they created in 1997. These

variables were student background characteristics, initial commitment, mid-fall behavioral/involvement measures, mid-fall perceptual measures, mid-spring behavioral/involvement measures, academic and social integration and subsequent commitment (p. 646). Berger and Milem's report found evidence that involvement can have benefits for students from underrepresented populations. They specifically cite studies about African-American students. One such study by Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) found that African-American students attending a mainly white campus who participated in activities such as clubs, sports, campus employment and more, were more likely to develop a positive racial identity (as cited in Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 644).

Here, I refer only to the academic and social integration and subsequent commitment components, as they are most relevant to the idea of peer mentoring. What Berger and Milem found is that "early peer involvement appears to strengthen perceptions of institutional and social support and ultimately persistence" (1999, p. 658). This is in line with Astin's research and the assertion that students must be engaged in their education experiences in order to learn and grow in their institutions (Roberts & McNeese, 2010, p. 2). Berger and Milem also found that students who did not get involved early on in the fall term generally stayed uninvolved throughout the year and were also more likely to not feel supported by their institution or find their peers supportive (1999, p. 658). This helps to support that student programs such as peer mentoring should begin at the start of the fall term to help students feel supported by their institution. This is supported by the contention that "it is important to identify [students who are not involved] very early in their first year and try to get them involved with some aspect of campus life, academic or social" (Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 659).

Interestingly, when it came down to academic and social integration, the study found that while both aspects are important to institutional commitment, they found that "social integration seems to play a larger role than does academic integration" (Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 659). Tinto on the other hand found that only some students had issues with persistence whether or not they became socially integrated; therefore, it depends entirely on the individual (Roberts & McNeese, 2010, p. 3). However, Tinto (1993) also argued, "that social integration and involvement may possibly counterbalance the absence of academic involvement" (as cited in Roberts & McNeese, 2010, p. 8).

Berger and Milem (1999) also contend that students who have positive perceptions about the level of peer support they receive can strengthen their institutional commitment and persistence. In contrast, they found that students who were not connecting to their peers were going to faculty for support in place of peer support (Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 670). For those who had little of either, Crosling, Thomas, and Heagney (2009) and Krause, Hartley, James, and McInnis (2005) found that "about a third of students drop out of university because they made few social connections in their first year and had little personal contact with academic staff" (as cited by Egege and Kutieleh, 2015, pp. 266-267). Therefore, I suggest that Aboriginal student programming should include faculty/staff interactions to strengthen the student experience. It is possible that students who may be shy in the peer mentoring relationship could then also connect with a staff member to help them feel more socially integrated into their institution.

Overall, Berger and Milem conclude that their study was able to use Astin's (1984) theory of involvement to help specify Tinto's (1993, 1997) conceptual description of the persistence process (1999, p. 661). They also asserted that more retention research needs to be done about the role that involvement or lack of involvement has on student persistence as well as more focus

on students who are not becoming engaged in the campus integration process (Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 659). They claim that if institutions want to improve retention on campus, particularly for underrepresented groups, they need to "find educationally sound ways to ensure that campus environments reflect the norms and values of a wider variety of students rather than the norms and values of a select few" (Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 662). This is especially important for Aboriginal students who may "experience a contemporary wave of assimilation through the need to fit in and acquire a sense of belonging in a predominantly Eurocentric post-secondary setting" (Rawana et al., 2015, p. 4).

Tieu et al. (2010) completed another study that looks at what kind of involvement can lead to a positive adjustment in university. This was a Canadian study that looked at what kind of involvement was most conducive to a positive adjustment in university and found "that the amount of structure present in out-of-class activities were positively related to university adjustment" (Tieu et al., 2010, p. 343). The study involved five Canadian universities, 797 participants and was designed to examine students' experiences with university transition during their first year of study (Tieu et al., 2010, p. 346). They ultimately were able to use 474 of the responses, which were the results of questionnaires given to students in November and March who participated in at least one out-of-class activity during that time frame. The study consisted of a variety of ethnicities, but no Aboriginal students.

Their findings support the idea that student engagement programming should be offered in a structured manner to maximize the benefits of the students who participate. Tieu et al. (2010) called this kind of programming as a high quality activity, which they defined as an activity that resulted in positive feelings, was important to the student, and provided a sense of connection to others (p. 343). This supports Astin's (1984) theory of involvement where involvement should

consist of quality and quantity. Tieu et al. also draw upon Milem and Berger (1997) and go on to explain that, "involvement in organized activities [such as student clubs/groups]…was positively related to students' intentions to reenroll for the second year" (2010, p. 345).

As for non-structured activities, they found those deflected academic effort whereas structured activities allowed for regular participation, because they think that students would not commit to an activity regularly "unless they cared about the activity, felt that the activity was important, and enjoyed participating in the activity" (Tieu et al., 2010, p. 346). Therefore, student engagement programming should be designed and organized in a manner that is meaningful to the intended student audience whether that is a club, organization or student group. Tieu et al. conclude "taking part in highly structured activities will provide students with a high quality experience which will facilitate a smoother transition into the first-year of university" (2010, p. 353). They recommend that the study could be used to promote the development of adjustment intervention programs or that "a transition to university program could be developed in which senior undergraduate students meet with first-year students regularly to provide support and mentorship" (Tieu et al., 2010, p. 354). This demonstrates the importance of peer-mentorship. How Tinto's theory can be culturally advanced is discussed next and includes studies specific to Aboriginal students and other minority groups. These studies address topics about identity, sense of belonging, and the importance of family to persistence.

A Cultural Critique of Tinto's Theory

Since my study is about the experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students, it is important to review Tinto's theory from a cultural perspective as well. "[C]ritics have argued that the theory's failure to recognize cultural variables makes it particularly problematic when applied to minority students" (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 451). Guiffrida explains that one significant

cultural limitation to Tinto's theory is that students are expected to break away from their past

associations and traditions to establish themselves in the social and academic realms (2006, p.

451). Johnson et al. (2007) support this theory and said; "diverse students' social identities

should not be supplanted in favor of integration into the dominant norms of the institution" (p.

536). I agree that this could be harmful to minority students as it suggests that minority students

separate their education from their cultural traditions and support systems. "Critics have also

contended that this aspect of Tinto's theory, which is rooted in the Western,

assimilated…paradigm, ignores bicultural integration, or the ability of minority students to

succeed at college while being both the majority and minority cultures" (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 452).

Lee, Donlan, and Brown (2010) support this and explained that for racial minorities, academic

and social integration into the university can be challenging if they attend a predominantly White

institution (pp. 260-261). Kirmayer et al. (2003) said that this is true for Aboriginal students as

well because "post-secondary experiences may be reminiscent of negative aspects of historical

Aboriginal education, such as residential schools and fears of re-colonization (as cited in Rawana

et al., 2015, p. 4). In light of these concerns, Guiffrida calls for more research that supports that

minority students retain their connections to cultural heritage and proposes that Tinto's theory

should more fully recognize cultural and familial connections (2006, p. 452).

This is also highlighted by Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson (1997) who note that

"[a]lthough Tinto recognizes an individual's group membership, the cultural formations of the

groups are notably absent from his discussion, although institutional culture plays a vital role in

his model" (p. 153). They also provide critiques by other researchers on Tinto's theory. One of

these is William Tierney (1992) who takes exception to Tinto's description of the rite of passage

into college or university and calls it a one-size fits all approach that does not take into

consideration a student's race, class or gender. Tierney feels this "is not valid in light of the

implications for minority students in predominantly white institutions…[because it] theoretically

privileges one culture over all others because ritual is culturally specific" (as cited in Braxton,

Sullivan & Johnson, 1997, p. 153).

One of Tinto's (1993) claims is that students' levels of commitment are shaped by their

academic and social interactions in college. However, he does not expand on the motivational

orientations to college commitment and suggests that a closer look at the minority students'

motivational orientations in college may differ from their dominant peers. Guillory and

Wolverton (2008) agree with this by saying that Tinto and Astin "do not fully explain the driving

forces and barriers that exist specifically for [Aboriginal] students" (p. 61). Therefore, to

advance and refine Tinto's theory and make it more culturally sensitive and descriptive of

minority student persistence, Guiffrida introduces two theories of human motivation. The first is

Deci and Ryan's (1991) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which is used "for understanding

how socio-cultural conditions interact with people's inherent psychological needs to shape their

behaviors" (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 453). For educational motivation, SDT looks at the intrinsic and

extrinsic motivations of students and whether they study because they find content interesting

(intrinsic) or study as a means to an end (extrinsic). This theory proposes that when students are

motivated intrinsically they are more successful in their learning because the fulfillment of

intrinsic needs are more important to growth and learning than the fulfilling of extrinsic needs

(Guiffrida, 2006, p. 453). From a cultural perspective, SDT is examined through dimensions of

cultural variation and how these variations affect student motivation. What stands out in regards

to cultural variations are the differences between collectivism and individualism where

individualists value independence, competition, and detachment from a person's support network

(like family) and where collectivists value interdependence, harmony, and emotional attachment to their family (Guiffrida, 2006, pp. 454-455). Guiffrida contends that SDT can be used to advance Tinto's theory by refining it so that it recognizes student motivational orientation but the differences in individualism and collectivism can be a limitation when considering cross-cultural norms. This is because other studies have suggested that minorities are more likely to be collectivists, but that is too broad of a categorization and not necessarily true across minorities (2006, pp. 455-456).

The other theory that Guiffrida introduces is Kanungo's (1982) Job Involvement Theory (JIT) which "argues that job involvement depends on the job's ability to fulfill the worker's most salient needs, whether intrinsic or extrinsic" (2006, p. 456). Kanungo found that employees from collectivist cultures were more likely to value societal improvement, equity, and harmony whereas employees from an individualist background valued the output of pay, promotion, and recognition (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 456). While JIT does not focus on educational motivation, Guiffrida uses it to further examine the motivations of people from collectivist or individualist backgrounds and feels that it "could be used to understand involvement in systems outside the work environment, including involvement patterns within families and communities (2006, p. 457).

Ultimately, these theories of cross-cultural psychology can be used to further Tinto's proposition of how family affects pre-college commitment by more fully embracing the idea of collectivist cultural orientations and recognizing the support potential of family and friends from home (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 457). This is supported by other studies referenced in this article that conclude "minority students can greatly benefit from the support of families, friends, and other members of their home communities" (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 457). Another way Tinto's theory can

be more culturally sensitive is by replacing the term "integration" to "connection" so that the focus is not on integrating students into the dominant culture of the institution and rejecting their former culture. "This subtle yet important change allows the theory to recognize that students can be comfortable in the college environment without abandoning supportive relationships at home or rejecting the values and norms of their home communities" (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 457). In his conclusion, Guiffrida points out that his refinements to Tinto's theory needs testing and if validated by more research, he thinks that it "would allow college faculty and staff who are aware of students' salient motivational orientations to effectively connect students to university social systems that fulfill these salient needs" (2006, p. 467). Understanding the limitations of Tinto's theory in a cross-cultural study provides me with insight into how retention is not a one-size fits all domain; there is no one perfect answer as to why students leave university or college, but it does provide a foundation to reviewing retention in general. Now that an outline has been provided on the foundational theories of this project, sense of belonging on campus and the importance of family to Aboriginal post-secondary students and how it relates to retention are described next.

Sense of Belonging and the Importance of Family

What is sense of belonging? "Sense of belonging is theorized to reflect students' integration into the college system" (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 228). It has also been referred to as "embeddedness" by Roberts and Rosenwald (2001) and as "mattering" by Schlossberg (1989) (as cited in Cooper, 2009, p. 1). Johnson et al. (2007) similarly refer to Schlossberg's work and how "students' need to feel that their presence on campus [is] noticed and important to others (including peers, family members, faculty and staff)" (p. 527). Roberts and McNeese (2010) who write about student involvement and engagement also refer to Nancy Schlossberg's theory

on marginality and mattering and further suggests that the "first step to becoming engaged and involved on campus colleges is for students to interact with their peers" (p. 3). Schlossberg also contends that student-peer interaction is fundamental to making campus activities and student organizations a meaningful experience (as cited in Roberts & McNeese, 2010, p. 3). Johnson et al. also explain Nora's (2004) concept of "fitting in" which is how much a student feels like they fit into an institution both personally and socially (2007, p. 527). However, they recognize that the concept of sense of belonging has not been widely studied and is inconsistently defined in the literature.

Despite the lack of a firm definition, Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, and Clarke, 2011 assert "it is generally believed that students who can engage with university life by understanding the culture, making friends or developing a sense of belonging are more likely to persevere and to report a positive experience" (as cited in Egege and Kutieleh, 2015, p. 266). This is supported by Timmons (2013) who said, "Aboriginal students want to feel they belong when they attend university. When they have to leave their communities, they need to build a new community" (p. 235). To investigate the concept of sense of belonging, Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salomone (2002) did a study to create an instrument to measure sense of belonging that could be used to better understand why students persist or withdraw from college with a particular focus on freshman seminar courses and learning communities. Using focus groups, they developed a list of items to assess sense of belonging. The major themes that developed were related to the quality of student/peer and student/faculty relationships.

In regards to student/peer relationships, they specifically looked at "perception of peer social support, perception of peer academic support, and perception of personal comfort with the classroom environment" (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 233). In learning communities, results showed

that it helped students to establish friendships with their peers that gave them the ability to discuss academic matters outside of the classroom and "contributed to increased perceptions of support and comfort" (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 234). Results also showed that the relationships established inside of the class carried over outside of the class and that many participants felt less alone in their academic pursuits. "Findings from this investigation indicate that 'sense of belonging' to the institution stems from perceptions of 'valued involvement' in the collegiate environment" (Hoffman et al., 2002, p.249, 251). Overall, their instrument found that learning communities contributed to the formation of meaningful relationships where "students not only valued knowing other students but felt valued themselves" (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 252). Therefore, institutions should do more to promote peer relationships and design educational policies that increase "the interaction and involvement of students on campus in their first year" (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 229).

Another researcher who looked at sense of belonging is Cooper (2009) who examined the notion of belonging in a cultural constructivist approach and expanded on Tinto's (1987) discussion about the "willingness of the institution to involve themselves in the social and intellectual development of their students" (as cited in Cooper, 2009, p. 2). Cooper highlights the importance of student participation in school activities:

> While ethnicity, gender, and residential versus commuter status have been associated with varying findings in terms of student retention, numerous studies have supported Tinto's theory that student involvement – often called student engagement – positively impacts student retention for all student groups. (p. 2)

Cooper also talks about the notion of campus culture and contends that institutions need to define their culture in order to create a supportive campus environment. He acknowledges, "culture is

not 'fixed' and should not be reified as a unified, historically continuous set of practices and norms" (Cooper, 2009, p. 3). Rather it should be viewed in a social constructivist approach where culture is a "fluid, multifaceted construct which continually evolves" (Cooper, 2009, p. 4). With this in mind, institutions can seek to create campus cultures that unify shared values and embrace differences where all students can feel they belong. Of course creating a supportive campus culture does not guarantee that all students would thrive or choose to get involved on campus. Examining why some students get involved while others do not is also a question that researchers have undertaken.

Cooper tackles this question by discussing the notion of identity. "Because of the socially constructed nature of identity, students go through a process in coming to identify with a particular college student role (Cooper, 2009, p 5). Collier (2000) expands on this by noting that a student has to learn the meaning and role of being a college student and define themselves in terms of that role" (as cited in Cooper, 2009, p. 5). Collective identity also plays a role in developing a sense of belonging in students. "Collective identity refers to the elements of identity related to the belonging to a particular group or social category" (Cooper, 2009, p. 5). Cooper relates collective identity to the benefits of an institution's material goods or marketing such as logos, advertisements and campus wear (2009, p. 5). Identifying with an institution is, of course, more than wearing a school hoodie and students may likely identify with more than one aspect of their campus culture. "The key is to be sure that these identities are actively promoted so that every student feels connected and part of at least one collective identity related to the university" (Cooper, 2009, p. 5). Now that the idea of sense of belonging has been explained, how it has been applied to different racial groups, including Aboriginal students, is discussed next.

As noted, Tinto (1993) feels that integration into the academic and social aspects of campus life is important to first year persistence. However, his theory has been criticized, particularly in regards to minority students, for putting the responsibility for success on the student rather than on the institution (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 525). A study by Hurtado and Carter (1997) also critiqued Tinto's theory and suggested that it did not value culturally supportive alternatives to post-secondary education participation for Latino students (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 526). Their study looked at two factors – one factor was whether their sense of belonging model could be applied to other minority students and the other factor was the socializing influence of living in residence. In their definition of sense of belonging, Johnson et al. (2007) state that "[r]ather than expecting students to bear sole responsibility for success through their integration into existing institutional structures, sense of belonging illustrates the interplay between the individual and the institution" (p. 526). They go on to say that for the Latino students involved in the study, a supportive racial climate was important to their sense of belonging.

As for other minority students, research by Gilliard (1996) found that race/ethnicity had an impact on sense of belonging and it was found that African American students were more likely to report to feel a less strong sense of belonging than White students (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 527). Alternately, Velásquez (1999) found that Chinese students who socialized with White students helped contribute to their sense of belonging, and Nora et al. (1996) found that Hispanic students who were encouraged by their peers, faculty, and advisors contributed to their social integration into campus life (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 527). Overall, Johnson et al. (2007) found that "[p]erceptions of the campus racial climate are influenced, in part, by

students' interactions with others from different racial/ethnic groups" (p. 528). They suggest that

institutional forces are what shapes diversity on campus and conclude:

> Rather than placing the burden on students to adapt to an unalterable campus context, this
>
> study's findings reinforce that the importance of understanding students' perceptions of the
>
> college experience. Those perceptions, in turn, should guide campus stakeholders in
>
> fostering inclusive campus climates that relate positively to diverse students' sense of
>
> belonging. (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 537)

A study about Aboriginal student engagement and commitment is explained next. This

particular study further supports that it is up to the institution to promote success instead of

success being solely the responsibility of the student,

In an American study, Lundberg (2007) identifies how student involvement and

institutional commitment of Native American students predicted student learning. Findings

showed that "Native American students reported higher levels of learning when the institution's

commitment to diversity was strong and when students were frequently engaged in discussion

with others" (Lundberg, 2007, p. 405). Using a national sample of 643 Native American students

who took the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (QSEQ), Lundberg (2007)

looked at how course learning, writing experiences, engagement with faculty, peers and others,

and the institution's commitment to diversity contributed to their learning. Lundberg also looked

at which variable contributed to the strongest predictor of learning. Results showed that the

strongest predictor for learning was "time spent in conversation with others" (Lundberg, 2007, p.

411). This could be anything from discussions about course concepts to topics around religion,

the arts, current events, and more. "Quality of relationships with faculty and institutional

emphasis on diversity were [also] relatively strong indicators, suggesting that Native American

students benefit from satisfying relationships with faculty and from institutions that value diversity" (Lundberg, 2007, p. 412). Lundberg's conclusion also "suggests that part of the model of success for Native Americans comes from institutions that value diversity…[and showing it] in ways that are evident to those students" (2007, p. 415).

To better understand the results of the study, Lundberg reviewed some of the main factors that affected Native American students and their motivation to persist. According to Lundberg's research overview, negative factors include poor secondary school guidance/preparation, racism, and a lack of confidence in academic ability (2007, p. 406). On the other hand, indicators of Native American student success are high academic aspirations, good study habits, and maintenance of cultural traditions and support from family (2007, p. 406). Lundberg further explained that "Native American students are more likely to take a nontraditional approach to their education in terms of switching institutions, stopping out to deal with life issues, and managing multiple adult roles while going to college (2007, p. 408). Not wanting to be away from their home community, strong ties to family and culture also leaves many Native American students "feeling torn between the culture of origin and the higher education culture" (Lundberg, 2007, p. 406). Lundberg ultimately concludes that "[t]he strength of the institution's emphasis on valuing diversity is important because it shifts the responsibility for student success more directly on the institution (2007, p. 412). Lundberg also emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for Native American students and believes "that part of the model of success for Native Americans comes from institutions that value diversity. Clearly, engagement with others is also an important contributor to Native American student success" (2007, p. 415).

Another study that elaborates on Tinto's theory of college student departure was completed by Lee, Donlan, and Brown (2010). This study analysed the results of a 2005-2006 university-

sponsored project about American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) students who attended a

predominantly White university. They wanted to better understand the factors that affect the

persistence of AI/AN students and to find out what areas the university could enhance retention

of AI/AN students. They used Tinto's (1993, 2006) integration-commitment model of attrition

as their conceptual frame who proposed that "college student persistence as longitudinal process

that starts before the student enrolls in college and terminates with either departure or

graduation" (as cited in Lee et al., 2010, p. 260). What they found is that the main factors to

affect AI/AN students were financial difficulties and family obligations. The reason for this as

per Lowe (2002) is that "within the Native American worldview, the individual does not view

self as being independent from others. A person is viewed as an extension to, and is integrated

with a family, community, tribe and creation/universe" (as cited in Lee et al., 2010, p. 270).

Therefore, an AI/NA student would not usually forgo family responsibilities in favour of their

academic pursuits, including financial responsibilities. For AI/NA culture, the study found that

family and financial obligations resulted in financial difficulties.

  These results support Tinto's (1993) theory that a student's commitment to graduation can

be affected by external commitments. However, it can be viewed that in order to be successful, a

student should distance themselves from external commitments. "In the case of an incoming

AI/AN undergraduate, Tinto's model would appear to imply a much higher degree of separation

from nuclear and extended family than that expected from students coming from more

mainstream cultures" (Lee et al., 2010, p. 270). In his later work though, Tinto (2006)

acknowledged:

  Where it was once argued that retention required students to break away from past

  communities, we now know that for some if not many students the ability to remain

connected to their past communities, family, church, or tribe is essential to their

persistence. (as cited in Lee at el., 2010, p. 270)

To support AI/NA students with these struggles, HeavyRunner and Decelles (2002) suggest that

institutions support the family relationship through their Family Education Model (FEM)

because "replicating the extended family structure within the college culture enhances an

American Indian student's sense of belonging and consequently leads to higher retention rates

among American Indians" (as cited in Guillory and Wolverton, 2008, p. 61). Guillory and

Wolverton discuss the importance of family in their article, *It's About Family: Native American*

Student Persistence in Higher Education (2008).

This article presents findings from a study done in 2002 by Guillory that explored the

similarities and differences of Native American student's perceptions about persistence factors

and barriers to graduation and how they compared to the perceptions of administrators at various

U.S. institutions. As previously discussed, some of the main factors that affect Aboriginal

student persistence in college or university are "precollege academic preparation, family support,

supportive and involved faculty, institutional commitment, and maintaining an active presence in

home communities and cultural ceremonies" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 59). To support

students with these challenges, Guillory and Wolverton (2008) suggest that administrators and

faculty recognize the importance of maintaining cultural ties instead of assimilating to the

mainstream university culture as a way to strengthen degree completion goals (p. 59). This can

be done by having Aboriginal Student Centre's promote academic and social engagement or

helping Aboriginal "students deal with instances of campus hostility and difficulty in

transitioning from the high school social environment to that of college [which] also impacts

whether they decide to stay or leave college" (Guillory and Wolverton, 2008, p. 60). As for

faculty, they can help the academic integration of Aboriginal students into their classrooms and since many institutions have few Aboriginal scholars, Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997) argue that, "non-Native faculty and staff can play a key role in cultivating a welcoming and supportive environment for these students" (as cited in Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 60). Financial support for daycare and retention programs is also suggested.

Their main contention is that creating a sense of family within the campus culture while also allowing students to maintain strong ties with their families strengthens persistence and "reduces feelings of resentment that family members feel toward students because they spend time away from home" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 61). This model differs from others because it is based on the perceptions of the student and not of the perspectives of those who govern institutional policy. This is in line with suggestions described earlier by Johnson et al. (2007) who state that the responsibility for success should not be on the student, but rather on the institution.

From the perspectives of the Native American students in the study there were three main factors in their persistence: family, giving back to their community, and on campus social support. In regards to family, whether it be the nuclear, or extended family, family was a motivational source for the students. "The connection for these [Aboriginal] students to their families…was so strong that they were willing to overcome many difficult situations, such as an unwelcoming environment, lack of academic preparation, and inadequate financial support" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 74). In contrast, these same students also worried about letting their families down if they failed. However, the students wanted to persist in order to make a better life for their families. They also wanted to improve their communities. They wanted to be able to obtain a career that could allow them to "combat deleterious conditions back home"

(Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 74). They also wanted to succeed in order to give back to the community that supported them through their educational journey. Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, and Nitzarim (2013) also found family support to be an important aspect to persistence and reported that it "has consistently been documented to relate to a variety of educational outcomes, including adjustment to college, persistence, and well-being" (p. 220). As for the third factor, support from faculty and peers were seen as essential. "Social support from the institution also countered the effects of leaving home and the feelings of isolation that many of the Native American students experienced during their stay at the university" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, pp. 75-76).

As for the main barriers to their achievement, students listed four barriers: family, single parenthood, lack of academic preparation, and inadequate financial support. Single parenthood, academic preparation, and financial support have previously been addressed in this paper. What is of note is that family is seen as both a contributing and detracting factor to persistence. This paradox can be frustrating for students. On one hand, family support was important to the students in the study and they wanted to make their parents proud, on the other hand, some students "felt the 'pull' from their families to come home, especially in situations where family members were dependent upon them for financial and emotional support" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 77). Tseng (2004) similarly reported that, "students from cultural backgrounds emphasizing family interdependence may be expected to fulfill obligations to the family that conflict with college responsibilities (as cited in Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005, p. 223). To help with this disconnect, I think that creating a sense of family on campus and encouraging students to maintain ties to their community is important to help students feel more comfortable in the campus culture. That way, students who feel pressure from their family to

succeed or to support them know they are in an institution where their difficulties are understood:

> By incorporating family with the educational experience of Native American students, institutions have the opportunity to bridge gaps, heal wounds, and build trust…. Institutions that serve Native American students cannot continue to operate using traditional approaches to student retention, if they want to truly serve and help our country's Indigenous peoples. (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 84)

Now that that the history of Aboriginal education, the statistical facts of the Aboriginal population and the importance of post-secondary education for Aboriginal people and how retention and sense of belonging has been addressed in theory, I now explain how peer mentoring can be related to persistence, which is the foundation of this project.

Peer Mentoring and the Importance of Peer Relationships

"Peer mentoring has been implemented in higher education institutions across the country as a means of increasing retention" (Shotton, Oosahwe & Cintrón, 2007, p. 83). According to Dunn and Moody (1995), "mentoring programs help to retain students by fostering loyalty and engendering a sense of belonging. Programs that include peer mentors can also help students with networking and socializing for both academic and student activities" (as cited in Shotton et al., 2007, p. 84). In regards to first year students, Adams, Banks, Davis, and Dickson (2010) and Gale and Parker (2011), highlighted the importance of peer mentoring to this population and argued that it "has become a standard feature of a best practice model for transition and for improving what is standardly referred to in the literature as the First Year Experience" (as cited in Egege and Kutieleh, 2015, p. 266). Egege and Kutieleh's overview of peer mentoring

programs research also showed they can help students to be "retained, to gain a sense of belonging and to develop communication and organisational skills" (2015, p. 266).

In regards to retention, students enter post-secondary education with a variety of characteristics and may "find factors that adversely affect their transition from high school to university. Further, because of the demands of a knowledge-based society, students from various cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, different learning styles, or with low entrance grades are entering university" (Salinitri, 2005, p. 854). Salinitri's research highlights peer mentoring as an intrusive intervention program to combat the departure of student's from university prior to graduation. About mentoring, she said:

> Mentoring is about creating an enduring and meaningful relationship with another person, with the focus on the quality of that relationship including such factors as mutual respect, willingness to learn from each other, or the use of interpersonal skills. Mentoring is distinguishable from other retention activities because of the emphasis on learning in general and mutual learning in particular. (Salinitri, 2005, p. 858)

As previously explained, social connectedness is another key factor to students' persistence and peer mentoring can be used as a method to enhance this connection. "[University], for most students, is not only a time of academic pursuits but also an opportunity to explore or enhance themselves as social beings" (Roberts & Styron, 2010, p. 3). Peer mentoring can also be a way for students to bond with one another, which is a critical part of social integration and persistence:

> Social integration refers to students' levels of social and psychological comfort with their colleges' milieus, association with or acceptance by affinity groups, and sense of belonging

that provides the security needed to join with others in common causes, whether

intellectual or social. (Kuh & Love, 2000, p. 197)

Roberts and Styron (2010) agree that social integration helps provide security to students "which

is needed to help students bond with other students to achieve common goals, one of the most

important being to persist until graduation (p. 3).

Therefore, as Tinto (1993) contends, it is necessary for post-secondary administrators to

provide students with opportunities to get involved in campus activities (as cited in Roberts &

Styron, 2010, p. 4). To that end, one such campus activity is peer mentoring, which is described

next from a minority student perspective.

When it comes to minority students and peer mentoring, Shotton, Oosahwe and Cintrón

(2007) described research by Tantum (1997) and Madrid (2004) that determined that peer support

and being able to identify with others on a cultural level are important factors in their

academic success (p. 84). Dennis et al. (2005) define academic success as a "function of both

personal characteristics such as mental ability, academic skills, motivation, and goals, and the

characteristics of the environment" (p. 224). Shotton et al. (2007) also contend that structured

social support systems is a factor that fosters success in American Indian students and believe

that the creation of institutional support groups would improve the retention of these students "by

helping them adapt to the university setting" (p. 83). These researchers did a study to expand on

the research about the effectiveness of peer-mentoring program and how it relates to student

integration and persistence. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, they conducted

interviews and focus groups to obtain descriptions of the experiences of American Indian

students in a peer-mentoring relationship and their perceptions about factors affected American

Indian persistence. The program they studied "provides academic and social programming

geared toward academic success, social integration, and personal develop of its participants"
(Shotton et al., 2007, p. 87). Of note, the program was student-initiated and is not supported by
professional staff or institutional funding. They call mentees "protégés" who are matched with
mentors who contact their protégé once a week and attend study hall with them on weekly basis.
Regular reports are given to the student coordinator. The program was developed because the
students saw a need for a retention program for their student population.

Shotton et al. (2007) found two mitigating factors in a successful peer relationship and
those were the importance of the initial peer-relationship development and how "peer mentors
play an important role in helping American Indian students overcome potential barriers to
academic success" (p. 90). This is supported by Dennis et al. (2005) who explain, "[P]eer
relationships are important in a number of outcomes among college students, such as sense of
social identity, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and goal commitment (p. 226).
Hardes (2006) also suggests peer mentoring can be used as an education strategy for Aboriginal
students as a method to alleviate any educational issues:

> Mentoring programs can help facilitate transition into a college environment. Typically,
> such programs match first-year students with second-year students who act as role models,
> are familiar with the support services available and can share experiences with new
> students so that they do not have to struggle through the system on their own. (Hardes,
> 2006, p. 30)

As for the key factors in establishing a good peer relationship, Shotton et al. (2007) found four
main factors: the mentor's commitment to the program and mentee; the expression of care
towards the protégé; whether the protégé saw the mentor as admirable; and the ability for both

parties to relate to one another (p. 90). If all of these factors were present then a positive relationship developed or if did not, the relationship failed to develop or lost momentum.

In regards to how peer mentoring related to persistence, there were three areas that helped overcome barriers to persistence. These were that mentors helped connect students to the community; they provided support; and they provided guidance. "Participants felt at ease with their peer mentors and felt comfortable approaching them for advice. It is important to note that [they] often sought the guidance of peer mentors more readily than advice from faculty or staff" (Shotton et al., 2007, p. 96). In regards to support and guidance, Richardson and Skinner (1992) stated, "Peers can provide support that is more directly instrumental to college outcomes by forming study groups, sharing notes and experiences, and giving advice about classes to take and strategies to use" (as cited in Dennis et al., 2005, pp. 225-226). In their conclusion, Shotton et al. (2007) call for future research into the benefits of peer mentoring and its role in facilitating the success of American Indian students.

In another study that examined the role of personal motivational characteristics and environmental social supports in college outcomes of ethnic minority first-generation college students, Dennis et al. (2005) also indicated there is value in "programs that promote study groups, peer mentoring, or similar services that help students find the support they need to deal with the pressures of college" (p. 234). Their study used an ecological perspective and how the person and the environment can predict achievement and adjustment in college where the environment is a student's system of interdependent structures such as face-to-face interaction and support from family members and peers (Dennis et al., 2005, p. 224). They specifically looked at the perceived social supports of family and peer support and the perceived lack of these supports of Asian and Latino students. Results suggested that peer support "is a stronger

predictor of college grades and adjustment than support from the family" (Dennis et al., 2005, p. 234). This was seen in the focus groups where many of the participants reported that dealing with academic problems was better alleviated by peer support. Results also showed that motivation to attend college for reasons of personal interest, academic curiosity, or wanting a good career "was found to be predictive of college adjustment" (Dennis et al., 2005, p. 233).

An additional study that looked at minority students and retention was carried out by Good, G. Halpin and G. Halpin (2000) that examined the academic and interpersonal growth of peer mentors of African American students in an engineering program. A peer-mentoring program was created to improve retention rates of the faculty's minority students and was based on a study where students "recommended the need for networking with upper-class mentors to ease the transition of freshman students into the university environment" (Good et al., 2000, p. 375). Peer mentoring including informal tutoring sessions, networking, informal dinners, and celebration. Good et al. (2000) contend that peer mentoring is "a viable approach to providing role models and leadership for underrepresented groups within higher education" (Good et al., 2000, p. 376). Results showed that 70% of the mentors reported a growth in academic skills; 50% reported a growth in study skills; 5% reported growth in critical thinking and problem solving skills; and 5% reported a better understanding of subject concepts. Results also showed that 90% of participants reported a growth in interpersonal skills, including sense of self-satisfaction and belonging. This helps to show that both mentors and mentees can gain skills in a peer mentoring relationship; it is not just the mentee who benefits from this program format. It also supports my argument that peer mentoring can create a sense of belonging.

Specific to Aboriginal students, Rawana et al. (2015) looked at peer mentorship programs for Aboriginal university students in Canada and found "few mentorship programs have been

developed for Aboriginal Canadian youth in Canadian post-secondary institutions, despite the many educational challenges experienced by Aboriginal youth compared to non-Aboriginal youth" (p. 4). This is the reason why literature included in this section draws more from American research and why this research was undertaken. Their study described the development and evaluation of a peer mentorship program using a mix-methods design that measured resilience and ethnic identity awareness. They concluded that after receiving peer mentoring, participants improved "in social competence resiliency, other-group ethnic orientation, and school engagement" (Rawana et al., 2015, p. 2). This helps to show that peer mentoring increases student engagement. Rawana et al. (2015) also showed "that a strong, positive ethnic identity is linked to increases in social connectedness, psychological well-being, self-esteem, and lower prejudice to others" (p.8). Therefore, I suggest that peer mentor programming should provide opportunities for Aboriginal students to take part in cultural learning should be incorporated into peer mentoring programs that are developed for Aboriginal students. Cultural learning and activities can instil a sense of pride into one's culture as demonstrated by Rawana et al. (2015) who summarized the work of Banister and Begoray (2006) and Poonwassie and Charter (2001) and said:

> Although cultural activities vary between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, some Aboriginal traditions, such as storytelling, hands-on interactive learning, and sharing circles, reinforce mentoring relationships and pass down traditional knowledge and values to younger generations. (p. 5.)

Summary

In the foregoing section, I reviewed literature that described peer mentoring in an academic setting and how it can be used to support the persistence of post-secondary education students by

promoting sense of belonging, social connectedness, and more. The reviewed revealed how peer

mentoring has been applied to minority students, including Aboriginal students, which further

illustrated the lack of literature on the Aboriginal student population as most studies found were

related to North American Aboriginal populations. The following section explains the data

source of this project, which is a peer-mentoring program called, Promoting Aboriginal

Community Together offered at the University of Manitoba by the first-year program. Using this

program as the source of data adds to the body of Canadian literature about peer mentoring for

the Aboriginal student population.

Data Source of this Project

The data source for this study is found in a voluntary peer-mentoring program at the

University of Manitoba called, "Promoting Aboriginal Community Together" (PACT), and is

available to any new or continuing Aboriginal students who want to participate. PACT was

developed to support new Aboriginal students' transition into university life by providing

participants with social and academic development, student activities, and the opportunity for

upper-level Aboriginal students to peer mentor a new Aboriginal student for an academic year.

PACT was developed between 2008 and 2009 and was created in consultation with a variety of

Aboriginal program staff on campus. The impetus for the program came in 2008 from the

Director of the first-year program, called University 1, who asked me to create a program that

would support its Aboriginal student population. Program development was guided by a brief

Internet search about what other post-secondary institutions were doing for their Aboriginal

student populations. I was pleased to be given the opportunity to develop my own program, but

as explained before, I did not do it alone. There were three main reasons for this:

1) I was not an expert at program development and knew there was many Aboriginal staff on campus that could guide my ideas.

2) I would not have been comfortable and did not want to go ahead with any ideas without the consultation and consent of the Aboriginal Student Centre, as a program about Aboriginal students should have their support (this was obtained).

3) With the above in mind, I wanted the program to be collaborative in nature and utilize the expertise and knowledge of the Aboriginal Student Centre staff, which is why a partnership was created and maintained over time.

The original proposal by the U1 Director for Aboriginal student programming was to revise the International Student Mentorship Program (ISMP) and create a similar program for its Aboriginal student population. ISMP worked on the premise that first-year international students were matched with any upper-level student who wanted to work with an international student. ISMP mentors were available to new international students as a resource as they transitioned into Canadian and university life for academic advice, university navigation, and more.

After reflection and discussion with a number of Aboriginal staff members on campus about how to develop a program that for Aboriginal students, a different approach to the ISMP mentor model was undertaken. What Aboriginal staff wanted for Aboriginal students was a positive, holistic student experience. Therefore, a non-hierarchical mentor model was developed to reflect the cultural values of sharing and respect. This was done, because "[i]f universities are to respect the cultural integrity of First Nations students and communities, they must adopt a posture that goes beyond the usual generation and conveyance of literate knowledge" (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001, p. 9). Eber Hampton, a Chickasaw man, who designed an Indigenous theory about education, defined respect as "the relationship between the individual and the group

recognized as mutually empowering" (as cited in Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001. p.9). For this reason, PACT mentors are not seen as "the expert" but as a Neechiwaken, which is a Cree term meaning "a friend on life's journey". The group selected this term, because PACT students learn with, and from, each other in a reciprocal relationship. These adjustments were made because it was important to recognize the differences between international and Aboriginal students, and even the differences between Canadian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Therefore, since the inception of the PACT program, careful consideration has been taken to offer a program that is culturally relevant for Aboriginal students pursuing their post-secondary education. Helping Aboriginal students achieve success, enhancing their experience in university, and improving the retention rate of Aboriginal students involves more than just revising forms, pamphlets, and letters; it requires a significant investment in relevant programming and academic support.

For this reason, PACT organization and implementation has evolved over the last seven years based on how members have responded to the program. One of the main student suggestions was for more Aboriginal knowledge and traditional practices to be included in PACT programming. Therefore, PACT meetings often include traditional teacher or Elders as guest speakers, smudging, and sharing circle whereas in the beginning we mostly had student discussion about academic tips. Making program changes has allowed the incorporation of traditional knowledge into PACT, which has helped students develop their sense of relationship to others and model competent and respectful behavior (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002, p. 14). To be an "Aboriginal" peer-mentor program, I believe that PACT needs be organized in a way that respects that all people are equal. Therefore, PACT does not use mainstream mentor terminology or definitions that place one person as the expert (mentor) and one person as the

novice (mentee) requiring assistance with nothing to share. Instead, with the approval of PACT members and advice from Aboriginal colleagues, PACT members are now called "Neechiwaken", which as explained earlier, is a Cree term meaning "a friend on life's journey" and encourages a reciprocal learning relationship. "Reciprocity is the equal engagement of the mentor and mentee. Mentor and mentee each have a role to play and a responsibility to the relationship" (Fischler & Zachary, 2009, p. 6). Another change that occurred over time is that some non-Aboriginal students who spent time at the Aboriginal Student Centre or who had heard about the program, asked to be mentors. These students were not denied as the aim of the program is to create a positive student community and I thought it was good for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to participate together, however it is not a common occurrence.

It is important to note here that this study is not meant to provide step-by-step instructions for developing a peer-mentoring program or even provide a detailed explanation of the structure of the PACT program. Instead, this project aspires to show how peer mentoring can be used to promote student involvement and how that relates to retention and sense of belonging on campus. Any participant statements that make suggestions about the format or programming of PACT are not included in the discussion, but are listed in Appendix J to provide basic guidelines for those interested. The reason for this is that a program evaluation would take away from the intent of this thesis project. Interview questions about programming were originally included when the format of the study was going to be an institutional analysis and would have warranted program details, but the focus of the study evolved over time.

What is the First-Year Program?

To provide context, the first-year program is explained in detail. This program is called University 1 (U1), but is referred to as the first-year program as the focus is not on U1. This program serves a large student population, which on average consists of 3,000 new students and 3,000 returning students each year. From 1998-2011, this first-year program was how students were admitted the University of Manitoba (except for the Faculty of Engineering, the School of Art, and the Faculty of Music). Previous to 1998, students were admitted directly into their faculty of choice, which is the most common admission practice of large Canadian universities. In the mid-1990's the U of M decided to consider using a different admission approach that would provide students with the freedom to explore their faculty options or become eligible for their target faculties within one or two years of study.

The reason for this new approach was because institutional statistics were showing that a high number of new students each year were changing faculties after one or two years or leaving university altogether. The expectation for the first-year program was that it would help students persist to graduation because they would enter their faculty with one year of student experience and academic skill-building behind them and also give them time to make a well-informed choice about what faculty they wanted to enter.

The first-year program is now well established, but with a change in the global economy and the impact it has had on higher education financing, the U of M's strategic enrolment plan is to increase student enrolment overall, particularly the Aboriginal student population. In addition, the U of M is reorganizing the Student Affairs structure in order to maximize staff expertise in order to create a better experience for its students and increase retention. In her *Introduction*, Lesley Andres, a specialist in Higher Education and Associate Professor at the University of British Colombia, explains the reason for this type of shift:

Multiple forces impacting on post-secondary education, including threats to funding, increasing relevance of education to the workplace, have led to growing pressures on post-secondary institutions to pay increasing attention to the quality and relevance of their students' experiences and related educational outcomes. (p. 1, 2004)

Therefore, direct entry was reintroduced as an admission option in 2012-2013 for faculties that elected to return to this model. Not all faculties did so, particularly the health fields, and so the first-year program continues to serve all first year students regardless of admission route. This means that admission at the U of M is now based on direct entry or to the first-year program. This is important to state because despite the change in admission options, all first-year students are able to access and/or use the services of this program in some way. Since its creation, the first-year program has developed programming for student athletes, students-at-risk, mature students, international students and Aboriginal students. However, Aboriginal student programming was not developed until 2008. This means that from 1998-2005 (when I was hired) newly admitted Aboriginal students were given the same supports as other new students   and were referred, as needed, to units that offered Aboriginal student support. Creating Aboriginal student support was a way to expand on the services the unit could provide. Next the U of M's Aboriginal student population is explained, which highlights why first-year Aboriginal programming is important.

University of Manitoba's First-Year Aboriginal Student Population

Since 2005, an average of 503 self-declared Aboriginal students have been admitted into the first-year program annually. The Office of Institutional Analysis (OIA) reported that in 2005, 1,596 students self-declared as First Nations, Inuit or Metis and that 391 were first-year students; in 2013, 2,140 students self-declared their status and 572 of these were in the first-year

program, which was 26.7% of the total U of M Aboriginal student population (Aboriginal Student Enrolment Reports, OIA 2007/12 and OIA 2014/12). This shows that the Aboriginal student population has grown incrementally over the years with almost 500 new Aboriginal students each year and means that the first-year program should strive to serve its Aboriginal student population and increase opportunities for their success and support them in continuing into their second year and beyond.

It is important to note that all Aboriginal profile demographic files include the following notation: "Aboriginal identity is self-declared on the Admission form. Because the self-declaration is voluntary, the numbers reported are less than the total population of Canadian Aboriginal students on campus" (OIA). This is in line with what other institutions have found with issues of reporting accurate Aboriginal student population numbers, and at the U of M, undergraduate reporting only began in 2001, which makes it difficult to compare to enrolment records in previous decades.

The following table (Table 1) outlines Aboriginal student demographics and begins with Fall 2005 because that was when the Office of Institutional Analysis (OIS) reorganized its demographic profile structure to be more comprehensive, allowing for term-to-term comparisons, and because that is the year I started working on campus. Data after Fall 2013 is not included because the IS Books for subsequent years are not yet available.

Table 1

University of Manitoba's University 1 Aboriginal Student Profile:

Academic Term	Total # of Declared Aboriginal Students*	Total # of First Year Declared Aboriginal Students	% of First Year Aboriginal Students from Aboriginal Student Total	Total # of First Year students	% of First Year Aboriginal Students from First Year Student Total
Fall 2005	1596	391	24.5	5759	6.80
Fall 2006	1578	386	24.5	5665	6.81
Fall 2007	1648	428	26.0	6037	7.12
Fall 2008	1766	497	28.1	5974	8.31
Fall 2009	1883	541	28.7	6557	8.25
Fall 2010	1912	554	29.0	6631	8.35
Fall 2011	2021	559	27.7	6680	8.36
Fall 2012	2087	602	28.8	6616	9.10
Fall 2013^	2140	572	26.7	5939	9.6

Note: *Undergraduate, Graduate, Post Graduate Medical Education

Note: ^ As of Fall 2013, data no longer includes non-Canadian Indigenous students.

Source: University of Manitoba, Office of Institutional Analysis IS Books, 2005-2013.

Table 1

The inclusion of this table is to illustrate that the first-year program has a high number of Aboriginal students in its student base and that the University of Manitoba has a large Aboriginal student population overall. These numbers show that Aboriginal student programming is needed to support the success of this student population.

The Importance of First-Year Aboriginal Student Support

The first-year programming strategy is premised on the fact that that there are common transition issues for all first year university students and that specific student populations such as mature students, student-athletes, international students and Aboriginal students can be provided with opportunities that address their unique status within the overall student population. For example, writing research papers, writing tests, class structure, academic policies, and procedures, academic language and uncertainty are issues that many first year students face. These difficulties can present an even greater challenge for Aboriginal students based on the common barriers previously discussed, especially those coming from rural areas:

> The transition from living on a reserve to living in a college environment creates a culture
>
> shock for Aboriginal students. The adjustment to urban living includes changes in
>
> lifestyle, spirituality and even simple things, such as eating different foods. Adjusting to
>
> the multicultural nature of Canadian society can lead to a conflict in values and beliefs.
>
> Students have to adjust not only to a non-Native culture but also to various Aboriginal
>
> backgrounds, including Status Indian, Métis, Inuit and other Aboriginal students from
>
> various bands, all with their own cultural identities. (Hardes, 2006, p. 29)

The original goal of my working with the Aboriginal student population was to provide first year advising support and programming to first year Aboriginal students that did not previously exist prior to my being hired at this office.

An initial strategy to provide Aboriginal student support once they were admitted to the university was to focus on facilitating their success and supporting them through their first year and hopefully beyond. The fulfillment of their first year goals would then be a visible contribution to the University of Manitoba's commitment to Indigenous student success. The U

of M is "committed to fostering the development of the next generation of Indigenous leaders by providing an inclusive and supportive learning environment that promotes Indigenous student success from the time of admission through graduation and beyond" (University of Manitoba, 2014, p. 16).

In general, the U of M characterizes their strategic enrolment management plan as "a process that enables us to intentionally plan the size and composition of our student body, enhance the student experience, and support student success" (University of Manitoba, 2013, p.1).

Since all of these efforts are strongly connected with the first-year experience, the first-year program is always in a unique position to facilitate Aboriginal student success at the start of their university careers. As noted, students are more likely to withdraw during the first year than any other time (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, a successful transition to university in the first year is one way of enhancing student success and thus improving retention rates from the first to second year. Building on the movement of the U of M's strategic goal to support and celebrate Indigenous student success is critical to the institution's ability to maintain or increase Aboriginal student enrolment. This is part of the reason why this study about peer mentoring has been selected as it explores a program that supports Aboriginal students in their transition into university. In fact, Aboriginal student recruitment enrolment is now a key priority of the U of M because the Aboriginal population in Manitoba is high and because institutions recognize the need to increase Aboriginal PSE attainment.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an explanation of the peer-mentoring program that has been developed at the U of M for the first year Aboriginal student population. Developed by the first-year program to provide peer-support activities between first year and upper year Aboriginal

students, the PACT program is in its 7th year of operation and the success of the program (based

on annual increase in student participation) makes it ideal for exploring peer mentoring in a

university setting. The intent of the PACT program is to create a positive student community,

develop leadership skills, student role models, and provide students in various faculties to work

with one another on an on-going basis and to support each other through the university

experience. The research design and methodology of this project is described next.

Chapter 3:   Research Design and Method

In this chapter I provide a rationale for the methodology and an explanation of the method used in this study. I selected a phenomenological approach. This chapter begins with an explanation of why I chose a qualitative research approach and how an Aboriginal perspective was incorporated into the design as well and why this done. The principles and philosophy of a phenomenological approach follows, as well as how potential ethical issues or concerns about conflict of interest and power relationships were minimized. Minimizing potential ethical issues was a critical component to the research design as I am the developer and facilitator of the peer-mentoring program being studied. Following this, a description of the setting, the recruitment methods, and what criteria were used for participant selection is explained. The procedures and data analysis conclude this chapter.

A Qualitative Approach: To explore the richness of the Aboriginal student experience

A phenomenological qualitative research approach was selected because it provided me with the depth needed to explore the richness of the Aboriginal student experience. It was also selected because I am passionate about helping Aboriginal students achieve success and felt that learning about their perceptions about peer mentoring was the best way to capture their thoughts and feelings. As Moustakas (1994) explained, "In phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic. The researcher's excitement and curiosity inspire[s] the search" (p. 104).

Another reason this approach was selected is because a quantitative approach relies on statistical analysis and measurements, which has the potential to reduce the individuality of participants and cannot adequately evaluate interactions amongst participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). A qualitative approach was also more suitable for this project as talking to Aboriginal

students and reflecting on their words instead of analyzing and organizing their experiences into numerical data better was better achieved by examining the collective experience of Aboriginal students. As explained by Creswell (2007), a qualitative approach is appropriate "when a complex, detailed understanding is needed; when the researcher wants to write in a literary, flexible style; and when the researcher seeks to understand the context of settings of participants" (p. 51). A qualitative approach also provided me with the flexibility to understand the experiences of Aboriginal students in a peer-mentoring program. In addition, it provided me with the ability to reflect on their experiences. I sought to understand their university environment as seen from their observations and experiences. Kvale (2006) explains that qualitative interviews allow a researcher to "attempt to understand the world from the subjects' points of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world. The interviews give voice to common people, allowing them to freely present their life situations in their own words, and open for a close personal interaction between the researchers and their subjects" (p. 481).

Within the field of Aboriginal education it also is important to learn, understand, and respect the views of the participants being studied. This is seen in the work by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) who argued that research can benefit from the Aboriginal point of view, which "promotes reciprocal relations with others and encourages responsibility over one's life" (as cited in Pidgeon and Hardy, 2002, p. 97). This is in line with recognizing that Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, and experiences should be taken into consideration in research as academic institutions of higher learning are generally based on Western principles of knowledge. Therefore, the methodology was designed to include and recognize recommendations made about Indigenous research methodologies and researching with Aboriginal people.

For example, Pidgeon (2002) explains that researching with Aboriginal peoples must not take the word "research" lightly as it represents a Western term that in the past was used to violate, disrespect and be intolerant of Aboriginal people (p. 96). Fortunately, research about Aboriginal people has emerged over time to be inclusive of Aboriginal worldviews and knowledge and gives Aboriginal people the opportunity to speak for themselves about research topics that is about their culture, traditions, or experiences. As Henderson (2000) explains, "Aboriginal worldviews assume that all life forms are connected. Humans are neither above nor below others in the circle of life. Everything that exists in the circle is one unity, one heart" (as cited in Steinhauer, 2002, p. 77). This is important to note because PACT strives to maintain an Aboriginal worldview where all students are equal and that learning is shared and not individualistic. It is a journey that benefits from having friends along.

With this in mind, I also incorporated an Aboriginal worldview into the research design using Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) recommendations for doing research with Aboriginal people. They called for research that values respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (four R's). By using PACT members as participants, this respected them by giving them the opportunity to share their stories. They were then provided an opportunity to review their interviews to show them that their feedback was relevant. It also gave them the responsibility to make any changes they deemed necessary. This created a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the participants, because it also allowed them input into the final data. This is important because "[p]ast research protocols often resulted in researchers telling Aboriginal peoples what was relevant research. As a result, Aboriginal peoples have been treated as outside viewers in their own lives" (Pidgeon, 2002, p. 97). This is why participants were given the opportunity to be a part of the data analysis process. Through member checking, the information

discovered could be deemed accurate, and this is important too because it is the researcher's responsibility to strive for respect and integrity in each step of the research process (Pidgeon, 2002).

Methodology: A phenomenological study

A phenomenological approach was selected because I wanted to "understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Participants were Aboriginal students in a peer-mentoring program called Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) pursuing post-secondary education at a commuter university in central Canada with a population of over 29,000 students. It was restricted to Aboriginal participants. The participant's individual and common experiences about their perceptions about what it is like to be in a peer-mentoring relationship was analysed to determine the effect of peer mentoring on their overall university experience. The main goal of this study was to determine whether peer mentoring helped students persist in their academic goals. Another goal was to determine if peer mentoring as a student engagement strategy affects sense of belonging to the university. The philosophical principles of phenomenology and why I chose this philosophical approach are explained next.

Principles of Phenomenology

The philosophical principles of phenomenology and why this philosophical approach was selected are explained to provide context on how this study was designed. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) explain:

Generally, in qualitative inquiry, phenomenology is a term that points to an interest in understanding social phenomena from the actor's own perceptions and describing the

world as experienced by the subjects, with the assumption that the important reality is what

people view it to be. (p. 26)

As such, I wanted to understand the reality of Aboriginal students pursuing post-secondary

education and how they understood their experiences in a peer-mentoring relationship.

Phenomenology was developed in the early twentieth century and founded as a philosophy

by Husserl and expanded on more by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty in the mid-1950s

(Kim, 2012, p. 630). "The subject matter of phenomenology began with consciousness and

experience, and then was expanded by Husserl and also Heidegger to include the human life

world. And by Merleau-Ponty and Sartre to take account of the body and human action in

historical texts" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 26).

I also chose phenomenology because it is viewed as an appropriate research method when

working with Aboriginal people. This is "because it is synchronous with holistic indigenous

cultural lifeway and values. Phenomenology, as a research method, assists indigenous people in

reproducing, through narrative communication, features of the past, present, and future"

(Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005, p. 1264). As explained earlier, non-Aboriginal researchers

used to frequently conduct research about Aboriginal people in a Western lens and did not

necessarily take Aboriginal worldviews into consideration. However, phenomenology can

capture the lived experiences of Aboriginal people and allow them to talk for themselves and

thus give a holistic picture of the human experience (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005). Crazy

Bull also contended "a qualitative research approach is more compatible with traditional ways of

knowing, as it examines relationships and the whole" (as cited in Struthers, 2001, p. 126). A

phenomenological approach is also linked to the importance of narrative and storytelling. By

allowing participants to speak about their experiences in university and in a peer-mentoring

relationship, they are sharing their histories. "Without narratives in an oral tradition, there is no history, no reference. Storytelling gives a unique expression to our experiences" (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, p.1270, 2005). Ultimately, phenomenology is appropriate to Indigenous research as it captures the essence of people's experiences, and in this case, the participants' stories. Phenomenology is also an approach that allows a "researcher to discover the unique cultural perspectives participants may have regarding their postsecondary experiences" (Jackson et al., 2003, p. 550).

There are two approaches to phenomenology that are commonly used; one approach was developed by van Manen who approached phenomenology in a hermeneutic manner, which interprets the "texts" of life but who did does not provide rules or methods to hermeneutical phenomenology (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). There is also Moustakas who looks at phenomenology in a transcendental or psychological manner and who drew largely from the work of Husserl. "From the perspective of transcendental philosophy, all objects of knowledge must conform to experience. Knowledge of objects resides in the subjective sources of the self" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 44). Moustakas developed steps "in the data analysis procedure and guidelines for assembling the textual and structural descriptions" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Therefore, in order to focus my own work, I used Moustakas' guidelines for conducting phenomenological research, which are as follows:

• Discovering a topic and question rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meanings and significance;

• Conducting a comprehensive review of the professional and research literature;

• Constructing a set of criteria to locate appropriate [participants];

• Providing [participants] with instructions on the nature and purpose of the investigation,

and developing an agreement that includes obtaining informed consent, insuring

confidentiality, and delineating the responsibilities of the primary researcher and research

participant, consistent with ethical principles of research;

• Developing a set of questions or topics to guide the interview process;

• Conducting and recording a lengthy person-to-person interview that focuses on a

bracketed topic and question. A follow-up interview may also be needed;

• Organizing and analyzing the data to facilitate development of individual textural and

structural descriptions, a composite textural description, a composite structural description,

and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences. (1994, pp. 103-104)

Before methodology is explained in more detail, it is important to explain how potential ethical

concerns were minimized due to the fact that I am the developer and facilitator of the program

being studied. This is important to add here so readers understand why the study was designed

as it was.

Minimizing Conflict of Interest

I acknowledge at this time that in addition to being the researcher for this study, I am also

the developer, and facilitator of the PACT program under study. When choosing this topic I

knew it would raise potential questions about conflict of interest (COI) since I am involved on a

personal level with the peer-mentor program being examined. As per the Tri-Council Policy

Statement (TPCS2 guide), "Conflicts may arise from an individual's involvement in dual and

multiple roles within or outside an institution. While it may not be possible to eliminate all

conflicts of interest, researchers are expected to identify, minimize or otherwise manage their

individual conflicts in a manner that is satisfactory to the REB" (2010, p. 91). In this project, I

am acting as the researcher and the PACT program facilitator of the program being examined, and this is considered a dual role. The TPCS2 guide (2010) explains that dual roles "may create conflicts, undue influences, power imbalances or coercion that could affect relationships with others and affect decision-making procedures" (p. 95).

This dual role posed potential ethical issues because participants in the PACT program were indirectly asked by the program facilitator to take part in the study. The issue at stake was the potential to cause undue influence or coercion in the recruitment process. Also, since the program is ongoing, there is also the potential for ethical concerns in conducting research while simultaneously administering the program over the duration of this study. This is called a dual role. For these reasons I knew that the Review Ethics Board (REB) would review COI carefully, because by choosing to study PACT it created the potential of a power imbalance over participants. In terms of participant selection, another potential for concern was that active PACT participants could be targeted for recruitment in order to obtain results that could bias the results towards a positive outcome (selection bias). To minimize or manage the identified conflicts, I did the following:

- Hired a research assistant (RA) not associated to the program who oversaw participant recruitment, participant selection, the interview process, and the transcriptions. Each interview was approximately one hour and the recruitment goal was fourteen students – 10 students participated.

- The RA, via email lists of PACT participants, completed the recruitment and selection process and all former or current members were invited to participate. This was done so that no names were deleted from the list prior recruitment even though there are a small number of non-Aboriginal PACT members. In the

invitation to participate it stated that only Aboriginal students were needed for the study.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure that all ethical considerations were properly addressed this study was subject to an ethics review and approval by a Research Ethics Board (REB), specifically by the Education/Nursing REB committee. This included obtaining the successful certificate of completion from the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (PRE) online tutorial, TCPS 2: Course on Research Ethics (CORE). The Academic Integrity Tutorial was also successfully completed, which is a new requirement of Graduate Studies.

The Ethics Protocol was submitted to the Ethics Review Board with the following:

1. A recruitment email template to be sent to former and current PACT members for the RA to send out.

2. An invitation letter to potential participants that outlined the project; provided a timeline; explained participant requirements; and gave the name of the researcher, the thesis advisor and the contact information for the Research Ethics Board.

3. The consent form for participants to sign.

4. The interview schedule and protocol to be used by the RA.

5. Permissions for use of PACT email and PACT databases by University 1 and the Aboriginal Student Centre.

6. A signed Confidentiality Agreement by the RA to not disclose any information shared in the interviews or participant identity.

7. The certificate of completion of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Course on Research Ethics (CORE).

Having the RA do this work best-minimized ethical concerns about selection bias and power imbalance during the interview process. As Kvale (2006) points out, "Close emotional relationships between interviewer and interviewee can open for more dangerous manipulation than the rather distanced relationships of an experimenter and experimental subjects" (p. 482). Therefore, these methods minimized COI by taking me out of the recruitment, selection, interview, and transcription process. The consent process also informed participants about COI and explained the involvement of myself as the researcher. It also explained that participant's identities would be protected and assured them I would never know who did or did not participate. The consent process also explained that I would take over once the interviews were completed and transcribed and that transcriptions would be coded with real names not included. Participants were coded as pseudonyms in the transcription and results section. In terms of data management, collected data was kept in password-protected computers or kept in locked drawers of the RA or thesis advisor to ensure its privacy and to ensure that I could not access the data myself. Lastly, participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

Setting

The research setting of this project is at the University of Manitoba, which is a commuter university with a population of over 29,000 students and is the largest academic institution in the province of Manitoba. The University of Manitoba is located in the City of Winnipeg, and as reported by the Winnipeg Free Press when summarizing National Household Survey (NHS) data, Winnipeg has the highest number of status First Nations people and Métis Canadians of any other city in Canada as well as one of the younger Aboriginal populations overall (Rabson, 2013). This means that a study in this city and province and at this large university is ideal since

Aboriginal people are enrolling into the U of M in increasing numbers (as seen in University 1 enrolment growths since 2005).

Furthermore, the University of Manitoba also makes an ideal setting because of my interest in the work being done by Student Affairs to increase Aboriginal student enrolment as well as my interest in supporting or assisting in the development of new initiatives for its Aboriginal student population. Lastly, the University of Manitoba is a suitable setting because the PACT program is administered at this institution, and since PACT membership has increased each year, there were a significant number of students available for recruitment. PACT data has been collected and maintained since 2009-2010 so the recruitment base included approximately 120 students (based on an average of 20 students per year from 2009-2010 to 2014-2015).

Recruitment

Students in the PACT program were invited by a research assistant to take part in an interview that asked them what their experiences were like as a current or former participant in a peer-mentoring relationship and what their perceptions and experiences were in relation to being part of a peer-mentoring program. Students were informed that interviews would be completed by a research assistant not associated to the program and the consent form made it clear that transcription would be completed by the RA using pseudonyms and that I would only see coded transcripts. This gave potential participants the opportunity to consider their participation. Using a research assistant removed any possibility of leading interviews to obtain expected results, removed student discomfort in disclosing thoughts about the program if any negative comments come out of the interview, and removed any authority issues (the power imbalance) in the interview process.

The consent process also explained that the results would be analysed by the researcher. Agreeing to these components signified they had no concerns about my dual role as researcher and program coordinator, and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. A maximum of fourteen students could have participated, but only ten students responded and they were selected for the interview process. The data collected in the interviews are discussed in the results section. In order to provide a reasonable amount of time for participants to consider their decision, the RA was directed to recruit for a two-week period, during which time participants who signified their interest were screened for eligibility (see Criteria, p. 81). This was mostly done by email verification. If there was enough interest, the RA was directed to try to find an equal mix of participants (mentors/mentees) to provide a balanced perspective of first year and upper-level students. However, if there were not enough participants to do so then all interviews would go forward. Ultimately, there were seven mentees and three mentors who participated.

Participants were recruited from PACT email lists from 2009-2010 to 2014-2015. Permission was given to the co-facilitator of PACT to provide the information to the RA, but since no data was changed in the databases, the primary researcher sent them directly to the RA. The RA had no pre-existing personal relationships with any of the participants and no conflicts arose during the interview process.

After the interviews and transcriptions were completed, the participants were sent their transcripts and given one week to request any changes or deletions. Member checking was added to the research design because it can improve the reliability of the data collection, but there is mixed opinions about the usefulness of this; some say it is important, while others say it may not be useful (Goldblatt, Kanieli-Miller & Neuman, 2011). Member checking was also a

way to assure the students that their interviews were transcribed accurately. Member checking

also safeguarded that the data collected was not revised in any way, which strengthened the

reliability of the data that was obtained. As mentioned earlier, member checking was also done

in the spirit of respect and reciprocity. The goal of the interviews was to identify their

experiences in PACT and whether being in a peer-mentoring program affected their persistence

or sense of belonging on campus. In the end, only one participant sent back revisions.

Criteria

Inclusion

The following criteria were required to qualify for this study:

- Participants must be of legal age at the time of the interview (18 years or older)

- Participants must be, or have been, an active PACT member for at least one academic
  term. The reason that one term is okay for these purposes is because in many cases,
  PACT matches do not necessarily continue for an entire academic year.

- Active is defined as: Any Aboriginal student who participated in the PACT program as a
  new Aboriginal student or an upper-level student for one academic term or more (Fall or
  Winter).

- An upper-level student is defined as: A student who has successfully completed one year
  of study (2.5 and higher) with a minimum of 24 credit hours and ideally is in a faculty.

- A peer-mentoring relationship is defined a new Aboriginal student and an upper-level
  student who have agreed to meet on a regular basis where the experienced student
  provides peer support to the new student.

- An active PACT member can also include a student who elected to not be in a peer-
  mentoring relationship, but joined PACT to take part in the community building activities

and monthly meetings (defined as an individual member). While the project focuses on

peer mentoring, sense of belonging is also being explored and a student not in a peer-

mentoring relationship can discuss this. Therefore, these members were not excluded

from the study.

- It is important to note that PACT students have the responsibility to accumulate a

    minimum of 5 hours per term toward PACT activities in order to obtain Co-Curricular

    Record (CCR) recognition. For this reason, any active PACT member had spent a

    minimum of five hours in the program, which I felt provided enough perspective for this

    study.

Exclusion

- There are only a few non-Aboriginal students in PACT who asked to join the program

    due to their personal connection to the Aboriginal student community by either spending

    a lot of time at the Aboriginal Student Centre or interest in working with the Aboriginal

    student community. Since the program is designed to build and promote a positive

    student community, non-Aboriginal students who have an interest in PACT are

    considered as mentors on a case-by-case basis. The consent process explained that

    Aboriginal participants were being sought and that non-Aboriginal members did not need

    to reply and were thanked for their time in PACT.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were used to collect data and the interview questions were developed based on

literature review (see Appendix F). Interviews were digitally audiotaped and conducted by the

RA who scheduled the interviews in an agreed upon location, except for in Migizii Agamik as

many PACT students spend time there. Interviews were scheduled for one hour with breaks in

between interviews to ensure the anonymity of the subjects and to avoid potential for others to put together who was being interviewed. This helped ensure the privacy of participants. Having a research assistant conduct the interviews also allowed participants to speak freely and not feel like they should make statements they thought I might want to hear if I had done the interviews myself.

While phenomenology and qualitative research generally uses open-ended or semi-structured interview formats, I chose a structured interview format. I did this because the RA did not know the students or the PACT program, which eliminated the opportunity for the RA to know what responses to probe about as needed for the semi-structured interview format. However, a benefit of the structured interview is that it allowed for comparable data across all responses. "Structured interviews do not require the development of rapport between interviewer and interviewee, and they can produce consistent data that can be compared across a number of respondents" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, "Benefits", para 2). Cohen and Crabtree (2006) also explained, "A well-developed understanding of a topic allows researchers to create a highly structured interview guide or questionnaire that provides respondents with relevant, meaningful and appropriate response categories to choose from for each question" ("When might", para 2). Since I have a thorough understanding of peer mentoring, I felt that a structured interview would be a suitable approach because it allowed for detailed descriptions about being in a peer-mentoring relationship.

The RA was instructed to transcribe each interview individually and he bolded and highlighted the interview text so I knew what the response was for each question. He titled each transcript as "Participant 1", "Participant 2", and so on, and removed names so the content was anonymous. I then reformatted each transcription so that only the interview questions that were

answered remained (some parts of questions were meant for the mentee or mentor so some questions were purposefully not asked as per the interview protocol). I then selected a pseudonym for each participant, which are used in the findings. This provided me with a clean set of interview responses for each participant. I then created a second set of transcripts by putting the participant responses for each question into a new document so that I could read the responses to each question as a whole. I was then able to start making initial interpretations of the data through multiple readings of the material. "This process, sometimes referred to as the hermeneutic circle, has been described as a spiral or reflexive process in which the investigators seek to uncover deeper levels of meaning in the text (Jackson et al. 2003, p. 552). Looking at participant responses individually and taking note of emerging themes and patterns, and then looking at responses as a whole to see if emerging themes stayed consistent, was how analysis was completed.

I also used semantic knowledge software, called Tropes (http://www.semantic-knowledge.com/tropes.htm) to confirm the themes I had found. *Tropes* is a program where documents can be uploaded and analysed for relations, frequency of word categories, and more. I uploaded each interview question into the software and checked for frequency of words to check my manual interpretation of common phrases and to discover any new ones. This program also provides the option to look at data in graph format and visually shows common connections. I used the frequency of words and the graph format of these frequencies to verify my interpretations. This provided a safeguard to ensure that my interpretations were not random or biased by my dual role.

As I continued to examine the data sets, similar themes, quotes, or statements were extracted to discover what the experiences of Aboriginal students in a peer-mentoring

relationship were, which was the phenomenon being explored in this study. I interpreted these similar themes, quotes or statements as significant statements, which provided me with an understanding of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) calls the process of finding significant statements "horizonalization". The purpose of horizonalization is to develop a list of significant statements that shows how participants experienced the topic and to develop a list of "nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements" (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). Horizonalization is usually based on open-ended questions, which allows for making a list of non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements. However, since my interviews were structured, I did not carry out that aspect of horizonalization, as it did not fit my design. In its place, I manually coded each interview for similar themes, condensed findings into dominant themes, and was thus able to interpret the data. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) described this method and explained, "Analysis include[s] meaning coding, condensation, and interpretation (p. 197). I also used *Tropes* for each interview question to check my results.

The end result was a list of common themes, which I interpreted as dominant themes. I called them dominant themes because I could numerically categorize responses based on frequency of similar thoughts or feelings. Therefore, findings are organized by a numerical breakdown of participant responses, which is not usual for qualitative studies. However, because structured interviews were used for data collection, a quantitative description of responses was useful to show how each dominant theme was selected. The reason numerical data emerged is "because structured interviews often produce quantitative data" (DiCicco-bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314).

I expected that the data would demonstrate that student involvement in a peer-mentoring program helps Aboriginal students persist in their academic goals and positively affect sense of

belonging to the university. The findings are discussed in Chapter 5. Any comments that leaned toward evaluating the program are not included in the results section to adhere to the focus of this study, which is not meant to evaluate the PACT program in any way. However, suggestions for the program are included in Appendix J to provide those interested in what participants had to say about specific aspects of the program.

The questions for the interview (Appendix F) were based on the literature review in order to provide what I hoped would be meaningful data through the structured interview format. Briefly, participants were asked about their motivation to attend university; what they thought university would be like; whether they faced any challenges while in university; why they joined PACT; if they joined to have a mentor or be a mentor; if PACT helped or benefited them in any way; if participation affected them; what peer-mentoring meant to them; and the benefits or disadvantages of peer-mentoring. They were also asked whether post-secondary institutions should encourage Aboriginal student engagement programming like PACT and asked what advice they would give to new Aboriginal students.

Methodological Limitations

There are methodological limitations to this study. First, because a research assistant conducted the interviews, transcriptions may have been interpreted differently than the intended message of the participants. Member checking was offered to each participant as a way to combat any misinterpretations of the interview, but only one participant sent back revisions. Therefore, it is possible that some statements may not be interpreted correctly in terms of tone and inflection. Since I was not able to hear the recorded transcriptions to ensure the anonymity of the participants, there was no way for me to double-check the accuracy of the transcriptions.

Second, because I was not the person who conducted the interviews, I had to design a structured interview format, which as explained earlier was because the research assistant did not know the students or the program, which eliminated the possibility of asking for clarification or to ask probing questions. Probing questions are commonly attributed to standardized open-ended interviews, which "allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up" (Turner, 2010, p. 756). Although some follow up questions were provided to help with certain questions, probing would have been up to the RA. Without the research background or intimacy that I have to the PACT program, the RA was not able to recognize when to ask for more information from the participant. Instead, the RA adhered to the interview protocol and this limited the ability to clarify responses in the interviews. On the other, having an RA do the interviews eliminated any possibility of me asking probing questions to "get" the answer I may have been hoping for.

Third, there was the possibility for data interpretation to be biased by my personal connection to the project. Research bias can be difficult, especially by novice researchers, because of the conversationalist nature of interviews. This is because while conversational encounters "afford unique opportunities to construct understanding from the perspective of the informant, [they] also mark an inherently subjective endeavour" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, pp. 80-81). This is because preconceptions or personal connection to the topic can taint interpretation. Tufford and Newman (2010) say that preconceptions include assumptions, values, interests, emotions, and theories (p. 81). To combat the effects of preconceptions, researchers often use bracketing. A phenomenological approach to interpretation established by Husserl is an approach that seeks to understand the lived experience of the subject, and in order to understand someone else's lived experience they must not include their own preconceptions.

"The process of tapping this essence of experience and looking beyond preconceptions became known by various interchangeable terms: phenomenological reduction, epoche, or bracketing" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 82). However, since an RA completed interviews and transcriptions, I was left with a data set that was not tainted by personal assumptions during the interview process. This made it easier to leave personal preconceptions to the side during the analysis phase. However, I did have to write the discussion (Chapter 5) in a very structured format in order to eliminate my role as facilitator, staff member, and university student in order to adhere to my role as researcher.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an outline of the methodology I used in this research, which is a qualitative phenomenological study. The principles and philosophy of a phenomenological approach was explained, followed by how potential ethical issues or concerns about conflict of interest and power relationships were addressed in this study. These components were given a lot of consideration given that I am the developer and facilitator of the peer-mentoring program being studied. The setting of the study, the recruitment methods, and what criteria were used for selection was also discussed. Lastly, an outline of the procedures and data analysis utilized was explained as well as the methodological limitations of this study. Findings are revealed next.

Chapter 4:   Findings

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students about peer mentoring they have received through the Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) program at the University of Manitoba and explored whether it helped students persist in their academic goals. It also examined if peer mentoring as a student engagement strategy affects sense of belonging to the university. Data for this project came from the student interviews and the themes that emerged are outlined in this chapter. When I interpreted the data I organized findings into dominant themes. This chapter provides excerpts from the interviews to support my findings.

Participants

This study includes the interview data of ten Aboriginal students enrolled at the University of Manitoba who were former or current members of the PACT program. Seven participants were female and three were male. The majority of the students were in their mid-twenties; two participants were 19, and three participants were 35 and over providing diversity in their ages. Their program choices also varied with programs in Business, Geological Sciences, Social Work, Nursing, Human Nutritional Sciences, Arts, and two students were in University 1.

Five participants were single with no children; of these, three were male students. One person was in relationship with no children and two participants were common-law with one child each. Two participants were married, one had no children, and the other had two children over the age of 19, and seven participants self-identified as First Nations and three self-identified as Métis. The First Nations students all received band funding and some also had student loans or worked part-time. The Métis students relied on student loans; employment, bursaries, and one of them had a line of credit. Some participants had trouble deciding whether they were rural or

urban students so it is unclear how many came to university from a rural community. Participants were from a variety of First Nations communities, including Pinaymootang (Fairford), Sakeeng, Fisher River, and Fox Lake. Two students listed their hometowns of Eddystone, Manitoba and Hudson Bay, Saskatchewan. Only one Métis student explained their genealogy (Red River Métis registered under the St. Norbert Group). Seven students joined PACT to have a peer mentor; two joined to be a mentor and one joined for the activities but was assigned a peer mentor as well. Only one participant specified that they had a peer mentor in their first year and was a mentor in subsequent years, but it is possible there were more like that. Of the ten participants, nine were undergraduate students and one was in a graduate program at the master's level.

Of note, one participant's daughter entered university after she started and they both joined PACT in their first year in university; they also both participated in this study (Tara and Lynn). Their experiences ended up being quite different as Tara felt her experience was not successful due to being matched with a non-Aboriginal mentor whereas Lynn had a "really good peer mentor" who provided a lot of help. Tara felt her mentor match might have worked better if the mentor was Aboriginal and found her experience disappointing.

Participant details are as follows:

Table 2 *Participant Details*

Name**	Self-Identifies As	Gender	Age	Program of Study	Marital Status	Main source of funding	PACT Role
Helen	First Nation	Female	26	Human Nutritional Sciences	Common-Law	Band Sponsorship	Mentor
Marie	First Nation	Female	27	Nursing	Single	Band sponsorship, student loan, employment	Mentee
Jen	First Nation	Female	23	Arts	Single	Band Sponsorship	Mentee
Tara	First Nation	Female	45+	Social Work	Married	Band sponsorship	Mentee
Lynn	First Nation	Female	19	University 1	In a Relationship	Band sponsorship	Mentee
Colleen	Métis	Female	39	Nursing	Married	Line of credit, bursary, scholarships	Mentee
Tim	First Nation	Male	29	Geological Sciences	Single	Band sponsorship, employment, scholarships	Mentor
Lucas	Métis	Male	19	Business	Single	Student Loan	Mentee
Joshua	First Nation	Male	21	University 1	Single	Band Sponsorship	Mentee
Tina	Métis	Female	35	Human Nutritional Sciences	Common-Law	Student Loan, bursaries, employment	Mentee then mentor

Note **: *Names have been changed for the purpose of confidentiality.*

Helen

Helen was in the final stages of her Master's degree in Human Nutritional Sciences. When she began university, she started in Summer Session 2006 and took an orientation course called NATV 1000: The Colonizers and the Colonized: Opening the Circle. She recalls being "very scared and very nervous, especially coming from a rural community". Part of her fear was not being familiar with the city or campus. To get through it she walked to a friend's house for the first three weeks and they bused to the university together because she was afraid she would get

on the wrong bus. She thinks university would have been a lot scarier if she did not have a friend to travel with. She struggled in her first year because she took a full course load and fell behind. She did not expect university to be so difficult because in high school she took a heavy course load and always did well. She was also a shy and quiet person and did not talk to anybody and found this difficult as well, especially when having to work in groups. Her motivation to get a degree helped her get through any challenges.

She joined PACT because she wanted to get more involved with campus activities and because she wanted to be with a group of people who she could identify with her experiences. She also felt that it was easier to make friends with the Aboriginal community and by then she was in her third year and felt experienced enough to help another student. Being a mentor made her think about her social self because she was still shy when she became a mentor so it challenged her. It made her question whether she was closed off as it takes time for her to get to know people and vice versa.

Marie

Marie was in the Nursing program and also wants to complete her Arts degree when she is done. As a new student, she felt university was intimidating because of its size. She felt somewhat prepared for university as she had attended Red River College previously and chose the U of M because she had quite a few family members who had gone there. She initially found university confusing and frustrating. She did not understand general terminology such as credit hours and sought assistance from advisors, including advisors from the Aboriginal Student Centre who helped her become organized. She also struggled with anxiety and eventually saw a doctor and got accommodations for her anxiety through Student Accessibility Services.

Marie joined PACT to get advice from a mentor on how to get into Nursing. She had already developed good studying techniques but felt a mentor could give her tips. She was paired with a 3rd year nursing student who was very busy and did not have much time for her. She did enjoy the group meetings and made new connections and felt she got help that way. The connections helped her because she felt the group understood where she was coming from and her struggles.

Jen

Jen was in Arts majoring in Native Studies and almost done. She may apply to the Red River College Nursing program in a few years, as Nursing was her original plan. When she started university she was nervous and scared. Her mom helped her by driving her to school the first few days. People she talked to said university was going to awesome but it was not a good experience for her. She attended orientation to get used to things but found the university to be really big. She had a friend who looked at her schedule and showed her where all her classes were and that helped. She experienced many challenges in her first year including being diagnosed with diabetes and had anxiety and depression. She also suffered from a serious car accident that required her to be medevac'd to the hospital. This affected her attendance and she was too shy to talk to her professors about it. She feels her shyness was really hard to deal with because she got so nervous, but over the years and being in groups like PACT, she has become more social.

She feels that PACT helped her develop better social skills and public speaking because the group often had sharing circles. She was matched with a mentor in the same year as her but still found it helpful as they gave her a lot of information. She wanted to know about U of M

services, what to do, and how to study. Overall, she found that PACT helped her out of her

comfort zone and gave her opportunities to volunteer in the community.

Tara

Tara was in Social Work and came to university late in life because she wants to work for

the Aboriginal community. She was terrified of coming to university because she thought

everyone would be so young. She found it tough in the beginning but was confident she would

make friends. She thinks PACT and the Aboriginal Student Centre made things easier. She

struggled at first with time management because she ended up socializing too much in her first

few months and did not study at home. This changed after her first round of grades. She lost her

mother during the first year and considered quitting and coming back later. She was an Access

student and after talking to her Access advisor she got tutors instead and continued on.

She joined PACT because it was an Aboriginal student group and she wanted to meet other

Aboriginal students who knew how it felt to be an Aboriginal student. She initially joined just

for the group activities, but was paired with a mentor. However, the mentor was non-Aboriginal

and that disappointed her. PACT helped her feel connected because the university was so big.

Seeing the group members in the Aboriginal Student Centre made the university seem smaller

and more familiar. She enjoyed the group meetings because it was like a check-in. She would

hear what other students were going through and was able to relate to what they were saying and

liked that the group would then talk about how to deal with those issues. She also felt that PACT

was a connection to her culture because of the shared experience of being Aboriginal.

Lynn

Lynn was in University 1 and at first she was interested in Nursing. The following year

she began the prerequisites for veterinary studies but is now planning on going to Red River

College for the animal health technician program instead. She said that it would be her last year

at the U of M. When she started she did not think university was that important and that it would

just be about studying. She felt prepared for university structure because she attended the

University of Winnipeg Collegiate, but the size really surprised her. She was really nervous

about the number of students who attend here and was anxious about it. Her mom reassured her

that not everyone is together at the same time and to just focus on herself – she found this advice

really helpful.

She experienced PACT while she was in high school when her mom took her to a meeting.

She liked it so kept going and joined when she came to university. She wanted a mentor because

it would be someone who knew how university worked and be available for questions. Her

mentor talked her through any anxiety she felt about school. She said that PACT helped her

become more comfortable in university and she liked the volunteering aspect. She also felt it

made the transition of coming to university easier and it was a group of people she became

familiar with and would recognize on campus and not feel so alone. It gave her a sense of

belonging because her mentor introduced her to people and it made her feel connected to others

because she made friends within PACT.

Colleen

Colleen was in Nursing and comes from a massage therapy background. She had to work

for a number of years to save up for university. Her husband was the one who encouraged her to

quit work and go back to school. She never thought she would be able to come to university and

the thought was overwhelming. She was very nervous and thought the idea was unrealistic. She

calls herself a planner so once she decided to come she started taking prerequisites and getting

prepared for university. She found writing to be challenging and was glad there was a lot of help

available. Her personal challenges were confidence and being persistent because university is really hard. She was also not able to see her friends socially anymore and found that difficult to explain to them, as they did not understand why not.

She joined PACT as a way to meet other people and to identify with other Aboriginal students on campus and because so many students are on campus, being in PACT helped her recognize people and it was nice to see familiar faces. She wanted a peer mentor to help with resources and to be able to touch base with someone else. She was matched with another nursing student, which was good, but she was matched with a male student and felt they did not have much in common. In retrospect, she thinks she would have felt more comfortable with a female mentor. She liked the PACT group meetings because she became familiar with Migizii Agamik and the Aboriginal Student Centre staff who were always ready with a smile. She was an Access student as well. She felt that PACT helped take away the barriers of having to find friends because it was a safe place to go to meet people of similar minds.

Tim

Tim was in Geological Sciences. When he began university he was unprepared financially and was nervous because he did not know anyone and was not sure what program to pick. In his first year he had personal issues with his family and also had issues with getting the grades needed for his program and scholarships, which he wanted to get to become more financially stable. He thinks university can be very stressful for Aboriginal students because of stories he heard, but did not experience anything negative and attributed this to not looking Aboriginal "as much as other people".

Tim joined PACT in his second year and wanted to be a mentor because he finds that social activities are the best way to relieve anxiety. He also wanted to meet friends and heard

that PACT had a lot of social events and volunteer opportunities. He felt that it was really

beneficial to him to be able to meet people with similar interests and backgrounds. He

particularly liked hearing others share the same stories and problems because it made him feel

like he was not the only one feeling those things, which limited any anxiety and he made some

good friends in the process. As a mentor, he provided financial advice and encouraged

scholarship applications. Ultimately, he liked that PACT created connections so members would

not feel so alone.

Lucas

Lucas was in Business and he came to university because he had a good experience in high

school and because his parents said he should get post-secondary education. When he began he

thought he would only have time to study and felt unprepared because everyone he met came

from a private school and worried his education was not as good. He was relieved when

university was livelier than just studying, he made friends with his peers and his classes were

smaller and more personal than he thought they would be. His biggest challenge was finding

time to study as he commuted three hours to and from school by bus and is still learning how to

manage his time.

He joined PACT to have a peer mentor as he thought university would be hard and wanted

someone to relate to who already knew what university was like. PACT gave him a sense of

support and without it he would not have learned about Migizii Agamik, which gave him

structure, as he knew he could find support there for assignment help. He also felt PACT gave

him the groundwork needed to handle university life. It also provided him with a role model to

look up to and something to aspire to. Overall, he felt PACT helps students feel more connected

and helps students talk to one another with the benefit of allowing students to get involved with the Aboriginal community.

Joshua

Joshua was in University 1 and his goal is to get into Education. He identified as an Access student. As a secondary student he sometimes felt he was "in the back and kind of forgotten about", which bothered him and other times he felt his teachers really motivated him. So he wants to become a teacher to teach kids like him. When he started university he did not think he was ready for it. He had dropped out of high school and completed it through adult education so when he got to university he worried about whether he would fit in and was very nervous. His main challenge is with anxiety in social settings and has a hard time talking to people. As an Access student he saw his personal counselor a lot, which helped and over time he made friends who have given him emotional support.

Joshua joined PACT because it sounded like a friendly environment and thought he could make some friends. He also wanted a peer mentor to have someone as a support system and who could show him around campus. PACT helped him with his anxiety as well as it allowed him to sit and listen with other people. He also learned about Aboriginal history when guest speakers came and it gave him a new perspective on spirituality and Native Studies. Overall, Joshua thinks PACT helps students to feel connected to one another, which is especially good for quiet students who could benefit from peer mentor.

Tina

Tina was about to complete her Human Nutritional Sciences degree and came to university to become a dietician. She came to university after working in the finance industry for five years and decided she was not happy with her career and knew she had to follow her passion, which

was nutrition. Even though calls herself an independent strong woman and feels she has the personality to succeed she did not think university was something she could do. She thought she had to be smarter and that she might struggle because she was Indigenous. She also had a young child at home and was looking after her ill mother. However, she had a sister here who introduced her to Migizii Agamik and the Aboriginal Student Centre where she was able to foster strong relationships and create a campus family. Networking and talking to her professors helped her feel like she could succeed. Because of her work background she was organized, studied regularly and felt socially at ease with her peers. However, as a mature student she says she experienced her fair share of racism in classes. She also struggled with personal issues and sought Elder guidance and student counseling, which helped, but these were not always available so she continues to struggle at times.

Tina joined PACT inadvertently when someone she admired offered to mentor her. Her mentor offered her help with papers and gave her an extra connection. The following year she agreed to be a mentor because she liked feeling connected and she liked the community involvement of being in the group. Since then she has mentored three female students and continues to keep a close relationship with them all. PACT is the only group she has stayed committed to because of how beneficial she feels it is. Mentoring has been a win-win for her because it reminds her of how the first year can be and in return she has provided support to shy female students and it has worked out really well because she likes to talk.

Participant Summary

The above provided an overview of each participant interview based on the interview protocol including why they chose to attend university, what program they were in, challenges they have faced, why they decided to join PACT, as well as some anecdotal points that gave more insight into their experience. The dominant themes that emerged from the interview

responses are described next. Responses specific to aspects of PACT programming are summarized in Appendix J to provide general ideas that can be included in peer-mentor programming for anyone interested in developing an Aboriginal peer mentoring program. However, as explained earlier, a detailed analysis of PACT is not undertaken as this is not a program evaluation project.

Dominant Themes

Findings in this chapter are organized into dominant themes, because with structured interviews, I was able to compare the data from participant to participant, which allowed me to clearly see when patterns emerged. As I examined the interview transcriptions, similar themes, quotes, or statements were noted during the analysis phase with manual coding and verification through *Tropes*. This allowed me to create a list of recurring statements about the participants' experiences. Participants were Aboriginal students in a peer-mentoring relationship. I then organized these themes, quotes, or statements into significant statements, which provided me with an understanding of the phenomenon. The end result was a list of common themes, which I interpret as dominant themes.

Dominant themes showed that participants had similar thoughts about the following: motivation to attend university; perceptions about starting university; academic preparedness; challenges that affected academic performance; reasons for getting involved; and, reasons for wanting to be in a peer-mentoring relationship. Participants also had similar perceptions of how peer mentoring helped them; how peer mentoring affected them; how they defined peer mentoring; how peer mentoring provides connections; why peer mentoring should be encouraged

in university; and, they gave similar advice to new Aboriginal students. These themes are

explained next.

Motivation to Attend University: to make a difference/create change in community &/or make better life/living

In order to better understand the participant's experiences in university, I wanted to know

their motivation to attend university. The interview started by asking them to explain what their

current or target faculty was and to explain what motivated them come to university. The

answers about motivation varied, but two themes emerged. These were:

- Making a difference and/or creating change in their communities and;

- Being able to better their life/make a good living.

Helen incorporated both of these in her response when she said, "I enjoy school, I knew that I

needed to go to school to better my life and be able to provide for my family the way I want to

and also to make a difference". In relation to working in the community, Tara explained that she

decided to get her Social Work degree so that she could "work with my people and work with

my community". Other responses were about being able to pursue their passion, being able to

travel, and one student came because his parents wanted him to get a post-secondary education.

Of note is that two students had changed their degree goals from Nursing to a different program

and two of the older students came to university for a career change. Two students also had

plans to attend Red River College after university to pursue additional training; attending

university was a way to complete the requirements for their future college program.

Perceptions about University: feeling nervous, scared or that they could not do it is minimized by family support

In order to elicit their perceptions about what kind of thoughts and feelings they had about university before they started and how they planned to address their feelings once they got here, the second and third questions asked: 2) Thinking back to before you started university, what kind of thoughts or feelings did you have about how university life might be like; and 3) Based on your thoughts and feelings, did you have any ideas or plans on how to address them? If yes, what were your ideas/plans?

The themes that emerged included:

- Feelings of being scared and nervous to attend university

- Feelings of thinking that university was not something they could do

From the answers related to being scared and nervous, these feelings were associated with coming from a rural area and not knowing the city, how big the university seemed, and not knowing what university would be like. As Jen explained:

> Before I started university I was very nervous and scared. I wasn't sure what it would be like. Some people told me what it would be like and made it sound like it was going to be awesome, but my first year wasn't awesome for me and it was hard, but as I went on it got better.

The feelings associated with thinking that university was something they could not do were related to feelings of not being prepared for university. Colleen did not finish high school and so never thought she would be able to come to university and thought that attending university was unrealistic. It was only through her husband's encouragement that she decided to try. Joshua also did not finish high school and because of this said; "I didn't think that university was great for me. I didn't think that I was ready for university". Tina had similar thoughts and even though she was a successful career woman, she said:

> However, when it came to university I did not think that was something I could do. I thought you had to be smarter to be a university student. I thought that, for one, being Indigenous; I thought that was definitely going to be a struggle for me.

To help allay their feelings, a couple of students had friends or family to show them around campus so they could learn where their classes were. One student even took a bus with her friend for the first few weeks so she would not get lost. Helen explained:

> I remember being very scared and very nervous especially coming from a rural community and I lived there my whole life, I didn't come to the city that much. I did, but you know not for long periods of time and I remember I was so scared to go to the campus and I, you know, I didn't know the city…I didn't know the transportation, like the buses, so it was entirely new story coming from a rural community.

In thinking back to the beginning of the school year, Joshua wishes he could tell himself to relax and calm down. Tina coped by introducing herself to the Aboriginal Student Centre staff and creating relationships with her professors, counselors, and Elders and by creating these connections she reports that she has "been able to excel".

Of note, three participants mentioned the Aboriginal Student Centre specifically for helping them adjust to university that helped them foster relationships, who helped as a go between with other offices when and who made it easier it to be here. In fact, the Aboriginal Student Centre was referenced as a positive support throughout the interviews.

Academic Preparedness: transition to university from high school and academic difficulty affects success

The next question asked participants to think about their experiences in university compared to how they thought it would be. The question was: Once classes began, based on how you were feeling prior to starting classes, was university like what you thought it would be? If not, why not? If yes, how so?

In relation to this question, themes that emerged from the data were:

- Comparisons of high school versus university, and;

- Explanations of academic difficulty

Jen said that university was not how she thought it would be and even though she knew her classes would be hard she acknowledged, "They are a lot different from high school". Lynn said because she went to the University of Winnipeg Collegiate for high school she was familiar with how university classes were structured but was surprised at the amount of people on campus. Helen had this to say about the difference between high school and university and academic difficulty:

> [W]hen I first started I really struggled. I was falling behind, I was having trouble like grasping chemistry specifically, because I had so much other courses, so it wasn't like high school at all, and I just never expected that. I thought it would be a little bit the same because in high school I took a lot of courses and always had a heavy course load kind of thing and it never bothered me, but university is a totally different story.

> In regards to academic difficulty, most participants mentioned at least one area in which they struggled. They struggled with things like heavy course loads, memorizing concepts, writing skills and time management. Tara thought university was how she thought it would be, but struggled with time management. She tried treating her study time like work and came to university from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. She said she "would go to classes and do some work, whatever, and then would socialize until 4 o'clock and then I wouldn't do any schoolwork when I got home". After her first round of marks Tara realized she had to make some changes and started studying at home as well. Tina also said university was how she thought it would be and knew it would require be a lot of work:

> But it was work that I could certainly handle, because again, I was coming directly from the workforce where I was a manager. I had a lot of work to do; it was just different work. University was very unstructured work because at university nobody was taking attendance and nobody could care less if you showed up or not, but it mattered to me.

In Tina's case, she explained that what helped her is that held herself accountable and showed respect to her professors by showing up to class and forming relationships with them. As for Colleen, when talking about her first experiences in university she said, "It was very challenging, definitely the writing aspect was very challenging, but I was surprised with the amount of help that was available". For help, Colleen used University 1 services, the Academic Learning Centre writing tutors and eventually connected with the Access program. Lucas was actually surprised at how much better university turned out to be. He thought classes would not be very interactive and in large lecture theatres, but as Lucas explained, "A lot of my classes were smaller…so it felt more personal with the prof".

Challenges that Affected Academic Performance: being shy, anxious; using Aboriginal peer/family support to help

The fifth interview question asked participants to discuss challenges that had affected their academic performance. The question asked was: Did you experience any challenges (or are you experiencing any challenges) that have affected your academic performance (challenges being social, cultural, academic, personal issues)? If yes, please explain. If no, please explain what you think has helped you to avoid such challenges.

This question generated a lot of discussion from participants and challenges varied from person to person. However, a few similarities and themes emerged. These were:

- Social challenges with shyness and anxiety, and;

- The use of Aboriginal peers and family as support

For academic challenges, participants struggled with course load, keeping up with readings, finding time to study, getting the grades needed for scholarships, math concepts, and not feeling prepared due to not graduating from high school. For social challenges, in addition to shyness

and anxiety, there were also issues of depression and not feeling confident or being persistent.

For personal issues, there were some financial difficulties, health problems, issues at home,

relationship problems; one student had a major accident, three students had family members pass

away and two students specifically mentioned racism.   No one reported any cultural challenges.

Three of the ten participants spoke in detail about their anxiety. Of the three, two mentioned they

had sought medical treatment for it.   Marie who had financial and family issues as well and had

some family members pass away during her time in university sought treatment for her anxiety and

also went to sessions on campus about dealing with anxiety. Overall she reported, "I've had a

rough time these past couple of years".   Jen, the other participant who sought medical treatment

for anxiety, sees a doctor regularly and in her first year of university was diagnosed with diabetes,

anxiety, and depression.   Jen had a major injury during university due to a car crash, which

contributed to the toll on her as she describes:

> Like first year was really hard for me because I was extremely shy and then also as the
> years went on my diabetes still affects [me], like even though I've had it for a while, it is
> something that's hard to control. My shyness though was one thing that was hard to deal
> with because just like meeting other people and talking, even just talking to anyone like
> academic advisers and stuff, I would feel nervous too.

Joshua also experienced anxiety and he attributed it to being in social situations:

> My main challenge was that I have extremely bad anxiety around social places, of just
> talking to people in general. I have a really hard time doing that but as, like, I started in
> September I wouldn't speak to anyone, but gradually I got…I was getting better and better
> at speaking out loud or talking to people who were asking questions to professors.

Both Jen and Joshua went on to explain that eventually they got better in social situations. As

for shyness, Helen also reported being very shy and quiet. Helen explained, "I was really shy

and quiet so that was tough… it was difficult at first. I didn't talk to anybody and I guess in

group projects I was more quiet and not as vocal as I am now".

Tim explained that his challenges were family and financial difficulties and the challenge

of trying to get the grades needed for scholarships, which in turn would help with the financial

issues. This cycle was stressful to him. This is the only question that elicited comments about

racism. About racism he said, "I have heard a lot of stories of people being mean towards

Aboriginals, although I have not experienced that myself, probably because I don't look

Aboriginal as much as other people; I've heard stories about it".

In contrast, Tina had direct instances of racism and told this story:

> I did find that as I was going through my classes, especially because I am a mature student
> that I certainly ran into my fair share of racism you know, and having to answer certain
> questions that I prefer not to. One of them, I'll never forget it. It was in my 2nd year. One
> of the girls that I was friends with, she had said: 'Well I don't really understand this, and I
> don't mean this with any disrespect, but I just don't understand why your people can't get
> over it. Like that was so long ago and this is a totally different time'. So it was like whole
> ugh, I don't want to have to explain the situation. Little things like that.

Tina's other issues were with math and issues at home with her partner, but she sought help for

anything that came up as much as she could.

As described, most participants went on to explain what supports they used to overcome

any difficulties. Supports used were academic advising, including three participants who had

Access support in counseling and advising; tutors, medical treatment, the Aboriginal Student

Centre and Migizii Agamik, student counseling, and Elder support. Of the ten participants, three

reported using the supports of peers, two used the support of their parents, and one specifically

mentioned getting support from her spouse. This was Colleen whose husband works full-time

and supports her financially while she attends university. Colleen is one of the participants who

left a career to go back to school. What she struggled with was "confidence and being

persistent". She also felt that her non-academic friends did not understand why she could no

longer socialize. To overcome any stress she said, "…just exercising and taking time for myself

has been really important to help me through that". As for parental support, both Jen and Lynn

mentioned their mothers as someone who encouraged them. After Jen's accident, it was her

mother who made her return to university and Lynn's mom also attends university so she gained

study tips from her.

Of note is that three participants talked about how the support of other Aboriginal

students, who they could relate to, helped them overcome some difficulties. Marie, who is in

Nursing and finds the program stressful explained, "I was reaching out to others and I have some

students in the faculty that are also Aboriginal that know exactly what I am going through and

we kind of get through it together". Jen also revealed that using peer support helped her become

more social, "My shyness, though, was one thing that was hard to deal with…but eventually,

over the years like being in PACT and other student groups, it helped me get used to it and be

more social". Joshua who suffers from social anxiety also said that making friends has helped

him. He explained, "I have made a lot of friends since I've been here and I think, like, my

friends have given me a lot of emotional support too, to help me". Tina also referenced the idea

that knowing other Aboriginal students helps and she spoke positively about culture:

> Culturally though, I always felt safe in Migizii Agamik- the Aboriginal Student Centre,
> because we are all kind of speaking the same language, and by that I mean we are all
> Aboriginal, we are celebrating our culture in those confines of the safe space.

Since PACT is primarily for Aboriginal students, these comments support the idea that peer

relationships can have a positive impact on students. After this set of questions that asked about

their thoughts on university and what issues and general supports they used, the remainder of the

questions moved onto their experiences in PACT.

Reasons for Getting Involved: to spend time with other Aboriginal students they could relate to

The sixth interview question asked participants to explain why they decided to join PACT.

The question was: Why did you decide to join Promoting Aboriginal Community Together? As

in, what made you want to be a part of PACT?

One main theme emerged:

- Participants joined because it was an opportunity to spend time with other Aboriginal students who they could relate to. I call this phenomenon an interest in "common identity".

When it came to learning about PACT, three participants learned about it through the

Aboriginal Student Centre (ASC) through staff, posters, or their orientation course and one

participant learned about it in their Access orientation. The ASC offers an orientation course for

university credit in early to mid-August and Access requires a 2-week orientation prior to

September for new students. PACT facilitators would visit these student orientations, explain

the PACT program, and encourage them to sign up. Jen learned about PACT in the ASC

orientation course and Helen and Marie learned about it through the ASC. Helen said she

learned it was a program being offered at the ASC and she wanted to get "more involved with

on-campus things". As for Marie, she said, "I was always there, I was studying there all the time

and I got to know some of the staff and you always see posters about [PACT]. Someone

suggested joining the group and I did". Lynn joined because her mom was a PACT member, and

Tina joined because she was encouraged to do so by someone she admired. Other reasons for

joining were to meet someone who was in their target faculty and Jen also said she joined

because her friends were in PACT and had heard about it the year before, but was "too scared to

join". Joshua, who heard about PACT in the Access orientation, had this to say about joining,

"…it made it sound like you get a mentor that shows you around campus and it's just a friendly

environment and cuz I didn't really know anyone…that sounded really good".

As for the main theme, five participants referenced joining PACT because of the benefit of

being with students who shared a common identity. Helen said:

> Being with a group of people that I feel like I can relate to more, or identify with, and I just
> find that it's easier to make friends in the Aboriginal community on campus as opposed to
> other, you know, other nationalities or ethnicities. I don't know if that's just my
> preference, or me but that was why…

Tara simply said, "Because it was an Aboriginal student group…I knew I would meet many

Aboriginal students who know how it feels to be an Aboriginal student so that was what it was".

Tim explained he joined PACT to make "true friends" and that doing so "allowed me to meet

people from a similar background with similar interests and it was really beneficial for me."

Colleen went into more detail in her response:

> I think PACT was an interesting way to meet people around campus and to just identify
> with other Aboriginal people on campus. It's a huge campus, there are thousands of
> students, and so it's nice to see some familiar faces when you're walking through the
> crowd and just be able to say hi or have lunch with somebody and it's just a nice way to do
> that.

Finally, Lucas said he joined because, "I am Aboriginal, and I think supporting the culture is a

good thing".

**Reasons for Wanting to be in a Peer Mentor Relationship: mentees want academic advice;
mentors want to provide advice and help**

Question seven was in several parts, and depending on the answer to the first part, they

were asked a follow up question. Part 7A asked: Did you join as a new student wanting a peer

mentor or as an upper year student wanting to be a peer mentor? Why did you want to be part of

a peer mentor relationship?

Seven students joined to have a mentor and three participants joined PACT to be a mentor. For

those who wanted a mentor, one common theme emerged:

- Mentees wanted academic tips from someone was already familiar with university life

As Marie said:

> I think I already had started to develop some good studying techniques and stuff but I figured that another student who was already familiar with the university could help put me in the right direction and give me tips about going where I wanted to go.

Similarly, Jen explained:

> …I felt like there was still stuff that I could learn about the university and because there's so many things to know about U of M like about services, what to do, how to study, like I still felt like I didn't know how to study well and my mentor was actually very helpful.

Lynn mirrored these sentiments by saying, "I just wanted a mentor because it would have been someone who knew how university worked", and Lucas said, "I thought university was going to be hard and I need someone to relate to who knows what they are doing". Colleen also wanted "to have that connection, that guide, or leadership on campus and to ask questions about where are resources…". Other reasons for wanting a peer mentor included wanting advice on how to enter a particular program; wanting someone to show them around campus; and, one new student joined just to be part of an Aboriginal group (but who was provided with a mentor as well).

Only two of the participants who joined to be a mentor provided comments about why they joined. Tim joined in his second year of study and his main advice was to always apply for scholarships. He explained, "…so I always stress that on my mentees, there is money to be made, so better be up for [applying for scholarships]". As for Tina, she became a mentor, "Because that's the role I've always taken on in my life…I've always taken on a role of helping others". Helen just said she applied to be a mentor because she was already in her third year of university.

Perceptions of How Peer Mentoring Helped: they found a common identity in each other

The next question was Part 7B1 and was given to participants who joined as new student.

The question was: Did PACT help you in any way? If so, how so?

One main theme emerged:

- Peer mentoring provided a way to identify with a common identity

This theme emerged again with three out of the seven "new" students mentioning this

phenomenon. Common identity, as explained before, is the idea that students joined PACT so

they could spend time with other Aboriginal students. This in turn helped them in their academic

journeys. As Tara explained:

> When I joined PACT, I think for me it was because the university is so big, when I went
> out there on campus and I would see other Aboriginal students out there from PACT, it
> made me feel connected. You know it didn't seem like so big, like so many familiar faces
> and like that, and then I would see them at the Aboriginal Student Centre and then [think],
> oh I remember him or her, so many familiar faces.

Marie went on to say:

> …I got to know the other students that were new, and kind of make connections with those
> people, and then students who have already been here for a while, they also reach out to
> you so it's not like you are just connected to one person, you meet a lot of other people and
> they help you as well.

Colleen similarly said, "…it is nice to have that social outlet of people that just comes from a

familiar background or a similar background and…it was just nice to decompress after a long

day or long or a long week". Lucas appreciated PACT because it connected him to the supports

in Migizii Agamik. About PACT he said, "It gave me kind of a sense of support, like I felt like I

had a place to go because I don't think without PACT I would have known where Migizii was".

Other responses indicated that PACT helped participants to develop better social skills, and

become more comfortable in university. Of note, PACT was where Joshua learned about

Aboriginal history in detail for the first time when a guest speaker talked about this to the group.

About this experience Joshua said, "…I guess it sort of, gave kind of like a new light for me on spiritual and Native Studies and stuff like that".

The next question was Part B2 and was given to participants who joined PACT to be a mentor. The question was: Do you think providing peer assistance to a new student was helpful to them? Was there any benefit to you?

There were only three participants who could respond to this question and their answers varied, but Tina's response is important to note as she talked about persistence. Helen explained how she enjoyed the group meetings and activities, but as a mentor, she did not have any successful matches. Her first mentee was too shy; her second match ended due to personal issues on her side that had nothing to do with PACT, and her last match was okay because they became friends, but as she explained, "I didn't even help her with schooling or anything, like I offered, but she was very independent". Tim said he felt he was able to provide some financial stability for his mentee and enjoyed their conversations. On being a mentor he said:

> I like making sure that they go in the right direction and at the very minimum achieving something whether it's something they like it or not, you know, because even if you don't like something you should try to achieve to be the best you know, or do the best.

Tina's answer was the only response in all the interview questions that specifically mentioned how PACT helped with persistence so her response is important to note as it specifically provides a response that directly relates to my main research question:

> To date I've mentored 3 females, 3 Aboriginal students, and each and every one of them, not only do I still maintain a relationship, a close relationship with each one of them, but each one of them in their own way has told me how if it wasn't for my mentoring them, that they are certain that they'd no longer be students in university. And so, that is a huge benefit. PACT is the one organization that I have stayed committed to throughout the years whereas others have come and gone, or I have lost interest. PACT has been solid right through my degree because of how beneficial it is. It's just a win-win on both sides here.

Tina continued on to say that being a mentor helps remind her of being a first year student,

which helps her form relationships with her mentees. Her answers provide insight into how

commitment to the mentor role is critical to providing positive peer mentor relationships.

There were additional parts to question seven (7C and 7D), but they asked about what kind

of activities they participated in and those responses do not add anything critical to this

discussion. 7D was meant for participants who joined for the group aspect only, but they all

made a brief response even though they were all mentors or mentees. The only thing of note in

these questions was that Tim mentioned that the social activities helped him to "relieve anxiety

and hear other people sharing the same stories and problems so you don't feel like you are the

only person". This relates to the theme of common identity.

Connections and familiarity: How Peer Mentoring Affected Participants

The eighth interview question asked participants to explain how PACT affected them. One

main theme emerged:

- Participants felt connected with other students. Therefore, this question also evoked

    responses about common identity, which at this point can be called the predominant

    theme.

Four of the participants revealed how PACT made them feel connected to other students or how

it was a way to meet with familiar people with the same problems. Marie said:

> It helped connect me with other students and I like the part [where] you get to know a lot
> of people like regulars around that area and you're making connections with people who
> understand where you are coming from and the struggles that you have.

Lynn similarly said:

> It made the transition of coming to university easier. It's like a group of people you can be with
> that you are familiar with so it wasn't like just some strangers all the time and just seeing them
> around campus and stuff. It's like, oh hey I know you, how is it going, so it's just like you are not

alone, so it's nice.

Tara was short in her description and simply stated, "…it made me feel connected to have other Aboriginal students working with Aboriginal connections". Tim's response was also brief. He said, "It made me aware of more people with the same problems and anxieties as me so it limited my anxiety a little bit and helped me meet some good friends in the process". Helen also talked about her shyness and how she wanted to be better able to connect to other students. This was difficult for her though as seen in her response:

> [PACT] made me think about my own, I don't know how to word it, but my own social self, and like I was still shy when I joined trying to be a mentor so it was hard to connect with other people, whereas other people, it's so much easier for them.

As for the others, PACT helped Jen go out of her comfort zone and gave her opportunities to volunteer in the community. Colleen said PACT introduced her to Migizii Agamik and how nice it was to go there, because she would be recognized and people would say hi to her. Lucas explained how PACT gave him groundwork for university life, and for Tina, PACT helped inspire her to want to do a good job for the students she worked with. Lastly, Lucas talked about how he liked listening in meetings and talked about when he learned how Bannatyne campus gets their students involved in the neighborhood. He liked hearing how those students were taking pride in their area and respecting the people around them.

Based on all the comments about feeling connected to others, I think this helps to show how peer mentoring helps students feel a sense of belonging in university. Having other Aboriginal students to connect with helped with the transition to university, helped alleviate anxiety, and helped make friends. It also introduced students to Migizii Agamik, a space where they felt welcome and as Colleen said, "…if you're having a bad day there's always smiles waiting for you at that end so it's just really nice". Therefore, PACT gave them a space where they could connect to one another and connect to a space on

campus, which is a positive outcome of this peer mentor program.

Friendship and guidance: How Participants Define Peer Mentoring

The ninth interview question asked participants what peer mentoring meant to them. Two

themes emerged:

- Mentors were like friends who supported them

- Mentors provided guidance about student life

Four of the participants indicated in some way that mentoring to them meant having a friend to

help them. Helen articulated this when she explained:

> It means having someone that you can go to when you're having troubles or challenges or
> even advice, or just someone friendly to, like talk to about anything, even if it's not school
> related to academic or mentoring related. That's what I would say mentoring is.

Jen was specific in her description and referred to PACT terminology when she explained what a

Neechiwaken is:

> Peer mentoring means to me, is two people coming together, and learning from each other,
> and because I know PACT has changed and they now call it Neechiwaken, which means a
> friend, and it is true because like sometimes when you have a mentee, they teach you
> something and you teach them something.

As described earlier, PACT refers to all members as Neechiwaken and tries to refrain from

calling one student the mentee and one student the mentor. Tina also referred to this

terminology:

> So we kind of defined that, and [peer mentoring] means being that Neechiwaken, that
> friend and that is what I've become to you know, the girls which I have helped; we're
> friends. I mean even now we still text each other. This is not a job, this is a friendship,
> and so friendship doesn't just end because the term has ended.

As for Colleen, she referred to PACT as a buddy system, which is another way to describe friends. She

said that peer mentoring is "…just like somebody you can connect with, and to go, to ask questions and

to socialize and it's kind of like a buddy system to check in with".

The other theme to emerge was how mentors provided help and guidance. Of note is that in the four related responses, the help provided was not just about schoolwork. This is demonstrated by Marie who said, "[PACT means] basically just having someone there to help you and it doesn't necessarily have to be like helping you write papers, just someone you can talk to if you need it". Lynn had a brief definition, "For me, peer mentoring means somebody to guide me to help me along the way; they know the struggles of a student". The last one to comment about this was Joshua who said, "It's nice to have someone who wants to be there to mentor you just to show you around campus. So it's a good thing".

Other responses were about role modeling with both Tim saying that PACT meant being a role model to someone and Lucas who said PACT provided him with a role model to look up to. Tara, specifically commented how PACT provided a sense of belonging so her thoughts are of note:

> I think it's just like a sense of belonging to know that, like, say you're too shy to talk to me, but we still have that one person who would be like, "How is it going?" and maybe they will invite you to go places. I know [my mentor] has introduced to me to some other people.

To summarize their responses, peer mentoring meant having someone to go to for guidance, for friendship, and to have someone be a role model as well as provide a sense of belonging to a group.

Question 10 had two parts and asked participants to discuss the benefits of the peer mentoring structure and any disadvantages of it. Part B asked them to discuss any benefits or disadvantages of other aspects of PACT besides the peer mentoring. Since responses are about providing their opinions of the program, they are not included here. Instead, these responses are summarized in Appendix J for anyone interested in the peer mentor structure and to see what students have to say about peer mentor program structure.

Evolving relationships: How Peer Mentoring Provides Connections

The eleventh interview question specifically asked participants about the concept of connection. The question was: "Do you think a peer-mentoring program like PACT helps students feel more connected to one another? How so?" Two themes emerged:

- Peer mentoring provided a way to meet others from similar backgrounds

- Peer mentoring provided a way to network/break the ice with others

These themes are similar as they both touch on how PACT facilitated meeting other students. In regards to meeting others from similar backgrounds, this related to others with similar faculty interests or others with student worries like feeling intimidated and being afraid to talk to others. Marie articulated this when she said:

> Yes, I think like said before, being able to connect with someone from a similar background, that understands what you are going through, and understands you know, that it can be really intimidating coming to the U of M for the first time, and helping work your way through that.

Tim also related to feelings of worry when he said:

> Oh yeah for sure, it helps them meet other people from similar backgrounds and helps them to meet people that might be afraid to talk to one another and meet someone that are like minded so they don't feel alone.

Jen related to meeting others with similar faculty interests. At PACT meetings students often talk about their faculty goals and degree plans and this is helpful because as Jen said, "So if you hear another student is going to your faculty you might go talk to them after and just connects you with others; it's like networking". Colleen and Lucas were the ones who felt that PACT provided connections through networking and icebreakers. Colleen touched on both themes:

> [PACT], it kind of is the icebreaker, it gives you the purpose, everybody is coming together with the purpose to meet everybody else so there are not those barriers of having to find people, to network and identify people who are interested in socializing and finding friends. So in that way it was a nice safe place to go that people of similar mind wanted to find the same thing.

As for Lucas, he said, "…I think it's a good way to breaking the ice and kind of getting people to talk to the others". Other responses were about how PACT allowed them to see each other regularly in otherwise busy lives; how it allowed anxious or shy people feel connected to others, and it made them feel like they are not alone in a big campus. As Tina said, "[PACT] changes the dynamics of how people feel in this crazy campus life, and uh, yeah, it absolutely connects individuals".

Rural, remote, and Aboriginal student support is important: Why Peer Mentoring Should be Encouraged in University

The twelfth question asked students their thoughts about peer mentoring programming at post-secondary institutions. The question was: Do you think PACT is a program that post-secondary institutions like the University of Manitoba should encourage or discourage as an Aboriginal student support program? Why?

Two themes emerged:

- Support programs should be encouraged for rural/remote students

- Aboriginal student support is important

About rural students, Marie said, "I think it's really helpful especially when you are coming from a reserve outside of the city and you are not familiar with the area". Jen elaborated by saying:

> I think it should be encouraged because a lot of Aboriginal students coming into [university] are from out of town and it is their first time away from home and being on their own and this kind of program connects them with others…

Colleen had a lot to say about rural students:

> I find a lot of the students are shy, especially coming from out of town. They don't know anybody and within your community you're used to associating in a certain way and everybody has that history or background or they know that person because they know this other person. You don't have that connection coming to the city…[and] the campus is just a different beast, there is just so many people and everybody is just walking around with purpose and you know, you can get lost just within the sea of people, so it's nice to have that connection…

Her statement supports that peer mentoring can help with sense of belonging. Lynn also alluded

to sense of belonging when she said:

> …I know a lot of people who I just see them, and they're just all quiet and kept to
> themselves and I feel like if they were to join PACT they would realize that they are not by
> themselves, they have people they can talk to and you don't have to be focused just in
> school all the time.

In regards to the importance of Aboriginal student support, Helen said there would always be

Aboriginal students at other institutions that need "just as much [support] as the people at the University

of Manitoba. The more support you have the more likely you are to succeed". It is also important

because Aboriginal students need to know they are not alone. This was specified by Tara who said,

"…we need that support, we need to know you're not the only one…you know we can understand each

other". Lucas said peer mentor programming is important because it is "…promoting Aboriginal

community and as long as it doing that I think it is a good program". Jen likewise said that peer mentor

programming "…is good for Aboriginal students because Aboriginal students are a lot different than

other students on campus". Joshua simply said that Aboriginal programs are "very important". In terms

of peer mentoring Tina said, "Fostering these types of relationships [is] super important, as a matter of

fact, when I go to other meetings, I can't help but think about the structure of PACT and how successful

it is". These statements support that peer support is important to help rural students adjust to university,

alleviates feelings of being alone on campus, and it supports community building as well as

acknowledges that Aboriginal students have different needs than other students.

Question thirteen asked participants for feedback on what kind of activities could be included in

PACT and responses do not add anything to the focus of the discussion. Their opinion statements are

included in Appendix J. The final question is summarized next.

Social support needed for the work required: Advice to New Aboriginal Students

Question fourteen asked participants to give advice. The question was: Thinking about your own experiences, what do you think Aboriginal students new to university should know about university life? Would you encourage them to join an extracurricular activity and why? Two themes emerged from the advice:

- Get involved to develop socially and have someone to talk to

- University requires a lot of work

Helen said she wishes she had done more extracurricular activities and that getting involved "helps develop social skills. It helps you make friends even if you are shy". Marie commented about how it is good to have someone to talk to, "It's good to have someone that can give you support or encouragement and point you in the direction where you need to go if you need help". About being alone, Tara said she would encourage students for sure because, "it's the community so you're not so alone out there; you don't get lost out there, because some people need that support". Lynn echoed this by saying, "I think that they should know that they're not by themselves, because I met people who came from outside of the city and they just don't know anybody and they are too shy to talk to someone".

About the challenges of university, Helen said university "requires a lot of commitment, a lot of time". Lucas also commented that university is a lot of work and students should study hard. Similarly, Jen said:

> I think they should know that university is very different from high school and also like everything is up to them. They basically have to be disciplined to do their own work and it is not going to be easy but it will be worth it.

Tim gave thoughtful long-term advice:

> University is going to be a tough time; minimum is like four years of your life so take your time in choosing your career choice and then you'll know what to do. Don't give up because that's what

university is as well, segregating people that quit versus people that don't quit. Anybody can get university grades on top; you just have to have the mindset, and the power and motivation to do it.

Whether or not students should join extracurricular activities generated a consensus. Seven participants encouraged this for several reasons, with two specifying staying active. Helen advised students to join something they would enjoy and Marie encouraged it because it is "a good way of keeping busy…connecting with others". As for Jen, she believes that extracurricular activities help develop skills "and helps [students] connect to campus life and it helps them meet others". Lynn said that PACT helped her meet new people and helped her lose her shyness so that she was able to join another group and encourages students to try new things. Lucas specifically recommended that students join a lot of extracurricular activities "especially Aboriginal ones".

Colleen was also supportive of extracurricular activities. She explained, "It's just a way again to get more out of university than just education. You can make friends and have positive experiences instead of relating the campus to stress and lectures and frustrations". As for Tina, she was adamant that students should get a "campus family" and said:

> I continue to tell students that I help…that the importance of getting involved, you need a campus family that's all there is to it…. Having a campus family means everything and I always stress that to first year students. And then joining any extracurricular activities is for a number of reasons. One, to stay involved, but it's important again not to do this alone and that you want to get involved [with] others and learn from other people's experiences. Why make a mistake if someone else made it before you; learn from them.

Lastly, both Tim and Joshua advised students to join activities that helped keep them active. Josh had this to say, "Staying active means an active mind. That's my thing; it's like physics. You know if you are active you are positive if you are doing nothing you are negative, that's how I look at it". As for Joshua, he said told a story about this:

> I think the Aboriginal students coming from the reserves need to know programs like PACT, and I encourage them to join any, like, activities in the gym, just like to get their minds going. Maybe like I know a lot of students I have, I made a friend and her name, I forget what her name was, but she was scared from the nerves and she missed home a lot and she ended up dropping out cuz she

couldn't do it and I think extra activities in the gym would have had benefited her.

All in all, participants were thoughtful and specific in their advice to new students and this question generated the longest responses in the interview. To summarize, advice to new students is to meet people to talk to and to go to for support and not feel alone. Even if someone is shy, they can develop social skills by doing this. Participants also related that university can be challenging, requires a lot of work and discipline, and is different than high school. Finally, students should get involved in extracurricular activities to connect with others, to alleviate the frustrations of university, to stay active and have a healthy mind, and to create a campus family.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with a participant overview followed by demographic details. A brief synopsis of each interview was also provided to give substance to the participants out of respect for their stories and time. This was followed by a breakdown of the responses for each question with emerging themes from responses described in detail and organized into dominant themes. Responses to questions that provided commentary or opinions on programming aspects were not included, as they did not provide relevant information to the discussion. These comments and suggestions are listed in Appendix J for those interested in learning what participants had to say about specific program components.

Chapter 5:   Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This study examined the perceptions and experiences of post-secondary Aboriginal students who were part of a peer mentoring relationship through the Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) program at the University of Manitoba and explored whether peer mentoring helps students persist in their academic goals. It also examined if peer mentoring affects sense of belonging to the university. Participants for this study were ten Aboriginal students who were current or former PACT members.

This chapter discusses whether peer mentoring contributes to the persistence or sense of belonging of Aboriginal students using the dominant themes that emerged from the participant interviews to frame the discussion. This is accomplished by comparing the results in Chapter 4 with what I expected to find as outlined in the literature review (Chapter 2). Comparisons are framed using one of my four research questions to structure my interpretation and to bring the original study objectives into focus. By doing so, I can put the data into perspective and reflect on the findings to describe what can be learned from this study, which is described in Chapter 6. Secondary themes that were not defined as dominant themes, but that warrant discussion are also included at the end of this chapter. Where possible, findings are organized by a numerical breakdown of participant responses, which is not usual for qualitative studies. However, because structured interviews were used for data collection, a quantitative description of responses was useful to show how each dominant theme was selected.

As a reminder, the dominant themes found in Chapter 4 showed that participants had similar thoughts about the following: motivation to attend university; perceptions about starting university; academic preparedness; challenges that affected academic performance; reasons for

getting involved; and, reasons for wanting to be in a peer-mentoring relationship. Participants also had similar perceptions of how peer mentoring helped them; how peer mentoring affected them; how they defined peer mentoring; how peer mentoring provides connections; why peer mentoring should be encouraged in university; and, they gave similar advice to new Aboriginal students. The discussion begins with an explanation about the first dominant theme and how it connects to the first research question, "What challenges do Aboriginal students have in university?"

Discussion of Dominant Themes and Findings

Motivation to Attend University: to make a difference/create change in community &/or make better life/living

The first dominant theme found was that the motivation of Aboriginal students to attend university is based on wanting to make a difference in the community and to be able to better their lives and/or make a good living. These results came out of the first interview question that asked participants about their motivation to attend university in order to provide context to their subsequent experiences in university.

I identified this as a dominant theme because four of the ten participants referred to these motivational influences. Specifically, the motivational influences were to graduate and give back to their community by working for them or representing their communities in professional fields as described by Helen, Tara and Joshua. Or, participants want to provide a good life for their families and to do that they want to graduate and make a good living as described by Helen and Lynn. Helen incorporated all of these factors in her responses when she said, "I enjoy school, I knew that I needed to go to school to better my life and be able to provide for my family the way I want to and also to make a difference."

The emergence of these motivational factors is supported by the literature review that described motivations that support persistence. As found by Guillory and Wolverton (2008), Native American students viewed family, giving back to their community, and on campus social support as factors that supported their persistence. The students wanted to persist in order to make a better life for their families. They also wanted to improve their communities. As Lopez (2001) said, "Ethnic minority young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds often see education as a means to better their lives and avoid the difficult lives of their parents" (as cited in Dennis et al., 2005, p. 224). Guillory and Wolverton (2008) also showed that Aboriginal students want to succeed for their families because "[to] persist in earning a college education [brings] hope of making life better for their families" (p. 74).

The research question that framed this interpretation was, "What challenges do Aboriginal students have in university?" By asking them about their motivations, I was looking to see whether their motivations overcame any challenges and helped them to persist. Based on their responses, I suggest that the personal goals of Aboriginal students can affect persistence. In this case, the personal goal of bettering the lives of their families and communities was a positive factor for persisting in university.

Perceptions about University: feeling nervous, scared, or that they could not do it is minimized by family support

The second dominant theme found that before starting university participants felt nervous, scared, or that being successful in university might not be something they could accomplish. These results came out of the second interview question that asked what they thought university would be like in order to understand how they felt prior to starting university and whether their feelings affected their initial motivation. Responses related to feelings of being nervous and

scared were associated with coming from a rural area, the intimidating size of the university, or not knowing what university would be like. The feelings associated with thinking that university was something they could not do successfully were related to feelings of not being prepared for university. The findings of these two feelings are explained separately because they are different from each other and because feelings of thinking university was not something they could do correspond with the responses of a specific age range.

I identified being scared or nervous about attending university as a dominant theme because eight of the ten participants referred to these types of feelings. Specifically, Helen noted being very scared or nervous about starting university due to coming from a rural area, and Jen and Joshua were scared or nervous because they did not know what university would be like. Marie was "intimidated" by the size of the campus, Tara said she was "terrified" because she was older, and Colleen thought coming to university was overwhelming and she was very nervous to do so. Tim was nervous because he did not know anyone, and Tina said she felt "nervous and unprepared".

Helen's explanation about how coming from a rural area made her feel nervous and scared is supported by the literature review. Hardes (2006) identified that coming from a rural or reserve community to attend university can be like "culture shock". This is supported by Timmons (2013) who expanded on this difficulty, "Students often have to leave their small communities and travel to attend post-secondary institution. This has been identified as a significant challenge for students, as they often leave their support systems in their communities" (p. 232). Hardes (2006) also said that a factor that affects persistence is feeling overwhelmed by the size of a university, which is seen in Marie's response.

The other set of feelings about how being successful in university might not be something they could accomplish was related to feelings of not being prepared for university. I incorporate this feelings to this theme, because self-doubt was a specific finding attributed to two of the three mature students. I define mature student as participants who are 30 years of age or older. For admissions purposes, mature students are students who enter university at 21 years of age or older. One of the mature students (Joshua) who fit this admission category also referenced his self-doubt of attending university. This merits discussion as the differences in the age of participants show a distinct difference in their responses.

Colleen, 39, explained that because she left home at the age of fifteen she was not able to finish high school and because of that never thought she would be able to come to university. She changed her mind only with the encouragement of her husband. Tina, 35, thought she had to be smarter to be a university student and "when it came to university I did not think that was something I could do". She got through these feelings with the support of her sister. Joshua, 21, explained that he "struggled hard in high school" and dropped out and even though he later attended adult education, he was not sure if he was capable of doing well in university classes. Looking back on his first year he said it was not as stressful as he thought it would be and was motivated to finish and "stay in" university.

The emergence of these emotional responses is supported by the literature review that explained a lack of academic preparation could affect persistence (Hardes, 2006; Lundberg, 2007; and Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). The reason a lack of academic preparation could affect persistence is because a lack of self-confidence may affect their motivation to complete their goals. This is seen in Jackson et al. (2003) who explain that the academic goals of Native American students plays a role in persistence, especially in regards to their self-confidence and

what they can achieve. McInerney and Swisher (1995) found that "perceptions of confidence and competence were key aspects to Native Americans' motivation for academic achievement" (as cited in Jackson et al., 2003, p. 549). Therefore, the opposite might be true and that a lack of confidence could have a negative effect on motivation and persistence. However, Joshua said that despite his doubts, he was motivated to stay in university so whether self-doubt or lack of confidence affects persistence is inconclusive.

The research question that framed these interpretations was, "What challenges do Aboriginal students have in university?" By asking participants about their feelings about starting university, I was looking to see whether their challenges, in this case, emotional challenges, had an effect on persistence. Based on their responses I suggest that Aboriginal students, whether they come from rural or urban areas, are coming to unfamiliar and large institutions where feelings of nervousness and fear can occur. In this case, feelings of nervousness or fear about starting university have the potential to affect persistence negatively, because these feelings could result in dropping out. However, there was no evidence to this effect in this set of responses so results are inconclusive. As to whether self-doubt affects persistence, lack of confidence could play a negative role in persistence as well, but results are also inclusive.

Family support

Another aspect to this theme is that feelings of being scared or nervous or that university was something they could not do was minimized by the support of family as well as by peers. The motivational factor of family is supported in the literature review that showed that family was frequently cited as a motivational factor that affected their participants' persistence (Guillory and Wolverton, 2008, p. 74). The importance of family support also came out in the third question, which asked participants to specify how they planned to address the thoughts and

feelings they had discussed in question two. This question was asked so that participants could more deeply reflect on their experiences and provides insight into the first year experience of Aboriginal students. (This is why responses from question three are included in this section). Out of the seven students who referenced feelings of being scared or nervous, four specified they had family who helped them, and three specified they had friends who helped them.

For example, to overcome feelings of nervousness, Helen had a friend show her around campus before university started and said, "I don't know what I would've done without her. I would have been way more scared I think". Marie also had family and friends to show her around campus and said "…it was overwhelming thinking about [university] and it helped to have that friend and family members who have been here before to you know…put me in the right direction". Jen and Lynn also had parental support through rides to school or advice on how university might be like. Colleen also said her husband supported her and Tina found support through her sister. These results further demonstrate that family support and encouragement can have a positive factor on persistence despite any initial worries. This fits with the research done by Jackson et al. (2003) who reported, "Students talked about the strong encouragement and support they received from one or both of their parents or a first- or second-degree relative…. In many cases the encouragement was almost an imperative to be academically successful" (p. 553).

The research question that framed these interpretations was, "What challenges do Aboriginal students have in university?" Based on frequency of responses related to family support, I suggest that family support can counteract any feelings of being unprepared for university. In addition, by asking participants about how they planned to address the feelings they discussed in question two, I was looking to see what strategies Aboriginal students use to

persist in their academic goals. In this case, family support was a positive factor for persisting in university. Based on this evidence, I suggest that family support can have a positive effect on persistence, because having that support helped participants begin or continue in their studies.

Academic Preparedness: transition to university from high school and academic difficulty affects success

The third dominant theme found that as Aboriginal students begin university they find that the transition from high school to university and academic difficulty in course work can have an affect on their success. These results came out of the fourth interview question that asked participants to compare their actual experiences in university with their initial expectation about university. This question was asked in order to shift their focus from recollections about being a new student to their experiences as university students overall. Responses related to transition were associated with comparisons of high school versus university and explanations of academic difficulty were related to specific courses or topics.

I identified academic preparedness as a dominant theme because two of the ten participants referred to the transition to university as affecting their academic performance and five participants referred to academic difficulty. Specifically, Helen and Jen described the transition into university as affecting academic performance and participants who ran into academic difficulty were Marie, Tara, Colleen, and Tina. Helen also cited academic difficulty. In regards to transition, even though only two responses referenced it, put together, there were seven responses in total that referred to academic difficulty as a result of transition from high school or difficulties with course work.

The emergence of the effect of transition and academic difficulty is supported by the literature review that explained how these challenges might affect academic success. For

example, Salinitri (2005) said that the challenges of transitioning from high school are related to "new found independence, homesickness, time management, finances or different teaching styles" (p. 854). As for academic difficulty, Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, Von Hippel and Lerner (1997) "found that most students, including academically achieving students, enter university unprepared for the required level of work and often need assistance to acclimate to a new environment" (as cited in Salinitri, 2005, p. 855). In addition, these results show the benefits of peer mentoring to new students and how "engagement activities have the potential to address the personal, social, and academic competences of students who are transitioning to university" (Goff, 2011, p. 9).

It is important to note here that participants did seek assistance for their difficulties because it shows that students took action to improve their academic difficulties in order to persist in their studies. Marie sought advice in choosing courses and found that helpful, because she benefited from her writing class. To overcome her feelings of being overwhelmed by a big campus, Jen had a friend show her around before classes started. Colleen also saw advisors and used the services of writing tutors and eventually joined the Access program, and Tina introduced herself to her professors and created relationships with them. By taking action to improve their difficulties, particularly by seeing advisors, they demonstrated they wanted to change their difficulties into academic success. The strategies they used to improve are in line with Tinto (2010) who said, "Student expectations about what they need to do to be successful in college, at least in the formal sense, is shaped not only by the prior knowledge students possess, but also by academic advising whether by faculty or staff" (p, 58).

The research question that framed these interpretations was, "What challenges do Aboriginal students have in university?" By asking Aboriginal students about their experiences

in university, I was looking to see whether they encountered any challenges and whether they sought assistance to overcome difficulties in order to persist in their studies. Results show that participants adjusted study habits, became familiar with the campus, and sought academic help to improve academic difficulties. Therefore, I suggest that seeking help for academic difficulties can alleviate struggles. In this case, wanting to do better in their courses and seeking help when difficulties occurred can be a positive factor for persisting in university for Aboriginal students.

Challenges that Affected Academic Performance: being shy, anxious; using Aboriginal peer/family support to help

The fourth dominant theme found was that social challenges of shyness and anxiety can have an impact on academic performance and to counteract these issues Aboriginal students rely on their peers and family for support. These results came out of the fifth interview question that asked participants to discuss any social, cultural, academic, or personal challenges that had affected their academic performance. This question was asked to provide more insight into the factors that influence Aboriginal student success and whether any negative factors affected persistence.

I identified this as a dominant theme because four of the ten participants referred to how the social challenges of being shy or anxious affected their academic performance. Helen, Marie, Jen, and Joshua described the challenges of shyness and anxiety. For Helen, being shy meant she did not talk to her fellow classmates and if they asked her to do something she would just do it "so that was tough". Marie's anxiety was so bad she saw her doctor who referred her to accessibility services for exam accommodations. For Jen, talking to people was "really hard" because she was "extremely shy". As for Joshua, he said that he has "extremely bad anxiety around social places".

Other challenges that participants faced were issues with academic difficulty, financial difficulty, and personal issues with deaths in the family, relationship issues, and both Tim and Tina made references to racism. There were no reports of cultural challenges. Jen actually dealt with a number of these issues in her first year including being diagnosed with diabetes, anxiety, and depression, and when her grandmother died she got into a car accident on the way to the funeral resulting in injury.

In regards to how participants used Aboriginal peer support was seen in the responses of Marie, Jen, Joshua, and Tina. They found support by making friends, meeting other Aboriginal students going through similar situations, and getting involved in student groups. Lynn and Colleen used family for support meaning a total of six out of ten students used Aboriginal peer or family support to overcome any challenges. Jen was the only student to say she used both peer and family support to deal with the numerous issues she was facing. To cope with her social and medical issues she relied on the support of her mother who encouraged her to keep going to university. She also used the peer support she found in PACT to help her with her shyness and said, "…over the years like being in PACT and other student groups, it helped me get used to [talking] and be more social".

The emergence of using peer and family support is supported by the literature review that described these supports and further demonstrates the importance of family support as seen in question three about how family support can have a positive factor on persistence. Thompson et al. (2013) found family support to be an important aspect to persistence and reported that it "has consistently been documented to relate to a variety of educational outcomes, including adjustment to college, persistence, and well-being" (p. 220). In relation to peer support, Goff (2011) said that students benefit from getting academic and social support from their peers (p. 1).

Findings from this question also support the common barriers and challenges faced by

Aboriginal students in post-secondary education as seen in the literature (Hampton & Roy, 2002;

Hardes, 2006, Holmes, 2006, Preston, 2008a, and Preston, 2008b).

The research question that framed this interpretation was, "What challenges do Aboriginal

students have in university?" By asking them about their social, cultural, academic, or personal

challenges, I was looking to see whether challenges had an affect on their academic performance

and/or on their persistence. Based on their responses, I suggest that Aboriginal students seek

support from their peers and from family to overcome challenges, which helps them to persist in

their academic goals. In this case, seeking support from their peers and family was a positive

factor for persisting in university as they all strove to overcome their challenges. It also supports

previous findings from question three about the positive influence of family support on

persistence.

The next part of the discussion is based on the second research question, "What are the

perceptions of Aboriginal students about their experiences as participants or former participants

in a peer-mentoring relationship?" This question helps to frame my interpretation of the next set

of findings about the experiences of Aboriginal students who were part of a peer-mentoring

relationship and continues with the sixth dominant theme.

Reasons for Getting Involved: to spend time with other Aboriginal students they could relate to

The fifth dominant theme found was that participants joined PACT because it was an

opportunity to spend time with other Aboriginal students who they could relate to. These results

came out of the sixth interview question that asked participants to explain why they decided to

join PACT in order to discover what motivated them to join a peer-mentoring program. For this

question, wanting to spend time with other Aboriginal students was the main theme to emerge

and for that reason I called this phenomenon an interest in "common identity". I define common identity as the desire to interact with students from a similar background, in this case other Aboriginal students, because together they understand the experience of being an Aboriginal post-secondary education student, which I suggest can ease the transition of entering university.

I identified this as a dominant theme because four of the ten participants referred to joining PACT in order to meet other Aboriginal students they could relate to and two students possibly implied this in their responses. Specifically, Helen, Tara, Colleen, and Tim made reference to joining in order to spend time with other students they could relate to. Helen said she joined because she wanted to get involved with campus activities and chose PACT because it was a group of people she felt she could "relate to more or identify with". Tara said she joined because she would meet other Aboriginal students who knew how it felt "to be an Aboriginal student". Colleen's response was similar to Helen's, and Tim said joining PACT allowed him to meet people "from similar backgrounds". Joshua also intimated that he joined PACT for this reason when he said it "sounded really good to just have that support system…and maybe I would've made a few friends". In addition, Lucas said he joined PACT because "supporting the culture is a good thing", which implies he joined because it was an Aboriginal student program where he could meet other Aboriginal students.

The emergence of wanting to identity with other students is supported by the literature review that described Astin's (1993) work that refers to the influence of peer relations. "Viewed from a collective or sociological perspective, a peer group would be defined as any group of individuals in which the members identify, affiliate with, and seek acceptance and approval from *each other*" (p. 401). As seen in the responses, the participants wanted to be able to identify with one another. Shotton et al. (2007) also showed that structured social support systems are a factor

that fosters success in American Indian students. Dennis et al. (2005) further highlighted the importance of social identity within peer relationships in general. Cooper's (2009) description of "collective identity" can also be applied to this phenomenon and defines collective identity as "the elements of identity related to the belonging to a particular group or social category" (p. 5).

The research question that framed these interpretations was, "What are the perceptions of Aboriginal students about their experiences as participants or former participants in a peer-mentoring relationship?" By asking participants why they joined a peer-mentoring program I was looking to see what motivated them to join and whether decisions could be related to persistence. Based on their responses I suggest that Aboriginal students benefit from opportunities that allow them to spend time with other Aboriginal students, because they feel that they can better relate to one another. In this case, finding a "common identity" in others makes the university experience less daunting and students find comfort in knowing there are other students on campus similar to them, which I believe is a positive factor for persisting in university.

Reasons for Wanting to be in a Peer Mentor Relationship: mentees want academic advice; mentors want to provide advice and help

The sixth dominant theme found was that students joined a peer mentoring program to either get academic advice from someone who was already familiar with university life or to provide academic advice and help students. These results came out of the first part of the seventh interview question (7a) that asked participants to explain why they wanted to be part of a peer mentor relationship where seven students joined to have a mentor and three participants joined PACT to be a mentor.

I identified this as a dominant theme because five out of the seven mentees made reference to joining PACT for academic advice. Marie and Colleen wanted advice on how to get into Nursing; Colleen also wanted advice on where to find student resources. Jen wanted help with study strategies, Lynn wanted a mentor "because it would have been someone who knew how university worked", and Lucas wanted to work with someone who knew what they were doing, because he anticipated that university would "be hard". As for the mentors, two out of three of them responded to this question. Tim said he liked giving advice, particularly financial advice, and Tina said she wanted to be a peer mentor because she has "always taken on a role of helping others".

The emergence of wanting mentors for academic advice is supported by the literature review that described the mentor role and how students could benefit from peer mentoring. Shotton et al. (2007) found that because "[mentees] viewed peer mentors as having recently experienced and successfully negotiated similar situations, participants were more open to seeking their guidance (p. 95). Dennis et al. (2005) also demonstrated that peers are beneficial because they can have a positive effect on learning through the sharing of experiences and giving academic advice (pp. 225-226).

The research question that framed these interpretations was, "What are the perceptions of Aboriginal students about their experiences as participants or former participants in a peer-mentoring relationship?" By asking participants why they wanted to be part of a peer mentor relationship I was looking to see if their responses could be related to persistence. Based on the results, I suggest that new Aboriginal students want to be successful and welcome advice from experienced students. In this case, I think that seeking help from experienced students could have a positive effect on persistence.

Perceptions of How Peer Mentoring Helped: they found a common identity in each other

The seventh dominant theme found was that peer mentoring provided connections with other students from a similar background and further demonstrates how peer mentoring can be related to the concept of "common identity". Participants also found that being in PACT helped develop better social skills and helped them feel more comfortable in university. These results came out of the second part of the seventh interview question (7b) that was directed at participants who joined PACT to have a mentor and asked if, and how, peer mentoring helped them.

I identified this as a dominant theme because four out of the seven mentees made reference to the concept of common identity. Specifically, Marie said that she liked going to meetings because she got to know other students who had been in university for a while and was able to "meet with a lot of other people and they help you as well". Tara said that because the university is so big, seeing other students on campus from PACT made her "feel connected". Colleen said that it was nice "to have that social outlet of people that just comes from a familiar background or similar background". Lastly, Lucas said that with PACT he felt like he had a place to go, which gave him "a sense of support".

The emergence that peer mentoring provided connections is supported by the literature review and further supports the importance of peer relations as well as the importance of social integration. For example, Kuh and Love's (2000) description of social integration explained that is related "to students' levels of social and psychological comfort with colleges' milieus, association with or acceptance by affinity groups, and sense of belonging" (p. 197). This also supports Tinto's (1993) constructs of academic and social integration in relation to the ability of students being able to adapt to the college environment.

The research question that framed these interpretations was, "What are the perceptions of Aboriginal students about their experiences as participants or former participants in a peer-mentoring relationship?" By asking mentees what kind of help they got from peer mentoring I was looking to see if their responses could be related to persistence. Based on the results, I suggest that student programming that provides students with the opportunity to connect with one another on regular basis and allows them to talk about challenges they are facing helps student feel connected to one another. In this case, I think finding a common identity with other Aboriginal students could have a positive effect on persistence because it can be related to sense of belonging as explained above.

In regards to the three mentors, they were asked whether they thought the assistance they provided was helpful to the new students in the third part of question seven (7b2). Helen said that while she enjoyed getting together with the whole group she said her three mentor matches were not successful. However, she was able to form a friendship with her third mentee so was helpful in providing peer support in that way. Tim explained he provided help with financial advice and liked providing mentor support as it reassured mentees that their "mentor is going to be there and give you a truthful answer". He also liked feeling that he was putting his mentees in the right direction and encouraging them to do their best. Tina, who reported successful peer mentor relationships with all of her mentees, was the only participant who directly referred to persistence in the entire interview.

Tina had mentored three female students since she became a PACT mentor and took pride in developing close peer mentor relationships with her students. She said that she helped her mentees feel comfortable on campus by consistently meeting and talking with them and maintained relationships with them even when they no longer required a mentor. Tina's

response to this question specifically addressed how peer mentoring helped with persistence. She explained that each of her mentees said that if they had not had her as a mentor "they are certain they'd no longer be students in university". Tina relates this impact to how reserved and shy her mentees have been and how working with them closely helped them feel more comfortable in university.

The emergence that peer support has a positive effect on persistence is supported by the literature review that described this benefit. For example, Berger and Milem (1999) said, "Positive perceptions of peer support also have positive total effects on subsequent institutional commitment and persistence" (p. 659). In this case, the peer support of Tina had a positive effect on the persistence of three students. Helen and Tim also provided benefits to their mentees through friendship and advice.

The research question that framed the interpretation about persistence was, "What are the perceptions of Aboriginal students about their experiences as participants or former participants in a peer-mentoring relationship?" By asking mentors whether they thought providing peer assistance was helpful to new students I was looking to see what assistance they highlighted as valuable in their role as mentor. Based on the results, I suggest that experienced students who are in a mentor role want to offer support in the form of friendship and advice in a consistent and committed manner. In this case, I think that getting help from experienced students could have a positive effect on persistence because they know what it is like to be a new student and can share their advice based on their experiences and what they found helpful to them.

The next part of the discussion is based on the third research question, "How did being in a peer-mentoring relationship/student community-building program affect their experience as a student?" This question helps to frame my interpretation of the next set of findings about how

being in a peer-mentoring program affected Aboriginal students and continues with the eighth

dominant theme.

Connections and familiarity: How Peer Mentoring Affected Participants

The eighth dominant theme found was that being part of a peer-mentoring program helped

participants feel connected to one another and gave them a way to find other Aboriginal students

they could relate to. Therefore, the concept of common identity was once again highlighted in

this theme. These results came out of the eighth interview question that asked participants how

participation in PACT affected them.

I identified this is a dominant theme because four out of ten participants indicated that

being part of PACT helped them connect to others who were similar to them. Specifically, Marie

said that the connections she made in PACT were "with people who understand where you

are coming from and the struggles that you have". Tara also referenced how PACT made her feel

connected and described connections as "Aboriginal students working with Aboriginal

connections". Lynn said PACT helped her transition into university and that it was "a group of

people you can be with that you are familiar with". On a different note, Tim said PACT helped

alleviate his anxiety, "It made me aware of more people with the same problems, and anxieties as

me so it limited my anxiety a little bit and helped me make good friends in the process".

The emergence that peer relationships provide connections is supported by the literature

review that described how peer relationships could have an effect on social and personal

adjustment. For example, Dennis et al. (2005) argued that peer relationships could have effect

on important college student outcomes such social adjustment and personal-emotional

adjustment (p. 226). The continued emergence that Aboriginal students view peer mentoring as

a way to make connections other with Aboriginal students they can relate to also demonstrates

the importance of programming where Aboriginal students can discover a common identity and

gain a sense of belonging on campus. These results fit with Egege and Kutieleh (2015) who

established that peer mentoring programs help students gain a sense of belonging (p. 266). In

addition, Lynn's statement about how being in peer-mentoring program made the transition of

coming to university easier is supported by Goff (2011) who said, "engagement activities have

the potential to address the personal, social, and academic competences of students who are

transitioning to university" (p. 9).

     The research question that framed these interpretations was, "What are the perceptions of

Aboriginal students about their experiences as participants or former participants in a peer-

mentoring relationship?" By asking participants how PACT affected them I was looking to see

what they viewed as the main benefit of being a peer relationship and whether there was any

connection to persistence. Based on the results, I suggest that Aboriginal students view peer

mentoring as a way to make connections other with Aboriginal students they can relate to. In

this case, I think that feeling connected to other students could have a positive effect on

persistence, because it provides a sense of familiarity and belonging on campus.

     The next part of the discussion is based on the fourth research question, "Do the themes

that emerge show any connection academic persistence?" This question helps to frame my

interpretation of the next set of findings about the experiences of Aboriginal students who were

part of a peer-mentoring relationship and continues with the ninth dominant theme. This

research question and related interview questions is the core of the study to determine whether

peer mentoring contributes to the persistence of Aboriginal students.

Friendship and guidance: How Participants Define Peer Mentoring

The ninth dominant theme found was that participants viewed peer mentoring as a way to get or provide friendship and guidance. These results came out of the ninth interview question that asked participants what peer mentoring meant to them. I identified this is a dominant theme because four out of ten participants said that peer mentoring provided them with some form of friendship and three participants indicated that peer mentoring was a way to get or provide guidance for a total of seven responses about friendship and guidance.

Specifically, in regards to friendship, Helen said peer mentoring meant having someone "friendly" to talk to about anything. Jen framed peer mentoring the way PACT does and how members are called "Neechiwaken, which means a friend". Tina also described peer mentoring in relation to this term and how being a mentor "is not a job, [it] is a friendship". Colleen said to her, peer mentoring was like a "buddy system to check in with". In regards to guidance, Marie said peer mentoring meant having someone to help and talk to as needed. Lynn actually used guide in her description when she said "peer mentoring means somebody to guide me to help me along the way; they know the struggles of student". Lastly, Joshua said that a mentor was someone who wanted to be there for a student in order to show them around. The responses of Tim and Lucas related peer mentoring to role modeling and Tara said peer mentoring gave her a sense of belonging because she knew there would be someone to talk to who could invite her to places and introduce to other students.

The emergence that friendship and guidance is an important aspect to university life is supported by the literature review that described the positive effects of socialization and integration. For example, Tinto (1975, 1993) suggested that students who are successfully socialized "into the campus academic and social systems are more likely to persist" (as cited in Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 643). Tinto (2010) also said that while student retention is primarily

an academic matter, social forces also play a role (p. 63). He goes on to say that "making friends and knowing people is important in gaining a sense of belonging and acceptance as a member of a social community and an important part of developing social identity" (Tinto, 2010, p. 64). In regards to the role modelling mentioned by Tim and Lucas, the emergence of this concept is supported by Good et al. (2000) who said that peer mentoring is "a viable approach to providing role models and leadership for underrepresented groups within higher education" (p. 376). There is also an academic aspect to guidance referred to by Lynn as "the struggles of a student". Richardson and Skinner (1992) referred to the academic side of guidance when they said, "Peers can provide support that is more directly instrumental to college outcomes by forming study groups, sharing notes and experiences, and giving advice about classes to take and strategies to use" (as cited in Dennis et al., 2005, pp. 225-226).

The research question that framed this interpretation was, "Do the themes that emerge show any connection academic persistence?" By asking participants what peer mentoring meant to them I was looking to see if their responses showed any connection to persistence. Based on the results, I suggest that Aboriginal students see peer mentoring as a way to make friends and to get or provide guidance, which may help in the persistence of their goals. By having a mentor available to talk to about challenges, to have as a friend, to socialize with, and who may also be viewed as a role model, gives mentees a better chance at persisting. In this case, I think that PACT peer mentors as friends and guides could have a positive effect on persistence, because it provides a sense of belonging on campus and to a peer group.

Interview question 10a and 10b asked participants what they saw as the benefits or disadvantages to the PACT structure and question 13 asked what supports could be included in PACT, but these results are not relevant to the discussion as they are related to program structure

or are the opinions of students. Therefore, a discussion on these questions is not included in this section and is why some questions are missing in the ensuing sections. A summary of the responses to these questions is provided in Appendix J for those who are interested in this type of information.

Evolving relationships: How Peer Mentoring Provides Connections

The tenth dominant theme found was that peer mentoring provided a way for participants to meet others from similar backgrounds and provided them a way to network and breaks the ice with each other. These perceptions are similar as they both explain how PACT facilitated bringing students together. These results came out of the eleventh interview question that asked participants whether they thought peer mentoring helped students feel more connected to one another.

I identified this is a dominant theme because five out of ten participants referred to how peer mentoring provided a way to connect with others with similar interests or background, two participants referred to how PACT allowed them to network and break the ice with other students like them, and one participant referenced both of these aspects. Therefore, eight participants in total identified these factors as ways in which peer mentoring provided connections to one another. As a side note, all ten participants asserted that peer mentoring provided connections in some way.

About providing connections to others from similar backgrounds, Marie said that PACT allowed them "to connect with someone from a similar background". Tara said it provided a connection to her culture because other PACT members understood where she came from. Lynn and Tim also referenced how being in a peer-mentoring program was a way to see familiar people to make friends or to meet with others who "are like minded". Tina said that PACT

"absolutely" provided connections because it made them feel like they "are not alone in this huge crazy campus".

In regards to similarities and networking, Jen explained that if she heard about another student who had the same faculty interest as her this was "like networking" because she could talk to them about it later. Colleen said that PACT was like an icebreaker because it provided an opportunity for students to meet regularly where they could network, socialize, find friends, and "was a nice safe place to go". Lucas also said that PACT was like an icebreaker because it got students talking to one another. There were also two individual responses with Helen explaining that because of the monthly meetings they got see each other on a regular basis and Joshua said that PACT helped with his social anxiety.

The emergence of peer mentoring as a program that provides positive connections amongst Aboriginal students is supported by the literature review that described these benefits. In particular, Berger and Milem (1999) highlighted the benefits of positive social support amongst minority students (p. 644). Shotton et al. (2007) also contend that structured social support systems is a factor that fosters success in American Indian students and believe that the creation of institutional support groups would improve the retention of these students "by helping them adapt to the university setting" (p. 83). This further supports Brawer (1996) who "supported the use of peer mentoring in order to develop social support networks among new students" (as cited in Good et al., 2000, p. 376).

The research question that framed this interpretation was, "Do the themes that emerge show any connection academic persistence?" By asking participants if they thought peer mentoring helped students feel more connected to one another I was also looking to see if their responses showed any connection to persistence. Based on the results, I suggest that peer

mentoring is a way to provide positive social supports for Aboriginal students, which may help in the persistence of their goals. Peer mentoring provides opportunities for peer relationships to evolve from networking and getting to know one other, to learning which students share similar interests with one another and talking about it, and finally being able to see each other on a regular basis. This familiarity is what can help with persistence. In this case, I think that peer mentoring could have a positive effect on persistence, because it provides a familiar and positive support network that Aboriginal students can depend on when they need to.

Rural, remote, and Aboriginal student support is important: Why Peer Mentoring Should be Encouraged in University

The eleventh dominant theme found was that support programs should be encouraged for rural or remote Aboriginal students and that Aboriginal student support is important. These results came out of the twelfth interview question that asked participants whether an Aboriginal peer mentor program like PACT should be encouraged or discouraged in post-secondary institutions as an Aboriginal student support program.

I identified this as a dominant theme because five out of ten participants referred to how Aboriginal student support is important, two participants referred to how support programs for rural or remote students should be encouraged, and one participant referenced both aspects. Therefore, eight participants in total identified these factors as to why post-secondary institutions should encourage Aboriginal student support programs. This question once again elicited an affirmative response from all ten participants who agreed that support programs should be encouraged in post-secondary institutions.

About the importance of support programs for rural or remote students, Marie said support programs for Aboriginal students are "really helpful especially when you are coming from a

reserve outside of the city and you are not familiar with the area". Jen said that because a lot of

Aboriginal students who attend university come from out of town, a support program like PACT

is good because they are often on their own for the first time "and sometimes you just feel better

knowing" there is someone there to ask questions. The third person who identified rural support

as important was Colleen who said she found a lot of Aboriginal students are shy "especially

coming from out of town". She also said that those coming from out of town are used to being

with people with the same history and background and coming to campus "you can get lost

within the sea of people, so it's nice to have that connection". Her response was based on

observation because she has lived in Winnipeg for her whole life.

In regards to the importance of Aboriginal student support, Helen said there would always

be new Aboriginal students in university and "the more support you have the more likely you are

to succeed". Tara said that programs like PACT are needed because students in the program "can

understand each other". Lucas said that a support program that promotes Aboriginal community

"is a good program". Jen said that peer mentor programming "is good for Aboriginal

students because Aboriginal students are a lot different than other students on campus". Joshua

simply said that Aboriginal programs are "very important" and Tina said peer mentoring as a

support program is important because of the "relationship that is formed" between students and

"because of how supportive the program is" of students.

The emergence that rural, remote, and Aboriginal student support is important is reinforced by the

literature review that described the difficulties that rural students can face and what supports can be put

in place for Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions. First, Hardes (2006) found that students

who come from rural or remote communities to attend university are leaving their support networks

behind (p. 30). She goes on to say that because of this, "Postsecondary institutions must provide

continual understanding and support for [Aboriginal] students when…social issues put them at risk of dropping out" (2006, p. 30). While no participants mentioned dropping out in this question, Joshua did refer to this in question fourteen when he explained he met a student who was "scared from the nerves and she missed home a lot and she ended up dropping out cause she couldn't do it". He also said this student was not in PACT and would have told her to join PACT if he had gotten the opportunity. Therefore, it can be inferred that coming from a rural area is difficult for students and puts them at risk for going back home. This is supported by Timmons' study that found participants "highlighted the difficulty of leaving their small, intimate communities" (2013, p. 234). Second, in regards to the importance of Aboriginal student support, Lundberg emphasized the importance of providing opportunities for Native American students and said "engagement with others is also an important contributor to Native American student success" (2007, p. 415). To that end, Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997) suggested, "finding mentors and creating support groups would be of great benefit" (as cited in Jackson et al., 2003, p. 549). In relation to persistence, Berger and Milem (1999) found that "early peer involvement appears to strengthen perceptions of institutional and social support and ultimately persistence" (1999, p. 658). This supports that peer mentoring as a method to facilitate peer involvement can strengthen persistence.

The research question that framed this interpretation was, "Do the themes that emerge show any connection academic persistence?" By asking participants whether an Aboriginal peer mentor program like PACT should be encouraged or discouraged in post-secondary institutions as a support program I was looking to see what participants viewed as the most important aspects of peer mentoring. I was also exploring if there was any connection to persistence. Based on the results, I suggest that Aboriginal students view rural and remote support as important as well as that Aboriginal student support is important overall. I also suggest that peer mentoring as a support program for Aboriginal students may

help in the persistence of their goals. A peer-mentoring program can provide support to rural or remote students who are new to an institution by pairing them with a mentor who is familiar with the city and the campus. By getting mentor support, rural or remote students who feel homesick or overwhelmed by the size of a university can feel better knowing they have someone they can go to for advice, which may help in the persistence of their goals. In addition, offering an Aboriginal student support program on campus to rural and urban Aboriginal students may also help with persistence, because it provides Aboriginal students a way to support each other in their academic journeys.

Social support needed for the work required: Advice to New Aboriginal Students

The twelfth dominant theme found was that social development and hard work is needed to be successful in university. These results came out of the fourteenth interview question that asked participants to think about their university experiences and provide their thoughts on what new Aboriginal students should know about university life. They were also asked if they would encourage extracurricular activities.

I identified this as a dominant theme because five out of ten participants referred to the benefits of social support or development, two participants referred to how university was hard work, and three participants referenced both aspects. Therefore, all participants made reference to these factors when talking about what advice they would give to new Aboriginal students.

Specifically, about the benefits of social support or development Helen said extracurricular activities "helps develop social skills. It helps you make friends even if you are shy". Marie said, "…it's good to have someone that can give you support or encouragement". Jen said extra-curricular activities "helps [students] develop skills and helps them connect them to campus life and it helps them meet others". Tara said the support of student groups helped her not feel so alone. Lynn similarly said students should know they are not alone and in a student group like PACT they can meet new people.

Colleen also referred to importance of making friends through student groups. Tim related the importance of social development to staying active because "if you are active you are positive". Tina highly encouraged extra-curricular activities and said it was important to create a "campus family".

In regards to the advice that university can be hard, Helen said that university "requires a lot of commitment, a lot of time". Jen talked about the commitment it takes to studying and that university is different than high school, and Tim said, "University is going to be a tough time". Lucas also said that university is hard and students should "study hard". Lastly, Joshua advised students who come from "reserves" should join activities like PACT or go to the gym "to get their minds going". This indicates that university students need to find ways to focus on, or get through, their studies. In regards to university being hard, participants also gave advice on how to overcome difficulties. Helen advised students to make a plan, be structured, and be organized. Jen said to be disciplined and do not get discouraged if grades are not high in the first year. Colleen advised students to learn what resources are available like Access programs, and Tim advised students to take their time in choosing a career and "don't give up".

To counteract these challenges, participants suggested that peer mentoring and getting involved in extracurricular activities can be helpful. Marie talked about how students can be busy with a lot of studying that limits the ability to have a social life, but that PACT was a good way to connect with others. Joining a group was also related to helping students feel less alone. This is seen when Tara said joining groups allows them to join the community "so you're not alone out there, you don't get lost out there".

The emergence that university can be difficult and that social support and development is important for new students is supported by the literature review that described student involvement. For example, Tieu et al. (2010) examined what kind of involvement/engagement can lead to a positive

adjustment in university. They found that highly structured activities maximize the benefits of students who participate in such activities. Whether PACT is a "high quality activity" is not something that is being measured, but peer mentoring as a form of involvement can result in positive feelings and create a sense of connection to others (Tieu et al., 2010, p. 343). This is supported by the positive effects of socialization that was discussed in the ninth dominant theme of friendship and guidance. As mentioned, Tinto (2010) said getting to know other students and making friends is how students can gain a sense of belonging in the academic community (p. 64). Tieu et al. also found that taking part in activities "was positively related to students' intentions to reenroll for the second year" (2010, p. 345). This helps to show that getting involved in extra-curricular activities can be connected to persistence.

The research question that framed this interpretation was, "Do the themes that emerge show any connection academic persistence?" By asking participants to provide advice to new Aboriginal students about what they should know about university life I was looking to see how their experiences shaped what advice they would offer. I was also looking to see if their comments could be applied to recommendations for post-secondary educators. I also asked whether they would encourage extracurricular activities in university to explore whether they found any benefits or disadvantages to student involvement/engagement.

Based on the results, I suggest that Aboriginal students new to the university setting need to be given academic advice on what academic resources are available to them and how to access them. They also need to be advised on how to organize their study time effectively and be made aware that university can be challenging, but that supports are available. I also suggest that by being given tools to navigate the academic requirements of university and working through academic difficulty, students can persist in their goals. I also suggest that student involvement in extra-curricular activities such as a peer mentoring program is a support structure that students can access, not only to get academic tips from

students but also as a way to get social support from their peers, which has been shown in this study to provide a sense of belonging, and helps students to feel less alone in their academic journeys.

Other Themes of Note

A secondary discussion is included to explain three factors that were not specified as dominant themes, but are important to note as they came up several times throughout the interviews. They are important because they offer commentary on what I think are important aspects of Aboriginal student programming and the Aboriginal student experience since I am being sensitive to potential dissonance that students may be experiencing. These factors are that racism is part of the university experience, differences in age affect the university experience, and Aboriginal students find comfort in spaces dedicated to them.

Racism is Part of the University Experience

Since I set out to acknowledge Aboriginal perspectives are in play in this study, it is important that I acknowledge that racism is part of the university experience for Aboriginal students (Lundberg, 2007; Timmons, 2013). To not do so would gloss over what is a reality for Aboriginal students, because racism exists in the post-secondary experience. This is seen in a study completed by Restoule et al. (2013) who did an online study of 250 Aboriginal students in Ontario and when asked about their initial experiences in university "90% of respondents reported experiencing racism in their school experiences" (p. 6).

However, in this study, only one question elicited comments about racism. Question 5 asked students to talk about any social, cultural, academic, or personal issues they had experienced. Two participants made reference to racism when responding to this question. Tim said he had heard stories of people "being mean" to Aboriginal people, but had not experienced

it himself because he does not really "look Aboriginal as much as some other people". This type of experience is not uncommon. Timmons (2013) found that some students downplay their identity if they did not look Aboriginal as a way to fit in better (2013, p. 235). While Tim did not say he downplayed his Aboriginal identity, his response suggests that he associated not looking "Aboriginal" as the reason why he did not experience racism himself. This implies that the racism he observed was directed at students who visibly looked "Aboriginal".

Tina was the other participant who talked about racism and she experienced racism herself. She talked about a discussion with a friend who did not understand "why your people can't get over it" in relation to events that happened "so long ago". To this, Tina said she had to answer questions she would prefer not to and thought, "[U]gh, I don't want to have to explain this situation". Tina also inferred she had more encounters with racism when she said, "I certainly ran into my fair share of racism" but she did not elaborate.

Racism was also referenced in one question that is not included in the analysis when students were asked to give suggestions for what student supports could be incorporated into PACT (question thirteen). The question was not included in the analysis because it was a question that asked for opinions. To this question, Jen suggested that a workshop on dealing with racism be included in PACT programming. Of note is that Jen was not one of the participants who talked about racism, which suggests that other students may have had thoughts on racism, but did not mention it

As a researcher, I wonder if more responses about racism would have been revealed if the interview questions had been designed differently. Knowing if, and when, Aboriginal students encounter racism, how they feel about it, and what strategies (if any) they use to overcome any negative feelings would be helpful for those who facilitate Aboriginal student programs to

alleviate any resulting negative feelings. Timmons (2013) examined the responses of fifty-nine Aboriginal students in 9 Canadian Atlantic institutions and found that those who encountered racism and prejudice developed feelings of loneliness and alienation (p. 234). These types of feelings could have a negative impact on the persistence of Aboriginal students, therefore; more research in this area is needed to discover how a peer-mentoring program could improve their experiences with racism.

How Differences in Age Affects the University Experience

Another theme of note that emerged from the data was that age and stage in life showed a distinct difference in how participants responded to the interview questions. This finding was not identified in the literature review. I believe there are a few reasons for this. 1) The PACT program was designed for first year Aboriginal students and so the literature focused on first year student issues. 2) This study is based on Tinto (1987, 1993) whose theory is largely based on students who are entering college or university from high school. 3) Peer mentoring literature was also looked at from the first year perspective as well.

As explained earlier, for the purpose of this study I define mature student as participants who are 30 years of age or older, which means that I define younger students as those who are 29 years or younger. Another distinction about age is that for admissions purposes at the University of Manitoba, mature students are defined as students who enter university at 21 years of age or older.

As a reminder, 7 participants were under the age of 30 (median age 23) and 3 participants were over the age of 35 (median age 39). I point this out because age and stage in life showed a difference in responses. For example, when participants talked about if university was like they thought it would be before they started school (question 4), younger students (Helen and Jen)

talked about academic difficulty in relation to the transition from high school to university, and 3 out of 7 younger students (Helen, Marie, and Jen) found it a lot different than they thought it would be and struggled academically. On the other hand, mature students found university to be what they expected and were prepared for any challenges. This included Tara and Tina; Colleen did not specify whether university was like she thought it would be like, but did list all the resources she accessed so she also prepared herself for any challenges.

Other differences were that mature students were married or in a common-law relationship, whereas the younger students were single, except for one who reported being in a relationship. This difference in relationship status made a difference in what supports they relied on as a student. Mature students got a lot of their support from their families and younger students found support in their peers through making friends on campus. For example, Colleen's husband supported her financially and encouraged her to attend university and Tina's sister worked on campus and helped connect her with campus resources and introduced her to people who could help her. As seen in the results, younger students also got support from their families; this is just an example to highlight how differences in age made a difference in responses.

Knowing how age plays a role in the Aboriginal student experience could provide some insight into how Aboriginal student programming can be administered for different age groups. For example, PACT does consider age when matching students and matches students of similar of age where possible, but programming does not differentiate for those who are younger or older. Now that differences have been identified in how age plays a role in their experiences as students, PACT program changes could be made to reflect these differences. These differences can also be acknowledged by other program administrators of Aboriginal support programs and

incorporated into their work. To adhere to the focus of this study I do not make my own

suggestions in this area, but it is something I am now interested in exploring.

Aboriginal Students Find Comfort in Spaces Dedicated to Them

The last theme of note that emerged from the data was Aboriginal students find comfort in

spaces dedicated to them. At the University of Manitoba, there is a building called Migizii

Agamik (Bald Eagle Lodge) that opened in 2008. Migizii Agamik houses the Indigenous

Student Centre, the Access and Aboriginal Focus Program, the Office of Indigenous

Achievement and is a dedicated space for Aboriginal students to study, eat, and access the

resources that are available to them in the building. Beyond the advising available through the

Indigenous Student Centre and the Access program, there is a full-time Academic Learning

Specialist available for students, and a rotation of support staff that are available on certain days

such as Student Counselling on Thursdays and the Indigenous Librarian on various days of the

week. There are also two Elders-in-Residence who take turns being available in the office. The

University of Manitoba Aboriginal Students' Association also has space in the building, and

building residents put on multiple events for cultural learning and more. Migizii Agamik is also

where all PACT meetings are held.

For these reason participants made reference to the value they saw in the supports they

could access in Migizii Agamik throughout the interviews responses. For example, Tina said, "I

always felt safe in Migizii Agamik…because we are all kind of speaking the same language, and

by that I mean we are all Aboriginal, we are celebrating our culture in those confines of the safe

space". Another example is when Marie talked about why she decided to join PACT. She said,

"[T]he Aboriginal Student Centre for me in the beginning of schooling here kind of became a

home away from home. I was always there". Lucas also said that if he had not joined PACT and

come to meetings he would not have known where Migizii Agamik was "so it kind of gave like a structure, where like I knew if I went to Migizii I'd have people there who would help me and help me [with] assignments". One last example is when Colleen talked about how PACT affected her. She said she liked going to Migizii Agamik and commented, "There's always somebody there, even just the staff that come to the meetings, that you recognize and you can say hi to and if you're having a bad day there's always smiles waiting for you at that end so it's just really nice".

I make note of this to acknowledge and honour the work that the Indigenous staff and support staff who work in this building. I also make note of it because this is another factor the literature review did not reveal. However, in exploring this further, Timmons (2013) found that Aboriginal students felt safe in their student lounges and that the space was their "refuge" (p. 235). Preston (2008b) also argued that Aboriginal students must be supported by various institutional initiatives such as "the presence of Elders, Aboriginal resources, Aboriginal instructors and staff members… reflective of Aboriginal cultural beliefs and values" (p. 63). Migizii Agamik offers all of these things and I agree with Preston in that institutions should offer initiatives that provide Aboriginal student support as described above. Not every institution has the budget to build dedicated space, but there are ways to support Aboriginal students in a variety of ways.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained how dominant themes were extracted from the data and how findings relate to the literature review (Chapter 2). Using a phenomenological approach I analysed the words of the participants and their experiences as Aboriginal students in a peer mentoring relationship to reveal the lived experiences of these students. Their experiences,

thoughts, and feelings are described in detail to not only guide this study, but to also acknowledge their insights as students. Their words are what post-secondary institutions, educators, and student program developers can use to guide their own work with the Aboriginal student population. Conclusions, implications of this study and recommendations for further research are described next in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations for Future Research

PACT is a program I have facilitated for seven years. Over this period of time I have met many Aboriginal students who come to university wanting to better their lives for themselves, for their families, and their communities. I see the challenges they go through and make friendships with these students, share in their successes, listen to them when they are upset, and have been proud to see multiple PACT members graduate from university. As the facilitator of the PACT program and as a staff member of the University of Manitoba, participant responses authenticated why I do the work I do. I am encouraged and inspired to continue my work and find new ways to support U of M Aboriginal students. My work with PACT also inspired this study as I had long wondered how PACT could be applied to a theoretical framework. When I became a graduate student I decided to turn my wondering into this exploration of how theories of student departure and development could be applied to peer mentoring and examined whether findings would demonstrate that student involvement in a peer-mentoring program helps Aboriginal students persist in their academic goals or affects sense of belonging to the university.

Conclusions

First, by analysing the experiences of Aboriginal students in a peer-mentoring program I was able to relate some of the finding to the retention theories of Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993, 1987, 1997), but a clear connection to persistence was not found because none of the participants explicitly said that peer mentoring helped them get from one year to another. On the other hand, findings alluded to the benefits of persistence in relation to being part of a peer-mentoring program.

For example, Tinto (1987) proposed, "a person's willingness to work toward the attainment of his/her goals is an important component of the process of persistence in higher education" (p. 44). This is true of the participants because their personal goals of bettering the lives of their families and communities were identified as positive factors for entering university and persisting in their goals. Therefore, I conclude that a peer-mentoring program should include a focus on the motivations of new Aboriginal students who enter university so they can be given positive reminders throughout each term as a way to encourage persistence. This work could be done by the peer mentor coordinator and by the mentors.

Tinto (1975) also argued that there are two aspects of integration into post-secondary life and that is academic and social integration. Social integration relates to how well an individual student conforms to the social system of an institution and argues that mechanisms such as peer group associations and extracurricular activities can help a student integrate socially (as cited in Braxton et al, 1997). Braxton et al. (1997) further this by stating that "the greater the level of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the focal college or university" (p. 111).

From the evidence, I conclude that Aboriginal students who take part in a peer mentoring relationship have a better chance of successfully integrating into a post-secondary institution, because they are given the opportunity to meet with other Aboriginal students they can relate to on a regular basis. This is demonstrated by how participants saw peer mentoring as a way to make friends and to get academic guidance, which they viewed as a benefit to peer mentoring. I suggest this can help Aboriginal students persist in their studies. In relation to peer mentor roles, by having a mentor available to talk to about challenges, to have as a friend, and to socialize with gives mentees a better chance at persisting, because they have someone who can help them

navigate university life. These are two examples of how Tinto's theory of student departure can be applied to peer mentoring, but since participants did not specify that their experiences in PACT helped them get from one year to another, results are inconclusive.

Second, while findings do not specifically show a connection to persistence, they do demonstrate that peer mentoring can be used as a method to provide a regular connection with other students, which contributes to a sense of common identity and sense of belonging on campus. This was consistently seen as important to the Aboriginal students interviewed for this study and can be connected to Astin's theory of student development.

For example, Astin proposed (1984) that a highly involved student is someone who studies a lot, spends time on campus, gets involved with student groups and interacts with professors. Astin also argued that students more willingly get involved if they identify with their environment (1999, p, 524). I connect identifying with the environment to sense of belonging because participants frequently mentioned how the peer support they got from one another helped them feel connected to one another, which gave them a sense of familiarity on campus and provided a sense of belonging to the university. Therefore, I conclude that peer mentoring positively affects sense of belonging.

Astin also proposed that to achieve maximum student involvement, student personnel workers should take the opportunity to stimulate students to get more involved in student organizations, to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities and to interact with new peer groups (1999, pp. 526-527). Based on the benefits that participants related in their responses about peer mentoring, I conclude that administrators, post-secondary educators, advisors, and student life offices should develop student programming for Aboriginal students that helps them to connect with their institutional environment. Feeling connected to their institution could then

make them more comfortable in the university environment and help them to persist in their

academic goals.

Third, being able to identify with other Aboriginal students on a regular basis is what

emerged as the most important peer mentoring aspect to participants. PACT helped participants

feel less alone and that they were not the only one to experience challenges or face worries. By

joining a peer-mentoring program, participants were able to make new friends, found a common

identity in one another, and it was a good way to make connections with students with similar

interests or backgrounds. From the challenges participants experienced to why each chose to

join PACT, I conclude that Aboriginal students can benefit from programming that provides

social connections and that peer mentoring is a feasible way to do this. Peer mentoring literature

that highlighted these features supports this conclusion. For example, Dennis et al. (2005)

explained, "[P]eer relationships are important in a number of outcomes among college students,

such as sense of social identity, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and goal

commitment (p. 226).

In summary, while results do not determine whether being a part of PACT helped students persist

in general, they do show the importance of student involvement and engagement. Therefore, based on

results, I conclude that Aboriginal students see benefits in Aboriginal student support program and that

those coming from rural areas would benefit the most from extra support in transitioning into university.

I also conclude that Aboriginal students can benefit from getting involved on campus and that doing so

can help provide a positive adjustment to university life and supports that student engagement is an

important component to being a student. University should not just be about studying as that can lead to

feeling alone. Instead, students who get involved and engage in their institutions are more likely to feel

connected to their university and help in their transition into university.

Implications of Findings

Dominant themes show that an Aboriginal peer mentoring program can have a positive effect on persistence because it gives Aboriginal students the opportunity to spend time with other Aboriginal students, which helps them feel more connected to the university. Therefore, I suggest that institutions should consider implementing similar programs like PACT into their student engagement programming.

Another main theme was that Aboriginal students see family and peer support as a critical aspect of being successful so I suggest that students be given the opportunity for family to visit the campus and be part of the university experience. This could include having family game nights, invitations to attend campus events, or invitations to cultural activities being offered on campus. This would allow the student to share their academic life with their families to instil a sense a pride amongst family members, give students the opportunity to show what they are doing, and in turn, give family members some assurance that their academic goals are worthwhile.

Peer mentoring programs should also include interactions with Aboriginal staff for role modelling and incorporate traditional knowledge with the use of Elders and participation in cultural activities. Rawana et al. (2015) called for the inclusion of cultural activities because in her research about Canadian Aboriginal peer mentoring programs she found "the majority of Aboriginal peer mentorship programs did not contain specific cultural activities or traditions" (p. 18). Therefore, I also suggest that opportunities for cultural learning should be included in Aboriginal student programming.

Institutions should also do more to promote Aboriginal student peer relationships whether through peer mentoring, learning communities, or student council involvement (as examples) as

peer relationships were consistently found to benefit students. With this in mind, institutions should seek to create programming that does more than just get Aboriginal students together. Programming should be purposeful and have clear outcomes for why a program is being offered.

Institutions should also offer transition programs that increase the involvement Aboriginal first-year students as a way to help students persist from one year to another. This is line with Berger and Milem (1999) who found that "early peer involvement appears to strengthen perceptions of institutional and social support and ultimately persistence" (p. 658).

Lastly, institutions have the responsibility of making all students feel like they belong. It is up to the institution to support student success; it should not be left to the student to have the sole responsibility of being successful and making meaning out of being a university student.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. First is the small sample size of the study. Recruitment emails were sent to five years of PACT databases. Each database has an average of 20 students; therefore, the response rate was low. The study is also based on one program at one institution and because of the small number of participants findings may not be generalizable across all institutions. On the other hand, results may be applied to other institutions of similar size and demographic to assess Aboriginal student engagement programming at their institutions, particularly peer mentor programs.

The second limitation was in the design of the study. In retrospect, as the facilitator and creator of the program that was examined, I was so careful to eliminate conflict of interest that my interview questions did not directly ask whether participants felt peer mentoring contributed to their sense of belonging on campus or in the persistence of their goals. Therefore, in my objective to minimize any bias or power of authority that could influence the results, I was

overly cautious. As a novice researcher I see now that I should have been more aggressive in my

questioning. As discovered, results did find sense of belonging and persistence as elements of

the outcomes of peer mentoring so interpretation was not overly affected.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study examined the experiences of Aboriginal students who were part of a peer-

mentoring program. On a small scale, findings showed that Aboriginal peer support provides a

sense of belonging on campus. To broaden findings on this topic, I recommend a larger

Canadian study about the impacts of peer support for Aboriginal students, which could be

implemented by a survey of Aboriginal students across Canada that examines what they view as

the benefits of peer relationships, whether through peer mentoring or other student engagement

programming. This way a quantitative measure of responses could be developed to move

beyond the opinions and perceptions of students. Results might strengthen how sense of

belonging is defined, which is important due to the inconsistent definition that currently exists.

Results could also provide institutions that would like to develop Aboriginal peer support

programming some examples of what Aboriginal students value in programming. A Canadian

study would also add to the sparse literature that exists about Aboriginal student peer mentor

programming. This study does add to Canadian literature on this topic and I look forward to a

time when there is more research in this area.

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Appendix A
Core Certificate

Appendix B
Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board Approval

UNIVERSITY
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Research Ethics and Compliance
Office of the Vice-President (Research and International)

APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

March 2, 2015

TO: Carla Loewen   (Advisor: Marlene Atleo)
           Principal Investigator

FROM: Donna Martin, Acting Chair
           Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

Re: Protocol #E2014:167
           "Peer Mentoring: Supporting Aboriginal Students in Academic Community
           and Transition into University"

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 and will expire
on March 2, 2016.**

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, please mail/e-mail/fax
(261-0325) a copy of this Approval (identifying the related UM Project Number) to the
Research Grants Officer in ORS in order to initiate fund setup.   (How to find your UM
Project Number: http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/mrt-faq.html#pr0)

-     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/orec/ethics/human_ethics_REB_forms_guidelines.html) **in order
to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.**

umanitoba.ca/research

Appendix C
Recruitment Email Template

UNIVERSITY of MANITOBA | Faculty of Education

Dear member of PACT,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study being conducted by Carla Loewen called, *Peer Mentoring: Supporting Aboriginal Students in Academic Community and Transition into University* as part of the requirements for a Masters in Education. The purpose of this study is to examine your perceptions of the peer mentoring you have received through the Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) program and how it may contribute to the persistence of your academic goals. The results of the research are expected to offer your insights into how best to integrate peer mentoring into Aboriginal student programming to support student engagement and sense of belonging in the university.

Please review the information in the attached Invitation Letter. If you have any questions about this project, or if you would like to participate, please reply to this email or contact me, Paul Ong, Research Assistant, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. Please note that Ms. Loewen is not part of the recruitment process and participants will be selected by me. The reason for this and other project details are in the attached documents. You may contact Dr. Marlene Atleo or myself if you have questions about the research project.

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 Marlene Atleo at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or **Maggie Bowman**, the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

Thank you in advance for your interest in this project.

Sincerely,

Paul Ong
▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Appendix D
Letter to Participants

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA | Faculty of Education

Hello PACT member,

My name is Carla Loewen and I am working on my Masters in Education at the University of Manitoba in the department of Adult and Post-Secondary Education. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about the perceptions of post-secondary Aboriginal students about the peer mentoring you have received through the Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) program and how it may contribute to the persistence of your academic goals. You are eligible to be in this study because you are a current or former participant in the Promoting Aboriginal Community Together program.

If you decide to participate in this study you will be interviewed once by a research assistant for approximately one hour (sixty minutes) at a time and location convenient for you. The interview will be recorded using a digital recorder and my research assistant, Paul Ong, will transcribe the contents and you will be given the option to edit. Please be aware that I will not know who is participating and the research assistant is not associated to PACT in any way. Also, be assured that your participation will be anonymous and you will not be identified by name to me at any point during the research process or in the final report. You will be provided with a $20.00 Starbucks gift card as appreciation for participation. The gift card will be provided at the time of the interview. At the end the study, your electronic and associated data will be archived in a secure and locked location at the university for five years and then destroyed. Data will also be saved on a password-protected computer.

Your participation is voluntary. Your responses will be confidential and there will be minimal risk associated with your participation. If you choose to withdraw from the study at any time during the study, your wishes will be honoured.

I appreciate your participation in this research study. In order for me to be able to continue this process, your signature is required to authorize my use of the information derived from the interview. Please read the attached consent form carefully and then sign it to indicate your agreement. The research assistant who is recruiting for this project will make arrangements to get the consent from you. ***Do not send the consent form to me or let me know of your agreement to participate.***

I hope that you will enjoy this opportunity to share your valuable insights. If you have any questions about this project you are welcome to **contact** my research assistant, Paul Ong, who can be reached at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Marlene Atleo at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ should you have any questions or
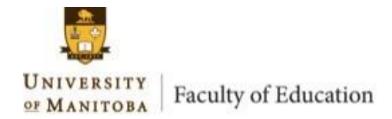
concerns.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Electronically sent

Carla Loewen

Appendix E
Information and Consent Form

UNIVERSITY of MANITOBA | Faculty of Education

Study Name: Peer Mentoring: Supporting Aboriginal Students in Academic
                                Community and Transition into University

Principal Investigator: Carla Loewen – Masters Student, Adult and Post-
Secondary Education
                                Phone: (204) 318.2927 Email: carla.loewen@umanitoba.ca

Research Supervisor: Dr. Marlene Atleo, Associate Professor, Education
                                Phone: (204) 474.6039 Email: atleo@cc.umanitoba.ca

Research Assistant   Paul Ong – Post-Baccalaureate Diploma Student, Education
                                Phone: (204) 417.3459 Email: umongp@myumanitoba.ca

This consent form, a copy of which you may save or print for your records and reference at this
time (it will not be available later), 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 contact Dr. Marlene Atleo or Paul Ong. Please take the time to read this
carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Carla Loewen is conducting this study as her Masters' Thesis, under the supervision of Dr.
Marlene Atleo. The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions of post-secondary
Aboriginal students about peer mentoring they have received through the Promoting Aboriginal
Community Together (PACT) program and how it may contribute to the persistence of their
academic goals. The results of the research is expected to offer guidelines for institutions of
higher learning on how they can integrate peer mentoring into Aboriginal student programming
as a method to strengthen student engagement and sense of belonging in the university.

This is an interview-based study and this is the information and consent form for the study.

We estimate it will only take no longer than 60 minutes to complete each interview, which will
be scheduled at a time and location convenient for you. Students who participate will receive a
$20.00 Starbucks gift card at the end of the interview. A potential benefit of participating, other
than receiving a gift card, is that you will be given the opportunity to express your thoughts and
experiences, and to participate in a research study that will contribute to the general state of

knowledge about peer mentoring and Aboriginal post-secondary education and how it could be applied to higher education research.

To be eligible for this study, you must be 18 years or older, self-identify as an Aboriginal person (Status, Non-Status, Inuit or Metis), and are a current or past PACT member with at least one academic term of PACT involvement. One academic term is defined as September to December (Fall term) or January to April (Winter term). As this is an Aboriginal student focused study; non-Aboriginal students are being excluded from this study. If you are a non-Aboriginal student, please do not respond to this recruitment email and the Principal Investigator respectfully thanks you for your participation in PACT.

Your participation is completely voluntary. Should you choose to withdraw from the study at any point or feel that you would rather leave some question(s) unanswered, you may do so without penalty. This means that should you choose to withdraw prior to the interview you can notify the research assistant, Paul Ong, by phone at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. Should you feel that you would rather leave some question(s) unanswered during the interview, you will still receive the gift card at the end of the interview.

Should you choose to withdraw from the study during the interview, the interview will be deleted from the MP3 recorder and you will not receive a gift card. Should you choose to withdraw after the interview and transcription is completed, the interview will be deleted from the MP3 recorder, from the password protected computer of the research assistant and the file where the coded transcription is stored on the principal investigator's (PI) password protected computer. You will be able to keep the gift card given to you at end of the interview.

All of the answers you provide will be kept confidential. Any information you provide will be stored on password-protected computers and in locked file cabinets. Only the PI, her supervisor, her committee and her research assistant will have access to your data. We need to keep your confidential data (consent forms, digital files and transcription notes) for five years for ethical purposes. However, once your interview is complete and the research assistant has coded your transcript and removed all identifying information, thus rendering it anonymous, it will be given to the PI who will never know your identity. We estimate we will do this by 04/15. Once all the data are collected and analyzed for this project, we plan to share this information with the research community through seminars, conferences, presentations, and journal articles. When presenting the results of this research, we will in no way focus on individual participants' responses and will instead present the findings in summary form.

The results of this study should be available by 08/15. If you would like to receive a summary, please indicate that here (if yes, the report will be sent to you via email): Yes ☐   No ☐

If you would like to participate in a member check (review transcript for accuracy), please indicate that here (if yes, your transcript will be sent to you via email): Yes ☐   No ☐

Please provide your email information in the space provided below. (University of Manitoba email addresses are preferred):

Name: _____

Email: _____

You only need to provide this information if you wish to receive a summary of the results or wish to participate in a member check; you are not required to provide this information to receive the Starbucks gift card.

Signing the bottom of this page indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. 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. If you wish to withdraw, simply notify the research assistant, Paul Ong, at the contact information provided at the top of this form. If you do choose to withdraw from this study, we will destroy any data that you have provided and not include it in the analysis. 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.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

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 Maggie Bowman, the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 204.474.7122 or Margaret.Bowman@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

If you have read the information presented in this form and do not have any questions about this study, please sign the bottom of the page. You should only sign if you agree to participate with full knowledge of the study presented to you in this information and consent form and of your own free will. The research assistant will arrange to get the consent form from you.

We strongly encourage you to save or print a copy of this consent form now for your records, as it will not be available later.

If you do not wish to participate in this study now, please disregard this email. Thank you for considering participating.

Participant's Signature_____Date _____

Research Assistant's Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix F
Interview Questions

Opening Script:

Thank you for your time today. Before we begin, I would like to remind you that this interview will be recorded. This is to ensure I have an accurate record of your responses. I also want to remind you that you will not be identified by name in this study.

As explained in the invitation letter, this research project is about the perceptions of post-secondary Aboriginal students about peer mentoring they have received through the Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) program at the University of Manitoba and how it may have contributed to the persistence of their academic goals. To help you understand the following questions, I will explain what I mean when I use certain terms in my interview questions. I am using the term "peer mentoring" to mean a process where two students participate in sharing their knowledge and experiences to facilitate a new student's transition into university life. "PACT" is a program co-coordinated by University 1 and the Aboriginal Student Centre. It is a voluntary program for any new or continuing Aboriginal students who want to participate. PACT was developed to support new Aboriginal student transition into university life by providing participants with social and academic development, student activities, and the opportunity for upper-year Aboriginal students to peer mentor a new Aboriginal student. If possible, please keep these definitions in mind as we proceed. If at any time you would like me to repeat these definitions, please do not hesitate to ask.

As a final reminder, please note that you are free to not answer questions or to stop at any time during the interview. If you choose to stop and wish to withdraw, there will be no negative consequences for doing so and none of your comments will be used in this study.

Are you ready to proceed?

To start, I will ask some general demographic information and then we will proceed with the interview questions.

Gender? Male _____ Female_____

How old are you? _____

What is your relationship status?

Single_____   Married_____   Common-law_____   Separated_____   Divorced_____   Widowed_____

Do you have any children? If yes, how many and what age(s)?

Do you have any other dependents? If yes, please specify.
Which group of Aboriginal peoples do you identify with?

First Nation_____   Metis_____   Inuit_____   Other_____

Which of the following best describes your home community?

Urban_____   Rural_____   Remote_____

Based on your response, which urban, rural or remote community?

_____

What are your sources of school income? Please indicate all that apply.

Band sponsorship ____ Student loan ____ Line of credit ____ Bursary ____

Employment_____Other (what?)_____

Thank you, I will now proceed with the interview questions:

The first questions are related to your experiences in university.

1. Please take a couple of minutes explaining what your current or target faculty is and what motivated you come to university (**probe for year of study if not mentioned**).

2. Thinking back to before you started university, what kind of thoughts or feelings did you have about how university life might be like? For example, were you nervous? Feeling prepared? Could you picture it?

3. Based on your thoughts and feelings, did you have any ideas or plans on how to address them? If yes, what were your ideas/plans? For example, if you were feeling nervous, what were you going to do to minimize your nervousness?

4. Once classes began, based on how you were feeling prior to starting classes was university like what you thought it would be? If not, why not? If yes, how so?

5. Did you experience any challenges (or are you experiencing any challenges) that have affected your academic performance (challenges being social, cultural, academic, personal issues)? If yes, please explain. If no, please explain what you think has helped you to avoid such challenges.

    (To interviewer:
    If mild emotional distress becomes evident, please ask the following question: "Would you like to pause the interview and take a break?" If yes, stop recording and let them take as long as they like for a break and continue when they want to, or if they leave the room, when they return.

    If more than mild emotional distress becomes evident, please ask the following question: "Do you want to stop the interview and reschedule?" If yes, thank them for their time and explain that you will contact them the next day to reschedule.)

    In either case, give them a University of Manitoba Student Counselling bookmark that you have brought to the interview with you and explain that Student Counsellors, ▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ are also available on Thursdays at the Aboriginal Student Centre by appointment or drop in. Give them the address if needed (Migizii Agamik building, 114 Sidney Smith St., Fort Garry Campus).

I will now ask you questions about your PACT involvement:

6. Why did you decide to join Promoting Aboriginal Community Together? As in, what made you want to be a part of PACT?

7. a) Did you join as a new student wanting a peer mentor or as an upper year student wanting to *be* a peer mentor? Why did you want to be part of a peer mentor relationship? (**To interviewer: If neither, go to d**)

    b1) If a new student, did PACT help you in any way? If so, how so?

    b2) If an upper year student, do you think providing peer assistance to a new student was helpful to them? Was there any benefit to you?

    c) What other PACT activities did you participate in and why?

    d) If you were not interested in the peer mentoring aspect, what interested you about the PACT program? Which PACT activities did you participate in and why?

8. How did participation in PACT affect you?

9. What does peer-mentoring mean to you?

10. a) Do you think there are any benefits to the PACT peer mentoring structure? Are there any disadvantages? What are they?

    b) What about the benefits and/or disadvantages of the other aspects of PACT?

11. Do you think a peer-mentoring program like PACT helps students feel more connected to one another? How so?

12. Do you think PACT is a program that post-secondary institutions like the University of Manitoba should encourage or discourage as an Aboriginal student support program? Why?

13. What other student supports could be incorporated into PACT?

14. Thinking about your own experiences, what do you think Aboriginal students new to university should know about university life? Would you encourage them to join an extracurricular activity and why?

Closing Script:

Ok, that's all of the questions. Thanks again for your time today.

Is there anything else you would like to share today?

Do you have any questions about the interview?

Appendix G
Email list U1 authorization

First Year Centre
205 Tier Building
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
Telephone 204-474-6209
Fax 204-474-7659
university_1@umanitoba.ca
1-800-432-1960 ext. 6209 (MB only)

UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA | University 1

December 8, 2014

Re: Authorization to use email lists

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Dr. Bonnie Hallman, Executive Director, Student Academic Success, authorize the use of Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) database information, specifically, the student names and email addresses of current and past PACT members, for the purposes of Ms. Carla Loewen's graduate research.

PACT was created by University 1 with database information shared with the Aboriginal Student Centre, because it is a joint program of both units. Justin Rasmussen, PACT Co-Coordinator at the Aboriginal Student Centre, has permission to release this information to Paul Ong, Research Assistant, for Carla Loewen's thesis project as part of her requirements for a Masters of Education.

If you have any questions, please contact me at ███████████ or at
██████████████████████

Sincerely,

████████████████████

Dr. Bonnie Hallman
Associate Professor and Executive Director
Student Academic Success

Appendix H
Email list ASC Authorization

ABORIGINAL STUDENT CENTRE

December 15, 2014

Re: Authorization to use email lists

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Christine Cyr, Director, Aboriginal Student Centre, authorize the use of Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) database information, specifically, the student names and email addresses of current and past PACT members, for the purposes of Ms. Carla Loewen's graduate research.

PACT was created by University 1 with database information shared with the Aboriginal Student Centre, because it is a joint program of both units. Justin Rasmussen, PACT Co-Coordinator at the Aboriginal Student Centre, has permission to release this information to Paul Ong, Research Assistant, for Carla Loewen's thesis project as part of her requirements for a Masters of Education.

If you have any questions, please contact me at ████████ or at ████████

Thank you,
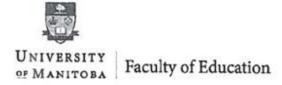
████████

Christine Cyr
Director, Aboriginal Student Centre

Aboriginal Student Centre
114 Sidney Smith Street
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2

Phone: 204-474-8850
Fax: 204-275-3142
Email: ███@umanitoba.ca

UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Appendix I
Research Assistant Confidentiality Agreement

UNIVERSITY | **Faculty of Education**
OF MANITOBA

December 12, 2014

Re: Confidentiality Agreement

Dear Paul Ong:

Thank you for agreeing to assist in my qualitative thesis project as part of the requirements to complete my Masters of Education. As previously discussed, you are agreeing to recruit, select participants, interview, and transcribe the interviews to eliminate conflict of interest due to my connection to the Promoting Aboriginal Community Together (PACT) program.

Agreeing to assist includes keeping the identity of all participants confidential as well as all information that is shared during the interview process. Terms and conditions of this process are described in the Ethics Protocol Submission Form. By signing this letter, you are agreeing to the above.

Thank you again for your assistance.

Signed,

Carla Loewen
Masters of Education candidate
Faculty of Education

Signed,

Paul Ong
Research Assistant
Faculty of Education

Attachment: Protocol Submission Form

Appendix J
Peer Mentoring Program Suggestions

The following questions were not part of the results or data analysis sections as the responses were opinion-based in nature. As explained earlier, the reason for not including these responses is that a program evaluation would take away from the focal point of this research. However, the responses do provide the perspective and insight of students involved in a peer mentoring program, which may provide guidelines or suggestions for anyone interested in creating or managing their own programs.

Question 7C: What other PACT activities did you participate in and why?

Helen: Siloam Mission volunteering***.
Marie: Siloam Mission, Elders Gathering, and Graduation Pow Wow volunteering.
Jen: Christmas potluck and went to the meeting**** where "they brought in high school students".
Tara: Siloam Mission, Graduation Pow Wow, other campus event volunteering, and end of term events.
Lynn: Siloam Mission and the meeting where some grade twelve students came so PACT students could talk about what university life was like, "which was cool".
Colleen: The social gatherings, which was nice to have to have that social piece on campus.
Tim: Attended the social gatherings the most "because everybody always has the same story as me".
Lucas: He mentioned attending the PACT monthly meetings but no comments about other activities made.
Joshua: Siloam Mission volunteering and was planning to do another charity volunteer event, but did not. He would like to do more of these activities if he stays in PACT.
Tina: Did not participate in any other activities because she found "them kind of boring".

Note***: Every year, PACT organizes visits to organizations to provide "Volunteer in the Community" events as a way to help the community and to provide PACT members with different ways to gain hours toward their Co-Curricular Record. This applies to campus events such as the Elders Gathering and the Graduation Pow Wow.

Note****: Jen and Lynn are referring to when a high school intervention program brought their students to a PACT meeting to introduce them to university students.

Question 7d: If you were not interested in the peer mentoring aspect, what interested you about the PACT program? Which PACT activities did you participate in and why?"

This question was asked in case any of the participants were not part of a peer mentoring relationship so they could talk about what interested them about PACT in general.

Helen: Was in a peer mentoring relationship so did not have anything to say for this question.
Marie: Liked volunteering at the Graduation Pow Wow and also appreciated that some meetings had food and admitted that she "used to go a lot for the food" but got tired of being fed pizza.
Jen: Said that PACT provided "the opportunity to do things on campus and it also looks good on your resume".
Tara: Was in a peer mentoring relationship so did not have anything to say for this question.
Lynn: Was in a peer mentoring relationship so did not have anything to say for this question.
Colleen: As an Access student, she said that joining PACT was a way for her Access peers to get together now and then. She explained this by saying, "We were all going to be divided across campus and different faculties, and that was kind of a way for us to come back and touch base and be together". However, she went on to reference activities that were not organized by PACT such as moccasin and bannock making. Those were general to Migizii Agamik activities.
Tim: Liked the social activities the best.
Lucas: He was interested in peer mentoring aspect and said he was too busy for the other parts.
Joshua: Liked the volunteering options "and how that goes towards your transcript later on, I think that's another thing that interested me the most".
Tina: Was in a peer mentoring relationship, and added that she really only participated in the peer mentoring and did not find the other aspects, including meetings to be "very beneficial".

Question 10a: Do you think there are any benefits to the PACT peer mentoring structure? Are there any disadvantages? What are they?

Benefits of Peer Mentoring Structure	*Disadvantages of Peer Mentoring Structure*
Helen: Monthly meetings, volunteering in the community, and the support and accessibility of PACT facilitators.	More ice breakers at the start with mentor matches so that pairs become more comfortable with each other making it easier to provide or ask for help.
Marie: No comment made about benefits.	If the mentor or mentee is busy themselves it is hard to set up times to meet or get a hold of them.
Jen: The Co-Curricular Record requirement is not strict. You can meet with your mentor or mentee or go to a meeting to gain hours.	Being asked to phone a mentee to set up first meeting. She would prefer text or email. Suggests that more relationship building is provided to "avoid awkwardness".
Tara: Making connections with other students made her feel "more at home".	Feels her mentor did not work out because she was non-Aboriginal, "had she been Aboriginal I think it would have".
Lynn: She benefited from her mentor who was really helpful, introduced her to several people, and talked her through any anxieties or struggles.	Feels mentors should be interviewed to see if they are "really outgoing and friendly and see if it actually works for them". This was in regards to seeing a mentor ignore their mentee in a class they shared.
Colleen: Based on her experience as a mentee, she would like to be a mentor.	Wishes she could have chosen her mentor because she was paired with a male student. This was fine, but thinks her experience would have been enhanced if she had been matched with a female student.
Tim: PACT is good for the volunteer and social aspect as it allows "people to connect and share views with one another and meet friends".	On the other hand, the social gatherings may not happen as much as some people would like.
Lucas: Good program.	Suggests more mentor monitoring and felt the pairing did not seem structured. Feels monthly check ins with mentors to see how much they

	are meeting their students would be helpful.
Joshua: Having someone taking the time to show their mentor around and help them is a benefit.	Said there were no disadvantages.
Tina: Having an experienced student work with students with little to no experience is "absolutely beneficial". Feels the structure works.	Mentors need training to understand what it means to be a mentor. This was in regards to observing several matches where the mentor was not meeting with their students or struggling with their own issues. She feels mentors need to understand "that you're in this for the long haul…and are you wanting that type of responsibility, and [if] no, then this is not the program for you".

Question 10b: What about the benefits and/or disadvantages of the other aspects of PACT?

Benefits of Other Program Aspects	*Disadvantages of Other Program Aspects*
Helen: Volunteering in the community "and giving back in that way".	No comments made about disadvantages.
Marie: Could not think of any benefits.	Could not think of any disadvantages.
Jen: Free food.	Did not think there were any disadvantages.
Tara: No comments made about benefits.	Felt that some PACT members "strayed away and…could have benefited if they kept coming to the meetings".
Lynn: Always felt welcome and liked being able to see familiar faces every few weeks.	Her evening classes sometimes conflicted with PACT meetings, which were also held in the evening, so would have to miss some meetings or leave them early.
Colleen: For PACT members who came from outside of the city where reserves or small communities, it was like a "welcome to the urban community".	No comments made about disadvantages.
Tim: No comments made about benefits.	Commented about the peer mentoring aspect

	here and how the mentor needs to be someone who is "responsible and reliable" otherwise the mentor could be a disadvantage to the mentee.
Lucas: Provides first year students a chance to get involved in the Aboriginal community.	Could not think of any disadvantages.
Joshua: No comments made about benefits.	Thinks the only disadvantage is that meetings take time away from studying but that since meetings are only once a month that is not really a disadvantage.
Tina: Seeing familiar faces at meetings was a benefit.	Did not do anything but meetings because did not care for the Co-Curricular aspect. "I don't do what I do so I can get it stamped on my transcript, I do what I do because I'm passionate with what I do".

Question 13: What other student supports could be incorporated into PACT?

Helen: More icebreakers and teamwork activities in the beginning for mentor matches.
Marie: Create a bursary for the program.
Jen: Workshops on "dealing with racism" or about bursaries.
Tara: More follow up by mentors if their mentees stop attending meetings.
Lynn: Workshops "that help students to be on top of their school work".
Colleen: More cultural activities and "encouraging more of those types of activities would be interesting".
Tim: Networking with other Aboriginal student groups "might benefit and increase social networking capability".
Lucas: Have facilitators meet with the pairs so members can get a sense of what the peer mentoring relationship will be like.
Joshua: Workshops on managing money or time management.
Tina: More involvement from the facilitators in terms of overseeing the mentor matches.