

# Indigenous Graduate and Professional Students Decolonizing, Reconciling, and Indigenizing Belongingness in Higher Education

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## Abstract:

Although belongingness has been conceptualized by higher education institutions in marginalizing ways, we reclaim the construct as authentic relationships characterized by humanization, mutuality, and respect for students' cultural assets, values, and social identities. To dismantle colonizing perspectives and foreground Indigenous ways of knowing and being, our study reflects narratives of three cis-male, Indigenous graduate and professional students and their educational experiences in the U.S. Through a collective case study with an autoethnographic lens, our findings highlighted decolonizing aspects of belongingness of embracing Indigenous values of the Peoplehood Matrix, emphasizing relationality in community, and bridging Indigenous knowledge with academia.

*Keywords:* Indigenous, Native American, Belonging, Graduate Students, Professional Students, Case Study

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**Land Acknowledgement:** We wrote this manuscript in San Marcos, Texas, USA. We acknowledge that the land we convened on has long served as a site of meeting and exchange among Indigenous peoples. The land now known as Central Texas was traditional territory to peoples including but not limited to the Tankawa, Apache, and Maikan-Garza Tribe of the Coahuiltecan People. We honor and respect the diverse Indigenous peoples connected to this territory on which we gathered to conduct this study.

## INTRODUCTION

Culture, identity, and traditional ways of knowing and being are fundamental to and beneficial for Indigenous students' thriving in higher education. Indigenous students face a multifaceted terrain within postsecondary institutions. Earning a higher degree may not only represent educational opportunity to contribute to their families and communities (Brayboy et al., 2014; Tachine & Begay, 2013) but also induce threats of marginalization, racism, and U.S. ethnocentrism affecting their belongingness and cultural

identity development (Perry, 2002). Along with traditional knowledge, studies have consistently underscored the importance of belongingness as a central cultural way of being for Indigenous students (Strayhorn et al., 2016).

Wilson (2008) argued "If Indigenous ways of knowing have to be narrowed through one particular lens (which it certainly does not), then surely the lens would be relationality" (p. 58). Although relationality is an essential aspect of Indigenous identity, postsecondary institutions subject Indigenous and racially minoritized students to campus assimilation, thereby oppressing the cultural assets of Students of Color (Brayboy et al., 2014). To resist Eurocentric assumptions about belonging, we conducted case studies with autoethnographic interpretations of self-identifying Indigenous men pursuing graduate and professional studies and their belongingness experiences. Due to the limited research in this area and the dominant, White-centric narratives in higher education, our study dismantles settler, colonial conceptions of belonging in higher education through authentic, Indigenized narratives.

From a decolonizing approach, we defined *belongingness* in our study as authentic relationships characterized by humanization, mutuality, and respect for students' cultural assets, values, and social identities.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There are multiple emerging and established theories that can be leveraged to examine the importance of cultural, spiritual, familial, and communal relationships which framed our study (Lopez, 2018). First, we introduce how belongingness has been framed in colonial terms, and the need for race-reimagining with Indigenous-specific lenses. Secondly, building upon the groundwork of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and TribalCrit, we describe our primary guiding framework, Holm et al.'s (2003) Peoplehood Framework. Lastly, we review studies pertaining to Indigenous student belongingness and graduate student experiences.

Tinto's (1975) integration theory has been one of the dominant models of belonging in higher education. It argues that student persistence requires social and academic "integration" of the campus environment. Despite its influence on conceptualizations of student belonging, it has also received criticism for its lack of applicability to students from diverse communities and identities (Waterman, 2007), promoting the racist and colonizing narrative that Indigenous students and Students of Color must assimilate into their institutions (Lee et al., 2010; Tierney, 1992). Institutional promotion of belongingness subjects Indigenous students to "rhetorics of disadvantage that presume they are in need of fixing instead of our institutions" (ACPA, 2018, p. 6). To challenge and decolonize this way of thinking, our study attempts to Indigenize mainstream perspectives through the promotion of Indigenous viewpoints and theoretical models to fit students' cultural strengths. The use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is crucial in our examination of marginalized populations and the power of dominant cultures (Tate, 1997; Tuck & Yang, 2014). To further analyze socio-historical contexts pertaining to Indigenous Peoples, we situate our study in Brayboy's (2005) Indigenous form of CRT, *TribalCrit*, as a means to investigate Indigenous peoples' experiences through a decolonizing lens.

A theory that continues to illuminate the experiences of Indigenous people is Holm et al.'s (2003) Peoplehood Framework. From work in the 1980s, Robert K. Thomas (as cited in Thomas, 1990) made a case for Indigenous Nationhood drawing similarities to possessions of history, language, religion, and land. This influenced the foundation for Peoplehood matrix, which examines four interwoven pieces consisting of: (a) shared history and understanding of

Native people's origins; (b) sense of place and connection between environment and identity; (c) shared language that translates to ways of knowing and socialization; and (d) the profound role of spirituality in their worldview. The four aspects form an Indigenous identity and the basis of a Peoplehood-inspired sense of belonging (Tachine et al., 2017).

### Indigenous Student Belonging in Higher Education

Examining Indigenous students' belongingness on a college campus, Beck et al. (2014) observed how students sought to build a community in which they could feel connected to their cultural identity and to their institution. Using their Indigenous culture as a vehicle of connection, these students carved their own sense of belonging and within it, they found academic success. Inspired by a QuantCrit approach, Fong et al. (2019) used measurement invariance testing to examine how Indigenous community college students interpreted belongingness factors differently from their non-Indigenous counterparts. Through race-reimagining White-centric conceptions of belonging, they found that Native-specific belongingness factors, such as the degree to which the institution encouraged to contribute back to their community, were salient predictors of academic outcomes and goal pursuits. Although these studies supported the fortitude and perseverance Indigenous students carry, this does not limit the importance of Indigenous-centered resources to cultivate belongingness.

In their qualitative study, Tachine et al. (2017) observed how traditions such as talking circles and hosting them in the Native Student Center at regularly scheduled times demonstrated the value of Indigenous traditions, knowledge, and cultures to enhance belongingness. Experiencing ceremony on campus, Indigenous college students were able to build connections to their community on campus and thus had a stronger sense of belonging within the institution. This aligns with our frameworks as they demonstrate that traditional practices that are culturally sustaining are important for the belonging of Students of Color. Examining sense of belonging as it relates to positive student outcomes, Oxendine (2015) used a quantitative cross-sectional survey with 154 Native American students at non-Native college and universities (NNCUs). Findings indicated that perceptions of institutional integration and cultural integrity contributed to a sense of belonging, which in turn, significantly predicted intentions to persist (see also Oxendine et al., 2020). Similarly among Miami students at a predominantly White institution (PWI), Mosley-Howard et al. (2016) found that coursework centered on Indigenous

culture and interpersonal connections promoted identity development and community building.

### **Indigenous Graduate Students in the U.S.**

In higher education, Indigenous students are often considered invisible or forgotten, but this neglect is even more heightened at the graduate level (Brayboy et al., 2014). This is reflected in the statistical portrait of Indigenous graduate students' enrollment and degree attainment rates in the U.S, which are disproportionately lower compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Brayboy et al., 2012). Prior studies have found that the experiences of Indigenous graduate students are often characterized by alienation, isolation, racism, and a lack of academic guidance and role models (Brayboy et al., 2012; Buckley, 1997; Fox, 2013). For instance, Pidgeon (2014) studied Indigenous graduate students' experiences at Canadian institutions using the Wholistic Indigenous Framework (Archibald et al., 2009; Pidgeon, 2016), which explains the multifaceted relationships that Indigenous people have with their communities, families, culture, and the four pieces of their being: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual selves (see also Secatero, 2009). This interconnectedness of relationships intersects with the 4Rs--Respect, Reciprocity, Relevance, and Responsibility--a set of Indigenous cultural values introduced by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991; see Waterman, 2020). Through this guiding framework, Pidgeon (2014) discussed how Indigenous graduate students felt out of place and disregarded, especially when faculty members were closed-minded towards Indigenous perspectives. Being silenced within and beyond the classroom by peers and faculty members is commonplace for Indigenous students pursuing graduate degrees (Garvey, 1997; Henning, 1999; Lacourt, 2003).

Similarly, Indigenous women reflecting on their doctoral education have shared about microaggressions from both campus and classroom climates (Shotton, 2017). These microaggressive experiences included exclusion by White faculty and peers, tokenism, stereotyping, and having their knowledge challenged. These marginalizing experiences can be compounded when students have limited access to family and community as sources of support (e.g., Secatero, 2009) or feel tensions between communal obligations and personal ambitions (Rodriguez-Rabin, 2003), which lead to greater isolation and alienation.

In the face of such hostility in graduate school, research highlights Indigenous student resilience and self-determination derived from cultural and communal strengths as sources of support. One example of this dynamic is

Masta's (2018) qualitative study using Indigenous methodology and small stories narrative approaches. From interviews with six Native American graduate students, she generated themes of ongoing colonization and defending Native identity. Similarly, Heavy-Runner et al. (2018) underscored the importance of American Indian graduate students' calling upon their cultural identity, specifically manifested through embracing language, family, tribal activities, and considerations of returning to their home community. This consideration of the home community was also discussed by Shotton (2018) in her examination of reciprocity among women pursuing doctoral education. Through their desire to pursue scholarly endeavors benefitting their communities, the women in her study did not view their degrees in individualistic terms but rather as bringing value to the larger collective. The vision to serve Indigenous communities and the intersection of cultural identity, support, and skills were essential aspects for Indigenous graduate students (Bird, 2017). Shield (2009) described metaphors shared by a graduate student capturing the connection with her community and the internalization of Indigenous culture as a source of resilience: "I considered the birds who are cared for by the Creator...There were many moments when I would see her flying or dream dreams about specific hawks. Strength would come. Peace would come." (p. 55).

To facilitate the educational pursuits and sense of belonging for Indigenous graduate students, scholars have recommended various avenues for support and empowerment (Brayboy et al., 2012). Mentors provide one prevalent source of support during graduate school. Shotton (2007) encouraged the establishment of peer-mentoring relationships--characterized by commitment, care, admiration, and trust--to help overcome barriers to their academic success. Other studies discussed establishing and sustaining centers and organizations that foster student belonging, accountability, and validation (Blair, 2015; Pidgeon et al., 2014).

### **PRESENT STUDY**

As Indigenous students journey through college, their sense of belonging and cultural identities are critical to their academic success yet often stymied by oppressive and racist systems and structures within higher education. However, questions remain about the extent these factors shape the experiences of Indigenous men pursuing graduate and professional degrees. Although our objective was not to focus primarily on Indigenous men, when the opportunity presented itself to do so, we found that the projection of the

voices of Indigenous men would be an important contribution to the field and to Indigenous communities. Brayboy et al. (2012) identified Indigenous men as a “critical area for future research,” citing their “educational plight” as an imperative for examination (p. 109). Structural factors associated with the academic attainment of Indigenous men include lower retention and graduation rates, higher incarceration rates, and a host of systemic poverty-, justice-, and health-related issues. Furthermore, research on Indigenous men in graduate school is even more scant compared to other subpopulations of Indigenous students at various educational levels, making them an even more underrepresented subgroup in the higher education literature.

Moreover, rather than exclusively having participants reflect on their graduate experiences, we included retrospective perceptions of their undergraduate education. In line with work by Garrod & Larimore (1997), our approach may provide a more holistic depiction of their postsecondary journeys and counternarratives of Indigenous resilience through college and a glimpse of newer insights into graduate school experiences. In addition, prior studies on Indigenous graduate students tend to focus broadly on educational experiences rather than specific experiences of belonging and resilience through leveraging their Indigenous culture and identity. Belonging is a well-documented antecedent to Native student persistence (Oxendine, 2015; Strayhorn, 2012; Tachine et al., 2017), but can often be framed in colonial, deficit-based, or assimilationist terms (Fong et al., 2019). Thus, by understanding the ways Indigenous graduate students harness their cultural identity and in turn experience a Peoplehood sense of belonging, we provide alternative perspectives to support Indigenous student persistence and the decolonization of postsecondary spaces. Our study examines Indigenous perspectives of belonging and how postsecondary institutions support or suppress these views. In our use of a collective case study and an autoethnographic approach, our goal was to examine this ignored population from a qualitative paradigm. Furthermore, given the lack of research on Indigenous graduate and professional students, we sought to present their voices, experiences, and stories and to combat colonized understandings of belonging, identity, and resilience.

## **METHOD**

The first phase of our study consisted of a qualitative, collective case study (Yin, 2017) on the belongingness experiences of three Indigenous graduate and professional students in the U.S. We used an instrumental approach to

examine multiple cases concurrently with a goal of extending insights more broadly and to examine theoretical predictions informed by the Peoplehood framework. In the second phase, we embraced an autoethnographic approach (Jones et al., 2016) from the first-listed author’s own experiences of colonialism in higher education as an Indigenous graduate student. These reflections are in the form of short poems in response to participant narratives as another interpretative lens and to highlight the relationality between author and participant voices as an aspect of Indigenous methodology.

## **Participants**

We used purposive sampling to select study participants through professional networks of the research team. Each participant was a self-identifying Indigenous student at either the graduate or professional (i.e., medical school) level. We recruited participants through email with consent forms and a description of the research study. Three graduate students agreed to participate and identified as cis-male. Although our intention was not to focus solely on men, our sampling procedure led us to this participant pool. Participants came from different NNCUs in various regions within the U.S. (North, South, and Southwest) and represented diverse lived experiences as Indigenous people. Their intended degrees varied by discipline: a doctorate in medicine, a doctorate in history, and a master’s in conservation management. Background information (e.g., education, cultural upbringing) is provided in each of their narratives.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

After IRB approval and prior to the formal interview, the first author had informal phone conversations to build rapport with the participants. Next, online, 90-minute interviews were conducted with participants so that their stories, experiences, and knowledge could be presented in their own words. Each interview followed a semi-structured interview protocol with questions pertaining to their cultural background, interactions with family and community, and belongingness in higher education. Additional informal phone conversations were held after the interview for debriefing and follow-up. During informal phone conversations preceding and following the formal interview, the first author kept a journal, took field notes, and wrote memos summarizing those interactions, which inspired parts of the autoethnographic poetry.

To enhance the trustworthiness of our analyses, we conducted member checking and peer debriefing. After interviews were transcribed verbatim, the authors engaged in multiple readings and independently coded within-case

observations, noting salient experiences that depicted the intersections of belongingness in higher education and their Indigenous identity and culture. During our collaborative analysis sessions, we used peer debriefing techniques to compile thick descriptions and representative quotes. As inquiry auditors for one another, we collaboratively participated by asking questions for clarification and examining one another's low-inference descriptions. Interviewees were sent their own narrative to read and submit clarifications or edits.

When presenting our findings, we attempted to keep intact narratives as much as possible with low-inference descriptions providing details about their cultural background and context for representative quotes. After each narrative, we present an autoethnographic verse from the first author that illustrates themes from his positionality. In the first author's own analysis of the interview data, he began to become more aware of his own positionality as an Indigenous man pursuing his doctoral degree. Not only did he relate to feelings and experiences participants shared, but also, he recalled similar experiences that bonded him with the participants. Aware of this relationality, the first author reflected and expressed the feelings of solidarity within the shared experiences in the form of poems as a "fourth" participant.

### Researcher Positionality

In our study, we acknowledged that our experiences, beliefs, and perceptions influenced every aspect of our methodology. All authors self-identify as being Scholars of Color; two of the three authors have published together on topics related to Indigenous students in higher education. The first-listed author identifies as a male doctoral student in education, descending from the Chiricahua Apache and Mexica Indigenous Nations who also identifies as Chicano. His roles involved interviewing the participants, interpreting data, and creating autoethnographic poems, drawing from experiences and teachings of grandparents, community members, and other Indigenous scholars. The second-listed author identifies as an Asian-American scholar with expertise in sociocultural perspectives on college student learning and development. He was responsible for conceiving the study and conducting multiple data readings and inquiry audits. The third-listed author identifies as a female Mexican American doctoral student in adult education, descending from the Purépecha Indigenous people from the Monte San Nicolás, Guanajuato, Mexico. She assisted in coding and interpreting interview data.

### FINDINGS

The weaving of the fabric of life is simple yet made complex by our surroundings, the thought processes of others and the boundaries that are placed around oneself by self and others. The three interviewees that you will learn about come from different geographical locations and academic disciplines but are connected through their deep Indigenous roots. Participants selected pseudonyms and were encouraged to choose names that reflected their Indigenous identities. After each narrative, we present one of the first author's autoethnographic poems.

### Marcus

Our first interviewee was Marcus, and he described his cultural background as follows:

*I was raised Pueblo and spent pretty much every single week at the Pueblo with my friends who were all Tigua. My tribal identity was formed through taking part in feast days and ceremonies with the Pueblos, by going up into the mountains with the Mescaleros, attending different powwows, the Gathering of Nations [The largest annual powwow with over 50,000 in attendance] and by going to the cultural center.*

Marcus mentioned that his language of Pueblo was limited, and that he knew more Navajo. He made it a point to greet his Navajo friends in their language as a sign of connection and respect. This was just a glimpse into Marcus' background to contextualize the thoughts and feelings he had of higher education, faculty, campus support, and the hopes of decolonizing it all.

Marcus was also raised as a storyteller. He received stories and ceremonies; his mentor taught him how to tell stories, when to tell stories, and understanding the *when* was just as important as the *how*. Marcus expressed the following,

*It's affected me not just as far as the way I think, but even academically. In history, there is no such thing as just talking. It's about the relaying of information, which in turn is about the relaying of history. The storytelling aspect of my culture is absolutely 100% core to who I am both personally and professionally. Then on top of that just on a daily basis I go through my ceremonies.*

In his higher education experience, Marcus described moments where he took opportunities to begin to decolonize and reconcile Eurocentric thinking and practices. One of

these experiences was encountering the misrepresentation of historical accounting regarding De Soto during graduate school. Hernando De Soto was an influential part of Francisco Pizarro's colonization of the Incas and later led an expedition in search of gold. De Soto, though a colonizer of the Americas, had complex and multifaceted relationships with Indigenous nations.

*I had a student as a TA who was writing a response on an exam. The question was, what did De Soto learn during his exploration of the southeast? Their response was one sentence. De Soto learned never to trust an Indian. I realized in that moment that the ignorance that even at a university level that's around this country, around the world for that matter...It's just people don't know, and people are telling the story. I realized that if I don't do it, who is?...If I can reach a few students here and there, if I can get a monument put up at a local university, if I can get a powwow going, if I can get a few classes where students are like, "Holy crap. I never knew that before, that's what it's about." It's about slowly changing the game so that we're actually still here in front of people now. For me success is opening peoples' eyes.*

Marcus' experiences while looking for universities to attend were paramount in why he decided on Greater University of Teaching Anthropology (GUTA; a pseudonym for his institution). Although he was casting a wide net to attend some of the most prestigious colleges in the state, a vice dean from GUTA, who identifies as Indigenous, reached out to him personally. The vice dean made it a point to mention, "Well, you know we got the oldest Native Student Association and we could really use somebody like you in the history department." He also mentioned, "You know, we got a PhD program." With this authentic relationship, Marcus knew if he had a problem that he could always go discuss them with the vice dean:

*I know that if I have a problem, I can go talk to him. I know that he's going to understand the Indigenous perspective. I'm not going to go talk to somebody who's never heard of an Indigenous person or heard of Indigenous problems. I know he's gone through a lot of the same stuff that I went through. That's valuable. It's, well, not even valuable. It's priceless.*

Marcus also experienced challenges in his coursework and mentioned the narrow-mindedness he faced with faculty members. He made it a point to share,

*That in higher education unfortunately is that a lot of professors, really what they want is their own points of view reflected in their students because they've studied it. They know they're right, or they feel they're right, or however you want to put it. In those spaces there is just not space for Indigenous mentalities.*

He followed up with mentioning professors who want preference White-normative ways and have no room for narrative storytelling:

*The professors who have absolutely no room for your thought process going from point A to point C, back to point B, and back to point A when you're trying to discuss something in class they want simple answers. Yes. No. Maybe. They want what they want to hear... But the ones who understand the Indigenous mindset, the ones who understand that there's more than one point of view have a little bit more of an open mind, absolutely. They have the space...It's very beneficial.*

During Marcus' undergraduate years, he was able to effect social change at his institution. Although he felt isolated when he began college, he graduated with a sense of accomplishment regarding the impact and lasting impression he made on campus. With the backing of the university administration, Marcus started a Native American Student Association that provided a space where students of various tribes could connect. Marcus was also instrumental in getting a monument placed on campus that paid homage to the tribes whose land the college was built on. He felt support from students on his campus and on other surrounding campuses that wanted to help amidst some pushback from administrators:

*It was not us seeking people to help us out, they heard about what we were doing and they came to us to help us out. I never felt that kind of support before. Back in [hometown], I was the not enrolled kid surrounded by enrolled kids. Here I was that Pueblo guy who was doing great work and now I'm that Pueblo guy at GUTA...they are working towards getting a fountain, a reflective space with sweet grass, or sage but they are receiving some pushback because there's so many other cultures on campus..."We're outnumbered." Even though we*

*have the, "We were here first," argument, when you're outnumbered 10 to 1 they put priority on the students that they have more of really.*

He recommended promoting advocacy for Indigenous students with respect to campus support,

*One thing that I would definitely remove is the bureaucracy needed to have Indigenous spaces and discussions. I'd really like to see just a space that it would be available, like a guaranteed space where if we can get somebody to teach something we can get it done instead of having to ask for permission every single time...Especially if we wanted to have like a quick lecture, or like if somebody was having a class that was focusing on Indigenous stuff...We have spaces for technology. We have spaces for tutoring and stuff like that but we don't have a space for cultural learning.*

Marcus considered himself in a unique position because he saw so many different sides of the story that other people have not. He reflected on the people of the reservation and how they have not seen the university side and vice versa. When it comes to history, Marcus was confident in his decolonizing purpose:

*They haven't read as much of the history as I have. They have one side of the story. The rest of the world has another side of the story. I got both sides of the story somehow and it puts me in a position that not many people are in. Now that's my motivation is that if I don't do it, who is?...Right now I think my biggest contribution is just telling the right story for once, and doing it from a different perspective that people have never seen before. It's my life. It's my life. I can't think of anything else anymore...Before getting into indigenous history I was worried about becoming the one trick pony. Giddy up because that's my job now. I'm doing it. I'm focusing on it. I'm dedicating my life on it, and there's not a damn thing that's going to stop me.*

...

*Poem*

I am further lost and even more afraid of my face  
 Can never be cleaned with any amount of Sage  
 I run, run away--I hope that I will understand someday  
 What does it mean?  
 To be an Indian in today's final scene  
 I sing, I pray

But nothing can make the pain go away  
 Words as blades that cut so deep  
 Can't make them stop haunting me in my sleep  
 I scream, answered by silence  
 I need something to find my asylum  
 "Kill the Indian, Save the man"  
 But I saw the weakness in your simple plan  
 I am stronger now – A true warrior  
 Never again will you subject me to such horrors  
 It is time that I light a fire of affinity  
 Claim what was misunderstood, my identity  
 ...

### **Frank**

Frank was a member of the Oneida Nation, Bear Clan, who grew up in the Midwest. His nation's territory traditionally was in the northeastern region of the U.S. Frank, though being a federally recognized member of the Oneida Nation, grew up in a multifaceted community that was culturally more of an urban, Anishinaabe Ojibwe community. Frank also understood his connection to his Midwest community through the relationships his grandmother carries through the powwow trail and active participation with the greater Indigenous community. Though culturally, not his own nation, Frank discussed his experiences within his urban community as one of acceptance and one that has roots in both traditional ways of being, but also in Western medicine. One relationship that was influential in Frank's life was his relationship with the American Indian Health and Family Services. Since Frank was younger, he has participated in their wellness programs, learning about health issues that affect Indigenous peoples and members of his own community. This understanding of health inspired Frank to pursue medicine professionally as a way to help his family, his community, and his nation and to serve Indigenous communities collectively through knowledge generation and practice:

*I want to work with Native communities to provide my training in Western medicine as an additional resource for communities. Not to come in and say, "Oh, you know, Western medicine is just the way it is." But rather, just to use my training as an additional tool for community to elevate health and to be able to work on, to eliminate disparities, but then also serving as a mentor for the younger generations and for community members. One of my other goals is I'd really like to serve as a "scientific advisor." Basically, on a tribal institutional review board to work with communities to*

*understand how to work with researchers that want to come in the communities and do research. I want to protect the community from malicious research, things like that have been done in the past.*

Knowledge that was passed down to Frank from his grandmother came in the form of traditions, language, and an understanding of taking care of oneself holistically. Drawing from his integration of traditional medicines and his education in Western medicine, Frank reclaimed spaces to be authentically himself and holistically Indigenous. Frank at one point discussed his Indigenizing of the world around him to balance the stressors of medical school, by braiding together aspects of ceremony with a regimen of physical and mental care for himself and for the relationships he held close:

*Traditions... well I don't strictly follow any set of traditions really, like any rituals or things, but we kind of try to carry some of the basic principles with me. You know Oneida traditions, one of our big things is the On'yote, it's the Good Mind, and it's one of the messages that the Peacemaker brought with him across to show the people the peace and power of righteousness so to speak this in a few terms, a Good Mind and just being able to interact with people, knowing before you do any kind of business, setting aside, acknowledge that shared humanistic experience, bringing forth that sense of respect when you meet more new people. Just try to carry that, those teachings with me, and also Anishinaabe side set of Grandfathers' teachings. You know trust, love, humility, respect. I can't list them all off the top of my head right now, but there's seven Grandfather teachings... I think it helped me deal with some of the college lifestyle cause a lot of stress and anxiety. One thing I like to do is I often like to go try a trail or something or go down to the water off of Lake Superior and just spend some time on the Grandfather Rocks and be around those Grandfathers. I find them kind of grounding, I always place my hands right on the rocks. I feel like they absorb a lot of my anxiety and stress. And also saying prayers and giving them an offering of tobacco and say She:koli to the trees and asking them for guidance and for to have a Good Mind. I do that a lot actually. And also, I'll stretch here and there and just kind of cleanse the mind and the body.*

Frank grounded himself in the integrated relationships he carried with his community, Oneida culture, Indigenous

identity, and his professional career. These cultural identities and assets provided him with a vision and created a sense of belonging within his community and the medical field that he wanted to integrate with Indigenous ways of knowing and being:

*[It] would be kinda cool to serve as a physician for some Native community. I mean, I'd work for Oneida, and that'd be pretty great too....But, even if I didn't work for my own community, I'd like to help out with some other Native community in some way, whether that be through being a physician or serving as a mentor for other Native students through education and help them through medicine and even not just medicine but other professions...So just trying to help that next generation come through and support them...*

Frank saw the interweaving of Western and traditional medicines as possible acts of reconciling and decolonizing:

*I don't want to just come in and use my knowledge of Western medicine to save the day. But really, what I want to do rather is I want to use my knowledge of Western science to work together with traditional knowledge. How can we both use Western science medicine and traditional medicine to elevate the health of our communities? And that's really what I want to do.*

Part of what grounded Frank in his goal pursuit was the support he received from other Native students and centers, including his Native classmates in medical school:

*Everyone I think, at least in your Native background kinda shares that same sense of belonging and understanding of why we're here and why we're doing all this work. I think Native people in general keep their communities in mind when they're making a career decision or at least involvement. Maybe they don't want to work in a community, but they always want to be a part of it in some way, somehow.*

A more prominent source of support was from his undergraduate Native student center:

*If the American Native Program wasn't there, I wouldn't have done as well because of the Native center and program on campus made that space for Native students to be. And you can smudge there, you can speak your language there. You can do culture there. We had*

*community events there. Without that, it wouldn't have been the same. I wouldn't have had the ability to learn and participate in our culture, all that, in a Western institution. Having that physical building, the sign, the emblems, the language, the symbology on the outside of the building made a physical presence that Native people are on this campus. Native people are doing good work, and we do exist in academia. If that wasn't there, you'd kinda be kind of worse in that way. It'll be harder to have a voice on campus.*

...

*Poem*

*Self-medicate*

Here is my hand, take it you say -- I want you to see  
another way

And then we come out on the other side

I no longer mourn of identities lost -- No longer a stranger  
in the mirror's frost

I hear the words, not sure who they belong to

I hear the language and it isn't the one I've grown  
accustomed

It is the language of my family lost

The words kiss the scars on my skin

They think I am beautiful

These are the words that I speak today

Decolonized, I found my way back

Will no longer feel the sting or shame of your attack

He has returned to the healing peaks

To dance is to pray, to pray is to heal

I made it out and am now Native with zeal

Medicines for the soul our traditions prove

...

**Simon**

The third participant was Simon, a first-year graduate student in fisheries and conservation management. His Indigenous origin was from the Taos Pueblo people of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, but he grew up outside of his Indigenous community in a Californian town, which was primarily White and Latinx. Although his grandparents passed down traditional stories and knowledge to him as a child, it was not until going to college where he forged stronger connections with his Indigenous identity and culture. In college, Simon described his college experience with his Indigenous student group as a source of belonging:

*That's the first time I really connected with an Indigenous community on a deeper level, just because I*

*made such good friends there, and spent a lot of time with those people, with those friends. Everyone was from somewhere different; everyone was different, but that kind of made everyone the same at the same time. I didn't feel out of place. I didn't feel like I didn't belong, because none of us did belong, really, but we did because we were all there. It helped me kind of figure out where I belong...It's not like I'll figure it out in a night or anything like that. I think that's a lifelong journey. But I think more than anything it kind of helped me just realize that my experience was okay, like, it was okay to grow up in those circumstances where the connection wasn't super strong through the language and the culture, and growing up not on ... away from my Indigenous community. I guess it made me realize, like, "Look, it's okay. There's all kinds of complex experiences out there as far as being an Indigenous person." But it just made me realize it's okay to feel the way I did, feeling like I didn't belong, feeling like I was not legit...*

With regard to the role of his Indigenous culture in his life, Simon emphasized how his way of looking at the world had been shaped, in particular, in his connection to land both during his undergraduate and graduate education. Given that he was attending graduate school in Arizona, the region he identified with his nation, his relationship to land was even more salient:

*I think the biggest for me has always been the connection to the land, and also just having that respect for the earth, of course, but also a respect for kind of the connections between everything... And I feel a pretty strong connection to just where I am here in Arizona, too. I feel more physically and spiritually connected to the natural world here. Also, being more into the part of the world that my Indigenous community is in I think is ... I think that affects me positively as well. It's just different out here. I don't know.*

Simon's relationship to land as a source of strength and resilience was evident when he encountered academic setbacks during his postsecondary education:

*I spend a lot of time connecting with the land and going on hikes. I just got back from a two-day trip, or I think it's a three-day trip up in the mountains. That's a big thing for me. It helps kind of refresh my mind and helps me kind of cope with any problems I might have or just*

*...it's a good way for me to reduce stress and things like that, too.*

As a fisheries and conservation management major in graduate school, Simon discussed how there was space for Indigenous topics to be included in his academic coursework:

*Yeah, statistics, ichthyology [the zoological study of fish], and a class on climate change adaptation. I want to say there's at least two Native students including myself in every one of those classes... I think there is space for Indigenous voices in those classes, especially so the climate change adaptation class I'm in ... it's very participation-based.*

Given how central land was to Simon's cultural and student development, his proximity to campus during graduate school was a notable aspect of his belonging experiences:

*One thing for me is I live kind of far from campus. I spend a lot of time just commuting. I ride my bike, but it takes, like, 20 minutes to ride to campus... I can't just stay there all day and all night. I have to come back at some point. Yeah, I just feel kind of disconnected being out here. If there was a decent way to live near campus or on campus ... I know there's dorms and stuff for grad students, but there's really not a lot, and it's not very affordable either. So, if there was a way to have more graduate housing, maybe that's something that would help connect a lot more grad students like myself with the university...if I was living on campus I feel like I would already be more involved with things. But just with the nature of grad school, but also just living far away, I think that's something that would help.*

Simon also underscored the barriers associated with graduate school in general, especially after taking a break between his undergraduate and graduate education:

*I think it's just different being in grad school, you're not really as connected with what's going on on campus and stuff like that...I haven't really had a lot of time to get to know more. It's been kind of an adjustment period for me just, you know, being out of school for a while and getting used to that again.*

...  
Poem

You'd be surprised what I came here to do  
With the surrounding smoke  
Of sweet grass, sage, and tobacco  
I have come to reclaim my life  
Share with you a story of shame, mistrust unholy  
Now my ancestors speak through me with glory  
There is only one thing left to say  
To all those that fear that they can't be who they are  
Native is not wrong -- Never believe their false song  
Not every diamond is White  
Even the darkest shades of red sparkle in the light  
...

## DISCUSSION

As the narratives came to fruition, they, much like the participants they belonged to, possessed a spirit which wove together their existence as both Indigenous persons and students. In particular, we observed how participants each embodied the interwoven aspects of the Peoplehood framework and the intersections with their postsecondary and career-related studies.

A cornerstone of Marcus' identity was storytelling. Guided by the teachings of his mentor to not only carry the knowledge of traditional stories but also preserve the history of the story--why it exists, when it is appropriate to tell, and the process for how to tell the story--as a cultural way of being and knowing. It was through stories that he explored, understood, and ultimately bridged the world of his cultural identity as an Indigenous person and that of an Indigenous scholar. History and Anthropology are understood to be fields based on records of remembrance yet can also reify colonized distortions of past events. These academic disciplines curate the stories that track events of the past, preserve traditions, honor predecessor generations, and ultimately guide future (mis)directions of people, cultures, governments, and societies. However, more often than not, historical events in the U.S. are told through White supremacist perspectives and can misrepresent or completely neglect the stories of Indigenous people. Personifying the TribalCrit tenet that stories are legitimate, Marcus harnessed his identity and abilities as a storyteller to expose historical erasures and correct distorted narratives within the academy. Through these actions, he reclaimed sacred history and emphasized the importance of understanding historical events holistically and accurately for the continued resistance and existence of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Marcus' understandings of Native origins were evident not only in his commitment to sacred history but also in his respect for land. His activism resulted in the establishment of monuments on campus, acknowledging the erasure of Native presence on his campuses and advocating for proper historical recognition. Marcus' relationship to land also manifested itself in promoting a sense of place in his educational environments, particularly for spaces to host powwows and other Indigenous-focused presentations that may integrate ceremonial cycle publically on campus. Moreover, his respect for land extended also to Indigenous language, as these mutually define one another (Holm et al., 2003). Marcus expressed both the connecting power of shared language and the common ways of knowing and socializing as central to his identity and instantiation of belonging throughout his undergraduate and graduate experiences.

As Frank carried out his ceremonial practices, he interacted with land in a decolonized way, reclaiming his sense of place in a physically colonized space. And in doing so, he reasserted who he was within that space as an Indigenous person, engaging in decolonial practices and world making. When Frank was able to physically separate himself from campus and take a walk, he revitalized himself through calling upon Indigenous knowledge and his understanding of tribal culture. He made a new world consisting of traditional knowledge of healing practices and that of Western understandings for the purpose of carrying himself in a balanced life (Bingham et al., 2014). In his own journey through academia, this demonstrated an awareness of the sacrifices and stressors associated with medical school (his active participation in learning to heal in the Western sense of the world). He recognized the wellness cost of learning Western medicine and thus adopted the role of a traditional healer to be able to accept the responsibility of caring for himself and others and to guide his educational pursuits.

In a colonized perspective, land is seen as an object that can be owned, used, and commercialized; in a decolonized worldview, land is seen as a spiritual entity that sustains life. Frank demonstrated the latter view, rejecting along with TribalCrit scholars, the imperialist dominion towards Indigenous lands. Although ceremonial cycle served as a prominent way that Frank articulated his connection to his identity and culture, he expressed implicit and explicit practices that highlighted the interconnectedness of the four pieces of Peoplehood. Frank exemplified the sacredness of land in his frequent visits to nature as a source of emotional and mental nourishment. A more authentic experience of

nature reminded him of the teachings that tie him to his Oneida sacred history and ceremony. His connection to sacred history is demonstrated by recognizing the Good Mind and the associated stories passed down through Haudenosaunee traditions. When Frank referenced The Good Mind, or the Oneida phrase, She:koli, he also explicitly created an authentic space to be connected to his nation and his linguistic ancestry. His awareness of traditional ceremonies instilled the high regard for honoring the relationships he had with the living beings around him. Frank often gave thanks to the trees, waters, and rocks for their mental and emotional healing capacities. The profound role of spirituality in his life not only linked land, history, and language together but also forged a deeper, cultural sense of belonging and identity within Frank to decolonize his academic journey.

Lastly, Simon's narrative was also interwoven with aspects of the Peoplehood Framework. Although he was raised outside of his Indigenous community, his grandparents passed down traditional stories and knowledge that connected him to the sacred history of his people. He acknowledged that though his connection to language and culture was not particularly salient growing up, due to him living away from the Indigenous community, he recognized that it took going to college and being a part of an Indigenous student group, where he could experience a deeper sense of "place." He felt that within the group, all members brought different experiences and ceremony cycles, and that his way of knowing was not inadequate; rather it was more about where he was in his own journey of learning about his Indigenous community. In a sense, Simon cultivated with other Indigenous students a sense of shared language, beyond spoken words, that tapped deeper ways of knowing and being.

Within his own understanding of his connection to his Indigenous community and ancestors, Simon chose a graduate program in the traditional territory closely connected to the nation of his ancestors. He felt a strong connection to the land not only physically but also spiritually. Simon expressed that his literal presence on the earth that was walked on by his ancestors evoked a greater connection to them, his identity, and his own sense of belonging. He referenced that outdoor hikes on the land were a great source of strength and resilience at times in his life when he encountered academic setbacks. These hikes served as ceremonies to refresh his mind and help him cope with any problems he was currently experiencing. In addition to placing himself in his traditional territory, Simon described his own cultural responsibility and reciprocity to his

relationship with place and land, which led him to pursue graduate studies focused on conserving lands historically linked with his ancestors. And in doing so, he strengthened his connection to his Indigenous values and greater belongingness as a student.

In sum, when examined through the lens of the Peoplehood Framework, each participant reflected the interconnectedness of their Indigenous knowledge and their professional and academic pursuits. This relationality also included the first author, much like that of the first participant, Marcus, who recalled the importance of storytelling and the imagery they convey to help him understand the world around him. In light of how the first author told stories through his poetry, these autoethnographic poems enhanced the universal relationality of the participants to each other and our readers, but also allowed for the first author to have an even greater contribution to this study as an almost fourth participant in the study.

### **Implications**

It is our hope that we can further contribute to the field, scholarship, and our professional community by offering implications on three major levels--*interpersonal*, *instructional*, and *institutional*--using Gray, Hope, and Matthews' (2018) framework. However, before discussing practical implications, we also want to highlight briefly some theoretical implications. Specifically, our study points to the need for current Indigenous models in graduate and professional education. Different stressors, feelings of alienation, and colonizing forces may exist at higher levels of education beyond the undergraduate level. Thus, we encourage other scholars to examine Indigenous graduate and professional students to further our understanding of this subpopulation. With this in mind, we turn to practical implications in the next sections.

**Interpersonal.** With an inclusive understanding of the journeys and the sociohistoric identities of Indigenous graduate students, college instructors and student affairs professionals may be better equipped to address belongingness factors (Lundberg & Lowe, 2016). One example of this relational understanding emerged from Marcus' narrative and his interactions with the vice dean at GUTA. The administrator's invitation and recognition of the contributions he would make to the history doctoral program was a driving force for Marcus to pursue a higher degree. It is our hope that faculty and student affairs professionals become more aware of the presence of Indigenous peoples and communities and actively decolonize their thinking in

order to foster allyship and authentic relationships of trust and mutuality.

**Instructional.** Instructional opportunities that decolonize Western thought are essential when working with Indigenous students. Affirming and inviting authentic Indigenous narratives or Native-centered perspectives are essential in graduate and professional courses given their discussion-based nature. During classroom discussions, embracing these perspectives as seen through Marcus' and Simon's narratives can foster more inclusive, instructional opportunities for Indigenous students and also avoid tokenism, or the pressure being the only person of a given race to be a spokesperson of one's community (Brayboy et al., 2014). A more critically conscious understanding of Indigenous perspectives may also facilitate the illumination of Indigenous knowledge respectfully and the amplification of Indigenous voices. This can be achieved through invited participation from Indigenous students, Native-informed curricular decisions and scholarship, and visits from community members.

**Institutional.** Addressing what can be done at the institutional level, all three participants exemplified the importance of having designated Indigenous spaces on campus and access to Native-centered resources (Tachine et al., 2017). It is often argued that diversity offices offer equal resources to the communities they serve; however, they may fail to provide resources in equitable ways for Indigenous students. One possible implication to improve offering of these resources is greater advocacy for creating Indigenous cultural and academic centers on campus. By doing so, institutions can show their commitment to dismantling the continuation of racist systems, structures, policies, and entities that marginalize Indigenous communities and students.

Further, a more holistic view of Indigenous education within a Eurocentric structure could influence the ways Indigenous students are advised and taught. This may foster a campus culture that decolonizes, reconciles, and Indigenous education. Despite the dehumanization that Indigenous communities have experienced with Western educational systems, belonging in higher education for Indigenous students should be foregrounded in the interconnectedness of culture, family, and community and extended beyond the walls of academe. All three participants expressed the importance of their Indigenous communities and the influences those communities had on their educational pursuits (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Inviting community members, family, and elders to play an active role in the educational process can forefront the learning processes of Indigenous students. Also, greater

concern towards campus housing for Indigenous graduate students given the cultural significance of place and space may be fruitful (Singson et al., 2016). It is our belief, that if considered, these implications may illuminate why Indigenous students ultimately pursue higher education. As Brayboy (2005) posited “theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways...” (p. 430), for our team, reading and understanding theory is important, but it is meaningless if we cannot utilize it to accomplish positive social change in the face of White-centric institutional systems that reproduce societal disadvantaging of Indigenous and racially minoritized students and their communities.

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