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## Cultivating Honor: How Indigenous Students Harness Resilience And Cultural Wealth To Thrive At A Borderlands University

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CULTIVATING HONOR: HOW INDIGENOUS STUDENTS HARNESS  
RESILIENCE AND CULTURAL WEALTH TO THRIVE

AT A BORDERLANDS UNIVERSITY

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## **Dedication**

To the individuals who dedicated their valuable experiences that made this study possible.

To my teachers, professors, and mentors who guided me in my lifelong educational journey.

To my students, who shared their aspirational capital.

To Mrs. Joan Burgin for always believing in me.

To Mercedes, who taught me resistance capital y gracias a Dios.

CULTIVATING HONOR: HOW INDIGENOUS STUDENTS HARNESS

RESILIENCE AND CULTURAL WEALTH TO THRIVE

AT A BORDERLANDS UNIVERSITY

by

LOURDES GARCIA, M.A., B.A.

DISSERTATION

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of the Requirements

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Leadership

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

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## **Acknowledgements**

### **The University of Texas at El Paso Land Acknowledgement Statement:**

As members of the University of Texas at El Paso community, we acknowledge that we are meeting on unceded Indigenous land. We would like to recognize and pay our respects to the Indigenous people with long ties to the immediate region: Lipan Apache, Mescalero Apache, Piro, Manso, Suma, Jumano, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, Piro/Manso/Tiwa Indian Tribe of the Pueblo of San Juan de Guadalupe, and Tortugas Pueblo. We also acknowledge the nations whose territories include present-day Texas: the Carrizo & Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Caddo, Tonkawa, Comanche, Alabama-Coushatta, Kickapoo, and the peoples of Chihuahua and northern Mexico from whom most/many of our students descend, such as the Rarámuri, Tepehuan, Wixarrika, and Nahuatlaca peoples. Finally, we recognize all of the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of these lands and territories here in Paso del Norte, on Turtle Island. The University of Texas at El Paso honors your history and cultures, and we seek greater awareness of the myriad ways in which your legacy can guide us in fruitful partnerships and mutually fulfilling relationships.

<<https://www.utep.edu/liberalarts/native-american-and-indigenous-studies/index.html>>

## **Abstract**

This qualitative study sheds light on students' lived experiences regarding Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) at Borderlands University (BU), a Hispanic-serving institution on the U.S.-Mexico border where First Peoples lived for thousands of years. This study supports Indigenous students whose dismal national college graduation rates must be addressed. It recognizes students' cultural wealth and richness (Yosso, 2005) and is grounded by the Peoplehood Matrix (Holm, 2003; Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird, 2017). This study was consistent with previous studies revealing that prioritizing student support raises equity and improves the overall academic experiences for all students in higher education (Tachine et al., 2017). Findings showed that Indigenous students want to be listened to and included in conversations that affect them and their communities. As revealed in this study, they have cultural wealth that helped improve and address many issues, such as NAGPRA. This study showed that students need support from faculty, but faculty also need support from administrators for their program to succeed. This study opens the discussion for Indigenous student advancement and positive inclusion and diversity through education that can change the trajectory of institutions.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	vi
Table of Contents .....	vi
List of Tables .....	xi
List of Figures .....	xii
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Brief History .....	2
Problem Statement .....	5
Purpose Statement .....	9
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	15
Supporting Students' Sense of Belonging .....	16
Challenges Encountered with Native American and Indigenous Studies .....	19
Yesterday's Atrocities Become Today's Higher Education Challenges .....	21
Overcoming Challenges with Inclusive Narratives .....	22
Respect and Humbleness to Overcome Challenges and Cultural Callousness .....	23
Fostering Relationships between Indigenous Communities and Higher Education .....	26
Challenging Deficit Thinking .....	29
Native American and Indigenous Studies Support Students .....	30
Conceptual Approach .....	33
Theoretical Framework .....	36
Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model .....	36
Linguistic Capital .....	38



Familial Capital.....	38
Navigational Capital .....	39
Resistance Capital.....	39
Cultural Capital Fosters Relationships with Indigenous Communities .....	40
The Peoplehood Matrix Model .....	41
Chapter Three: Methodology and Study Rationale .....	45
Research Design.....	47
Research Question .....	47
Site Selection and Sample Size.....	48
Participants.....	48
Data Collection .....	49
Data Analysis .....	52
Trustworthiness .....	53
Subjectivity Statement and Ethical Considerations .....	54
Chapter 4: Findings.....	56
Theme One: Recognizing the Cultural Richness Students Bring .....	57
Resilience .....	57
“Students bring a lot to it; they have a lot to teach too.” .....	59
Creation of a Native American and Indigenous Studies Degree.....	63
Challenges to Indigenous Studies .....	67
“It’s a small beginning.” .....	71

Theme Two: Factors Influencing Indigenous Studies and Students .....	73
Lack of Indigenous Faculty, Mentors, and Advisors .....	73
“Imposter Syndrome. It feels different.” .....	75
Conflicting Beliefs Create Cultural Clashes .....	76
“It doesn’t hurt me to do it. It just feels sad.” ..	76
“A lot of assimilation needed to be done just to survive.” .....	77
“It didn’t count as a language.” .....	78
Holidays and Feast Days: “I don’t have the luxury of getting away with it.” .....	79
Theme Three: Challenges .....	81
“How do I learn more about my ancestry?” .....	87
Ancestral Remains .....	88
The First Domino .....	88
Senate Bill 17 .....	89
Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion .....	115
Implications for Practice .....	133
Limitations and Delimitations .....	138
Recommendations for Future Study .....	139
References .....	142
Appendix A: Recruitment Letter .....	154
Appendix B: Interview Question Protocol .....	155

Appendix C: Code Streamlining Example.....	156
Appendix D: CITI Certificate .....	157
Appendix E: Community Cultural Wealth Capital Model.....	158
Appendix F: The Peoplehood Matrix .....	159
Vita.....	160

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Spring 2024 Native American and Indigenous Student Enrollment.....	56
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## List of Figures

Figure 1: The Peoplehood Matrix. ....	33
Figure 2: A Model of Community Cultural Wealth. ....	35

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This qualitative study sheds light on students and key individuals involved in establishing the Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) minor at Borderlands University (BU) on the U.S.-Mexico border. Borderlands University, a Hispanic Serving Institution, and the surrounding areas, where First Peoples thrived for thousands of years, are historically fertile and culturally wealthy environments of lived experiences that students bring.

After more than 20 years of hard work and challenges, the Indigenous land acknowledgement statement at Borderlands University is finally a reality (Jackson, 2021). This statement recognizes the Indigenous presence that existed for more than 15,000 years prior to the arrival of European colonizers and other settlers (Blackhawk, 2023; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Eickhoff, 1996; Martínez, 2018; Shepherd, 2019). Despite this rich history, many residents and visitors to the desert southwest borderlands remain unaware that these are unceded Indigenous lands (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Martínez, 2018) and are oblivious to the vibrant and flourishing Indigenous Peoples who thrived in the region.

Rich fertile soil, fresh water sources, crops such as grapes, corn, and beans, as well as plentiful game, existed in the region that served as home to “seminomadic Manso and Suma Indians” before 1530, which Spaniard explorers encountered (Hackett, 1911; Martínez, 2018, p. 10). Much later, in 1659, after many years of continuous encounters between the region’s Indigenous Peoples and Spanish settlers and upon the recommendation of Fray Agustín de Rodríguez and Fray Garcia de San Francisco y Zuñiga, “the mission of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe where Ciudad Juárez now stands” was founded (Martínez, 2018, p. 10). After the 1680 Pueblo Indian revolt in northern New Mexico, the regional population rose to nearly five thousand, including Piro, Suma, and Tigua tribes (Martínez, 2018, p. 11). In what was once an

abundant existence for Indigenous Peoples of the desert southwest, the aftermath became a merciless border. Causes for the unfair taking of the richest resources created an unspeakable dependence forever dividing the People. Human violations included settling and colonizing, broken land treaties, looting, rioting, and burning vital records to destroy rightful ownership and birthrights (Martínez, 2018). Consequently, Martínez writes (2018), “Dependency would become a way of life” (p. 13).

To fully grasp the challenges faced by the descendants of First Peoples who attend Borderlands University, it is crucial to examine the region’s history. Dr. Theresa Rocha Beardall of the University of Washington noted that “the past informs the present. Precedence is required” (2023). Precedence is, therefore, crucial to comprehending the importance and relevance of this study.

### **Brief History**

Tall green corn stalks planted in the fertile garden sway amidst the sun’s warmth while the drummer’s bass rhythms deeply thump and synchronize with your heartbeat. Ysleta del Sur Pueblo youth demonstrate the “bell dance” with utmost care and respect in remembrance of their ancestors. The air is sweet with the lingering smell of freshly baked bread from the *horno* (oven) early that morning. An abundant collection of mesquite wood lies readily for the next bread-baking special occasion, prepared with the guidance of elder women. Visitors to the Tribal Cultural Center may experience similar events as described. Pueblo Peoples lived in thriving economies that produced plentiful nourishment due to their advanced agricultural systems that yielded crops such as corn, squash, pumpkin, amaranth, and cotton (Comar, 2015; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Eickhoff, 1996).

For thousands of years, Indigenous Peoples educated their communities on resources from the land, languages, and cultural practices and, as a result, thrived in all aspects of their lives (Adams, 2020; Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Eickhoff, 1996). They bravely fought destructive and violent assimilation acts such as the abduction of their children, who were forcefully sent to boarding schools that exterminated their way of life (Adams, 2020). Boarding schools were the “institutional manifestation of the government’s determination to completely restructure the Indian’s minds and personalities” (Adams, 2020, p. 97). Since its establishment by Pratt in 1879, Carlisle Indian Industrial School forcefully assimilated, erased, and silenced the voices of children as young as five from more than 140 tribes (Adams, 2020). Graves of 186 children are recorded, yet many were unaccounted for. Standing Bear, who attended Carlisle, recounted the forced shaving of his and other Sioux boys’ beautiful long hair they treasured as part of their identity as a painful and emotional experience that “hurt my feelings so deeply that tears welled up in my eyes” (Adams, 2020, p. 101).

Forcefully cutting the children’s hair went beyond physically altering their identity. The children’s traditional customs and culture were given the deep six. It was violence toward an ethnicity from an invasive, unconscionable government that coveted cultural erasure and genocide (Adams, 2020; Beardall, 2023; Brayboy, 2005; Calloway, 2019). Hence, to the settlers, their hair was “symbolic of savagism” and a traumatic cultural assault on their identity (Adams, 2020). The militaristic boarding schools utilized education as a torture chamber of the Indigenous soul, as described by Luther Standing Bear, a student at Carlisle who was forced to read a paragraph eleven times until “everything before me went black and I sat down thoroughly cowed and humiliated for the first time in my life and in front of the whole class!” (Adams, 2020, p. 138). At Carlisle, the children realized they were strictly “forbidden to speak our mother



tongue,” Standing Bear relates (Calloway, 2019, p. 418). By suppressing the languages of Indigenous peoples, the dominant culture is not only depriving those communities of a vital part of their heritage, but also robbing America of a rich cultural legacy. As Standing Bear argues, “the language of a people is an integral part of their history, and it can only be kept alive by the people themselves – not by scholars” (Calloway, 2019, p. 418). In the Borderlands University region, Franciscans oversaw the education of the Tiwa until 1852, when the clergy replaced them (Comar, 2015). Although the friars recognized the importance of the Indigenous Peoples’ way of life and considered them “semi-separate Indigenous communities,” torture and tribulations continued (Comar, 2015, p. 144). Amidst Indigenous Peoples’ forced assimilation, to the extent of emulating European dress and decreeing colonially similar constitutional documents, injustices continued (Calloway, 2019; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023).

Moreover, colonization practices are still evident in today’s educational institutions (Brayboy, 2005). For example, social practices mandate and punish students who speak their native languages (Brayboy, 2005). Many children have experienced corporal punishment, such as swatting and hitting, that leaves red marks on their small hands. Faced with such pressure, most people will forcefully assimilate to avoid discrimination, racial slurs, and violence (Alberto, 2017). Language and cultural knowledge erasure was the result of the “racial mixture” or “*mestizaje*” of the Indigenous Mexican Peoples (Alberto, 2017, p. 249; Bejarano & Shepherd, 2018). Thus, a decisive factor such as language is represented through culture and reflected in identity surrounding “immigration status, gender, phenotype, sexuality, and region, as well as race and ethnicity” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76).

The previous background and historical overview are essential in understanding what has culminated and led to the Land Acknowledgement Statement and the creation of the Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) minor at Borderlands University.

### **Problem Statement**

“Why don’t our students survive when they come to your universities?” (Sanders, 2018, p.107). The question above posed by a tribal college president highlights the ever-present problem for Indigenous and tribal students in mainstream higher education and those who transfer to mainstream colleges and universities. This problem stems from the lack of sufficient degree programs and studies supporting Indigenous students and how they construct, navigate, and experience Western and colonized education (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016).

Culturally insensitive practices and a lack of support for Indigenous students contribute to a multitude of negative college experiences. These include low completion rates, classroom invalidation, and hostility both in and outside the classroom (Brayboy, 2005; Sanders, 2018; Shotton & Reyes, 2018; Standing Bear, 1978). A lack of accurate data misrepresents the type and scope of challenges Indigenous and Native American students face in colleges and universities, such as low graduation rates and dropping out of college. As a result, higher dropout rates exist for Indigenous students ages 16-24 as compared to other ethnicities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

### **Problematic Statistics**

Indigenous students total less than 1% of graduate and undergraduate students in higher education (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). While precise data is inaccessible, current indications suggest that only 10% of Indigenous students attain bachelor’s degrees, and 17% obtain associate degrees (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). This troubling

statistic underscores the fact that out of 60% of college-bound high school graduates, only 17% of Indigenous students make it to college, and fewer finish (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Numerous reasons exist to explain these concerning statistics.

Indigenous students face various challenges in their college quest. For example, most Indigenous students seek financial assistance compared to white students. Between 2011 and 2012, 85% of Indigenous students received federal grant aid compared to 69% of white students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Additionally, statistics reveal an underrepresentation of Indigenous students in colleges and universities nationwide. In 2019, out of more than 2 million bachelor's degrees conferred in the United States, only 9,165 were earned by students identifying as "American Indian/Alaska Native" (Malfa et al., 2022, p. 211). This disparity is even more pronounced for master's degrees, with just 3,453 out of over 830,000 degrees granted to Indigenous students. Particularly problematic is the dismal representation at the doctoral level, where only 720 Indigenous students earned advanced degrees out of nearly 190,000 nationwide (Malfa et al., 2022, p. 211).

Indigenous students are the least likely to attend college because they have the highest dropout rates for 16 to 24-year-olds at 10.2%, which is 8.1% higher than "Asian" students and almost 2.4% higher than "Hispanic" students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In addition, Indigenous students face challenges such as a lack of support enabling their smooth transition from tribal and community colleges to public colleges and universities (Brayboy, 2018). The lack of precise data concerning Indigenous students in higher education presents a notable challenge, especially considering these students constitute only 1% of the total student population (Malfa, 2022). This deficiency not only fosters but also perpetuates Indigenous

peoples' underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in academia, exacerbated by their exclusion from data and studies (Malfa, 2022).

The question arises regarding why the data reflects low attendance for Indigenous students in higher education (Brayboy, 2022; Minthorn & Shotton, 2018). Likewise, the gatekeeper educational pipeline blocks Indigenous students and places them within a “failure-frame” characterized by a definition that fails to accurately describe their lived experiences (Brayboy et al., 2012, p. 2). For instance, a measure of success is usually defined as a student attending a single institution of higher education full-time, not exceeding four concurrent linear years, and earning at least a bachelor's degree. The reality shows that Indigenous students attend several postsecondary institutions with “breaks for various reasons” (Brayboy et al., 2012, p. 2) as a non-linear experience.

Native American poverty rates in the U.S. range from as high as 32.3% in Texas to an unacceptable 49.4% in North and South Dakota (World Population, 2023). A common expectation is that education serves as a pathway toward improving students' and their families' financial and economic well-being (Cole, 2016; Shotton, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017). Hence, a student's higher educational attainment is directly correlated to their earning ability. For example, students with a master's degree earned 21% more than those with a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2023), and students with a bachelor's degree earned 55% more than high school graduates (NCES, 2023). High dropout rates, high unemployment, poor healthcare, and lack of adequate housing, resources, and opportunities (World Population, 2023) have led to psychological and mental distress for the Indigenous community (Cole, 2016). A bleak outlook leads many Indigenous youth to depressive views about their chances. Scholars have significant evidence to show that “institutional racism is a major factor in suicide rates among young Native Americans”

(Cole, 2016, p. 96). Sadly, suicide rates occur on reservations three to ten times the national average (Cole, 2016). North Dakota senator Byron Dorgan attributed the deaths directly to “a trail of broken promises to American Indians” (Cole, 2016, p. 96). This “toxic collection of pathologies” comes from historical trauma that transcends hopelessness and post-traumatic stress disorder rooted in aggressive assimilation tactics centered on erasure (Adams, 2020; Cole, 2016; Zinn, 2015).

### **Campus Climate**

Campus climate studies revealed that Indigenous students feel undervalued because they experience classroom hostility and invalidation (Brayboy, 2012; Stewart-Ambo, 2021). They are undervalued via Eurocentric-heavy dogma that presents an incomplete and fragmented experience of Indigenous Peoples. Eurocentrism eclipses their views (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016) and supports culture eradication.

Moreover, Indigenous students in a remedial English class experienced culturally insensitive practices when the assignment involved writing a Native American story (Stewart-Ambo, 2021). While non-Native students chose to write about popular culture, an Indigenous student wrote a traditional story passed down by his grandmother (Stewart-Ambo, 2021). As a result, classmates criticized him and told him that his story “wasn’t real” (Stewart-Ambo, 2021, p. 510). As illustrated, culturally insensitive environments contribute to implications that impact not only whether Indigenous students attend college but also their choice of study, low enrollment, lack of retention, and degree completion (Stewart-Ambo, 2021). Higher education institutions must carefully examine what they are doing and what they must do to create environments in which Native American and Indigenous students feel welcome. As an under-

represented population, as previously established, it is crucial to help students feel they belong and are not invisible.

Besides facing microaggressions during their first year in college, Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird's (2017) study reveals that social disconnection exacerbates the absence of Indigenous students' sense of belonging. Microaggressions are "subtle, commonplace experiences of prejudice that marginalized groups encounter regularly, which adversely affects academic achievement, fosters feelings of isolation, and promotes depression" (Shotton, 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2016; Tachine et al., 2017, p. 787). This issue underscores the importance of colleges and universities seeking to attract more Indigenous students to support Indigenous students by validating their culture versus the prevailing "ingrained Eurocentric" campus climate found at most institutions (Tachine et al., 2017).

### **Purpose Statement**

The objective of this qualitative study was to listen to enrolled Indigenous students and other key individuals and document the findings from their lived experiences. Key individuals include the Indigenous community, faculty, and others involved in creating the Native American and Indigenous Studies minor. As this study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach, the identity and number of participants remained unknown until data collection commenced in September 2023. Chapter four provides a comprehensive account of this study's findings.

Its historically rich background makes Borderlands University an ideal study location. It was once and continues as an epicenter where First Peoples, world nations, republics, countries, colonizers, and settlers met by force or circumstance (Hackett, 1911; Eickhoff, 1996; Shepherd, 2019). The Native American and Indigenous Studies minor is a significant component adding to

the cultural wealth of the area, which continues as a meeting place and home for Indigenous peoples.

In summary, this study invited the voices of students and key individuals to share their lived experiences involved in the development of Native American and Indigenous Studies, highlighting the application of cultural knowledge and wealth students bring with them. Moreover, the conceptual framework is guided by Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005) and Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird's Peoplehood Matrix (2017), challenging the stereotypical portrayal of Indigenous and First Peoples as victims. My position is that Indigenous peoples have historically thrived and have within them the potential for continued flourishing within higher education. Further, establishing and supporting Native American and Indigenous Studies empowers Indigenous students' college persistence, retention, and graduation (Shotton, 2018). Persistence represents a student returning to any school, and retention represents returning to the same school (Tachine, 2015). Education is one of the main paths to prepare Indigenous students to improve their quality of life and give back to their communities, which is recognized among scholars as Native American self-determination and nation-building (Brayboy et al., 2012; Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; Tachine et al., 2017). Achieving the objective of this study necessitates addressing the following research question.

### **Research Question**

This study addressed the following research question:

**(RQ)** What are Indigenous students' experiences at Borderlands University?

These inquiries form the basis of two integrated frameworks within this study:

[Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005) + The Peoplehood Matrix Model (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017)].

## Definitions

This study uses Indigenous, Native American, and First Peoples to describe Indigenous Peoples in the United States. The terms “American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN)” are used as direct quotes derived from federal and state data such as the U.S. Census. Whenever possible, specific Tribal names are used as a form of respect and as preferred by Indigenous Peoples (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023). Additionally, ‘student’ represents Sovereign, Indigenous, or Native American students.

*Tribal Colleges.* Thirty-two tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) exist in the U.S. (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2023). TCUs promote Tribal culture, languages, and traditions and support Tribal communities and services (Blackhawk, 2023; U.S. Dept. of Educ, 2023; Wall, 2020). According to the American Indian College Fund, 86% of students who attend a TCU before transferring to a mainstream university complete their studies compared to less than 10% of Indigenous students who attend mainstream colleges directly from reservation high schools (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2023).

The *Native American and Indigenous Studies* (NAIS) minor is the program of study at Borderlands University, located on the U.S.-Mexico border. It continues as the home and meeting place of diverse cultures and ethnicities.

The *Peoplehood Matrix* is defined as a “holistic framework” of “four intertwined factors including language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 789). The peoplehood matrix comes from “persistent peoples,” reflecting First Peoples’ resistance through colonization and survival (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 790). The model is derived from the *Peoplehood Matrix* from Holm, Pearson, and Chavis as a general and specialized theory for American Indian studies (2003). Language, sacred history, place, and ceremonial cycle are



intertwined and interwoven within Indian communities and people (Stratton & Washburn, 2008). They provide Native “forms of knowledge, while at the same time, [promote] a heteroholistic epistemological framework” (Stratton & Washburn, 2008, p. 55).

Stratton and Washburn (2008) describe the heteroholistic worldview as one that unites Indigenous societies in that they view themselves as “The People,” which establishes their connection and relationship with “specific geographic location and sets up a system of mutual responsibilities and reciprocal relationships with the land and its inhabitants” (Stratton & Washburn, 2008, p. 55). The absence of any of the four aspects of the Peoplehood Matrix disrupts the connection and “undermines or adversely affects the ability of a particular Native Nation to endure” (Stratton & Washburn, 2008, p. 55). For example, the many forceful removals of Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral lands disrupted their sacred connection to the land, which was essential for ceremonial events requiring visits connected to “oral sacred history” (Stratton & Washburn, 2008, p. 68). The loss of land further distanced Indigenous communities and relocated them to areas that required the use of colonized languages, such as English and Spanish, and led to the loss of Indigenous languages (Stratton & Washburn, 2008). The loss of one aspect leads to imbalance, resulting in an imbalance in that Indigenous children lose their language, which “alienates them” from their cultural heritage (Stratton & Washburn, 2008, p. 68).

### ***Significance of the Study***

The significance of this study is in its endeavor to shed additional light and listen to the voices of students and individuals who have contributed to establishing the Native American and Indigenous Studies minor at Borderlands University. This study offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities inherent in this academic program. There is particular emphasis on

improving academic institutions for Indigenous students, with the understanding that the improvements made will ultimately benefit all students (Best Colleges, 2022; Brayboy, 2015).

The establishment of the Native American and Indigenous Studies minor is particularly significant for Borderlands University, given that the surrounding region served as the homeland and an epicenter for a diverse range of Indigenous tribes, including the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, Piro, Manso, Suma, Apache, Tarahumara, and Jumano (Shepherd, 2019). By offering this program, the university promotes cultural diversity and challenges one-sided and inaccurate views of Indigenous peoples and their experiences.

Moreover, by focusing on the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous students, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to improve academic institutions for Indigenous populations. By highlighting the challenges faced and opportunities provided by the NAIS minor, this study endeavors to inform future initiatives to create inclusive and supportive educational environments for Indigenous students within Borderlands University and beyond. Furthermore, higher education institutions must welcome Indigenous students through a well-planned curriculum where they can hear the voices of ancestral wisdom and see the rich culture and practices beneficial to the mind, body, and spirit. In addition to the low one percent of Indigenous students and less than one percent in higher education, it is rare to find Indigenous programs of study (Bryant, 2021). Thus, listening to the stories, voices, needs, and wants is imperative and a step in the right direction for colleges and educational institutions

As Brayboy et al. (2015) explain, “Despite frequent rhetoric touting commitment to diversity, many postsecondary leaders lack general knowledge of Native people’s rich, complex history and modern-day sociocultural needs and desires” (p.155). Thus, Borderlands University sets itself in a unique position that promotes diversity and welcomes students of all ethnicities

(Hurtado et al., 2015). Borderlands University's unique location also sets it apart as a prime location for Indigenous studies.

The 2023-2024 enrollment at Borderlands University was 24,351 (Borderlands Data, 2024). Its location and community were "in the center of the pre-and post-contact Indigenous world that never really disappeared and navigated colonization by Spain, Mexico, and the United States" (Shepherd, 2019, para. 3-4). The regional area surrounding Borderlands University is home to Cheyenne, Cherokee, Navajo, Tohono O'odham, Apache, Ojibwe, Zapotec, and Mixtec from Mexico (Shepherd, 2019, para. 8). This study agrees with findings that the disappearance of Native American and Indigenous Peoples is a myth (Blackhawk, 2023). Next, a literature review will delve into the phenomenology of students' lived experiences, often silenced and deleted yet deeply intertwined within, through aspects such as cultural wealth and the Peoplehood Matrix they bring. Factors pose numerous daily challenges requiring students to enforce their aspirational, resistant, and navigational capital. These challenges include complexities related to the Native American Graves Protection Act (NAGPRA) and Senate Bill 17 (SB 17), demonstrating their significant impact on the Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) minor.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This literature review is thematically organized to synthesize existing research findings relevant to the research question:

**(RQ)** What are Indigenous students' experiences at Borderlands University?

The themes are: (a) the importance of Native American and Indigenous Studies in academic institutions, (b) challenges students and Native American and Indigenous Studies encountered, (c) the Native American Graves Protection Act (NAGPRA), and (d) Senate Bill 17 (SB 17).

### **The Importance of Native American and Indigenous Studies in Academic Institutions**

Including ethnic studies is advantageous due to the various benefits of Native American and Indigenous Studies for students and higher education alike. For instance, ethnic studies majors have 20% higher graduation rates, and students report increased self-confidence, self-efficacy, and positive well-being (Best Colleges, 2022).

In addition, Native American and Indigenous knowledge helps higher education meet their student outcome goals of student success and retention. A study by Brayboy et al. (2015) highlights that the more knowledgeable the leadership is regarding Indigenous culture, the better it can serve its Indigenous students and faculty. Although enrollment is the lowest for Native American and Indigenous students, enrollment patterns show an increase in undergraduate enrollment in public institutions from “10.5 million students in 2000 to 13.7 million—a 30 percent increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Despite this steady increase, AI/AN students remain underrepresented in IHEs” (Brayboy et al., 2015, p. 157). Campus climates that include Indigenous students that NAIS programs provide, where Indigenous students see themselves and feel a place of belonging, contribute to student success (Brayboy et al., 2015).

Thus, the presence of Indigenous Studies courses helps Native American and Indigenous Students feel acknowledged and provides opportunities for more extensive community-centered settings versus competitive atmospheres that are larger and tend to overwhelm Indigenous students accustomed to working cooperatively in smaller settings (Brayboy et al., 2015). Thus, the presence of Native American and Indigenous Studies and the interactions with other like-minded faculty and peers helps support students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn et al., 2016).

### **Supporting Students' Sense of Belonging**

Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird (2017) identified a significant success factor as a student's *sense of belonging* as a necessary component in college persistence, as identified by Vincent Tinto (p. 788). A sense of belonging encompasses various elements on and off campus that influence whether students perceive or "feel they are part of the campus community," which either motivates or discourages students (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 789). A central finding to create a sense of belonging included the "ability to maintain a strong cultural identity through engaging one's culture as an anchor" (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 789). Thus, students must establish and continue their connections and friendships with Native and Indigenous peers who respect their culture, which extends to finding "Native American/Alaskan Native staff support" on campus who "enrich their sense of belonging" (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 789).

Furthermore, a mixed-methods dissertation by Keith (2016) at North Dakota State University finds that culturally relevant studies help counteract deficit perspectives in higher education that discount the cultural capital, or knowledge, students bring with them (Keith, 2016; Yosso, 2005). Hence, ethnic studies help support students' sense of belonging. For instance, an ethnically aware environment supports students and counteracts prejudicial, discriminatory practices that may lead to invisibility and a lack of belonging (Keith, 2016). By offering ethnic

studies, higher education institutions help Indigenous students feel they belong within the campus environment (Keith, 2016).

Consequently, students who wish to maintain their cultural ties, roots, identity, and tribal knowledge also benefit from a sense of community and belonging on campus (Keith, 2016). Erik Erikson identified the wish for students to maintain their cultural roots and resist assimilation in his resistance theoretical framework (Keith, 2016; Syed & Fish, 2018). Amidst heinous genocidal assimilation in boarding schools, Indigenous students should have the right to freely express their culture without feeling belittled or penalized on campus or in the classroom (Brayboy, 2005; Mankiller & Wallis, 1993). These “schools, mostly located off reservations, were centers of widespread sexual, emotional, and physical abuse” (Cole, 2016, p. 96).

Boarding school abuses were rampant and rarely addressed. Extensive research by Shepherd (2020) documents abuses of Indigenous students who were forced to perform the most uncleanly work, such as cleaning filthy sewer pipes, and beaten by supervisors and ultimately sent away to schools further away without their parent's knowledge or consent. Dunbar-Ortiz's (2023) words resonate in that boarding schools were an ultimate failure for their claims of educating Indigenous children and instead endangered, abused, and used them for economic gains. When students became old enough to continue their studies, they were held back because, according to a school supervisor, “who will do the work?” (Shepherd, 2010, p. 84). In the Indian Bureau “outing system,” Indigenous schoolgirls as young as ten years of age forcefully worked in non-Indigenous households without pay (Shepherd, 2010, p. 85). Between 1911 and 1913, in Riverside, California, a Hualapai Indigenous girl was raped after being sent to work at a non-Indigenous household. After her parents complained to the school, an investigator “exonerated the young man and blamed the young girl for becoming pregnant. The pain and trauma

associated with such sexual violence are important parts of the Truxton school and its program of colonial education” (Shepherd, 2010, p. 86).

Tachine et al. (2017) also attribute native-centered campus resources as motivators for a sense of belonging and success, contributing to college persistence. Native centers provide Indigenous students spaces to connect with peers and create relationships with other “Native students and staff” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 788). Similarly, Shotton’s (2010) findings support the premise that Native American student centers serve as a home environment connecting students to their culture and are necessary for their success, as discussed earlier. Moreover, Native cultural college centers that validate historical and contemporary experiences help students succeed in “higher education as an Indigenous space” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 788).

Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird (2017) utilize the *peoplehood matrix* as their theoretical framework for a sense of belonging (p. 789). The *peoplehood matrix* is defined as a “holistic framework” of “four intertwined factors including language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 789). The peoplehood matrix comes from “persistent peoples, reflecting First Peoples’ resistance through colonization and survival” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 790). Thus, a thriving Native American and Indigenous Studies program must support all students, specifically Indigenous students in their first year, by creating spaces where students can experience a sense of belonging.

Tachine et al. (2017) found that in creating Native American and Indigenous Studies programs, universities must specifically focus on Native American and Indigenous students’ first year in college. This crucial year impacts all students and determines whether they return in the spring semester and subsequently continue their studies (Tachine et al., 2017). Consequently, Native American and Indigenous student retention rates are the lowest among all other ethnicities

(Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022; Tachine et al., 2017). At the Center for Indian Education in Arizona State, scholars Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird (2017) find that a significant factor directly impacting student retention is their sense of belonging and interconnectedness on campus. They define a sense of belonging as “feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 786).

### **Challenges Encountered with Native American and Indigenous Studies in Higher Education**

The next theme examines the challenges of creating Native American and Indigenous Studies Programs of study in higher education. This theme includes fostering relationships with Indigenous communities as possible challenges. To begin, historical atrocities endured by Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples in educational institutions continue creating challenges regarding how Indigenous communities may perceive institutions of higher education (Brayboy, 2015; Shotton & Reyes, 2018). Education was yet another forced assimilation procedure imposed on First Peoples. The Board of Indian Commissioners viewed Indigenous Peoples as a “half-civilized parasite” and that the “only alternative left is to fit him by education for civilized life” (Calloway, 2019, p. 383).

Thus, assimilation led to the modern-day loss of tribal practices for many Indigenous students and their families. Essential tribal beliefs and ways of knowing protected the children and youth in a “natural safety net” that vanished for many in unconscionable assimilation practices (Cole, 2016, p. 96; Zinn, 2004; Zinn, 2016).

The educational immersion of European culture and assault on Indigenous children began by forcibly removing them from their homes. The colonial goal was to educate them in boarding



schools such as Carlisle, Pennsylvania (Calloway, 2019). Soldiers and police seized children to enforce the mandatory attendance by the commissioner of Indian affairs. Off-reservation boarding schools far from the “contaminating influence” of friends, family, and loved ones was the government’s “determination to completely restructure the Indians’ minds and personalities” and to “change them forever” (Calloway, 2019, p. 384). Helen Sekaquaptewa, a Hopi woman, recalls her experience in 1969 at the Keams Canyon Boarding School in Arizona as “we were a group of homesick, lonesome, little girls” who “would gather in a corner and cry softly so the matron would not hear and scold or spank us” (Calloway, 2019, p. 385). Experiences such as those described cannot be forgotten or dismissed.

As a result, Native American and Indigenous students face many challenges in pursuing a higher education degree. These challenges include “under-preparation, adjustment difficulties to the academic community, problems with family and self, cultural differences, social isolation, and monetary complications” (Thompson et al., 2020, p. 64-65).

Institutional support is a significant part of Indigenous student success. Brown School identified these factors at Washington University in St. Louis, where the Indigenous student graduation rates exceeded 93%, four times the national average (Thompson et al., 2020, p. 66). Additionally, Shotton and Reyes (2018) suggest that factors that support student success include culturally relevant curricular and co-curricular experiences. Hence, validating cultural identity empowers students to succeed by communicating through practice that assimilation is not a requirement. Curricular practices include allowing students to maintain a connection to their homes and families and the freedom to attend ceremonies and festivities without demotion due to attendance policies. Shotton and Reyes (2018) find that college persistence improves when the college experience validates students’ values by respecting their spiritual practices.

The Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis is one of the only higher education institutions to provide student support by concentrating their Indigenous studies program within the Master of Social Work program, which is also supported by an “American Indian Studies Center” (Thompson et al., 2020, p. 65). The center prepares students to work in an urban or tribal setting while also providing “career, social, and cultural support for AI/AN students, engages AI/AN communities locally and nationally, conducts research and collaborates with faculty at Washington University and St. Louis organizations” (Thompson et al., 2020, p. 65).

### **Yesterday’s Atrocities Become Today’s Higher Education Challenges**

Atrocities in education connected with boarding schools create challenges for both higher education institutions and Indigenous students today (Adams, 2020; Brayboy, 2005; Wilbur, 2022). Consequently, the atrocities and ill-treatment faced by most Indigenous students in boarding schools devastated individuals and their families, thus creating distrust of educational institutions (Wilbur, 2022). Additionally, Bejarano and Shepherd’s (2018) study indicates that challenges such as scapegoating, hostility, and access to financial aid cause youth to question their place within higher education. In addition, many students face institutional marginalization and racism in the classroom from other students and school employees (Bejarano & Shepherd, 2018).

Further challenges persist concerning how Indigenous students perceive educational institutions. For example, a study at Chapel Hill University indicates that exposure to boarding schools impacts how Indigenous students view higher education and education in general (Wilbur, 2022). Once created to erase and eradicate First Peoples, historical trauma continues to impact their physical and mental health and educational institution outlook (Wilbur, 2022).

Hence, Indigenous students and their families face limited access to high-quality healthcare and educational opportunities, stress, suicide, and high depression rates related to historical trauma (Wilbur, 2022).

### **Overcoming Challenges with Inclusive Narratives**

Institutions of higher education must acknowledge historical trauma as an authentic challenge for Indigenous students and “redirect blame away from individuals for perceived behavioral pathologies” (Wilbur, 2022, p. 16). Similarly, Dr. Bryan Brayboy advises that educational institutions should move away from conversations about “who should be ashamed and who isn’t” and move more toward rights and responsibilities (Brayboy, 2021, 15:09-15:16). Thus, according to Sotero’s conceptual model of historical trauma, individuals experience post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and panic disorders, anger, social isolation, shame, loss of self-worth, terror and fear, grief, withdrawal, or numbness (Wilbur, 2021, p. 16). This trauma impacts how students perceive higher education.

Furthermore, evidence found by Nathaniel Mohatt supports the theory that when Indigenous students face microaggressions and injustices, such as those found in educational institutions, they serve as “memories of past traumatic events” (Wilbur, 2022, p. 39). Thus, inequities found in higher education serve as powerful reminders evident in the “inequitable dominant cultural and structural narrative, which negatively impacts health and can create issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder” (Wilbur, 2022, p. 22). Consequently, these “cultural narratives of trauma may be especially relevant to health, perhaps more so than the actual occurrence of an event, because they frame the psychosocial, political-economic, and social-ecological context within which that event is experienced” (Wilbur, 2022, p. 40). Higher education institutions must acknowledge how historical trauma will impact Native American and

Indigenous students. For example, in an interview with scholar Bryan Brayboy, higher education institutions must collaborate with Indigenous communities in responsibly creating Native American and Indigenous Studies.

Improving the educational experience in higher education means positive classroom communication and behaviors. For example, higher education leaders may take it for granted that Indigenous students know how to navigate their newly found institutional culture, yet probably do not (Brayboy, 2015) due to being first-generation students. Challenges can arise for students not accustomed to experiencing “harshly spoken words,” such as receiving criticism on a presentation or writing that many Indigenous students take to heart (Brayboy, 2015, p. 159), which is not to be confused with academic expectations. Communication styles differ and may even cause students to leave the institution after an experience as described.

### **Respect and Humbleness to Overcome Challenges and Cultural Callousness**

Dr. Bryan Brayboy states that higher education institutions must take responsibility for respecting the Indigenous culture and reflect this clearly in their mission/vision statements. Brayboy elaborates that higher education institutions must humble themselves and not dominate the conversation with Indigenous People and instead ask, “What can I do to help?” (Brayboy, 2021, 19:47-19:50). This includes sensitivity toward mainstream higher education practices and locations.

Specifically, many higher education institutions face current challenges because their physical land location “has dead bodies buried on them” (Brayboy, 2021, 23:36-23:40). Many institutions also have anonymous Indigenous bones in their museums on campus. Thus, this predicament creates many issues for Indigenous students on campus, especially if they are unaware of these items within their presence. Consequently, many Indigenous students’ cultural

practices regarding if they come into contact with the dead without their knowledge create monetary, physical, and mental well-being hardship for them in that they must now “go home for a ceremony” (Brayboy, 2021, 24:46-48) which creates logistical challenges such as loss of income and time away from studies, which can “impact their health and their mental health” (Brayboy, 2021, 24:48-24:50). For many Indigenous Peoples, the bodies and bones place them in a negative predicament where they must “create an equilibrium so that we are balanced in terms of who we are spiritually and emotionally” (Brayboy, 2021, 25:17-25:22). Higher education institutions can prevent implications such as described by respecting Indigenous culture. Recognizing and respecting Indigenous students is practiced at a multilingual university in Colombia, as described below in Valencia and Miranda’s (2022) study.

Valencia and Miranda (2022) address multiple challenges Indigenous students face, such as campus invisibility, which melts them in the majority background. Their study addresses how students actively engage as agents in “contesting” and consequently “reshaping” colonial practices that persevere in educational institutions (p. 470). Students questioned hegemonic academic, cultural, and organizational practices. Similar to North America, only 6.7% of the Indigenous population reached higher education compared to 18.8% of the nation of Colombia (Valencia & Miranda, 2022).

Valencia and Miranda’s (2022) study addresses the research question in shedding light on the complexity Indigenous students face in higher education, such as the border colonial mentality visible in higher education experiences. Other challenges included leaving their families and homes, facing language and cultural difficulties, and adjusting to campus and Western epistemologies and ways of life (Valencia & Miranda, 2022). They address this study’s research question in that higher education institutions are interested in fostering their

relationships and improving Indigenous student experiences on campus, connecting with ancestral student ties, language and culture inclusion, campus visibility, and student retention and graduation rates (Valencia & Miranda, 2022).

Their study also reveals that Universidad del Valle offers Indigenous native language and Spanish courses that address reading and writing challenges. Their theoretical framework is the decolonial intercultural position that views culture, languages, and semiotics as resources to embrace rather than a tolerance of coexistence that fails to challenge established hegemony, injustice, and inequality (Valencia & Miranda, 2022). They offer concepts against “decolonial thinking and border epistemologies” that maintain colonial model practices visible in higher education (Valencia & Miranda, 2022, p. 473). Such societally legitimate hierarchies view Indigenous students as “cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually inferior” (Valencia & Miranda, 2022, p. 473).

Valencia and Miranda’s study (2022) suggests that for Indigenous students to feel welcome, higher education institutions must acknowledge historical colonial imbalances, empower students, and include them as political and culturally active agents on campus. Their study also discovered that Universidad del Valle created a “space for thought, study, and coexistence” where students held cultural activities for all who wished to participate (Valencia & Miranda, 2022, p. 478). The Universidad del Valle also offered a furnished office and a small piece of land on campus for an Indigenous student garden (Valencia & Miranda, 2022). In addition, they provided the ‘Casa de Paso,’ or temporary residence for Indigenous students, while they arranged more permanent housing (Valencia & Miranda, 2022, p. 478).

## **Fostering Relationships between Indigenous Communities and Higher Education**

Especially significant are relationships needed for students transferring from Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). As previously stated, less than 10 percent of students who transfer from tribal high schools to mainstream colleges experience success, which impacts their educational experience (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2023). Thus, the existence of the NAIS minor at Borderlands University positively impacts students transferring from Tribal communities. According to faculty emeritus at the Institute of American Indian Arts and the former Chief Judge of the Mescalero Apache Tribe, Stephen Wall (2020), Tribal colleges and communities provide Indigenous core values. Thus, the existence of NAIS programs can impact students by supporting Tribal Colleges in Indigenous cultural knowledge, Indigenous languages and “fostering an aware tribal citizenry” (Wall, 2020, paragraph 24).

In conjunction with this study’s methodology, Tribal colleges follow a curriculum supporting the idea that everyone brings wealth and knowledge (Murry et al., 2020; Yosso, 2005; Wall, 2020). Thus, the literature highlights fostering close relationships with Tribal communities for curriculum success. Chief Judge Wall (2020) reminds academia that most Tribes highly value cultural knowledge, cultural wisdom, and closely consulting with “our elders, those who have extensive cultural wisdom and a sense of community spirit” (para. 18).

Furthermore, fostering relationships with Indigenous communities is beneficial, as evidence from the literature verifies higher student success rates and facilitated transfers for TCU students by offering support and outreach partnerships (Bryan, 2018). Partnerships created by implementing ethnic and culturally relevant studies in higher education support students and increase student retention (Bryan, 2018). The study recommends “intentionally” including Native American communities in their outreach (Bryan, 2018, p. 7). These include and are not

limited to service learning, bridge programs, professional development, and Native American and Indigenous alum networks (Bryan, 2018, p. 7). The significance is the improvement and increased student enrollment that leads to an increase in Native American and Indigenous students with college degrees that will ultimately improve the quality of life for students and their communities (Bryan, 2018).

The following documents how Brayboy and Huaman (2016) successfully co-developed graduate programs with and for American Indian Peoples in Utah, Alaska, and Arizona. They preserved Indigenous knowledge and built upon what was already known by fostering relationships with tribal peoples and listening to their knowledge essence. Thereafter, their meaningful educational programs served students and taught future educators wishing to follow their model (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016). Brayboy and Huaman (2016) share their journey in designing the Indigenous Doctoral Program and Pueblo Doctoral Cohort at Arizona State University.

As they listened deeply to Pueblo Peoples, they experienced a revelation of essential elements necessary to construct nurturing environments that support students while offering rigorous quantitative and qualitative courses. Indigenous students utilize the additional knowledge to give back to their tribal communities (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016). In 2011, Pueblo leaders, community members, tribal administrators, educators, policymakers, and youth participated in more than 35 “think-tank sessions that identified language, land, health, cultural resources, environment, governance, art, law, family, education, and economic and community development as ten critical areas for discussion” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 137).

Brayboy and Huaman contribute to the Pueblo Doctoral Cohort, which is about tribal nation-building in higher education, as described by Kwami Ageye Akoto (1992). Akoto



describes tribal nation-building as “the conscious and focused application of [Indigenous] people’s collective resources, energies, and knowledge[s] to the task of liberating and developing the psychic and physical space identified as [their] own” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 140; original brackets). The Doctoral program converges around the understanding that students are already leaders within their communities and are not “made” leaders by the program (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 143).

Consequently, such an interconnected practice engages deep listening and builds strong connections between Indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies. The program became an extension of the Indigenous cohort’s work that supported their home communities, which the Pueblo scholars were committed to serving (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016). These conversations came about with questions such as: “What will be your contribution to your people? How will you work to maintain and protect Pueblo values and ways of life for future generations?” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 143).

This successful program led to the creation of the second cohort in New Mexico partnered with the Navaho Nation, focusing on policy research and development directly impacting Navaho education and public safety programs (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016). In developing the cohort, they confirmed that deep listening is crucial for flourishing and supportive programs. Furthermore, it is necessary to “develop conscientiousness and versatility around diverse Indigenous groups versus ‘cookie-cutter’ programs” by working closely with each tribe, student, and cohort (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 143). Thus, intentionally designing supportive programs and cohorts helps students succeed in “Western schooling as a historically imposing” and known colonial assimilation institution that hinders their educational success (Brayboy &

Huaman, 2016, p. 135). Their model is ideal for increasing the number of Indigenous students in higher education and graduation rates, as we will see in Heather Shotton's (2018) study.

Despite the underrepresentation of Indigenous students in higher education, there has been an encouraging increase in Native women pursuing doctoral degrees (Shotton, 2018). According to Shotton (2013), in 2013, Native women earned graduate degrees at a rate four times higher than Native men, with 65% earning master's degrees and 56% earning doctorates (p. 489). In addition, Native women seek advanced degrees to support their communities, which is much different than Western students, who commonly seek individualistic gains for their higher education (Shotton, 2018).

In contrast, Native women attend college from a tribal nation-building lens that values community service and giving back (Shotton, 2018). This community lens is essential for colleges and universities that aim to add Indigenous and ethnic studies. Implementing Shotton's (2018) findings will improve their program's success. Specifically, the tribal nation-building lens' focus asks how the degree will support and service the Indigenous community that students desire to return to and advance.

### **Challenging Deficit Thinking**

Studies point to building an undergraduate-to-higher education pipeline to increase Indigenous students studying advanced degrees. Successful student pathways empower students and provide essential support. Historically, educational institutions have taken extreme measures to change the Indigenous life essence, which is what connects them to natural resources and is part of their strength and identity in that it "plucks their culture like a fish from water, leaving them floundering helplessly upon the arid bank" (Eickhoff, 1996, p. 11).

Both Brayboy (2005, 2016) and Shotton (2018) re-emphasize the goals of Native and Indigenous students as a nation-building lens that seeks to “serve the greater good of their tribal nation and community rather than primarily serving themselves” (Shotton, 2018, p. 502). These findings are crucial and benefit the Indigenous community as colleges and universities successfully create Indigenous programs that reflect Native perspectives of sharing, generosity, and cooperation (Shotton, 2018). Colleges and universities that follow the Western individualistic learning model that focuses on competitiveness may need to review their program if they desire Native and Indigenous students to succeed and feel welcome.

In sum, Keith (2016) shows that higher education institutions can support students in their cultural identity and communicate through institutional practices that also form an integral part of the campus. For instance, a “humanist” approach at a Tribal College values interdependence between teachers and students, thus promoting participation and relationship-building (Keith, 2016). For example, a “grandmother-figure” as a primary teacher in one of the courses resonates with Indigenous students accustomed to the “grandmother-figure” as a supportive matriarch who values learning and symbolizes “respect for elders” (Keith, 2016, p. 58).

### **Native American and Indigenous Studies Support Students**

Heather Shotton, Star Oosahwe, and Rosa Cintrón (2007) re-emphasize the underrepresentation of Native American and Indigenous students in higher education institutions. Native American and Indigenous students remain the least enrolled in higher education (Malfa et al., 2022). The existence of Native American and Indigenous Studies programs fosters success among students due to the structured social support systems that accompany the programs (Shotton et al., 2007). Thus, social support systems found within Native American and

Indigenous Studies programs are key factors in college outcomes due to the positive self-esteem building that Shotton et al.'s (2007) study found in aiding students to adjust to college while providing student connection groups on campus (Shotton et al., 2007). In addition, Shotton et al.'s study finds that female students of color thrive with peer support from individuals they identify with.

Connections provide necessary breathing spaces away from “racial and ethnic hypersensitivity and hostility” while at the same time offering spaces for valuable “exchange (of) academic information and support” (Shotton et al., 2007, p. 83). These findings connect with Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth theory of navigational capital within educational institutions. The presence of the Native American and Indigenous Studies minor impacts the student experience by providing a more stable environment where students can find support. This factor is crucial because students may or may not find supportive peers without NAIS programs. Peer exchanges, such as meeting with one another, “stop the bleeding only long enough to send friends back into battle” (Shotton et al., 2007, p. 83). Thus, NAIS programs are only the beginning of sustaining students coping with “inhospitable college environments” (Shotton et al., 2007, p. 83).

Essential factors for Indigenous student success include culturally sensitive teachers and pedagogy supporting students to “persist and construct their success” (Barney, 2018, p. 910). A finding that aligns with this study's research question is that higher education institutions must look beyond individual student success and further investigate the “complex and strengthening entangled web of relationships and environments” (Barney, 2018, p. 910). Also notable is that fostering relationships means doing research differently that goes beyond the postpositivist view of research and involves Indigenous communities (Barney, 2018). Indigenous students want their teachers to be involved and to provide positive support and encouragement.

Bejarano and Shepherd's study (2018) indicates that students can experience success based on the capital they bring. They identify this as a "border-rooted" paradigm that is underutilized and brings strengths found in local "socio-cultural and historical epistemologies" impacting HSIs on the border (p. 278). In addition, student challenges such as scapegoating, hostility, and access to financial aid cause them to question their place within higher education. Furthermore, many students face institutional marginalization and racism in the classroom from other students and school employees (Bejarano & Shepherd, 2018). Bejarano and Shepherd's research documents their experiences working with Latino and Indigenous students in classrooms within the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Their findings are vital in discovering improvements by building on ethnic knowledge.

An Indigenous teacher preparation program (Indigenous Knowledge for Effective Education Program (IKEEP) shows evidence of the valuable and sacred knowledge and ways of knowing found within the community, which is vital to supporting students (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020). A six-year study revealed the need to "facilitate an intimate connection between inquiry, design, and dissemination—a process inseparable from doing the long-term work of cultivating relationships for social change" (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020, p. 405).

In sum, the existence of Native American and Indigenous Studies undoubtedly provides support for students and opportunities for mentors. The literature shows evidence that student mentorship brings positive results in helping students succeed (Shotton et al., 2007). A student reflects, "When there were no Native(s) at the institutions I attended, I noticed a significant difference in both my ambition and the support I received" (Shotton et al., 2007, p. 84).

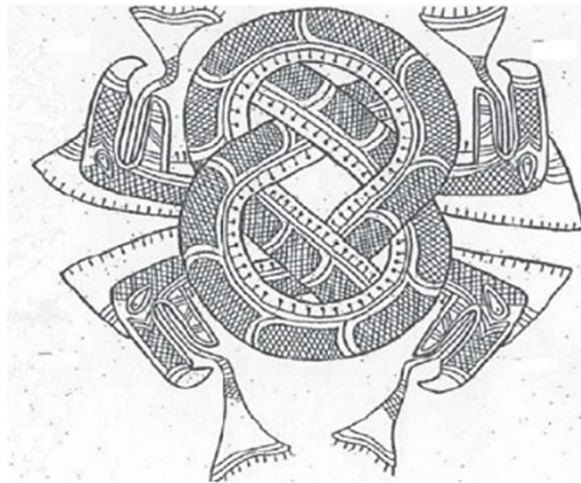
## Conceptual Approach

In conducting this study, I have adopted the phenomenological or the lived experience lens as the primary guiding tool because it offers the most insightful approach to understanding the subject matter (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The conceptual approach to understanding the phenomena is Tachine's Peoplehood Matrix Model (2017; See Figure 1) and Yosso's Community

Cultural Wealth Model (2005; See Figure 2). The rationale for selecting these two models is their relevance and applicability to the research question. The concepts derived from the literature review indicate that listening to and understanding Indigenous students improves the quality and equity in higher education (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017). The Peoplehood Matrix and Community Cultural Wealth Model unify and focus on the experiences and wealth that students bring (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017; Yosso, 2005).

Place

Language



Sacred History

Ceremonial Cycle

Figure 1: The Peoplehood Matrix. (Holm, 2003; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017, p. 791).

The conceptual framework of the Peoplehood Matrix consists of four aspects of Peoplehood: place, language, sacred history, and the ceremonial cycle (Holm, 2003; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017). These four closely woven aspects arise as a sense of belonging,

identity, and individual well-being, collectively contributing to student success (Strayhorn, 2016; Tachine et al., 2017).

In addition to managing their courses, students skillfully tend to multiple activities and commitments. Despite this, their well-being depends on the Peoplehood aspect of maintaining a close tie to home, family, and cultural ceremonies that affect college success and persistence (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Tachine et al., 2017). Thus, Indigenous student success studies reveal a close connection to space, home, and family, which “at frequent intervals was a crucial strategy for their success” (Strayhorn, 2016; Tachine, 2015). Educational institutions should support these activities to encourage a sense of belonging, closely woven into Indigenous student persistence (Strayhorn, 2016; Tachine, 2015, p. 787). Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model seeks to recognize the multitude of wealth in “knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Thus, Indigenous communities continue to utilize their cultural wealth and capital to thrive, as documented throughout primary historical documents and archaeological findings (Calloway, 2019; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023).

The basis for using the Community Cultural Wealth Model as a conceptual approach stems from the empowerment view that finds enrichment in cultural knowledge that has existed for thousands of years. Using students’ cultural wealth to build an ideal educational environment resounds in the words of Luther Standing Bear of the Sioux Nation and Lakota Tribe. He noted that the boarding schools’ purpose was to “copy and imitate; not to exchange languages and ideas, and not to develop the best traits that had come out of uncountable experiences of the hundreds of thousands of years living upon this continent” (Standing Bear, 1978, p. 236). Thousands of children died at boarding schools and were buried in mass unmarked graves

(Adams, 2020; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023). The children suffered sexual abuse, beatings, forced unpaid labor, severe depression, and suicide and were stripped of their languages and community skills (Adams, 2020; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023). The selected methodology agrees with inclusive and validating what students bring by valuing and recognizing their community and personal cultural wealth (Hurtado et al., 2015; Yosso, 2005).

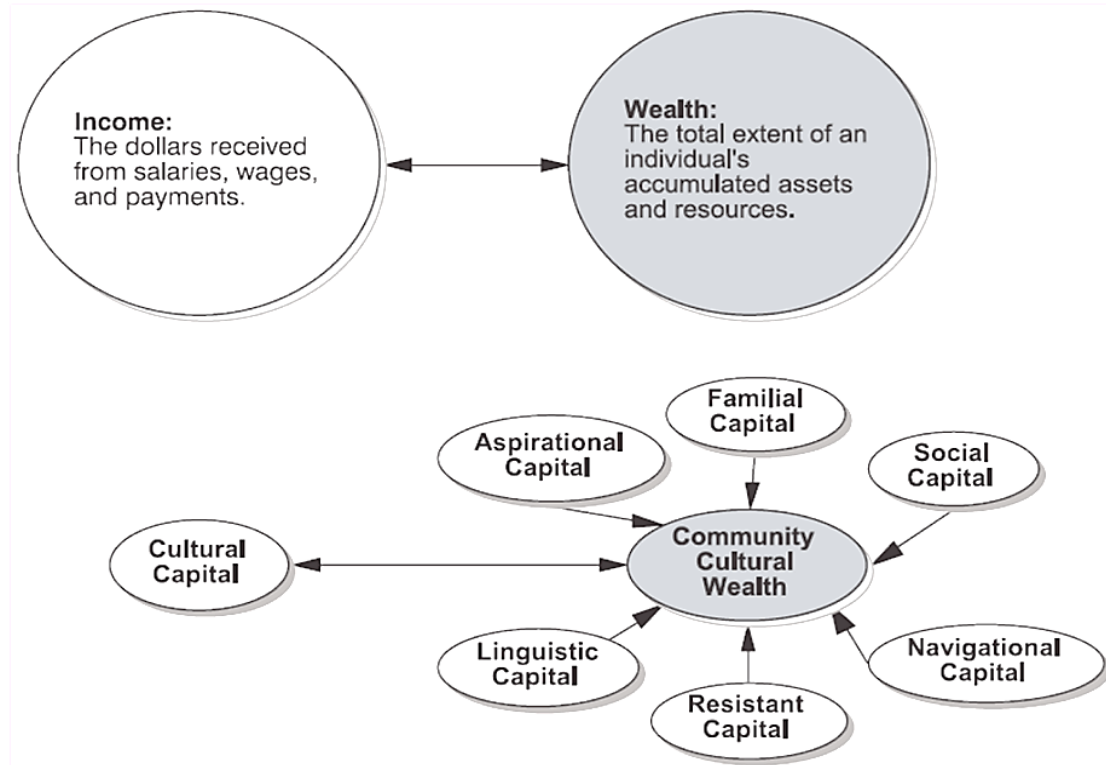


Figure 2: A Model of Community Cultural Wealth. (Yosso, 2005, p. 78; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995).

The creation and existence of the Native American and Indigenous Studies minor at BU supports cultural wealth and inclusion. Indigenous studies focus on higher education as spaces of cultural wealth and knowledge exchanges, as Chief Standing Bear yearned for. In recounting his experiences at Carlisle, Chief Standing Bear said, “We had much to teach them, and what a school could have been established upon that idea! However, this was not the attitude of the day” (Standing Bear, 1978, p. 236).



## **Theoretical Framework**

The rationale for utilizing The Peoplehood Matrix and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework is that the Indigenous community has prevailed by practicing their cultural knowledge, which supports them within their community cultural wealth and cultural capital (Brayboy, 2018; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Gonzalez, 2013; Tachine et al., 2017; Yosso, 2005).

Next, I will present an assessment of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model followed by The Peoplehood Matrix (Tachine et al., 2017; See Appendix E & Appendix F).

### **Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model**

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Theory is relevant to this study because it reflects forms of capital for Indigenous students facing exorbitant challenges found in higher education (Brayboy, 2018; Shotton & Reyes, 2018), which parallels their resilient history. Indigenous Peoples' endurance against forced religious and forced educational assimilation are excellent examples of their use of cultural capital to thrive (Brayboy, 2018; Calloway, 2019; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Eickhoff, 1996; Riggs, 2021).

Indigenous Peoples' remarkable endurance against forced educational assimilation is a testimonial to their expert use of cultural capital to thrive (Brayboy, 2018; Calloway, 2019; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Eickhoff, 1996; Riggs, 2021). By preserving and applying their community cultural wealth and knowledge, Indigenous Peoples have resiliently resisted the impact of invasive settler colonialism and, although at a highly sacrificial cost, managed to maintain their self-sustainability within their communities. This resilience manifested in tangible forms of abundance, such as bountiful harvests and communal prosperity, despite being forced to sustain the settlers by providing them with the majority of their crops, food, and shelter (Calloway, 2019; Eickhoff, 1996; Hackett, 1911). Additionally, tribal scholars offer evidence that Indigenous

students' educational attainment builds capacity for tribes and peoples or *nation-building* (Brayboy, 2012). For this reason, cultural studies are an essential part of their higher education, encouraging students to persist.

Nation-building signifies “the efforts of tribal nations to promote the sovereignty and self-determination of their peoples” (Brayboy, 2012, p. 147). Sovereignty refers to the “inherent right of tribal nations to direct their futures and engage the world in ways that are meaningful to them, while self-determination can be understood as the engagement, or operationalization, of sovereignty” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 147).

Community Cultural Wealth theory appropriately addresses higher education institutions' ability to collaborate with Indigenous communities to support students already utilizing their cultural capital. Yosso's (2005) theory aligns with the resilience and community wealth Indigenous Peoples and students use daily to endure and thrive in academia. Yosso's six forms of capital include “aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Thus, students bring with them their community cultural wealth and knowledge. Utilizing multiple forms of capital is evident for Indigenous students attending higher education institutions, which historically underrepresent or disregard their cultural wealth (Brayboy, 2012; Barney, 2018; Valencia & Miranda, 2022). Hence, community cultural wealth theory aligns with Brayboy's “strategies of resistance through education” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 135).

Yosso's cultural capital validates the knowledge and wealth that “students of color” bring to educational institutions (Yosso, 2005, p. 69). It is “the sense of group consciousness and collective identity that serves as a resource” to advance an entire group (Yosso, 2005, p. 81). For instance, “Black people shared their cultural capital with one another and developed their social

capital (Black social capital) for survival and success in a segregated world bounded by the omnipresent forces of racism and discrimination” (Yosso, 2005, p. 81).

### ***Linguistic Capital***

Linguistic capital encompasses not only language proficiency but also proficiency in non-verbal communication, which is also represented as one of the four aspects of The Peoplehood Matrix of language (Holm, 2003; Tachine et al., 2017). Additionally, students bring an enhanced experience and knowledge to the educational environment (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital includes storytelling that involves both listening to and “recounting oral histories, parables, stories (*cuentos*) and proverbs (*dichos*), memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme, visual art, music or poetry” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

In a community cultural wealth study in higher education, Reyes and Duran (2021) found that aspirational wealth is mentioned most among researchers, followed by familial capital. Aspirational capital refers to dreams and goals parents set for themselves and their children that contradict the historically low educational outcomes for students of color that “nurtures their children’s future academic attainment” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78).

### ***Familial Capital***

Familial capital is cultural knowledge kept within and nurtured within the family or kin, including a “sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Cultural ties extend to immediate family, both living and “passed on,” as well as aunts, aunties, grandparents, cousins, and family friends also considered part of the family (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Familial capital enriches students with knowledge from immediate and extended family members, such as lessons of caring, coping, and realizing they are “not alone in dealing with

their problems” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Social capital refers to the interconnected network of peers, social contacts, and community resources that offer “both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79), which ranges from students sharing information on institutions that offer the most support or provide guidance on applying for scholarships.

### ***Navigational Capital***

Navigational capital teaches students strategies and skills in maneuvering through the “racially-hostile” educational institutions that seek to blame them for their inability to “sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school and ultimately dropping out” in addition to the genocide and cultural erasure faced by many Indigenous students at the hands of government-sponsored boarding schools (Brayboy, 2005; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Mankiller & Wallis, 1993; Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Navigational capital equips students with the abilities and skills to navigate social institutions such as places of higher learning. Thus, the cultural knowledge they learned from each other enables students to navigate and maneuver through unsupportive and hostile environments (Yosso, 2005).

### ***Resistance Capital***

Resistance capital challenges inequality and resists racism (Yosso, 2005). Resistant capital is found among African American, Latina(o), Afro-Latina(o), Mexican-American, Indigenous American, Native Americans, and others who raise their children as “resistors” and “assert themselves as intelligent, beautiful, strong, and worthy of respect to resist the barrage of societal messages devaluing Blackness” (Yosso, 2005, p. 81). Resistant capital can become

action-based, such as resistant capital, which “includes cultural knowledge of the structures of racism and motivation to transform such oppressive structures” (Yosso, 2005, p. 81).

Yosso’s model supports this study’s theoretical framework because it contrasts with deficit ideology stigmatizing Indigenous Peoples and students (Yosso, 2005). Accordingly, deficit ideology “blames the victim” systemically as entire cultures based upon a single dimension (Gorski, 2010, p. 4). At the core of deficit ideology is the belief that inequalities result not from unjust social conditions such as systemic racism or economic injustice but from intellectual, moral, cultural, and behavioral deficiencies assumed to be “inherent in disenfranchised individuals and communities” (Gorski, 2010, p. 4; Valencia, 1997; Yosso, 2005).

### ***Cultural Capital Fosters Relationships with Indigenous Communities***

To foster relationships with Indigenous communities that will consequently support students, the alternative to deficit ideology, a remnant of imperial history that socializes compliance through oppression ranging from colonization to enslavement and educational inequities, must be present (Gorski, 2011; Valencia, 1997). The conceptual framework for this study falls upon Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005) and Tachine’s nation-building Peoplehood Matrix (2017).

To conclude this section, resistant capital is the sum of knowledge and skills “fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” and is congruent to Indigenous’ Peoples long and arduous journey documented in history as they fought erasure, genocide, and forced and violent assimilation (Brayboy, 2005; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Mankiller & Wallis, 1993; Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

## The Peoplehood Matrix Model

The *peoplehood matrix* is a “holistic framework” of “four intertwined factors including language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 789; See Appendix F). The peoplehood matrix comes from “persistent peoples,” reflecting First Peoples’ resistance through colonization and survival (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 790). Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird (2017) utilize the *peoplehood matrix* as their theoretical framework for a sense of belonging (p. 789). The *peoplehood matrix* is defined as a “holistic framework” of “four intertwined factors including language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 789). Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird’s (2016) study found that higher education institutions must support Native American students, especially during their crucial first year in college. By implementing the Peoplehood Matrix, colleges can improve students’ sense of belonging.

The Peoplehood Matrix provides an excellent model for supporting Indigenous students during their first year of college, statistically known as the toughest (Tachine et al., 2017). The fact is that Indigenous students’ likelihood of returning to school or *persistence* is the lowest of all other ethnicities at 62.1% and an even lower retention rate of 51.9% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). Persistence is the rate measured by the percentage of students who return to college at *any* institution for their second year. Retention rates represent the percentage of students returning to the *same* institution (NSCRC, 2023).

Native scholars attribute college persistence, retention, and graduation as crucial factors in Native nation-building, which adds to the successes experienced by Native and Indigenous students who give back to their communities through achievements such as college degrees, training, and the benefits accompanying marketable degrees (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; Stewart-Ambo, 2021). Higher education is recognized and has influenced its building capacity

for Native American and Indigenous Peoples (Brayboy et al., 2012; Stewart-Ambo, 2021). Brayboy et al. (2012) identify nation-building as “the role of college graduates in protecting and strengthening tribal sovereignty, self-determination and self-reliance (Stewart-Ambo, 2021, p. 500). The knowledge students acquire as a result of Native and Indigenous studies programs that support them in obtaining degrees in fields such as law, teaching, nursing, and accounting place tribes in better political and economic contexts as they expand and assist their people in economic and development endeavors (Stewart-Ambo, 2021).

Similar to Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird’s study (2017), Native American and Indigenous students at Borderlands University are deemed invisible, underrepresented, and underserved. Thus, to enhance and increase student success, language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land must be integral components for students’ individual well-being and mental and spiritual health (Holm et al., 2003; Tachine et al., 2017). These four factors are interwoven and support each other in an all-inclusive, continuous, non-linear flow (Holm et al., 2003; Tachine et al., 2007). Holm, Pearson, & Chavis (2003) explain that “no single factor is more important than the others, and all necessarily support each other as well as a particular group’s larger sense of identity” (p. 12) and “intertwine, interpenetrate, and interact” (p. 13). *Land or Place* for many “Native Americans, an Indian identity is intertwined with rights to land.” (Holm et al., 2003, p. 12). The Peoplehood concept of land can consist of place, “social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological behaviors exhibited by groups of people Indigenous to particular territories” (Holm et al., 2003, p. 12). Land or place has value beyond monetary, and “particular territories are always mentioned in sacred histories, and quite often creation and migration stories specify certain landmarks as being holy” (Holm et al., 2003, p. 14). *Language* includes “nuances, references, and grammar, gives a sacred history a meaning of its own, particularly if origin,

creation, migration, and other stories are spoken rather than written” (Holm et al., 2003, p. 13). *Sacred History* is told in the “vernacular not only to give each member of the group an understanding of where they come from but also to impart proper behavior and how they maintain group cohesion through ritualism and ceremony. It is an explanation of its own distinct culture, customs, and political economy” (Holm et al., 2003, p.13). *Ceremonial Cycle* is the inseparable relationship to the three other aspects of Peoplehood and how it is “inseparably linked to language, sacred history, and a particular environment” (Holm et al., 2003, p. 14). Thus, the ceremonial cycle is directly linked to when and where ceremonies are conducted. For example, “solstices and equinoxes, salmon runs, buffalo carving, the blooming of particular plants, the appearance of certain stars or planets—that occur at a certain time and place. Ceremonies most often coincide with seasonal, stellar, planetary, solar, floral, or faunal change that occurs above, below, on the surface, or within a group’s territorial range” (Holm et al., 2003, p. 14).

Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird (2017, p. 791) derive the following model from Holm et al.’s., (2003) Peoplehood Matrix:

- Political and Cultural Sovereignty (statehood)
- Group identity (nationality)
- Individual Well-being (mental and spiritual health).

Thus, Indigenous students may experience that the “land is our mother” and “provides love, joy, and nourishment” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 790). In their study, Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird (2017) listened to Native students who “may often feel ‘out of’ or ‘in search of/creating place” (p. 790). Language goes beyond spoken or written words and includes “ways of knowing, ways of socializing, and other nonverbal communication” (Tachine et al., 2017, p.



790). Ceremonial cycle includes the powerful conviction that “encompasses the profound role that spirituality has on Native people’s livelihood and is linked by way of language, sacred history, and place” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 790). Ceremonial cycle “makes up a group’s ‘world’ and directly affects its worldview” (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 790).

### **Chapter Three: Methodology and Study Rationale**

This study's research design focused on analyzing the phenomenon of lived experiences in creating the Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) minor at Borderlands University, which included events surrounding the Indigenous educational community. The rationale for selecting the phenomenological design is that it delves into the journey and lived experiences of students and key individuals in this shared phenomenology (Glesne, 2016). My goal for this study was to shed light and listen to the voices of Indigenous students and other individuals on the collected experiences as they "coalesce into the commonality of the formation and significance" of the creation of NAIS at BU (Glesne, 2016, p. 290; Jackson, 2021).

The rationale for phenomenology is to seek a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of lived experiences (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, the chosen methodology was appropriate because it helped shed light on silenced and invisibilized students who are underrepresented across college campuses in the U.S. (Tachine et al., 2017). This study included Sovereign, non-federally, and federally recognized Peoples, such as, but not limited to, Tiwa Peoples, whose story is "a mirror of the entire Indian story in the United States" (Eickhoff, 1996, p.3). and "lived phenomenon is similar to or worse than other Indigenous Peoples who were tormented, killed, forcefully, mercilessly, and violently deported from their homelands" (Eickhoff, 1996).

In recognizing students' lived experiences, Murry et al.'s (2020) phenomenological study supports this qualitative study's methodology, which states that diversity is an asset that provides phenomenal tools educators must view as strengths. Furthermore, societal practices should not overpower multi-faceted interpretations that exist for equally valid realities (Hart, 2011). For example, a jeweler's shop sells many types of rings, such as wedding rings symbolizing marriage

pacts in many societies (Hart, 2011). Yet to the jeweler, the rings symbolize an altogether different item as a commodity that meets the payroll.

Thus, intentionality represents different yet equally valid realities, which is the logic behind utilizing phenomenology in this study (Hart, 2011). Phenomenology seeks to understand the pure human experience without secondary filters (Hart, 2011). Secondary filters include a description of an experience from a third party disconnected from those whose experiences were erased, marginalized, or assimilated within the hegemonic social structure. Furthermore, phenomenology is the study of the experience in essence and how it is interpreted and understood, which creates meaning-making and establishes a worldview for the individual (Patton, 2015, p. 116). Thus, “phenomenological research is the study of essences” (Patton, 2015, p. 117), bringing to light what is known and adding to this conversation. My study included a rigorous analysis of the data discovered. In my coding exercises, I identified common elements or patterns observed within data sets through transcription using a phenomenological approach that describes experiences as closely as possible. I endeavored to conduct the study verbatim from the first-person point of view and avoided adding secondary filters (Patton, 2015). I accomplished this by presenting the data directly from the participants’ perspective without adding unnecessary interpretations or filtering their words. Verbatim describes an exact reproduction of their words and experiences without alteration.

To further explain, I incorporated a qualitative phenomenology grounded in the interpretive paradigm to shed light and meaning on the lived experiences. This interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology includes meaning-making and individual interpretation of significant higher education experiences (Smith et al., 2022). I rigorously worked to capture the essence and meaning-making of the lived phenomenon as closely as the

participants experienced it. Lopez and Willis (2009) also interpret lived social experiences as a socially complex and constructed social reality. Thus, the interpretive paradigm guides this methodology by reflecting “lived, contextual realities and concerns” (Lopez & Willis, 2009, p. 726). Hence, an interpretive lens can “manifest what is normally hidden” in the experiences, relations, and communications and is an ideal tool for this study (Lopez & Willis, 2009, p. 728).

In summary, the qualitative method allowed me to more precisely identify the phenomenon and lived experiences that are quantitatively immeasurable (Maxwell, 2013; Tisdell, 2016). This study was dependent upon participants sharing their valuable experiences and beliefs and how they serve as guidance beacons.

### **Research Design**

The research reflected a phenomenological design utilized to help discover lived experiences in creating the NAIS program as a shared phenomenology perceived by individuals who have experienced similar occurrences (Glesne, 2016). I opted for a qualitative phenomenological study because it was the best tool that did justice in accurately capturing each individual’s irreplicable lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consequently, the gathered experiences will converge to reveal the authentic significance of the lived experience (Patton, 2015). By documenting the essence and words utilized by the individuals (Patton, 2015), the research design encompasses semi-structured, open-ended, meaningful interviews (Patton, 2015).

### **Research Question**

I framed the research question based on the study’s purpose:

**(RQ)** What are Indigenous students’ experiences at Borderlands University?

These inquiries form the basis of two integrated frameworks within this study: [Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model (2005) + The Peoplehood Matrix model (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017)].

### **Site Selection and Sample Size**

This study took place on the U.S.-Mexico border. It included Sovereign, federally, and non-federally recognized Native and Indigenous Peoples such as the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, Cheyenne, Cherokee, Navajo, Tohono O'odham, Apache, Ojibwe, and Mexican Indigenous Peoples such as the Tarahumara, Zapotec, and Mixtec (Shepherd, 2019).

The sample size was not predetermined due to the small number of students who officially identified as Indigenous at BU. Thus, the exact sample size that would transpire was unknown before the study. I was seeking purposive and relevant interviewees. This study's data saturation point was unreachable because new data will continue to emerge. Additionally, qualitative research does not dictate a specific sample size (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2015), and the seven participants provided sufficient relevant data (J. Saldaña, personal communication, October 25, 2023).

### **Participants**

I refrained from utilizing real names or other identifiers for participants. The reason for this delimitation was to protect the identity of the individuals whose shared knowledge and valuable experiences made this study possible. This study uses the term 'student' to represent Sovereign, Indigenous, or Native American students.

The sample size consisted of seven participants. Five identified as Native and Indigenous students, and the other two participants were professors. One identified as part Indigenous. The student selection criteria for the five students was that they were enrolled at BU and identified as

primarily or partially Indigenous. I also endeavored to interview students currently taking NAIS courses. However, the sample of individuals who fit the first two criteria was minimal.

I recruited interviewees by visiting classrooms and inviting them to participate in my study. I left my contact information. I also utilized my college email to recruit additional students (See Appendix A for the recruitment letter).

### **Data Collection**

Although this study focused on the Native American and Indigenous Studies minor, data collection included the experiences and challenges faced by Indigenous community members, staff, faculty, and others relevant to Indigenous studies and events pertinent to the educational community. Relevant data regarding Ocotillo Community College was also included because it is a feeder school to Borderlands University. Participants were identified by sphere of influence and word of mouth. As a result, I personally spoke to more than 136 students in their classrooms to invite them to participate in this study. I also recruited participants utilizing the snowball technique in which I strategically emailed individuals using my Borderlands University email to key individuals recommended by someone as a person with relevant knowledge in Native American and Indigenous Studies. I also asked participants if they knew someone willing to speak with me after the interview. I also networked at BU events.

The primary purpose of the data collection was to listen to the lived experiences that could guide me in answering the research question. One way I did this was to listen very closely to participants and their stories. Next, I meticulously listened to the interviews I had recorded with permission and transcribed the data verbatim. I coded the data into themes that provided rich, thick descriptions that “illuminated the understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Yazan, 2015, p. 148).

Data collection tools included in-depth, semi-structured interviews from strategically prepared questions aligned with the research question (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The data collection design included “effective interviews, careful interviewing, and mining data from documents” (Yazan, 2015). Strategic and purposeful data collection included various techniques for rigorous and accurate results. In addition to in-depth semi-structured interviews, I applied techniques I learned in my courses along with skills I already had, such as attentive observation, snowball sampling, and mining for document data (Bhattacharya, 2017; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Yazan, 2015). Documents I reviewed included emails, photos, historical documents, meeting notes, meeting agendas, databases, monographs, and online open records.

I carefully aligned the data collection with the study’s purpose and research question to understand the why and how, which facilitated concentration that led to specific outcomes or “local causality” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 88). Interviews allowed participants to describe their lived experiences and make sense of their essence (Patton, 2015). Data collection included carefully researching and preparing interview questions. The interviews were conducted with a dual approach: they were comprehensive and flexible. Thus, participants were offered the opportunity to utilize the prepared questions or answer the open-ended themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions, which they could answer directly. My intention was to encourage participants to share their experiences in a manner that felt most comfortable, valuable, and relevant to them. I asked participants for permission to record their responses on my smartphone. After they agreed, I assured them of anonymity and that the recordings would only be utilized for study purposes, securely stored, and destroyed after study completion. I conducted all the interviews in person except for one participant who preferred to meet via Zoom. Only one interview included video in

addition to sound. I drafted an invitation letter that I presented to participants verbally and in writing before the interview, stating their freedom to exercise their unconditional right to end the interview at any time or to opt-out during the interview if they wished without any penalty whatsoever. Interviews averaged 58 minutes, with the possibility of follow-ups.

In summary, I followed Maxwell's (2013) guidance by being mindful, respectful, and conscious of the interviewee's precious time to avoid being depicted as an invasive nuisance. Throughout the interviews, I was mindful of my role as a guest entering a sacred space and endeavored to minimize generating negative and unforeseen memories. I wanted to cultivate a positive interview environment, as previous studies suggest that interviews may trigger "episodic memory" and facilitate "mental time travel" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 103). Thus, participants were reminded of their autonomy to disclose information only if they felt comfortable sharing it anonymously, as documented on the consent form.

### **Interview Questions**

The script before the interview begins will resemble the following: *"Thank you for giving me the privilege of interviewing you. Your experiences are valuable. Your contribution to this research is that it may help others and improve the education field. I highly respect and value all your answers. You are free to end or withdraw from this interview at any time with zero penalty whatsoever."*

The context of the interview questions directs the study to delve deeply into the study's purpose, methodology, framework, and validity (Maxwell, 2013). Interview questions included: (1) Can you tell me your experiences in college or university? (2a) Have you ever shared your cultural background with your classmates? (2b) What was their reaction? (2c) What was the comparison when you shared your background in NAIS courses? (3) Could you please share how



your cultural knowledge passed on to you by friends, family, and community has influenced your experiences in academic settings? (4) Could you please share how your cultural knowledge passed on to you by friends, family, and community has influenced your experiences in academic settings? (5) In your experience, what roles did the college or university play in providing student support and a sense of belonging? (6) How has your school helped you connect with other Indigenous students? (7) What role have Indigenous studies/courses played in your personal growth and development? (8) Can you tell me about your language, roots, or spaces that inspire you? (9) Can you describe the experiences you bring to NAIS? (10) Would you like to add or suggest anything I may have overlooked? (11) Do you know anyone else I should interview?

### **Data Analysis**

This study simultaneously utilized data collection and data analysis to provide meaning-making, or “the process of making sense out of the data, which involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read” (Yazan, 2015, p. 149). This study analyzed primary documents, databases, interviews, and open records to obtain data (Yazan, 2015). Both inductive and deductive coding methods were part of the data analysis. Due to the theoretical framework, codes were identified as the study progressed within the data or the inductive approach (Saldaña, 2021). Deductive coding was also used as predefined codes from the research question concepts (Saldaña, 2021). To track the codes, I created a template to identify and develop codes, which later became themes and concepts that I transferred to a comprehensive codebook I developed and used Microsoft Excel for organization.

Audio transcriptions were manually analyzed and thematically coded into categories, themes, and concepts (Saldaña, 2021). I then transcribed the audio files into a Word document

and meticulously reviewed each entry by playing them out loud to ensure the accuracy of every word and to give justice to the words shared. Due to the qualitative analysis style, codes were derived from words and phrases that become symbols of “summative, salient, essence-capturing” data from interviews and other sources (Saldaña, 2021, p. 4). Thus, coding assisted in this study’s data analysis for patterns and other meaning-making techniques (Saldaña, 2021). After collecting data, this study will “streamline data from codes to subcodes to categories and subcategories to themes and concepts to assertions” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 18). After manually analyzing and coding data, I manually and further organized the data to uncover any overlooked patterns. (Please see Appendix C for sample data coding).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness strategies enhance credibility. The action plan for this study includes memo writing, member checking, and rich, thick descriptions (Patton, 2015). These tools expose personal tendencies and thus facilitate future data analysis (Patton, 2015). Member checking helps determine accurate data collection by asking the individuals if notes reflect what they shared (Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Memos combine thoughts and data as a reflective practice, provide valuable insight, and bracket bias (Yin, 2016). Entries and reflections reveal personal tendencies and assist with future data analysis (Yin, 2016, p. 183). The rationale for using these techniques is due to findings indicating that memos organize and align thoughts and data (Yin, 2016). Throughout the study, member checking will be used by asking participants during and after interviews for accurate data interpretation (Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Rich, thick description adds to trustworthiness and rigor (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, medical and legal fields have previously provided detailed descriptions to ensure

validation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study will provide a sufficiently detailed description of the study's "context to enable readers to compare the fit with their situations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.256) and is one of the best ways to transfer data "to assess the similarity between them and the study" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 125; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In sum, rich, thick description explains what is happening to whom and why.

In sum, this study will carefully follow Section 13 of the American Educational Research Association Code of Ethics, and "in all other respects, education researchers adhere to the standards 13.01(a)–(c)" (American Education Research Association, 2011, p. 151). This study will rigorously follow ethical measures in the accurate collection and data analysis. (Please see Appendix D for Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative certificate).

### **Subjectivity Statement and Ethical Considerations**

"We are constantly reinforcing our right to be here because we are constantly being questioned about our right to be here" (The Honorable Sonia Sotomayor in Byrd, 2003, p. 130).

The quote above serves as a reminder of the many societal injustices, ranging from economic to educational barriers. A hegemonic professor at Ocotillo Community College always asks students, including myself, "Where are you from?" After much observation, I realized this categorizes students as "other" because of their border ancestry.

In the beginning, I approached my research feeling like an outsider. I am a Mestiza with Indigenous ancestry. My phenomenological lens as a Mexican American Latina deeply rooted in the borderlands and with Indigenous ancestors from northern New Mexico led me to experience microaggressions often disguised and dismissed as social "niceties" (DiAngelo, 2021, p. 52; Shotton, 2017). Thus, I understand the invisible struggles bravely faced by many with similar stories. As my research progressed, I uncovered beautiful stories of strength, pride, power, and resilience. After discovering my Indigenous roots, my study transformed into a more personal

experience. I suddenly felt as if I were seeing everything clearly and sharply focused. For example, I experienced profoundness while listening to singers and drummers share personal stories coded in powerful beats at a Powwow. As deeply dormant memories were awakened, sadness moistened my eyes and fell like moondrops.

My diverse education has sharpened my awareness of the potential harm caused by cultural insensitivity and ignorance. My positionality “critiques, challenges, transforms and empowers” students (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 10). As an undergraduate journalism student, I cultivated interviewing skills while writing for newspapers. An interview that changed my life was with Dr. Diana Natalicio. My life-altering decision was to become a bilingual education teacher in Fabens, Texas, where I helped improve language inequities. Before this, I discovered the importance of marketable skills as an undergraduate student working as a hospital pharmacy technician mixing medicinal powders and nutrients to help heal patients.

Although my formal education is rooted in a postpositivist empirical lens, I chose the qualitative method for this study because of its malleability in collecting immeasurable data from lived experiences. The qualitative lens goes beyond the postpositivist reach to uncover the cultural wealth Indigenous students utilize in dealing with official and self-appointed gatekeepers (Blackhawk, 2023; Brayboy, 2005; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023).

Creating an inclusive environment that empowers and validates students’ sense of belonging is the responsibility of all individuals, from staff to leadership. My subjectivity echoes the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in that I, too, “refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So, we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice” (King, 1968).

## Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter four reveals the findings from semi-structured, open-ended, in-person interviews conducted with professors and Indigenous students at Borderlands University (BU), located on the U.S.-Mexico border. It is a nationally recognized Hispanic-serving institution that intersects three states and two countries. Of approximately 24,000 students, 88% identify as Latina(o), and one out of two students is the first in their family to attend college (NCES, 2023). Many students have Indigenous heritage. However, they are either unaware or identify as mainly Latina(o), which may indicate why the data shows 0% ‘American Indian or Alaska Native,’ which is inaccurate (IPEDS, 2024, para. 5).

Ocotillo Community College (OCC) is relevant to this study because most students transfer to BU. It is a public, 2-year feeder school to Borderlands University, which offers certificates and associate degrees (NCES, 2023). Ocotillo Community College’s 2024 enrollment rates reflected more than 65 students identified as American Indian, 63 identified as two or more ethnicities, and 25 as Pacific Islanders. OCC’s total enrollment in Spring 2024 was 22,860.

In comparison, Borderlands University Spring 2024 enrollment was 24,351. In total, 45 students identified as Native American, 313 as unknown, 26 as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 141 as two or more races (Borderlands Data, 2024).

Borderlands University (BU)		Ocotillo Community College (OCC)	
Native American	45	Native American	65
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	26	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	25
Two or more ethnicities	141	Two or more ethnicities	63
Unknown	313	Unknown	229
<b>Total Enrollment</b>	<b>24, 351</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>22, 860</b>

Table 1: Spring 2024 Native American and Indigenous Student Enrollment

## Theme One: Recognizing the Cultural Richness Students Bring to Educational Institutions

This study is grounded by Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (2005) and Tachine's Peoplehood Matrix (2017). The cultural richness Indigenous students bring to colleges and universities is evident throughout the interviews I conducted for this study. For instance, a participant talked about the sanctity of language and preserving and protecting "the image of my people." The Indigenous students reinforced the cultural capital that they bring as irreproducible. The student relates, "I think a lot of professors actually leaned on me for, you know, my background." In contributing to a higher education setting, the Indigenous student added that they were "able to project [knowledge] in a very different manner, differently than other grad students might have known." Sacred history shared by this student included lived experiences and personal knowledge such as "current issues, language, culture, and traditions."

### *Resilience*

My people were *resilient*.  
They guided me.  
I am to *preserve* and *protect* my people and past.  
We are a humble people. Very *proud*.  
I worked hard and am the first to get a degree.  
The deeper you dig, the deeper I hide my sacred stories.  
It is my sacred duty to protect them.  
To carry my ancestors with me through sacred stories.  
All their struggles.  
I gotta protect this song,  
I gotta protect these words,  
I gotta protect this prayer.  
Prayers of *power*.  
Prayers of *protection*.  
Prayers of *resistance*.  
My elders tell me, "Protect them with your LIFE.  
When you feel that it's time,  
Then you pass it on.  
Pass it on so we don't die.

—BU Student

Interviews reflect the richness and cultural wealth students bring to educational institutions. As described by an Indigenous student, “And that’s what I bring to the richness of the higher education setting where I can actually voice my opinions on certain aspects of borderlands Native American communities, where I have been able to, I think I’ve been able to do a good job of it.”

In contrast, not recognizing students’ valuable knowledge and experiences leads to inaccurate statements and crass comments, such as “If the Indigenous had turned themselves in during summer instead of winter, it would have been easier for them.” This misinformed and callous OCC professor was describing the Trail of Tears, which was one of the many Western colonizers’ forced removals of Indigenous Peoples from their homelands in termination and relocation practices by the government. (Adams, 2020; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Shepherd, 2010). Statements such as these are examples of the many modern-day microaggressions and abuses students face, negatively impacting their college experience (Brayboy, 2015; Tachine et al., 2017).

In addition to culturally enhancing the collegiate environment, listening to Indigenous voices on campus is beneficial in avoiding unforeseeable yet undesirable actions. For example, an Indigenous student described that when they arrived at Borderlands University, students dressed up according to the selected Homecoming theme. One of the days was “Wild West” day. The student brought this concern to the student organization association, explaining that “that can be kind of problematic.” Fortunately, the cultural oversight was prevented. This experience raised questions for the student, such as:

It was such a small thing, but it was like, wow if I hadn't said anything, it could have happened. And who knows, maybe everyone would've been cowboys. You know, who's to say? But it changed. Those little subtle things meant a lot.

This example illustrates one of many situations in which cultural awareness is critical. Thus, the student's input was beneficial to the institution. The issue is that an educational institution should practice cultural sensitivity and respect by practicing cultural awareness of various belief systems.

**Indigenous Studies: “Students bring a lot to it; they have a lot to teach, too.”**

Students expressed that even though “Indigenous people are all clumped up into just being one big universal group,” colleges should be mindful of the fact that despite some similarities, there are many differences:

Indigenous Peoples are very different. Cultural practices are different. Outlooks are different. There's a lot of differences, and so if you have Indigenous students from different backgrounds, which I've seen here [BU], we do have a few from different tribes from different regions of the country or even countries. I think that's something that should be taken into consideration and should be learned from.

The Indigenous student also shared that in recognizing differences as strengths, colleges should endeavor to support a knowledgeable and welcoming environment:

I think it's very hard for there to be a professor who has knowledge on all the groups. If you're going to be doing Indigenous studies, you have to be aware that there's differences. Considering that a lot of tribes do hide what they have, understandably so, because a lot of things have been taken by force.



A lot of information is not going to be shared with outsiders. And to have students come into a welcoming environment and be willing to share what they [can] share, I think that's very beneficial. I think that would really help a lot, especially in this new minor that they have.

The data shared by the above student conveys the rich academic wealth students bring to the educational environment and the opportunity for all students and community members to learn about their roots.

Another Indigenous student added that it has become socially popular for:

[People] that want to be a Native. You want to identify because it's cool. Because it'll help you get a job. I know that's out there, but in my experience, there's a lot more people that just want to understand themselves better.

Thus, Indigenous courses provide students access to discover their roots and heritage, which carries the profound possibility of impacting those already receptive to finding themselves comparable to timeless tales of a person who does not yet know who they are. Their situation changes when newfound knowledge of self positively shapes their self-view and self-value. An Indigenous student shared:

It's not soul-searching, but it's looking for yourself and what you find valuable and how much you want to commit to it. To, you know, if the paper shows you that you're 50% some kind of Native, it's like, okay, shoot, well, what does that mean to you?

Are you going to research?

Are you going to learn?

Are you going to change your habits?

Are you going to do this?

Are you going to be an active part of the community?

A professor agreed with Indigenous student views in that access to a Native American and Indigenous Studies degree can facilitate access to Indigenous heritage knowledge that has become very popular:

Many, many, many people [who] are interested in their heritage, you know, [who are] doing ancestry.com or, you know, 23andMe® and all of those things. And they're finding out stuff that they want to know. And then there's these programs on TV about it, you know, *Finding Your Roots* and all that kind of stuff. So, it's really kind of popular, and I think the other thing that happened in the last few years. There's a silver lining to everything was that [because of] COVID--people couldn't do a whole lot else. But that was one thing they could do then, is kind of maybe, do a little bit of Googling and finding out more about their background and their history. And so, it's something which is taking off, and we can use that within the university to leverage. And especially young people, I think really, really want to know. It's key that they have a platform to do these things now because their ancestors are dying.

Thus, students bring valuable background and knowledge, a sense of place, language, sacred history, and ceremonial cycle. Students described their experiences interwoven in how they approach their education, which enables them to succeed despite the many microaggressions they encounter in Western, colonial-style education. The aspects of the Peoplehood Matrix are interwoven in such a way that the strong connection and the value they place on family is a support they bring. Learning more about their families through NAIS brings students access to the aspects of the Peoplehood Matrix if they were unaware of them. One of the main reasons NAIS is so vital for Indigenous students is that although place, language, sacred history, and

ceremonial cycle are strongly interwoven, not all students realize this due to familial circumstances or disconnection from their culture due to assimilation and a myriad other reasons. It is key to mention that the family includes the chosen family that supports, mentors and guides Indigenous students. The data revealed the familial capital students connect with in navigating the academic environment, which is new to many. Their sense of community, and the connection they foster with one another as an extended family they can lean on as they would with their families back home or additional trusted members of their social capital network. Within NAIS, students encounter the value of their language, experiences, and history, as well as the value they bring. Such as, students read articles and learn through assignments and share knowledge, and “they can go back and talk to their *tias and tios*, [and] find out where they come from,” said an NAIS professor.

Another Indigenous student agreed that knowing who you are and what your roots uncover can help students feel pride in themselves, leading to higher self-esteem. The aspects of the Peoplehood Matrix are revealed and made known to them in such a way that they realize their strength and power, which enables them to face challenges and is reflected in their academics. The courses provide a platform for students to take the time to research and study their sacred history, which then becomes a defining sense of pride. An Indigenous student shared their experience and how their strong connection to growing up on their reservation, surrounded by their family who shared powerful stories of their sacred past and participated in many ceremonies, cannot be materialized from a textbook taught through colonial-style educational institutions. The student shared the following:

I mean, everybody's unique, everybody's different, you know, some of it also depends on your outlook in life. You know, if you're going in there and you're expecting to be treated royally because you're Native, well, then that's not going to happen.

But if you go in there and show them the pride that you have of where you come from, then you gain a lot of respect. You really do. That's what I've done. This is who I am.

This is what I do. But most importantly, this is what I do for my people. And that kind of guided me in all of my research. All of my writing.

### **Creation of a Native American and Indigenous Studies Degree**

A perpetual goal, according to a Borderlands University professor, "was to create a Native Studies minor." Students shared that for many years, multiple faculty members cared about students having access to a Native Studies degree. A significant factor that helped to push this was that one of the administrative faculty "had Indigenous ancestry" and was "especially interested in creating the minor." Students resonated interest and brought their aspirational capital. Although many barriers were set before them, it would be a strenuous journey. Their aspirational capital supported the dream and the possibilities that would become accessible with the NAIS minor. An Indigenous student said, "It's good for *everybody*. *Anyone* would value from having a minor possibility. Anyone would value from having these voices and stuff heard because it just makes a more well-rounded education."

Thus, Borderlands University began offering NAIS courses in Spring 2023. An Indigenous student commented:

I think that's where [we, the students] were helpful because all these teachers wanted these things done already. You know, [Professor's Name], I heard that, like years ago, was pushing for a Native American Studies minor, and they couldn't get it. Or I think

they wanted a Native American Studies program here, and Texas State had basically said, 'Well, if someone wants a Native American Studies degree, they can go to UT-Austin.'

Yeah, UT-Austin's got a degree program or something like that. So, if they want that, just go there. Why have it here?

In the example above, students revealed their resistant capital in facing the opposition from the colossal entity that is the state educational system that was resistant to allowing a NAIS bachelor's degree because one existed in their system eight and a half hours away. Students exercised resistant capital because they were not willing to become subordinate. Instead, they expressed nonconformism, pushing for transformation and consequently moving away from educational dependence. Thus, the NAIS minor was the mold in the making.

### ***Why a Native American and Indigenous Studies minor?***

Nevertheless, Borderlands University began with the minor because "the scrutiny wasn't as strict or as vigorous as compared to creating a major," and it "wasn't so much that the University was doing anything actively to resist it. It was that nobody had really made the effort yet," a professor stated. Indigenous students agreed:

Right. So there just wasn't that student backing even though there was plenty of like interest in, I mean, I feel like [Borderlands] is a perfect place for something that's more interdisciplinary and intertribal because we are on the border. We have not only the local tribes [but] Indigenous people coming in from Mexico and acknowledging that blend of humanity. That diversity is kind of what [Borderlands] could do with that; it would be amazing, you know.

Students practiced their aspirational capital and envisioned the success of NAIS within the community network that offers social support and resources in the region. These resources

include attending a local or nearby powwow or learning about Indigenous cultures in surrounding natural landmarks and museum exhibits. Additionally, the consistent influx of diverse people coming to the region, along with those in place, “provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Students experience social capital, which reinforces that they are not alone. They reflect and learn more about Indigenous traditions, cuisine, customs, and art from the Southwest, Mexico, and many other regions. If students seek social capital, they will find a nurturing network that will “transcend the adversity in their daily lives by uniting with supportive social networks” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

Another student further described historical social capital as intricately pre-established networks found in intertwined factors such as language, land, and sacred history. The student shared that:

You had people from near Canada trading all the way with Indigenous communities far into South America. I mean, you had people from the West Coast trading with people from the East Coast, and you know, people would move around. They would go live in different places. They even developed international sign languages to communicate, even though everyone spoke a different language.

As the students above described, linguistic capital has survived. Thus, students’ linguistic capital brings language, words, communication styles, and other forms of communication to educational institutions. Most of the students in the region are bilingual, even though Spanish is a colonized language. Indigenous students bring multiple languages, listening, and storytelling skills passed through their families as they teach lessons through *dichos* (sayings) or *cuentos* (stories), music, and song. Students also acquire valuable linguistic skills early in their lives as they may need to

translate for their parents and learn math skills if they have a *puesto* or other small family money-making gig. Some students recalled selling *raspas* made by shaving a block of ice with a metal cast iron ice shaver and adding sweetened red cherry, blue raspberry, and other flavors.

A BU professor concurred that twenty years ago, faculty members discussed the possibility of establishing a NAIS minor or major. However, “the problem is that being in the UT–system: the UT–system tightly controls the creation of new majors. And if there is a pre-existing major at one of the schools in the system, that makes it even more difficult to create a new major, which is nonsensical, particularly in a state this big and when [BU] is so far away from UT–Austin, which has had their major for a while.”

In addition to students and faculty desiring to have a Native American and Indigenous Studies degree, an interview with another college professor reveals that the degree benefits students and the community in accessing better career opportunities. The professor described the social capital attached to education, which revolves around job prospects. The essence of working with students in liberal arts, which houses the NAIS degree, extends far beyond mere employment. Much of the “history, the mission of liberal arts has always been much *more* than that. It’s always been about *who you are* in society and understanding society and all of its many forms in order to *change it for the better*.” The liberal arts educational platform fosters a deep understanding of society’s complexities to facilitate positive change. The professor said that “because education is almost like a platform to perform the other things around the different colleges and liberal arts has a very strong place within the School of Education or Colleges of Education throughout the country.” The NAIS degree encourages reflection and practice related to social capital because students “become social science teachers and those kinds of things. Getting young people to think about this, particularly in high school and junior high, middle school is very important.”

The NAIS degree puts students in contact with the Indigenous community and offers networking, navigational capital, and emotional support, which reassures students that they are not alone in their pursuit of higher education.

### **Challenges to Indigenous Studies**

Aside from the UT–system’s tight control over creating new majors, several factors contributed to the delay. Factors that challenged the NAIS degree included the region’s “embrace of Mestizaje” yet not “reflecting the elements of Indigenous identity today, and then, of course, we’re in Texas, so it’s not just the university’s fault. It’s kind of the general region and population just lacking an awareness of Indigenous Studies,” a professor shared. The lack of Indigenous recognition amidst strong historical Indigenous presence in the Borderlands University region is evident, yet paradoxical in part because “Texas has basically turned its back on any kind of Indigenous history. There are only three federally recognized tribes in Texas. One of which is here in Borderlands.”

Indigenous students shared how their social and navigational knowledge has assisted them in maneuvering the challenges they face in educational institutions in a state that shows little support for cultural diversity. Navigational capital helps students utilize skills in maneuvering through hostile terrain. Students were interested in Native Studies, yet challenges existed in bringing a Native American and Indigenous Studies program to Borderlands University, which affected the recruitment of students. Although professors said, “the minor will increase multiculturalism awareness, which is relevant in terms of scholarship. It’s still an important framework because we live in a multicultural society. So you can present it to students, Native students, or non-Native students.” The minor’s presence creates a sense of place or space, language, and sacred history accessible to students, as described by the Peoplehood Matrix.



Thus, offering Native American and Indigenous Studies benefits Indigenous students and the university on many levels. Benefits include attracting students to BU and “the university can broaden and expand quote ‘cultural competency.’” The professor added that those who expect to propose “something to the university successfully, you’ve got to be able to speak their language.” To disregard this detail and present blind proposals, “without any concern for what the university is interested in, you may fail.” The professor added the following:

Concerns of the university [such as] time to graduation, the cost of things.

Like how much is this going to cost in tuition?

Is this going to slow students down from graduating?

And then, is this going to help them find jobs?

Especially here at [Borderlands].

If you cannot speak to the university mission of social mobility, then you need to kind of rethink what you’re doing and why and what the goals are.

Now, that doesn’t mean that everything has to be monetized, you know.

But you’ve got to be able to say, in this case, what I told people was that, well, on one level, if you get a degree in engineering or political science, and you want to go into politics or government affairs. Or if you get a degree in nursing, or if you get a degree in education, if you have that minor in Native studies, then you can go to Tribal Governments when they’re hiring people, and then you can say,

‘Look, I have a degree in biology, wildlife sciences, engineering, nursing, business, *and also* a minor in Native Studies.

And then I understand a little bit of what Tribal Governments need, a little bit about what Tribal Sovereignty is.

And then that makes me a better engineer.

Or that makes me a better nurse.

Or that makes me a better teacher.

But that makes me a better, you know, business and marketing person.'

And so that's what I told them. And that's the truth. I mean, I've seen the job announcements that tribes have. This will help student mobility, and it will help them find jobs.

Students also mentioned a recent challenge affecting course availability and whether they can take Indigenous Studies before their graduation timelines. Some students practiced their resistant capital and voiced their frustration regarding NAIS courses, noting that these courses are not offered every semester. This inconsistency poses significant logistical challenges for students whose circumstances demand timely access to these courses. Some students may require specific NAIS courses to fulfill graduation requirements, advance their academic programs, or deepen their understanding of Indigenous perspectives. In this situation, students relied on their resistant capital, which gives them the strength to move forward despite challenges that present themselves as obstacles and societal messages that interfere with their academic journey.

Additionally, Indigenous students utilize the lack of course availability by taking action and perhaps relying on their families for familial capital to support them with additional time to complete their degrees. Students must focus on their aspirational capital while waiting for courses to become available. Aspirational capital builds the resilience for students to persevere and keep their dreams sharply focused and in front of them despite barriers (Yosso, 2005). Hence, the gap in NAIS course availability is not only due to lack of funding for the minor but also a result of the administration becoming "a lot stricter in the university management from the

deans upward about getting a course to make. You have to have five graduate students or ten undergraduate students. And that presents a difficulty for a number of courses that you know you have to get enough interest,” as stated by a professor.

As a result, students persist by using their resistant capital, recognizing that other universities demonstrate strong support by prioritizing NAIS courses. In doing so, students recognize the presence of “oppressive structures” within their own educational institutions (Yosso, 2005, p. 81). All the students interviewed mentioned that they would prefer to attend a more supportive educational institution, but “unfortunately, I didn’t attend because I couldn’t afford the gas and the travel. But then again, you know, New Mexico is different because they have all the Pueblos up there. Texas is very, very different, very racist.”

Another student related to practicing resistant and social capital in facing current challenges at BU and deciding not to attend a tribal college, “I do think my college experience probably would have been nicer there or more enjoyable. But I mean, I’m going to school for an education, not to socialize.” Additionally, the tribal college did not offer the STEM degree the student was seeking. Students interested in NAIS and other courses across disciplines expressed frustration when their classes don’t make it due to the university student quota, as described by the professor above. Consequently, some NAIS courses may only become available “once every other semester, sometimes once every other year to make sure that you have enough built-up demand that you’re actually going to get at least ten students in the course, and so that is an issue,” the professor added. Students unaware of this Borderlands University requirement end up looking for the courses during registration, only to experience disappointment that the NAIS courses they looked forward to taking are unavailable. Students skillfully harness their community cultural wealth as aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital to succeed.

*“It’s a small beginning.”*

During this study, many Indigenous students expressed an interest in the university hiring more Indigenous faculty and Indigenous advisors to expand the Indigenous Studies minor. Adding tenure-track Indigenous faculty would provide social support networks that reassure students they are not alone in their academic journey. An Indigenous student expressed that “universities need to hire Native American advisors who can guide and help Native American students find their path first and foremost.” Doing so would support student social capital and build their resistance capital through education.

Additionally, for positive student well-being encompassing aspects of the Peoplehood Matrix, the presence of Indigenous and similar-minded individuals needs to be available to tend to student needs. Indigenous students made their aspirational capital known despite previous and ongoing challenges. Their aspirational capital included adding an Indigenous Studies major and Institute at Borderlands University as an accessible dream. Students’ aspirational capital is represented as community cultural wealth that presses them forward to aspire beyond the barriers surrounding many of them. In response to an Indigenous student who asked when this aspiration could come to fruition, a professor replied, “It’s not undoable. I mean, the deal is just that there has to be a commitment on the part of both the university and the different departments. The departments, I think, are open to that, for the most part.”

The social capital network that professors described “means that [BU] actually would hire Indigenous faculty who teach Indigenous stuff. But, you know, to be frank with you, we’ve had such trouble even just getting African American faculty in this university. And frankly, there has been resistance to hiring African Americans. It’s like, you know, we have Latinx faculty. So, that’s far enough. We’ve got diversity. We don’t need anything else.”

At Borderlands, students have had to actively meet challenges through navigational and resistant capital to maneuver the academic lack of support. A BU professor provided a snapshot of the complexities they faced upon starting their college tenure and noticed how students have had to navigate numerous programs and minors within the institution. Students heavily implemented their navigational knowledge as they traversed the treacherous ocean of academia that has left many others stranded. The NAIS minor supports student social capital and would provide them with institutional advocates who can raise questions, such as a professor who stated:

When I came here, I had to ask the provost. I said, ‘What’s the program?’ We had millions of programs or things that are called ‘programs’ in quotes in the college. And there’s a difference between things that are in what’s called the inventory of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. I fought strongly to try and get African American Studies, for example, to become a major rather than a minor or maybe part of a department rather than just a minor and an office in the liberal arts building.

And the same thing I would hope would happen with Indigenous Native American Indigenous Studies is that making a minor is the first step toward it becoming a full-fledged program. But that’s kind of up to us and working with students to make it popular. To make it coherent.

And so, we have a problem in this university with turning minors into something more important that has real recognition.

Supporting students in offering marketable degrees helps offer positive elements they can utilize in their social capital. They are interested in access to degrees and majors that can have the “momentum into something more important that has *real recognition*.” Tools such as these

support students, which can become social capital for their families and communities and is “something that is attractive to students. So, yeah, it’s on their resume. It’s actually, in some cases, on the degree. And so, you know, that’s a possible way forward.” The BU professor described the challenges in balancing the regulations for degree approval, saying, “It’s almost like a market to try to sell something. And you’re kind of caught between trying to make something attractive so that people want to do it. But also, just make sure that it’s relevant and not just another little designation that gets added onto their transcript.”

Although students apply their resilience and resistant capital as they seek devoted professors who work endlessly, they share the many small steps they have taken for decades to advance. Yet, an Indigenous student shared that BU has them “on a whim.” Indigenous and other marginalized students experience a noticeable lack of real commitment. They shared that it’s not enough for BU just to say, but also to do and “really reach out to the Indigenous communities through accessible programs.” Furthermore, to expect a minor to succeed and flourish without adequate support is illogical. If you desire a beautiful garden that others enjoy and are attracted to, you must supply nutritious, fertile soil, sunshine, and fresh water.

## **Theme Two: Factors Influencing Indigenous Studies and Students in Higher Education**

### ***Lack of Indigenous Faculty, Mentors, and Advisors***

Findings from the data pointed to almost nonexistent Indigenous faculty, advisors, and mentors at BU, which mirrors the academic landscape across the nation (IPEDS, 2024). An Indigenous student elaborated on the social capital Indigenous academic mentors can provide as follows:

Advisors provide mentorship to young kids. They mentor them. They guide them. They mold them to become good students first and foremost. And then, you know, good

educators, or whatever they want to study. But I think for Native Americans, we need to have Native American advisors.

Consequently, while attending BU, in the student's quest to find mentors, they visited colleges known for supporting Indigenous students. Ultimately, they found a university with a dedicated Native American advisor, "and I just saw I clicked eye to eye. Wow, yeah! Yes! Unfortunately, I didn't attend because I couldn't afford the gas and the travel. But then again, you know, New Mexico is different because they have all the Pueblos up there. Texas is very, very different, very racist." This data sheds light on the intricate orchestration in which students must leverage their multiple community cultural wealth, such as aspirational, social, navigational, and resistant capital, to successfully persist in college, often relying on their own initiatives and resources.

The data also revealed the inverse viewpoint of simply going through the motions and staffing Indigenous advisors, which is not the panacea and does not guarantee student success. To explain, an Indigenous student describes the experience of attending a university with a 6% Native American demographic, which is much higher than the norm. This university was all-Indigenous inclusive, complete with American Indian student services and advisors. Even so, the student shares:

I hung out with other Native students. They [college advisors] provided and told me about different scholarships related to Indigenous people. There were facilitators. Once I went to school, they would have Halloween parties. They would have these things. I did not do as well there as these facilities were there. I didn't know. In retrospect, I didn't see the value in them, and I didn't utilize them the way I could. And sadly, I suffered for it. It was the first time I was being compared to other Native American students.

The student above described their experience that led to stress, “I was told my hair color is the wrong color. I was insulted, or ostracized” because their Indigenous language “wasn’t good enough, so I dropped out of school.” Other Indigenous students concurred with micro-aggressive experiences that included racist comments on campus and further widespread on social media (Tachine et al., 2017).

***“Imposter Syndrome. It feels different.”***

Indigenous students expressed the necessity of educational experiences that support their spaces, languages, sacred history, and approval to bring all the aspects together they can honor in ceremonial cycle as outlined by the Peoplehood Matrix. One student described how Native American and Indigenous Studies offers such opportunities:

Before the minor, really the only place where I felt there were other like-minded people was with the [Indigenous] student organization. Other than that, there’s a saying for that: *Imposter syndrome*. Where you feel like an outsider even though you’re from here because there’s hardly anyone here that shares similar backgrounds with you. It feels different. I come here. I mean, sure, we grew up in the same city, so we have that in common. But when it comes to wanting to talk about other things, viewpoints, mindsets. I usually find that there’s not anyone I can really share it with because no one can relate. A lot of people don’t understand.

Indigenous students expressed that there are few opportunities to meet other Indigenous students on campus “with different departments. I only see them [students] when I’m running from class to class or between places. I think the fact that there’s not a lot of tribes nearby here makes it hard to find that commonality.” Students also expressed that their many life responsibilities



contribute to not spending too much time on campus. “I don’t participate. I just come to do classes and now work and do classes, and then I leave.” Multiple challenges exist for students.

A professor confirmed “how busy students are” in that “most take too many classes and they work a lot of full-time. They live with their families on the north or east side and have long commutes and they have family obligations. So, we don’t have a large student resident population here.” Thus, students at BU struggle to participate in extra-curricular activities and “have a hard time because they’ve got like a 40-mile drive, or a 30-mile drive or a 20-mile drive through I-10, and they work 40 hours a week” as compared to other colleges and universities.

### **Conflicting Beliefs Create Cultural Clashes**

An Indigenous student helped shed light on previously hidden data that “affects academic progress” due to clashing views for students raised on “very old cultural values and traditions.” The student recalled, “Since I grew up within my community, I would say my mindset has affected my academic progress. We usually identify the Western mindset as productivity-heavy. It’s very, I don’t know; it has a huge capitalistic productivity mindset. There’s very strict ways to do things.”

The student continued to relate the collision between Indigenous beliefs and the Western views most colleges and universities have modeled themselves after, which directly opposes the aspects of the Peoplehood Matrix, which holistically intertwines all facets to achieve physical, emotional, and mental well-being. The student describes:

Since I was raised that, all life has value; all living things deserve some respect. It feels strange when I have to go through and euthanize whole groups of animals because they didn’t have the gene we needed. So, that’s been tough. I mean, I’m okay with doing it, you know. I give the animals my thanks for the help and for helping with everything

they've provided. You know, give them a little farewell and everything, so it doesn't affect me like it doesn't hurt me to do it. It just —*it feels sad*. But I wouldn't say it's anything that I can't do. I mean, I hunt. I'm used to taking animal lives. I guess it's just in this sense; it's a little different because, well, I'm not eating them.

***“A lot of assimilation needed to be done just to survive.”***

Indigenous students revealed that the sacred protection practices would disappear without teachings and passing down traditions. Educational assimilation is alive and actively experienced by Indigenous students even today. Indigenous students describe challenges regarding questions such as “What does it mean to be Native American? How do other people see it? What does it represent? How do I look or not look? How do I sound or not sound? Do I think or am I Native?”

Students expressed concern that they are “at risk of losing their culture” and that their tribe is only “five to six thousand people now. This wasn't the case a few generations back. And then culturally-speaking, where a lot has been lost, and we're trying to recover a lot of it; bring a lot of it back.”

Indigenous students were concerned about the destructive effects assimilation has not only on people but also on the assimilated spaces themselves. They shared:

Indigenous outlooks have had a bigger impact. They've started to recently realize like, hey, a lot of animals are going extinct. We're starting to see the devastating effects our city structures are having on the environment on the whole globe. A lot of people like to think Indigenous communities back then were just little pockets of people just in loincloths and stabbing animals and eating them. I mean, no, they were very complex societies.

Furthermore, they detailed the complex and thriving systems already practiced before

assimilation began as settlers were encouraged to invade territories ‘Westward Ho’ and enforce their ‘Manifest Destiny.’ The places and spaces, languages, sacred history, and ceremony long established by Indigenous Peoples were attacked. Assimilation is evident and sends a negative message to Indigenous students who lose earned credits, time, and money spent in college.

Indigenous students invest a significant portion of their aspirational capital with hopes and dreams when they enter academia. However, without having developed linguistic and resistant capital, essential elements that require nurturing and mentorship over time, their academic journey may be profoundly affected. An Indigenous student recounts, “I had taken an Indigenous language class, and BU said that it didn’t count as a language. I was told by the language person that I needed to learn a *real* language. So, at the time, I didn’t think of fighting it. Now, I wish I had.” Thus, the data revealed a clash between Western, colonial-style education and the Peoplehood Matrix, which embraces student well-being as holistically positive.

***“It’s all about producing data.”***

Students expressed additional challenges in their academic journey, stemming from a clash between their ways of knowing and being reflected by the Peoplehood Matrix and a predominantly Western educational framework that overlooks the importance of self-care in place of working at a nonstop pace to produce data. It is essential to note the burden Indigenous students must navigate as they strive to balance their community cultural wealth with an educational system designed around colonial norms. Indigenous students shared that they believe in self-care, which is interwoven in the components of the ceremonial cycle, which holistically encompasses mental and spiritual well-being. Nevertheless, this does not mean that students work less. On the contrary, the data revealed that the extra burdens placed on students trying to fit their ways of being into a colonial template wear heavily on them in that “it affects [me] in a

way [that] really drains you,” as stated by an Indigenous student. The student continued to describe the profound emotional and physical toll of navigating this cultural disharmony:

We really value taking care of ourselves, and sometimes, in these settings, it’s just very much do this, do this, do this. What are you doing? You gotta come here. You gotta work on this. You need to — it’s just a lot. And so, you can see how it affects a lot of Indigenous people. It’s all about producing data.

### **Holidays and Feast Days: “I don’t have the luxury of getting away with it.”**

Students shared that they “don’t have the luxury of getting away with” participating in holidays, feast days, or celebrations. Students recounted instances where they were confronted with the decision to attend a sacred ceremony or event, risking potential grade reductions or encountering challenges with unsupportive college staff. A student described:

There’s certain cultural events that occur. I guess you would call them holidays or feast days. And I’m very involved in the community, so I’ll want to participate, but sometimes, the classes or the PIs [principal investigators] won’t understand, and so I don’t have the luxury of getting away with it. I’ll get some sort of like, I don’t want to say punishment, but it does affect my grade. Like when [Borderlands City] passed the resolution. I actually got my grade dropped that day for being there. To me, even though changing Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day is the smallest thing you can do to make up for the genocide and all the havoc that’s been put on my people. It’s still a step forward. And to be asked to go and even to say a few words, I thought this is important. Out of all the Indigenous communities in the area, they asked our group to go. So, I’m like, okay, you know, I’m going to go. To me, this had greater impact. It was more important. But yeah, I had my grade completely dropped from like an *A* to a *B* for that.

## **“Ebbs and flows.”**

Indigenous students have described facing challenges and the institution’s response as “ebbs and flows.” For example, this can range from requesting Indigenous Peoples Day instead of Columbus Day and adding it to the student guide distributed to incoming students. The institution has “control over that.” For instance, they asked college administrators if the student calendars “can you have it say Indigenous People’s Day instead?”

Students continuously pressure the institution for changes, and sometimes, students encounter a labyrinth of paperwork and meetings. Very slowly, the issues move up to the faculty senate, which argues that instead of officially recognizing Indigenous People’s Day, “so where we wanted this change is like physical change, instead, they said oh well, you are allowed to *celebrate* Indigenous People’s Day. And so, we had come to the understanding that Borderlands University is officially recognizing, and they’re like, no, no, no, no. It was worded differently.”

The data depicted sharply underscores the tough challenges and barriers Indigenous students confront. In navigating through the infestation of official and self-appointed gatekeepers, they rely heavily on their social, navigational, and, above all, resistant capital to progress.

Paradoxically, on October 16, 2023, I had the honor of being present to witness [Borderlands] County Judge sign into resolution with the approval of the Commissioners Court the “name change of the recognized Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples’ Day to recognize and maintain a diverse and inclusive culture within the County workforce.”

Every second Monday in October, the County celebrates Indigenous Peoples’ Day. Additionally, in 2021, the U.S. celebrated its first national Indigenous Peoples’ Day in a:

Commemoration President Joe Biden proclaimed as a day to honor ‘our diverse history and the Indigenous peoples who contribute to shaping this Nation;’ whereas this shift in the national historical memory follows a movement to recover previously silenced histories by acknowledging Indigenous History as part of American History; and the County is committed to acknowledging with gratitude and respect that we stand on Indigenous land and we pay our respects to the Indigenous People with long ties to the immediate region: Lipan Apache, Mescalero Apache, Piro, Manso, Suma, Jumano, Ysleta de Sur Pueblo, Piro/Manso/Tiwa Indian Tribe of the Pueblo of San Juan de Guadalupe, and Tortugas Pueblo; and whereas we also acknowledge the nations whose territories include present day Texas: The Carrizo and Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Caddo, Tonkawa, Comanche, Alabama-Coushatta, Kickapoo; and whereas the County is located on the U.S.-Mexico border and it is equally important that we recognize Indigenous groups in present day Northern Mexico: Raramuri, Tepehuan, Wixarrika, and Peoples.

### **Theme Three: Challenges**

I found teachers to talk to.  
I found people to speak to.  
But it was coming from a non-Native space.  
I then ended up finding that I just had to look for myself.  
—BU student

Indigenous students expressed a need for student support, an element of social capital in their community cultural wealth they utilize in peer and social contacts to maneuver the academic environment. Students revealed they found advisors and professors who wanted to help, but it came from a non-Native space. However, students expressed it was helpful “learning and knowing that I could talk to other people that weren’t Native, but who had good advice.” Nevertheless, Indigenous students also expressed that they have felt a lack of support and had

“very little Indigenous connection.” They added that “it’s not quite the same” and that there is a real need to connect with advisors and mentors who can be there to talk to and who understand them.

Thereby, someone who can guide them in polishing and utilizing the navigational capital they bring (Yosso, 2005). A graduate Indigenous student stressed that “each and every student attending college has something to contribute. That’s why they’re there. That’s why we’re all there.” The student added that guidance is especially crucial during their “freshman [and] sophomore year. It’s a lot of stress.”

Other Indigenous students experienced that some professors are “supportive because they know what it was like to be from underprivileged, underrepresented backgrounds. They knew the different obstacles that came with that kind of background.” Students benefit from this type of social capital, thus preparing them to succeed in the academic social network.

An Indigenous student shared their experience when they had a supportive advisor who listened when the student suggested, “You know what would be great? I said, ‘What if I do a Pueblo-style drum-making workshop?’ She’s like, yeah, that would be great. So, I did a Pueblo-style drum-making workshop a week or two before Thanksgiving, and I was like . . .whoa!”

Another Indigenous student also expressed a similar challenge not only in finding support from college advisors but also with those whom they can connect with who share Indigenous backgrounds or views. Instead, an Indigenous student expresses how they were “being ostracized by the Native group that I thought were my friends.” The Indigenous student describes reaching out to “these people I looked up to. I tried reaching out to the Hispanic group. Maybe I would fit. But I ended up having trouble there as well.”

***“Even though our battles are different, I could see and recognize something familiar in what they had to offer and what they had to say.”***

Students of various backgrounds facing similar challenges, such as acceptance and belonging in college, find solace in socialization with like-minded individuals. The support provided both in and out of the classroom brings students needed relief. Indigenous students also find much-needed encouragement from compassionate professors who perhaps “can’t speak to a Native experience but [have] done research and knows of these issues.” Students revealed their resistance and social capital by skillfully seeking out other students to support one another in resisting academic inequity. The data shows that students find support in each other, as described by Indigenous students in:

Talking to the Queer Student Association and hearing about *their* struggles.

Talking to the Muslim Student Association and hearing *their* struggles, I was able to see the multiplicity of people and the grey and the mix and things like that.

And we all recognize, like, well, something that helps them is having extracurriculars;

Something that helps them through school. In a funny way, because you just blend in, you know, Hispanic, a lot of the features, of course, are Indigenous.

Indigenous students brought up a recurring challenge within the struggle to fit in. It is a strong current that easily blends you into the social waters, especially if you don’t resist, and many have found it easier and less painful if you nonchalantly go with it. Although rooted in Indigenous heritage, others do not identify with the Spanish, Hispanic, Latina(o), and Chicana(o) aspects prevalent at Borderlands University. An Indigenous student pointed out that the community has “this focus on the binary of Mexican. It’s a Mexican-serving university, which is great. It’s awesome, you know, but it doesn’t have to be our one thing. Right, and it’s important



to see Native contributions, not as like pretty window dressing, but something that improves and is *valuable to* anyone.”

Another Indigenous student describes:

So oftentimes, I didn’t get called out unless I made something of it.

You know, I just kind of look generally brown.

So, you know that’s a problem of feeling erased.

So, the problem of, I mean, on some aspects, it’s like a blending.

So, I’ve met Native students that say, like, well, ‘I don’t care because it’s not a defining part of me.’

Indigenous students experienced being categorized into a majority group and expressed they did not like this inaccurate representation of themselves and their culture. For example, students from Ysleta del Sur Pueblo are challenged and “get a lot of flack and have a long history of people [saying], ‘well, you’re just Mexican. You’re just kind of something; you’re not really Native American’ because they are not the classic image of what Natives look like.”

***“And that’s another problem I think is what we perceive Natives look like.”***

An Indigenous student describes:

So, you think of like Plains Indians, and you know the beating—and what’s it called?

Buckskin dresses: the headdresses like there’s still that tinge of what Natives might look like. So, when you see, you know the Southwest groups: Pueblos, Navajos a little bit, but not really. But the Pueblos really hit hard where it’s like, a lot of their look, a lot of these things people associate with the Southwest associated with Mexico, all of a sudden,

you’re blended in, you know. And there isn’t that acknowledgement of a *different* history.

An acknowledgement of, like, well, *no*, I don’t want to be mistaken for Mexican because

there's a hard history between Pueblos and Spanish, right? So then, it's not favorable; It's not something you want to be possibly blended into because *it's not just a culture. It's a history.*

***“My difficulties didn't matter.”***

An Indigenous student tells of difficult moments in classroom assignments associated with his background and the resistant capital they used to persevere in feeling frustration at the system. They expressed how this felt:

I have no good experiences here at [Borderlands] University. I remember during a history class, the Hispanic students were allowed to write their reports in their Native languages. When it was presented, it was presented to everyone. I was excluded because the professor meant that it was only for Spanish speakers that were having difficulty in English.

This student used their cultural capital as resistant capital by leaning on the richness and pride in their sovereign roots. They found comfort in honoring their own language, place, ceremony, and history.

Another Indigenous student shares that:

It's important to make Native American Indigenous students feel welcome, right? That's an important part. And we have tribes here that would be valuable and a program that would, I think, would be valuable for them to learn. But in the same swath, it's knowing that advances for them aren't just valuable to *them*, it's good for *everybody*. The power itself comes out of a pan-Indian identity to unite and form something conglomerating in places where you are not in your homeland, where you were pushed in with a bunch of other people.

Indigenous students must still fight and utilize resistant capital from opposers who will belittle their cultural wealth and question their cultural validity. This has caused discouragement and kept many Indigenous students from learning more and embracing their culture. Students expressed the pain they felt when questioned regarding their Indigenous bloodline or judged on “blood quantum and the whole ‘how Native are you?’ and people questioning my culture.”

Students continued to use their resistant capital to fight categorization within separate identified Indigenous groups and expressed the need to be “completely accepting of people [who] are trying to look and understand” [their Indigeneity]. And “hopefully being aware of what’s out there is of comfort, you know? So when we go to something like a powwow, it’s like an amalgam of everything nowadays. It’s not, you know, the box and the rules that people imagine sometimes these things.” Indigenous students experienced judgments based upon “blood quantum” or a measurement of the degree of ancestry and perceived authenticity of their culture. They said, “We’re on the border of two countries that have dealt very differently with their Indigenous peoples.” Then they continued, pointing out that:

It wasn’t so long ago in, like, especially Mexico’s history, where being Indigenous was dangerous. And it’s still seen as a very negative thing. So, I hear it all the time with someone being like, well, I just found out my grandmother was Yaqui. I just found out on, like, on her deathbed, she finally told me. So now they’re having this realization of being some kind of Native.

Professors shared that the location of Borderlands University is a region that faced human struggles in an Indigenous presence as compared to other places with a “large Indigenous presence on reservations.”

Whereas “the history here is a little bit different, and it’s got a particular amount of violence and *dispossession and deportations*” of Indigenous Peoples.

***“How do I learn more about my ancestry?”***

Another factor unique to Borderlands University that affects Native American and Indigenous Studies is brought up by a professor that there “is practically zero Indigenous faculty on campus that identify outwardly, publicly, professionally as Indigenous. And there’s very few students that identify as Indigenous on paperwork” submitted to the University.

Yet, the university professor shared that “there’s clearly Chicana/Chicano students that have Indigenous heritage, or their grandmother, you know, or their grandfather, and it’s very, very, very close to them.” Yet with this:

Some of those students don’t necessarily identify on the forms given by the university as Indigenous. Or some of them they don’t know.

And this has played out in every single one of my Native history classes.

*Every single one.*

Every semester I teach the class, a student comes up to me and asks the question, how do I learn more about my ancestry?

I think my grandmother, grandfather, great grandmother, great grandfather, is Rarámuri or Apache.

***“I didn’t grow up recognizing my Indigenous heritage but discovered it, and now that I have discovered it, this is something I’m very proud of. And I want to know more about it.”***—Anonymous Indigenous Student

A separate interview with a different Borderlands professor echoed how strongly students seek knowledge of their Indigenous roots. The professor shares:

So frankly, the rest of the state of Texas has kind of become empty land on Indigenous territory in a sense, but here we are in this little part of Texas, which is really a part of the New Mexico, Mexico whatever region, and we do have a strong tie to Indigenous [Peoples]. The Tigua are connected to the Tigua outside of Albuquerque, who were kind of forcibly brought here after the Pueblo Revolts. The Mescalero, for millennia, have gone back and forth throughout this land southward and northward. So, we do have a real *strong* Indigenous connection. I think it's partly a matter of Texas is just not very helpful in terms of encouraging that, but also that we have a project of recovery that we have to just recover that knowledge and that understanding and help people begin to recognize it as a *positive identity*.

We see that among a lot of students, I mean, we've seen a lot of students who come to us, and you know, said, you know, "I never — I was not; I didn't grow up recognizing my Indigenous heritage but discovered it," you know. "And now that I have discovered it, this is something I'm very proud of. And I want to know more about it."

I think probably our biggest strength in the Native American Indigenous Studies program is to encourage those kinds of students to come in because they just want to know more.

And as they know more, they get deeply involved in it.

### **Ancestral Remains**

At Borderlands University, students recognize that "you have freedom of speech, but then also sometimes they don't want you doing too much, you know, and so there was just ebbs and flows, and I think it's only been recently with the things we're doing with the human remains that then really kind of pushed on buttons that they weren't used to being pushed."

Students, staff, and faculty recognize that administrators must work under the state system. Yet, it's necessary to stay awake and intercede if necessary. Most students were unaware of ancestral remains stored in several locations on campus that they passed by daily on their way to class or to study. Not surprisingly, students felt they were kept in the dark because Borderlands University "didn't want to talk about it publicly." According to an Indigenous student, acknowledging the remains and letting the community know how BU would handle this issue would be a "smarter choice" and more transparent behavior.

The student shares that instead, "It took us fussing. It took us fighting for them to do something, and again, that might just tie with a larger state thing, which is what I think a lot of people were discussing that they were scared or worried or concerned because the Texas State is being cautious about how they talk about this." Next, I will introduce the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) issue at BU.

## **NAGPRA**

The human rights issue of ancestral remains in museums and college campuses is a severe federal matter. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) dictates that human remains must be appropriately repatriated or returned to "lineal descendants, and to Indian tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, and Native Hawaiian organizations" (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2024).

The federal government dictates that any "institution of higher learning, archaeological institution or any institution" receiving federal funding must abide by this federal law (U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 2024). A BU professor said this federal repatriation act "is not optional and important. It covers human remains and items of cultural patrimony, especially sacred items and funerary items." While writing this research, I attended a panel regarding NAGPRA on

November 16, 2023, at Borderlands University, where students, staff, faculty, members of the Indigenous community, and advisors from other universities met to discuss the issue of human remains and other sacred items.

During the panel, the repatriation process was described as “long and complicated.” A professor explained that one way human remains ended up at colleges and universities such as BU was the result of many university faculty members who worked on “archaeological work, excavations, and anthropological digs primarily in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the 20<sup>th</sup> century on public lands. These public lands, however, used to be Indigenous lands.” They stated:

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, predominantly across the west and earlier, east of the Mississippi River, the federal government relocated deported Indigenous Peoples from their homelands. That land then generally fell under the jurisdiction of the Department of Interior, which was established in 1849. And so, we have Indigenous lands. Native People moved off of them violently, and then the federal government under the National Park Service, National Forest Service, the General Land Office, the Bureau of Land Management, and other entities took over control of that land. And so, researchers then were able to do archaeological digs on those public lands. They did these digs, and they brought the human remains into the institutions and museums and universities and used them as research.

Some students said that they recalled seeing Indigenous bones displayed in the campus museum in the 80s and 90s. A student shared that during the 90s, a Native American student group was “pushing for it [repatriation of remains] to be done, and something happened, and they were no longer a student organization, you know, and the student organization ceased to exist.” Students

do not know the exact reason and speculate that they “pushed too hard,” which may have been the reason for the university to shut the organization down.

The Indigenous student shared that students, community members, faculty, and museum staff now work together to rectify the unacceptable past and comply with NAGPRA. The student added that before the mandate:

Everyone learned an easy way around it. In the steps of NAGPRA, you take the inventory, you send out the e-mail, or you send out the letter, and you’re done. You’ve done your part. Boom, right? And you never try again. That’s where a lot of people stopped.

Like, you never try again. It’s on record. It’s *their* fault for not answering the letter, right?

It’s not on us. We’ve done our part. I don’t know how people were actually using these things for research, you know. It would be an interesting thing, but it’s like things have changed. Things have shifted.

### **NAGPRA Regulations**

Since the 1990s, NAGPRA regulations implemented rules for regulation revision, which, according to Secretary Deb Haaland, includes a “safe return of sacred objects to the communities from which they were stolen. Finalizing these changes is an important part of laying the groundwork for the healing of our people.” (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023, p. 2).

NAGPRA 2024 final rules include the following requirements:

- Strengthening the authority and role of Tribes and Native Hawaiian Organizations (NHOs) in repatriation by requiring deference to the Indigenous Knowledge of lineal descendants, Tribes, and NHOs.



- Requiring museums and federal agencies to obtain free, prior, and informed consent from lineal descendants, Tribes, or NHOs before allowing any exhibition of, access to, or research on human remains or cultural items.
- Eliminating the category of culturally unidentifiable human remains and resetting the requirements for cultural affiliation to better align the regulations with congressional intent. Increase transparency and reporting of holdings or collections and shed light on collections currently unreported under the existing regulation.
- Museums and federal agencies must consult and update inventories of human remains and associated funerary objects within five years of this final rule (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023, p. 7).

Indigenous students at Borderlands University said that the process of complying with NAGPRA and the repatriation of the remains would be complicated and would include the following:

To comply is to redo the inventory and re-reach out. All these steps, and we've already discussed, it's going to be a lot of money, right?

So, if they [administration] could get away with not doing it, then why not *not* do it, right?

But then it took [new director], and I think it was good to hear [new director] starting to look at what they had and be like, "Okay, what do we do about this?"

Indigenous students were instrumental in bringing the NAGPRA issue to the forefront. They led their efforts across various disciplines and within the Indigenous student group to engage with campus stakeholders and advocate for properly handling ancestral remains. Students described the following challenges they encountered in getting the institution to take meaningful and timely action:

Because we were asking about it and talking to everyone, it turned into, like, well, what does [department] have? And then, [department] had to go look at their records. So, we were *all* trying to figure things out. And then it came to trying to talk to the provost, and that's when, all of a sudden, the communication got cut. All of a sudden, we couldn't talk to other people. People were having trouble talking to us. We were uninformed about how things were going even though they said we were going to be told.

Students commented that matters were complicated because some employees were in danger of losing "their job if they talk about things they shouldn't." They commented that they "heard people say that in general, like the lawyers, it's gotta go through the lawyers, lawyers, I don't know who these lawyers are. It's always just the lawyers we have to run this by." Consequently, Indigenous students organized with non-Indigenous students to mobilize and prioritize institutional action. An Indigenous student shared, "Because we're students and [have] freedom of speech that we're allowed, we could push it differently than they [staff and faculty] could. We could do stuff. We could fight."

According to a professor, "Administrations tend to see things like this as a threat, as a danger." Administrations tend to keep as much information as possible inaccessible to protect themselves and:

When they see something as a danger, they either just kind of begin to block it, and they put it in front of the lawyers and stuff like that. Or they just hope that they can wait long enough that it will go away. But it's clear that this is not going to go away. [Student organization] has done, I think, a very important job of keeping people aware that this is an issue and that something needs to be done. And it appears that the administration is slowly moving.

Students experienced the suppression of the human remains issue, yet they persisted and continued raising awareness about it. While progress from the administration was slow, they began to address the matter.

### **The First Domino**

I had the opportunity to attend a meeting at BU with consultants from a more experienced university who have been working on their NAGPRA project since 2015. During this meeting, they offered guidance and explained how their university handled the extensive collection of human remains with positive results. The experts shared their experiences in gaining the full support of their provost and administration. They “created new partnerships, established new lines of communication, and developed fruitful relationships. Ancestral remains and funerary objects were returned to the appropriate tribal communities.” As a result, their guidance served as a “series of dominoes” that opened communication lines to get Borderlands University administration to provide necessary funding and mobilize leadership. One of the professors commented, “The first domino that you have to build is actually a complete inventory of what you have, where it comes from, and who the possible connections might be with respect to different tribes, pueblos, and so on.”

The professor added that “they’re at that stage now. They’re putting together the resources” and “moving the thing ahead so there’s different irons in the fire, but I think we’re finally at a point where it’s actually going to happen. They’re going to get it done.” BU was referred to as being at an advantage compared to other universities that have “tons of remains” to address. The professor added that Borderlands also enjoys “autonomy, that we can put the pressure on and make sure that it happens here.” Unlike other universities whose “administration and so on have, we’re told, been pretty resistant to helping to move the process along.”

Professors recognized the significant number of human remains to address; however, they mentioned the advantage at BU was that everyone worked together to organize toward the same goal.

### **“Not Simply Done & Dusted.”**

Nevertheless, the repatriation process will not be simply “done and dusted” due to the “various stages” of individual remains and plentiful ambiguity surrounding the issue, according to Borderlands professors. There may be disputes regarding whether the remains are in federal or state jurisdiction. Consequently, if the remains “are from Chaco Canyon, for example, that’s a national monument” or:

Disputes between the Navajo and the So, there’s going to be some difficult issues. It’s not like something that is done and dusted. There will be a number of remains that will be repatriated to wherever they go, returned. There will be others that this may go on for quite a period of time. Others that some of the tribes may say, well, we don’t have the capacity, or we’re not interested, and we don’t want to deal with this. So, they’re in your keeping in your possession. And the [museum] then will have to do something to deal with the remaining remains, in a sense—pueblos, Laguna, and so on about things at Chaco.

Chaco Canyon National Park offers a miniscule snapshot of the advanced and astronomically precise Puebloan culture unearthed by archeologists who calculated and pinpointed dates before 850 and 1250 CE (National Park Service.gov). The sacred ceremonial Chaco Canyon tells the beauty of a complex and flourishing community with Chacoan-planned architecture “oriented to solar, lunar, and cardinal directions,” allowing communication between the “great houses” (National Park Service.gov, 2024, p. 6). Researchers cannot fathom the color, sounds, food and

ceremony, sacred traditions, and sacred knowledge at the Pueblo peoples' sacred Chaco Canyon at their most vibrant and pinnacle times.

Furthermore, clashing views regarding spiritual beliefs may lead to delicate situations in which the “descendants are not in agreement about what to do [regarding] the dead and is very different from traditional Indigenous positions. And those can create issues within tribes within families.”

Human remains on college campuses are a delicately sensitive matter to many Indigenous students and community members. One Indigenous student shared that there exist “strict taboo rules about being around the dead. We’re not supposed to be.” The fact that colleges should be conscious of cultural views is evident as Indigenous students expressed how the presence of Indigenous remains affects them. Students were appalled that ancestral remains were on campus and that this information was on a need-to-know basis. Indeed, most students were unaware of this issue. An Indigenous student affirmed that:

I had hung out at that [building X] for various things.  
I went to the [building X] party.  
I liked the [building X],  
but that knowledge completely shifted my relationship with that building.  
It shifted my relationship with [building Y].  
How I felt about [xyz department]; And it made me question a lot of things.  
It made me think about all the people I’d known at Borderlands for all these years and how no one told.

*No one.*

I found out people did know.

People I trusted knew, and no one thought of telling me.

Maybe some of them were in the mindset that nothing’s going to happen:

‘[Borderlands] is never going to do anything, you know about this.  
There’s no way to fix this wrong because [Borderlands] is never going to put the money in.  
[Borderlands] is never going to acknowledge it.  
[Borderlands] is never going to do these things, right.’

And again, these are busy academics.

You got all these other things in your life, you know, so you wouldn't think about it.  
You just go about your day doing your stuff, right?!

But suddenly, there was a group of students being like,  
No!  
We don't like this!  
And it sucked to have to do that.  
You know, it would have been nice if:  
we heard that news,  
we said we were upset,  
and then [Borderlands] was like,

'You're right. Let's do this thing.'

But we had to be self-advocates.  
We had to make it be seen and shown that,  
No!  
This isn't just about a few Native students who care.  
This is about the university.  
These are not only us right now but future Native students feeling comfortable in our school.  
Being able to look you in the eye and be like:  
    'No, we're *Friends* with you.  
    It's like, "*Are you?*"!  
    If you're not dealing with the remains that you have in your life, in your, your  
    [building X].  
    If you're not being fair.'

It goes *beyond* just like the *wants* and *needs* or *comfort* of a handful of people.  
It's making a much more *honest* response to the community or reaching out to the community.  
I didn't know how it would go.  
But I knew this was what we *had* to do.  
There was *no other option*.

Students added that the issue of ancestral remains on campus:

Became an identifiable gathering of students that showed it was something they wanted because there were teachers who always cared, and there's been Native students coming to [Borderlands] *always*.  
But the difference was now, here's something everyone can point to.  
Here's a student group that wants this.  
Here's a handful of students who want this.  
Here's a mix of students, not just Native, that see value in knowing and learning about Indigenous issues, right?  
In being able to then *be the example*.

A Borderlands professor acknowledged that appropriately handling human remains at The [museum], “the important thing is that the current people who are in it are thinking about this in a very progressive way. And I think they want to do the right thing.” The professor shares:

I mean, I really pushed when I got here. I had talked to various people, and I was aware that there were remains here. And I went to various people around the university, and I said, ‘Look, there are remains. Where are they?’

And, frankly, there was a fair bit of denial about it. But I wanted to make it clear that:

(a) If we have these things, there is a law, and we have to do this. But (b) this can be a positive process. This is something that we can do that can really move us forward.

And so, I had some meetings with them [museum] and basically was trying to press them that we have to do this.

‘So, what have we got? Let’s start from the very beginning.’

And it turns out that they [museum] had already done a great deal of work back when the Native American Graves Protection Act was done in the early 1990s. They had done a lot of the inventory of human remains. And then they also have funerary objects and things like that. Some of the Mimbres pottery that they have are clearly funerary objects which need to be dealt with. So, they’ve been very good about that.

The professor continues:

The [museum] has done a great deal of work. Then there’s the [z] collection. They have a lot of remains. And they were just collecting mostly flora, I think, but along with their collections of flora and so on, they wound up having a lot of remains. Some of them, I think it’s unclear whether they’re human remains or animal remains. You know, they’re

bones. So, there is a process of sorting out animal bones from human remains and all that kind of thing, finding out where they came from. Some would be subject to NAGPRA, and some will not be subject to NAGPRA.

Properly and respectfully caring for the ancestral remains places the caretakers in a “difficult and complex” task that, as described, is a lengthy and gradual process. Hence, some remains will take longer or cannot be repatriated. Thus, according to a Borderlands University professor, the issue is that the university is responsible for aptly housing the remains. For the time being, buildings housing remains are:

Now putting together a sign to go outside of the [museum], which, when someone is about to enter, they will know that there are human remains. And for some people, not many, but you know, there will be people who will not want to enter a building or cannot enter a building that has those remains in it. It’s important to be very open about where they are.

Properly handling human remains is not something that can “be done and be over,” which is especially the case for remains that cannot be repatriated. As a professor explained that it would be necessary to find an acceptable other place where they can be kept, respectfully kept, in conditions that are acceptable to the various parties that may have an interest in them.” The scope of time to accomplish this task may range from “fifteen, twenty years down the line. A tribe that had one point of view toward this may change. In particular, younger generations in some of the tribes are much more progressive and much more interested in their cultural heritage.” A professor explained that “their parents who are now in charge of the tribal government may not have an interest,” which could change over time.



Another professor closely researching and following NAGPRA regulations shared that the university must address the repatriation issue, not only because federal law supersedes state law but also due to “substantial penalties associated with non-compliance. Universities cannot choose to ignore NAGPRA.” Thus, NAGPRA is an issue that the university must heed. As previously mentioned, the Indigenous student organization raised their voices regarding human remains on campus and received support from students, the college, and the Indigenous community. The professor added that NAGPRA “is one of the issues separate from the state of Texas, its anti-DEI legislation. This is a federal law. This is compliance. And if you don’t comply, you are punished.”

***“They are now doing the right thing.”***

In response to student concerns and the severity of the issues, “the provost office has changed its tune and has been improving its response to NAGPRA, and they are headed in the right direction,” according to a professor who was “concerned because the university seemed to be hiding behind some legal issues and talking with the UT-system lawyers. In the past four to six months, I’ve been impressed with [Borderlands] response.”

The professor added that BU is:

Headed in the right direction, and so I have to give them some credit for that. The provost and president have to do these things because it’s law. But I’m also impressed with their support for bringing in the consultants and contemplating putting money towards hiring additional assistance. Their approach has changed, and I think that they are now doing the right thing.

***“Doing your due diligence: That you care about what they think and feel, and that you’re listening to them.”***

The professor concluded that complying with NAGPRA is exceptionally complicated and not simply a question of “find human remains and give them back to the tribe.” Much more is involved, and “you’ve got to do protocultural protocols and reaching out to tribal groups. You have to have face-to-face meetings with them. You need to go to the communities, talk with them, introduce yourselves.” The complexity includes respecting tribal beliefs and cultural behavior. Thus, NAGPRA is “not simply about following federal law. It’s about recognizing Indigenous sovereignty about Indigenous cultural protocols, building relationships with community members, and showing Native communities that you are doing your due diligence. That you care about what they think and feel, and that you’re *listening* to them.”

The issue of ancestral remains started when “Native students went to their anthropology, archaeology departments, and their museums and started asking about ancestral remains.” As a result of students asking questions is “where this stuff gets started. It gets started with students and Tribal members.” Thus, Native students began inquiring about ancestral remains within their anthropology, archaeology departments, and museums. It was the initiative of students and Tribal members asking questions that initiated the process of advocating for the respectful treatment of ancestral remains.

### **Senate Bill 17**

Senate Bill 17 took effect on January 1, 2024. The ruling requires all Texas colleges and universities receiving state funding to dismantle any existing diversity, equity, and inclusion offices (Dey, 2023). Senate Bill 17 further complicates the educational sphere, ranging from hiring employees to attracting students. Supporters of SB 17 singled out DEI offices as indoctrination beacons (Dey, 2023), which contributes to an Indigenous heritage invisibility façade. As an Indigenous student stated, “Many universities are guilty of this. They exclude

Indigenous people. No one ever says or does anything really for Indigenous people. So, it leaves us out. I guess it's like oh well, they don't exist."

Interview data coincides with a student who perceives that Senate Bill 17 will create an even more pronounced invisibility vibe regarding how students choose to identify or are ever aware of their Indigenous identity. A professor contributed that due to SB 17, "[Borderlands University] doesn't really see these [Indigenous] students and so, with the lack of the diversity, equity inclusion offices on campus, the University has lost its official ability to you know, kind of look into these things and promote them as diversity, equity inclusion. Kind of publicly."

Thus, faculty and staff at Ocotillo Community College expressed concern as to whether they could put up library displays for Indigenous Heritage Month. Nonetheless, critics point to issues as commented by an educator at Ocotillo Community College, where many Borderlands University students begin their academic journey. An OCC student strongly commented:

If I can't celebrate me being Mexican and Black, then I'm getting treated differently. And I don't want to come to a school where I am being discriminated against and treated like the black sheep.

***"Not be forgotten."***

Due to SB 17, educators say they face additional challenges in their book collections because of the censorship of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Moreover, Ocotillo Community College had to close its DEI doors and miss out on Native American and Indigenous People's events and celebrations. An Indigenous Borderlands University student shared:

What really sets us apart is our responsibility to our communities. Knowing that, they are at risk of losing their culture, whereas us, on the other hand, we're just a few thousand now. I want to say we're maybe about five to 6,000 people now. That wasn't the case just

a few generations back. And then culturally speaking, where a lot has been lost, and we're trying to recover a lot of it, bring a lot of it back.

The student added that if Indigenous culture could be celebrated at the University level, "I do think my college experience probably would have been nicer there or more enjoyable. But I mean, I'm going to school for an education, not to socialize. But yeah, I do think including Indigenous people in topics and conversations is important. But you never see anything, really, on the same level for Indigenous people. Indigenous Peoples Day. I didn't see anything about that."

The student added:

I mean including [Indigenous issues] in the conversation more. When you hear when people are graduating and they talk, it's like, yeah, you know this community or this community. And then I find that Indigenous people are always left out. To me, growing up, constantly having to deal with that. It doesn't bug me anymore. People forget that there's Indigenous students in the area, or communities in the area.

People ask where I'm from, and I'll tell them what tribe, and they're 'never heard of them.' Yeah, I'm like in the same city. So, I think that would be helpful. Being mentioned more. Not be forgotten, I guess.

***'What we're creating here is a different kind of university.'***

Senate Bill 17 creates barriers that make teaching and attending school more challenging.

A professor stated that, "this has been difficult for me." They continued that:

If we're trying to bring in students or we're representing the college mission, that I would say to people, "what we're creating here is a different kind of university than other universities. And you know, our values are different. They're oriented towards

community values and so on and so forth.” But frankly, in the last four years, the administration has changed so that there is resistance to a lot of progressive ideas. And it’s become harder for me to actually say to an incoming student or a new faculty member, “You want to come here because this is a place where we’re a new kind of university, and you can do things that you wouldn’t be able to do in the University of Nebraska,” or whatever. It’s harder to say that now, frankly.

During this study, I witnessed teaching from a heavily unilateral perspective at a different institution, which I predict will only become more burdensome due to SB 17. When I described this to a Borderlands University professor, they implicated:

That’s our responsibility. To continue to teach them various alternatives to give them an understanding. For example, to teach North American history, but world history as well from an anti-colonial perspective so that they understand what the true meaning of and the impacts of colonialism were and are. And if we don’t do that, we’re not doing our job. So, we will continue to do that and therefore, for students who are coming in and who really need that background and those understandings, they’re going to continue to get them. Even at the worst university, they’re going to get them. There’s no way that this can be stopped. We’ll keep teaching that stuff.

Nevertheless, the professor concluded that “we have some issues [at Borderlands University], but think we’ve done a good job here, though, of dealing with that in terms of trying to provide a good and meaningful education to what is essentially an underserved population.”

Regarding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Senate Bill 17 (SB 17), Borderlands University professors commented that it would affect smaller colleges, such as Ocotillo Community College (OCC), more. Many OCC students continue their studies at Borderlands. A

Borderlands professor explained that because (SB 17) has made it much more challenging to address DEI:

Universities are approaching them differently and kind of quietly and stuff like that. But if you can't publicly promote and investigate and pursue DEI work, no matter how well you do it secretly, it's gonna hurt your efforts. And so, the last thing about curriculum and teaching here on campus, I don't believe that the DEI laws are going to institutionally impact faculty curriculum. And I don't think that the institution is going to police or monitor faculty curriculum.

The issue at [Ocotillo Community College] is partially one of dual enrollment. And if you've got high school kids taking dual enrollment or dual credit courses, that's the big, big problem. Because they're high school students, and that's the challenge for many people at [OCC]. Now, if you're a tenure track or tenured faculty [at OCC] and all of your students are college students that have graduated from high school, then I think you're a little bit safer, but the community colleges as institutions are in a more precarious position vis-à-vis the anti-DEI legislation, than [Borderlands], being a Research-1 university. That's the second or third largest employer in the county, and that generates tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars in research. Borderlands is protected.

Indigenous students commented that SB 17 would make it difficult as well as tie professors' hands yet, "so many teachers are borderline advocates, activists that are like, no, I want to teach what I want to teach, and they're going to make it hard."

Indigenous students gave examples already visible before SB 17, "like you can't do this, you can't do that. The tightening and rules and regulations about inviting guests makes things difficult."

A BU Indigenous student commented that before SB 17, “If it’s for academic purposes, you’re allowed to and all that jazz. I wanted it written down because I could see the importance of that. I knew that we can have our rules and regulations as a campus, but what does that do when it comes to conflict with our freedom of speech, freedom of religion, things like that, right.”

The student added that, “the advantage of having weak whole cheese writing as a document, because then you can use it wherever you want, however you want.”

Additionally, the student stated, “I think various things are going on, and people are trying to figure out ways to deal with what they know is happening with Texas and its push against diversity. All of this is reacting and trying to figure out how to eat your cake and eat it, too. But no, not really. You’re just trying to make it work for you so you can keep your job. And is that really a benefit to what universities represent, which are these kinds of places of higher education and sometimes breaking past those regulations?”

With Borderlands University located amidst a ban on diversity, equity, and inclusion officially implemented on January 1, 2024, a professor shared that:

This is part of the problem with all of these kinds of things is the symbolic thing. Oh, we have them, but there’s the real thing, which is actually having a program that makes it *mean* something. And at the moment, the university doesn’t really have a commitment of that kind. And SB 17, for example is something that gets in the way of that because you cannot explicitly create programs or policies or missions that lead toward turning things into something real, so diversity. Trying to make diversity real is something that is now illegal.

***“We don’t say the words D.E. and I.”***

Ocotillo College had to shut its doors and dismantle its Diversity Office, which hosted many local celebrations and provided opportunities for learning and building community trust. Not only are regional students’ few opportunities to attend college impacted, but SB17’s sticky, slithery tentacles also affect the hiring process. A BU professor related:

I mean our hiring process; we just went to a meeting the other day. We always have a meeting with equal opportunities with EO. Which means less and less and less. Basically, they’ve had to take certain parts/stages out of the hiring process because they are illegal under the terms of SB17. Without explicitly saying it. We don’t say the words D.E. and I.

Educators from Ocotillo College had similar SB17 setbacks and said they could no longer request leaves, formerly called ‘sabbaticals,’ to work on academic projects. The BU professor commented:

You know, for a so-called libertarian state, Texas has outlawed so many things. Like, people can’t go on “sabbatical.” You can’t mention the word “sabbatical” in this state. You know, it’s crazy, but we find ways around it. We just fight so we have professional development leave instead of “sabbatical.”

***“I see it as the swan song of racism.”***

Many educators at Ocotillo Community College and Borderlands University are experiencing the tightening grip of SB17 and question if the educational atmosphere will worsen. Yet, an important question is whether Texas will risk losing its top ten university ranking due to implications resulting from its creation and enforcement of SB 17. A Borderlands University professor shared:



I think in the so-called culture wars that we're in, the powers that be are worried about their short-term political gain, and they see a lot of gain to be had by pushing these kinds of things. It's the same in Florida and a number of other states. It's kind of I see it as the swan song of racism, essentially. I think in another five or ten years, this will pass, and we'll be to a new stage when there will be a real recognition of diversity, equality, and inclusion and the importance of African American history and, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. I don't think that this is going to be a lasting thing, partly because the demographics are totally against it. But they just see a political advantage in this, and it's kind of an instrumental thing on their part. The sad thing, or I guess the question or the challenge, is that the Texas University system and particularly UT–Austin, I mean, is one of the top ten universities in the country, and will this, in a sense, *backfire* on the administrators of the state of Texas? Do they want to ruin the Texas University system, which they have great pride in? The University of Texas? I don't think they do. I don't think they really want to do that.

### **Land Acknowledgement Statement**

Reading it over and over again.  
We just stood there and said:  
We've got this thing.  
We just want someone to sign it.  
We've got this thing.  
We just want someone to sign it.  
So we read it over and over again.  
And then, by the end,  
it was signed.

—BU student

Within the last few years, the focus for Indigenous students at BU shifted toward bringing attention to crucial Indigenous-related issues, which began with the Land Acknowledgement Statement. Even though there is a lack of Indigenous faculty and advisors at Borderlands

University, non-Native yet supportive professors have helped accomplish such essentials as a Land Acknowledgement Statement.

### **Going Beyond a Statement**

Borderlands University worked with the Indigenous community to write the Land Acknowledgement Statement. A BU professor said they had “been working with different community members years before creating the statement. We’ve been working with Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, working a little bit with Mescalero, and then non-federally recognized community members in the area. But then also Native folks that were from other states that had moved to the [Borderlands area].”

It is worth noting that proper measures were taken before creating the statement. A professor closely involved in the process said, “We created an Indigenous community advisory group that had about twelve people on it, maybe ten. And we met several times before” creating the land acknowledgement statement. The professor added that “they looked at the statement; they made some comments on it. But then they liked that *we were going beyond a statement* because that’s sort of the history of these statements.” The professor explained that it is located in “very heavily Indigenous regions” and added:

The Mescalero are very close to [Borderlands]; as you know, Ysleta del Sur and Raramuri are close to us. So, to me, it was also very important that those were part of the community and that we had to recognize and introduce that community, the Indigenous community, into what we did as a college.

The professor continued describing the vision set by other universities that recognize and honor the Indigenous peoples who lived on the land and surrounding areas. These institutions have:

Really gone to great lengths not only to recognize the owners of the land on which the campus is located but also to bring them in with various kinds of projects. Some of them which are quite radical in terms of their understanding and representation of colonialism and the violence that was done to the Indians by the English colonialists, so you know, that was an experience I'd had, and I thought it was important that we redo that and at the same time, you know, there were people here in the university that had been wanting to do these kinds of things for a long time.

The professor recounted the challenges and ambiance when approaching administration for approval of the Land Acknowledgement Statement:

We would go to the dean or to the provost or whatever, and there just was no interest. The administration wasn't interested at all, so we didn't feel like we could really press these things. And I just said to them, well, you know, we just have to do it. You know, let's do it. So then it was just like pushing on an open door. So, introducing the Land Acknowledgement Statement was just something that we did as a college kind of immediately. I mean, we wrote it up, we discussed it, we had discussions with the Indian Student Group, and so on about content of the statement to make sure that, you know, it was what we wanted it to be.

So, it was introduced to the college, and you know, we just immediately passed it. It was something that I don't think there was any opposition whatsoever to it in liberal arts. And after that, the issue was to get it taken to higher levels so that it would be passed, you know, by the administration as a whole and become [Borderlands] policy. We were a little bit worried about that because of the, well, frankly, the right-wing administration which has come here after [Borderlands administrator].

During this study, Borderlands University experienced a leadership shift that shook its foundation. The previous president served for thirty-one years, the sixth-longest tenure in public academic history. Even so, a Borderlands professor stated that the new administration was not “unsympathetic toward Indigenous people,” which helped in getting approval further up the chain of power. As a result, “we didn’t really have any issue” in approving the land acknowledgement statement. The professor described that gaining approval was slow:

Administrations can just be slow, so it took a little while, but eventually, you know, they did adopt that as official [Borderlands] policy. So, you know, the land acknowledgement is officially [Borderlands] policy. It’s one thing to have it announced, and frankly, it only; the land acknowledgement is only done by people who care to do it. And you know, we would do it regularly at any of our college meetings and so on and made sure that it became a part, a regular part, of what we did, but at other levels, I mean, it’s very rare that you would go to a meeting elsewhere in the university where it would even be said. Even though the land acknowledgement statement became an official yet academic document and available as an option, the college professor closely involved described that:

Now, the other thing that I did is had a number of plaques made that we put around the university in different places that had the land acknowledgement statement on it so that when people go to different departments or [Museum] or places like that, or the [Borderlands] Center that they would actually see the land acknowledgement statement and that would sort of bring it to life, bring it to light.

Thus, using the land acknowledgement statement is an action statement that references the history of events that recognize the struggles on the land. Those who choose to bring

the statement to life by using it communicate to students and others respect and acknowledgement.

Students, professors, and the Indigenous community worked collaboratively to write a land acknowledgement statement that is “respectful, and it is an acknowledgement,” and honors the aspect of place or space in the Peoplehood Matrix. Students and professors worked diligently to apply the linguistic capital students bring so it would be as accurate as possible. A professor closely associated with the process mentioned that “the only real intervention I think that I made was to introduce the word ‘*unceded*’ to the statement, which makes it very clear, that these lands *were not*, you know, somehow presented to the white people as a gift, you know, that they *still belong* to the Indigenous people.” During the drafting, the concern was to ensure that the statement served as a platform to build students’ cultural capital with the upcoming NAIS minor. The concerns brought up by BU professors included “Access, for example, is one of the things” and making it accessible. The end goal was to “make our curriculum Indigenous-friendly.”

Students shared the sentiment in making the statement one that would serve as a message of welcoming acknowledgment to future students and, above all, to feel comfortable. An Indigenous student shared, “it’s not only us right now but future Native students feeling comfortable in our school.” The professors concurred, and they asked, “First of all, how do we make our curriculum Indigenous-friendly and open to Indigenous issues? And then secondly, how do we make the university open to Indigenous people so that it not just that, you know, we’ll let them in if they come to us, but how do we do the outreach so that we can make sure that you know young people or old people, for that matter, know that we’re here and what they can get out of coming to [Borderlands].”

During the data collection, students expressed their desire for more Indigenous students, staff, and faculty, which would help support them in their social capital which would create “a sense that there’s some reason that they might want to come to [Borderlands] or they might want to come to university in general. You know, because frankly, the educational institutions of the United States and North America generally has not been very kind to Indigenous people,” noted a BU professor. Students’ aspirational capital in having the fulfillment of achieving their academic goals is “important that we’re involved in a process of turning that around so that we are *actively engaged* in making the university useful and open and *inviting and welcoming* to Indigenous people,” was described by a BU professor who worked closely with the statement.

A second professor who also worked closely with Indigenous students regarding the statement provided additional data and agreed “that we wanted it to be more than a statement, and so in the original documentation that we gave the university, we included a list of goals and statements.” The faculty met with college administrators and faculty senate members via Zoom to discuss ongoing efforts to create a Land Acknowledgement Statement during the COVID-19 pandemic on October 13, 2020.

An Indigenous student observed that “supporters were a lot of teachers. We had a lot of luck with people who were waiting to have academics have a Native representation. You know, there’s so many teachers that really wanted to see it and saw the value in it. So, we had a lot of support early on in that.” As a result, the Borderlands University Land Acknowledgement Statement is an academic document that waited underground unnoticed while it ripened to fruition. Most of the work occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when students, professors, and the Indigenous community collaborated and voted to “get this passed via ZOOM.”

Another Indigenous student says their positive experiences resulted from “my professors being very supportive of Native American issues.” The student noticed their professor had “developed an Indigenous Land Acknowledgement that she puts on her syllabuses.” Thus, students saw the development of the statement and how it could bring additional social capital opportunities to add to their cultural capital.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Concluding Thoughts**

This study originated as a growing seed of concern when I questioned the absence of Indigenous students, faculty, and staff in colleges and universities, which rendered their experiences unaccounted for and invisible. Inspired by Roe and Elizabeth Cloud, who dedicated over two decades to reforming federal Indian policy and challenged the “mythology of the Indigenous disappearance” (Blackhawk, 2023, p. 395), I challenged Indigenous invisibility and exclusion within academia. Historically, educational institutions have been the opposite of supportive learning environments to progress cultural enrichment (Adams, 2023). The issue becomes more severe because Borderlands University is in a state that creates Senate bills that criminalize diversity, equity, and inclusion. As an educator, I was troubled to discover that out of 100 Indigenous 9<sup>th</sup> graders, just forty-eight will graduate high school. Of these, twenty will get to go to college or university, and only one will graduate with a college degree (Wood, 2020). In addition to representing the lowest group to graduate, it also takes Native and Indigenous students 39% longer to graduate (Minthorn, 2020). As the students’ experiences in this study revealed, institutions must be willing to listen and be attentive to the value Indigenous students bring.

I witnessed historical events during this qualitative study, such as the county resolution to celebrate Indigenous Peoples’ Day every second Monday in October. The academic and Indigenous community members shared their lived experiences regarding issues surrounding Native American and Indigenous Studies at Borderlands University and its feeder school, Ocotillo Community College.

This concluding chapter includes a brief historical background, a discussion of four themes that emerged during the qualitative study, and how they tie to Tara Yosso’s Community



Cultural Wealth Model (2005) and Tachine's Peoplehood Matrix (2017). The themes are: (a) the importance of Native American and Indigenous Studies in academic institutions, (b) challenges students and Native American and Indigenous Studies encountered, (c) NAGPRA, and (d) Senate Bill 17.

My selection of a phenomenological lens sharply focused on the lived experiences and the cultural richness students bring as opposed to the traditional Deficit Thinking Model (Valencia, 1997), which is historically common to educational institutions. This chapter includes implications for practice, recommendations for future study, limitations, and delimitations. The research question that guided this study is:

**(RQ)** What are Indigenous students' experiences at Borderlands University?

These inquiries form the basis of two integrated frameworks within this study:

[Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005) + The Peoplehood Matrix Model (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017)].

Students in the surrounding regions from BU come from resilient people whose ancestors resided and traversed the lands for twenty-three thousand years prior to the seventeenth century when settlers arrived on the Eastern seaboard and made contact with Indigenous Peoples (Adams, 2020; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023; Larson, 2023). Walking alongside hundreds of students walking to their classes amongst the southwest desert ocotillo or waterfall sculpture backdrop at BU, it's hard not to realize the countless students with Indigenous roots hidden deeply within them. They may not belong to a federally recognized tribe, or they may, and are most likely, not counted in the statistics as an Indigenous graduate. Yet, the subtle truth revealed in the data confirms that the student sitting in the lecture hall or the college employee or professor who has taught for years may have Indigenous roots. Indigenous students are similarly resilient as desert

flowers learn to survive and thrive in harsh environments. Next, I will highlight the findings of this study.

## **Discussion**

An interpretation of the findings is arranged in the following themes: (a) the importance of Native American and Indigenous Studies in academic institutions, (b) challenges encountered by students and Native American and Indigenous Studies, (c) NAGPRA, and (d) Senate Bill 17.

### **The Importance of Native American and Indigenous Studies in Academic Institutions**

A significant component most educational institutions often forget is the cultural richness students bring, as Dr. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model supports (2005). Thus, Indigenous students bring forth a wealth of first-hand knowledge that only those with specific lived experiences are "able to project in a very different manner, differently than other grad students might have known." These lived experiences and personal knowledge tie into "current issues, language, culture, and traditions," which professors lean on. Thus, the cultural knowledge students bring allows others to learn about their own and others' Indigenous roots.

Thus, sovereign Indigenous knowledges are not only the right of Indigenous students and not problems to erase, but valuable wealth and "resources that can educate and enrich all students, as well as society by framing ideas as gift-giving logic" (Jacob et al., 2018, p. 160).

Further, students described that their knowledge of sacred history, language, ceremony, and place builds bridges to the Indigenous community. Contrarily, cultural insensitivity or unfamiliarity creates discord inside the classroom and breaks years of trust with the Indigenous community when engaging in perhaps nonintentional yet equally damaging behaviors. To illustrate, an Indigenous student described the popular Homecoming events at BU, including dressing up in a Wild West theme. Because an Indigenous voice was present, it provided critical

cultural awareness. As described by an Indigenous BU student, one can only ponder what could have happened: “Maybe everyone would’ve been cowboys, you know, who’s to say? But it changed. Those little subtle things meant a lot.” The present voice of an Indigenous student proved invaluable to the institution.

Indigenous studies and student input provide opportunities for all students to learn more about their roots and heritage and add self-value and self-worth, especially for students struggling and needing the comfort of identity discovery (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Dr. Tachine’s Peoplehood Matrix (2017) is a holistic intertwining of language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land knowledge that brings mental and spiritual health and well-being.

In addition to the knowledge Indigenous students bring, their voices provide a “platform to perform” other positive things around the different colleges at BU. Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Theory (2005) applies in that Indigenous students bring value and knowledge to their cultural integrity. As an Indigenous student shared, “This is who I am. This is what I do. But most importantly, this is what I do for my people.”

A Native student added that the knowledge they bring is their “customs and history passed through story, dance, chant, and tattoo.” This student asserts their ability for academic excellence, which “gave me a hyper-vigilant and attentive mentality for school. In essence, it made me disciplined more for purposes of honor.” Thus, Indigenous students bring linguistic and cultural capital, which other students become enriched from this knowledge. Hence, Indigenous students bring their social, aspirational, and navigational capital, which empowers them to maneuver to success when they find themselves in unsupportive educational environments (Yosso, 2005).

Similar to previous studies, this study revealed that having Indigenous voices on campus opens the possibility of accomplishing the unexpected and speaking out regarding practices that can change the course of an institution's history. An Indigenous student said, "It's good for *everybody. Anyone* would value from having an NAIS minor [degree] possibility. Anyone would value from having these voices and stuff heard because it just makes a more well-rounded education." Similar to previous findings, this study reveals the cultural wealth students bring, as shown in the Peoplehood Matrix (Tachine et al., 2017; Yosso, 2003). This holistic model attributes a student's physical, emotional, and mental well-being to intertwining language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land (Tachine et al., 2017). A student shared this mutuality in ways of thinking: "Native Indigenous here, I felt they were similar to me in my experiences, so I can say this was the most inclusive experience of them all." The Indigenous transfer student said that while their experiences with BU were negative when associating with other Indigenous students, "We shared food, prayers and even courtesies to each other." Thus, this finding maintains the Peoplehood Matrix of support contributing to respect, recognition, and belonging (Tachine et al., 2017).

This study is consistent with previous findings revealing that it is beneficial for both Borderlands University (BU) and the Indigenous community to further support and strengthen the pathway between home and college (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Tachine, 2017). For example, mutually beneficial educational and economic partnerships exist in establishing student teaching internships, which prepare Indigenous student teachers and relieve teacher shortages. Such partnerships extend to many other fields of study. Likewise, establishing a strong and trusting relationship with the Indigenous community creates a positive environment that other colleges can model due to its success. The connection also prepares future youth who learn from

their mentor Indigenous student teachers who spark their interest in attending college. Further, instead of Indigenous families who have “good reason to be suspicious of anything European, and schools, even Indian-controlled ones,” as stated by HeavyRunner and DeCelles, the disconnection can begin to mend, “bridge gaps, heal wounds, and build trust” (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 84). In doing so, Indigenous families will feel comfortable sending their children to BU because they see their children returning and working in the Indigenous community.

In summary, students in this study expressed a strong desire for connection with other Indigenous students, faculty, and advisors. They seek acknowledgment from educational institutions that they are not one uniform, homogenous group and wish to be valued and “not forgotten.” Consistent with prior research, students underscore the necessity of seeing themselves reflected and having their voices and concerns listened to within their academic communities. Thus, higher education institutions must demonstrate a willingness not only to ask but also to listen deeply.

### **Challenges Students and Native American and Indigenous Studies Encounter**

The second point of discussion is the challenges Indigenous students and those involved in establishing NAIS encountered. First, students mentioned that they struggled to find Indigenous mentors and professors they hoped would guide and accompany them on their academic journey. Although students “found teachers to talk to, it was coming from a non-Native space, which I then ended up finding that I just had to look for myself.” Consequently, if students wanted to find Indigenous mentors in their academic setting, they had to take time from their studies and other responsibilities to search even though they may not find anyone. In this study,

some students expressed they did not find anyone and even traveled away from their communities in search of a sense of belonging (Tachine et al., 2016).

Similar to previous findings, students echoed their need for support from Indigenous professors teaching Indigenous courses and Indigenous advisors to “guide and support” them and where they can “voice my opinion and have my opinion heard.” Unlike previous studies, where Indigenous student support was plentiful and positive (Brayboy, 2015), the findings of this study revealed that when Indigenous students searched for supportive mentors on their own, those who did find support said that “learning and knowing that I could talk to other people that weren’t Native, but who had good advice” helped them. This finding aligns with the findings from Strayhorn (2016), whose study revealed that Indigenous students who interconnected with peers and professors of various backgrounds had an increased sense of belonging. The findings in my research showed that students had “very little Indigenous connection,” and students said that without the Indigenous support and interaction, “it’s not quite the same.” The findings in my study are similar to Brayboy (2015) and Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird (2017), that it is necessary to support students so they may “create relationships with Native students and staff” (p. 788). The findings of the current study revealed that, in general, students struggled to find support and a sense of belonging from Indigenous peers, staff, mentors, and professors. This study also suggests that although students can find support if they search hard enough, educational institutions should not leave it up to the student or up to chance for them to seek this support.

Similar to the findings from Strayhorn (2016), this study also revealed that some students had positive interactions with peers and professors from non-Indigenous backgrounds. However, other students did not. Findings for this current study suggest that supporting Indigenous students

involves promoting a sense of belonging through positive institutional support and commitment. Access to NAIS sends a positive message to all students, namely that BU provides a learning environment open to listening to Indigenous students, scholars, and their wealth and knowledge (Yosso, 2007).

Further, this study found additional challenges in that students experienced microaggressions, which they felt would be easier to navigate if there existed a closer connection with Indigenous individuals in their academic settings. This study revealed that students felt more comfortable and could “see eye to eye” and connect with those who understood their similar struggles. Microaggressions were sometimes subtle and other times highly offensive to Indigenous students in this study, similar to previous findings of “prejudice that marginalized groups encountered on a regular basis that [have] a cumulative impact that can adversely affect academic achievement, foster feelings of isolation, and promote depression” (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017, p. 787). This study revealed negative experiences among students of Indigenous backgrounds that should not be repeated. One comment was from an OCC professor who crassly and insensitively remarked, “If the Indigenous had turned themselves in during summer instead of winter, it would have been easier for them.” This comment echoes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s immortal words in his 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” where his critique rings truth that the “white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice” and the ignorant view that a displaced and forced removals Peoples’ pain and suffering should be moved to a “more convenient season” (King, 1963, para. 24).

Similar to previous studies, students in this study expressed that state policies affecting their education are racist. This study agrees with earlier studies that hostile environments reduce

retention, persistence, and graduation rates (Tachine et al., 2017). The findings from this study highlight that mere interactions with individuals from any specific background do not inherently foster a sense of belonging among students. Unlike other studies, this study underscores the importance of supportive interactions characterized by positive experiences, including the respectful acknowledgment of students' concerns and values and that they are listened to. Some participants expressed feeling marginalized within the dominant group, perceiving their experiences as being disregarded, erased, and minimized. Professors shared a similar dissonance in their experiences regarding BU's view, which lacks commitment to supporting cultural diversity. This study shared similar findings by previous scholars regarding challenges Indigenous students regularly encountered (Brayboy, 2015; Strayhorn, 2016; Tachine et al., 2017). A professor shared that BU, through its lack of support and commitment, sends the message, "We have Latinx faculty, so that's far enough. We've got diversity. We don't need anything else."

Similar to previous studies mentioned, the findings of this study revealed that students not only lack institutional support but also lack social support and Indigenous representation, resulting in students experiencing "imposter syndrome, where you feel like an outsider even if you're from here because there's hardly anyone here that shares a similar background with you. It feels different." Similar to findings from Brayboy (2015), Strayhorn (2016), and Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird (2017), findings from this study suggest that Indigenous students in academia today face challenges and struggles such as hostility both inside and outside the classroom instead of supportive environments. They must make many sacrifices regarding their cultural beliefs to acquire an education. Findings from this study revealed that despite re-lived trauma, microaggressions, direct hostility, and many sacrifices, Indigenous students are resilient



and work hard to excel beyond measure, persist, and do all they can to finish their studies so that they can return to their communities and give back as shown by previous findings (Brayboy, 2015; Tachine et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, this study does not solely suggest that Indigenous and Native students must have Indigenous faculty and mentors to succeed and feel a sense of belonging. However, it is highly desirable, as the findings show. This finding is derived from a student who revealed an alternate experience in an educational institution with a 6% Native American demographic, American Indian Services, and facilitators, yet “did not do as well there as these facilities were there, and sadly, I suffered for it.” The student describes the experience of being physically compared regarding their appearance and language as deficient, “I was told my hair color is the wrong color. I was insulted, or ostracized” because their Indigenous language “wasn’t good enough, so I dropped out of school.” Another Indigenous student adds a similar experience at BU when “most people would ask condescending and ridiculous questions.” This student said that they could connect with other Indigenous and Native students who shared kinship and ways of knowing, ways of socializing, and language (Tachine et al., 2017). When I asked this student how they found like-minded Sovereign and Indigenous students, they replied, “Out of sheer coincidence.” So, there was no active institutionally sponsored support for this student.

Similar to previous studies, the findings of this study align with The Peoplehood Matrix in that students experience a sense of belonging and shared ways of knowing and thinking through connection with Indigenous and Native American students, faculty, facilitators, and advisors. This study revealed that fostering a thriving student environment is not achieved simply by adding Indigenous employees. Much more is necessary. Even though students expressed that universities “need to hire Native American advisors that can help guide students with finding

their path and provide a mentorship” and that when they interacted with them, they “clicked eye to eye,” it is not the panacea of success for Indigenous students. As shown in Tachine’s Peoplehood Matrix (2017), other factors must be present. These include (a) a shared history that acknowledges the kinship, trauma, and ancestral relationship with others, (b) the land that provides a strong tie and sense of belonging, (c) the shared language and way of expressing and understanding one another and (d) the crucial ceremonial cycle that connects language, sacred history, and place (Tachine et al., 2017). Similar to Tachine et al.’s (2008) study, an Indigenous student in this study shared that “before the NAIS degree, the only place where I felt there were other like-minded people was with the [Indigenous] student organization. When it comes to wanting to talk about other things, viewpoints, and mindsets, I usually find that there’s not anyone I can really share it with because no one can relate. A lot of people don’t understand.” Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird’s Peoplehood Matrix, which intertwines language with the other elements, recognizes language as an essential factor that tells the story of a people’s history. Similar to previous studies, this study also revealed that students at BU and OCC experienced the loss of maternal Indigenous languages, but also post-Spanish conquest language loss. Students recalled corporal punishment when using Spanish outside the home.

Consequently, students faced a second language loss, even though a colonized one. The third language challenge exists similar to previous studies in that students felt ostracized and judged because when they spoke their Indigenous or Spanish language, it was broken, such as experienced by students from a previous study who spoke “broken Navajo and [found] it difficult to enunciate some words in a sentence. I was taught to speak and write English since childhood” and they faced discouraging criticism (Martin, 2023, p. 13). My study showed similar findings connected to language loss, equivalent to a loss of linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005) and an

absence of language found in the four intertwined factors described in the Peoplehood Matrix (Tachine et al., 2017).

The existence of Native American and Indigenous Studies at BU undoubtedly provides support for students and opportunities for mentors. Similar to previous studies, this study shows evidence that student mentorship brings positive results in helping students succeed (Shotton et al., 2007). A student from a previous study reflects, “When there were no Native(s) at the institutions I attended, I noticed a significant difference in both my ambition and the support I received” (Shotton et al., 2007, p. 84). Thus, having access to like-minded people helps students cope with the many challenges specific to Indigenous students at educational institutions.

An Indigenous student shared this precise challenge in working harder at the demanding studies required of their field, yet facing grade drops and “tough situations” when they could not make up studies to attend “certain cultural events that occur” or Indigenous “holidays or feast days.” The student said, “I’m very involved in the [Indigenous] community, so I’ll want to participate, but sometimes, the classes or the PIs [principal investigators] won’t understand, and so I don’t have the luxury of getting away with it.”

The results of this study are similar to previous findings on student’s spiritual needs fulfillment as shown in the Peoplehood’s Model ceremonial cycle, which is the role of spirituality in Native Peoples’ livelihood through language, sacred history, and place (Tachine et al., 2017). The findings of this study revealed that students were “punished” and “it does affect my grade.” I was present at the [Borderlands City] historic resolution during this study when this occurred. I witnessed what the Indigenous student described as, “I actually got my grade dropped that day for being there.”

The student explains how Tachine's ceremonial cycle (2017) applies to the importance and their decision to attend the event at the county courthouse: "To me, even though changing Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day is the smallest thing you can do to make up for the genocide and all the havoc that's been put on my people. It's still a step forward." The student described that they felt it was so important and had a "greater impact" even though they "had my grade completely dropped from an *A* to a *B* for that." This study's third point of discussion reveals the importance of supporting Indigenous students and NAIS in that they saved BU from facing federal fines and sanctions.

### ***Federal versus State: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act***

This study's guiding question: What are Indigenous students' experiences at BU? (Tachine et al., 2017; Yosso, 2005) are answered with the issue of NAGPRA. Similar to findings in previous studies, students were strongly outspoken and upset regarding denial and negligence about ancestral remains on campus. It was nonacceptable to do as little as possible and find "an easy way around" addressing federal law. In alignment with prior studies, students drew upon their resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) rooted in their lived experiences of ancestral wisdom and social justice so familiar to them.

However, the findings of this study shed light on the gatekeepers that students encountered in the inflexible bureaucratic policies and lawyers who darkly eclipsed accountability behind litigious maneuvers. This study found that students were committed to resisting and engaging in their social justice strength (Brayboy, 2015; Yosso, 2005). It also revealed student cultural wealth and resistance capital when students prioritized "bringing action" and expressing their "freedom of speech that we're allowed. We could do stuff; we could fight." Similar to previous studies, this study revealed that BU Indigenous students confronted

complexly challenging issues before them not as victims (Shepherd, 2010) but as victors who care about unpleasant yet essential issues. This study sheds light on the sentiment of Indigenous students who bore the burden of voicing their concerns, “We don’t like this! And it sucked to have to do that.” Students revealed the convenience of “you know, it would have been nice if we heard the news” regarding the remains, and “we said we were upset, and then [Borderlands] was like, ‘you’re right; let’s do this thing,’ but we had to be self-advocates.” This study revealed that students could foresee beyond themselves and that this issue was “about the University. These are not only us right now, but future Native students feeling comfortable in our school.”

This study revealed that students who had tried before to bring attention to such matters fell upon deaf ears. Previously, “everyone found an easy way around it [NAGPRA].” This study revealed that if it had not been for relentless students who took time to keep pressing the NAGPRA issue that will affect students now and those to come, “things have shifted.” The federal government’s strict NAGPRA compliance caused the institutional bureaucracy to “change their tune.” In essence, Indigenous students who organized and partnered with Indigenous community members, professors, and museum staff to rectify the unacceptable past of ancestral remains saved BU from severe federal sanctions and penalties. This study highlights Indigenous and non-Indigenous students’ significant role in elevating and bringing the NAGPRA issue to the forefront, ultimately benefiting the university. This study can attest to previous studies (Brayboy, 2021) that many Indigenous students are uncomfortable and follow “strict taboo rules about being around the dead; we’re not supposed to be.” Similarly, despite the government-sponsored boarding school horrors and child removals, Indigenous students at BU drew upon their ancestral wealth and knowledge. For example, Chief Manuelito of the Navajo Nation, although many Indigenous members who resisted government assimilation fought

against unjust policies and boarding school programs, were sent to Alcatraz prison (Blackhawk, 2023).

Similar to previous studies, the findings of this study revealed that Indigenous students were punished for participating in ceremonies and other important events. Similar to previous studies, tribes who resisted assimilation and whose children were kept away from ceremonial events ranging from “seasonal fishing in the Northwest, wild rice gatherings in the Great Lakes, and herding in the Southwest” (Blackhawk, 2023, p. 394). Families wrote to boarding schools imploring them to release their children for such significant communal events and to “do the right thing” and “I am real anxious to have her here [home] while we make maple sugar” (Blackhawk, 2023, p. 393). Additionally, students in this study revealed that it’s not enough to say you will properly deal with human remains yet do nothing. You cannot look current and future students “in the eye” and say, “We’re *Friends* with you.” This study found that students questioned bureaucratic inaction and asked, “Are you?! If you’re not being fair.” Students expressed that the issue goes beyond a small handful of people’s comfort, wants, and needs. Findings were similar to previous studies in that addressing such concerns affects all students, “not just Native,” and “being able to be the example” of the proper way for administrators to listen and take honorable action.

Consequently, the students helped propel BU to address NAGPRA. What students identified and took action upon as “self-advocates” was a benefit for BU in avoiding federal penalties. Thus, BU can now seize a positive opportunity beyond compliance, which builds connections to the Indigenous community and “be the example.” This issue is “not only us right now.” Indigenous students shared that NAGPRA is about “Native students feeling comfortable in our school. It’s making a much more honest response to the community.” This example aligns

with Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird's (2007) Peoplehood Matrix of Indigenous students wanting to give back and honor their communities. Similar to previous findings, this study revealed that students do not separate themselves from their community cultural wealth and knowledge they bring, which, in this case, their social and resistant capital benefitted BU (Yosso, 2005). This view also aligns with the "strategies of resistance through education" that Indigenous students demonstrated, as shown by this study's findings (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 135).

Professors credit BU for "the first domino" that will continue to move in the right direction. BU showed its newfound support by bringing consultants and community members and listening to students. Similar to previous studies, the experiences of Indigenous students leading BU to honor their "due diligence" shows that "you care about what [students] think and feel and that you're listening to them." The Peoplehood Matrix describes the holistics of addressing issues based on a persistent people's survival and the importance of sacred history (Tachine et al., 2017). Indigenous students recognized and prioritized the NAGPRA issue and took action, contributing to individual well-being and being valuable to the People (Tachine et al., 2017). The findings of this study shed light on how BU can show concern and caring and can continue to become actively engaged in "making the university open and inviting and welcoming to Indigenous people." Students want to focus on their studies instead of wondering what is hidden beneath the surface.

### **State Senate Bill 17 (SB 17)**

Along with anxiety, most students enter college full of hopes and dreams but want schools to listen, value what they bring, and foster a sense of belonging. Indigenous students have had to endure educational trauma in boarding schools that punished tribal knowledge (Adams, 2000; Blackhawk, 2023; Brayboy, 2005). Indigenous children had to hide and witness

their older siblings and later themselves, “seized” and hauled away by police, only to face corporal punishment and abuses such as “Lakota girls in shackles, and the frozen bodies of children running home to their families” (Blackhawk, 2023, p. 396, 399). Similar to previous studies, the findings of this study revealed that even today, students still encounter diversity, equity, and inclusion gatekeepers inside the assumed protection provided by modern educational institutions. Students will face the harsh reality that SB 17 fails to support welcoming spaces but instead subjects Indigenous students to unpleasant and traumatic situations both in and out of the classroom. As one student in this study expressed, they had experienced “self-doubt and identity issues” due to being “insulted and ostracized.” Another Indigenous student shared their experience that included being asked “condescending or ridiculous questions” related to their customs. One student relived gender trauma when told by an OCC faculty member that Indigenous women eagerly sought the company of largely-endowed white males. Microaggressions such as these are usually launched at unsuspecting individuals who are perceived as weak and in private (Shotton, 2017). Similar to previous studies, the findings of this study revealed that students wish to attend schools that do not devalue or view their knowledge as a deficit but as wealth. Similar to previous studies, the findings of this study revealed that unlike what SB 17 proposes, Indigenous students challenge the “mythology of Indigenous disappearance” and prefer schools such as the American Indian Institute established in Wichita in 1915 that defied boarding schools by emphasizing tribal knowledge, “hiring Native teachers, who incorporated oral traditions, and Indian languages into the curriculum” (Blackhawk, 2023, p. 395).

Similarly, this study revealed that a student who had taken an Indigenous language class at another college was told that “it didn’t count as a language,” and the BU “language person



[said] that *I need to learn a real language.*” Students who attended the American Indian Institute excelled as superintendents, nurses, and leaders who “positioned themselves alongside world leaders” (Blackhawk, 2023, p. 403). Similar to previous studies, the findings of this study revealed that Native and Indigenous students endure many sacrifices and are activists for the community, which reflects the words of Navajo Chief Dodge, who encouraged Indigenous youth, “Education is the ladder. Tell our people to take it” (Blackhawk, 2023, p. 402). Similarly, Native and Indigenous students must endure the hostility that SB 17 forces in turning their back on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Findings from this study align with the data that colleges and universities that actively promote cultural awareness and address cultural issues increase student success for all students (Ku‘uipo Cummings Losch, 2023). In contrast, a lack of a positively responsive institution increases stress “related to racism, potentially leading to reduced participation in classroom activities and a lower likelihood” of degree completion (Ku‘uipo Cummings Losch, 2023, p. 115). Similar to previous studies, this study revealed that SB 17 adversely affects Indigenous students’ ability to develop a sense of belonging, which leads to an imbalance of Holm’s (2003) Peoplehood Matrix in that disconnection from one leads to a loss of the other aspects. This study finds SB 17 as a myopic bill that forces a loss of sacred history, language, land, and ceremonial cycle that deletes everyone’s history and strengths. Thus, if a dishonorable group chooses to eclipse others, they also block their own progress and cancel valuable knowledge that could contribute to solving various societal challenges, such as issues related to democracy, equality, environmental sustainability, education, and the preservation of languages, which played crucial roles for the U.S. government during WWII.

As the findings of this study reveal, Ocotillo Community College, the feeder school to BU, had to close the doors to its diversity office to comply with SB 17 in January 2024. Even though studies establish that cultural studies increase graduation rates (Ku‘uipo Cummings Losch, 2023), critics project that SB 17 will produce unforeseen consequences. One facet that colleges enjoy waving is their top ten ranking. However, these numbers are as stable as beads of mercury, especially if students select more welcoming colleges in states with more supportive environments. In creating SB 17, Texas schools face exclusion from federal grants favoring DEI.

Senate Bill 17 has “kind of publicly” cemented shut its “official ability” to access cultural heritage paths of study and “to look into these things and promote them as diversity, equity, and inclusion.” Only time will tell the damages caused, federal funds lost, and the failure to foster a welcoming environment as students choose to attend other schools based on negative images and reputations. Similar to previous studies, the findings of this study revealed a close link between reputation and image, affecting school rankings (Gutiérrez-Villar, 2022; Steiner et al., 2012).

### **Implications for Practice, Limitations, and Delimitations,**

### **Recommendations for Future Study and Concluding Thoughts**

This qualitative study shed light on the experiences of students and key individuals, such as professors who established the NAIS minor at Borderlands University. The analysis of the data revealed the priority of creating the NAIS degree because it supports students’ cultural capital and acknowledges and works with the Peoplehood Matrix. Recommendations include the development of social capital opportunities facilitated through NAIS. This section will highlight the significance of this study. Following this, I will address the limitations and delimitations encountered during the research process. Additionally, recommendations for future study will be

provided, offering insights into potential areas for future study. Finally, I will conclude with some closing thoughts.

### **Implications for Practice**

Although students expressed interest in having an expanded NAIS major, challenges make this difficult specifically because BU is under the tightly controlled UT-system. Due to this, professors realized that logistically, creating an NAIS major was more complex and thus began offering NAIS courses. It was easier to “do the minor and then to create a graduate certificate.” A BU professor explained that to create majors, you need “faculty lines in that, essentially, you need a department.” Aside from UT-system approval, the creation of majors includes additional tenure track faculty and “demonstrating job opportunities.” This finding demonstrates that support and funding are necessary for a successful minor and possible future major. Brayboy and Huaman (2016) have dedicated their lives to building successful partnerships between Indigenous peoples and higher education guided by rigor.

The first implication for practice is nation-building in the form of *capacity building*, *capacity strengthening*, and *capacity recognition* (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016). *Capacity recognition* identifies and nurtures the “existing efforts and talents” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 140). *Capacity nurturance* is the “ability to care for students entrusted to us” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 140). In educational tribal nation-building, according to Kwami Ageye Akoto, it is “the conscious and focused application of [Indigenous] people’s collective resources, energies, and knowledge[s] to the task of liberating and developing the psychic and physical space that is identified as [their] own” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 140).

Students at BU described the great sacrifices they make to cooperate with Eurocentric views that success is excessively laboring for the advancement of the individual or “productivity

heavy,” as one Indigenous student described. The collision between the “Western capitalistic productivity mindset and strict ways to do things” clashes with Indigenous peoples’ view who value serving “others, rather than serve individual ambitions” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 141). The implication is that BU practices *capacity nurturance* instead of its historic goal of reproducing “professionals and (re)produce Western/Eurocentric knowledge, meanings, and citizens” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 141). Ignoring the needs of Indigenous students inequitable interferes with their physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being, as described by the Peoplehood Matrix, and removes strength from educational nation-building (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016; Tachine, 2017). Additionally, Indigenous students “really value taking care of ourselves.” Students not only educationally assimilate but also comply with “producing data” at a cutthroat pace that “really drains you” with little time to reflect and create. This study does not suggest a lack of rigor, as critics will point out.

On the contrary, Indigenous students must not only exceed the rigors of their studies while fulfilling multiple responsibilities, facing sacrifices, and assimilating to earn their education. For example, an Indigenous student “was raised that all life has value, all living things deserve respect,” yet due to clashing views, “it feels strange when I have to go through and euthanize whole groups of animals because they didn’t have the gene we needed, so it’s been tough.” The student assimilated to meet the demands of their study but practiced their own resilience by giving the “animals my thanks for the help and with everything they’ve provided” and “give them a little farewell so it doesn’t hurt me to do it. It just feels sad.”

The second implication for practice is also part of nation-building in education and *capacity building*, as Brayboy and Huaman (2016) suggested. Similarly, BU students and others are already leaders and experts in Indigenous issues and topics. Thus, students are “already

leaders in their own communities and organizations. They continue to be valuable parts of a greater whole. We have not ‘made’ them leaders” (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016, p. 143). Brayboy and Huaman (2016) endorse nurturing environments, guidance, and “emotional support for those Indian students with the courage to step into the ‘White Man’s World’” (p. 144). The responsibility of being a voice for Indigenous issues should not rest solely on students who will not always be at the University and may not be aware of issues such as NAGPRA. Thus, the question arises of who the voice of Indigenous students will be when obligations and commitments do not allow them to communicate their concerns. The second implication is that *capacity strengthening* (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016) represents BU hiring Indigenous faculty and facilitators from the pool of qualified, talented, and caring individuals already working on NAGPRA. Professors credited BU for “now doing the right thing and headed in the right direction.” Yet, what happens when caring teachers, students, and BU employees are not present or able to speak out? Essentially, thanks to the voices of Indigenous students who spoke out, attention to NAGPRA was revitalized.

Consequently, NAGPRA is not only an issue of capacity and “simply following federal law.” Borderlands University does not have the option to comply with NAGPRA. It is a challenging and complex matter. In hiring a specific panel of those at BU who are already involved, the process of “recognizing Indigenous sovereignty, following Indigenous cultural protocols, building relationships with community members, about showing Native communities that you are doing your due diligence. That you care about what they think and feel, and that you’re *listening* to them.” To ignore or allow recent efforts to subside, BU can face “substantial penalties” and must not “choose to ignore NAGPRA.”

Rather than exhausting students, staff, and faculty who must allocate their time, a strong implication is that a funded and purposefully selected advisory group is necessary. The group can consist of dedicated students, community members, faculty, and museum staff who now work together in *capacity recognition*, as described by Brayboy and Huaman (2016), which recognizes and identifies the talent you already have.

If BU wants its NAIS minor to grow, it must invest. A budget that includes Indigenous staff, Indigenous tenure-track, and Indigenous tenured faculty is necessary. It is unrealistic to expect a degree to survive independently without administrative support and funding. Thanks to the persistence of staff, students, and faculty, a major milestone was achieved in May 2024 in securing funding to appoint a NAGPRA Coordinator.

A third implication is building capacity by eliminating the quota for NAIS courses. New administrative regulations require five graduate or ten undergraduate students per course to escape deletion even though students have registered. This policy creates difficulties and frustrations for students already on limited educational timeframes. Specifically, Indigenous students experience 39% longer to graduate (Minthorn, 2020). This means NAIS courses may only become available “once every other semester, sometimes once every year.” Budget concerns for public institutions can be an issue. However, students report unpleasant experiences in courses at BU that are so large they are taught in an auditorium. Class size data from UCLA during the 2022-2023 school year reports ranges from the smallest classroom size (2-9 students) at 25% to the highest (20-29 students) at 48% (College Data, 2023). Thus, the ideal classroom size is relative. However, leaving students and faculty scrambling after deleting a course for logistical purposes is not a best practice. The current practice of skipping semesters to offer NAIS courses also leads to overcrowding.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

### ***Limitations***

The first limitation is the small sample size of five Indigenous students and two professors, and the second is the time factor.

The reason that the sample was smaller is not due to student connection. I individually spoke to approximately 136 students and invited them to participate in my study. Of these, only five fit the criteria, such as identifying as Indigenous, being currently enrolled at BU, and being willing to participate.

Secondly, time is a limiting factor in ideally capturing the complete essence of the participants' lived experiences. Undoubtedly, the impact and presence of the NAIS minor will continue to progress and develop. Thus, additional time and attention beyond this study is necessary as future findings will change. Additionally, it takes time to grow trust. The first Indigenous student interview was the most difficult because it took time to connect.

Lastly, this study occurred during the cusp of state and federal changes impacting the results. For state changes, Senate Bill 17 took effect on January 2024, and the interviews began in September 2023. Thus, participants had to anticipate upcoming changes due to SB 17 and final NAGPRA regulations.

### ***Delimitations***

The main delimitation in this study is that I did not use aliases or other identifiers for participants or spaces. The reason for this self-imposed boundary was to protect the identity of the participants whose shared knowledge and valuable experiences made this study possible. I also restricted student participants to those who identify as Indigenous because this study focuses on listening to Indigenous students' experiences and the knowledge they bring.

## **Recommendations for Future Study**

Recommendations for future study include prioritizing the cultivation and support of students' cultural capital through the support of NAIS, which will lead to developing student social capital opportunities. This study focused on shedding light on Indigenous students' and key individuals' experiences in establishing NAIS. This study was limited to a smaller sample size, so future studies should focus on collecting a larger sample as early as possible, as this qualitative study took time to build trust. Further, a larger sample opens the study to more data and participant experiences. Future researchers will need time to find and increase the sample size to capture the lived essence and build connections. Even though I applied the most rigorous measures possible throughout this study, I sometimes experienced periods of no access to targeted participants or data. Additionally, I used member checking to ensure credibility and accuracy post-transcription.

A larger sample size is desirable for future studies because participants would most likely share experiences that others may identify with and show students they are not alone. Future studies may include students from Ocotillo Community College because their 2024 enrollment rates reflected more than 65 students who identified as American Indian, 63 as two or more ethnicities, and 25 Pacific Islanders. I also recommend including students who self-identified as having mixed Indigenous backgrounds, as findings showed that participation in NAIS courses correlates with a sense of belonging, positively impacting student retention, persistence, and graduation rates for all students.

Furthermore, the trajectory of NAIS and SB 17 remains unwritten. It is an ongoing experience for BU students and the academic community. Student experiences and knowledge associated with the NAIS minor will continue to progress and develop. A recommendation for



future studies includes a longitudinal study that closely measures SB 17's impact on enrollment rates, as well as retention, persistence, and graduation rates. Additionally, future studies should analyze BU's strategic planning beyond state support and its initiatives in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) through federal funding.

Another pivotal recommendation for future study is to closely follow BU campus events to assess the progression of NAIS institutional support. Monitoring indicators such as the total number of Indigenous faculty and staff, the availability of consecutive NAIS courses, and the amount of NAIS funding should be closely followed, measured, and compared to college rankings. Future studies could include comparisons of the duration and number of Indigenous faculty appointments and budgetary allocations for NAIS across different years. The purpose is to provide a comprehensive and measurable metric for comparison, analysis, and reflection of BU's institutional commitment to supporting NAIS, Indigenous faculty and staff recruitment, creation of tenured positions, course offerings, and budget allocations.

Future studies should also build upon existing connections with the Indigenous community and mentors who have guided the NAIS minor to foster open communication and support. An area deserving particular attention is the inclusion of Indigenous student voices in matters concerning the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). This study revealed that following student self-advocacy and federal feedback on NAGPRA compliance, Indigenous students were consulted, leading to the placement of signs at building entrances housing ancestral remains. As concerns such as NAIS support, SB 17, and NAGPRA continue to unfold, future studies could build upon the beginnings of these issues and analyze implemented changes. This could involve assessing and measuring alterations in class sizes, the

frequency of consecutive NAIS course offerings, the recruitment of Indigenous tenure-track faculty, and budgetary allocations for NAIS.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Even though the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education designated BU as a Research (R1) college, its location is a desert of many types. Consequently, educational hopes and dreams similarly surround its quiet desert beauty. It brings promises and blessings to come, such as the colorful spring blooms of bright yellow-orange poppy flowers beautifying nearby mountains amidst sharply challenging thorns. Students and faculty resiliently bloom and shine in their gifts to build something better, to be different, and to improve the present and future for those to come. Indigenous students and faculty shared their experiences and cultural wealth and demonstrated how they give back by nurturing and replanting educational seeds for all. Indigenous students bring invaluable cultural wealth and sacred Indigenous knowledge. The blend of humanity that always was at BU can lead to an “amazing change for the better.” I met many caring individuals who boldly fight with resilience despite obstacles and follow a special mission to “create a different kind of university oriented towards community values where students and faculty want to come here.” A place where the Peoplehood Matrix grows (Tachine et al., 2017). Together, we can build a welcoming and supportive educational environment that does not represent a brick-and-mortar institution closed off from the blue sky, crisp fresh air, majestic mountains, and warm sun. Let us learn from sacred Indigenous knowledge in that education is found in everyday activities and nature that surrounds us.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

September 2023

Dear Study Participant,

Thank you for allowing me to interview you for a study regarding lived college experiences. I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas at El Paso. This study will be used and published in the UTEP dissertations database.

I am happy that you have agreed to be part of this study that will add to the body of knowledge and help improve the student college experience.

The study title is "*Native American and Indigenous Peoples' Presence, Voice and Study on the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands; Cultivating community cultural wealth and embracing place, language, history, and ceremony.*"

This project seeks to study Native American and Indigenous Studies in higher education.

Please note that your participation is entirely voluntary. The extent of your participation would include one interview and possible follow-up interviews if needed. I will arrange a time and location that is most convenient for you.

With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

You will not be in any harm at any time. You will remain anonymous.

Your participation is voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate.

You can end the interview anytime with no further obligations or penalty.

The information you provide is optional. You decide what you would like to disclose.

You will receive a copy of the informed consent form for your review.

If you are willing to participate, please email me at [lgarcia38@miners.utep.edu](mailto:lgarcia38@miners.utep.edu), or text me at (915) 203-5986. If you have any questions regarding this study, you may also contact UTEP's Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.) at (915) 747-6590 or [irb.orsp@utep.edu](mailto:irb.orsp@utep.edu) or my supervisor Dr. Jesus Cisneros [jcisneros7@utep.edu](mailto:jcisneros7@utep.edu).

Thank you for your time and participation.

***Lourdes Garcia***

Lourdes Garcia

Doctor of Education (ED.D.) degree program in Educational Leadership and Administration  
candidate

The University of Texas at El Paso

## Appendix B: Interview Question Protocol

This interview is confidential. Your identity and name shall not be revealed or disclosed. All notes will be destroyed upon research completion.

“Thank you for the privilege of interviewing you. Your experiences are valuable. Your participation helps improve the educational experience. I respect and value your answers.”

You are free to end or withdraw from this interview at any time with zero penalties whatsoever.

**Thank you** for meeting with me to discuss your experiences. I am a doctoral student conducting a qualitative study on Native American and Indigenous Studies in higher education. You are free to disclose or not disclose any information as you feel comfortable and may opt out at any time without any penalty. This interview ranges from 60-90 minutes.

Do I have your permission to audio record our conversation?

Q1: Can you tell me your experiences in college or university?

Q2a: Have you ever shared your cultural background with your classmates?

2b: What was their reaction?

2c: What was the comparison when you shared your background in NAIS courses?

Q3: Could you please share how your cultural knowledge passed on to you by friends, family, and community has influenced your experiences in academic settings?

Q4: What can colleges and universities learn from the knowledge Indigenous students bring with them?

Q5: In your experience, what roles did the college or university play in providing student support and a sense of belonging?

Q6: How has your school helped you connect with other Indigenous students?

Q7: What role have Indigenous studies/courses played in your personal growth and development?

Q8: Can you tell me about your language, roots, or spaces that inspire you?

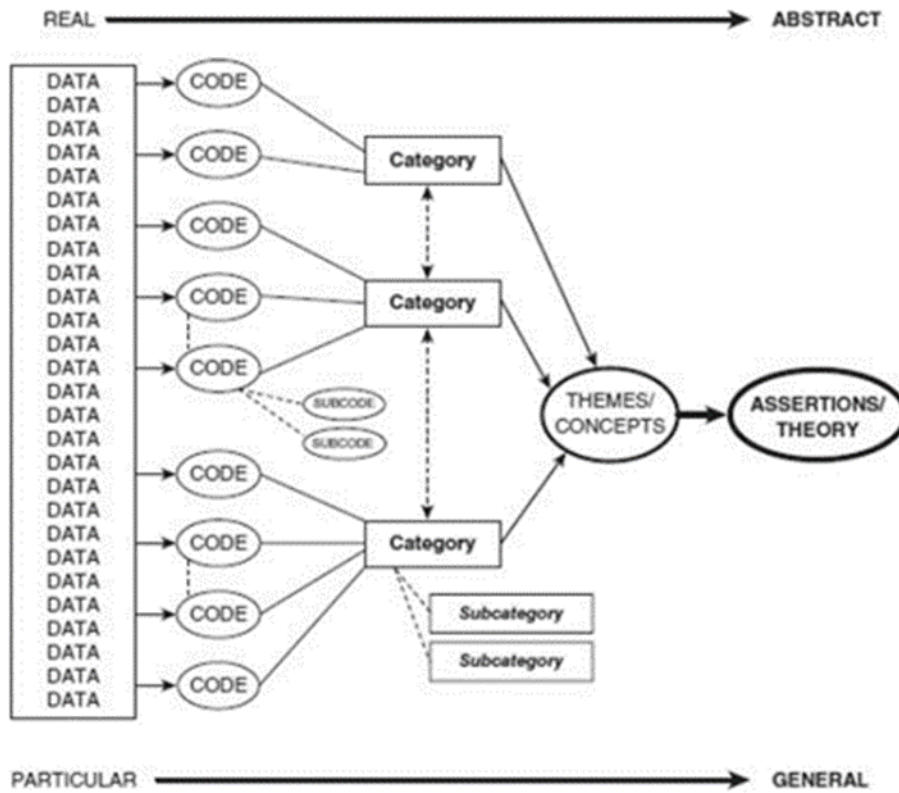
Q9: Can you describe the experiences you bring to NAIS?

Q10: Would you like to add or suggest anything that I may have overlooked?

Q11: Do you know anyone else I should interview?



## Appendix C: Code Streamlining Example



“Streamlining data from codes to subcodes to categories and subcategories to themes and concepts to assertions” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 18).

## Appendix D: CITI Certificate



Completion Date 27-Aug-2021  
Expiration Date 26-Aug-2024  
Record ID 44482739

This is to certify that:

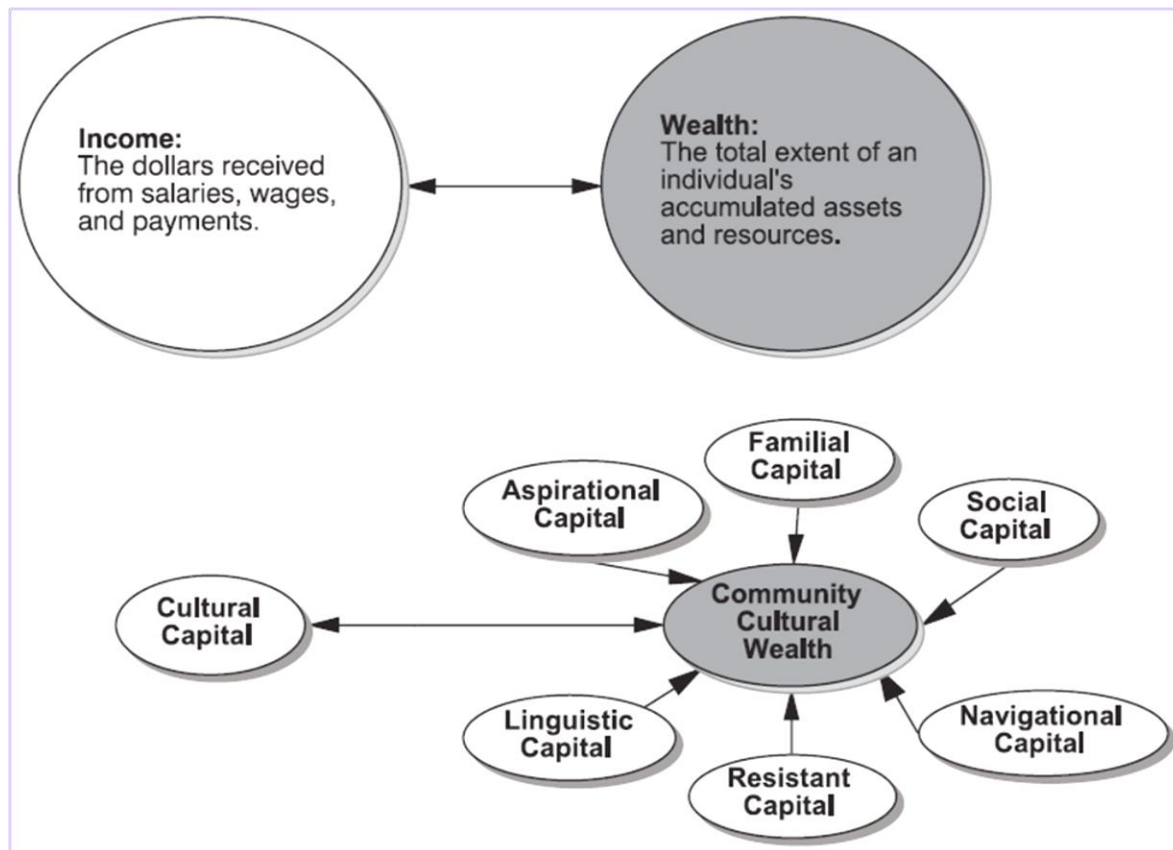
**Lourdes Garcia**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**Human Subjects Research**  
(Curriculum Group)  
**Social Behavioral Researchers**  
(Course Learner Group)  
**1 - Basic**

Not valid for renewal of certification  
through CME.

## Appendix E: Community Cultural Wealth Capital Model



Tara J. Yosso (2005) Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory

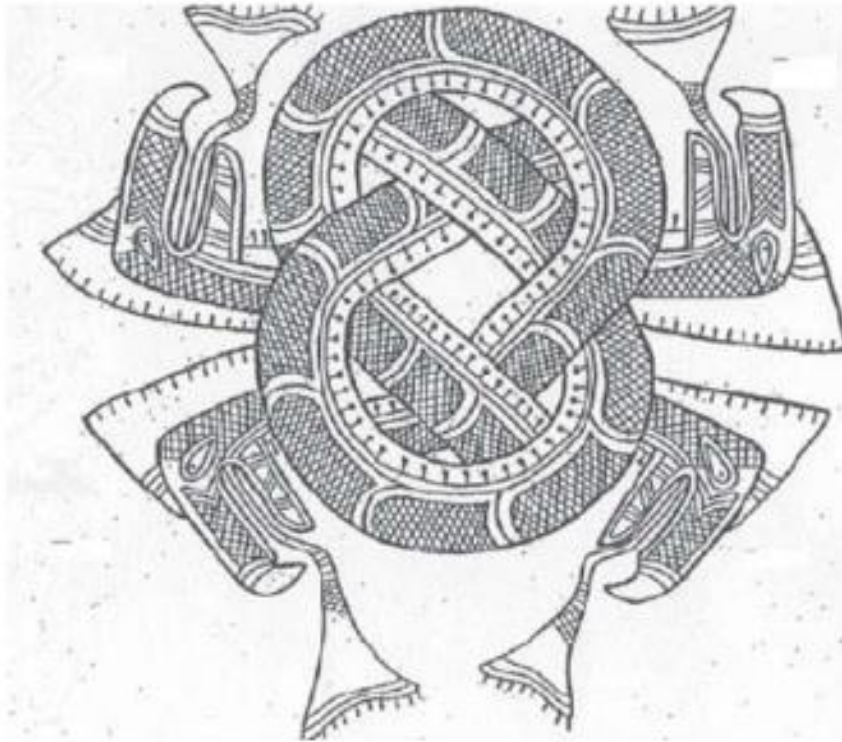
discussion of community cultural wealth, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8:1, 69-91, DOI:

10.1080/1361332052000341006

## Appendix F: The Peoplehood Matrix

Place

Language



Sacred History

Ceremonial Cycle

From the intertwined bodies symbolizing the four aspects of peoplehood are derived:

- Political and Cultural Sovereignty (statehood)
- Group Identity (nationality)
- Individual Well-being (mental and spiritual health)

The Peoplehood Matrix is an intertwined holistic model of the four factors of language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land. Together, they are necessary and contribute to Indigenous students' physical, mental, and spiritual well-being in pursuing their education (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 791).

## **Vita**

Lourdes Garcia earned her Master of Library and Information Science degree from The University of Texas at Austin. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies from The University of Texas at El Paso with an emphasis in broadcast journalism. She also earned a Teaching Certificate in Bilingual Education and Early Childhood from The University of Texas at El Paso.

Ms. Garcia is a lifelong educator with experience working in higher education, PK-12, and Early College High School students. She has taught communication courses at the college level and worked as a school community liaison for area schools.