

Chapter 10

Grandmothers' Pedagogy: Lessons for Supporting Native Students' Attendance at Universities

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Introduction

Shimásáni (Navajo word for my maternal grandmother) was a beautiful person, full of faith in the Creator, tender and kind in her words, patient, a purposeful listener, and a conduit of wisdom. She cheered for me during joyful times and helped me through difficult times. Even after she passed away, her legacy and teachings remain within me. Although it's been sixteen years since I last held her close, she is persistently in my thoughts and prayers. I share my personal thoughts of my grandmother as an opener to this conversation, to position myself as a Navajo scholar who has a deep relationship and respect for Shimásáni and grandmothers at large. I believe that I'm not alone in viewing grandmothers with high regard. Among most Indigenous peoples, our grandmothers are considered precious and closely connected to our lives as Wilson (Wahpatonwan Dakota scholar) beautifully stated: 'The stories handed down from grandmother to granddaughter are rooted in a deep sense of kinship responsibility, a responsibility that relays a culture, an identity, and sense of belonging essential to my life' (1998, p. 27).

It was not surprising, then, to learn in my research that Native students also recognized the influential role that grandmothers had in their life. Since my professional work and research interest centers on Native college students, I am blessed to be surrounded by Native college students. And in those spaces, I heard over and over the many stories from Native students on how their grandmas sparked motivation that enabled them to keep moving forward in college. This made me think about my own experience and the personal connection that I had with Shimásáni. I then began thinking what lessons can we, higher education scholars, practitioners, and faculty, learn from grandmothers in supporting Native college students? What I share with you comes from my dissertation research and from my experience in

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J. Frawley et al. (eds.), *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions and Participation in Higher Education*, DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-4062-7_10

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working with Native college students (Tachine 2015). This is a reopening of an ongoing conversation that I hope will spark others to consider how we might engage in our work that reflects a grandmother's love.

Using Indigenous Storywork (Archibald 2008), an Indigenous qualitative methodological approach, and Narrative Inquiry (Reissman 2008), I share portions from a larger study that investigated Navajo students' stories as they transitioned into college. For this chapter, I highlight grandmother qualities such as listening, sharing stories, and having an openness to vulnerability that influenced and motivated Navajo students to navigate through complex challenges and persist in going to college. I then provide examples of United States (US) higher education institutions that are making strides in listening, sharing stories, and opening spaces of vulnerability, that advance educational and personal growth among Native college students. These lessons and examples probe our thinking to consider how higher education institutions can move towards grandmothers' pedagogy that cultivates a loving and caring environment for Indigenous and, potentially, all students.

Literature and Theory Guiding the Study

To contextualize the research, I first review the scholarship on Indigenous undergraduate students' experiences as they relate to accessing and persisting in college. I then provide experiences and literature centered on grandmothers that helped me to begin thinking about their role in higher education. I then offer a family educational model (Heavyrunner & DeCelles 2002) as an Indigenous theoretical concept to begin constructing an Indigenous student-specific version of what I am calling grandmothers' pedagogy in higher education.

In 2014, the US White House released a report stating, 'Native youth and Native education are in a state of emergency' (US Executive Office of the President, 2014, p. 19). The report detailed the history and current state of Native education, and also provided recommendations for change to address the many challenges plaguing Native youth. The impetus for the report arose after a visit by US President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama with six Lakota youths from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. Students shared the reality of their lives after which President Obama commented, 'there were tears in that room pretty much the entire conversation' (Obama 2014, para. 18). Proponents of Native education stated that this was the first time a President had listened and expressed concerns about Native education since former President John F. Kennedy's leadership in the 1960s (Klein 2015). Promising plans are underway to strengthen the livelihood for Native youth through efforts such as the Generation Indigenous initiative, a national network to reach out, engage, and provide educational opportunities for Native youth (Gillette & Thiele 2015). Yet 'cautious optimism' is also felt, as broken promises have been the lens through which many Native people have viewed federal and state governmental institutions (Stigliani 2015).

Although former President Obama and federal administrators focused attention on Native educational issues, empirical research on Native students entering and persisting in higher education is scarce. Most research – only a handful of quantitative studies – represents Natives as an asterisk, specifying that their numbers are so small that they cannot be studied (Fairchild and Tippeconnic 2010; Brayboy et al. 2012; Shotton et al. 2013). What we do know is a disempowering picture. Research documents that the high school graduation rate for Native students who attended public schools was at 68% in 2012; US Bureau of Indian Education schools fared worse with a graduation rate of 53%; that year, the national graduation rate for all students was 81% (US Department of Education 2014). Native high school students are the least likely to graduate from high school, compared to other ethnic populations; and when we highlight the Native students who move on to college, the numbers are even less promising. In 1980, the total enrollment of Native students in degree-granting institutions was 83,900; in 1990 the enrollment grew to 102,800; in 2000 the enrollment increased to 151,200, and by 2012, the total enrollment was 172,900 (US Department of Education 2013). Although the total numbers have increased over time, there has been a steady decrease since 2009 (207,900), and when you look at the overall Native population growth those numbers are less favorable. While the Native American population increased by 39% from 2000 to 2010, the rate of college enrollment and degrees conferred stagnated at 1% during the same period (US Department of Education 2012; Norris et al. 2012). These numbers illustrate a stagnation crisis in need of attention.

Closer examination of the first-year college persistence rates details that many Native American students withdraw from or drop out of college. However, national data is again sparse on first-year persistence rates, especially data that is disaggregated by race or ethnicity. Available research that has attempted to look at first-year persistence rates shows mixed results. For example, one study found that Native first-year retention rates were 14% lower than those for the total student sample for Division II schools, and 12% lower for Division III schools (Pavel 1999). The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) reported that the first-year retention rates for Native students in four-year colleges were 70.5%, lower than the rate of 82.2% for Whites, 75.1% for Blacks, 79.6% for Hispanics, and 88.9% for Asians (2015). In general, however, the data on Natives is limited, and the numbers are discouraging and indicate that Native students are least likely to graduate from high school and college. These numbers reflect a global concern as Indigenous college students all across the world are negatively disempowered, with similar scenarios.

Despite the challenges previously mentioned, research also demonstrates that family and home has a profound influence on empowering Native students in their pathways to college (Rindone 1988; Pavel and Padilla 1993; Guillory and Wolverton 2008; Jackson and Smith 2001; Jackson et al. 2003; Heavyrunner and DeCelles 2002; Waterman 2012). For example, Navajo students from very low-income (below \$5,999/year) homes mentioned family support was the driving motivation for promoting their academic success (Rindone 1988). We would reason that financial support should be indicated as the most important aspect, considering that these

students are far below the poverty level. Yet, family support mattered most in their motivation to move forward in college. And when Native students encountered challenges in college, they indicated that family was the most influential factor in helping them to overcome those challenges (Guillory and Wolverton 2008). For some Native students, such as those from the Haudenosaunee Nation, a crucial strategy for their success included being able to return home to family at frequent intervals (Waterman 2012). This is consistent with other research that found that 56.8% of 155 Native students indicated a need to go home compared to 31.6% of Blacks, 24.4% of Hispanics, and 16.7% of Anglos (Benjamin et al. 1993). Moreover, the Gates Millennium Scholarship (GMS), a prestigious and all-expenses-paid scholarship program, provides under-represented students with the opportunity to attend any university of their dreams. When given the chance to attend any college in America, Native GMS recipients chose schools that were closer to home: an indication that family and home are critically important in their college selection and overall successful progression (Tippeconnic and Faircloth 2008).

The previous findings surrounding family and community are congruent when we look at Indigenous students from other areas around the globe. Australian Aboriginal students were found to be more collectively minded than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (White and Fogarty 2000), suggesting that they were more likely to consider family as an important aspect of their worldview. Moreover, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reported that their experiences at universities increased their ability to contribute to their welfare of their community (a vital motivator for their college-going journey); yet, they indicated that the university did not provide support to help them cope with responsibilities such as family obligations (Asmar et al. 2014). Canadian First Nations students define success in terms that coincide with the relational dimensions of family and community (Juntunen et al. 2001). Understanding the lives of First Nations post-secondary students, including the awareness of their extended family obligations, was found to be a crucial strategy for facilitating success for those students (Hampton and Roy 2002). For Māori, academic participation and success are increased when the learning environment reflects the essence of a whānau (family) environment designed through an interdependent perspective that honors academics with emotion and culture (McMurchy-Pilkington et al. 2013).

Grandmothers' Experiences and Stories

Knowing that the literature and my own experience supported familial influence among Native college students, I began to be more conscious of how Native students talked about family. As I shared earlier, in my involvement with Native students there have been countless times when grandmother stories have arisen. Often these stories would occur when students wanted to share a fond memory of home, and also when they were confiding in me about the challenges they were facing in college. In listening to those stories, I noticed that when students began speaking

about their grandmother a soft smile would often appear on their face. Instantly, they became more at ease as they reflected on a specific message that their grandmother had told them such as 'You are doing good son. Keep working hard at school.' Or they would recount a story that their grandmother had shared with them which made the students feel stronger in tackling whatever current circumstances they were encountering.

These types of experiences support the literature on grandmothers and story sharing. LaBarre et al. (2010) found grandmothers played a central role in the psychopathology of children by assisting in their emotional development and being a second maternal figure. Regarding Indigenous grandmothers, Loppie (2007) investigated teachings from Indigenous grandmothers in expanding qualitative research enquiry. She found that through Indigenous grandmothers' stories, mutual support and life lessons are generated: 'stories are intended to teach' (Loppie 2007, p. 281). Wilson (1998), a Wahpaton Dakota scholar, described reflections of her grandmother who imparted lifelong lessons through story sharing, and instilled validation and affirmation of her sense of identity with wisdom and care. Rendón (2009) calls on institutions and educators to move towards a pedagogy based on wholeness and harmony that is rooted in ancient wisdom: 'Ancient epistemology is the first way of knowing, the way of our ancestors, the original way of work' (p. 133). In essence, grandmothers embodied holism in which the whole person is supported.

When we consider the Navajo way of life, it is important to know that Navajo is based upon a matrilineal society in which the mother is the matriarch and the core of the family and home (Parsons Yazzie and Speas 2007). Along with this understanding, there is a deeply valued reverence for women including mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. Contrary to Eurocentric frameworks where patriarchy is the foundation of governance, systems, and practices, Navajo way of life privileges and honors women as an integral part of life. To acknowledge the powerful role of family, including maternal figures, research among Native college students must call upon theoretical frameworks that address familial perspectives.

Theoretical Framework: Family Education Model

Using Indigenous frameworks among Indigenous students is critical to advancing our work in supporting their matriculation through college. Around the world, Indigenous peoples are creating family-centred, culturally responsive models. For example, Mason Durie, a Māori scholar, created the Whare Tapa Wha model where Māori development is viewed in a holistic manner (Durie 1994). He conceptualized a four-walled house wherein each wall represents a core aspect. One important wall included the Te Taha Whanau which consists of the wide family networks, and the obligation, commitment, and support that the family provides. Whanau also helps form the identity and purpose of a person, that goes beyond the individual by acknowledging the sacredness in a collective (Durie 1994). The Te Taha Whanau model has been applied to retention strategies for Māori students attending Victoria

University, yet the focus of family is centered on ‘pseudo-whanau’ such as institutional support staff and mentors (Steward and Rawrhiti 2004, p. 41). Models such as the Te Taha Whanau are integral in providing a space for holistic and Indigenous worldviews to be interwoven in higher education sectors; however, careful and critical implementation and analysis of Indigenous models are warranted. Many universities often negate the influential role that Indigenous family members (outside of the college walls) have in helping to address retention concerns.

Understanding the valuable influence that family connection has on Native students and their persistence, Heavyrunner and DeCelles (2002) developed the Family Educational Model (FEM), a conceptual framework that positions family within the fabric of higher education in order to increase persistence for Native students. FEM has been used predominantly in Tribal colleges. FEM outlines several strategies. For the purpose of this chapter, I place attention on five strategies that directly relate to aspects of holism in which the whole (including cultural, racial, and spiritual) person is supported:

- Tribal college staff and students’ families must work together in relationships based on equality and respect;
- Retention programs must affirm and strengthen families’ cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society;
- Retention programs advocate for services and systems that are fair, responsible and accountable to the families that are served;
- Student retention programs are flexible and responsible in regard to emerging family and community issues; and
- Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance and administration (Heavyrunner and Decelles 2002; p. 30–31).

Mainstream colleges have adopted FEM to increase Native persistence rates, but the usage of FEM was limited within a specific program and not folded into broader institutional retention initiatives (Tachine and Begay 2013). To explore FEM, I have integrated the scholarship and experiences of grandmothers with FEM, creating grandmothers’ pedagogy in higher education. Thus, I have developed a Native-specific theoretical concept that employs efforts to learn and develop, based on wholeness and liberation.

Methodology

Indigenous methodology has been what Emerson (2014) described as ‘a new way of knowing and being that is so old that it looks new’ (p. 58), meaning that Indigenous methodology has been employed since time immemorial. A powerful way in which Indigenous peoples have skilfully passed on methodology is through storytelling. The fluidity of storytelling and stories within Native societies has been vital and a

legitimate source of understanding and navigating through the multifaceted dimensions of life including solving problems (Kovach 2009; Archibald 2008; Denetdale 2014; Wilson 2008). There are creation stories that detail how life was formed and how we are all connected, trickster stories that are funny yet convey important life lessons, and experiential family stories that describe struggles and acts of resistance. To center Indigenous methodology in research, I utilized a mixed-methods approach that included an Indigenous approach.

Indigenous Storywork and Narrative Analysis

This study used a combination of qualitative methodologies, Indigenous Storywork (Archibald 2008) and Narrative Inquiry (Riessman 2008), as they both feature stories as an influential mode of inquiry by respecting the stories that are shared, valuing the knowledge gained through the analytical meaning-making process, and recognizing the interconnectedness between storyteller and listener. Indigenous Storywork was developed by Jo-Ann Archibald, who is from the Sto:lo Nation, in her work with Sto:lo and Coast Salish elders and storytellers as a way to bridge Indigenous storytelling into formal educational contexts. Seven theoretical principles guide Indigenous Storywork including adhering to respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. Overall, Indigenous Storywork acknowledges and claims Indigenous ways of knowing into research.

Narrative Analysis complements Indigenous ways of knowing, such that narrative analysis acknowledges that 'individuals must now construct who they are and how they want to be known' (Riessman 2008, p. 7). For Native people who have often been operationalized by non-Natives, reclaiming the research space by asserting 'who they are and how they want to be known' is a promising step towards decolonizing methodologies (Smith 1999). Narrative Analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form (Riessman 2008). Narrative Analysis provides a space where people can make sense of the past, engage others in the experiences of the storyteller, and mobilize others into action for progressive change.

Research Site and Recruitment

The Southwest region of the USA is an ideal place to garner stories of Native student experiences because the location is home to many distinct federally recognized Tribal Nations, and is in an area that has the largest American Indian and Alaskan Native representation (US Census Bureau 2011). This study was conducted at a state university within the southwest. To protect the anonymity of the students, the pseudonym of the school is Big State University (BSU), a large, public research institution located in a state with a high concentration (5.3%) of Native peoples

when compared to the national average of 1.2% (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). Despite having a higher concentration of Native peoples in the state, Native students are under-represented at every level at BSU, accounting for only 2% of the overall population.

As I worked on the Big State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for conducting ethical research, I took steps towards seeking approval from the Navajo Tribe. Tribal Nations are distinct sovereign entities and many Tribes have their own process of conducting research with their people. I focused on Navajo students because they represented the largest student group attending BSU, they are the second largest Tribal group in the USA, and there is limited research on their experiences in entering college. Moreover, because I am Navajo I wanted to give back to my community by sharing the experiences of my people. Before acquiring Big State University's IRB approval, I consulted with the Navajo Nation IRB to see whether Tribal approval was needed for this study. Research that follows Tribal protocol is extremely important, as devastating circumstances have resulted from abusing research practices among Native peoples (National Congress of American Indians 2015). I learned that because this study would occur outside the juridical boundaries of the Navajo Nation, Tribal approval was not warranted as articulated in the Navajo Nation Human Subjects Code which states: 'The purpose of this Code is to set forth the conditions under which investigators, physicians, researchers and others may perform research activities on living human subjects within the territorial jurisdiction of the Navajo Nation' (Navajo Nation Code 3252, 2002, p. 295). With that understanding and upon review through Big State University's IRB process, I was approved to conduct the research.

Through purposeful sampling, ten full-time, first-time Navajo freshman students were selected to take part in this study. To protect the anonymity of the students, all students' names in this chapter are pseudonyms. I worked with the Native student support service offices to assist me in recruiting students by sending out emails to potential students through their LISTSERV. The ten Navajo students consisted of six female and four male students. They were all traditional college-aged students, meaning that they were between eighteen and nineteen years of age, had just graduated from high school and were in their first year of college. They were enrolled in various majors including political science, physics, pre-medicine/pre-nursing, natural resources, architecture, and engineering. Six students had attended Navajo Reservation high schools throughout 9–12th grades, two students had attended off-reservation high schools (located in border towns of the Navajo Reservation) and lived in school housing with other Native students for most of their 9–12th grade schooling, and two students had attended urban schools throughout their 9–12th grade schooling.

I conducted four open-structured, conversational in-depth interviews with each student throughout the spring semester of their freshman year, in 2013. A guiding interview question protocol was used at each interview; however, an open-structured conversational approach showed respect for the participant's story by allowing for the person to share openly what they wished to share, ultimately allowing the

'stories to breathe' (Kovach 2009, p. 99). Each interview averaged between two and two and a half hours.

The analytical process is not linear, as much of what I have described below occurred fluidly, sometimes simultaneously, and was often circulatory. Using thematic analysis, students' stories were first analyzed as a whole (Reissman 2008), whereby I listed all the themes that were emerging for each student. Then, using a constant comparative analysis, themes were compared to other themes within and across students' stories to see how they were similar and/or different (Merriam 2009). Furthermore, drawing pictures helped me with the analytical process. Archibald (2008) recognizes that 'by requiring visualization, the storyteller [researcher] is making the listener or learner use his/her imagination' (p. 134). This work is part of a larger study that looked at 'monsters', or challenges, that Navajo students encountered and the 'weapons', or sources, that helped them to navigate through those challenges (Tachine 2015). Within the weapons theme, trusting relationships and vulnerability emerged as one area of inquiry. I transported the analysis process to NVivo, a qualitative software used to analyze data. Codes were created, based on the themes that emerged from the prior stages that reflected my research questions and explored grandmothers' pedagogy of story sharing, openness to vulnerability, and motivation.

Guided by Indigenous Storywork's theoretical principles, I utilized mutual thinking, memo-writing, and peer review to validate the findings. For example, an important aspect in the formation of the students' stories was to ensure that they were interpreted and told correctly. I accomplished this by first offering students the opportunity to read over their interview transcripts and make corrections and/or add new information towards 'mutual thinking' where we get to know one other, including understanding cultural traditions and protocols, and establishing a consensual working approach (Lighting 1992). Secondly, I worked with students to ensure that I was culturally sensitive to their story by sending them copies of the findings and inviting them to provide feedback and make changes. Third, I utilized personal journaling and memo-writing as a way to trace personal analysis, formulate concepts, and document emerging ideas that helped to make meaning (Kovach 2009). Finally, I presented initial findings to a group of Native researchers and college students as a way to ensure that my interpretation was culturally nuanced in the students' terms. These steps were crucial to ensuring valid representation of the findings.

Findings

All ten students revealed remarkable stories of grandmothers and identified how vital their grandmothers were in guiding them through various challenges in college. Most often, grandmothers shared hardship stories with students and directed life lessons through experiential teachings. Grandmothers also comforted students while they withstood personal struggles. Because of their grandmothers' stories of

vulnerability and resiliency, life lessons, and love, students were equipped to press on towards their goals of going to college.

Story Sharing

Jessie, Sam, Joy, Amber, Cecilia, and Sarah explained that recalling and comparing their difficult experiences with their grandmothers' personal hardship stories instilled in them a determination to push through their own struggles. Amber questioned whether she would be successful in college, but remembering her grandmothers' boarding school stories made her reassess her situation. Amber stated, 'I don't know if I can do this, and they [grandmothers] would always tell me about their boarding school stories, and what they had to go through, and what a better place I am in now. My situation is for the better.' Being reminded of her grandmothers' stories of boarding school life redirected Amber to reassess her situation and then work through it. Joy had a similar experience. She shared her thoughts about listening to her grandmother speak about the past. She explained, 'It's just something about when they told me stories, like the way they endured all those difficult hardships and how much more they had to go through compared to what we go through today. A lot of the stories, you can really visualize all these things. ... Nobody else can tell stories like that.' Their grandmothers' personal stories of adversity instilled perseverance in students as they worked through their own tough circumstances. In essence, students believed that because their grandmothers had endured much more suffering, they should be able to conquer their obstacles too.

Openness to Vulnerability

While Jessie, Cecilia, Joy, Amber, and Sarah dealt with complex personal and family trials, it was the straightforward, loving advice from their grandmothers that enabled them to maneuver through their challenges. As Jessie battled depression and contemplated suicide, her great-grandmother was the only person she confided in about her personal struggles. Jessie openly discussed the significant conversation that she had with her great-grandmother:

She told me, 'You shouldn't question your life. You were put on this earth for a reason. You shouldn't take it for granted. You shouldn't take away the life that you were given.' She continued and said, 'When you were sick, you were given that second chance to live and you know the Creator thought this person is going to become somebody so I'm going to give her the chance to live longer.' And she said, 'I feel you're taking it as a joke like you don't care, like you just want to kill yourself.' And I was just like, 'oh.' I mean she didn't yell at me, she was just talking to me. It made me cry, and I said, 'No, I don't feel that way. You're not understanding me.' But it was what I needed to hear at that time. It was that relief, it was just like ok, yeah, you're right, I'm not doing something right here, I don't know what is wrong with me. Pretty much, I think she helped me. She said, 'I'm here if you

need to talk to anybody.' I have always felt that really good connection with my great-grandma.

During a time when Jessie felt alone and on the verge of despair, she confided her darkest secret of contemplating suicide to her great-grandmother. Connecting with her great-grandmother was extremely powerful for Jessie because she told Jessie that she had a purpose in life, a reason to live, and that insight was what prompted Jessie to re-evaluate her situation. Jessie's great-grandmother passed away later that December, soon after they had their talk. Jessie commented, 'I was really fortunate enough to have talked to her the way I did before she left and to have that intimate conversation with her.' Similar to Jessie, Cecilia battled depression and suicidal thoughts, and it was her paternal grandmother who gave her encouragement. Cecilia saw her as a symbol of 'strength' as she 'understood where I was coming from, especially with my experiences.' Grandmothers served as influential sources of support for students.

Motivation

The level of adoration and respect for grandparents was profound. For example, Sarah explained that her main motivation to get a college degree was to have the resources to one day provide for her grandparents. Sarah was accustomed to caring for her ailing grandmother who was battling diabetes. Her grandmother had several seizures, and it was Sarah who held and secured her grandmother when seizures struck her body. Eventually, her grandmother had to have both her legs amputated as her diabetes worsened. In tears, Sarah shared:

My grandma, she's like my best friend. It's hard because my grandma and grandpa, they both are in nursing homes now. When I was younger I promised myself; they are not going to go in there. I'm going to always be here and take care of them. But as I grew older, you know, I can't take care of my grandparents without anything to fall back on. How am I supposed to get them places if I don't have a ride [vehicle] or gas money or anything? ... And it just hurts so much. But that was my main influence. Once I get done, I will bring my grandparents home, and I don't care how much money it will take, I'm going to do it. I'm going to bring my grandparents home ... That's how much I love my grandma. That is one of my motivations, and you know knowing that I could have some money, and a home to care for them, where they would feel most comfortable, that's what gets me through you know, day to day.

During her later years of high school, Sarah's grandparents were both residing in a nursing home. She was accustomed to being near them, learning from them, and caring for them. Knowing that her grandparents were no longer living at their home-stead was distressing for Sarah. Therefore, this was a catalyst for Sarah to attain a college degree and to one day have the resources to tend to her best friends, her grandparents.

Through stories of historical adversity, intimate opportunities to disclose the private conflict, grandmothers exemplified wisdom and love to students. Having an

open and trusting relationship to be vulnerable, students were equipped to withstand adversity and overcome obstacles, and have the motivation to move forward.

Grandmothers' Pedagogy

What do I mean when I refer to grandmothers' pedagogy? I shared evidence that grandmothers' teachings of sharing stories and being open to vulnerability provide a beautiful space where students reflect upon their circumstances and are motivated to move forward through difficulties. Principles of listening, sharing stories, openness to vulnerability, trust, and motivation are traditional practices that assert and honor Indigenous ways of knowing. These powerful exchanges have been passed down from generation to generation as tools, or gifts, to help Indigenous peoples navigate through life.

Through grandmothers' pedagogy, institutions can learn from students, and reflect on and improve upon our work to support and increase students' retention and graduation rates. This process is an insightful way for practitioners and administrators to not only learn from students, who are often ignored or rendered invisible, but also provide a space for marginalized students to speak from the margins, validate their experiences, and share their stories of success.

An area of research that should be further explored is considering the gendered dynamics among Indigenous students. Indigenous men and non-gender-conforming identity groups must be included in thinking about family support and grandmothers' pedagogy. As mentioned earlier, the Navajo students in this study come from a matrilineal society in which women figures are respected and integral to family cohesion. Yet not all Navajo and Indigenous peoples should be considered as following a matrilineal worldview. There is much diversity among Indigenous peoples and, therefore, views should be critically examined and not generalized. What we must not forget is how Eurocentric frameworks of patriarchy and sexism have been embedded into our society, thus creating complex and tangled perceptions of being a woman, mother, and grandmother.

Currently, higher education and society at large do not use a grandmothers' wisdom framework to inform practice. Yet grandmothers are the pillars of many families. We can learn much from the teachings that they provide to our students and us. I believe if higher education institutions were to embody a loving, grandmother-like atmosphere and environment on our campuses, we would incorporate more programs and practices that teach others to care for one another. I am fortunate to have worked in various environments where grandmothers' practices of listening, story sharing, and openness to vulnerability have occurred. Let me share briefly what those looked like.

Arizona State University (ASU): Listening Sessions

As a postdoctoral scholar, I have worked with Dr Bryan Brayboy who fulfills many important roles at ASU. One critically important role is that of Special Assistant to ASU President for American Indian Affairs, where he works with ASU to increase retention and graduation rates for Native students. To better understand Native student concerns, he led a series of listening sessions with Native students across ASU's various college campuses. These listening sessions were built around learning from students about their college experiences, including listening to the challenges they encountered and the successful practices and programs that influenced their college matriculation. We received feedback from students indicating that they were pleased that an upper administrator took the time to not only listen to their experiences, but also fully engage in getting to know them. These listening sessions included FEM practices by providing a space where 'college staff and students can work together in building relationships based on respect' (Heavyrunner and Decelles 2002, p. 30). Moreover, grandmothers took the time to listen to students, especially regarding the challenges that they were encountering. When institutions of higher learning take the time and simply listen to Native students, by asking them what their experiences in college have been like, grandmothers' pedagogy of listening occurs.

University of Arizona (UA): Sharing Circles

To build on listening by then engaging in conversations, sharing stories, as we learned in the findings, was also found to be a crucial strategy in helping Native students in college. At the UA, a series of sharing circles – an Indigenous qualitative methodological approach – was conducted with Native college students (Tachine et al. 2016). Similar in nature to the listening sessions held at ASU, the sharing circles were an opportunity for students to share their collegial experiences. However, what was unique about UA's approach was that the sharing circles were designed as an exploratory research study led by Native graduate students and faculty in higher education, in partnership with the president of the university, vice-president of student affairs, and various student affairs leaders. The impetus of the sharing circles was similar in nature to grandmothers' pedagogy of story sharing: to learn from stories and then teach each other. For example, results from the sharing circles will be disseminated to university personnel and Tribal communities as an informative teaching tool that sheds light on the experiences of Native college students, in the hope that programs and practices will be strengthened to support their needs.

UA: Openness to Vulnerability

During a tragic period that impacted the UA Native community, I served as the director of UA's Native American Student Affairs (NASA), a Native student center that provides personal and academic support. At that crucial time, I witnessed UA open spaces for vulnerability that ultimately helped the healing process. For example, UA administrators allowed our Native student community to conduct a traditional Navajo cleansing ceremony in the residential hall where the tragedy occurred, and at NASA because of its direct connection with Native students. As I reflect back to that time, I am sure that some administrators felt uncomfortable and vulnerable participating in, and even approving, the ceremony. This scenario reminds me of when Native students shared traumatic personal stories with their grandmothers. At those difficult times, grandmothers displayed love and understanding by listening to students and meeting their grandchild where they were at. Higher education institutions like UA not only listened, but joined Native students during their times of struggle, and opened spaces for vulnerability to emerge by allowing cultural and spiritual traditions to help heal and strengthen a campus community.

Final Thoughts

Too often, in higher education, we do not take the time to nurture our Indigenous students. When we implement pedagogies that center on an ethic of care for Indigenous students, we will be informed about how to transform a campus environment into a loving and caring home environment for all students. Colleges should adopt practices where sharing circles and listening sessions are regularly applied. Careful attention and training would be needed for the people who lead such sessions to ensure that students' stories were treated with respect and not misinterpreted. Furthermore, like a tender grandmother, we must hold our children (students) during times of distress by implementing ceremonial protocols and policies that allow for students to freely practice their traditional, spiritual teachings.

From a grandmothers' perspective, we may look at college with a wiser outlook. In the college admissions selection process, we would not solely base admittance upon whether students were 'the cream of the crop,' but from a view of love and acceptance. We would see persistence not in terms of 'grade point average and credits earned,' but nurturing the development of self. We would understand that graduation is not simply completion and a bid farewell, but a stepping-stone of growth, and show this by offering continued guidance and support. We would examine our work based on the best interests of our children (our students), not the best interests of the institution or ourselves. We can learn a lot from a grandmother higher education pedagogy that honors listening, story sharing, and an openness to vulnerability.

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