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*“To My Relations...”*: A Case Study of Native American  
High School Youth Identities and Writing in an Indigenous  
College Preparatory Program

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Education

by  
Nora Alba Cisneros

2019

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

*“To My Relations...”*: A Case Study of Native American High School Youth Identities and  
Writing in an Indigenous College Preparatory Program

by

Nora Alba Cisneros

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Daniel G. Solórzano, Chair

This qualitative study examines the experiences of Native American urban high school students in an Indigenous college preparatory program. Attainment of higher education is very important to Indigenous college students, their families, their communities, and their nations (Brayboy, 2005; Quijada, 2012; Keene, 2014). However, few studies have outlined how Native American high school students make sense of higher education and how they engage in college preparation pathways. As such, this study identifies the structural challenges that limit Native American high school students’ access to higher education. Guided by the insights of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Indigenous Methodologies (Kovach, 2009) and Chicana Feminist Epistemology (Delgado Bernal, 1998), this study also illuminates how writing emerged as a salient pedagogy for affirming urban Native American students’ intersectional identities and educational aspirations.

Employing a case study method as well as Indigenous methodologies, this study focused on 20 Native American high school participants, ages 15-18, who participated in an Indigenous

college preparatory program. Eighteen out of the twenty participants self-identified as female and two students self-identified as male. The student participants attended urban public schools in Southern California while participating in a year-long college preparatory program developed by Native American educators at a public research university. Data for this study is drawn from 1) interviews of participants schooling experiences, 2) Sharing Circles, 3) participant observations, and 4) a collaborative analysis with participants of over 60 written documents (letters, essays, personal statements, and journal entries). Preliminary themes from written documents were identified and presented to student participants for a collaborative analysis and development of sharing circle protocols. Following this process, final themes were identified. Findings from the study indicated that, through an Indigenous college preparatory program, Native American youth in urban schools can be engaged as writers to imagine more just education practices, more meaningful social movements across communities, and ultimately more empowered ways of living while refusing settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. This study offers recommendations for college preparatory programs and targeted writing pedagogies to prepare Indigenous students to become competitive for baccalaureate education that contributes to the sovereignties of Indigenous peoples.

The dissertation of Nora Alba Cisneros is approved.

Douglas M. Kellner

Teresa L. McCarty

Alejandro Covarrubias

Daniel G. Solórzano, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and to the loving memory of my Tio Andres,

Hugo, Tio Chavo, and Tia Eva.

This dissertation is also dedicated to the “Indigenous Leaders,” their families, the program director, and college mentors who shared their stories, knowledges and aspirations. May creator continue to bless all their journeys within and beyond higher education.

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<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09518398.2017.1401147>

## VITA

### EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

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Honorable Mention, Ford Dissertation Year Fellowship	2017
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### PUBLICATIONS

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**Cisneros, N.A.**, Hidalgo, L., Martinez-Vu, Y., & Vega, C. (2019). "Mothers of Color in Academia: Fierce mothering challenging spatial exclusion in academia through a Chicana Feminist Praxis." In *Chicana M(otherwork) Anthology*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Cisneros, N.A. (2018). "To my relations: Writing and refusal towards an Indigenous Epistolary Methodology." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* [Special Issue edited by Sandy Grande and Teresa L. McCarty].

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### **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

Cisneros, N.A. (2019). *Raising our Waseem: Indigenous and Chicana women unsettling urban green spaces*. National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies.

Cisneros, N.A. (2018). *Tlilli, Tlapalli towards Chicana and Indigenous Feminist Writing Pedagogies*. *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS)*. El Paso, TX.

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Cisneros, N. (2017). *Gloria Anzaldua's Tlilli, Tlapalli as guiding theory and practical application for writing curriculum in Chicana Studies at an HSI*. Conference on Community Writing. University of Colorado, Boulder.

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Cisneros, N. (2015). *Cradling Chicana Indigenous Methodologies*. Critical Race Studies in Education Association Annual Conference, Vanderbilt University, TN.

Cisneros, N. A. (2012). *Testimonios from the Borderlands*. National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS), Chicago, IL.

## CHAPTER ONE: PROLOGUE AND INTRODUCTION

*Dearest semillas,*

*Your mother wrote this that you hold in your hands. This study and written dissertation defy many odds: Indigenous students have some of the lowest higher education attainment rates across the nation and yet the students in this study are all making their journey through higher education; most Chicana and Indigenous women aren't able to pursue and attain a Ph.D. and yet here I am about to become Doctora Cisneros. There are many reasons and stories for why we have these heartbreaking experiences with education, and you are already learning these reasons at your tender ages. Yet, we persist. This dissertation is for our family (past, present and future). You should feel proud of these degrees and writings since I did not accomplish this work on my own; both of you wrote this with me. I wrote while you grew inside me and, after each of you were born, I knew exactly who I was writing this work for. Your existence as Indigenous children helped bloom this dissertation, and for that you should feel pride. The doctoral degree, however, will not solely represent my worth: Educational degrees can be tools to help maintain who we have been and who we aspire to be as sovereign Indigenous Peoples. I am Chicana, Indigenous, Yoeme and Odami/Tepehuana from the lands we now know as Inglewood, Compton, Arizona, Durango, Zacatecas and Durango. This dissertation is an ofrenda I present so that you and other Indigenous students do not forget to seek Indigenous relatives wherever you may be. -Your mami*

I begin this chapter with a letter that I wrote to my children to center the importance of families and education in this study of Indigenous students and college preparation. Growing up in Los Angeles, my Mexican and Indigenous identities were shaped by relationships with my family and elders. I learned that we all have a place in this world, that there will always be a tall tree to guide us, and that there are stories, protocols and responsibilities for almost everything we do. Now as an educator and professional in higher education, I work for Indigenous<sup>1</sup> students who, like myself, are attaining professional degrees so that we may better serve our tribal communities and urban neighborhoods. I am introducing myself purposefully in this chapter

---

<sup>1</sup> I intentionally capitalize "Indigenous" in this proposal, although APA citation style suggests that "indigenous is "correct." My intention is to underscore the political nature of this word.

because I consider this study to be relational work<sup>2</sup> and because I want to persuade you of the importance of identity and education in the lives and writings of Indigenous students.

Traditionally, educational research has not been preoccupied with the specific identities, histories, aspirations and narratives of Indigenous students. This dissertation study supports the ongoing efforts by Indigenous educators to illuminate the educational state of Indigenous<sup>3</sup> youth. Within the last few years, the California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center at California State University San Marcos has delivered landmark publications: *State of American Indian and Alaskan Native Education in California* (2012) and *Redbook: Southern California American Indian Education Resources* (2014). These publications are significant for a couple of reasons. Firstly, these publications were entirely conceived, researched, written and edited by California American Indian education leaders and funded with the support of various southern California Tribal nations. Secondly, these are the first publications to systematically provide an understanding of the educational issues and resources within the American Indian and Alaskan Native populations in California. Sources such as these have been sorely missing from the educational research because Native student population is commonly deemed as ‘statistically insignificant’.

Another landmark publication on Indigenous education, *Beyond the Asterisk: Understanding Native Students in Higher Education* (2013) also serves as an impetus for serving Native American students through this dissertation study. As referenced in the title, the

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<sup>2</sup> In Indigenous writing, a prologue creates a space for expressing communal relations while serving as a bridging function for non-Indigenous readers (Kovach, 2009): we give enough information about our lineages, where we were raised and who our descendants are. It feels different in writing, but this is one of the ways in which Indigenous folks relate.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this proposal I use *AI/AN*, *Native* or *Native American*, and *Indigenous* interchangeably. There is a wide range and variation among the over 500 tribal nation groups in the United States. The purpose of my proposal, however, is to offer an overview of the literature that addresses these groups broadly and the terms that may prevail in the Lit Review are Native American and American Indian. In the findings chapters I use term Indigenous as this is the term most used by participants and program staff.



“American Indian research asterisk”, or not including data on Indigenous students on account of low numbers and/or low statistical significance, has prevailed over student education research and limited the willingness of researchers to engage this population in their work (Garland, 2007, p.612; Lowe, 2005). Indigenous student enrollment is often the smallest at public institutions and, therefore, is often excluded from analyses. Another factor related to the asterisk phenomenon occurs when Indigenous data are collected, at the institutional or national levels, and then reported alongside other racial and ethnic groupings. Among racial/ethnic data groupings, Native American data often become statistically powerless and therefore unreliable in comparison. Subsequently, data about Indigenous, Native American, and American Indian students are generally not reported or discussed within quantitative or qualitative educational research studies (Garland, 2010).

I have found, in my talks with other Indigenous students, educators and community members, that there is a shared frustration over the asterisk phenomenon (“we are NOT insignificant!”) as well a strong agreement that asterisk associated research language and mentality, such as “not statistically significant” (Lowe, 2005, p. 39) is rooted in a deficit perspective of Indigenous populations. As a teacher and college mentor for Indigenous students, I understand that the success of my students in higher education depends on understanding their unique histories, strengths, and needs. Unfortunately, where California’s Indigenous students are concerned, their exclusion from institutional data and curriculum has contributed to their overall neglect and invisibility across the three tiers of public higher education<sup>4</sup>. Inspired by these scholarly publications of Indigenous education, this study of Indigenous high school students in a college preparatory program in California further disrupts the asterisk phenomenon in education.

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<sup>4</sup> The three tiers of higher education in California refer to the Community Colleges, California State Universities and University of California.

## **Organization of This Chapter**

This introductory chapter outlines the context of my dissertation as well as the two guiding questions for this study. I first provide context for California's Native American populations and reservations since approximately half of the student participants in the study belong to or are connected culturally with these tribal nations. I then include some of the available statistics to illustrate the current state of educational attainment for Indigenous students in California. Lastly, I outline the theoretical, methodological and practical significance of my dissertation study.

## **Introduction**

The disparities in Native American educational attainment are alarming. Native American students in California have dismal educational attainment rates and they experience disproportionate levels of college readiness across the educational pipeline. In addition, universities have disproportionately low enrollment of Native American students. The educational experiences of Native American students are shaped by endemic structural and institutional colonization, racism and white supremacy (Lomawaima, 1995; Smith, 1999). Nevertheless, Native American students maintain high educational aspirations (Brayboy, 2005; Deyhle, 1995).

## **Indigenous Peoples in California**

In 2010, California had the largest population of AI/AN alone (362,801); the second-largest AI/AN population was in Oklahoma (321,687), followed by Arizona (296,529). California represents 14 percent of the total AI/AN-alone population in the United States. California has more than 720,000 AI/AN citizens (alone or in combination with another race) residing in both rural and urban communities. Ten California counties are included in the top 50

U.S. counties with the highest AI/AN-alone populations. In addition, Los Angeles, San Diego and Riverside Counties are among the top 20 in that group. California's Indigenous population consists of a significant number of members of tribes and nations not based in California. More than half of the Native Americans living in California are members of tribes located outside of California (*CFCC Research Update, 2012*).

California's Native American communities include descendants or members of 108 California- based federally recognized tribes (about 20 percent of all tribes in the United States). As of 2008, an additional 74 tribes in California are petitioning for federal recognition (*CFCC Research Update, 2012*). As of 2005, only 3 percent of California's AI/AN population lived on a reservation or rancherias. Although California has the largest tribal population in the United States, it has very little tribal land. (See appendix 1). Moreover, in 2010, the majority of the AI/AN-alone population (67 percent) and the majority of the AI/AN- in-combination population (92 percent) lived outside of tribal areas (Norris, Vine & Hoeffel, 2012). The present reservations in California represent a dynamic and complex history of legal and cultural arrangements between American Indian nations and local, state and federal governments. These dynamic histories impact how tribal nations engage education within and beyond their reservations. Given that some of the student participants in this study are relatives to these nations or had cultural connections to these communities, the histories of California reservations deserve a lengthier discussion and will be covered in the second chapter.

### **California's Native American Student Educational Outcomes**

The topic of higher education preparation and access for Native American students in California is important. A lack of access to higher education and dismal college readiness hinder the educational trajectories of Native American students. Examining educational attainment

exposes educational disparities. When compared to whites, American Indians experience disparities in high school graduation, college preparation, and college graduation rates. In 2011, California had 382,558 graduating students, of which AI/AN's made up .7%. The following information pertains to the data released by the California Department of Education (CDE) for the 2007 cohort.

In California, 21% of American Indian/Alaska Native students did not graduate from high school, which is higher than every other racial group outside of Latino/Hispanics (*State of AI/AN Education in California, 2012*). California's overall push-out rate for the 2007 cohort was 14.4%. The 2007 AI/AN student cohort dropout rate was 20.7%, which was 6.3% higher than the state average. Overall, 40% of the 2007 cohort graduates completed the required courses for UC and /or CSU entrance. For the AI/AN students in that cohort, that percentage was about 13% lower than the state average. The 27% of AI/AN students who completed the UC/CSU entrance requirements was the lowest of any race/ethnicity.

### **Access to Higher Education**

Even though progress has been made in aggregate for Native American enrollment in higher education over the past twenty years, little has changed with respect to the types of institutions at which Native American students are enrolled. Data show that Native Americans continue to be underrepresented both in the more prestigious private and four-year sectors of higher education. Native Americans are also noticeably underrepresented among college degree recipients (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001b), and this underrepresentation occurs at all degree levels.

Moreover, California's Native American students are severely underrepresented across the three-tiers of higher education. The following information regarding California's Native

American students in higher education come from *The State of American Indian/Alaska Native Education in California Report* (2012) by the California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center at California State University San Marcos. At the community college level, American Indian enrollment for the 2010-2011 school year was about .6%. At the CSU level, AI/AN enrollment for Fall 2011 was about .4% and within the UC system, AI/AN enrollment for Fall 2011 was about .7%. One of the factors leading to disproportionate representation may be that only 40% of California's American Indian high school graduates fulfill UC/CSU entrance requirements, which is 13% lower than the state average

In summary, this section outlined the educational inequities experienced by diverse Native American populations in present-day California. The inequities that Native American students encounter in accessing higher education are rooted in ongoing histories of colonialism, white supremacy and patriarchy. These systems of domination are replicated in the excessive disciplines, expulsions, and attrition rates in high schools that Native American students experience, as well as lack of resources for their preparation and successful matriculation into high education institutions.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

In this study, I originally planned to examine the connections between pedagogical practices and college pathways in the Indigenous College preparatory program. I was interested in the degree to which the various pedagogies within the program could influence students' subsequent higher education journeys. Throughout the course of my participation in the program, initially as general mentor and then as a writing mentor, and in the process of data analysis, my study broadened to identify the structural challenges in preparing for college experienced by student participants as well as identifying the practices and relationships fostered within the

college prep program that shaped students' perspectives of higher education and their identities, and how all these shifts were expressed in their writing. Thus, this dissertation study identifies practices and pedagogies that can effectively serve Indigenous youth in a variety of ways as they prepare for higher education. The following research questions guide my study:

1. *What are the structural challenges that impact the access of college preparation for Indigenous students?*
2. *What are the pedagogies in a college preparatory program that support Indigenous students' identities and higher education aspirations?*

### **Significance of Study**

This study has several implications for educational theorists, researchers, and practitioners. Building on the tenets of Tribal Critical Race Theory (CRT), this study documents Native American youth analyzing and respond to colonialism, racism, white supremacy, and gender-based oppressions in their educational contexts. Native American youth in this study understood that the stories they told about their self-education and their families' histories indeed outlined theories of education and self-determination. The students' understanding of higher education was shaped by their cultural inheritance and relationships with Indigenous communities and they requested that the college preparation activities reflect those cultural values. In other words, the students' strategic adaptations of higher education goals to align with their cultural values advances Tribal CRT as praxis.

For Critical Race theorists in Education, Indigenous Feminisms and Chicano/a Studies, this study will hopefully offer an example of a more explicit conversation between these fields. More empirical work that documents in detail how the insights of Chicana feminist epistemology and Indigenous Feminisms are employed in college outreach work with youth is needed to raise

new questions and push the boundaries of these traditions. With the work of scholars in critical race theory in education (Delgado Bernal 1998, Delgado Bernal 2001, Solórzano & Delgado Bernal 2001) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005; Tachine, 2014) this conversation has begun, yet room for growth remains. The navigational strategies employed by Indigenous and Chicana feminists have applications for accessing, preparing for and challenging higher education attainment.

This study also makes significant contributions to Qualitative Research by engaging Chicana Feminist Epistemologies and creative writing in a study of Indigenous students' access to higher education pathway. Chicana feminists (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002) argue that documenting and theorizing about the lived experiences of colonized women *through creative writing* is vital for challenging the simplistic notions of difference and oppression of non-dominant people. In this dissertation study, I employed creative writing as a generative tool to document, analyze and represent qualitative data. I created letters, poetry, and short stories to provide richer illustrations of what I was experiencing during my fieldwork. The creative writing practices I developed became central spaces from which I could affirm my multiple and intersecting identities and social locations as a Chicana-Indigenous-Mother scholar. By actively incorporating more creative writing practices into my qualitative research, I was able to more fully reflect on my work as a mentor for the students in the program: through the use of letters, poetry and short stories, I was able to engage and affirm the emotions I experienced in mentoring Indigenous youth through the thoughts, feelings and memories that emerged often quite suddenly in our meetings.

This study also illuminates practices for serving Indigenous students through college preparation programs. At some universities there are long standing college-prep programs, such

as the Tribal Resources in Business, Engineering, and Science (TRIBE) program at the University of New Mexico, geared specifically to serve and prepare college-bound Native American students. Native American students can earn college credit, gain understanding of university knowledge, and learn how to examine tribal governance across various Native American nations (Youngbull, 2018). While college-bound students are encouraged to participate by their respective nations to participate in the six-week residential TRIBES program, there are Native American students with differential degrees of tribal affiliation that may not be exposed by their nations to such college-prep programs and opportunities. Also, some of the available general college access and readiness programs fail to consider that schooling and higher education are institutions in which Indigenous students are met with colonialism, racism and culturally inappropriate practices. The specific practices of an Indigenous college preparatory program outlined thru this study will motivate practitioners to develop models of college readiness that represent the ways in which Indigenous students use their cultural knowledge to ascertain preparation for higher education and beyond.

### **Dissertation Outline**

The first chapter in this dissertation establishes the purpose of the study. In Chapter Two, I review the three principal bodies of literature that I draw from to situate my dissertation case study. In Chapter Three, I delineate the theoretical frameworks and methodologies I utilized in the research design for this study. As part of the research design, I outline my positionality in this study. I then describe how students in the Indigenous college preparatory program gathered to participate in this study as well as how we collaborated in the analytical process. Chapter Four addresses the findings for research question one by outlining some of the structural challenges that impact the access of Indigenous students for higher education. Chapter Five addresses



research question two by describing how writing emerged as one of the salient pedagogies in which Indigenous students affirmed their identities and educational aspirations. Finally, in Chapter Six, I highlight the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study. I also outline recommendations for college preparatory programs and for educators seeking to better serve Indigenous students.

### **EPILOGUE: Why We write<sup>5</sup>**

*But Ms., why do we have to write?  
Don't they see we're tired?  
I had to get on 3 buses to get here  
And I don't have the monies to go to college anyways*

*My parents made sure I had enough lunch  
I saw my grandmother making these sandwiches at 5am before she left for work  
I won't see her until after her second shift ends  
So, Ms., don't they see we're tired?*

*Teachers tell us that college is a must  
That a degree will help us give back  
But the college counselor doesn't stop by our classroom  
Guess we're not intelligent enough or AP enough  
But they don't see giving back or intelligence like we do  
They don't see our tribes and how they give back all the time  
As water protectors  
As elders up early making sure we don't go hungry  
As writers learning to write  
So, Ms., don't they see we're tired?*

*Some of us are really good at school, Ms.  
Most of us are doing our best in school even though we're tired.  
Most of us will make it to college and beyond, Ms.  
But all of us are brave for showing that Indigenous peoples are here.  
This is why we write.*

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<sup>5</sup> The purposes of this chapter are to share why this dissertation study matters for educators and to provide a preview of how the dissertation is organized. This closing epilogue can be read as a creative interpretation of the themes raised in this dissertation and is inspired by one of many such conversations between students and myself during the program.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the relevant literature that informed and guided this study. According to Boote and Beile (2005), the purpose of a literature review is to “advance our collective understanding of the topic” by understanding the types of research that have been conducted before, and to “know the strengths and weaknesses of existing studies” (p. 3). The literature review also ensures that a study’s findings contribute to the scholarly field. Therefore, my case study of Indigenous high school students in a college preparatory program in Southern California draws from three main bodies of literature. I begin with an overview of the historical context of Native American education, with a focus on California’s Indigenous peoples’ history. Next, I provide an examination of the contemporary topics in the education of Native American students, including the documented effective practices in curriculum, pedagogy as well as online learning. This literature guides us in our examination of the pedagogies and education practices that emerged in the college preparatory program. Finally, I include an examination of Native American identity literature and provide a synthesis of the issues that are most salient to consider for educational attainment.

### **Historical Context of Native American Education**

Several scholars delineate the history of Native American educational experiences into eras reflecting established systems of federal power (Grande, 2004; Szasz, 1999; Thompson, 1978). Grande (2004) listed these eras as:

- (1) Period of missionary domination, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries
- (2) Period of federal government domination from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries; and,
- (3) Period of self-determination from the mid-twentieth century to the present

The delineated eras above are relevant to the experience of most Native American peoples, including those in California. Clustering the educational experiences of Native American into these three epochs provides a helpful organizational perspective of the federal trends and policies and, therefore, I use them for my review of education.

### **Indigenous Education: older than colonization!**

Western education for Indigenous peoples was predicated on the belief that Indigenous societies had no education structures of their own and that their religions and culture were ‘savage’ (Lomawaima, 1999; Grande, 2004). Therefore, as a critical Scholar of Color, it is imperative for me to begin my review of American Indian education by illuminating Indigenous education practices and structures prior to European colonization. Furthermore, as an Indigenous scholar, I feel the responsibility to remind readers that our cultures, religions, oral traditions and kinship practices are our education, and these precede and survive European colonization. Our worldviews, histories and localized knowledges have always been foundations for the survival and continuity of Indigenous communities.

Contrary to the larger colonizing narrative, American Indian children indeed did experience an indigenous education: their education was integrated into the tribe's community life (Grande, 2004; Klug & Whitfield, 2003). Indigenous cultures constantly evolved and changed through time and teaching children how to maintain and/or adapt to their environments was central to their ways of life. In preparation for tribal life, children listened to the stories told by elders, worked with adults, and participated in ceremonies that reflected the customs of the clans (Grande, 2004; Spring, 2001; Szasz, 2007). Because American Indian languages were oral and not written, knowledge regarding educational practices was shared through stories and songs. Understanding the sacred stories of the cultures in California has been a challenge for

outsiders since some Indigenous communities do not share their most sacred details. However, teaching and learning the myths through oral and other specific manual traditions (such as basket weaving and ceramics) remain a salient form of formal education for many of California's Indigenous peoples.

### **California's Indigenous Peoples in the Missionary Period**

The 21 missions and four military presidios along present day California were designed to convert the Indigenous to a Catholic life and use them as a compliant source of cheap labor for the Spanish crown (Shipek 1978). While separate schools were not formed at first, the friars imparted basic Spanish literacy that led to informal small centers of schooling across missions (Noriega, 1992). The friars desired to convert Indigenous peoples to Catholicism to establish a docile workforce for the Spanish government. Any formal schooling of the peoples of California was strictly for religious and work-related purposes. For example, California Indians on missions learned how to play European musical instruments for mass (Shipek, 1978).

The education imparted by California missionaries also attempted to change kinship relations among Indigenous peoples to comply with Catholic practices and beliefs (Forbes, 1982). The kinship and intimate lives of Indigenous peoples in California represented a variety of relations that were passed on thru explicit cultural practices such as kinship taboos, clan identifications, puberty sponsorships and lineage rules<sup>6</sup>. Family units among the Serrano, Cahuilla and Diegueno were patrilineal, nuclear and often included sororal polygyny and levirate unions. Marriage variations facilitated distribution of resources and the preservation of kinship relations. Some of these practices changed when Spanish missionaries introduced monogamy and baptism. Missionaries enforced baptismal sponsorships across clans, thus undermining

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<sup>6</sup> The role and significance of Indigenous families and kinship systems offers potentially illuminating perspectives on California's history and I will include a lengthier discussion of this in future developments of this dissertation work and analyses.

traditional patrilineal apprenticeships within clans (Costo & Costo, 1987). Despite these changes, it is important to note that California's Indigenous peoples transported many of their pre-contact kinship practices to the mission system, such as inter-village ceremonies.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, while the missionary period is mostly remembered for the church and state convergence to advance imperialism (Grande, 2004), the descendants of those Indigenous populations remind us that their ancestral relations resisted and survived. As evidenced by the many kinds of resistance employed by California Indians such as rebellions, runaways, abortion, suicide, and poor efforts at labor, the Spanish were never completely successful at converting Indian people to Catholicism [Castillo (1987) 73; Forbes 47-48]. For example, in 1734, the Indigenous peoples of present Baja California organized a mass insurrection that took the Spanish soldiers almost two years to suppress. In 1785, Toypurina, a young Indigenous woman led a mass revolt at the San Gabriel Mission in Alta California. In 1801, the goddess Chupu appeared to a Chumash woman at the Santa Barbara Mission and gave her a prophecy against Catholic baptism that would inflame the missionaries and nourish Chumash resistance

### **An Intersectionality note: California Indigenous Women and Education**

When researching early Indigenous education history, researchers should actively pursue women's voices, both Native and non-Native, in order to create more inclusive and complex perspectives. Some accounts of Native educational practices outside of California appear in early explorer/settler descriptions of Indian culture. Christopher Columbus wrote that Indian women were "very gentle and without knowledge of...evil... They love their neighbors as themselves,

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<sup>7</sup> A detailed history of the mission system is beyond the scope of this dissertation; however, aforementioned aspects of mission history such as education and changes in family structures and ceremonial practices are relevant to the current legal status of many of California's native peoples. Ceremonies are not metaphors; they are rites that restore balance between human and non-human beings as well as an expression of culture (Deloria,). When Indigenous peoples are prevented from the daily responsibilities of tending to ceremonies and their land, their relationships become fragmented and their belonging to that place is threatened.

and have the sweetest talk in the world, and gentle, and always with a smile" (Takaki, 1993, p. 32).

Currently, there are a few books on notable California's Native American women, primarily the women who have been culture bearers in times of tumultuous changes, such as Delfina Cuero (Kumeyaay), a very famous and influential American Indian woman spent her years transnationally between the San Diego area and northern Mexico. The Kumeyaay Nation (the group closest to San Diego is known as the Ipai, the peoples in Mexico as the Tipai) are often identified as "Diegueño" due to their removal in 1769 from their traditional lands to the first Spanish Mission in Alta California, San Diego de Alcalá. Born in 1900, Cuero fought European-imposed gender roles, ideals of womanhood and national borders to maintain her traditions. She passed on her extensive knowledge of Kumeyaay ethnogeography and ethnobotany due to her inheritance of oral tradition (sacred) and oral history (everyday), so that despite the personal struggles with racism throughout her lifetime, Cuero persevered and lived where and how she chose at the end of her days. Unfortunately, Delfina Cuero's contributions to the survival of the Kumeyaay people will not be found in any standard California history textbook nor will you come across her or other notable California Indian women [such as Alice Piper (Paiute), Pilulaw Khus (Chumash)] in most education history books. This is just one illustration of how gendering the educational experiences of Native Americans can yield more nuanced questions and discussions. This is also an illustration of why I am committed to looking for gender and tribal-specific histories in my research of Native American education in Southern California.

## **U.S Federal Domination: Genocide and Reservations**

When the United States took possession of California, the exploitation of Indigenous peoples intensified leading to the near collapse of southern California populations such as the Serrano and Cahuilla peoples (Costo & Costo, 1987). California's U. S. leadership wanted the policies of removal continued, and in 1849 California's Constitutional Convention denied Native people political and legal rights by denying them both the right to vote and the right to testify against Anglo- Americans. In 1850 the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians was passed, codifying an 1846 U.S. Proclamation that criminalized unemployed indigenous peoples and forced them into private labor contracts or public work. Native people in California, under the proclamation, could not leave their employer without written permission. Until it was repealed in 1863, this act permitted nothing less than the legalized slavery of Indians. This also encouraged the widespread kidnaping of Indian children.

## **Education for California's Native Children**

Historical investigation of education for American Indians in California has not been robust. California's first common school act made no mention of Indians or any other non-white group (Beck, 1987). It simply directed the superintendent of instruction to direct school funds to counties based on the whole number of children in the state, between the ages of five and eighteen years (Beck, 1987). When a new act was adopted in 1855, however, it directed to county superintendents to allocate school funds in the county treasury among the various towns, cities, and school districts in proportion to the number of white children residing there, between the ages of four and eighteen years. This new act did not exclude Indians and other non-whites from the public schools, but the insertion of the word 'white' clearly indicated that the legislature had in mind all-white schools. The sporadic presence of Indian and Black children in a few

otherwise white schools in the late 1860's produced a public backlash, and the Legislature again amended the school act in 1870 (Beck, 1987). While expanding the role of the schools in significant ways, the lawmakers left it clear that they wanted a racially segregated system. By 1889 the government was determined to promote non-reservation boarding schools for the schooling of American Indian children<sup>8</sup>.

Few federal educational resources were helpful for California Indians (Golberg & Champagne, 1996). During the late 1800s, there were a few federal boarding schools established in California: Tule River, Round Valley, Middle Town in Lake County, the Hoopa Valley Reservation, Perris and Fort Bidwell (Goldberg & Champagne, 1996). The Perris boarding school was moved to Riverside in 1890 and became the Sherman Institute.

### **Sherman Institute: California's off-reservation boarding school**

Sherman Institute in Riverside, California has received limited attention in the boarding school literature despite its longevity and prominent role in the education of various generations of American Indian students<sup>9</sup>. A brief discussion of Sherman is important because many Native generations attended Sherman Institute, including current tribal and education leaders in southern California<sup>10</sup>. Sherman Institute was an extension of the Perris Indian School located in Perris, California. Perris Indian School was opened in 1892 and the student population quickly outgrew the facilities, leading to the opening of Sherman Institute. Located on Magnolia Avenue in the city of Riverside, Sherman became the nation's 25<sup>th</sup> off-reservation boarding school in 1901. The school was built, in the words of then Senator George C. Perkins, to "enable the Indian, who can

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<sup>8</sup>In the late 1860s reservation day schools preceded off-reservation boarding schools but these quickly fell out of favor since their proximity to tribal communities trumped goals of speedy assimilation. By late 1870s policymakers began calling for total insulation from tribal life for Indian children (Wallace, 1995).

<sup>9</sup>To date, only a small number of articles have been published regarding Sherman Institute. *The Indian School on Magnolia Avenue: Voices and Images from Sherman Institute* (2012) is the first book to be published on Sherman Indian School.

<sup>10</sup>Opmi Indian school, the site for my case-study, has a robust history and relation to Sherman Institute as they are proximal in geographical location and current tribal administration and education leaders at Opmi Reservation attended Sherman.



no longer exist in a wild state,...to meet the requirements of modern progress” (quoted in Trafzer, Gilbert & Sisquoc, 2012). Senator Perkins comments, along with Sherman’s earliest mission statements and other archived documents are evidence of the racist and colonial rhetoric of manifest destiny and provide the rationale for another school dedicated to assimilation.

Although the supporters of Sherman Institute may not describe their intentions as cultural genocide, they indeed espoused complete assimilation of Native American youth via their labor-intensive curriculum, severe disciplinary policies, and lack of concern for students (Trafzer & Loupe, 2013) Educators did not generally educate nor encourage children to return to their reservations. Sherman taught Native children only the most rudimentary curriculum and focused intensely on vocational work. Students had a gendered curriculum in that girls were employed in local domestic work with non-Native families and boys in off-campus work-study programs. School records and personal stories indicate that officials were not generally inclined to encourage native students to pursue higher education. Nevertheless, some Sherman students such as Viola Martinez (Paiute) and Frank Clarke managed to pursue higher education in the late 1930’s. Like many other native students at boarding schools, Sherman students employed various techniques to resist forced assimilation, such as running away, working poorly in their places of employment and secretly maintaining their languages. Sherman continued to operate during many transitional periods in the landscape of American Indian education. Trafzer et al (2012) book includes oral histories from Sherman alumni that clearly illuminate the complexity and importance of native student agency. Sherman remains a significant regional educational setting for many tribal leaders in California as well as for students from across California’s tribal nations.

## **American Indian Higher Education and Self-Determination**

A thorough review of American Indian higher education is beyond the scope of this review, but some aspects of this history are essential and have been succinctly put together by historians such as Cary Michael Carney. The federal period in which boarding schools were established was also characterized by a growth in the establishment of colleges, including institutions for African Americans and women, from the late 1800s to the early 1900s (Carney, 1999, Tippeconnic Fox et al., 2005). However, despite this growth in higher education, American Indian higher education remained focused on vocational training (Carney, 1999; Tippeconnic Fox et al., 2005). Overall, sustained patterns of dismal enrollment and retention in higher education persisted for American Indians until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **American Indian Education History summary**

In this section, I delineated some of the historical underpinnings of American Indian education in order to contextualize the current dismal experiences of current American Indian students. Centuries of assimilation, genocide, colonial imperialism, white supremacy and segregation should not be forgotten when considering the challenges and strengths that Native students face. American Indian communities have also exerted resistance and agency for their students (Brayboy, 2005; Carney, 1999; Fann, 2009, Smith, 1999). As a result, there have been widespread efforts by tribes to address the unique position of American Indian students. In the next section I review some of the prominent themes in contemporary American Indian education that are relevant for my proposal to document curriculum and pedagogies in southern California.

## Contemporary American Indian Education Context

### Criteria for selecting the Literature

In preparation for this section, I identified and reviewed over peer-reviewed articles and book chapters reporting education research with American Indian students. My review consisted of a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary references from four social sciences databases (ERIC, EBSCO, JSTOR and ProQuest). My review is not meant to be exhaustive (e.g., I recognize that some American Indian education studies are not easily recognized as such and may have evaded my search); however, on the basis of my knowledge of the literature, my identified sources appear to approximate the diversity of topics and approaches that are commonly used in research with American Indians students in education. In planning my review of American Indian contemporary education, I relied on Cooper's (1988) Taxonomy of Literature Reviews to support my approach in conducting a *purposive sample* in which I examined only the central or pivotal articles or books in the field.

In terms of topics, more than half of the articles I read addressed educational disparities and support for the use of culturally responsible schooling (CRS). Because of space limitations, I provide only a concise summary of these topics and approaches here. In the following pages, I first provide a brief discussion of the importance of Indian control of education and the salient factors commonly found in successful tribally controlled schools. I then proceed to summarize the curriculum and teaching practices researchers have found to work best in the education of American Indian students. Finally, I provide a synthesis of the limited research on the experiences of American Indian students with online learning environments.

## **Indian Control of Education**

It is important to foreground my discussion of curriculum and pedagogy by briefly discussing the meaning of Indian control of education, as I believe this is the impetus for the changes that are taking place in education across Indigenous communities in California<sup>11</sup>. Indian control of education is defined by Tippeconnic (2000) as when “Indian people have the power to decide what their youth and adults are to be taught, how they will be taught and what human and fiscal resources will be used to support teaching and learning-- without outside forces influencing or dictating the educational system” (p. 44). Tippeconnic (2000) further discussed how two of these terms differ:

The most significant difference is between tribal control and local community control—with tribal control meaning the actual tribal government is in control as opposed to education controlled by community members, usually on school boards. Tribal control is in keeping with the government-to-government relationship and the federal policy of tribal self-determination. Parent involvement does not necessarily mean tribal control.” (p. 44).

Tippeconnic’s discussion is significant because contemporary Indian control of education, and tribal control of education specifically, is not always clearly recognized in urban settings where Indigenous students may represent various tribal nations or may have differential relationships with their respective tribes. Half of the students in the program identified with tribal nations across California and, although they attended large public schools away from their tribal nations’ residential areas, had been exposed to their tribal nation’s control of education via

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<sup>11</sup> Indian control of education is also a phrase that’s commonly used among Native scholars and tribal leadership. ‘Indian control’, ‘self-determination’, ‘tribal control’, and ‘local control’ are terms that are used interchangeably in federal policy discourse, but these terms can have different meanings depending on which educational system is being referenced.

intertribal community events. Some of the students in the program had less regular contact with their tribal communities because their tribal nations are outside of California or because their families had not developed close relationships with their respective tribes. These different dynamics for Indigenous students from urban locations are important for educators to consider so we can more directly seek and compensate tribal nations for their active involvement with students across distances and geographic spaces.

Indian control of education has a long history and can be traced back to 1835 when tribes such as the Choctaw and Cherokee operated their own schools that incorporated tribal and the English languages into their studies (DeJong, 1993; Deloria, 1974; Fuchs & Havinghurst, 1972; Szasz & Ryan, 1972; Tippeconnic, 1999). The Choctaw and Cherokee decided what they wanted in their schools as far as curriculum. Other tribes also wanted to determine the kind of education that would be provided for their children and, with the help of community action programs, took it upon themselves to establish relevant educational alternatives. One such effort during the 1960s was Rough Rock Demonstration School in Arizona, established by the Navajo in 1966.

Teresa McCarty's *A Place to be Navajo- Rough Rock and the Struggle for Self-Determination in Indigenous Schooling* (2002) documented the efforts of tribal community-based educational initiatives in Indigenous language maintenance. Since its inception, Rough Rock School remained under close scrutiny and received numerous delegations such as politicians and educators from Washington, D.C. and from other tribal nations (Szasz, 1977). Rough Rock designed a K-12 Navajo Materials Development project and introduced an inquiry-based Navajo Language and Culture Curriculum, as well as a multi-year collaboration with Hawaii's Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP), followed by an eight-year teacher inquiry initiative known as the Rough Rock English-Navajo Language Arts Program and yielded

innovative bilingual instructional materials, approaches, and strategies that have been influential for other tribally controlled schools. Today, there are 123 out of 183 BIA funded schools that are contract or grant schools, suggesting that tribal nations are moving away from sole BIE control and moving to some variant of Indian control of education.

Senese (1986) and Snyder-Joy (1994) have also written about the challenges that tribes have faced in taking control of education. They contend that, although the passage of the Indian Education and Self-Determination Act of 1975 and the successes of Rough Rock encouraged other tribes to gain control of their schools, many of those efforts have often been hindered by Bureau of Indian Education control and state standardized testing standards. Currently, the Bureau of Indian Education states its mission:

As stated in Title 25 CFR Part 32.3, BIE's mission is to provide quality education opportunities from early childhood through life in accordance with a tribe's needs for cultural and economic wellbeing, in keeping with the wide diversity of Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages as distinct cultural and governmental entities (<http://www.bie.edu/index.htm>).

While this statement acknowledges that the education of American Indian students in BIE schools should conform to the cultural and economic needs of the tribe, this does not necessarily mean that the BIE allows or supports full tribal control of education. Moreover, students in BIE schools perform consistently below American Indian students in public schools on national and state assessments. For example, based on a 2011 study using data from the National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP), BIE 4th graders scored on average 22 points lower in reading and 14 points lower in math than Indian students attending public schools. The gap in scores is even wider when the average for BIE students is compared to the national average for non-Indian

students. Furthermore, in reviewing the data on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2012-13, the Study Group found that only one out of four BIE-funded schools, including both tribally controlled and BIE-operated schools, met the state-defined proficiency standards. These performance indicators suggest that factors about the BIE system compound the social and economic disadvantages of American Indian students.

The descriptions of Indian controlled education, the current BIE mission statement and dismal outcomes of BIE schools are important for my study of college preparation, pedagogies and higher education pathways for Indigenous students. While none of the students in the program attended tribally controlled high schools, the literature on Indian controlled education and my experiences as a college mentor with Indigenous students allow me to assert that Indian control of education can vary widely and provide guidance for educators of Indigenous students in urban settings. Thus, it is important to review some of the characteristics of schools that are fully under tribal control.

### **Tribally Controlled Schools**

Recent studies have identified that a number of factors are critical if the education of American Indians/Alaska Natives is to improve and serve the interests of tribal nations (Tribal Leaders Speak: The State of Indian Education, U.S Department of Education, 2010; BIE American Indian Education Study Group, 2014). One of the most prominent factors in the reports is tribal control of education. Because of the nuances of Indian control of education, I think it is pertinent for me to further consider the factors of successful tribally controlled schools for higher education preparation programs.

Campbell's (2010) study of leadership at two tribally controlled schools in the Midwest describes how leaders at these schools operationalized and institutionalized tribal control of

education to meet each tribe's own unique needs. Campbell's study focused on participant perspective of tribal control and her findings indicated that the interviewees wanted their students to be academically prepared with a foundation in their languages and cultures. The participants also wanted students to pursue their goals and to bring back home their knowledge if they chose to. Campbell's findings are illustrative of the underpinning thoughts and motivations for tribally controlled schools. Because Campbell's study did not include an in-depth study of curriculum and pedagogy at the two schools, I am inclined to suggest that the curriculum and pedagogies at tribally controlled schools (and variations thereof) should be systematically studied. Campbell summarized the following six factors as necessary components of successful tribally controlled schools:

1. *Meaningful community and tribal involvement and control* (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1991; McCoy, 1991; Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969; Synder-Joy, 1994; Tippeconnic, 2000).

2. *Meaningful parental involvement* (Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969; Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1991;).

3. *A relevant curriculum that recognizes and integrates tribal histories, cultures, and languages* (Meriam Report, 1928; Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969; Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1991).

4. *Increased numbers of American Indian/Alaska Natives to serve as principals, teachers, counselors and other professional educators in schools* (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1991; Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969;).



5. *Recognition of the unique tribal sovereignty status, based on treaties, court decisions and acts of Congress* (McCoy, 1991; Special Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969; White House Conference on Indian Education, 1992;).

6. *Use teaching methods that integrate American Indian/Alaska Native culture and languages* (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1991; Reyhner, 1997; Swisher-Deyhle, 1992; White House Conference on Indian Education, 1992).

These factors, some of which were first identified in the Merriam Report, continue to appear in current government reports and studies (Campbell, 2010). These factors have proven difficult, if not impossible, to implement in BIE-funded schools and are even less likely to be considered by urban public-school educators and leaders. The 6 components outlined above can be useful in guiding the design and implementation of a college preparation program that can largely be influenced by various tribal nations.

### **Best Practices with American Indian Students: Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Pedagogy**

For my review of the practices that work best when teaching Native students, I relied heavily on the reviews contributed by scholars such as Castagno & Brayboy (2008), Demmert (2001) and Hillberg & Tharpe (2002). Castagno and Brayboy's (2008) review of the literature on culturally responsive schooling (CRS) is insightful for understanding how curriculum and pedagogy affect Indigenous students. Demmert (2001) also conducted an extensive literature review of a 20-year period and provided summary and evidence of what works and what does not work when teaching American Indian students<sup>12</sup>. Demmert contends that there are several factors that "Even in classrooms consisting exclusively of a single cultural group, as is the case

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<sup>12</sup> I want to underscore now that there is no generic American Indian student, but extensive research has shown what benefits the learning needs of many Native students.

in many reservation schools, teachers must use a variety of instructional strategies. Effective teaching of American Indian students requires a flexible learning environment (Hilberg & Tharpe, 2002) and experiential, hands-on, and active learning strategies should be used (Reyhner, 2001). In order to build new learning out of prior knowledge, reflective processing should be integrated (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). Cooperative learning has also been found to be useful in classrooms (Hilberg & Tharpe, 2002

Researchers have also found that there is also positive relationship between Indigenous students' achievement and their strong sense of cultural identity (Cleary & Peacock, 1998) and pedagogical techniques are a critical element in this achievement (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). Important factors in culturally responsive teaching are teacher's knowledge of Native culture and learning styles; teacher's reflections on his or her own belief systems and stereotypes; and schools' actions in modeling respect for diversity and alternative ways of knowing (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003).

Moreover, researchers have found that American Indian students use simultaneous processing rather than sequential processing when learning school materials (Dunn & Griggs, 1995; Preston, 1991). The traditional standard school curriculum is very sequential in nature. A new fact is presented that leads to another fact and to another until a whole is established. Textbooks and other written classroom materials are typically developed in a sequential fashion. This works against the learning style of some American Indian students who tend to process information in a simultaneous fashion, synthesizing separate elements into a whole. That is, they first see the whole picture and gain insight on specific details from that image but not necessarily in the traditional sequence. For instance, instead of teaching the grammatical parts that make up

a sentence, present the entire sentence first, and then break it apart by its grammatical components.

In many American Indian cultures, children learn new skills by observing them and then doing them. This hands-on technique can be part of their natural learning style and should be used to the maximum extent possible (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). Teachers are realizing more and more that an active, hands-on curriculum benefits all learners and usually leads to a fuller understanding of the concepts represented. Demonstration is an example of an in-class method that uses a visual, hands-on process. While demonstrations are generally sequential in nature, by showing what the final product looks like before the demonstration, the teacher can introduce simultaneous processing into the learning equation. Following a demonstration, students should have the opportunity to make their own product based on their observations during the demonstration. This fits in with some traditional knowledge models used in Native communities.

Thus, the most commonly cited learning styles for Native American youth include visual, hands-on, connecting to real-life, direct experience, participating in real-world activities, reflective, collaborative, circular, simultaneous processing, and naturalistic (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Davidson, 1992; Gilliland, 1995; Goin, 1999; Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; More, 1989; Sparks, 2000; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Tharp & Yamauchi, 1994). High academic achievement among Native American students has also been closely associated with exposure to Native American college role models and college culture from multiple and diverse tribal perspectives. The following section will delineate some of the studies that have been done regarding the experiences with online or distance learning of Native American students.

## **Native American Students and Online Learning**

This study is also inspired by the need to document and understand the challenges and affordances offered by online learning environments for youth. The college preparatory program employed an online learning platform for delivering Indigenous Studies course content throughout the program. My study also investigated how students experienced this component of the college preparatory program. I was initially weary of using online learning environments for non-dominant youth such as the students in this program but understood that supporting students in their exposure to online learning courses could be beneficial for them since many higher learning institutions are increasing their online course offerings. Moreover, scholarly research on high school students and online learning environments is practically non-existent. The following studies are representative of research conducted on the topic of Native American learners and online learning within the last ten years. The studies I reviewed regarding American Indian students' experiences with online and distance learning did not consider using critical media literacy, as posed by Kellner and Share (2005), to transform students' use of online culture and practices. Altering critical media literacy into pedagogical practice within a reservation high school may be a major challenge for the online learning program that is the focus of my study.

Recent research on American Indian college students in North Carolina (Fire, 2009) found that students felt empowered through participating in online coursework. Fire's research provided evidence that Native learners have had success in online learning environments. Fire (2009) conducted a single-site descriptive case study using tribal college students in order to further understand online learning experiences of traditional, remote Native Americans. The study found that students learned better online when they worked with instructors who modeled Native Ways of Knowing (NWOK) and when they took coursework designed to enable NWOK.

Success also depended on access to technology, a user-friendly learning management system, and mentoring. American Indian students felt empowered by the ability to express their own *voice* through participating in online coursework.

Todacheene (2008) also researched college students and looked at students' sense of community, connectedness, and learning experiences. A survey research questionnaire, developed by Rovai (2002), was utilized. On-campus learners experienced a greater sense of community than off-campus Tribal college students. The study attributed this to the on-campus students' face-to-face interaction and access to resources.

It is not only students that need to adapt to new educational environments. Doshier (2003) studied American Indian nursing students' online learning experiences and found that instructors also needed to adapt. Ambler (1999) wrote more than a decade ago that online instructors needed to understand the value of maintaining a personal connection with students. Ambler believed the Montana Consortium demonstrated the importance of this when they had instructors travel to reservation tribal colleges to visit students in person. Since 1974, the University of Alaska-Fairbanks has also placed faculty in Native communities to reduce cultural distance.

Davis (2000) also studied the topic of Native American culture and found that Tribal leaders were concerned about sending cultural information over distance learning networks. The research emphasized that specific cultural information should be discussed with Tribal spiritual leaders before being disseminated through online learning coursework. However, leaders' responses indicated a willingness to get involved in digital learning.

## **Native American Students' Aspirations for Higher Education**

Despite the numerous institutional barriers, a vast amount of research reveals that American Indian students understand the value of earning a college degree, maintain high educational aspirations, and would like to pursue a college education (Fann, 2009; Tierney, 1992; Tippeconnic, 1998). A major report released earlier this year, *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2013: American Indian Students*, shows that 52 percent of American Indian 2013 high school graduates who took the ACT® college readiness assessment met none of the four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks that indicate likely success in credit-bearing first-year college courses. That compares to 31 percent of all ACT-tested 2013 graduates who met none of the benchmarks. Though 86 percent of American Indian graduates indicate that they want to pursue some type of postsecondary education, only 54 percent of those students enroll in a postsecondary institution the fall immediately following high school graduation. The disconnect between postsecondary aspirations on the one hand and preparation and enrollment on the other is particularly pronounced in Native American students and warrants further study

Much of the research pertaining to Native American students and educational aspirations have been approached from the dominant cultural perspective and has failed to address differing cultural perspectives on aspirations. The mainstream educational system has been established on the premise of individualism and competition, where educational value is enhanced when one excels as an individual (Cross, 1991). In contrast to mainstream culture, Native American cultural goals are neither competitive nor meritocratic, and usually are more reflective of the values of generosity, reverence for the earth, and wisdom (McNickle, 1973). Within many American Indian cultures, emphasis is placed on generosity, which is usually displayed through informal and formal means of giving and sharing (Badwound & Tierney, 1988). Throughout

childhood, American Indian children are surrounded by the values of extensive sharing, generosity, and cooperation (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Success and prestige depend more on the extent to which an individual share accumulated wealth, rather than the material wealth one accrues (Badwound & Tierney, 1988). It is important for me to underscore that the above-mentioned perspectives on aspirations should not be understood as being generalizable because there is no monolithic Native American student.

From a broad Indigenous frame of reference, achievement and excelling may differ considerably from the individual perspective of mainstream culture. That is, within American Indian cultures the emphasis may not be on the individual but on the group; where the prevailing concern is for the welfare of the group and demonstrated concern for group welfare is virtuous (Badwound & Tierney, 1988). The emphasis is placed on the ethic of cooperation and group commitment over that of the individual (Deyhle, 1995; Lamphere, 1977; Swisher, 1990), and individual achievement is connected to the betterment of the group (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997).

Furthermore, the notion of reciprocity has started to emerge in current literature as a key motivating factor for academic success among American Indian students. Scholars have indicated that the desire to obtain a university degree reflects a larger purpose for American Indian students than simply getting a better job; that is, a university degree is “often linked to aspirations with much broader collective/tribal considerations” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 4). The concepts regarding American Indian aspirations are important for this study because they are illustrative of the ways in which aspirations can be expressed by students, community, and/or program practitioners.

## **Native American Education Summary**

In this section, I provided an overview of the history of Native American education in the United States with special attention to California's Indigenous populations. I also provided a brief review of the current themes of Native American education, such as tribal control of schools, challenges in higher education and online learning trends for Native American students.

## **Native American Identity Literature**

### **Criteria for Selecting the Literature**

I made significant efforts to review journals, books, reports, national databases, and literature that were written by scholars whose work and positionality are endogenous to the fields of American Indian education and identity. In other words, in my writing of this literature review I privileged the works of Native American scholars (and other Scholars of Color) while not dismissing seminal works by non-Native authors.

I frame my review of Native American identities as a discussion existing between the works of Indigenous writers in both contemporary and historical periods. This includes seminal writings from Native American writers such as Deborah Miranda as well as Native American scholars, such as Teresa LaFramboise, whose scholarly work can be found in journals such as *The Journal of Early Adolescence*. By selecting information representative of a variety of temporal and disciplinary views, this literature review allows a broader explanation for the trends in Native identity.

### **Indigenous perspectives on Identity**

Early in my work as a college mentor for urban Native American youth I learned not to make any assumptions regarding students' identities. My students imparted what I had known from personal experience: that Indigenous identities can be fluid and contingent on family,



community, tribal, and historical relations. Growing up in an enormous urban AI community as well as honoring my own lineages sensitized me to working with youth in Southern California. I propose that studies of youth identity development and formation must consider different historical perspectives (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992). In the following pages I address some of the most traditional topics in Native American identity literature that I deem relevant for my study of Native American youth.

An important topic to address first is how the term “American Indian” is defined, considering the diversity of tribal nations, complex histories, and relocation of natives from reservation lands. The BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) defines an American Indian or Alaska Native as “someone who has blood degree from and is recognized as such by a federally recognized tribe or village as an enrolled tribal member and or the United States” (BIA). This definition aligns with the political legal position that Native people have specific rights, protections, and services provided to them by the United States because they are members of a federally recognized tribe. However, this definition does not underscore that other factors, such as a person’s knowledge of his or her tribe’s culture, history, language, religion, familial kinships are also important (Garrouette, 2003). This second definition is closely aligned with the ways in which many American Indians scholars describe American Indian identity.

How American Indian identity is defined, who claims to be Indian and why, and the concerns among multi-heritage AIs are complex historical and contemporary issues. While the politics of identity and the life experiences of Indians have been addressed in recent years by scholars, activists, and novelists, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding *how* and *why* American Indians choose their identities (Lee, 2006; Mihesuah, 1998; Newman, 2005) This gap seems to be more pronounced in studies of AI youth in urban, suburban and reservation

areas (Huffman, 2006). Therefore, I ground my understanding of identity in the works of notable Native scholars that have written extensively on the subject of identity (generally, not youth-specific<sup>13</sup>) and hope to contribute to the needed nuanced understanding of how and why AI youth make sense of their identity.

One of the most referred to scholars in this domain is Perry G. Horse. In his work, Horse (2001; 2005) asserts that contact with one's own Native consciousness and identity is influenced in at least five ways: 1) how well one is grounded in their native language and culture, 2) whether one's genealogical heritage as an Indian is valid, 3) whether one embraces a general philosophy or worldview that derives from distinctly Indian ways, that is old traditions, 4) the degree to which one thinks of him- or herself in a certain way, this is, one's own idea of self as an Indian person, and 5) whether one is officially recognized as a member of an Indian tribe by the government of that tribe (Horse, 2005; Horse, 2012).

Although Horse presents factors that adequately summarize many Native's understandings of their identities, these factors are not inclusive of the experiences of many American Indians. Choctaw Scholar Devon Abbot Mihesua's writings on Native identity provide nuanced questions and considerations. We cannot ignore that many American Indians are growing up in urban settings away from their tribal communities and many of the younger populations are increasingly growing up in multi-heritage settings where genealogical and tribal membership information may not be a priority. Some are still able to learn about their tribal culture but may not have the opportunity to learn their language and tribal practices (Deyhle, 1995; Mihesuah, 1998). Mihesuah also reminds us that Tribes have different languages, religions, histories, and specific nomenclatures for identity and membership. Mihesuah also

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<sup>13</sup> Tribal identity development and formation in adolescents has been less studied and I will briefly discuss this towards end of this section.

notes that phenotype (the expressed color of hair, eyes, and skin) serve as gages used to measure how ‘Indian’ one is and either confines or widens one’s choice of identity. Even within a group, the personal needs, phenotype, and environmental influences of everyone is different.

### **Legal and Racial Statuses**

The legal and political status of American Indians in this country is what truly sets Indians apart from other U.S. citizens (Baca, 1998; Forbes, 1990). Treaties between the United States and tribes remain in effect, and current federal American Indian policy acknowledges the sovereign status of tribal governments. Under tribal sovereignty, tribal governments are the sole authority that can determine who is or is not a member, or citizen, of a given tribal nation (Thornton, 1997). Within the tribe one’s recognition is validated in various ways: parentage, clan relationships, kinship patterns, descendant status, one’s individual tribal name, and other community-based norms.

The process of enrollment in an American Indian tribe has historical roots that extend back to the early nineteenth century (Bizarro, 2004; Thornton, 1997). The practices of creating formal censuses and keeping lists of names of tribal members evolved to ensure an accurate distribution of benefits. Over time, American Indians themselves established formal tribal governments and began to regulate their membership more carefully, especially with regard to land allotments, distributions of tribal funds, and voting (Cohen, 1942).

Today, the rules prescribed in tribal constitutions under the powers conferred by the Dawes and Indian Reorganization Acts give rise to difficulties rooted in the fact that membership is limited to those able to document lineal descent from someone on the tribe’s original or base rolls (Bizarro, 2004). Many of these tribal rolls date back to the 1890s, serving as the cornerstone of the Dawes Act. Although requirements for membership in any one of the more than 560 tribes

currently recognized by the federal government vary widely, most require both lineal descent and a minimum certifiable Indian blood quantum for membership. Although not all tribes require a minimum blood quantum for tribal membership, of the nearly two-thirds that do, many have set one-fourth as the minimum (Thornton 1997).

As previously suggested, the formal organization of tribes into constitutional governments-imposed concepts of peoplehood and nationhood that embody Western notions of individual and collective identity. Pivotal to the current discussion are the formal rules and regulations governing tribal membership. Over time, and in response to changes in political opportunity structures, incentives (and disincentives) have emerged for tribes to expand or restrict the rules and requirements governing membership (Grande, 2000).

Another distinguishing feature in the AI identity literature is the complex question of race. Are American Indians a racial group? This is not a new or simple question to answer but some comments are necessary to consider when researching how and why AI peoples may identify as they do.

The United States census invites individuals to identify themselves as American Indians by race and as tribal members by tribe. As sociologist Joane Nagel (1997) points out, however, at the time of earliest European contact, the Indigenous inhabitants of North America understood themselves solely in terms of their particular social, cultural, and language groups. Legal scholars have argued that the idea of indigenous North Americans as a single race was a European invention (Cornell, 1988; Goldberg, 2002. Nogel (1997) and Wilson (1998) have posited that the racialization of American Indians was a precursor to a range of official strategies of domination, including removal and relocation, undermining of indigenous political and justice and the separation of children from their parents for purposes of schooling.

The question of whether American Indians constitute a racial group has been repeatedly argued in the courts. The federal and state legal treatment of the racial identity of American Indians from the beginning of the American Republic to recent decades has been inconsistent, (Goldberg, 2002). Some states that banned miscegenation between Whites and Blacks, allowed marriage between Whites and American Indians, while other states did not (Maillard, 2007). Some places applied Jim Crow laws to American Indians, while some did not (Pratt, 2005). As the Supreme Court notes with regularity, Indian nations did not participate in the framing or ratification of the Constitution. But as Rossum (2011) notes, pointing out that which should be obvious, Indian tribes are expressly included in the Constitution and their nationhood cannot be discarded by the Supreme Court. Thus, the paradox that tangles notions of identity formation is that Indian nations are by definition racial, but they cannot be disregarded from the American legal structure.

Finally, much of the scholarly work on legal and racial identity of American Indians is in the extensive Federal and Tribal law literatures (Churchill, 1999; Goldberg, 2002; Grande, 2000). Thus, it is essential to understand the early and on-going federal cases (such as the Marshall Trilogy cases and current ICWA rulings) that shape how and why American Indians identify as they do. However, much of the autobiographical and academic research on American Indian identity formation is not specifically concerned with *how* and *why* Native youth make sense of their identities. The perspectives of American Indian youth on their identity have been largely excluded from many large studies of identity due to their small sample size<sup>14</sup> and we have yet to understand how they make meaning of their legal, racial, ethnic or tribal identities (along with gender, sexual orientation), especially as these relate to their educational experiences. A

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<sup>14</sup> This marginalization merits a lengthier discussion in the methods section

historical understanding of land and identity are helpful for further grounding a critical examination of how AI peoples make sense of their identities.

### **History, Land and Identity**

Many American Indian scholars that have written on identity propose that the historical time period of a person's life must also be taken into account when attempting to understand how and why people identify as American Indian (Deyhle, 1992; Grande, 2000; Mihesuah, 1998). History, as transmitted in oral traditions, is significant to American Indian culture and identity. The role of history in identity formation, while relatively unexamined, has received some attention in works on psychosocial identity (e.g., Kroger, 1993 and Erikson's 1963, 1968, and 1980 writings on historical influences on identity formation, including Yuroks and Sioux). The role of history in American Indian identity formation should be considered in the following respect for my proposed study: the contributions of one's specific tribe's history to their identity formation.

Indian lands, like their identities, were negotiated and given meaning according to circumstance (Thorpe, 1996; LaDuke, 1999). The Spanish viewed land as space on which to build their religious institutions - the missions (Noriega, 1992). They brought the ideology, structure and power of the Inquisition and imposed them on Indians and their territories. The ideology was Christianity with its incipient racial dichotomies of 'heathens' and 'Christians', 'gentiles' and 'neophytes', and 'savages' and 'civilized' (Weaver, 2001).

The secularization of the missions, and the transition to Mexican independence created a new land policy that promoted individual rights over church or corporate rights. The Indians became emancipated from the Missions, but lost claim to the surrounding territories which were turned into large rancho grants (Castillo, 1987; Costo & Costo, 1987)). Indian identity during the

Mexican era was transformed from Christianized neophytes to *gente sin razon* as opposed to *gente de razon*, a Californio regional identity (Noriega, 1992). There were many complex social identities competing for land during this time - Californio, Indio, among others. However, this new Indian identity did not last long after the Mexican American war.

The United States invasion created a new set of ideologies, structures and powers with which the California Indians had to contend (Costo, 1987). American ideologies were progress, manifest destiny, rights of conquest, notions of superior and inferior statuses, and land as commodity. White mainstream Americans and institutions did not uphold treaties, carelessly established reservations, used their power to conduct mass genocide and to confiscate Indian lands in California (Hurtado, 1988; Thornton, 1997). Indians as sovereign nations, however, coped, endured, adapted, and survived.

Indian identity took on a new form with the Red Power Movement in the 1960s. The Red Power movement was very valuable in increasing pride and organizing activist politics against racism and assimilation (Cornell, 1998; Warrior, 1968). A new political resurgence and ethnic renewal emerged and took form through political activism, formation of Indian organizations, and through the processes of pan-Indianism and tribalization, that emerged from the relocation and urbanization of American Indians.

### **Summary of Native American Identity**

While the historical, political, and economic forces affecting American Indians' identity choices and development often can be readily categorized, the vast differences among tribes and individual Indians, in addition to the complexities they face, disallow one empirical study on Indian identity to answer the myriad questions about how an individual or group maintains, alters, or loses identity. The task of sorting out the elements that contribute to an Indian person's

identity choice and development, and how that person's ethnic, gender, racial, political, occupational, and religious identities intersect may appear daunting. But these studies are important because: 1) definitions of "American Indian" differ not only among non-Indians but also among Indians; 2) an Indian may have several identities (individual, occupational, religious, social, etc.) that correspond to their allegiances (such as family, tribe, community, state, country); 3) Indian identity constantly develops in response to the person's social, political, and economic environments. In this section, I shared some insights about these issues and elements that are informed by my own experience and from interaction with Native American people of many backgrounds in California.

### **Chapter Two Summary**

In this review of the chapter, I first presented the various historical factors that have shaped the landscape of educational opportunities for Native American students in California. These histories and context are important even for the Native American youth that do not have an ancestral relationship to the Indigenous peoples of California, as these youth still identify as Native American and often engage in community spaces and lands with California based Native Americans. I then presented a discussion of the relevance of Indian control of education to urban settings, with attention to the variation of schools that Native American youth may be exposed to. I also delineated the most effective curriculum and pedagogical practices to use when teaching Native American students. It is evident that documenting and understanding the practices, relationships and pedagogies of a college preparatory program via a systematic qualitative study can support endogenous college preparatory efforts that are relevant to students' realities across urban spaces. Chapter Three details *how* this study examined the structural



challenges identified by the students as barriers to college preparation as well as the pedagogies of the college preparatory program.

### CHAPTER THREE: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Dearest daughter,

I write to you after a day of teaching and office hours with students. The drive back home is long but it's the end of the week and I am excited that I get to hold you for as long as you want me to. I won't have to leave for work, and we can continue the story we started a few days ago. I can recount the story of the talking deer and the tall tree, as your great-grandmother taught it to me. We can imagine how you, our earth, are a digger eager to touch the roots. That is the story you created a few days ago. It warms me to think of your story and how it is related to our Surem. One of my students, Nicola, said today that her family does not have stories. One of her classmates pointed out that Nicola does tell great stories. So, we expanded our ideas and definitions of families and stories, making sure to mark those stories that come from elders in tribal communities. Seeing the class come together to grow and affirm our different families and stories allowed me to think about the many ways we can teach each other about our given and chosen relations. I end this letter, proud of my students, thinking of those that came before you, reminding us every night that we are here. – Letters to my daughter, June 2015.

I begin this chapter on theory and methods with an excerpt from a letter. This is one of the letters I wrote to my daughter when I began recognizing and naming the fractious writing practices, I had learned in my qualitative research courses. While many courses allowed for a variety of written formats to advance our scholarship, I learned that standard ethnographic field notes and analytical memos were regarded as the only "reliable and objective" sources of information in those qualitative research courses. My preferred use of letters as valid sources of memories and detailed fieldwork were graded as questionable sources of data. The excerpt from the letter above represents a marked refusal from the objective field notes and memos I was required to write. The excerpt above also acknowledges my relatives and specific stories important to my cultures while revealing rich information from my moments with student participants. Thus, the letter that opens this chapter encapsulates the relationships, writing and qualitative practices employed in this study.

Chapter Three then establishes the theoretical frameworks that guided this dissertation study. In this chapter I also delineate my positionality, the design, collection and analysis of data. First, I present an overview of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) and Indigenous Methodologies (Wilson, 2001) to illuminate how these theories influenced the design and analysis of my dissertation study. In addition, I will share how Indigenous Methodologies served as a theoretical framework underpinning a collaborative research methodology I developed: Indigenous Epistolary Methodology (Cisneros, 2018). I then delineate my positionality and describe places and sites where data was collected, how I gathered student participants and, finally, how data was analyzed to answer the two research questions:

1. *What are the structural challenges that impact the access of college preparation for Indigenous students?*
2. *What are the pedagogies in a college preparatory program that support Indigenous students' identities and higher education aspirations?*

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Tribal Critical Race Theory**

For this study I utilized Tribal Critical Race Theory to conceptualize the research questions, methods and analysis. Tribal Critical Race Theory (Tribal Crit) guided my inquiry to ensure that my proposed study accounted for issues of race, colonization, and other forms of structural subjugation that continue to shape the educational opportunities for Indigenous peoples in the United States. To understand how Tribal Crit contributes to this study, it is important to first define the framework and its genealogies.

TribalCrit emerges from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and is rooted in the multiple, nuanced, and historically- and geographically located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities. CRT emerged in the legal field during the 1970s. Education scholars

began to utilize CRT as a research tool during the 1990s (Valencia, 2008; Yosso, 2005).

Solórzano (1998) defines critical race theory in education as a framework that “challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (p. 122).

Furthermore, CRT in education serves to reveal how dominant ideas of colorblindness and meritocracy “disadvantage people of color while further advantaging whites” (Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005, p.274; see also Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Drawing from the fields of law, psychology, sociology, history, and education, Solórzano (1998) identifies five principal tenets of CRT in education. The tenants call for scholars to 1) centralize race and racism, 2) challenge the dominant perspective, 3) commit to social justice, 4) value experiential knowledge, and 5) conduct interdisciplinary research.

While CRT serves as a framework in and of itself, it does not address the specific needs of tribal peoples because it does not address American Indians’ liminality as both legal/political and racialized beings or the experience of colonization. Much of what TribalCrit offers as an analytical lens is a new and more culturally nuanced way of examining the lives and experiences of tribal peoples since contact with Europeans over 500 years ago. Brayboy (2005) outlines the following tenets of TribalCrit:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.

7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change.

The above tenets are useful for examining the educational experiences of individuals who identify as Native American. TribalCrit provides a theoretical lens for addressing many of the challenges Native American communities in California are presently facing, such as discrimination and erasure in schools, the encroachment of their lands and natural resources, and ensuring the repatriation of Indigenous human remains, among other challenges. For the methods in this study I am highlighting how five of the eight TribalCrit tenets shape my methodological choices.

*Tenet 1. The primary tenet of TribalCrit is the notion that<sup>15</sup> colonization is endemic to society.* The explicit and implicit goal of interactions between dominant white U.S. society and American Indians has been to colonize, civilize and disintegrate tribal governments (Grande, 2004). I maintain, as many other Indigenous scholars have done so [Basso (1996); Lomawaima & McCarty (2002)] that the schooling of American Indians has been the most endemic and explicit of colonial projects in the United States. Boarding schools were intended to strip students of their tribal customs. Presently, colonization is rife in schooling structures, practices, culture and curriculum. This study documents and analyzes how colonization operates within the current California high schools to limit Native American students' access to higher education. My time with the program afforded me a glimpse into how students and practitioners negotiate and resist some of the colonizing narratives and practices in their schools.

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<sup>15</sup> Brayboy (2005a) defines colonization as the European American knowledge and power structures that deeply permeate present-day society.

*Tenet 2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.* This tenet is particularly useful for my study because it allows me to methodically consider how universities and educational institutions continue to erase the histories and presence of Native Americans to use the campuses for their own material gains, with no economic accountability or reparations for the Indigenous peoples whose lands they inhabit. This tenet also allows me to consider how the policies of relocation for Native American families allowed white settlers to rationalize and legitimize the taking of lands, further fracturing the connections for younger Indigenous people to their ancestral lands. For my study, this tenet proved useful as students named the importance of 1) acknowledging the Indigenous stewards of the lands campuses are located on (especially in university recruitment practices such as campus tours) and 2) having Indigenous Studies in high school as a pathway to higher education.

*Tenet 3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.* This tenet allows me to consider how identities and schooling intersect to influence identity formations. Native American youth and children's education has been regulated by U.S government, via schools, to meet goals of white supremacy (removal, assimilation). For example, in this study, students from different tribal nations and educational backgrounds offer us critical and creative and stories on identities and schooling that behoove us to rethink traditional pathways to higher education. The students' narratives on politics and race suggest their identities and aspirations are situated in liminal spaces that can be transformative for their growth as Indigenous scholars. While commonalities undoubtedly exist among Native American students, specific historical, legal, racial and political grounding of students' identities are the impetus of this inquiry. ‘

*Tenet 4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.* In the spirit of self-determination, American Indian students and nations should be the ones to write about education and identities. In my review of research articles on identity of American Indian youth, I noticed a disturbing trend of excluding the nuanced perspectives of students and tribes. I contend that when American Indian youth and their tribal nations are excluded from quantitative and qualitative research what is missing is the passion and the authority to ask new and different questions based on histories and experiences as Indigenous people.

I should also acknowledge that Native Americans have been thinking, speaking and writing about education and identities for a very long time. They really have. People like Luther Standing Bear, Ella Deloria, and Charles Eastman were writing about Indian education more than fifty years ago. They wrote about how Indian nations viewed the education of their children as the fabric of identity and community. The work of these authors hold high meaning to me as a Chicana and Indigenous researcher in academia as my intention with this study is to document and understand how and why Indigenous youth make meaning of their identities within the context of education, as revealed primarily thru their writings.

*Tenet 8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.* Contrary to traditional academic favor of ‘scientifically based’ research as being the primary justifiable form of research, the eighth tenet honors stories and oral knowledge as real and legitimate forms of data and ways of being. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory. Indigenous scholars (Arrows, 2008; Basso, 2000; Brayboy, 2005; Champagne, 2002) argue that stories serve a central purpose in orienting what it means to be a tribal member. Students’ stories remind us of our origins and serve as

lessons for the younger members of our communities; they have a place in our communities and in our lives (e.g. see Basso, 2000; Battiste, 2002; Olivas, 1990). Stories also serve as guideposts for our elders and other policy makers throughout tribal communities.

These stories do not have to be told by accomplished academics or writers; rather, the stories valued by TribalCrit are the foundations on which Indigenous communities are built. Therefore, the perspectives and stories of students are legitimate sources of data. The stories shared by students reveal 1) frustrations with the fragmented schooling curriculum, 2) their understanding of the values that resonate with their cultures, and 3) the importance of shared social struggles and humor across their communities. The form and content of these students' stories, however, may differ from the types of knowledge privileged by educational institutions; I include their letters, notes and essays- without any editing of grammar or sentence structure. Native American students have often struggled with leveraging the academic language of educational institutions and have been viewed as deficient or altogether ignored. As their mentor, I offered targeted feedback for their writing, including grammar, sentence mechanics and organization. However, I offered this only after affirming their efforts and content. Similarly, my intentions in this study are to honor and elevate students' stories.

### **Theoretical Framework: Indigenous Methodologies**

Indigenous Methodologies have experienced a significant growth in academic settings (Wilson, 2001). There are diverse academic perspectives on Indigenous Knowledges, and most coincide with the notion described by Brayboy & Maughan as “processes that encapsulate a set of relationships rather than bounded concepts.” (3). In other words, many (but not all) Indigenous peoples generate and pass on knowledge in relational, metaphysical, performative, interactional, animate, and cyclical ways that are in relation to place and person (Ermine, 1999).



It is important to stress that female Indigenous scholars such as Devon Mihesuah, Margaret Kovach (2009) and Sandy Grande (2004) have further advanced Indigenous Methodologies as specific protocols and customs of communities that shape approaches to research. Some of these tribal specific protocols, customs and traditions can be discerned in verbal, behavioral, material and written expressions, among others. Aside from seeking answers for my research questions, another purpose of this study was to be aware of how my own Indigenous knowledges guided my scholarly endeavors.

### **Indigenous Epistolary Methodology**

I look to my family tradition of writing letters in order to document and reflect on my work in ways that made sense to me as an Indigenous woman, mother and teacher. In my training as a qualitative researcher, I have learned to produce meticulous field notes, analytic memos and journal entries to capture as much detail as possible from my fieldwork. However, I found that these formats failed to render the feelings, intimate thoughts and difficult questions I have been experiencing in my field. As a teaching apprentice in educational research courses, I have had numerous conversations with Students of Color who have also struggled to satisfactorily document their experiences as researchers. In the letters to my children after a long day of fieldwork, I recount and reflect on the day's events. These letters also serve as sources of data in place of the journal commonly used throughout ethnographic fieldwork<sup>16</sup>. In my letters to my children, I often record thoughts, questions and feelings about the research without much concern about structure (or other formalities). Collectively, these documents allowed me to develop insight into the broader significance of what I will be seeing in fieldwork. By using letters in place of field journal, I aimed to illustrate the power of the epistolary genre for

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<sup>16</sup> These letters do not replace analytic memos. I discuss my use of analytic memos later in this chapter.

facilitating a dialogical knowing between myself as a qualitative researcher and as an Indigenous woman mother scholar.

My ideas for making use of the epistolary genre derive from my own great-grandmother's practice of writing letters to family when she was a student at Santa Fe Indian School as well from the plethora of letters that have been written by educators and activists, such as Paulo Freire in *Letters to Christina* (1996) and Sonia Nieto's (2008) book, *Dear Paulo: Letters from Those Who Dare to Teach*. Letters are written with a recipient in mind and can create the context for shared epistemologies and relational aspects of understanding. I situate an Indigenous Epistolary Methodology (IEM) (Cisneros, 2018) within Indigenous Knowledges and Chicana Feminist Epistemology frameworks to demonstrate how an IEM can unsettle dominant forms of writing in qualitative research, providing a more engaging account of Indigenous writers and our research process. My intentions in writing a dissertation informed by epistolary documents is multifold. I wanted to connect themes and youth's words together so that the stories shared throughout the dissertation would bind theory and practice. I also want the letters included throughout the dissertation to invite (and provoke) qualitative researchers and other scholars to think of how to integrate multiple forms of writing that offers different spaces for critical inquiry.

### **Qualitative Case Study**

The research questions that guided this study are also addressed by utilizing qualitative research, specifically the case study. Merriam (1998, 2009) informs that case study in educational research is suitable to identify and explain specific issues and problems of practice. A case study design also allows a researcher to analyze a social and cultural present-day phenomenon within its real-life context, in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin,

2011, 2013). The case study approach to study Indigenous youth's experiences in a college preparatory program allows for data to be collected from multiple resources such as participant interviews and focus groups as well as from multiple written texts such as letters, essays, field notes, and analytic memos. The richly descriptive focus on meaning offered by the case study approach allowed me to accentuate my analysis on the verbal and written words of student participants across a collage of intersecting settings, interactions and temporalities.

### **Positionality**

My own educational trajectories influenced my journey to this dissertation study and to the various roles I would play as a mentor and graduate student researcher for the college preparatory program, from here on referred to by the pseudonym Native American Youth Education Program (NAYEP). Growing up in economically disenfranchised neighborhoods in Southern California, my siblings, cousins and I attended schools that were inequitably funded and historically segregated. These schools were steeped in punitive education practices that reflected culturally deficit models of education. The curriculum reflected and replicated damaging histories and perspectives of Indigenous peoples and Communities of Color. Throughout middle school, many times I witnessed tired (and possibly racist) white teachers tell our entire class that “none of you will be smart enough to make it to any college”. Other times, we had an array of ill-prepared substitute teachers that refused to teach or grade any of our submitted work. Occasionally, my classmates and I were graced with the presence of kind teachers and other adults willing to share their passion for learning, reading and writing. Throughout school, I tried my best to do well academically. Gratefully, the first Chicano counselor at my high school, Hector, also encouraged other students and I to partake in challenging leadership roles. Always, my siblings and I were loved and encouraged by our

parents, relatives, and community elders to “*echale ganas y quema lapiz,*” to persevere in school and to write a lot.

My curiosity for college was facilitated by Chicana college students from a large public university that was within an hour from where I lived. The students belonged to the campus’ Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA), a student organization that had historically challenged anti-racist, anti-immigrant and anti-Latino discourses and policies. The MEChistas invited high school students to be a part of the university campus organization, welcomed us to campus classes and events to meet people that could serve as mentors, and they offered targeted college application support. Very importantly for me and other Chicana/o Indigenous youth, the MEChistas connected us with Native American and Black college student organizations on their campus, and thus modeled for us how to join the larger anti-racist and anti-colonial movements. The university MEChistas presented my classmates and I (most of us first generation students) with a preview of what I see reflected in the college preparatory program that is the focus of this study: mentoring, teaching and community building with underserved high school students that is guided by cultural values and social justice. The “college prep” I received from these MEChistas, while brief, motivated me to persevere through community colleges, undergraduate and graduate school.

Based on these and other related educational and professional experiences, I chose to begin a qualitative case study of Indigenous urban high school students. A study that would look at specific high school schooling practices and how these impact access to college preparation, as well as consider how students make sense of these practices and their journey engaging in a college prep program. The students’ oral and written narratives in this study provide an in-depth glance of the complex processes, factors and interactions that shape college preparation. The

following sections explains how I came to be part of the college preparatory program, how and where data collection took place over a two-year time period.

### **Site and Place Descriptions**

The college preparatory program for Indigenous youth is part of a large innovative education and legal program that connects community members with the resources from Native American students and faculty at the university to further Native American governance. The program is housed within the School of Law at a public university in Southern California and supported by various California Native American tribal nations. The program offers a series of courses to the university's matriculated undergraduate and graduate students. Some of the courses offered include *Working in Tribal Communities: Preparing for the Field*, *Working in Tribal Communities: Service Learning*, and *California Indian Strategies for Contemporary Change*. It is through taking these courses from 2013-2014 that I was brought into the emerging NAYEP launched in Fall of 2014. The program would provide online college courses and regular college preparatory mentoring to Native American high school youth in cohorts throughout the Southern California region. The university level courses offered to students online would introduce the subject areas of Federal Indian Law, Tribal Economic Development and Cultural Preservation. The mentoring, provided by university Indigenous students that had taken the series of courses on working with tribal communities, was designed to assist high school students with their personal statements and understanding of the study at the university level.

My first conversations with the NAYEP director took place in 2014 while I was taking the series of courses to work with tribal communities. I approached the director to express my personal and professional interests in supporting Indigenous high school youth prepare for higher

education. I shared my identities as a doctoral student, as a mother, an educator, and as a Chicana scholar of Indigenous descent (specifically Mexican, Pascua Yaqui & Mescalero Apache). I also shared that I intended to study college access and preparation of Native American and Indigenous Chicana/o/x Latina/o/x students for my doctoral dissertation but that my graduate program did not (at that time) have Native American professors or relationships with Native American educators. I understood that, given my outsider position to local tribal communities, the respectful way to engage and support Native American youth, would be to support Native American led programs. The emerging NAYEP, with its emphasis on preparing Native youth for higher education, provided me with the opportunity to support and inform about tribal-led education efforts in Southern California.

I spent the first few months with NAYEP meeting mentors, faculty and university students that would be working with the program's first cohort of students across two regions in Southern California. These regions of Southern California already had dynamic tribal and intertribal K-12 education programs for their youth but Native American students, their families and tribal nation leaders expressed wanting meaningful engagement with the university's Native American students, faculty and community. The online courses and on-site mentoring of high school youth by college mentors would be a welcome resource for the high school students, especially those Native American students that lived in cities, attended public schools and did not have regular contact with their Native nations. As a college mentor, I would support students at the two sites during the weekly mentoring meetings- one site at a local state university in the southernmost region of California, and the other site at a Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) center in the northernmost region of Southern California. From here on, the

two program sites discussed in this study are referred to as the Southernmost site and the Northernmost site.

After defending my dissertation proposal and receiving approval of institutional review board requirements, I engaged in purposeful sampling techniques to recruit participants for my study. Purposeful sampling is a technique used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This involves identifying and choosing individuals or groups of individuals that are estimated to be experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Piano Park, 2011).

As outlined in the previous paragraph, the two sites had been identified by program director and mentors as locations with dynamic urban Native American communities whose families might be motivated to participate in NAYEP. The Northernmost site staff had spent months promoting the program and the partnerships with the university and had invited me to speak at a large dinner meeting to meet with potential families and students. The Southernmost meeting site, located at a public university, also had university students that had met with various tribal communities to distribute information about the program. I traveled with some of these students and the program director to meet with tribal nation educators and discuss the program's content and receive feedback on the emerging program's goals.

The educators in these southernmost regions encouraged interested families to meet at the Southernmost university site for a formal presentation on the program. Meeting families first to inform them about NAYEP proved to be an important practice in building relationships with the students. Unfortunately, many traditional college preparatory programs limit their communication with families to the distribution of informational flyers or booklets. The literature on college preparatory also, for the most part, misses documenting the influence of

parents and families (Ceja, 2006). After meeting and talking with parents at these gatherings, I proceeded to meet and recruit students for the NAYEP.

### **Gathering of Students**

When recruiting students, I spent a few minutes explaining my personal and professional backgrounds, as well as my reasons for studying higher education access, preparation, and attainment. The students often asked how I navigated through multiple degrees and how I selected my area of study. I shared my own educational trajectory, challenges and growths as a scholar, and I shared with them some of the emerging statistics on education attainment for Native American students in California. I shared an overview of the program's structure, goals, activities and assignments. I also invited them to be part of my specific study of the program (the dissertation). I shared the research questions I had developed at the time and proposed plan for the study. As a result, I collected a total of 30 participant forms that were signed by parents and students. All the students selected pseudonyms for themselves. Fifteen of the 20 students indicated that they wanted their tribal affiliations, along with other ethnic backgrounds, explicitly named and not concealed throughout my study.

Once I was able to identify potential students' tribal affiliations, I consulted with the program director to see whether tribal approval was needed for this study. Research that follows tribal protocols is important to ensure that the participants are protected as citizens of their nations and that tribal histories and knowledge shared by participants be protected as tribal knowledge. I learned that tribal approval was not warranted because this study would occur off the juridical boundaries of the students' respective nations. I also learned that tribal approval was not warranted because, although I was interested in understanding students emerging identity as Indigenous scholars in NAYEP, I was not planning to reveal students' specific tribal



knowledges. My use of Indigenous Knowledges as theory and method was directed at my own positionality- my identities and culture. I chose not to disclose I did not intend to divulge students' specific tribal cultures because it is not my place, nor do I have the right to share a culture that is not my own. Nonetheless, because I had taken the series of courses in working with tribal communities, I ensured that the documents regarding the study explicitly stated that I would not reveal students' specific tribal protocols, stories and knowledges without explicit approval from tribal institutional review boards.

### **Student demographics**

Originally, I wanted to have 30-40 participants from a range of tribal affiliations, gender identities, differing home residency (on or off reservations), and with a range of high school grade point average of 2.7 to 3.8. Given the intensive hours I would spend as a researcher and mentor assisting students with academics and writing support, I was unable to maintain a close mentoring relationship with all 30 students in the program. In the end, given the time restrictions, my study focused on 20 student participants. This number of participants most closely reflected the number of students that regularly participated in the program. For my study, student participants satisfied the following requirements:

- 1) Identify as Native American. I did not ask student participants to provide written verification of their citizenship or relationship status with their tribe. Instead, student participants were invited to identify and share about their respective Native American communities in the demographic information sheet given to students. Many of the students in the program came from families that participated in urban Native American community gatherings and centers and, thus, many of the student participants recognized each other's families from community gatherings. These

- students and their families readily shared about their relationships with their respective tribal nations. All the final 20 student participants identified as being affiliated with Native American nations from the United States.
- 2) Student participants were also welcomed, but not required to, share and write about all racial, ethnic and gender identities. Seventeen of the 20 students that participated in the study readily self-identified as multi-racial, with “white” and “Black” being the most commonly stated identities in addition to a Native American group. A couple of those 18 students also identified being Filipino and Mexican, in addition to Native American. Eighteen of the 20 student participants in the study self-identified as female, and two students self-identified as male. The remaining 10 students from that NAYEP cohort were majority female as well. In chapter five, which highlights the experiences of the two young men from the study, I offer my perspectives on the self-identified gender representation of this cohort.
  - 3) Be a junior or senior in high school and maintain at least a 2.7 grade point average in A-G courses, as determined by high school documentation. Students and their families were asked to submit a copy of their most recent school progress report along with their initial application to the program. The minimum GPA of 2.7 was to ensure that we would not burden students with lower GPAs to take college level courses. Students and families would be asked to submit a copy of their school progress report to the program at end of each university academic quarter so the program mentors and directors could ensure that the students high school GPA was not being negatively affected by the additional work they engaged in as part of the NAYEP. Seventeen of the 20 student participants had never attended a reservation-based or tribal-based

school. All 17 students had attended urban public schools. The three remaining participants had some experience attending a reservation based primary school or after-school program. More information on students' GPA distribution and educational background is discussed in Chapter Four.

- 4) Express interest in or wanting support for higher education, specifically college, as noted on the intake form and application. Students were asked to elaborate on their response to the question "why do you want to be part of NAYEP". All 20 students, regardless of GPA, expressed wanting support for higher education applications. Some students offered paragraph-length responses to this question and some students offered briefer responses. Eighteen of the 20 students expressed an interest in attending a California State University (CSU). Thirteen of the 20 students expressed an interest in attending a University of California (UC), and 4 of the 20 students expressed an interest in attending a California Community College (CCC).

### **Data Collection**

This section discusses how I developed the protocols for interviews, sharing circles and documents analysis. I also describe how the interviews, sharing circles and document analysis were conducted with student participants.

#### **Individual Interviews**

My prior work experience with college preparatory programs and scholarly knowledge of the literature aided me to think holistically when formulating the individual interview questions. Taking on a holistic approach to individual interview meant that I would broaden questions to account for educational trajectories, familial histories, and exposure to higher education that would aid in identifying structural influences that may have been overlooked in my review of the

literature. I also developed questions that would invite in-depth perspectives on their thoughts, emotions and aspirations. Study participants were interviewed twice throughout their participation in the program: early in their first academic quarter of the program and then halfway through the one-year program. The focus of the first interview was to get to know the student. Guiding questions such as, “how do you identify yourself? What are the places you call home?” were shared. The first interview protocol also had questions that related to their schooling experiences prior to engaging with the college prep program, with a focus on the types of messages or info they received about college. The second interview protocol included questions related to their experiences during the program and expectations for higher education beyond their time in the program. Guiding questions gleaned participants’ thoughts, emotions, questions or meaning-making that they expressed during their time in the program. Both interviews were open-structured and conversational.

After I completed my first draft of interview protocol, I conducted one pilot interview with two undergraduate college mentors from the program. I asked them whether the questions were culturally sensitive, age-appropriate and whether they thought the questions may elicit further conversations between participants and myself. With feedback from the pilot study, I made some slight adjustments to the first interview protocol. For example, in my original first interview protocol I had the following question, “how would you describe your relationship with your teachers?”. With feedback from the pilot, I adjusted that question to the following questions “Can you tell me about a teacher that was supportive of you? Can you tell me about a teacher that, maybe, you had a difficult experience with?” Those obvious changes allowed for student participants to describe a range of experiences where longer and in-depth answers were given, often providing responses to other questions about school that were already on the protocol.

Thus, careful consideration to adjusting the interview protocol throughout the duration of the interviews helped to lessen redundancy.

The individual interviews were collected using a digital audio recorder on my computer laptop. These interviews were completed in an average of an hour. Prior to starting the interview, participants were given an informed consent form stating their rights and that the interview would be audio-recorded. I conducted the individual interviews at the program meeting site. I primarily utilized the site's meeting rooms, which offered a space that was quieter yet still proximal to their regular meeting rooms.

### **Sharing Circles**

In addition to individual interviews, I invited students to participate as part of focus groups that would take place toward the end of their time in the program. While the literature on focus groups asserts that it is preferable for the facilitator to not have prior relationships with participants (Parker & Tritter, 2006), I found that having a prior relationship with participants contributed to the fluidity, honesty and vulnerability that transformed the focus groups into the Indigenous Methodological approach known as Sharing Circles (Tachine, Yellow Bird & Cabrera, 2016). In this study, the intended focus groups with students became small circles in which students verbally reflected on their collective experiences in education and wrote a letter to future students about their experiences in the program. I want to emphasize that students took the initiative of circling up when I called them to the meeting room for the focus group. Their initiative to create a circular meeting space was not surprising for me as “circling up” is a common practice we engaged in throughout the program. Our ancestors also met in circles and

many of our community gatherings still follow this transformative practice<sup>17</sup>. I believe now that having the focus groups in this way was a necessity, as the challenges youth face require collective listening and wisdom.

These sharing circles began with a brief prayer, led by a student, offering the circle as a space that would connect us to the land we were on and to the future students in the program. After prayer, I verbally reviewed the purpose and protocols of the circles and shared the proposed activities, which included open-ended questions, reflections on students' previously written letters and a final epistolary writing activity. The initial part of the circles also included sharing food (frijoles and green chile tamales) as nourishment and as an expression of gratitude for their knowledge. In line with Yoeme gathering protocols, I also placed wasem (flowers) and sage around the food table and students were encouraged to eat and drink as they wished throughout the circle.

The sharing circles took place in the last quarter of the program. The two sharing circles were intended to last between 50-60 minutes, but each circle lasted up to 90 minutes. Students were initially eager to participate in a small group setting such as a sharing circle but, as the time for the circles neared, some expressed reservations about sharing in-depth perspectives among their peers. This downward shift in enthusiasm for the focus groups may have been due to the realization that they would be sharing personal perspectives in a more serious setting than they were accustomed to as groups. Initially all 20 student participants signed up for each circle, but

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<sup>17</sup> Some of the students in the program expressed familiarity with the Medicine Wheel as a way of teaching, learning, and they invoked a use of the Medicine Wheel as a way to make sense of the circular ways we engaged throughout the program. While a couple of the Lakota students openly recognized this influence in many of the program's practices, I choose not to invoke the Medicine Wheel specifically in this discussion of methods as I have not prayed on such a decision nor did I consult with elders if this is an endeavor for me to undertake.

the sessions began and ended with six students in each circle, for a total of 12 students participating in the circles, all self-identified as female.

The questions I developed to guide the sharing circles were open-ended, and when appropriate, I prepared and shared follow-up questions. However, in both circles, I did not have to resort to using follow up questions to prompt more sharing, as students seemed motivated to share and listen to lengthy and vivid responses. Students responded freely for up to 5-8 minutes per question. Their body language- their focused attention, their nods and quiet verbal affirmations- suggested a respect and validation of their peers' stories and experiences.

The Sharing Circles included several freelisting activities (Bernard, 2013), in which students were asked to, for example, list preferred or favorite traditional learning practices or to rank their experiences as part of NAYEP. Responses to freelisting exercises were written on large surfaces (whiteboards or paper easels) to provide talking points for the group. This output was photographed at the end of the sharing circle session and used in the production of sharing circle notes. The rapid production of detailed "debrief notes" from the circles were blended with verbatim recorded quotations to produce detailed content regarding specific, pre-identified domains of interest. In this case, these domains were: schooling experiences, college preparation, Indigenous identities.

Sharing circles ended with a journal entry in which students were asked to write a short letter to future Indigenous students in the program. Students seemed eager to share their knowledge, challenges and growth in the program with future students. I believe that including an epistolary writing activity in the sharing circles was useful in reiterating that learning and writing take time and cannot often be presented whole, but rather in pieces that hearten lived experiences and are directed toward relatives we have yet to meet.

## **Document Protocols**

In this study I collected a variety of students' written documents to help evaluate the program's effectiveness with the curriculum as well as to identify how to best support students in the development of their college statements. My collection, analysis and consideration of students' writing grew exponentially as the program progressed and as I got to know the students. The first documents collected in the study included a demographic intake form and a program application, which included a couple of short essay questions (see Appendix C). The students' initial responses to these documents helped inform the purpose and questions for the first set of interviews later in the first quarter. I wrote detailed observations of the site visits and of the presentations we made to families and tribal education leaders. I also wrote letters to my children throughout the program and I developed theoretical memos as I kept reviewing the literature and research on college access and writing-centered teaching.

Early in the program's first quarter we also asked students to keep a journal for the program that they would use at least once every visit to site or workshop. The program purchased leather bound college journals for the students, and we encouraged them to decorate them with stickers or drawings if the journals were too generic. I let them know that their journal would only be collected once every quarter to ensure that they were writing, but that the content of the journals was solely theirs to share with me and other college mentors if they felt comfortable doing so. Thus, the students' journal entries, which included letters and free writes, that are featured throughout this study were specifically offered and approved by students. Students kept all their original documents. I scanned copies of the journal entries they offered, and I asked them to initial the specific writings they authorized me to use for full publication in the study. Writings that students offered for use in the study but were not initialed were not



included in this final version of study. The purpose of collecting a variety of documents is to illuminate the structure and practices of NAYEP in order to answer the two research questions guiding this study.

### **Data Analysis**

This section details the data analysis process I used to develop the findings. Data analysis for this dissertation entailed the use of triangulation to analyze the multiple sources of data: individual interviews, focus groups, field notes, analytic memos, theoretical memos, student letters and essays, and my own letters.

Cohen and Manion (1986) explain that the triangulation of data attempts “to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint” (p. 254). Triangulation allows for an in-depth understanding of a topic by viewing multiple perspectives. Considering that the college preparation has proven to be a rather complex topic, I deemed it essential to use multiple methods and to triangulate the resulting data. Therefore, the participants’ writings such as short essays and letters, and the field notes written during the early months of my college-prep observations were triangulated to examine the level of a college-going culture and the individual level of how students experienced college preparatory culture. I also utilized contextualizing strategies to triangulate the data. Maxwell (1996) explains that contextualizing strategies attempt to “understand the data in context, using methods to identify the relationship among different elements of text” (Maxwell, 1996). I used theoretical memos to identify and clarify the relationships between each data category. Glasser notes that, “memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about substantive codes and their theoretically coded relationships as they emerge” (Glasser, 1998, p. 177). After observations and

interviews, I wrote theoretical memos to triangulate the data and to reveal the relationships between the data.

Data analysis occurred throughout the study until completion of data collection but was emphasized during three specific rounds. The first round of coding documents, such as demographic intake forms and short essays, occurred prior to collecting the first student interviews. The second round of coding occurred after collecting the second student interviews, and the third round upon collecting all interviews and sharing circles.

The collection and analysis of letters occurred simultaneously with interviews in this study. Each youth participated in a series of two interviews (for a total of 40 interviews) where their stories were audio-recorded and where they reflected on the letters they had written during their time in the college preparatory program. Following the audio-recording of the 40 interviews, transcriptions were created. During this phase of analysis, I reviewed the 40 transcripts using a grounded theory approach that allowed concurrent involvement in data analysis and advancing theory development (Glaser, 1978). This approach also allowed me to utilize an Indigenous Knowledge and Chicana Feminist Epistemology analytic lens to isolate thematic categories that emerged from the data and explore the ways gender, race and tribal specificity emerged in the participant's educational trajectories. The data I isolated from my own written letters allowed for me to generate themes that I could integrate into the sharing circles.

I employed the three stages of coding used in grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In the first stage of open coding, I selected and named the categories present when analyzing the data. In the second stage—axial coding—I made connections between categories. In the third stage of selective coding, I identified core categories to answer the research questions.

The collaborative data analysis phase of the students' letters and essays took place during two sharing circles of 6 young women in each group. The reflections constructed from my preliminary analysis were used to create a 'reflection write-up' where each young woman was given a series of reflections on the letters to read aloud as a group and had individual time to respond in writing. This dialogue allowed us to connect our writing with that of others and consider how settler colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy have shaped those experiences.

### **Limitations**

This study is designed to focus on urban Native American youth's experiences as they journey toward higher education within the context of an Indigenous college preparatory program. The research on urban Native American youth is limited, and because the existing literature on college preparation is still narrow, it may be convenient for scholars and practitioners to broadly generalize Native American college preparatory experiences. There are more than 565 federally recognized nations in the United States, each with their own distinctive cultural, social and political perspectives and histories. Moreover, more Native Americans are increasingly living in urban locations and identifying with other racial and ethnic groups, in addition to specific Native American nations. Therefore, my hope is that thru this study, scholars and practitioners can appreciate the complex mosaic that is Native American youth's histories, identities, and schooling experiences. I hope what is shared in this study provides a deeper awareness of under-researched areas and calls for continued interest in what Indigenous student's journeys to higher education entails.

### **Chapter Three Summary**

This chapter described how TribalCrit in education, Indigenous Methodologies and case-study methods guide the overall design of study. The chapter also outlined my positionality as well as site description and entry and how student participants were gathered. The data collection section also presented the collection strategies of interviews, sharing circles, and documents. Finally, the data analysis section outlines the use of triangulation to analyze the multiple sources of data.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Structural Challenges that Impact Access to College Preparation

#### **Introduction**

This chapter addresses research question number one: *What are the structural challenges that impact the access of college preparation for Indigenous students?* Study participants indicated that there were specific challenges they encountered in their schooling they felt had limited their access to college preparation. Students indicated that the urgent (and often sole) emphasis on their high school grade point average (HSGPA) that was communicated throughout their schooling reinforced a deficit perspective of their abilities and self-worth when their HSGPA's categorized them as low-achieving students. Student participants also shared that punitive writing instruction in schooling had limited their willingness to approach writing as an avenue for preparing for higher education. The students understood that writing was an important academic practice for accessing and securing higher education opportunities and funding, yet many shared a trepidation with writing due to negative feedback from their teachers about their abilities as writers. Cumulatively, these two structural practices in their schooling impacted their access to college preparation.

#### **“Those numbers don’t break this Native Scholar!” Structural Challenge 1: Emphasis on HSGPA**

“Dear Ms. C,  
I am not sure what I feel about my grades. You told us to feel free to write out what our grades meant to us. To write out questions if we had them, how our grades make us feel or how they matter for college. My grades are a big reason for my many worries, for a long time now. I’m not against the idea of getting a grade given to my work. I liked motivation or drive(?) to always get better in school but, at some point, it became all about the grades with my teachers, counselor and every adult that talked to me. Everyone that has an opinion about college is pretty loud about how grades, how our GPA, can make us or BREAK us. Like I really have been told those words by some teachers and one college rep from a UC. Like what a hurtful word. That was hard to hear for me especially when I know my grades don’t represent who I am learning to be as a

Native Scholar like you all say we are in this program. My GPA does not show what we all go thru in our classes or schools. My grades may show I was tired. I am tired because I get up super early to get my sisters and me ready for school, because I stay up late working on my school things or waiting up for my older sis to get home from work. Maybe my grades show I feel loved but also that I worry a lot about my sisters and who will get them ready for school if I go off to college? Maybe my grades show I find it hard to breathe normally when a test is in front of me? I can explain what I know, I can write what I know and even talk about it in front of the class. I can get high grades for those! But then there's some tests where I don't do well and that brings down my GPA. I'm not sure how to get better at tests like that yet but I am feeling like I can learn more. I've tried asking nurse if she can help me figure out how to be calmer for tests, but she said to just calm myself. I think she was in a hurry. So, while my GPA is not considered college bound, I wanted to write out that those numbers don't break this Native Scholar. Thank you.

-Michelle, 10<sup>th</sup> grader

*Those numbers don't break this Native scholar.* Michelle's phrase articulated what I and other mentors had witnessed throughout our time with students in the college-prep program: the students in the program had a diverse set of HSGPAs, academic, personal and social skills and none of these skills alone should define them or limit them as scholars. I recall feeling struck by the realization that some of these students may have felt, for a long time, what they would later call the "GPA pain". Michelle was not the only student that expressed intense emotions and discomfort with the implications of her HSGPA. Many students also expressed similar stressful sentiments about their grades, they articulated an acute awareness of the structural problem and they delineated implications of not having the coveted HSGPA.

The coveted HSGPA's, according to multiple conversations with students, was approximately any HSGPA above 3.8. Students expressed hearing from multiple sources that 3.8 was considered competitive for admission and scholarships. One other student, Jade, recounted hearing from a teaching assistant that "anything below 3.8 just doesn't do much for you at all. It's like it almost doesn't matter what you have to offer if that number isn't 3.8 or higher. I keep feeling I have this GPA pain because I'm not near a 3.8."

Jade's reference to the GPA pain was concerning, especially since her own GPA and that of other students, were college competitive. It should be noted that the students in the program did not self-report their HSGPA. To participate in the program, families had to provide written documentation from their student's school verifying a GPA of 2.8 and above. Eighteen of the twenty program participants had above a 3.2 HSGPA, and over half of all students had a HSGPA of 3.5 or greater. Only two of the 20 program participants had a 3.8. Thus, while most of the students had HSGPA's that made them competitively eligible for various universities, they all reported negative and stressful emotions about themselves in relation to their HSGPA.

My conversations with students further revealed that the institutional emphasis on HSGPA not only caused them emotional distress, but that emphasis also served to obscure that students in their school had limited opportunities for advanced placement (AP) classes. The students shared that many of them had not been placed in AP courses and they expressed understanding that AP courses indicated rigorous academic preparation. This awareness also lent to their reported distress. A shortage of access to AP courses in their schools may have influenced teachers and counselors to elevate the emphasis on HSGPA. Jade, Michelle and other students recounted that teachers and counselors specifically expressed that a high HSGPA would indicate to admissions committees that they "could do well in more advanced classes". The students did not fault their teachers or counselors for expressing these perspectives and, often, they expressed relief at being exposed to the expectations of university admissions, even if the knowledge distressed them.

Indeed, the availability of AP courses has been identified by researchers as central to a rigorous high school curriculum. Original research (Oakes & Guiton, 1995) as well as syntheses of research (Gandara, 2002) suggest that schools in affluent areas offer more rigorous academic

work. Rigorous curriculum has been consistently identified as one of the highest predictors of college persistence for Latina/o and African American students (Perna, 2003). While there is a lack of educational research to indicate whether rigorous school curriculum is also a predictor of college persistence for Native American students, the narratives of students in this study indicate that restricted limited access to AP courses in their lower income schools may have contributed to a stressful emphasis on HSGPA that became a structural challenge for students.

Furthermore, in our conversations about college admissions and HSGPA, students emphasized that their HSGPA reflected, in large part, their performance on standardized exams and not their performance in other forms of evaluation. Students recounted that, in their understanding of their grade reports, their test scores in math and science courses relied solely on their exams and did not reflect their performance in other valuable class assignments, group problem solving or homework submissions. Students were quite bothered that their work in other assignments within the subject made up, in many cases, about thirty percent of grade reflected. The subject of HSGPA emerged in the first interviews with students as a salient and “stressful” component of college preparation that they wanted to further critique in the upcoming workshops.

Early in the first quarter of the program, after the first set of student interviews, another program mentor and I facilitated a workshop about college application components that would emphasize personal writing statements and other written components of college applications. We were holding the workshop on a Saturday morning at the main public university that hosted NAYEP. Students had carpooled in from the areas of Riverside, Bakersfield, San Diego and Los Angeles. Briana, another experienced college mentor and I, had prepared a short presentation for the workshop where we wanted to gauge students’ understanding of the college application



process. When Briana and I were preparing for the workshop, she shared with me that most students express that grades were the most important components of a college application. Briana added that the written personal statements were not given as much attention and she was interested in shifting students' perspectives of that because she also saw the statements as important opportunities for students to actively represent themselves to admissions committees. Briana and I decided to collectively re-orient students' attention from HSGPA in our workshop by framing the personal statements as an opportunity to advocate for themselves beyond the grades. I did not anticipate that students would anchor so much of the workshop discussion on HSGPA first.

Briana and I both began that first workshop by briefly sharing our own journeys in applying for colleges. We shared that our high school grades (or in my case community college grades) were not perfect and that our test scores may not have been as competitive as the scores of students from more affluent schools. We shared that our personal statements served as spaces to reflect on our education, communities and families and that we believe the written statements were critical in our subsequent acceptances at public and private universities. We continued the workshop by asking students if they could identify the important components of a college application. Briana and I wrote down students' responses on the board and we asked students to help us rank them in order of importance. Grades and test scores ranked the highest. Trailing far behind these two were personal statements. Briana and I affirmed for students the relevance of grades and test scores, but we wanted to further understand why students expressed felt such strong emotions about grades. Therefore, we continued with an activity we had planned to help us all transition into the first writing activity of the program.

We divided up students into triads and informed them that they would take on the role of

a college admissions committee and collectively review college applicants. The students expressed interest in this activity and did not hesitate to gather into groups. Once the students had rearranged themselves in triads, we prefaced the activity by informing students that we would ask for them to reflect on this activity in their writing journals (provided by the program) toward the end of the workshop. I recall that they seemed enthusiastic about the activity and I remember one student, Jade, exclaiming “I like this! Let’s find out how this really goes down”, as she moved to join a couple of students. This comment reminded me that students are often left out of decision-making processes in education policies, even when they have a prominent stake in these processes.

Once students were settled in, Briana opened up the slide show we had created for the activity. We proposed to students that admissions committees at colleges may meet to go over the qualities that they are looking for in applicants for that year. Therefore, the students’ first task was to agree to a set of qualifications. Briana briefly presented slides informing students of the expected grade point averages for admissions to UC’s, CSU’s, private universities and California Community Colleges. We asked student groups to discuss what GPA’s they would find acceptable as an admission committee of a UC type of institution. This led to a few minutes of discussion within groups. After a couple of minutes, I asked the groups for their GPA ranges and wrote these on the board. Some students offered an unsolicited (but appreciated) explanation for why their group agreed on certain GPA. Most students seemed attentive as their colleagues spoke. One high school senior student, Camila, expressed outright discomfort with GPAs:

Can I say this feels off? Like we know how the GPAs matter. You all are spending time with us to tell us in many ways how college degrees can be a tool to help our families and here we are about to cut students off from those chances by saying ‘your grades aren’t good enough’ or ‘too bad that teacher didn’t have time to teach you algebra so you barely pass and your GPA sucks.

Camila paused, looked around to her group, and continued. Michelle acknowledged

Camila's statement by adding:

I think you right on that. It feels off somehow now that we're learning how much those grades and points matter but those letters don't say much about what the school, class or teacher was like or what was going on at home, huh. That's why I think the lower GPA range would be more real since most students can pass courses, no? Like if students can't minimum pass courses then maybe they will have an extra hard time at college. We don't want that for anyone either. I feel like there has to be something more. But I hear you Camila.

I saw heads nodding when both Camila and Michelle voiced their thoughts and questions.

I thanked them for sharing and asked if anyone else wanted to add to the conversation. More students chimed in with sharing similar stories about how grades did not reflect all that was happening in their courses or in their homes at the time. Many students present also shared that the grades reflected their performance on exams versus other ways in which they were assessed on the subject that suggested a deeper understanding of the topics. Students offered differing HSGPA scales for admissions and after they seemed to exhaust their energy, Nina, another senior, asked if we could settle on GPA by show of hands. I looked at students and at Briana for any hint of disagreement. Briana chimed in agreeing that voting on GPA would be a good next step to move discussion forward. Most students present voted on a minimum of 2.7 for admission to a public university. Quite notably, a minority of students that had voted for the minimum GPA to be lower than 2.7 asked me to make a note of their vote so that they could further look into how GPA differences matter (critical researchers in the making! I recall thinking at that time).

Students were accustomed to seeing me take notes since I had informed them early on about my roles as a college mentor and researcher and it became customary for students to come to me with ideas, they wanted me to make note of. While students took a break before we moved

on to the next admissions topic, Rob, another participant, came over to where I was sitting and quietly waved hello. I smiled and asked him if he wanted to add something to my notes. He nodded. This was not the first time we had such an exchange consisting of his quiet wave followed by a lengthy discussion of something he didn't share out in the larger group. He asked me if I was "sure that a GPA lower than 2.7 is bad, since 2.7 still leaves out a lot of students". I could tell he wanted an earnest response so I affirmed his concern and responded that I could not think of a specific data set or study to support that students with below 2.7 GPA would not do well in college. He smiled at this response and began to tell me that colleges should find out more about students since:

GPA may not be everything a student is or can be. Like for me, I'm alright when it comes to tests and stuff so my HSGPA is ok, but I know that those exams don't measure other ways of knowing the subjects. I see that with my friends, like how they explain or write about math but when it comes to those exams it's like a whole different subject! And at my school, it's like everything depends on those exams. The teachers' paychecks too, I think. We get told to do what we want all the other time but that we can't mess up on those exams or the school suffers, and we won't get to a good college. I'm not lying, Ms. That's exactly what the counselor told us last time. That's why I can't really fully agree to even that 2.7. Nah. (composite from conversation & Rob's journal entry)

I smiled in agreement. He looked on to make sure I made note of what he said, and I asked him if he could also write some of what he told me in his journal. He nodded and quickly waved goodbye as the students came back into the room to discuss another important component of college admission, written statements and their own experiences with writing.

### **"Bad writing"- Structural Challenge 2: How writing impacted college prep access**

This section illuminates another structural challenge that was identified by students as a schooling practice that may have prevented them from being considered for college preparatory opportunities: punitive writing instruction. Early in the recruitment process for the program, site coordinators informed me that students would likely need support with their writing of personal

statements. The demographic intake form also included a list of areas that students could rank as areas they wanted support in, and writing personal statements ranked consistently as first or second. Writing also emerged as an area of concern for students during the first interviews when I asked them to share how I may specifically support their writing of personal statements; students specifically ask that I: 1) don't cross out too much of their writing, 2) actually respond to their writing "if possible", and 3) help them "become better writers". I recall being profoundly saddened when hearing their requests because the statements revealed sentiments I experienced in my own growth as an emerging scholar. I took their requests seriously and sought to understand what wounded them as writers in their schooling trajectories. Thus, I begin by sharing a letter written by Sophia, an 11th grade student in which she reflects on the teacher and school circumstances that affected her relationship to writing and higher education.

Dear Ms. Patrick,

I am writing this letter because I am preparing to apply for college in 1 year. One year may seem like a long time away but can feel like it's tomorrow. Or it can feel like it was yesterday. Three years ago, you were my 8th grade teacher. You may or may not remember me, but you taught me science. You planned good lessons for the class, and you had us do a lot of writing for the lab reports even when we didn't have a lab to work from. Not having a lab or lab materials wasn't a problem. You encouraged us to write down as we were learning, then you would help us go over the writing for the reports. I learned how to write science reports and for a while I thought I could one day go into something in science since I was good at writing reports. My mentors in this program asked me to think about a time when I felt excited about writing something in school, so I decided to write you even though I'm not sure how to get a hold of you. I left 8th grade science thinking I could write science (whatever that meant.)

But I no longer feel that way. And I think of how many other teachers I had before you and after you. Too many of them didn't take the time to read our writing. To really read it for what I was trying to say. I know I make mistakes to write but it's not easy to find the words, to write them right. English teachers often did pay a lot of attention to our writing but mostly for what we wrote wrong. I understand it's important to write with no mistakes and we only got the attention when our first drafts were good. Maybe bad writing like mine is too much trouble and takes too much of their time.

So I wanted to tell you why I remember your class from three years ago. You took our science lab reports with so much care and feels like yesterday. So one year from now I'm supposed to feel more ready to get into a college. One of the mentors from this program said my writing will see me thru. At first I told her with respect that I don't

believe writing can do that. Not my writing. She repeated “your writing will carry you”. She said it seriously like she really believes it. I went home thinking how strange it feels to have a teacher say that, and I remembered you and your science lab reports. I’m staying in this program since they said I can meet other Natives in science. I’m not sure if that’s what I will do in college or after, but I want you to know I’m excited.”- *Sophia, 11th grader.*

Bad writing. I found that phrase in Sophia’s letter poignantly painful. I recall, upon reading it for the first time, and wanting to know more about why she used phrase “bad writing like mine” to describe her writing. Sophia’s letter, provided above in its entirety, informs us of how institutional agents, such as teachers, shaped her engagement with writing along her educational trajectory. Sophia’s experiences with writing also influenced her career aspirations. In her letter, Sophia reveals the profound impressions that adults in schools can have on a student that is developing their academic and personal skills.

The stories shared by students during the first interviews also reveal how writing instruction shaped their schooling. When prompted to reflect on their experiences with writing throughout their schooling, Jade, an 11th grader from San Diego, vividly recalled experiencing punitive comments about her writing throughout her classes but received minimal or no guidance about how to improve her writing beyond the grammar. When I asked how that made her feel she simply replied “Alone. Like what do I do with all that writing crossed out and no feedback? How do I ask a teacher to do more work and give me feedback? Like why ask a student to write if you’re not going to read it? I had to figure out on my own how to do better. So alone, yes.”

Kimberly, a senior high school student from a Los Angeles public school, recounted how teachers and counselors undervalued the support she received from her family with writing.

Kimberly shared that:

I recall how once I had worked so hard on the application for a Saturday academy they were inviting us to be part of for a private university in downtown. My English and

homeroom teacher were so busy with students and the applications for the program. Someone in my class told me to see if the AP English teacher would help since those students didn't have to write an essay to get in the Saturday academy. They said that the AP English class was already part of Saturday academies at colleges. I didn't even know about these, so I was a bit heated to hear how those of us in AP had to write to apply. But I kind of like to write so I said fine I will do it, but I'll still ask if I can get that AP teacher to review my essay.....

So, I told my mom about the academy, feeling a little bad because she already does so much to get us to school and now, I'm going to ask her to take me to downtown for an academy. But when I told her she was all about it and even asked to help me with my essay so my essay would be strong for when I met with the AP English teacher. I remember how tired my mom probably was. She works 7 days a week. You know she went to college for a bit but then left to take care of us, so I know why me preparing for college means a lot to her. She mainly helped me with spelling and punctuation. She said she was proud of what I wrote because it was a story. I was like glowing. Anyhow, I remember the next day going to look for the AP English teacher, I was nervous, but I told her I wanted to be part of the AP class' Saturday academy group and that I wrote an essay. She seemed nice and asked to look at my essay, which was 3 pages. It took her maybe a minute, not kidding, a minute at most for her to read thru it. She turned to me and said, "This needs a lot of work to make it to Saturday academy." I was so surprised about how she like decided that in a minute that all I could say was something like "but my mom looked it over.." and she asked in a still nice but annoyed way "well that's ok but did you mom go to college? Because I don't see this essay as ready for college prep. Talk to your counselor first to see if you qualify." I was stunned. I was so hurt about her seeing my essay, not really reading it and then making my mom look bad. I feel like my writing held me back from a big opportunity.

Jade and Kimberly's recollection of their experiences with writing, while different in length, suggest a profound awareness of writing as a means of communication and as a means of requesting feedback for writing improvement. Both accounts impressed on me the importance of engaging students as advocates of their writing throughout NAYEP. While Jade did not offer us a specific instance in which her writing received punitive feedback, she revealed feeling alone, and maybe even helpless, when all she received as feedback on writing is crossed out words and sentences. While not all students may respond to the writing evaluation practice with similar insights and sentiments, Jade's words suggest that students write with the expectation that their papers will be read and afforded a response or communication regarding the writing. Jade's

comment about teacher workload also suggests that youth can be aware of the challenges that teachers may face in resource-strapped schools, such as the low-income school she attended. Kimberly's lengthier narrative reveals a specific instance in which she felt her writing limited her access to a college preparatory opportunity. Kimberly's punitive experience with writing illuminates her motivation and agency to partake in college preparatory opportunity that did not seem afforded to her since she was not in the AP class connected to the Saturday academy. Kimberly's access to that particular college preparatory opportunity was denied because 1) she was not exposed to the more rigorous curriculum of the AP class, and 2) she did not have an established relationship with an AP teacher and therefore could not secure more than a cursory look at her essay. Her story also reminds us that writing occurs across contexts (in school, at home, etc.) and that a student's writing may reflect motivations, relationships and aspirations that may not be readily apparent. I believe that by the end of their participation in the program, both Jade and Kimberly expressed a nuanced recognition of punitive writing practices and a more self-affirming perspective toward their writing development.

Sierra, another student, lamented during the first interview about the minimal opportunities she had during high school to write in ways that helped her express her social identities. When I asked her if she could say a bit more about why she ranked writing as an area she would need a lot of support in, she responded:

I guess what I mean by how writing has been, you know, not taught well or limiting for me is that none of my high school teachers have been able to show us different ways of writing. I mean really show us. That would mean not just assigning a grade to a creative writing piece but actually presenting us with different types of writing and writers, like going beyond what's the standard. And it would mean really responding. Like I know many teachers aren't deep in African American or Native American lit but there's so many of those writers that it's not that hard to at least present them to us.

I don't expect too much feedback but at least a few sentences, a short note at the end. I know some teachers do that, especially in the smarter kids' classes. It's like those



teachers really take the students' writing seriously. I take my writing seriously, so I want like at least a note on what I write so I know how to move forward. A checkmark doesn't cut it for me. And getting that kind of support would be so important to motivate me to look for ways to get into a good college. It's not that I am not motivated to go to college but not feeling like I can write well does hurt.

Sierra's follow up response indicated she was aware that there were bodies of literature and writers of diverse identities that she was not getting exposed to in her schooling. This realization, in addition to not getting substantial writing feedback in her school, prompted Sierra to be quite critical of how her access to college was affected by curriculum and instruction.

Painful experiences with writing were also shared by students during one of the initial workshops on college application components. Along with a discussion of HSGPA, students offered similar instances of receiving punitive feedback. I recall students' facial expressions and body language shifting to express discomfort when learning that they would be working on writing statements for the next couple of workshops. Briana, another college student mentor, and I presented students with examples of personal statement prompts. Briana and I asked them to take a minute to talk with their colleagues about what a personal statement was and their experience with them, if any. Some students exchanged a few words about the personal statement with each other. Some students looked at each other quietly. After a minute or so I asked students to volunteer and share what they know about personal statements by taking a colorful post-it, providing a brief answer on it and sticking in on the whiteboard. Some of the responses that were offered on the post in included:

- Personal statements explain your problems and your overcoming them
- The statement can't have mistakes
- The writing has to show what you know
- The statement scares me
- The statement I can get help with
- Personal statements can be about my family and school
- Personal statements can help them see past my test scores

The statement tells them why I should get in

The students took a minute to read the collective responses on their own and then moved on to discuss amongst themselves. I noticed a few students from most triads started jotting down what their colleagues were saying. I acknowledged this endogenous practice and added “I hear many of you sharing your ideas. That’s good. I see some of you have started to jot down a few notes. That’s a good practice so we don’t forget what our colleagues shared. Groups, feel free to have someone in your group jot down a few ideas.” Signaling the practice of jotting notes down out loud to the group was helpful for groups whose members had not yet gotten around to writing. Once students seemed to quiet down, I called for the groups to elaborate on what they discussed by asking two specific questions “what then is your personal statement going to look like? What stories will you tell in this document?” One junior, Monica, wrote in her journal that day what many students probably experience:

I had avoided those questions about college applications. I try not to deeply think or write about who I am because I am not a good writer. I’m barely a good student. I avoid these big questions when I am by myself, but I am a junior and can’t really avoid them if I am going to be writing to get scholarships and stuff. I guess it’s better to do this with some help now then to be trying to write alone about this later on.

Another student, Camila, shared that her group focused on the idea that they could get help with statements. Only one student in her group expressed feeling confident in sharing her personal statements with a teacher or school counselor. The other two students shared feeling anxious about the kind of feedback they would receive since they had not experienced feedback that was formative or affirming in previous essays. Denise, one of the students in Camila’s group, added:

I don’t feel comfortable in sharing my writing with any of my current teachers so I am glad to hear that we can get feedback here with you all. I didn’t know other people had

similar things happen to them where all we ever see about our writing is how bad its written, how ‘poor’ the form is which is what I have read on my essays. I’m not against improving my writing at all. I’m not even mad at the fact that I’m not a gifted writer. I’m uncomfortable that my essays don’t really get read because I hardly ever see more than a grade or entire sentences get crossed out but nothing else. I can’t think of a time when I got more than one sentence of feedback.

Students in the other groups nodded their heads in agreement or to indicate their understanding. Right after Denise finished, Briana and I asked students to journal other reactions to the statements shared. We then continued the workshop on personal statements with various writing exercises and sharing examples of statements from Indigenous college students.

### **Summary of Chapter Four**

Ultimately, the writings and stories in this section seek to position high school students as holders of their own writing histories. What I mean by ‘holders of their own histories’, is that students know more about their own learning journeys than educators and society give them credit for. They have more awareness and agency about themselves as learners if they are supported in reflecting about how they have learned to write. My overall motivation in this chapter was to point out the systemic ways in which schooling, via an unbalanced emphasis on HSGPA and reliance on punitive writing practices, shaped their access to college preparatory opportunities. An accompanying motivation for writing this chapter was to also elevate the student participants as having agency of their growth as writers. In acknowledging Indigenous high school youth as writers of their own knowledges, I join various Indigenous and Chicana/o scholars that have documented undergraduate and graduate students as creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002). I learned that many of the students were eager to verbally share stories about their schools, teachers and their experiences as Indigenous students in urban public schools. They were, however, less eager about writing these stories down on their own. My goal and task for the program then was to support them in successfully writing personal statements

that they could use for college admissions and scholarships. To support students as writers and as emerging Indigenous scholars, I would need to be diligent in my responsibilities as a mentor and researcher to identify the pedagogies that may best support these goals. The next chapter highlights the development of a pedagogy that emerged throughout the program to address the concerns raised by students throughout this chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Indigenous Writing Pedagogies: The role of writing in a college preparatory program

#### Introduction

“For me, writing begins with the impulse to push boundaries, to shape ideas, images, and words that travel through the body and echo in the mind into something that has never existed. The writing process is the same mysterious process that we use to make the world”- *Gloria Anzaldua*

For me, I avoid writing in many ways...I don't know why exactly. But when I heard other students in this program talk about their writing and their struggles. It got me to think why that is. Like what's at stake you know, if we don't write ourselves, others write about us? And I kept thinking what story I want to tell about me, my family. This personal statement is about me and my relatives. The colleges can't deny me if I write my own story, If I make my own world. Accepted or not, I write this story.”- *Nina B (Yurok) journal entry.*

Making our world. Making our story. Reflecting on the purposes and process of writing, Queer Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldua is quoted as describing writing para “idear”-the Spanish word meaning “to form or conceive an idea, to develop a theory, to invent and imagine.” (p.2). Anzaldua describes writing as a process for making a world, for questioning, affecting and shifting the paradigms that governed her reality. Similarly, Nina B, a 10th grade participant in the college prep program, expresses a shift of paradigm- an affirmation, an agency, in making her own story- regarding herself, her writing and, ultimately, the purpose of higher education. During my own time documenting the college prep program and in my role as a mentor for the students, I strived to identify the pedagogies that would support them in completing personal statements for college admissions and scholarships. Yet, as a first-generation Chicana Indigenous writer and researcher, I also found something deeply dissatisfying about locating pedagogies solely for college admissions. Fundamentally, I wondered about the affordances of specific pedagogies in affirming Indigenous students as they engage with an institution that remains

inherently violent toward Indigenous peoples. Thus, in this chapter I address the second research question guiding my dissertation study: *What are the pedagogies in a college preparatory program that support Indigenous students' identities and higher education aspirations?*

I submit that writing emerged as one of the primary ways in which the students made sense of their various social identities. Writing also furthered their educational aspirations. The ways in which the students and I engaged with writing was, primarily, relational as Indigenous peoples. Meaning that much of the writing we engaged in was aligned with affirming each other's identities as members of Indigenous communities and nations. One of the salient ways in which students used writing to elevate their Indigenous identities was to compose writing histories as a space in which to reflect on how writing has shaped their educational opportunities. Students also wrote to express their visions of using their college degree attainment for the good of their communities, thus going beyond standard individualistic degree attainment goals of most college prep programs. Ultimately, these experiences with writing scaffolded empowering personal statements that unfolded to affect students' subsequent success beyond college.

As Nina B's journal entry in the beginning of this chapter demonstrates, students seemed able to express thoughts and feelings about schooling that they typically kept to themselves. Writing in this program appeared to take on different purposes, not often seen in typical college preparatory programs. Instead of writing to convince a college of their merit for being accepted into that institution, these students were using their words in a manner like expert writers—to make sense of the world. In doing so they elevated themselves as Indigenous scholars who would do well for themselves and their communities beyond the attainment of a college degree. For a student in this college prep program, writing included collaborative forms of thinking,

developing an on-going relationship with writing, and practicing a relational approach to reading and writing in preparation for college work.

The stories of who we are and our relations, along with our educational trajectories can inform why and how we write in what I call Indigenous Writing Pedagogies (IWP). I introduce the term Indigenous Writing Pedagogies to encapsulate experiences that position Indigenous students and educators as participants with, if not actual writers of, words and written histories that are part of our communities. Newly positioned as a first-generation emerging scholar at the periphery of the doctoral community, at times I felt more akin to a high school student: I entered academia, unfamiliar with the language, procedures, locations, and writing expected by my professors and new peers. Like many of the participants in this study, I too needed writing to be radically different: I needed writing to better serve my family and communities, despite experiencing writing as a punitive tool throughout my schooling. I needed writing to express the constellations of stories, affect and aspirations that emerged throughout my educational trajectory. I firmly believe that writing in relation with other Indigenous and Women of Color writers has afforded me the journey of affirming myself as a Chicana and Indigenous mother scholar.

Indigenous Writing Pedagogies primarily calls attention to the ways in which relationship building as writers differs from the solitary and punitive writing most often valued in the teaching and assessment of writing in high school. I also position Indigenous Writing Pedagogies as comprising the often-dismissed dimensions of Refusal (Simpson, 2011) and highlight the potential of IWP for the self-affirmation of Indigenous students. Thus, IWP also shifts the academic knowledge from a general understanding of college preparatory work and to consider instead the writing and relationships that often take go unnoticed but that can have critical impact

on the connection between identity development and higher education attainment of Indigenous students.

This chapter is organized to first describe how Indigenous Writing Pedagogies emerged as a journey for the students and for me in this college prep program. I use excerpts from letters and journal entries written by the students as well as my own analytic memos and field notes to delineate the nuanced expressions, questions and affective responses to their identities and higher education aspirations. I then present some of the writing histories that students shared in the program as a means for us to understand that refusal and resistance to writing can stem from long-standing exposure to punitive experiences with writing in their primary schooling. These punitive histories with writing also limited the access to college prep resources for students. Altogether, I conclude with a discussion of how the Indigenous Writing Pedagogies developed in this program might serve as a way to develop college preparatory programs that are culturally sustaining and revitalizing (McCarty & Lee, 2016) for Indigenous students.

### **Emergence of Indigenous Writing Pedagogies**

In this section I present an excerpt of a letter written by Melina, an 11th grade student from a Los Angeles public high school. Melina self identifies as female, Black and as a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. Her words provide us with an entrance to discuss the context that many Indigenous students encounter throughout schooling and higher education. This context informs us as to why Indigenous Writing Pedagogies may be a valuable pedagogical experience for Indigenous students pursuing higher education.

Dear Ms. Cisneros,

I am sorry I am sending this letter in so late in the week. I was behind on the readings and I missed the first bus to the metro station in downtown. A part of me really wanted to attend class and another part of me was embarrassed at how late I am on a lot of things. I am now submitting essay 3 and this brief letter as the reflection piece that accompanies



each essay. These past few weeks have felt very busy with the visits to UCLA and SDSU. Next month we are visiting another university. These are all in California, but it feels they are very far away. I like that we visit these colleges as a group. Well as a family. I especially like meeting Native college students because they make us feel welcome. But then I get scared of not seeing other Native in my classes, in books or not having Native teachers like I have now in this program. My chest hurts when I try to imagine sleeping in those pretty new dorms, away from Aunt Roxy and my little sister Angie. Are the Native men teachers there as good at listening as Aunt Roxy or Aunt Teena? I feel that the one woman Native professor we met knows how to listen but what about the men Native teachers? Will they really listen to Native girls? -  
*-Melina B, letter,*

As former student Melina so poignantly states in the excerpt from letter, Indigenous students understand well before enrolling in college that they may experience deep alienation within university courses and university texts. Many of the students in the college prep program initially expressed some trepidation about themselves at universities. This trepidation seemed rooted in their awareness regarding the forced schooling of Indigenous peoples (and often within their own families). Their own primary schooling experiences also seemed to inform their trepidation moving forward with higher education. Within the growing literature produced on Indigenous students' in higher education, there is a consensus that Indigenous students continue to be underrepresented, misrepresented or altogether unrecognized as politically, legally, culturally and ethnically diverse groups of peoples. These oppressive practices have a long historical trajectory in education (Carney, 1999; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006) and publications that elevate the words and educational histories of Indigenous high school students like Melina are alarmingly sparse.

**“What about young Indigenous women and IWP? - Academia erases us too”**

Indigenous women in higher education such as Choctaw scholar Devon Abbot Mihesuah (2003) and Tammy Trucks-Bordeaux (2003) have sustained writing and dialogues about the specific hardships that Indigenous women encounter as emerging scholars in higher education.

Mihesuah describes the hardships in academia as trenches because of the multiple and often lengthy racial, cultural, and gendered misconceptions that Indigenous women contend, resist and correct. Melina's concern about Native representation in the class suggests that the visible presence of other Native students is important in her perceived accessibility to and subsequent retention in the university. Indigenous women in academia also encounter direct affronts to their knowledges, theories and their writing scholarship. In 'Academic Massacres: The Story of Two American Indian Women and Their Struggle to Survive Academia,' Trucks-Bordeaux recounts the shared pain and trauma she experienced when a fellow Indigenous woman's scholarship was verbally degraded despite an active publishing record. The callous words from the administrator toward an emerging Indigenous scholar and her subsequent dismissal wounded the already small number of Indigenous students in that institution. Trucks-Bordeaux advises Indigenous students to prepare themselves as activists in academia because many academic doors may close for them once they are actually part of the institution. Trucks-Bordeaux ends her piece with the following "You may never be accepted by others, but before you confine yourself to serious depression or consider leaving the education you so rightly deserve, ask yourself the most important question: Do we not have a right to voice our concerns?" (p. 5).

Trucks-Bordeaux's advice and unambiguous question for Indigenous students prompts me to emphasize the importance of writing our concerns. The students in this college prep program overwhelmingly shared how writing allowed them to come to an understanding of what they have experienced as Indigenous students in primary education. Although writing has often been used as a calamitous tool of colonization, it is also true that writing has been a force used by Indigenous peoples in the service of their tribal communities. This possibility for writing was affirmed in the students' development throughout their writing. Mihesuah (2003) encourages

Indigenous students to engage in writing as a tool of empowerment especially within the trenches of academia. And indeed, Indigenous women have been using writing as a tool to denounce the silencing and marginalization they encounter inside and outside of academia. In 'I Give You Back: Indigenous Women Writing to Survive' Elizabeth Archuleta (2006) asserts that Indigenous women's writing has functioned as a space for theorizing and healing. Archuleta draws on Cherrie Moraga's 'Theory in the Flesh' to demonstrate that women's knowledges are rooted in our bodily experiences. Thus, if writing has been used as a tool, force, and site of empowerment for Indigenous women in academia, then might writing also be used as a practice that Indigenous high school students can use to make sense of themselves as Indigenous peoples thru and beyond higher education?

### **IWP is relational**

In this section I discuss how Indigenous Writing Pedagogies emerged primarily from the building of relationships between Indigenous students and myself in this program. The relationship between writing, teaching and social identities was of most interest to me as an educator and as an aspiring writer, so it is unsurprising that the pedagogies I examined more closely in the program were those related to writing. Writing pedagogies-the teaching and learning of writing-fascinates me. I have both scholarly and personal knowledge of the role that writing plays in higher education access: scholars of college pathways contend that rigorous academic preparation is central to college preparation (Perna, 2005) and to successful writing experiences in the college freshman year (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). My professional experience mentoring high school students also allows me to contend that writing is central in accessing higher education.

I was informed early on in this college prep program that many students would need support with their writing. I was unaware, at that time, that one of the principal forms of assistance students would benefit from was in building trusting relationships with each other and with mentors in the program to support their writing. Building trusting relationships with students would not just take time as one would expect working with youth; this chapter illustrates that building those relationships would require that mentors work together to provide clear essay guidelines, express high expectations of all students, and provide affirming feedback for student writing. Providing transparent guidelines and affirmative feedback have been central practices in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement (Russell, 2002) and in the field of writing studies. My professional training in the field of writing exposed me to the importance of developing collaborative and transparent writing guidelines and this knowledge proved central to the journey of how writing became a relational endeavor. This relational aspect of writing emerged as a salient topic in conversations and observations I recorded. One of the program's most senior tutors, who was also an experienced college prep program professional, specifically told me that writing had always been an issue in these programs. When I asked him to explain what he meant by "an issue", he stated:

"I don't mean just this program nor just these students. I mean most students. I mean most of us, no? When it comes to writing we don't see ourselves in it. As writers. Most Indigenous students don't, and it shows during the program. Not meeting deadlines, not submitting, not feeling like what they have to say/write matters or can change something. You know why that is?"

"I have some ideas, but I would like to hear yours."

"You'll see what I mean early on in the orientations when there's some writing activities."

You'll see them wince at the idea of writing on day one. And if you get to know them, they will tell you why. Writing has been like punishment for some of them. These are not the traditional college bound students, you know, that have heard all the time from teachers how good they're going to do in college or life. They may have not had a teacher be nice or encouraging about their writing. Maybe. But usually that's not what I hear. And I can relate. Can you?"

I recall taking a long pause after this question. "Yea. I still struggle with writing. I still resist it. But I also know I'm meant for it, you know. That it's a tool, a way to connect, it's a relation. I mean that I learn more about myself thru the writing. I don't come to the table always knowing. I find things out by writing. And it doesn't have to be in solitude. I often turn to Writers of Color, Chicana writers, Indigenous writers. Especially to their creative writing and their biographies. To see myself and feel less alone in my writing..."

"That last thing you just said. You learn thru the writing, thru connecting with the words of Indigenous and Chicana writers, and that you don't have to do it alone. That's what I think too. But for a lot of reasons students think that they have to know or have answers when they come to the writing. That they can't talk to each other about how their writing is going. And that must feel scary. I want them to hear that from you too. This is all good. I know this will be good for all of us if we approach writing with them this way"

I shared with him that I was, in some ways, excited about this unique concern with writing since most college prep programs focused intensely on test preparations. When writing is emphasized in college prep programs, it is framed solely as a desirable skill for admissions, scholarships and future college course success. The writing emphasis is often on the drafting, planning and editing with the primary goal of successfully obtaining admissions or scholarships. I agree that college prep programs should support students in these goals. However, I think it is

important to make the distinctions between writing as a means to a product meaning the emphasis is in the end result of producing a document with x purpose. Throughout this chapter I demonstrate that paying close attention to the writing histories of students and to their development as writers requires more intentional pedagogies that can serve students beyond the traditional goal of college acceptance.

I also shared with him that, as a Chicana and Indigenous first-generation scholar, I approached this endeavor with a sense of responsibility and trepidation. The responsibility I felt as a mentor to Indigenous youth also contributed to the experience of writing as a relational project. Grounded in the insights of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2003; Giroux, 2003; Freire, 1970) and Xicana feminist epistemology (Anzaldúa, 1999; Anzaldúa, 1998; Moraga, 1993), I intended to explore if and how students' ability to express their thoughts and critically analyze their everyday lived experiences changed as they developed their facility with writing. There were little to no known studies documenting the role of writing in college prep literature that could guide the development of our pedagogies. Most of the literature on college prep emphasizes the importance of supporting students to engage in “rigorous academic work” (Perna, 2000) but this literature is often limited in defining rigorous academic work as exposure and access to Advanced Placement courses. The affordances of how and why writing matters for historically marginalized students is often overlooked.

Throughout my time in the college prep program in various roles and settings, the students and I wrote together in relationship to each other' racial, gender and tribal backgrounds. We also wrote acknowledging the higher education aspirations we had shared with each other. Each student had their own goals, challenges, strengths, and blind spots when practicing the craft of writing during times of developmental transitions, and each college prep mentor was

motivated by and responded differently to student writing. I tried to be conscious of all of these roles, settings, and relationships when I wrote to, with, about, and for Indigenous high school students.

Over the course of the program, most frequently we wrote email messages to each other: questions, feedback, updates, advice, and notes of encouragement. In our face-to-face workshops and electronic exchanges, we were laying foundations for relationships that would sustain writing evaluations and pointed advice for college. We were learning how to work together, and students were defining their boundaries for what aspects of themselves were open and included in the writing of their stories. We were learning what motivates us to move forward, how to honor our relatives and how other Indigenous peoples used their college education to support the growth of their nations. Along with this learning, we were constantly writing in each other's presence. Allocating time during workshops and meetings specifically for writing in each other's presence proved to be essential to the larger project of building the practice of writing and for the more immediate goals of having student meet their deadlines. The students kept a journal of their experiences in the program. In their journals they recorded observations and posed questions about their experiences in the program. I responded to their journal entries, commenting on observations, offering working suggestions to questions, and posing new directions that I hope guided their subsequent engagement in higher education.

Finally, I demonstrate that writing as relational experience among Indigenous youth emerged for the reasons that a closeness also emerges in shared spaces where Indigenous peoples come together: the closeness and connection emerges when we verbally recognize our ancestors, our present tribal communities and we acknowledge that the place we congregate on is Indigenous land. Recently, I have seen an increasing amount of resources and writing on the

importance of Indigenous land acknowledgement in public spaces (Goeman, 2016; Keene, 2018). I support the growth of land acknowledgement if it is not merely symbolic and as long as Indigenous peoples are not displaced from their place on that land. Thus, along with the other Indigenous mentors in the program, I was very judicious about how we acknowledged the Indigenous peoples of the land we were on. It is, however, quite customary and organic for Indigenous peoples to verbally name our relatives and our ancestral lands in our introductions to each other. This often leads us to recognize shared histories with each other and fosters a more comfortable exchange of experiences.

Opening up the program's initial meetings with a formal land acknowledgment allowed those present to thank the original stewards of those lands, to learn about this Indigenous history if they did not know it before, and (importantly for the youth) allowed for us to model to each other that our intentions and actions in that meeting should honor our past, present and future relatives. After a couple of weeks, we developed the practice of having students take turns verbally acknowledging the land we inhabited. Altogether, these practices within the program- the attention to student writing thru transparent guidelines and affirmative feedback and the acknowledgement of our tribes along with land acknowledgement of the spaces where we met- I contend, dramatically placed our writing as a relational endeavor.

**Indigenous Writing Pedagogies is writing with truth: How “writing with truth” matters in this sociopolitical (“violently racist murderous”) climate**

Dear Ms. Cisneros,

I write this letter response to you since you reminded us today to feel free to send you a message or a letter about any issues we were having in the program. I thought of sending you a text but I wanted this to look more important so I think a letter is best for this. It might be a few days before you read it but ok. Last night after practice I finished looking thru a profile of one of the creators from Black Lives Matter and I saw that a post from them had been shared by a group in Rapid City in south Dakota. It had a lot of followers, also one of the nations there follows them so I look up this group. The group's profile



shows they talk about police violence against Natives in Rapid City and other places close to there. The group is doing some demonstrations so other communities can know that police also kills Natives. Seeing how much is the same but still different with Blacks and Natives facing these killings makes me think a lot about what we're learning. I wanted the other students to know about this and know about Sandra and I was also curious to see if they're as mad as me about it. I think they are. I was worried they would be all whatever about it and then I'd be all I don't know if I want to be their friend but it's gonna be ok, I think. The biggest thing I see connected to us learning about our tribes right now is that we are fighting the violently racist things like we have been since they took our lands, right? I heard someone on the news call it 'sociopolitical time or climate' and I thought how messed up this all is that they can't even write it with truth and call it a violently racist murder climate or time. Not sure how this is some feedback for the program like you all ask us for but maybe to say that I'm glad we can talk about this as we learn about being ready for college and all that.  
Thank you. -Sierra, letter dated August 27, 2015

Sierra dropped off this letter in a container that is designated as a "Letter Box" at the site of program workshops in Bakersfield. Students are encouraged to use this box as an alternate space for expressing their questions or thoughts for program mentors to read. Mina, the on-site coordinator at this location, and I had explained to students the importance of sharing their questions and thoughts with us and we often planned some questions or short prompts so we could get a more directed form of feedback from them. Other times we just reminded students that we wanted to hear from them and that the box had been empty for a couple of weeks. We then allowed time within the workshop, lesson or activity for students to write one question or comment. Sierra had typed and printed the above letter in advance and used the letter box as a means of maintaining the conversation she had initiated at the program workshop the week before.

In this section I delineate how students in the study, like Sierra, expressed awareness of the sociopolitical context and how that awareness lent more meaning to their preparation for college and to their development as Indigenous writers within the program. As a reminder, the high school students were immersed in a college preparatory program whose goals were to

prepare students to engage in higher education with a strengthened and diversified identities as Indigenous peoples along with and a broader understanding of the responsibilities, challenges and opportunities of Native American nations and communities. Youth participants in the program shared a growing awareness of their Indigenous identities in relation to Communities of Color. More specifically, some of our early meetings in the program were centered on students' concerns and questions about the violence against Black communities. Students reflected and articulated explicit connections between the ongoing and historic state-sanctioned violence against their own tribal nations and the state-sanctioned violence toward Black communities they were learning about thru their engagement with social media and news. As this section demonstrates, the interest and awareness that students expressed about these histories between Black and Indigenous peoples reminds us that young people recognize and analyze how white supremacy and settler colonialism keep hurting and killing our relatives. The students' words in this section illuminate that these violences and injustices matter to them as they prepare to engage in higher education.

Sierra, identified as Msvkoke, Black and white was one of the first students to raise this concern during one of our group meetings. Sierra grew up in Bakersfield, California most of her life, had attended public schools and had throughout her adolescence occasionally visited extended Msvkoke family in Oklahoma. Sierra expressed a strong affiliation with her Black heritage and relatives due to their geographic proximity to those relatives. Sierra once described herself as “always thinking, too tall and very energetic”. At one of these early meetings before most of the youth showed up, Sierra approached me with a very important question. I had just showed up to the center and was helping Mina, the on-site coordinator, set up the room furniture when Sierra showed up and asked if she could help with setting up the room. Mina asked Sierra

to help spread out the snacks at all the tables. Mina left to print out some of the readings for the meeting and Sierra moved to assist me with moving chairs (I was in my very visible second trimester of pregnancy and many of the youth would quickly move to assist me in any way they could). As we finished setting up chairs, Sierra asked me if I had heard about Sandra Bland. The name did not immediately resonate with me so I told her I hadn't, and I asked if she would share with me about Sandra Bland. Sierra raised her eyebrows, sat down and took a few seconds to respond. This prompted me to sit along with her (Sierra was not someone that quickly sat down at any of the meetings since she seemed to always have a palpable energy). Sierra began:

So, ok, a few weeks ago Sandra Bland was arrested supposedly for fighting or resisting an officer. They found her dead in the jail like 2 or 3 days later, I think. She was 27, no 28. This happened in Texas. But I'm reading this happens everywhere, all the time. I know we all heard of Eric Garner and Treyvon, right? Police kill Native Americans right now in the Dakotas too! Well why don't we hear names of Sandra and the women, right? I don't know if they have videos of Sandra's supposed fight with police but I believe her family. I DON'T believe that police want to help Blacks and Natives you know. I believe us, our peoples, but why are we forgetting the girls? Just messes with me. I'm trying my best to do good in school, get a job and help people but is that even gonna help keep us safe? Sandra went to college and was all involved in helping people, right. But that didn't stop cops from beating her and throwing her in jail. I don't know. I just think we need to know this. What do you think Ms. Cisneros?

I took a few deep breaths and thanked her for sharing. Sierra watched me intently as I slowly crafted an inadequate response for her. I quickly realized I didn't have a thoughtful response to her powerful story or for her poignant questions. I continued:

Sierra, I thought I could have some thoughtful and like a good response to this. I don't know that there is such a thing as a right or thoughtful or good response to all this that's been happening. I think it's important that you put into words your thoughts, questions, feelings and I think you shared it in a way that makes me think and feel it in a way that makes me want to do something about it or join the various communities and movements that are calling it what it is and demanding justice....But I'm listening to you...

Sierra then asked if there was some way to bring this to the group either that day or at the next meeting. I responded affirmatively and asked her if she could share what role she wanted

me or Mina to have in this conversation. I recall thinking it was important for me to have her understand that I was there to support as necessary, but I also felt a responsibility to prepare for the conversation as well as adjust workshop topics. I also recall feeling conflicted as to whether she was asking me to be an active participant or just creating the space for her and the youth. I decided to be direct and ask her what she had in mind for sharing with group and what she had in mind for me in that conversation. Sierra had a characteristically quick and energetic response to my questions:

Oh, I know! Um well today we're going to discuss how some Native nations are fighting for their land and water rights, right? Some of them are lawyers or researchers. That's what Mina said last time. You did too. But I know some are also like on the front of that defense, right? And not just defending land and water but they're active about our bodies too, right. So maybe we can see if this is something, we can also learn at whatever university we go to, no? Like how to defend our bodies. I learned that Sandra had been to college years back and she was known for being activist. I don't want us to wait till after college to learn how to be activists like the ones I see protesting against police. Can you help me find out in the group today if they feel this matter? Maybe you know some Native college students that can share with us if they can learn how to defend, be active...and maybe they might know some Black college students that are part of Black Lives Matter. What do you think?

I nodded my head and told her we could take a few minutes to think and plan for next week. I suggested that waiting until we meet again as a group would give her and I time to select how to share Sandra Bland's story with the group. We would together select either a video clip, news piece or a social media post that Sierra thought would be a good way to prompt a conversation. I also suggested that writing was one possible approach, meaning we could ask students to write up some type of free-write or semi-structured responses to the questions we would put on the large post-its. Sierra had been one of the more active writers in that youth group and I did not have to explain for her at the moment the differences between a free-write and semi-structured response.

The following week Sierra and I met up a few minutes before the program meeting to plan how we could ask the group about how they might deal with these issues as future college students. I encouraged her to write down the questions she had on the large post its and set them up across the wall. Some of the questions she wrote out included: What does it mean to be an activist? How can we do this in college? What are some of the things we face? How about the things that other people face and defend? What do we have in common? Can we help their causes or work together in college? I asked her to briefly rehearse with me what she would say to the group as the context for these questions. She pulled up an article on my laptop about Sandra Bland that highlighted her life story with a few pictures of Bland with her family and friends. The online article was brief enough and I suggested to Sierra that one way to get students more engaged would be to ask them to help read it out loud. Sierra asked me to chime in on the conversation if the conversation took long or was stalled.

Once the meeting began, we invited students to share any questions or comments about the program or the upcoming planned college campus trips. After a couple of questions were addressed, Sierra sat at the front of the class and asked if she could take a few minutes to ask the group to help her “think through some important issues”. She shared with the students about Sandra Bland and how there’s many young activists letting the country know about why Sandra matters. Sierra asked me to pull up the brief online article and I asked students if they could help us read thru it out loud. After students read article out loud, Sierra asked students to think about the questions she had written on the wall. I expected a couple of minutes of silence from the students, but students offered immediate thoughts. Kimberly, a youth participant in the program that identifies as Lummi and white, chimed in immediately to say she had written some ideas down throughout the week in her journal. The practice of keeping a journal was part of the

program and we asked students to use it as a physical space to hold their thoughts or questions until they wanted to share. Kimberly opened her journal and read in a low voice:

“Dear Ms. B and Ms. Cisneros: I hope I don’t forget to share this with class, I looked up Sandra Bland from when I overheard Kimberly talking. It’s so sad and makes me mad too. I see the communities standing up against police now as they always have. I recognize that BlackLivesMatter defends their families with all they’ve got, with their bodies and their lives. That’s natural. It comes from a place deep inside and before you. That’s those relatives making you stand up. I know this because I see it connected to how Native peoples also fought back and defended themselves against the military and police. The military or what they call them before? Cowboys, right? Those are all the old police hunting down Native Americans. They been doing this against Native Americans and against Blacks since hundreds of years. This is our shared fight. Remembering the fallen is what we fight for too. Sandra was a Black woman and we should not forget that. We need to remember the names of the Native American women that have fallen too. This is something I’m thinking about as I am thinking about what college prep can really do for us”

Kimberly stood to look around after she finished reading her journal letter out loud. I recall the room was quiet, but students were looking at her and shaking their heads, as in agreement with what she had read. Robert, another youth in the program, spoke up and added:

I didn’t write it down but I’m thinking about the pictures of Sandra with her family. And Kim brought it up right now too, this shared fight she said. What I felt reminds me of how I feel when I hear about the women in my home communities that are not safe. They go missing. Not seen again and the police act like they don’t care, or they say it’s the fault of the women and families. And the men too act like they can’t do anything about it. We get really angry and loud when the cops come for us men but we stay quiet when cousins, sisters or moms disappear. That’s why I think we need to look for the women’s names too, like Kim and Sierra said. We don’t have to go to college to do that you know, to stand up and protect our families. But it may help us work together across tribes and others that also fight to protect their families. The degrees have to do more for us than just get us a job you know so I am feeling what both Kim and Sierra said... The degrees and the writing we do need to be for these truths....

Kimberly and Robert’s comments generated further discussion among the group of students with Sierra and Kimberly responding to some of the comments and taking notes on the whiteboard. After a few minutes, Sierra nodded at me as if asking to proceed with the written

component of that discussion. She and I had agreed earlier that I would help lead the group through a written reflection based on some of the group questions and comments. Sierra expressed wanting to participate in the written reflection so I asked the group if they could take out their journals for a guided writing exercise. I reminded them I would not be collecting nor requiring them to share these write ups but that I was asking them to “center their words” to reflect on Sandra Bland’s life and death, or to answer some of the questions listed on the post-its. I reminded them they were welcome to write in complete sentences, in bullet points, or to illustrate their responses and that our main ask as a learning and writing community is that we dedicate some of our time and words to Sandra, her communities and others facing the same violence. After about 10 minutes, we closed our journals and took a quick break to have a snack outdoors. When we returned, we transitioned to the scheduled topics for the class that day. Quite fittingly, the content of that cohort meeting would be to learn about the different actions undertaken by Oceti Sakowin (the traditional name for Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples) in mobilizing resistance to stop the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline. Our previous discussion about the life and death of Sandra Bland and about Indigenous women facilitated student interest in learning more about the specific hardships endured by Oceti Sako activists, about the politics of protecting tribal lands and elevating Native American women. Students were eager to write their ideas out together on the post-it sheets, and they took to writing in their journals for a lengthy period. Reflecting on the meeting, a student wrote in her journal that she was “not a brave activist or speaker but I like that writing can be a way to share truths we know as Indigenous peoples. This makes writing worth more than I thought of before”.

This vignette of Native American students writing in a college preparatory program compels us to journey with them as they learn to use writing as an affordance beyond the

imperatives of accessing higher education. Students learned that writing can be a tool to develop a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and imagine projects of solidarity against the violence of white supremacy and settler colonialism. Researchers have suggested that critical consciousness of oppressive social forces can replace feelings of isolation and self-blame for one's challenges with a sense of engagement in a broader collective struggle for social justice (Diemer et al., 2014; Ginwright, 2010) I propose that the teaching and utilization of writing in the program marks a departure from the ways in which students have experienced writing in their schooling. Participating with students in collective writing moments, as demonstrated in the above vignette, was as a way of using writing for truth and as an act of solidarity. I let them know early on in the classes that my participation in writing along with them was intentional; meaning I was also an emerging writer that wanted to write in community and that I saw writing together as a way to value both their writing journey and writing results. I let them know that this commitment to writing in community was a way in which I as an educator resisted the common practice of viewing student writing as a product or commodity. In the present political climate, the teaching of writing has becoming increasingly product oriented, a trend that has often eclipsed process approaches and writing for a variety of purposes and functions (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Dudley, 1997; Graves, 2002; Shafer, 2000; Thomas, 2000, 2001; Wartchow & Gustavson, 1999, cited in Smith, 2000b; Wesley, 2000).

Many of the students expressed an interest in using writing as a tool to acknowledge, respond to or organize with others against the violences experienced by Native Americans and African Americans. In doing so, they shift the teaching and learning of writing in education from a product oriented practice (write to get into college) to an affordance- a relationship between the properties of writing and the critical possibilities to determine how the writing can be used. The



agency that students demonstrated in shifting the purposes of writing is important as some of them had expressed wanting support with writing in some of the initial program meetings. Some students expressed outright discomfort with engaging writing in the program and most were able to recall negative experiences with writing in their schools. I submit that these writing histories need to be taken into consideration when engaging students in writing for college preparation. The next section demonstrates how writing shaped the schooling experiences of students in this college preparatory program and, ultimately, how these writing histories can shape access and disengagement with higher education.

### **What about Indigenous young men in college prep?**

It is important to address that the stories presented in this chapter are mostly from students that identified as female. I want to share some observations about the young men that did participate in the program as these may hold some insight for future considerations in recruitment, enrollment and retention into college preparatory programs for Indigenous young men. I do analyze the participation and writing of young men from the program in this chapter but want to offer this reflection to acknowledge my discomfort with this limited engagement from young men in such a unique program. The discomfort of not successfully being able to engage young men in the program was shared by most of the program coordinators and mentors as well as by the program director. Most of the adults in the program were aware that higher education outreach programs are also challenged in recruiting and retaining young Men of Color, specifically Black and Latino young men ( Howard, 2006, Rios 2011) yet we did not have a preemptive plan nor foresaw the gravity of this challenge for the program for Native American young men. I should add that program director and mentors from the pilot summer program (not included as part of this dissertation study) had acknowledged the limited participation of young

men and had at one point managed to bring in more male mentors for the following cohort. The prominence of male mentors that summer did not immediately increase the numbers of young men enrolling in the program. Male identifying students often expressed interest in the program during outreach and recruitment activities, but they would not follow up with enrollment even when the enrollment process was supported by eager program mentors. The sign-ups for the program initially required name, address and guardian or parent contact number. The program mentors would then send information about program via mail and call parents or guardians. This recruitment and enrollment approach yielded interest in the program from young men's families but minimal interest from the young men themselves. The program mentors, one of them a younger man, suggested that once parental consent for program participation had been secured, that the program mentors should focus their contact efforts with the young men and not their families. Doing so would, he argued, provide young men with a semblance of agency and independence; a message to the young men that participating in the program was their choice and an independent step in their higher education much like the ones they would be making once they were enrolled in college. Many of the adults in the program agreed to try this in their outreach efforts but made it clear that the program would continue to communicate with and depend on the support of the families. Many of the young men that persisted in the program had enrolled along with a close male friend or with a male relative such as a brother or cousin. I think that developing programming focused on supporting young men in a small cohort would be beneficial for fostering trust, intimacy and to support the young men in acknowledging and seeking help with academic challenges they may encounter.

It was challenging for many of us in the program to think of different pedagogical practices to verbally engage male-identifying students throughout the academic workshops and

activities. I noticed early in the program workshops that the young men were less verbally active than female students when participating in larger group discussions. I initially thought the male students' reluctance to participate in a sustained manner may have been because the majority of program participants (students and mentors) were female. Once, I even thought that my being pregnant during the time of our weekly meetings may have been a deterrent for the young men to be more active participants. This thought quickly waned as the young men in the program were quick to support me by offering to carry my bags or the supplies I carried into the meetings once I was more visibly pregnant.

While I do not know why many of the Indigenous young men we attempted to recruit into the program did not respond, I do know it was important for me to include the voices and writing of the few young men that did partake in the program. I realized that the male students in the group deserved our on-going investment in them even if their participation looked vastly different than how the female students participated. I learned to broaden my interpretation of program participation from *consistent* attendance and verbal participation in group discussions to *sustained* attendance, *sustained* verbal exchanges, and *sustained* writing responses in the workshops, activities or focus groups. The main difference between sustained and consistent participation in the program for me meant acknowledging that there will be meetings in which the young men will not verbally engage in. The young men may even show up late for or leave group meetings early. It meant we checked in on them when they missed a group meeting or assignment and that we reserved from acting on judgements or assumptions about their interest in the program. Looking back on these reflections about how to actively engage young men in the program, I contend that a combination of practices may be helpful such as 1) supporting cohorts of students by gender if they seem inclined to these group formations, 2) acknowledging

the gender-specific challenges that students have faced in their schooling and in their communities, and 3) seeking Indigenous community members and resources to support students beyond academic goals. The voices and the writings from Rob and Damian in this chapter will illuminate the challenges, opportunities and futurities before us as we walk with Indigenous youth through their/our academic journeys.

### **Self-Affirmation Theory and Indigenous Students' Writing**

“Dear Ms. Cisneros,

You asked us to reflect on our writing journals about program and why we are a part of it. This reflection is very late so I think I will be honest with you about why this is late and why I kept coming back to the meetings even though I'm one of the few men in the program and even though the program was really hard for me. At times, I'm not trying to diss the program, or you or anyone really but I did start the program knowing my chances of getting into a college were not the best. I am surprising a lot of people and mostly myself for keeping up with it so long and feeling much different about myself. I really saw this as I looked through my journal and my copy of the application I submitted for the program. Like I almost didn't believe that was me that wrote that response about not feeling ready or good enough for college. There's something messed up that I thought so little of myself and I been thinking about why I felt that. At first, I didn't want to think about it, and I said to myself that I may not do this final reflection. But I guess I needed some time and I learned in this program to make sure the profs and mentors know when I need more time, so I'm relieved I reached out to you.

So here I am now remembering and reflecting, and I don't feel the same (bad) about myself and college from when I joined. I really do think I am ready to be there, wherever that college is, and do good work. And by good work I mean not just a diploma to serve me but to also support my tribe and community. I'll gain some skills in probably mechanical engineering because we need that in the nations and I am really into learning about how to use the land's natural energy, right? I also think about how different I come to designing some better power generators in my reservation. I also think about how different the writing we do in the program is from the writing I do in my school right now. Before, I would just put off most writing assignments completely and not do it until I got called out for not turning it in. Other times I would not know how or where to start, and I didn't know that was ok too and that I could really ask for help with the writing. In this program I had the chance to see how it's different for everyone and that's ok. I also learned that the feedback I get from teachers or adults on my writing can look and feel different than what I seen before. You and the mentors taught us that we can communicate to the reader with a letter or note or email about where we are in the writing and what we need help in. So, then the feedback in the paper isn't so mean. It can be more of a conversation about where to write differently or better. I also learned to not write alone and that was really mind blowing for me to share actual space and time to “write in community” like you always say. That's what that felt like. I feel more secure in what I have to write because

it's my voice and my experience that I am honoring, and I know I can always improve. I learned to write about what matters to me and those I care for.

I thought about how I came at all this college and higher ed situation before and I see how less defensive/nervous and more able/capable? I feel now. Before, not feeling good enough for college made me feel very defensive or mad, like I had to protect myself from getting ignored by adults like I have before. when it came to college things. Remember I shared with you about how whenever the teacher talked about how everyone can go to college, she always had her back to me. She never looked at me or included me in the after -school talks about college visits. I always wondered why that was and think it maybe she didn't know anything much about me, how my family or background was different than hers or how maybe she didn't think I could really get in a college. Maybe, like many other adults, she doesn't know how important it is to also talk about college with native youth because they don't really see us. I think that's what I will miss the most about this program, being seen, the support I receive for myself and my community, and the skills I get with writing. I know every time I write it counts for me and I get better at it too. Mostly, I hope this reflection communicates something useful for Native youth. And partly, just partly, I hope this reflection teaches some adults that Native youth are also in the room. -Damian

In the letter above, replicated in its entirety, Damian allows us to learn that the mentoring and writing support of the program shifted his perception about higher education and strengthened his views of himself. Damian, a 16 year-old high school student at the time of the program, identifies as later in the program during an ice-breaker activity when the students were sharing about how they saw themselves and how others saw them, Damian had shared that he identified mainly as California Native (Chumash) and also had grandparents that were Chinese and Black. He said he was one of the darker and taller kids among all his family and that he wasn't always too open about his multiple identities because "each of those groups either get shade thrown at them or no one cares about them for the most part. People think I'm Black and maybe mixed with Filipino so Im constantly explaining I am Native, Black and Chinese. Some teachers don't know what to do with that". Damian felt he was a "math wizard" that struggled in his other subjects. He expressed feeling not ready for college and that people only talked with him about careers related to math and "about how rich" he would be with a math background.

Damian expressed a quiet but persistent interest in learning about the different careers that Native Americans held with a math background. Damian was one of the two young men who stayed with this cohort of 20 students throughout the year.

Through the letter, Damian invites us to know that he thought of himself as incapable of being college ready prior to the program. In the letter above, replicated in its entirety, Damian allows us to learn that the mentoring and writing support of the program shifted his perception about higher education and strengthened his views of himself. Damian was one of the two young men who stayed with this cohort of 20 students throughout the year. Damian, a 16 year-old high school student at the time of the program, identified himself in depth during an ice-breaker activity when the students were sharing about how they saw themselves and how others saw them, Damian had shared that he identified mainly as California Native (Syquan Kumeeyay) and also has grandparents that were Chinese and Black. He spent his early years living in a reservation but moved to large urban school and neighborhood once his parents separated when he was in elementary school. Damian felt he was a “math wizard” that struggled in his other academic subjects. He expressed feeling not ready for college and that people only talked with him about careers related to math and “about how rich” he would be with a math background. Damian expressed a quiet but persistent interest in learning about the different careers that Native Americans held with a math background. He said he was one of the darker and taller kids among all his family and that he wasn’t always too open about all his ancestries because

each of those groups either get “shade thrown at them or no one cares about them for the most part. People think I’m Black, because of my skin color and hair, and sometimes Filipino so I’m constantly explaining I am Native, Black and Chinese. Most of the kids in my school or block don’t make a big deal of it once I say nah I’m Native and Black or I’m Native and Chinese. Native kids at the gatherings don’t say nothin either because many of them also like mixed. But at school? Some teachers don’t know what to do with someone like me. I think it’s also that the teachers only see Latino and white students so it’s just all too much, I guess.

Through the ice-breaker activity we learn that Damian is willing to reflect on the external factors that contributed to his lower self-perception. One of the factors that shaped his lower self-perceptions was having a teacher that excluded him from the college preparation conversations or activities offered to others. While we have limited information about the context of this experience and cannot ascertain the intentions of the teacher, Damian's recollection allows us to see how the messages of college readiness and college access are also communicated with our bodies, eye contact and/or movements. Damian's account of feeling this exclusion via the physical language communicated to him by his teacher reveals that youth who are members of historically marginalized communities, often learn about their perceived social worth by how their bodies are physically excluded.

What happened to Damian in his classroom- not being seen and having adults physically exclude him from these important conversations – most likely reflects what we see so many other Black children and youth experience in schools. For scholars who focus on the educational experience and academic outcomes of Youth of Color and Indigenous youth, we acknowledge that historically and presently, Black males in schools are often viewed as violent or difficult to educate (Howard, 2013). Research on racial disparities in schools highlights how racial bias contributes to severe infractions against Black students, across gender (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2012). While Damian's letter offers limited information about his experiences in school, earlier conversations and writing assignments reveal that racial bias toward him as a Black male in a largely white and Latina/o high school may have limited his access to college preparatory opportunities and contributed to the hurt he felt and low self-perception.

Through the letter, we learn that Damian no longer feels incapable of being ready for college. Damian seems surprised to see how little he thought of himself. The reflective writing, we engaged the youth in allowed them to see how their thinking and feelings shifted thru the program. As part of the evaluation team for the program, I asked that the initial application for the program contain three questions for prospective applicants to share how they felt prepared or not for college, what they wanted program staff to know about their academic needs and aspirations, and what was most important for them in their lives at the time they were applying. Toward the end of their time in the program, we asked students to reflect on how prepared they were now and how their perceptions and aspirations may or may not have changed. Most of the students wrote about what mattered to them: their family, their communities, health, land, and “surviving”). I believe that asking students to write about what mattered to them as they came into a program allowed them to be flexible in their growth within the program. We are able to read about this change in Damian’s letter and his own surprise in how his thinking shifted from feeling unprepared to being “ready for college”. This change is aligned with the studies on self-affirmation theory and writing. According to self-affirmation theory, writing about an important value reduces defensiveness because it affirms the integrity of the self. Steele (1988) proposed that people have a self-system that maintains self-integrity, "a phenomenal experience of the self-conceptions and self-images - as adaptively and morally adequate, that is, as competent, good, coherent, unitary, stable, capable of free choice, capable of controlling important outcomes, and so on" (p. 262). As Sherman and Cohen (2006) noted, "When this image of self-integrity is threatened, people respond in such a way as to restore self-worth" (p. 185). Thus, according to self-affirmation theory, reflecting on important values reduces defensiveness by boosting self-images or self-worth. Other researchers have proposed that self-affirmation, such



as writing about or reflecting on an important value, reduces negative affect or increases positive affect (Tesser, 2000). Damian's letter documents a change toward positive self-affirmation as a result of many factors including the program's features such as mentorship and writing.

Another factor Damian indicated that may have contributed to his low self-perception is the erasure of Native Americans in the schooling he received. Damian indicated his teachers did not express much interest or knowledge in him as a Native American youth nor in Native Americans in general. The erasure of Native American peoples is systemic across schooling (CITE). Native American histories and cultures receive minimal attention in public education curriculum materials, unless required by states or districts (CITE). Similarly, Rob also often wrote in his journal about how little interest public school adults expressed about Native Americans and that often teachers would only sparingly mention Native Americans during Native American History month. Rob grew up in a reservation in Southern California but attended a local public school since his tribal nation did not have a school in their reservation. Rob verbally identified as Kumeyaay and Native American. Rob was a high school junior at the time he enrolled in the program and was the second male to consistently stay and participate in the program for the academic year duration. Rob maintained a quiet disposition during his time in the program and approached writing opportunities with quick and thoughtful responses. During one program meeting in which students were talking about how little their schools knew about the different Native American communities, Rob offered insight as to how he felt when teachers and classmates expressed limited knowledge or care for Native Americans and Indigenous peoples. Students had been discussing the visit that president Barack Obama had made to the Standing Rock Sioux tribal Nation in North Dakota a few earlier in the year. Students had learned that President Obama was only the 4<sup>th</sup> sitting president to visit a Native

American reservation. Students expressed a variety of perspectives about how little attention Native Americans receive from public leaders. Overall, they were enthusiastic about Obama's visit, but they expressed a clear pain about not seeing themselves represented in larger culture and schools. Rob took to the class to express some thoughts he had been working on in his journal:

I want to say that I don't think we should call it something other than what it is: they don't want to really visit us in our reservations unless they need something from us like our land or water or they need to get drunk and act all stupid. Leaders or just regular people. They don't really want to see us or read about us or write about us in their books or in their shows because then they would have to deal with us and what's being done to our relatives. I think Obama showing up is like really he wants to know who we are and that's not gonna be very comfortable for him. I'm glad he showed up and I think other adults in high positions should ask to see us and talk to us too. But they won't because it's uncomfortable for them. My teachers always have speed thru the readings on Native Americans in the shitty books we have in the class. And we have a reservation right down the road from the school!!! I mean really, all of the buildings, cars everything is on ancestors land so how insulting is it to just speed thru that. If we feel the pain of not being recognized then they can deal with the pain of seeing what their schools, their businesses and racism does to us.

Rob's lengthy commentary elicited many signs and whispers of agreement from his program cohort mates. Many students nodded and some snapped their fingers when Rob clearly named the pain, he felt in not having teachers or adults recognize Native American peoples' histories or present existence. Rob thoughtfully proposes that many adults do not want to build relationships with Native Americans because they may feel discomfort with learning about their own role in the systemic racism experienced by Native Americans. Rob's own tribal nation in Southern California has experienced on-going land loss and pollution due to the expansion of upper-class residential areas encroaching the reservation. While Rob reported not being included in some of the college going events in his high school, he was keen on finding his way to a professional career as an engineer because he saw a need for that specialized knowledge in his

reservation. Rob's writing entries in his journal often included some mention of the troubles his nation was experiencing in terms of governance or he wrote about what he was learning from other nation's political battles on their reservations.

Rob also highlighted in his final reflection letter how he also experienced positive changes in his self-perception as a result of the program's mentors, content and writing support:

Finally, I want to admit that I am feeling very beyond ready to take on college and whatever it throws at me. That's not a metaphor Ms. Cisneros. WHATEVER COLLEGE THROWS AT ME. As a Native man I am aware that some systems aren't really meant to build us up and we have to be prepared because we may need to go thru those systems to help keep our lands and relatives safe. I really get that. In school people have told me I am defensive like it's a bad thing but I don't think as a Native man I can afford to not be on the lookout all the time. I have to find different ways of being how I am. I can write what I am thinking, feeling and questioning. I am more confident in myself as a student and know I can use my writing to get answers from people. Like you said one time to always have receipts. Haha. To keep our writing as proof that we know things, that we can ask for answers and keep track of who and how they respond to us. Getting a response from a reader was something new for me and I am glad the other students were good peoples with the feedback. That's real for us as Natives. People used writing and boarding schools to take our lands away and now we can use writing and these colleges to let them know we're still here. We can use college and writing to build with other people and not do this hard work alone.

Rob's final letter indicates an enhanced sense of his writing capacities and critical analysis of how college and writing can support his own goals of working with other Native Americans. It was clear from his initial journal entries that Rob felt comfortable in the program but had experienced writing as a challenging and lonely endeavor when writing in school. In one journal entry he expressed feeling anxious about peer-review activities since he wasn't accustomed to receiving substantial written or verbal feedback on his writing from his classmates nor teachers. The students in the program learned to read and respond with empathy to each other's writing. In developing a peer-review one-page guide for students at the start of the program we asked students to write on post it notes how they would want to receive feedback

from their peers for their personal statement drafts. Most students expressed not wanting their writing crossed out and expressed wanting a paragraph or a few lines of feedback (as opposed to “lots of written commands all over the pages about where we messed up”). Rob’s writings and commentary indicate a heightened awareness of racism, land loss and erasure of his people in schools. In his final letter he indicates an acceptance of this awareness that has often been referred to as defensiveness. We read his own thoughts on why he feels justified in being aware and how he is open to using his writing to communicate with others.

Lastly, there is a thread in the writing that the young men engaged with that I think is useful in transcending the theory of self-affirmation to be more applicable for Indigenous youth’s development. The notion of “giving back” to communities through higher education opportunities emerged reliably and often dominated as a theme throughout the students’ writing and conversations. This idea of giving back is salient through much of the literature on Indigenous students in higher education, demonstrating that Indigenous youth share a willingness to use the degrees, skills and networking gained in college for imperatives beyond their own success (Brayboy, 2005; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). I propose that reflecting on and writing about important values strengthens Indigenous youth into transcend concerns about self-image or self-worth. Writing about important values can remind youth what they care about beyond themselves and may induce positive other-directed feelings that can then affirmatively shape their educational trajectories.

The above letters and conversations, along with a year’s worth of journaling and various writing exercises, engaged Damian and Rob to experience an empowering outlook for their personal, educational and community trajectories. Damian and Rob’s growth, evidenced in the positive feelings and inclusion of others beyond the self, such as communities and tribal nations,

indicates that writing can support a transcending of self for Indigenous youth during key transitions in their development. Eighteen of the twenty students in the study for this dissertation expressed, in their final written reflection letters, a positive change in how they viewed themselves in relation to college readiness. The writing practices and relationships we developed in the program allowed students to regularly reflect on their values as Indigenous young people and, by their own written account, bolstered their preparation for college thru the course of the intensive summer program and yearlong meetings.

The temporal aspect of this change is significant: we designed the majority of the reflective writing to take place in the summer and in the Fall in order to strengthen our mentoring and support for students as they would then engage in the program's rigorous baccalaureate level Indigenous Studies coursework during the Winter and Spring. That students would express feeling strongly about who they are and feel more prepared for their college paths at end of Spring (almost a year to their start in the program) is significant in that it aligns with the findings on self-affirmation interventions among youth. In their randomized field experiments of self-affirmation designed to buffer historically underrepresented middle school students, Goyer, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Binning, Cook, Reeves, Taborsky-Barba, Sherman and Cohen (2017) found that the self-affirmation writing interventions they employed increased Latina/o students probability of entering college readiness tracks in high school two years after the intervention. Goyer et al also found that, seven years after the self-affirmation written intervention, the probability of college enrollment increased for African American students. Native American or Indigenous students were not a part of the study.

In addition, as demonstrated in this study, the affective aspects of writing for youth deserves more attention. Affective scholars are noting the interdisciplinary movement-

encompassing psychology, neuroscience and composition- known as writing and healing.

Psychologist James Pennebaker, considered one of the early proposers of this interdisciplinary field, identified that writing about traumatic or painful events contributed to an overall improved mood and more positive outlook on their personal trajectories in relation to traumatic or painful event (Hurley Moran, 2004). While we do not have a study demonstrating the practice of writing as a healing practice for historically disadvantaged youth, the findings from this dissertation study document how students make sense of painful historic and present events. Students sought each other out for support in understanding why the violence against women occurred and for how to respond collectively and across racial and ethnic communities. Students wrote about these events in the same shared space and had mentors present to support them in expressing their thoughts and questions. The students were aware, thru the land acknowledgement practice, that the shared space in which the writing and learning occurred was a place where their past and present relations with each other were affirmed. I propose that these features of Indigenous Writing Pedagogies might also offer positive benefits in relation to healing.

### **Summary of Indigenous Writing Pedagogies Chapter**

In summation, the Indigenous Writing Pedagogies we developed in this program- grounded as interventions that support Indigenous students multiple, historic and emerging identities and connected to the sociopolitical context students are growing up in to support them as active agents of their histories and educational trajectories- are aligned with the findings of aforementioned studies. Students in this college preparatory program highlighted the role that writing played in cultivating their college readiness, in bolstering their educational aspirations, and, most saliently, in affirming their intersectional identities as Indigenous students. By framing Indigenous Writing Pedagogies as writing that is relational, sociopolitical and self-affirming, we

better understand the youth development of urban Native American and Indigenous youth within society. As noted earlier in this chapter, one of the most studied and fundamental predictors of college enrollment and success is academic preparation. While the development and measure of academic skills varies within and between schools as well as within and between individuals, it is nonetheless reasonable to explore how strengthening students writing skills can be one of the specific strategies of academic preparation. Students in this study expressed feeling more confident and prepared for upcoming college application statements and for their future college courses. specific form of academic college readiness. While students encountered challenges in their writing and within the Indigenous Studies college level courses they took in the program, all students that engaged in the writing support workshops received a grade of B or above in their courses. Students in the study also reported that writing workshops within the program functioned as a space in which they could reflect more on the various professional pathways they could take to work with Native American nations, thus bolstering and diversifying their educational aspirations. Surprisingly, writing also served as a practice and space for making sense or connecting with each other on the sociopolitical violence that Native Americans and People of Color encounter, such as the physical violence and death experienced at hands of police officers.

## CHAPTER SIX

### EPILOGUE, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

#### **Epilogue**

*To my dearest Tlalli and Tony,*

*When you get to this part of the dissertation that I wrote, you will have journeyed with an amazing group of Native youth that I had the honor to work with as a mentor. You both met these students on many occasions. Tlalli, you accompanied us on some of the UCIndigenous Lands campus visits and students took to you like a little sister. Tony, while in utero, you were moved by their voices and their joy. The native youth you met all pursued higher education. Some of the students are attending a community college and others will be attending state universities close to their homes. With each journal entry they offered, essay draft and letter they wrote, my heart opened as I listened to their stories about who they were and what they aspired to do for their relatives and for themselves. I think about both of you as I revisit their writings and I wonder, what will your journeys look like? What aspirations will you each have and how will your schools shape those paths? How will your given and chosen families shape who you are? Will higher education be part of your journeys? I am sure that the parents and caretakers of the students also asked themselves these questions at some point. And as parents we encourage our seeds to continue through college, and we pray to creator for we know college is difficult for most Native peoples. You should also know that these students deeply moved me in my own pursuit of higher education. Their efforts to grow as Indigenous leaders, writers, innovators, professionals, and activists motivated me to continue in this doctorate program. This Ph.D. is for both of you, for the Indigenous students you met and for those after them.*

I open this chapter with the last official letter entry of my dissertation work, written a couple of years after my last field visit with students in the late summer of 2015. I wrote this letter to my children with the hope that they will one day look at this work for insights into higher education from a relational and maternal perspective. I am writing this final chapter of my dissertation almost four years after my fieldwork visits with students. Much has happened since my participation as a mentor in the college preparatory program, including my own children starting school. Importantly, many of the youth featured in the study have moved on to institutions of higher education. I have maintained contact with students mainly through social



media platforms. Many of them shared their high school graduation photos as well as some iteration of their higher education plans and trajectories. Years later, many of the same issues that students brought up as impacting their lives, such as the loss of their lands, the killing of People of Color by police officers, and the missing and murdered Indigenous women across the Americas, still resonate strongly with them and with me. Given the urgencies of this moment, I felt compelled to journey through their words and writing by finishing this dissertation study with even greater vigilance for educational programs that can serve as places of refuge and co-resistance for Indigenous youth. In this chapter, I revisit the study and summarize the findings shared in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. I include a discussion of the implications for methodology and share implications for college preparation programs.

### **Revisiting the Study**

*To My Relations* is a case study of Indigenous high school students engaged in a college preparatory program. Nationwide, just 64.2% of eligible Native American youth graduated from high school in 2014. In California, the dropout rate for Native American students is 6.3% higher than the state average (Proudfit, 2014). In California, Native American students are severely underrepresented across California State University and University of California institutions. These disturbing trends indicate that Native American youth face serious challenges in various educational contexts. While studies have demonstrated that educational disparities for Indigenous students result from historical racial inequities in their schools (Brayboy, 2005; Quijada Cerecer, 2013), questions remain on how contemporary Indigenous youth generate multimodal responses to inequities in their schooling, writing back to the institution. As such, the guiding research questions for this study were the following: 1) *What are the structural challenges that impact the access of college preparation for Indigenous students?* and, 2) *What*

*are the pedagogies in an Indigenous college preparatory program that support students' identities and higher education aspirations?* This study of Indigenous high school students in a college preparatory program unveils narratives that center on schooling and writing to examine the fundamental purposes, perils and opportunities of higher education for Indigenous youth. Guided by the theoretical insights of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), and Indigenous Methodologies (Kovach, Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), I collected four types of qualitative data: 1) individual interviews of participants' schooling experiences, 2) sharing circles, 3) participant observations, and 4) over 40 written documents (letters, journal entries and memos).

In Chapter Four, I documented the challenges that students faced in accessing higher education preparation. It was important to document how students were quick to identify the specific structures in their schools that impeded their access to college preparatory opportunities, such as the intense focus on high school grade point average and the punitive writing instruction they received. In Chapter Five, I documented the saliency that writing played in cultivating students college readiness, in bolstering their educational aspirations, and, most saliently, in affirming their intersectional identities as Indigenous students. In developing Indigenous Writing Pedagogies as the teaching of writing that is relational, sociopolitical and self-affirming, we better understand the development of urban Indigenous youth within society. The chapter also offers insights into challenges of preparing for college as an Indigenous student navigating and reinterpreting relationships, ideas, feelings and spaces.

The findings from the defining practices of the program, Indigenous Writing Pedagogies, cannot be described as representative of or applicable to all Indigenous students. I turn to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1998) assertion that “in the particular lies the general” (p.118). The particulars of the program and students in this study illuminate broader themes that should

resonate across populations of Indigenous students and Students of Color. The absent perspectives from family members, and limited perspectives from program mentors and coordinators is another important boundary of this case study. The focus of the study was to understand how Native American and Indigenous students made sense of their identities and educational aspirations in a college preparatory program. Thus, I focused my detailed recording and analysis on their written and oral stories and on their experiences in the program. The voices, stories, intentions, and practices of program coordinators and mentors were not included in-depth in this final dissertation (although some of these are embedded within the dissertation). Future work on college preparatory programs for Indigenous students should implement a broader research design that seeks the perspectives of individuals formative to the program as well as the perspectives of students' family members, community elders and tribal leaders.

In the following sections I delineate the theoretical and methodical implications of this study. I first discuss how my development of an Indigenous Epistolary Methodological (IEM) is an innovative methodology that advances the calls for Decolonial Methodologies and Tribal Critical Race Theory (CRT). I also discuss how this study advances the importance of incorporating creative writing in qualitative research. I then delineate implications that this study holds for college preparatory programs that serve Indigenous students in urban settings and I close this chapter with implications for educators seeking to use writing for supporting identity development of Indigenous students.

### **Implications for Methodology**

When I was engaging with the program and with students, I wanted to see what it would mean to build a study that grounded my own experiences and centered the relationships and

practices that were critical to my own trajectory as a student but also to my identity as a Chicana and Indigenous woman- and found that alignment through Indigenous research methodologies. In these years of my doctoral work, I have felt inspired by the recognition of Indigenous research in higher education such as the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (2005). Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) seminal work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* served as a clarion call for Indigenous researchers to develop and utilize research methodologies to reclaim space in academia. More specifically, she outlines writing as a specific project that Indigenous researchers can engage in as they reclaim and reformulate Indigenous knowledges, cultures, and languages. Her work served as a clarion call for me to frame writing as a multimodal affordance for Indigenous researchers. Writing is important to qualitative research and, when grounded in Indigenous histories, cultures and epistemologies, writing can become a methodology. Tribal CRT (Brayboy, 2005) helped guide my analysis of focusing on systemic and structural factors. Tribal CRT illuminates the histories and contemporary policies and structures that shape Indigenous peoples' educational trajectories and attainment. Through the methodologies used in this study, I learned that students' identities and aspirations were deeply shaped by the various violences that Indigenous communities experience due to ongoing colonization and white supremacy (Tribal CRT Tenet 1), that the students' different college and career aspirations were shaped by the diverse histories and context of their respective tribes (Tribal CRT Tenet 4), and that each students' stories, especially in their various written forms, represent legitimate ways of experiencing life, beliefs, and visions (Tribal CRT Tenets 7 and 8). Collectively, these Indigenous theoretical and methodological frameworks shaped my own development of Indigenous Epistolary Methodology and Indigenous Writing Pedagogies.

Through the development of an Indigenous Epistolary Methodology (Cisneros, 2018), I was able to honor the history and practice of writing letters from my own family, the intentional building of relationships grounded in Indigenous communities, and expanding the purposes of higher education beyond degree attainment. My development of an Indigenous Epistolary Methodology recognizes that traditional written documents- such as letters- often found in the archives of our homes and families can illuminate intimate histories of schooling, migrations, removals, and labor. If we acknowledge that physical letters may have been one of the most common forms of communication in the last century, then we can consider letters as insightful to the relationships that mattered to our relatives, and as a way for us to harmonize with traditional knowledge systems. For those of us with Indigenous relatives that were removed far from home for schooling, the letters written during those times can be reframed as sites where familial and tribal knowledges are experienced as we see ourselves in relation to research. For those of us with Indigenous relatives that resisted the violences of boarding schools, their letters can embolden us to refuse the assimilation and violence of settler colonialism and white supremacy still embedded in higher education. Their letters can also inspire us to cultivate research skills that center deep cultural sensitivities for many Indigenous peoples, such as relationships, praying, beading, planting and working with other nations.

Through modeling how letters can be written to record, analyze, reflect on or interrogate experiences, students learned to position themselves as reflective and critical thinkers and writers. By sharing some of the letters from my own family along with sharing my lengthy higher education journey with students in the program, I sought to support students in understanding how education, research and writing can cultivate in them a myriad of skills for and beyond college preparation. Students learned to construct letters for various purposes: to

record detailed information about a place or event such as a campus visit, to challenge a situation such as when they wrote letter to a university president asking why there was no formal land acknowledgement at the university, and to reflect on personal experiences such as when they wrote letters to a relative or friend letting them know how they felt about seeing Indigenous elders and families at a university. Students learned to refer to these letters for scaffolding their personal statement and scholarship essays. Many of the students also brought in their letters when we gathered to conduct the focus group and reflect on the first interviews. Given the salience of letters in my family, I took to letter writing throughout the study to make sense of my experiences as mentor and researcher. Thus, the detailed letters functioned much like analytical memos in that students and I used them to reflect on our experiences in the program (Saldana, 2013).

Moreover, an Indigenous Epistolary Methodology also recognizes agency in writing that can help emerging Indigenous scholars re-claim a space with dignity within and mainstream qualitative methodologies. Student participants expressed having limited exposure to Indigenous writers and having negative experiences with writing in their schooling. Their experiences resonated with me: as much as I wanted to believe in my capacity to write, I had painful experiences with writing throughout my own schooling. The most truthful, beautiful and empowering writing I encountered was that of those letters from my family and in the writings from Indigenous, Chicana and Women of Color. I was fortunate to have faculty mentors that listened to my trepidations with the writings I encountered in methods courses and they integrated Indigenous Methodologies into the course discussion and curriculum. As a methodology, writing letters served as a way of documenting and analyzing my experiences with attention to detail, affect and relationships with the foresight that the letters may illuminate

stories to be bridged with other forms of traditional qualitative data in my study. Also, in learning to consider readers and audiences for their letters, the students and I learned the importance of writing for specific audiences; students learned various composing strategies for writing to solicit a variety of responses from their readers. Thus, students learned to recognize that their writing can leverage discourses, relationships in their personal, educational and professional trajectories.

Lastly, too few qualitative research methodologies incorporate the experiences of Indigenous youth. My dissertation study demonstrates that Indigenous youth are open to learning about qualitative research. Through their campus visits to research universities, Indigenous youth in this study demonstrated an emerging and growing awareness that the production of knowledge and reproduction of power in society can be traced to academia. Many of the youth had, in one form or another, heard of how researchers had unbalanced or abusive practices when researching in those communities. Thus, they had many questions regarding research, and they were eager to learn how Indigenous scholars conducted studies, especially in higher education. The youth were also insightful, critical and proved to be skillful in their understanding of how universities have research partnerships with corporations and often wondered out loud why universities didn't have as many partnerships with tribes. Some of the participants also asked to be part of my ongoing collection analysis and presentation of data ("Ms. Cisneros that's way too many, um, codes for the focus group things!! Can you regroup all the words, so our eyes don't hurt please?"). Altogether, the ways in which students made space for themselves in this dissertation study allows me to recommend that, as researchers, we should be more attentive to the intimate, affective and empowering insights, questions, feeling and stories from Indigenous youth and Youth of Color. This recommendation is aligned with Unangax scholar Eve Tuck's (2009) call

for researchers to resist the tendency of focusing on damage-centered narratives about Indigenous communities. While the youth in this dissertation study did not hide the causes of their painful lived realities, the letters and other writing exercises provided them a practice in which to share those painful and angering realities as well as illuminate how they healed, refused, grew, and loved from those experiences. An Indigenous Epistolary Methodology offers affordances for the myriad of interconnected experiences that Indigenous youth and Indigenous scholars experience within and beyond academia.

### **Implications for Practice**

#### **Engaging College Preparation for Indigenous Students**

The literature on college-going practices argues that preparing all students to make informed decisions for post-secondary pathways and preparing them for academically rigorous college level work (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Perna, 2009) entail school-wide commitments and practices. Although researchers have produced various recommendations to support college preparation programs within and outside of schools, the recommendations do not account for the challenges of urban schools that increasingly enroll Indigenous students (Proudfit, 2013). This dissertation addresses the need for studies to examine college preparation for Indigenous students more in detail and through a qualitative case study methodology. By conducting a qualitative case study with Indigenous students that attended urban schools while participating in an Indigenous college preparatory program, I was able to understand how their previous schooling experiences shaped their engagement with the Indigenous college preparation program.

This dissertation study found that Indigenous students in urban schools have unique backgrounds and experiences that challenge college preparatory programs to expand their practices beyond the school site to include tribal nation collaborations, integration of Indigenous



elders, university campus visits, and writing focused support. I recommend that educators demonstrate a knowledge of and willingness to affirm the diversity of Native American and Indigenous students in urban school settings. The experiences of student participants suggest that too often educators make minimal or no effort to learn more about the students' respective tribal nations and cultures. Previous research has demonstrated that the presence and diversity of Indigenous students also goes unrecognized in postsecondary institutions (Shotton, Lowe & Waterman, 2013). Altogether, the marginalization experienced by Indigenous students throughout their schooling trajectories makes it imperative that college preparation programs thoughtfully and genuinely seek out Indigenous students, elders and communities for guidance on how to best serve their unique needs.

Moreover, educators interested in serving Indigenous and Native American students in urban areas should recognize that the students they serve may have differing relationships with their respective tribal nations. Educators should be aware that tribal nations have differing definitions, categories and processes for enrollment of members and that students in urban locations may or may not have robust relationships with their respective tribes. Educators should not ignore or make assumptions about the tribal membership and relationship of Indigenous urban students. Indigenous students in urban schools should be encouraged and supported in securing the guidance and resources from broader Indigenous higher education and professional associations. Tribal education departments can be a key resource for specific information and education opportunities. Urban educators can engage in proactive and intentional forms of communicating information from tribal education departments to urban Indigenous students.

Finally, the student participants in this study remind us that college preparation programs and projects need to address issues of racism, settler colonialism, gender violence and other

forms of subordination that may shape students' decisions about higher education. Student participants in the program constantly asked mentors for the truths about what college was going to be like for them as Indigenous students. The female student participants voiced concern for their physical safety and the young men expressed deep concern in dealing with racism and invisibility on campus. The importance of naming the issues that often go unnamed and dismissed in our discussions of higher education cannot be underestimated. Most students expressed relief learning they weren't alone in their concerns. Thus, some key recommendations for educators and mentors in college preparatory programs would include the following: 1) become educated about the historic pillaging of Indigenous lands that is foundational to the existence of public universities, 2) recognize the ongoing invisibility of Indigenous peoples within universities, 3) get to know local Indigenous nations and communities beyond the university's location, 4) acknowledge that Indigenous students and communities continue to be impacted by specific forms of violence that may or may not be replicated at the university, and 5) acknowledge that Indigenous students' pathways through higher education widely vary and that differential pathways in higher education should not be framed from a deficit perspective. This last point is important for Indigenous youth that may, after much exposure to campuses, choose to pursue higher education at an institution that is closer to what they know as home. In expressing a desire to stay home to pursue higher education (as some students expressed in this study), Indigenous youth can engage in the challenging decolonial work of growing at home. As Deborah Bird reminds us "to get in the way of settler colonization, all the Native has to do is stay at home" (as cited in Woolfe, 2006, p. 388).

## **Engaging Social Identities with Writing**

Chapter Five illuminated that when educators provided different opportunities, such as various forms of writing, for the students to discuss their racial, tribal and gendered identities, students expressed a strengthening of their college aspirations. The different modalities of writing also provided an avenue for students to express their concerns about the oppression and violence experienced by Indigenous communities and People of Color. I recommend that educators, teachers, counselors, mentors and college admissions should acknowledge how other forms of student identities beyond class, such as those based on tribe, race, gender, class, and immigration status also shape how students engage higher education pathways. If indeed the objective is to prepare students with the skills to navigate higher education successfully and prepare them to overcome potential obstacles, then we cannot ignore the affordances that writing can offer. As demonstrated in this dissertation study, developing writing pedagogies and practices anchored in supporting students in their histories, their truths and in their self-affirmation can strengthen students in their postsecondary endeavors. My proposal of Indigenous Writing Pedagogies specifically incorporated reading and writing assignments that encourage students to reflect on their identities. Although some of the students expressed having teachers assign readings that advocated for an analysis of race, class, gender, there was not an immediate connection to higher education. With the development of Indigenous Writing Pedagogies, readings and writing exercises would build a critical understanding of what it means to be a scholar, the first in their family to attend college, and be in relation with Indigenous sovereign nations. College preparation programs should incorporate readings and documentaries that examine—critically and from non-deficit perspective—the autobiographical experiences of underrepresented students accessing, transitioning, and graduating from college, with an added

emphasis on often marginalized Indigenous students. Readings could include various books, such as *Rain is not my Indian name* (2001) by Cynthia Leitich Smith (Muscogee), *Take us to your chief and other stories* (2016) by Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway), *Bad Indians: A tribal memoir* (2013) by Deborah Miranda (Esselen/Chumash), *How to say I love you in Indian* (2014) by Gyasi Ross, *Smoke Signals* (1998) movie and *Barking Water* (2009) movie. By reading such literature and viewing the movies, students will have the opportunity to learn about the obstacles encountered by other Indigenous folks. Writing projects can be developed as resources for Indigenous students to navigate growing up and moving through higher education. My future scholarship will also be directed toward the development of writing-based college preparatory curriculum for Indigenous students.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I declare that the most fundamental implication of my dissertation study is that Indigenous youth matter within and beyond educational settings. In the literature on college preparation we read about Indigenous students without hearing their voices or reading their writing. The lived experiences of the youth participants as Indigenous, as tribal community members, as multi-racial, as urban, as first-generation college bound students are essential in ensuring that college preparation programs, college choice models and other student-centered programs serve their multifaceted needs. It is imperative that Indigenous youth are also engaged in the theorizing, development, implementation and evaluation of college preparatory programs; especially programs that are tied to and benefit from universities built on Indigenous land (all). I offer this dissertation study as a wasem (flower) that blooms with words reminding us all in higher education that Indigenous youth deserved to be embraced with love, respect, hope and resources as they create different and better pathways for themselves and their relatives.

I'd like to end with the brief words from some of the youth that participated in the program and that are now in different journeys across higher education.

NC: Where are you now in your higher education journey? And what does it mean to be an Indigenous scholar?

*"I am at SDSU, a junior, and looking to be a lawyer for my nation. It means being true to the land, to protecting it and putting what I learn in my classes to use for helping conserve the land and water sources. This meaning is a part of everything in my life, not just college related."- J.D.*

*"I just transferred from Mira Costa to CSU Fullerton. It took me a bit longer than I planned due to work schedules and home responsibilities, but I kept focused on what I learned years ago in NAYEP. That I am valuable as I am, that I am capable of more, that I can speak, write and advocate for myself and my communities, especially when we keep facing loss of lands now thru gentrification. I want to help youth like me know their lands, know the lands that colleges are on and reclaim all that. I will be getting a master's in urban planning after I finish my B.A. I can do this knowing my ancestors are my entourage!!Yes"-M.K*

## Appendix A: First Student Interview Protocol

- Can you tell me about yourself?
  - How do you identify?
  - What is family to you? Who are your relatives, given and/or chosen?
  - Where are the places you call home?
  - Which communities do you feel close to?
- 
- What schools have you attended? What can you tell me about those schools?
  - Can you tell me about a teacher that was supportive?
  - Can you tell me about a teacher that was not supportive?
  - Did you learn about Native Americans in school?
  - Does your school bring in Native Americans from the community? When? Why?
- 
- When you entered high school, what did you think about college?
  - Who informed the way you thought about college?
  - Who talked to you about college?
  - Who, at your school, has the information about college?
  - If you have questions about college, like what classes to take, what colleges to apply to, and how to apply, who do you turn to for information and resources?
  - What do teachers in general say to you about college?
  - How do you think the materials that your classes cover compare to the tests you have to take to get into college? (Like the ACT)
  - Does your high school ever visit colleges or do college representatives visit your high school? If yes, what was that like? If no, why do you think?
  - Does your school talk to your parents about college or your options after high school?
- 
- What are you planning to do after you graduate high school?
  - How were you preparing for that?
  - Has anyone in school spoken about life after high school to you?
  - What did they say?
  - How did they help you think about what you would do after high school?
  - What do you think teachers, and people who work at your school expect every student to do during high school and after graduating high school?
- 
- Will you apply to colleges? Which ones? Why do you think you will apply to those?
  - Are there any colleges you would like to go to but may not apply? Why or why not?
  - Who might help you during the college application process? How?

## **Appendix B: Sharing Circles Protocols (Questions & Writing Activities)**

### **Introductions**

- Set up food, flowers and sage
- Ask students how they want to gather in the room
- Open with collective land acknowledgement
- Circle up for prayer, welcome students to join
- Explain foods, flowers and sage to students
- Verbally read planned circle activities and goals
- Remind students that they have agency in how to participate or not
- Explain why recording and next steps for data after circle

### **Questions for circle**

- When we last spoke, you all introduced yourself and told me a little about your background. So, today how would you identify yourself? Do you feel that your identities have grown or changed? If so, how? If not, why?
- So how is this program for you so far? What has it been like to take college level courses What has it been like to prepare for college?
- How do you all feel about all the writing you've done?
- Is this program what you expected? Can you share an experience(s) with me that has been rewarding? How did that feel like? Can you share an experience with me that has been challenging? And how did you deal with these challenges? What did you feel during and after that situation?
- Tell me how your family has been a part of this college prep experience? How about your Tribal community? What about your friends, how have they been a part of your college prep experience? Lastly, how about NAYEP staff (mentors, director, site coordinators) how have they been a part of your college prep experience?
- How are you feeling about college and universities now? Which colleges are you considering and why?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years? What are your goals for the future?
- What are your educational goals? What impacts these goals? How do you see yourself today in relation to those goals?
- Why do you think there are so little Native students going to college?

### **Guiding Activity for Collaborative Analysis and Epistolary Activity**

- How has participating in these interviews and writing journals impacted you as a student? What are you thankful for?
- In preparation for this circle I asked that you bookmark some of your journal entries for sharing what you have learned about your schooling, college prep and overall experiences. Could we each select one piece to either read out loud in its entirety or an excerpt? We can start on this side of the circle.
- Thank you for sharing. What did we hear in this piece? Can someone help write this on the first whiteboard? We will do the same for each shared writing piece. Then we can

look at all the words and statements collectively and search for some commonalities and divergent perspectives.

- Based on your experiences, what advice would you provide to the next generation of NAYEP students? Can you think of 3 specific tips you would give them if they are part of NAYEP?
- Let's take 10 minutes to create a letter for those students. You can share some of your experiences in the program or just straight share advice. We can include date, a greeting and maybe a few sentences or paragraphs even. Close it as you wish. I will collect those after.
- How about advice for Native high school students that don't have a program like NAYEP? What would you tell them? Let's take to the whiteboard for those consejos/advice.



## **Appendix C: Demographic Intake Form**

**Please answer questions below. If you have any questions or concerns in answering any of these questions, do let me know. Thank you.**

Name (First, Last):

Address (street address, city, state, zip code)

Guardian name/s

Guardian contact info (cell phone, email address, work phone number)

Your contact info (cell number, email address)

Referred by:

Date of birth:

Gender:

Tribal Affiliation:

Racial, Ethnic Identifications:

What language(s) do you speak?

What locations do you call home (can be names of cities, states, reservations, etc)?

*School information:*

Location (name, state) you attended elementary school:

Location (name, state) you attend of high school:

Favorite School Subjects:

Favorite teacher and why:

What classes are you currently taking?

What is your cumulative GPA?

Have you participated in any college prep activities or programs?

Are there any interests, skills, or challenges that are important to mention about your education?

*Family information:*

Who did you live with during elementary school?

Who do you live with now during high school?

How many siblings do you have?

How many people live in your home?

Do you receive free or reduced cost lunch at school?

*Programming Questions:*

What is your primary reason for seeking help in the college preparation process?

Are there any particular institutions, areas of study, or other program types that you feel drawn to?

What areas would you like most support in? Please rank 1-8 in order of importance to you.

College application process

Financial aid

Connecting with Native American college students/organizations or professors

Tutoring for current high school classes

Writing college application statements

College choice advising

Test Preparation

College Tours

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